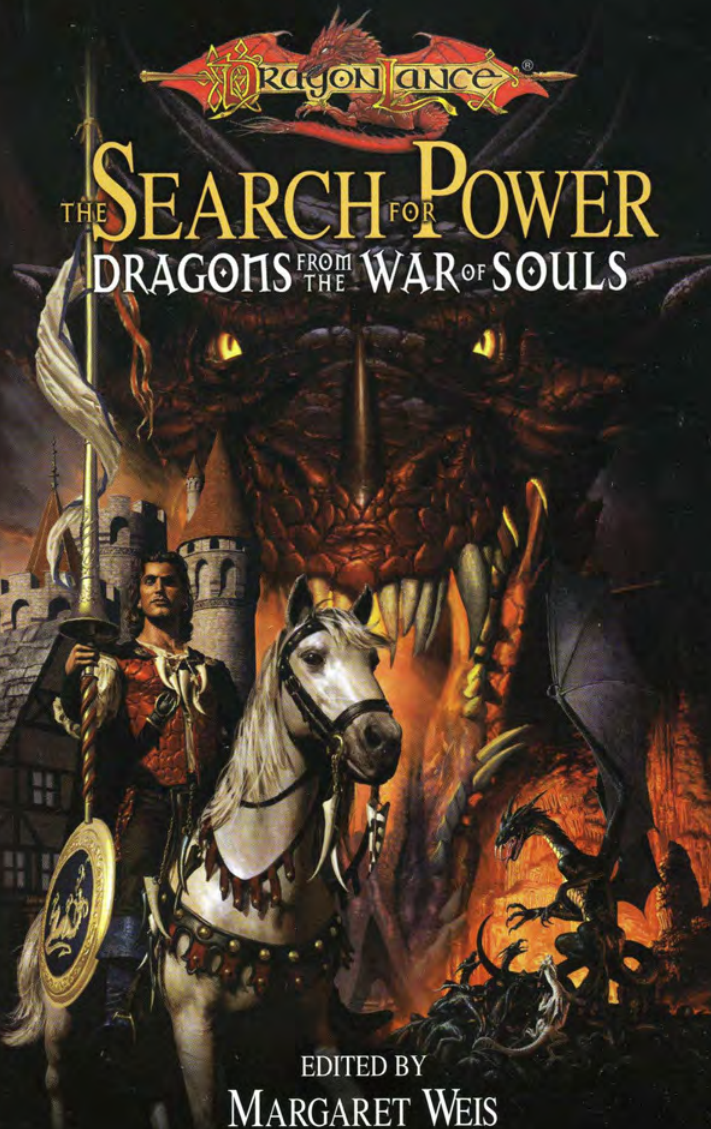




THE **SEARCH** FOR **POWER**
DRAGONS FROM THE **WAR OF SOULS**



EDITED BY

MARGARET WEIS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

When NANCY VARIAN BERBERICK began her writing career, she lived in a far, cold corner of northern New Jersey and scratched out a garden from the stony hill and the woods behind her house. Then she lived on the very hot, very damp southern edge of North Carolina, where she only had to wish for a garden and the rain would fall, granting her vegetables, flowers, herbs and kudzu. Lots of kudzu. Now she lives in warm (and sometimes very hot, but almost always dry) New Mexico, near the foothills of the Sandia Mountains, where the people don't have to fight kudzu. She finds it just right. Nancy is the author of ten fantasy novels. The latest is *The Lioness* in the Dragonlance series. Her byline also appears on a couple dozen short stories, a handful of Old English poetry translations, and assorted reviews and opinion pieces in the SF review magazine *Tangent*. Her first novel for the Dragonlance setting, *Stormblade*, was published way back in 1987 and is being given a spiffy new cover in 2004. Her latest Dragonlance novel, *Prisoner of Haven*, will be published in the summer of 2004. You can find out more about Nancy Varian Berberick and her work, as well as links to some of her short stories, at www.nvberberick.com

For most of his life, JAMIE CHAMBERS knew only the hot summers and mild winters of north Georgia. There he developed a lifelong love of fantasy and role-playing games since his introduction to the Dragonlance setting in 1985. He received a bachelor's degree in English from Reinhardt College, where he met his wife, Renae. In the year 2001 Jamie packed up his family and belongings, trading the warmer climes of Georgia for the frigid winters and mild summers of southeast Wisconsin. After leading the design of the Sovereign Stone's incarnation as a D20 System game world, Jamie spearheaded the development of the Dragonlance Campaign Setting from *Wizards of the Coast* and *Age of Mortals* from Sovereign Press. Jamie now lives in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, and shares his home with his wife, three children, a golden retriever, and two cats. He serves as the Vice President for Sovereign Press, Inc. and is currently working on the upcoming *Towers of High Sorcery* supplement for the Dragonlance game line.

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JEFF GRUBB is a Dragonlance Dinosaur, striding across the semi-molten surface of Krynn as the continents first hardened and the first rains began to cool the lava. (This is another way of saying that he is a grizzled Dragonlance game-designer and author who over the years has written the Dragonlance novel *Lord Toede* as well as numerous short stories in the Tales series. He tends to specialize in gnomes.) Also well-known for his popular Magic: The Gathering novels, Grubb is currently designing games and writing a variety of short stories, which have appeared or are appearing in the *Best of the Realms* collection, *The Repentant*, and an upcoming volume of *Thieves' World*.

JOHN HELFERS is an author, editor, and longtime Dragonlance fan currently living in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay in 1995 with a degree in English. For the past nine years he has worked with Martin Greenberg at Tekno Books. He has coedited sixteen anthologies, published thirty short stories, and written both fiction and nonfiction books, including a comprehensive history of the U.S. Navy. Recent novels include *Twilight Zone: Deep in the Dark* (Simon and Schuster/I Books) and the fantasy novel *Trial By Fire* (Five Star Publishing). He is thrilled to join the wonderful authors who have helped create the world of Dragonlance.

MIRANDA HORNER has tons of fun editing a variety of projects, playing games, reading for pleasure, doing needlework, and writing. A former editor and website producer for Wizards of the Coast, Miranda now works as a contractor for

the Online Media team. Her first short story for the Dragonlance setting was "Tree of Life" in the *Heroes and Fools* collection. She currently lives in the Kansas City area with her husband Shaun and three cats.

DOUGLAS NILES is the author of more than thirty books, including a dozen Dragonlance novels, and numerous short stories. An award-winning game designer of military simulations, he has also co-authored (with Michael Dobson) two major alternate history novels published by Forge. *Fox on the Rhine* and *Fox at the Front* tell an epic war story based on the "what-if" possibility that Adolf Hitler was killed in the Bomb Plot of July 20, 1944. A former game designer for TSR Inc, well known for his many Dungeons and Dragons adventures, Niles has been a free-lance writer since 1990. He lives in Wisconsin with his wife, Christine.

JEAN RABE spends her days at a computer keyboard, usually with two dogs wrapped around her feet, and sometimes with a parrot on her shoulder. She is the author of a dozen fantasy novels and nearly three dozen fantasy, science fiction and military short stories. When she's not writing, she enjoys watching football (and participating in a few fantasy football leagues, gardening (or pretending to), visiting museums, playing a variety of games, adding to her tower of to-be-read books, and fiercely tugging on old socks. Her upcoming books include *Lake of Death* in the Dragonlance line, and *The Finest Creation* from Tor Books. Visit her website at: www.sff.net/people/jeanr.

LUCIEN SOULBAN loves writing with a strange passion that defies explanation. This marks his sixth anthology, including *Path of the Just*, *The Book of Final Flesh*, and *Lucifer's Shadow*. He's written over fifty roleplaying products, in addition to serving as line developer and editor for companies like Guardians of Order and White Wolf Publishing. Lucien is currently living in beautiful Montreal and script-writing for the video game company Relic Entertainment.

In addition to writing novels and short stories, KEVIN T. STEIN is a graphic and web designer. A contributor to the Dragonlance world for ten years, he has just returned from teaching in Japan. Check out his online portfolio at obeydesign.com.

MARK SEHESTEDT grew up a short drive from Roswell, NM in the American Southwest, but he has never seen a UFO (though not for lack of trying). He now resides in the Pacific Northwest with his lovely wife, super-intelligent children, and no cats. He is a Book Editor for Wizards of the Coast. Film rights to “Osuin’s Treasure” are up for grabs—just in case Peter Jackson is reading this.

PAUL B. THOMPSON is the author of sixteen novels, a couple dozen short stories, and a lot of other stuff, ranging from anonymous computer ad copy to concert notes for classical music performances. His most recent Dragonlance books include Volume II of the Ergoth Empire trilogy, *The Wizard’s Fate* (with Tonya Cook), and a solo novel, *The Middle of Nowhere*. He’s also the author of a one-year-old daughter, by far his most promising work. A freelance writer for fourteen years, he reads non-fiction for fun and rents so many movies he has a special account with the video store. He lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina with his wife Elizabeth and their daughter Sara.

DAN WILLIS was born in the nation’s capital and raised in rural Maryland. He attended Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, and studied psychology, writing, and literature. While working as a computer programmer and web designer, Dan became a regular columnist for several independent computer and video game websites, before turning to writing full time. Dan’s published work includes the novel, *The Dragon Well*, part of the Dragonlance Young Adventures series. Dan Willis lives with his wife and two children in rural Utah.



THE SEARCH FOR POWER
DRAGONS OF THE WAR OF SOULS

EDITED BY
MARGARET WEIS



THE SEARCH FOR POWER: Dragons of the War of Souls

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INTRODUCTION

MARGARET WEIS

Twenty years ago, in 1984, a publishing phenomenon began. That year *Dragons of Autumn Twilight*, the first volume in the Dragonlance Chronicles series, was published. This book was the first novel a game company had ever published that tied in directly with a line of game products. Since that time, almost every major game on the market, from role-playing games to card games to computer games, has its own line of novels. Look what we started!

Because this year marks the twentieth anniversary, I thought it would be a propitious time to take a stroll down Memory Lane (the fourth street on your right as you travel north from the Inn of the Last Home) and reflect back on the various anthologies we have published over the years.

The first series of short stories dealing with Krynn came out in the year 1987, and the first book was titled *The Magic Of Krynn*. It was followed by *Kender, Gully Dwarves, and Gnomes* and *Love and War*. A second series followed in 1992, and included stories devoted to *The Reign of Istar*, *The Cataclysm*, and *The War of the Lance*. Since then we have published *The Dragons of Krynn* (1994), *The Dragons at War* (1996), *The Dragons of Chaos* (1997), *Relics and Omens* (1998), *Heroes and Fools* (1999), and *The Search for Magic*

INTRODUCTION

(2001). To date, there have been two “Best of Tales” anthologies, for those who missed the original editions, some of which will be reissued in the near future.

Some of our authors in the very first short story series have remained with us down through the years. Many became successful novelists, but always found time to return to Dragonlance Tales and write short stories for us. You’ll find some of these authors back for this anthology: Nancy Varian Berberick, Richard A. Knaak, Paul B. Thompson, and Douglas Niles.

We have been proud over the years to introduce some authors who have gone on to their own sterling careers in science fantasy fiction, people such as Nick O’Donohue, Mark Anthony, and Michael Williams. We are pleased to introduce some authors new to Dragonlance in this anthology, including Jamie Chambers, Lucien Soulban, Dan Willis, and Douglas W. Clark.

Traditions have developed in the anthologies. Probably the most memorable of these is Jeff Grubb’s ongoing “gnome stories,” which many say will live forever (and others say will live in infamy!). And you will find a gnome story by Jeff Grubb in this, our thirteenth collection of Tales. Stories featuring dragons, which play such a major role in Dragonlance history, are another tradition. We return to that tradition and dedicate this entire anthology to the dragons from the War of Souls.

I have enjoyed working on the Dragonlance short story anthologies over the years, mainly because I’ve been privileged to work with so many talented and creative authors. Each time we put together an anthology, I worry, “What else is there that is new and fresh to say about Krynn?” Every time, the authors come up with creative, amazing story lines, so that with each successive anthology we publish, we keep getting better!

I want to take this opportunity to thank all those authors who’ve given me and the fans so many hours of enjoyment.

INTRODUCTION

And I'd like to thank the fans who have supported us down through the years and who continue to support Dragonlance. Together the authors and fans have made our short story collections some of the most popular and successful on the market today.

Margaret Weis



OSUIN'S TREASURE

MARK SEHESTEDT

T*he Khalkist Mountains east of Sanction . . .*

1

“Now, boy, tell me of Osuin’s treasure.”

“What?”

The young man, no more than sixteen, if that, looked up at Subcommander Maros. The boy’s face was covered in blood, but it was from a small cut on the forehead. Nothing serious, but it had bled down his face and all over his once-white tabard. His hair, long in need of cutting and now caked with dust and blood, hung in his face.

Maros waved a small logbook in front of the boy’s face. The pale leather of the cover was stained dark red. “I have your knight commander’s log. Your *dead* knight commander’s log. It says you were bearing Lord Osuin’s treasure to Sanction, in hopes of taking it by ship to Whitestone. Now, unless you want to join your commander, tell me what and where this treasure is.”

The boy clenched his jaw and looked away. The knight holding him slapped him across the back of the head. “Answer!”

“Easy, Uthun.” Maros frowned. He reached out and

grabbed the boy's chin, forcing him to look up. "What is your name, boy?"

The boy swallowed, took a deep breath, then said, "Aithan, squire to Sir Euric of Solanthus."

"You mean *the late* Sir Euric," said Maros. "I can take you to your lord's dead body if you like, though it isn't a pretty sight. My men . . . well, the Knights of the Lily, when we are stirred up, are not known for our mercy."

A sob shook the boy, but to his credit he choked it down.

"So, Squire Aithan, I ask again: Where is this 'Osuin's treasure?'"

Aithan looked Maros in the eye and said, "*Est Sularus oth Mithas*. You may take my life but not my honor. You'll get nothing from me." With that, he spat on the subcommander's breastplate.

Uthun's knife was at the boy's throat in an instant. "Shall I kill him, Subcommander?"

Wiping the bloody spittle away, Maros said, "No, Uthun. He keeps his honor and defies his enemies. I will not condemn him. On the contrary, Aithan, I salute you. Well spoken."

Aithan was trembling, his eyes flicking like a bird's from the subcommander to the blade at his throat.

"However," Maros continued, "my Order also has a saying: Submit or die. So you see, we find ourselves at an impasse. All your comrades are dead, Aithan. You are the last. We already have everything your troop was carrying, so by answering my question you are not betraying your honor. You are not giving me anything I do not already have. You are only saving your own life, perhaps to fight me another day, yes? To avenge your lord?" Maros reached for the sword at his waist but did not draw it. "So I ask you for the last time: What and where is Osuin's treasure?"

Aithan looked to the sword. "All dead, you say? Everyone?"

"Save you. So far."

The squire's head fell. "He was in the wagon."

"He?" Maros slid his blade a few inches from the scabbard.

"Osuin's treasure."

"The treasure is a person?"

"Not exactly." Aithan raised his head, just a little, and Maros saw the eyes peeking at him through the grimy hair held a strange gleam—part defiance and part humor. "Go see for yourself, Subcommander."

Maros held the squire's gaze. There was something there, something hidden. Of that much he was certain. The boy knew something.

Still holding the boy's gaze, Maros said to Uthun. "Where is the wagon?"

"Went off the ridge, Subcommander. In the fight, the horse took an arrow in the rump, panicked, and ran off. Wagon's a shattered mess, and the horse is quite dead."

"And the cargo?"

"Don't know anything about any cargo, sir. No one's been down there yet."

Maros stared down at the squire. There was fear there and defiance, but something else as well. The boy lasted five breaths before looking down. Impressive, thought Maros. He slammed his sword back into its scabbard.

"Bring him along." Maros pointed at the squire, then turned on his heel and walked away.

2

The wagon was indeed beyond repair. They could take bits of it to use for firewood tonight—there was precious little to find in these stony mountains—but its traveling days were over. The rear axle had split in half; every wheel had broken spokes. The horse had died in the fall, and Maros winced to see the creature's twisted body. Sad waste of an animal, even one as worn and bedraggled as it had been.

The contents of the wagon lay scattered amongst the stones of the valley. Foodstuffs, broken water casks, blankets, a few weapons and tools, and one cast-iron cage. The cage seemed in good enough condition, save for the door that had fallen open on broken hinges.

“Subcommander!” shouted Djerid. “Here, sir!”

Djerid, a barbarian who had grown up in the mountains around Neraka, was the knights’ guide and scout. Maros hadn’t cared for the man at first—his clothes hadn’t seen a wash in weeks, he insisted on wearing his collection of braided scalps across his breast in imitation of the knights’ tabards, and he ate his meat raw, right off the bone. But in the months that Maros’s talon had been patrolling the eastern passes out of Sanction, the barbarian had earned the subcommander’s respect. No one knew these mountains better than Djerid, and he had never steered the knights wrong—that, and the man fought like a cornered badger. He never bore a shield but instead fought with two swords, and he was good with them. Damned good. In the ambush, he’d killed three Solamnics by himself.

“What is it?” asked Maros as he approached.

Djerid stepped back and pointed down. At his feet was a bundle of armor and torn dusty cloth. “This one’s still breathin’,” said Djerid, “though not f’r long, methinks.”

Maros stepped over the broken body of the wagon driver. His eyes were closed, but his chest still rose and fell in shallow breaths. Other than a few scrapes, there was no visible wound on him, but the position of his limbs testified to a broken back.

“The wagon driver, I presume,” said Maros.

Djerid shrugged. “Seems so.”

A worn sackcloth cloak swathed the driver head to foot, but where it fell away could be seen the mail and tabard of a Solamnic Knight. The tabard was dingy from days on the road, but still the emblem of the Order of the Crown showed plain on the breast, and the dead driver also wore

the long, full mustache of a Solamnic Knight.

"Why in the Abyss would a Knight of the Crown be driving a wagon?" Maros wondered aloud.

"Not much of a driver, if you ask me," Djerid said. "Might still be alive if he was."

"Rouse him," ordered Maros, and he turned to motion for Uthun to bring over the captive squire.

Djerid nudged the knight in the ribs, none too gently. The man's eyes widened and his mouth opened in a gasp that was half-scream. A small trickle of blood ran out of the corner of his mouth. After a moment, his pain subsided and he gaped at the Dark Knights standing over him.

"Mur—" the knight gasped. "Murdering . . . whoreson bastards."

Maros knelt over the man. "That's no way to talk, sir. Djerid is the only whore's son among us, and I'd not anger him were I you."

The dying man ignored Maros as his eyes caught on the squire. "Aithan! Sorry . . . boy. Tell 'em—" a coughing fit seized him, and more blood splattered from his lips. "Tell 'em . . . nothing. *Est Sularus oth Mithas.*"

"Squire Aithan has kept his honor," said Maros, "but if you tell me what was in the wagon, you might yet save his life."

The man's eyes shot back to Maros. "Cage is . . . empty?"

"Broken open in the fall, yes," said Maros.

A strange groan came from the man, and it took Maros a moment to realize what it was: laughter. The man was laughing!

"You find the death of this boy amusing, sir?" asked Maros.

The man took a deep, gurgling breath, then turned his attention to Aithan. "Aith," he rasped. "Lord . . . Osuin's son? He is gone?"

Aithan closed his eyes and nodded. "He is, sir."

"What is this?" asked Maros. "There was another in the wagon? Your lord's son? He survived the fall and escaped?"

Aithan clamped his jaw shut and looked away. Maros turned to the dying Solamnic at his feet. The man was trembling from the pain, but still he managed to give Maros a mocking smile.

"You're . . . all going to die," said the Solamnic.

"Is that so?" said Maros. "From one lord's whelp? Forgive my lack of fear, sir."

The Solamnic ignored Maros and looked to the squire. "Sorry . . . Aith. Take . . . courage."

Maros stood and motioned to Uthun and Illus, the other soldier who had come down the slope with them. "Hold the boy."

The two knights, each a full head taller than Aithan, held the squire by his elbows and pinned his body between so that the squire could scarcely move.

"Djerid," said Maros. "I am going to ask this knight some questions. Each time I ask and he does not answer, I want you to cut off one of the boy's fingers. When we run out of fingers, we'll find other parts to slice."

Djerid drew his knife. It was as long as his forearm and sharp only on one side. Aithan struggled and kicked, but he was no match for the two Dark Knights holding him.

"No—!" the Solamnic choked. "Bastards! Cowards!"

Maros shook his head in mock sadness. "Were you not so broken, I'd offer you the chance to fight for his life. Alas, I don't think you are quite up to it. So you see? We'll have to do it my way."

Djerid seized one of Aithan's wrists, pried the small finger open, and set the edge of his blade under the knuckle. "Ready, Subcommander."

The Crown Knight coughed up more blood, and fresh tears ran from his eyes.

"Would you like some water before we begin?" asked Maros.

"Damn you," said the knight. "I'll . . . take nothing . . . from you."

"But you will *give* something to me. Answers." He looked down at the knight. "Remember. I ask only once. You answer, or the boy bleeds. First: What is Osuin's treasure?"

The knight glared at Maros and clenched his jaw.

Maros nodded to Djerid. Illus winced and looked away. Uthun smiled. The knife cut. Aithan screamed.

"No!" the Solamnic shouted.

Djerid tossed the finger away and pried another loose. Blood poured from the fresh wound, soaking the ground and running over Djerid's blade as he placed it under the next finger. Aithan's eyes were wide; the boy was in too much pain even to scream. The two knights had to hold him up, for his legs had gone soft and his body sagged between them.

"You have something to say?" Maros asked the knight.

"Bastard." The Solamnic spat. "Just a boy, you . . . cur."

Maros shook his head in mock sadness and looked back to his men.

"No!" the Solamnic shouted, and Maros raised his hand.

"Pl-please. No . . . more. Spare him."

"Then answer my question! Tell me about the treasure."

"You've read . . . the log?"

"I have."

The log told an interesting story but was damnably short on details. Osuin of Toscath in Solamnia, a lord commander and Knight of the Rose, had lost his "most precious treasure" while it was en route from the Solamnic outpost in Missing City to Sanction. Sable's forces had taken it and killed all but two in the party, who barely managed to escape with their tale. Lord Osuin had been enraged at the theft and had sent his best men to retrieve his treasure. Lord Euric had sworn to lead the party. His contingent of a dozen knights followed their quarry's last known trail. After many miserable weeks in Sable's swamp they had found the treasure, but at great cost. Four knights died in the fight retrieving it, and Euric

wrote that Lord Osuin's treasure was "sadly beyond repair, though there may be some faint hope in Whitestone, or perhaps in Schallsea, if Lord Osuin wills it." Keeping their vow to return the treasure to their lord, the knights had fought their way out of the swamp, losing two more men and a guide before reaching the mountains.

"Lord Euric's notes were most entertaining, and I'm sure your quest would have made a great tale had you lived to tell it, but nothing in the log tells me what I want to know. *What is this treasure of Lord Osuin's?*"

The knight took a shallow, ragged breath, and then whispered. "Gone. Cage empty. No . . . treasure."

"So you say, but I'll be the judge of that. Tell me then, where is Osuin's treasure? Where has your lord's son taken it? Sanction? Is that it?"

The knight's eyes closed, but his lips curled up in a faint smile before he answered. "He'll . . . be coming for you. Only wish I . . . could live . . . to see it."

"Enough!" shouted Maros. "No more riddles! Tell me what I want to know or the boy dies. One piece at a time."

The smile melted off the knight's face. He tried to swallow, but choked instead and began a long fit of coughing that brought black blood up to his lips. Finally, his eyes opened, he took in a slow breath, and whispered, "Doesn't . . . matter. Sorry . . . boy. Death would be . . . a mercy now. Sorry."

"Answer me!" Maros crouched next to the knight, grabbed his tabard in both fists, and shook him.

It was too late. A moment later, the Solamnic Knight was dead.

"Damn," said Maros. He dropped the corpse, stood up, and turned to the scout. "Did you find any tracks leading out of here?"

Djerid shook his head. "Nah. Ground's too stony. Whatever was in the cage is long gone." Djerid glanced down at his knife, which still lay under the boy's finger. "Uh . . . Subcommander?"

Maros looked at the dazed boy and considered his options. After a moment, he said, "Aithan, was he speaking the truth?"

Aithan glared at him through his tears.

"Care to lose another finger, boy?"

Aithan dropped his gaze. "He was."

Maros looked down the mountain. It fell away in broken ridges and dry runoffs. Boulders and fissures littered the mountainside, and though there were precious few trees, thorn-thick scrub dotted the landscape. Had they more time, he might've ordered a search, but the last sliver of sun had already disappeared behind the mountain's peak behind them. They'd be hard-pressed to reach their hideout before dark as it was.

"Orders, sir?" asked Uthun, breaking the subcommander's reverie.

Maros took a final look at the empty cage, then set back to business. "Have the men gather as much wood from the wagon as they can carry and retrieve any of the foodstuffs that are still edible."

"Shall we bury the dead, Subcommander?" asked Illus, the other soldier who had come down the slope with them.

"No time, I'm afraid. Today we'll feed the vultures instead of the worms."

Uthun shook the squire. "And this one, Subcommander? Is he for the vultures, as well?"

Maros looked at Aithan. The boy's jaw was still set in defiance, but Maros could see the fear in his eyes—and the pain. Yet there was something in the squire's manner—perhaps the way his eyes kept watching their surroundings rather than his captors or Djerid's knife—that made the Subcommander suspect there was something frightening the boy more than the prospect of death at the hands of the Knights of Neraka. These Solamnics did love their honor. Maros found it one of their few redeeming qualities. It made them predictable.

“No, Uthun,” said Maros. “Not yet anyway. Staunch the bleeding, then bind and gag him. He can walk behind your horse. If his tongue doesn’t loosen by the time we’ve returned to the fort, we can sell him. Those lazy hulks in Blöde pay well for good strong backs to break in the mines.”

3

The high peaks hid the sun long before it sank into the New Sea beyond Sanction, and night came early to the high mountains. Shadows bled together, the stony ground faded into a uniform gray, and a cold wind fell down the mountain on which the Dark Knights rode, tugging at their cloaks and drowning out all sound.

It was almost too dark to see by the time the talon rounded the northern slope of the mountain and found the entrance to their campsite. Maros cursed as he reined his horse to halt.

Before him was a great slice in the mountain, narrow but tall, as if Chaos himself had driven an axe into the mountainside. It was the entrance into the ravine that housed the knights’ favorite campsite. Surrounded by high rock walls on all sides, the only way in was through the gap, which was narrow enough for two men to guard. The walls beyond were close—no more than two men could ride abreast inside—winding, and now, as full night set in, black as the Abyss. On the stony ground inside, a horse could easily break a leg in the dark.

“Dismount!” Subcommander Maros had to shout to be heard over the wind. “Lead the horses in! Get some torches lit as soon as you’re out of the wind! Labach! Goiar! You have first watch!”

The men obeyed, and Maros sat on his mount watching the sky as his men filed past. A bright glow lit the clouds in the west. It was not the sun, which had long since fled below the horizon. No, out there was Sanction, even now

besieged by his fellow Knights of Neraka. Though the peaks of the Mountains of Doom seemed to be sleeping tonight, the rivers of molten rock at their feet—some of which ringed the city in a moat of fire—glowed bright against the low clouds. Maros thought it a glorious sight—a city wreathed in flame. Some day, he thought, some day soon, Sanction will be ours.

From the corner of his eye, Maros saw movement off to his right. He tensed and turned to look at the boulder-strewn slope they had just come down. The wind kicked up clouds of dust and grit and set the dry scrub to waving. In the dim light, bush and shadow were indistinguishable. He could have sworn something had been moving out of rhythm with the wind. His eyes scanned the slope, but he had to squint to keep out the dust.

He sat there, watching until the last of his men had filed in, but saw nothing save the wind lashing the mountainside. He dismounted and led his horse into the ravine.

“You men,” he addressed the night sentries as he passed them, “keep a close watch.”

“See something, Subcommander?” asked Goiar.

“Just shadows and dirt.” He looked into the ravine. The last knight was already rounding the first bend ahead, and the light from his torch was swiftly fading. “Someone will bring you tea when it’s ready,” he told the sentries, then followed the rest of the company.

A few paces inside, and the tall walls of the ravine kept out most of the wind, though it still howled like tortured souls through the high passes above. During strong gusts, dirt and dry leaves rained down from above.

Maros rubbed the grit out of his eyes as he followed the winding path down into the cleft of the mountainside. Dust and worse had caked in his hair, and he could still smell blood on his armor. He’d only killed one man in the fight, but it had been a blow to the neck and blood had fountained out in great spurts as the Solamnic fell.

"Are you well, Subcommander?" asked the soldier ahead, who had been forced to slow his pace as those ahead took their time navigating the final steep descent into their campsite.

"Fine." Maros forced a smile. "Though I'd sell my soul for a warm bath right now."

Thunder rumbled in the western sky.

4

No one in Maros's company knew how Chuerim's Gullet had earned its name, but the Knights of Neraka had been using the small, high-walled valley as a hideout and campsite long before the siege of Sanction had begun. The only way inside was the winding path through the ravine, which led to a sizeable depression surrounded by fifty-foot walls. Whereas most of the mountain's ravines and gullies were the result of eons of wind and rain, the sheer depth of Chuerim's Gullet testified that it was most likely the damage caused by an earthquake in ages past. In the spring, a small stream ran off the southern wall and collected in a large stone basin, which slowly trickled away into cracks of the mountain, but it was dry now. Dry though the pool was, the knights still picketed the horses next to it before building their meager fires and spreading their blankets around the entrance.

Subcommander Maros ordered the prisoner taken to his campfire, then set about his rounds. In his ten years of service, he'd known many officers who remained aloof from the other knights, believing that familiarity fostered contempt and contempt bred rebellion. Maros was no such fool. The Code demanded respect, but that respect had to be sharpened, honed, and cared for, just like any other weapon. It had become his habit each night to exchange a word or two with each man in his talon—even Djerid the barbarian scout—bestowing praise or issuing a reprimand where needed. Tonight the praise was liberal. His men had performed their duty without mistake and without com-

plaint. The ambush had been a complete rout, and they had not lost a single knight.

Still, there was the matter of the "treasure"—whatever it was—and the knight's son who had fled with it; he was probably halfway to Sanction by now. Strong as the siege was, it was meant to keep out reinforcements and supplies. There was a chance, slim as it was, that a lone man could slip through in the dark. Maros cursed the loss. The dying knight had said the lord's son would come for them. Knowing the damned Solamnics' honor, he might well try to rescue the boy, but one lone knight, probably injured from the tumble down the ridge, presented little real threat to his talon. If he held his father's treasure, something so valuable that men had traveled for hundreds of miles braving death and worse in Sable's swamps, to retrieve it, surely he would not risk all to save one boy's life.

Still, the mystery nagged at Maros. The Solamnics had lost many men retrieving the treasure. They had braved the mountain passes guarded by their enemies to try to get it home, and all that time they had kept it in a cage. Coin, jewels, relics . . . these were not kept in cages. Cages held the living. They did not protect treasures; they held captives. Something in the Solamnic's tale still did not ring true.

Maros had his suspicions. Many years ago, when the Dark Queen had roused her dragon armies in her attempt to conquer, every army sent against them had faltered—until the return of the dragons. To be sure, the Dark Queen had her own dragons to wreak havoc and terrorize her enemies, but the golds and silvers that had risen to oppose her had begun the turn the tide. Without them, things would have gone far worse for the Solamnics and their allies, but the golds and the silvers had yet again disappeared from Ansalon. Now, with rumors of the "one god" on everyone's lips, and more whispers saying that this one god's prophet was even now leading her forces to Sanction, Maros suspected there was only one answer to the riddle of that empty cage. After

reading the knight commander's logbook, it had occurred to him that the Solamnics might have found a dragonlance or some other powerful new weapon to aid their forces, but it made no sense to keep such a thing in a cage in the back of a wagon. That left only one possibility in Maros's mind: the Solamnics had caught a dragonlet, probably a gold or silver, and hoped to nurture it. It would have to have been no more than a hatchling to be caged, for no cage made by human hands could hold even a yearling dragon. Perhaps the lord's son, sitting in the wagon beside the cage, had bonded with the hatchling. That left only one question: Where was the dragonlet and the lord's son now?

Maros found Uthun seated next to a fire, holding his breastplate on his lap and scrubbing at the blood with an oiled cloth. The rest of his armor lay in an organized pile next to him, and his sheathed sword was within easy reach. The prisoner, half in shock and shivering, sat opposite him. Uthun had tied Aithan's hands behind his back, and the leash of the leather collar was wound around his knees so that he could not straighten. A bandage covered his right hand, and it had filled with blood. They hadn't taken the time to cauterize the wound, and it had bled freely on the way here.

When Uthun saw the subcommander approaching he stood and saluted. Maros unbuckled his belt and held the scabbard in his hand. "Help me with the armor," he said.

In moments, Maros too had removed his armor and laid it in a neat pile next to the fire. He retrieved his cloak from his pack, donned it, and sat across from Aithan while Uthun began cleansing the blood from his commander's armor.

"Have you eaten?" Maros asked.

Aithan started, looking up from the fire. "No." His voice was weak. He'd likely lost a lot of blood, and the pain had probably sapped most of his strength, just as Maros had hoped it would.

"I fear we don't have much, but we shall not starve you. Uthun?"

"Yes, Subcommander?"

"Unbind his wrists, if you would. That bandage needs changing."

"At once."

After Uthun had applied a fresh bandage—not too gently—the squire seemed to buck up. Maros handed the boy a few strips of dried beef and a crust of bread.

"Tea should be here shortly," Maros told him.

The squire nodded. Through a mouthful of bread, he mumbled a reluctant, "Thank you."

The three were finishing their meager fare when one of the younger knights brought over a steaming kettle of tea and three cups. The cups were small, scratched, and dented but clean.

"Uthun," said Maros, "see that tea is taken out to the sentries."

Uthun saluted, retrieved his sword, and walked away.

"Now, Squire Aithan," said Maros, "let us discuss the dragon."

Aithan looked over the rim of his steaming cup. "Dragon?"

"The hatchling you and your comrades were taking back to Whitestone."

The young man's brows creased and he shook his head. "You are mistaken, sir."

Maros found himself at a loss for words. Much to his surprise, he did not suspect the boy was lying. Although there was something hidden, almost sad even, behind the boy's eyes, Maros could sense no deception in his manner. Solamnics were terrible liars anyway. It was against their Oath and Measure. If the boy had indeed managed to overcome his fear and adhere to his honor, he would not lie to a direct question. Refuse to speak perhaps, but not lie.

"There was no dragon?" asked Maros. "No gold hatchling? Or a silver perhaps?"

"The golds and silvers are gone, sir." Aithan took another

sip of his tea, and then whispered, "More's the pity."

"Then what was in the cage?" asked Maros, his impatience rising again. "What did your lord's son guard?"

Aithan clamped his jaw and stared into the fire.

"Well?"

Still the squire did not speak.

Maros closed his eyes and rubbed at his temples. Damn, he thought. The boy is hiding something, but if he's lying about the dragon, then I'm a gully dwarf.

"Aithan," he said at last, "you must understand: I have no desire to hurt you."

"No?" The squire looked down at his bloody hand, the fresh bandage already filling with red.

"That?" said Maros. "That is nothing, boy. If that is the worst pain you know in your life, you will count yourself fortunate."

"Are—" the boy gulped at his tea. Maros could see his hands trembling. "Are you going to kill me?"

Maros let the question hang for a bit. The boy was scared. Let that fear work; let it whittle away at his courage.

Finally, he answered, "On my honor, Aithan, I will not hurt you unless you give me cause, but when we return to the fort, you will be given over to Sir Isurlak. He is of the Order of the Skull, and they have . . . ways of getting information, ways you will not like, I think. I promise you, Aithan, Sir Isurlak is very good at what he does. He *enjoys* it." Maros paused, letting his words sink into the boy's imagination. It was hard not to pity the boy. He had courage and honor, but all that would be broken once Isurlak had at him. "So," he continued, "I ask you for the last time: What is Osuin's Treasure?"

Aithan's jaw began to shake, his bottom lip quivering. To hide his fear, he took a long gulp of tea. He wiped his lips with his sleeve and said, "Please, sir—"

"You have had all the mercy I can give, Aithan. Once we are at the fort, I cannot help you."

Aithan swallowed once, and then looked Maros in the

eye. "All I can tell you is that Osuin's treasure is lost. Pray that it stays lost."

"My goddess is gone, Aithan." Maros sighed and shook his head. "We will be at the fort late tomorrow. I suggest you be the one to pray. You're going to need it."

5

It was nearing midnight, almost time for the change of the watch. Clouds swirled about Sanction, and lightning, red-tinged like the fires from the Mountains of Doom, boiled in their depths. Maros stood just outside the city, alone. A voice, colder than the depths of frozen mountain streams, whispered from the mountains outside in the city, but he could not discern the words. Then Maros saw her.

Distant as she was, Maros could see that the girl wore the armor of a Knight of Neraka. Her hair was wreathed in flame. Her footsteps shook the earth, and storm clouds raged above her. A dark presence waited there.

Maros opened his mouth to call out when—

The horses snorted and stomped, and Maros woke up instantly, Uthun only a moment later. The fierce wind on the mountain overhead had died down to a fitful breeze. Inside the camp, the horses were milling about. A few of them whinnied and even from this distance Maros could hear them pulling at the ropes.

"Subcommander?" whispered Uthun as he sat up. "What is it?"

"An adder perhaps?" said Maros. "Go."

Uthun kicked out of his blanket, grabbed his sword, and was gone. Maros stood and buckled on his sword belt beneath the cloak. He looked around. The fires had died down to flickering embers, but by their faint glow Maros could see that the entire camp was awake and alert. He could hear men speaking, trying to calm the horses, then he heard something else.

Maros looked down. Aithan was still lying down, huddled next to the dying fire. At first Maros thought the boy was crying, but then he caught the words.

"Blessed Paladine, have mercy. Kiri-Jolith, thy justice save us. Holy Mishakal—"

"Silence, boy," said Maros. "Your gods are gone. As are mine."

"He's here," the boy whispered. "He's here, he's here, he's here . . ."

"Who is here, Aithan? Your lord's son? Is that it?"

The boy ignored him and went on mumbling. "Blessed Paladine, have mercy. Kiri-Jolith . . ."

Maros cursed and turned away. He considered climbing into his armor, but it was nigh on impossible to don and buckle the breastplate properly without assistance. Instead, he grabbed his shield, fitted it to his right arm, and held his helmet, ready to throw it on at the first whisper of an arrow. He could see men, two with torches, milling among the horses.

Moments later, Uthun returned.

"Report," said Maros.

"Something spooked the horses, Subcommander. Don't know what."

"Not a snake?"

"If so, it's gone now, sir."

"A scorpion, perhaps. Did you check to see if any of the mounts were stung?"

"Djerid is doing it now, sir."

"Well done." Already the horses were quieting. Djerid had a way with the animals that often amazed Maros. The fiercest warhorse tamed around the man.

"Orders, Subcommander?" asked Uthun.

"Has the watch yet changed?"

"I'm not sure, sir."

"If not, change it," ordered Maros. "I want fresh men out there. Put out four—two at the main entrance, two inside the camp; I don't care who. See to it."

Uthun saluted, dashing off. The horses were quiet again, so Maros sat back down and set his helmet and shield beside him. Seeing their subcommander relaxing, other knights throughout the camp went back to their blankets.

As silence returned to the camp, again Maros heard the boy muttering. "Forgive me, blessed Paladine. Have mercy—"

"I said be silent, Aithan!"

The prayers ceased, though Maros thought he could still hear a small whisper or whimper escaping the boy now and again.

Maros sat, listening. After a while, the men with the horses extinguished their torches and returned to their blankets. One of the knights stumbled off to the edge of camp to relieve himself. Not long after the man went back to sleep, snoring rose again throughout the camp. Still, Uthun had not returned.

Unease crept into the back of Maros's mind. One of the horses tossed its head, slapping its halter against its neighbors before quieting again. Somewhere in the darkness a man spat and cursed. Djerid most likely. Spitting was only one of the man's filthy habits.

Maros slowly counted to a hundred—still no sign of Uthun—then stood and drew his sword. At the sound, the men nearest him sat up and reached for their own weapons. They rushed to stand as the subcommander strode past.

"Up!" said Maros as he walked among the blankets and dying fires. "Up damn you! Now! Everyone!"

Armor clattered and swords whispered from their scabbards as the talon obeyed. In the time Maros took a dozen steps, every man in camp stood on guard.

"You four—" Maros pointed at four knights with his blade— "go check on the outer sentries. Be vigilant and don't separate, even for a moment. You three—" he pointed again— "I want fires stoked at the entrance and torches set throughout the camp. If so much as a lizard slinks into

camp, I want to be able to see it."

The men rushed to obey. Not including Maros, that left only four men, two of them standing guard near the entrance of the ravine.

"Djerid!" called Maros.

"Yes, Subcommander?" the scout answered from where he was helping one of the knights buckle his breastplate.

"Get the horses ready to depart."

"Sir?"

"You heard me."

The scout rushed to obey, throwing the saddles on the horses, tightening girths, and pulling on bridles.

"We are leaving, Subcommander?" asked one of his knights, already in full armor, though he still held his helmet in his hands.

"Not yet. Not till dawn if we can help it, but we must be ready—"

A scream, wafting from the open mouth of the ravine, interrupted him. At first, Maros thought it was only the wind picking up, but when he stopped to listen, there was no mistaking. Someone in the ravine was shrieking, desperation and—no mistaking it—agony giving a ragged edge to the voice. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the scream stopped.

"What . . . ?" asked one of the men guarding the entrance.

"Crossbows!" said Maros, spurring his men to action. Only two crossbows remained in camp, the rest were with the sentries. "You men—" Maros pointed to the two guards nearby. "Get back! Anyone not holding a bow, I want behind the shields. You too, Djerid!"

Within moments, four knights, one scout, and one bound and whimpering captive were crouched behind their shields, two crossbows held at the ready.

"What do we do, sir?" asked one of the shieldmen. Maros could see the whites of his eyes, wide and frightened, behind the fearsome visor of his helmet.

"We wait."

"But . . . the sentries."

"Are either captive," said Maros, "or dead. We wait for dawn, then we ride out."

They waited. The night wore on, the breeze picking up again, pelting them with dust and grit from above, and the thunder that had been rumbling for hours began to close in. Soon they could smell rain on the wind. The rising wind and moistening air dampened the torches they'd set alight near the entrance, and the fires began to smolder. The camp grew dark.

"Keep alert, crossbowmen," said Maros. "Watch the entrance. Anything that comes out of that ravine, kill it."

"What do you think it is, Subcommander?" one of the men asked nervously. It was Toras, who'd just joined the talon last summer.

"Whatever was in that cage. Or whoever took it."

"What was it?" asked Cloram, a crossbowman. "In the cage I mean?"

"Damned if I know."

Lightning flashed, painting all the world in brilliant white for an instant, then answering thunder shook the mountain-side, bringing a chorus of frightened squeals from the horses. Moments later, large raindrops began to pelt down—intermittently at first, like the patter of dozens of tiny hammers, but soon the storm roiled in earnest.

"Damn and damn," said Maros as he watched the torches and last vestiges of flame within the campfires begin to sputter and smoke. The darkness spread.

"What do we do, Subcommander?"

"We could set up a sharp lean-to over a fire," suggested Djerid. "It'll keep off the worst of the wind'n rain. Enough t' keep a fire burnin' anyway."

"Good idea. See to it," Maros ordered, then returned his attention to Aithan, who lay crouched behind them, still in his bonds, still muttering under his breath. "You know

what it is, don't you boy?" said Maros. "You know what's out there."

Aithan turned his attention upward, but in the predawn gloom Maros could not read his features. "*Est Sularus oth Mithas,*" whispered the boy.

Maros crouched, grabbed a fistful of the boy's tabard, and hauled him into a sitting position. "I told you I would not harm you unless you gave me cause. Well, some of my men are missing. Your silence already may have killed them. Cause is given."

The subcommander stood, dragged the squire to his feet, and placed the edge of his naked blade under the boy's chin.

"You there!" he called out into the darkness. His voice, long-used to giving orders in battle, echoed off the cliff walls. "Whoever you are! Show yourself! Surrender now, or the boy dies! Bring Lord Osuin's treasure with you, and I swear both of you will walk out of here!"

Twice more Maros repeated his words. The wind picked up, the rain fell harder, and the thunder grew louder, but no answer came.

"Your last chance!" shouted Maros. "I count five, then the boy dies!"

Still nothing.

"One!"

Aithan trembled and his knees went weak, so that Maros had to hold him upright.

"Two!"

The squire's trembling increased, and that was when Maros realized the boy wasn't frightened. He was laughing!

"You find this funny, Aithan? Your friend out there is about to watch you die."

"Fool," Aithan said through his tears. "Killing me is a mercy. My . . . *friend* out there is going to kill you all, and me, too, most likely, unless you really do have the spine to end me now."

"Enough!" Maros spat. He pressed the steel under the boy's chin and tensed his arm to pull. "Thr—"

Something struck the ground not far away—a clatter of steel—and the horses went mad, rearing and bucking and struggling against their ropes. Even over the sound of the rain and wind, Maros heard the picket line snap, then the horses were free, running through the camp, kicking blankets, toppling baggage, and jostling into each other in their panic.

"Stop them!" shouted Maros. "They'll make for the—"

Then the horses were on top of them, iron-shod hooves pounding on every side. Maros threw Aithan to the ground, then leaped and rolled. The clanging of armor told him others were doing the same. A man screamed, then the thunder of hoofbeats passed. By the time Maros, dripping mud, regained his feet, their mounts were gone.

Aithan lay crouched in the mud but seemed unhurt. Djerid and two knights were climbing back up, but another lay on the ground, clutching at his midsection. Maros went to him.

"Illus, are you all right?"

"Kicked me," said the knight through clenched teeth. "Ah . . . hard. Broken."

The rain was coming down quite hard now, and it wouldn't take long for the fires to drown. It would soon be too dark to see.

"What spooked the horses?" asked Toras.

"Go see."

"Alone, sir?"

"Damn you, man! It's right over there. You'll be safe." Then, softening his tone, Maros nodded to Djerid and said, "Go with him."

Maros returned his attention to the injured knight. He removed his gauntlet and, after pulling the man's hands away, felt along his body. At least two ribs were broken, but they had not penetrated the skin.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"Yes," Illus said, though even speaking caused him to hiss in pain. "Have to. Don't I?"

Maros looked up. Every horse was gone. "Yes," he said.

Toras and Djerid returned in a clatter of armor and splashing mud.

"Subcommander!" said Toras.

"What?"

"It's . . ." The man licked his lips and swallowed.

"What? What is it?"

"Uthun . . . I think."

"What do you mean?" said Maros.

"Looks like his armor, but the rest . . ." Toras stopped, turned, and fell to his knees, retching and spitting.

"Somethin' threw the corpse into the horses," Djerid finished for him. "He's a mangled mess, but there's enough face left t' see. It's Uthun."

"But," Cloram said, "it came from the cliffs! Nothing came in the entrance. We saw. No man could climb those heights. I tried it myself last summer. It's impossible."

Djerid drew one of his swords from the scabbard on his back. He pointed it at Aithan. Blinding lightning flashed, making Djerid's blade seem a shard of fire. "Ask that one. He knows more'n he's tellin'."

"Get those shields back up first and get behind them!" ordered Maros as thunder shook the mountainside. "If that lordling is somehow up there, he could have a bow."

Everyone obeyed, even Djerid, though he kept his blade in hand and one eye on Aithan. The fires were now dead, and the men sat in darkness behind their shields.

Maros grabbed Aithan's chin and wrenched the boy's head around.

"I agree with my scout," Maros told the boy. "That's why you're so scared, isn't it? You know what it is. You know what's out there. Don't you, boy? Don't you?" Even through his thick gauntlet, Maros could feel the boy quaking with fear. "Speak!"

"*Est Sularus oth—*"

Maros clenched his fist and slammed it into the boy's side. "Enough of that!" he shouted. "Tell me or you die! Now!"

Lightning flashed once more, and in the instant before darkness fell again, Maros heard one of his men cry out, then the sharp *clack!* of one of the crossbows loosing.

Maros dropped the boy and turned to his men. "What is it?"

Thunder boomed, so loud the ground shook. "I think I saw something!" said the knight with the now-empty crossbow. "Crawling down the cliff like a . . . a . . . like a damned lizard! Only it was big. Larger than a man!"

"Where?" asked Maros as he tried to see. The surrounding cliffs were only a darker shadow against the utter blackness of the sky overhead. It was so dark now and the rain coming down so heavy, Maros could barely see Djerid or his fellow knights.

"On the rock face about where the horses were," the knight replied. "I swear, sir! On my life!"

"Did you hit it?"

Just then something splattered into the mud right in the middle of their group. "What—?" said Maros, but Illus was already screaming.

Illus was staring at what had landed at his feet. Maros fumbled in the dark. He grabbed it and gasped—*hair*. It was Uthun's head.

The headless corpse slammed into the crossbowmen an instant later, knocking them over, and then chaos erupted. Men screamed—the knights in terror, Djerid in defiance—as a shadow rushed from the darkness, growling as it tore into the knights.

Maros reached for his sword. His fingers wrapped around the well-worn leather hilt, then something bowled into him and he went down face-first into the cold mud. He was halfway to his feet when he was struck again, and this time something heavy jumped on top of him, knocking the breath out of him.

He breathed in—smelling steel, wet leather and blood—then fought his way out from under the burden. It was dead weight, heavy and lifeless. When another bolt of lightning split the sky, Maros saw what the dead-weight was: Cloram's lifeless eyes stared at him from a face black with blood and torn skin.

Thunder crashed as Maros regained his feet. His shield was gone, but he held his sword in a firm hand.

Lightning flashed again, and Maros saw torn bodies and pieces of bodies strewn everywhere. The last man standing was Djerid, both blades in hand, facing a horror out of nightmare. It was man-shaped and very tall, but it crouched low as it sprang.

Then the sky was dark again, and Maros couldn't see. Through the wind and rain he heard Djerid's battle cry, steel striking bone, heavy steps struggling in the mud, and the feral roar of a beast. Thunder filled the world, and Maros was blind, deaf, surrounded by the stench of blood and fear.

Maros raised his sword and warily made for where he had last seen Djerid. The beast had managed to kill his men, but it had done so by picking them off in the dark. Perhaps Djerid was still alive; perhaps they could take down this enemy together.

The sky flared as lightning lashed at the mountain, and in the gaps between blinding light and drowning dark, Maros saw Djerid no more than a dozen paces away. One arm was gone and his own sword had been driven through the middle of his chest, impaling him to the ground. Lifeless eyes stared into the storm.

A shadow fell over Maros. He turned, took in a breath, and turned to fight—

6

—blue sky. No clouds. No rain. Darkness fled. It was so clear that Maros had to squint.

"You're awake."

Maros started at the voice. At the sudden movement, pain filled his senses. He groaned.

"Don't move. You'll only make it worse."

The speaker knelt over Maros. It was that damned squire, Aithan. His cheeks were ruddy from the early morning chill, and he had wrapped himself in one of the knight's cloaks.

"What—?" said Maros, and he was surprised at the sound of his own voice. It was raw, haggard, pitiful.

"You're dying," said Aithan. There was no remorse or sorrow in his voice. "Everyone else . . . is dead. Baren, he, uh . . . he broke your back. And your arms, uh . . . well, best not to speak of that."

Maros tried to move his fingers. He could not feel them. Nothing. Not even a tingle. Not even the bone-chill of lying in the mud. He tried to raise his head, but only made it an inch or so. The boy had covered him in cloaks. Another was folded beneath his head.

"Baren?" he asked. "Who is—?"

"Lord Osuin's son," said Aithan. "His treasure."

Maros trembled at the memory of last night's horror. "That . . . thing. *That* was Osuin's treasure?"

"Yes. His only son."

"But—"

"Baren was a knight," explained Aithan, "like his father, and his father before him. On his way from Missing City to Sanction, he was taken by Sable's minions. Her hunger for power gnaws at her, but even that is surpassed by her malicious curiosity. When we found Lord Osuin's son, he had been . . . changed. Warped. Twisted into something feral and savage. He was more beast than man."

"Spawn." Maros closed his eyes. The light hurt.

"Perhaps. I don't know of such things. Lord Euric thought we had rescued him in time, before the process was complete. He thought there might be some hope, in Schallsea perhaps, of saving him, of returning Lord Osuin's son to him."

"Your lord . . . was a fool." Maros would have laughed, but he no longer had the strength for laughing. Just breathing was an effort. Talking was agony.

"He kept his oaths."

Maros tried to open his eyes. "Why are you . . . ?"

"Alive?"

Maros tried to say yes, but it came out a groan.

"I don't know. He . . . he came at me, after breaking you. After tearing your scout to pieces. He grabbed me. Sniffed at me, then . . . left. Why? I wish I knew."

They sat in silence. Maros had to fight for breath. His own heartbeat was almost deafening.

"On the journey," Aithan continued, though he seemed to be talking to himself, "Sir Euric had me sit in the wagon—well out of reach. I would read to Baren from the Oath and the Measure, sing to him, pray, or just talk. It was Sir Euric's hope that it might help to draw the man out of the beast. He grew quieter and more peaceful as the days passed. Sometimes I would even catch a sad look in his eye, and I hoped to think it might be the man in him, the knight, but then the beast would seize him again, and . . . and . . ."

Maros thought he heard the boy crying, but he could no longer muster the strength to open his eyes.

"I feared Baren the man was gone forever, but after last night . . . I don't know. Maybe there is some humanity left in him after all. Maybe, as Sir Euric hoped, the reading and prayers restored some of his humanity. All I know is he killed you, killed you all, but out of mercy left me alive."

The boy spoke true. Maros knew that. Maros gathered the last of his strength and whispered. "Why . . . tell me . . . now? Your . . . h-honor—"

"Is not betrayed," Aithan said. "I swore to speak to no living man of our mission, save those members of our company. You will not betray my secret, save to the dead. You could have killed me. Your man, Uthun, certainly would

have. Your scout wanted to, at the end, but you did not. I . . . I felt I owed you an explanation.”

It was small comfort. Dying here, far away from his home, Maros no longer cared about any treasure, about Sanction, about his Order.

“Shall I pray for you, sir?” asked Aithan.

“Pray . . . hard,” Maros could feel his life ebbing away. “But for yourself too . . .”

“Sir?”

“Sanction. Two days. Walk. Lord Osuin’s treasure—” Maros drew his last breath— “is still out there. Pray hard.”



LOYALTY

RICHARD A. KNAAK

The island sat by itself in the northern Courrain Ocean. A mist-enshrouded place of rocky hills and a dour oak forest, it was not marked on any map. That made it the perfect hiding place for those rebelling against the Emperor Hotak, and since finding rebels was the mission of the *Crimson Dagger*, the sleek, three-masted minotaur warship anchored off shore to scout the island.

Captain Salvias sat at the bow of the foremost longboat, brooding, brown eyes staring over his narrow muzzle. His slightly-curved horns, more than two feet in length, only added to his impressive form. Even among minotaurs, who often stood over seven feet in height, the grey-furred captain was tall, topping out at nearly eight feet. Broader of shoulder than any of the others aboard the *Dagger*, he was squeezed into his gleaming silver breast plate. He had served in the fleet since shortly after the coming of the Dragon Overlords more than two decades earlier and had commanded the *Dagger* for over ten years. Always in the thick of any battle, Salvias had built up a fierce loyalty among his crew over that decade.

“Over there!” he rumbled. “The safest landfall should be there.”

The rowers faithfully adjusted. The longboats veered

around submerged rocks and made for the narrow strip of sand.

Overhead, thick storm clouds thundered. Never a day went by without the threat of a major tempest. If not for the fact that the deities no longer watched over Krynn, the crew would have blamed the unnatural weather on the gods.

The kilted warriors swarmed out of the boats as soon as they hit the shore. Twin-edged axes and longswords at the ready, they methodically spread out, securing the area. Commander Drako, leader of the ship's marine fighter unit, rushed up to Salvas and saluted. The green stripe across the top of his leather kilt trimmed with silver marked his branch of the military. The rest of the crew wore kilts with only the lower tips colored green, indicating their status as members of the Imperial Fleet. Like all minotaurs in service to Hotak, though, Drako wore a breastplate with the black silhouette of a rearing warhorse emblazoned in the center.

"Perimeter covered, Captain!" the dark brown minotaur growled. "A dekarian and his unit will keep the vicinity under watch, while the rest of us move inland."

A harsh snort erupted from behind Salvas. Jek, the first mate, joined the two minotaurs. "Doubt we'll find much here. This place smells of death . . . but old death."

"Nevertheless," the captain said, "we'll search."

Jek nodded, the three gold rings in his right ear jingling. Slightly shorter than average, he made up for this disadvantage with a wrestler's build worthy of the Great Circus. "Aye, Captain. I never said otherwise."

In truth, if Salvas had ordered his first mate to turn over every stone on the island, the broad-snouted minotaur would have obeyed. Jek had sailed with Salvas longer than anyone and had his life saved twice by his captain.

Salvas studied the horizon. "It's too late to begin the hunt. If there are rebels here, they'll know the island better than us. We're safer making camp here. We stay on the beach tonight, then move in at first light. Drako, set pickets. Jek,

make certain that the crew's fed. Give out one ration of ale to each. There are a couple of barrels in the boat with the other supplies."

"Aye, Captain!" With a grin, Jek hurried off. The addition of a ration of ale would be a welcome treat for the crew. The single ration would not affect their battle readiness, but it would boost their morale.

"Never a better ship I've served on than yours, captain," Drako commented. "You treat the crew like clan, while still keepin' them fit and ready."

"An ill-tempered crew dishonors its ship and itself."

"And a good crew has a good captain." The marine commander dipped his horns in respect then followed after Jek.

Salvas fought back a frown as he surveyed the *Crimson Dagger's* complement. They moved with the discipline and training minotaurs received from the day they first learned to walk, but Salvas's warriors had the added swagger of those who trusted completely in their leader.

After years of loyalty, they were about to be betrayed.



Captain Salvas waited until all but a handful of guards were asleep, then he quietly rose from his woolen blanket and made his way across the soft sand. He steered clear of the two fires in the center of the encampment then headed directly for the shrouded forest.

A sentry noticed his approach and immediately stood at attention. "Captain, what brings you—"

Salvas pointed one finger at the other minotaur. Eyes suddenly blank, the guard lowered his ax and turned away from his superior. Salvas walked past the oblivious figure without further pause.

Salvas carefully pushed through the thick forest. The landscape rose steeply as he proceeded, and the brush grew denser, but no obstacle could defeat his determination. He

moved along as if perfectly at home in the dark, not once tripping on a root or becoming disoriented.

At last, the towering minotaur broke out of the woods to find himself standing near the base of the first of the high, steep hills. He stared at each in turn, seeking something among them with more power than his eyes.

There! A squat peak with two points resembling horns. Salvas sensed the distinctive magic emanating from within. There could be no mistake. He had found the lair.

With sudden impatience, Salvas grabbed a handhold and pulled himself up. He could have made the ascent far easier had he chosen to, but years of hiding had instilled in him a tremendous wariness. The path looked safe, but where magic was concerned, looks could be very deceptive.

As the minotaur laboriously climbed, he found no hidden traps to greet him. Midway up, Salvas paused to gather his thoughts and consider this strange fact—the absence of threat—and then he noticed the cave mouth.

A lip of rock had hidden it from view until this very moment. The mere sight of the cave entrance stirred a long-dead emotion. Despite his earlier intent to proceed carefully, the captain threw caution to the wind and scrambled up the rest of the way. His breathing grew rapid and intense as he neared the mammoth mouth of the cave.

Climbing onto a ledge, the gasping minotaur stared into the pitch-black entrance. Even his superior vision could not penetrate the utter darkness, which meant that this was no ordinary dark. Salvas stretched a hand forward and watched as first his fingers and then the rest of his hand seemingly dissolved from contact with the dark.

He pulled the hand out. Finding it free of any harm, the minotaur fearlessly strode forward.

A peculiar tingle coursed through Salvas as he entered the cave. His surroundings were swallowed by blackness. A magic far older than any ever wielded by humans or elves permeated his senses.

Suddenly, he found himself in an immense cavern lit by glittering orange-red crystals scattered amidst the rocky walls. The stench of sulfur filled his nostrils. Huge stalactites and stalagmites created the effect of a set of monstrous teeth. Massive scratch marks gouged the upward-sloping floor.

All of this registered only peripherally on Captain Salvas, for ahead of him lay a spectacle so grotesque and so fascinating that for a moment he could only gape.

The twelve dragon skulls had been arranged to create a terrible totem. Each skull faced outward, with the four largest forming the base and succeeding smaller ones rising upward. Many bore the marks of harsh combat—broken teeth, slashes cut deeply into the bone itself—and all seemed to wear an expression of horror, if such an emotion was possible to express without the adornment of flesh. The totem rose high above the minotaur.

Salvas took a step toward the totem. His boot struck an object that rolled for several yards, creating a loud echo. The captain glanced at what he had accidentally kicked—a human skull. The skull was scorched black, and the bones that were scattered beneath his feet were the same—burnt. A few fragments of leather clothed the remains of this skeleton. A rusted sword lay nearby.

Salvas was unperturbed. Burnt bones were hardly unusual to discover in the sanctum of a dragon.

"I've found your lair at last, Volcanus," the captain whispered defiantly. "She'll be yours no longer."

As he walked closer toward the macabre array, Captain Salvas of the Imperial Fleet transformed.

His horns melted, turning into a crest that ran down his back. His muzzle narrowed to a savage tip, his teeth growing sharper, longer, more predatory. His brow grew more rigid, and the color of his eyes turned from brown to deep silver.

Salvas's garments dissolved as if created from smoke and his body hunched over. He fell onto all fours. His fingers

stretched and his nails became curved claws that dug into the rock floor. The minotaur's grey fur receded into his body, revealing gleaming silver scales.

From his shoulder blades burst two arching growths that spread in the blink of an eye into small wings. As the wings flapped, they unfolded larger and larger, becoming gargantuan, webbed appendages more than capable of uplifting his expanding massive form. At the same time, a huge, spiked tail burst from his lower backside, quickly draping itself across the floor behind him.

When the transformation was completed, what had once been a decorated officer of the Minotaur Empire—now a silver dragon—rumbled his pleasure at his true form.

"I am myself again," the silver behemoth uttered, his words echoing through the cave. "I am Shield once more."

His reptilian gaze swept over the totem, fixing on a skull on the second tier. Shield's eyes suddenly softened and he lowered his gigantic head in long-repressed sadness. This was the one. This was hers. Shield knew it.

"Starlight, my mate," he whispered in a loving voice. "After so long, I am able to rescue you . . . and take you away from this hellish limbo at last."

With incredible delicacy, the dragon reached for the skull of his dead beloved.

As he touched the skull, a foul crimson aura instantly engulfed the entire totem, spreading rapidly to the dragon. Shield roared in agony and fell back. Smoke rose from several parts of his body where his scaled hide had been burned.

As he lay confused and in pain, what almost sounded like mocking laughter assailed his ears. The silver leviathan opened watery eyes and beheld for an instant what appeared to be the spectre of a gigantic red dragon.

"Volcanus?" Shield muttered.

As quickly as the image had materialized, it vanished. Shield shook his head, then exhaled. Slowly the pain dwindled.

The totem stood there, looking exactly as before. With

some trepidation, Shield reached out with his higher senses, seeking to fathom the spell that had attacked him. Trust Volcanus, even in death, to lay one last, vicious trap.

No such spell could be detected. The silver dragon circled the totem, studying it up and down, but found nothing to explain his alarm.

Suspicious but determined, Shield reached again for his mate's skull.

The aura again burst to life, its chaotic fury sending a blinded Shield reeling. He collided with the cave wall then rolled to one side.

This time, he most certainly heard laughter—laughter with a familiar, mocking ring.

As Shield's head cleared, the silver behemoth watched with horror as the aura spread far above the totem and begin to assume shape. It stretched wide and high, creating a figure the leviathan recognized readily.

The crimson outline of a dragon.

Shield . . . hissed the wind.

The silver knew that voice, heard it in the nightmares he still suffered. It was the voice of Starlight's slayer.

"Volcanus?"

That was impossible to believe. Volcanus had run afoul of the dread Malys only days after taking the life of Shield's mate. His own skull decorated her totem, just as Starlight's decorated his. This could not be Volcanus.

I sensed you coming . . . the wind hissed. After all these years I sensed you . . . and now you are here . . .

"You are dead!" Shield roared, his thundering voice rattling the cavern. "Dead! Haunt me no further!"

Dead? the glowing outline lowered itself and drew nearer to the totem. *As they are, do you mean?*

Moans suddenly arose from the totem, the moans of dragons in torment. The horrific sounds made the huge silver cringe. He pressed against the wall, for he knew that among the agonized voices was that of his beloved.

The moans finally faded away, but the menacing outline of the other dragon did not. The ghostly Volcanus rose high again, shrieking with laughter. *She is still mine, Shield . . .*

“It cannot be! Malys took your life! You cannot be here . . .” In a subdued voice, the silver dragon added, “She cannot still be here . . .”

If her essence is not here, then why have you hidden yourself for so long among such puny creatures, debasing yourself and pretending to be one of them, just so that you could have this chance to be reunited with her?

He had come only to steal her skull, to symbolically free her of the fate that had befallen her. . . yet . . . yet it was true. Shield still felt her presence, in his thoughts, in his dreams, and now in this cave.

“How? How can this be, Volcanus?”

He stared at the ghost dragon, with its burning red orbs and slender muzzle, which had made Volcanus look different from his fellow reds. Shield had always thought his nemesis better resembled one of the conniving greens.

Death came to many during the Dragon Purge, Volcanus replied. The victor of today often becomes the feast of tomorrow . . .

Even though few of his own kind had participated in the Purge, Shield needed no history lesson of that terrible time. Never before had dragons so maliciously hunted other dragons. The victors had drained the life force and magic of their victims, leaving husks behind. Afterward, the great dragons had begun collecting trophy heads, for when placed together through spellwork, they created an awful reservoir of power. Malys had been the most successful among the overlords; her totem reputed to consist of more than one hundred skulls. She had grown into a monstrous, bloated thing, able to ravage and transform entire lands, in great part due to the power of her totem.

Yet with all that, Malys was not invincible. What had slain her, Shield did not know, but he had sensed her death only days before. Her death had led him here.

Now, just when he had thought he would retrieve Starlight's skull, this new horror had emerged.

I knew that I might one day falter, the spectre breathed, so I planned ahead. With my blood and the blood of each I took, I blended a unique spell, bound myself to the totem . . . and bound the dead in the process. I might perish in body . . . but I would still live among them . . .

"As a ghoulish shade! An abomination!" Shield summoned his magic. "An abomination I will eradicate now!"

At the cost of causing her further pain? My pain is her pain, silver . . .

His strange and dire words made Shield hesitate. The silver dragon felt guilty for not having been near when Volcanus slew his mate; to cause Starlight further suffering now would be unthinkable. Would his actions free her or only make her fate worse, he wondered.

Then the wind that was Volcanus's voice said, *I can free her for you . . .*

The silver's hope rose, then instantly fell. He knew that Volcanus would offer nothing so valuable without cost. "Why? What would you demand of me?"

Only your body . . .

"My . . . what?"

Did you think that I would be forever satisfied to be this . . . this shadow? The fearsome shape drifted closer. I waited, patiently, knowing that someone would come eventually . . . and they did. Treasure hunters seeking the mythic dragon gold! One came who appeared strong enough - but when I conquered his will, took his body . . . it could not contain my greatness.

A bolt of crimson energy struck the ground ahead of Shield, making him jump. *He burnt to a crisp. They all burnt. Even so strong a brute as a minotaur could not hold my wondrous being! None of the lesser races would suffice . . .*

Shield looked around at the collections of bones he had dismissed with not much more than a sidelong glance. They were all black and ruined. The lesser races.

Another dragon . . . surely another dragon could hold me and let me live again, Volcanus went on avidly. How ironic that this chosen one should be you . . .

The silver behemoth gouged the rock floor with his claws, so repulsed was he by this suggestion. "You will never overcome my will, never take my body! I'll leave you condemned to this shadow fate forever!"

Volcanus flared bright, his red orbs burning into Shield's mind. *Then you condemn Starlight as well . . .*

Once more the skulls moaned in a ghastly chorus . . . one in particular could be heard, the loudest, most pained.

"Nooo!" roared Shield, losing control. Claws out, wings spread across the chamber, he flew toward the totem.

With a laugh, the dark spirit shimmered—and a tremendous red bolt shot from the totem at the silver dragon. It threw Shield against the ceiling, then tossed him to the ground, where he lay dazed and battered.

You have disguised yourself as a minotaur too long, old foe . . . you are weak, awkward . . . Volcanus's magic picked up the silver and hurled him at another wall. Shield roared as his bones crunched with the impact. *I can retrain your body once it is mine . . . once you have come to realize that you have no other choice . . .*

With that, the force that had held Shield at bay now lofted him and heaved him out of the cave. The malevolent glitter of the chamber gave way to the dark, stormy night. With a roar of agony, Shield plummeted to the forest.

He landed with a resounding boom, rolling end over end into the trees. Huge trunks snapped upon impact with his massive body. He lay there for a long while, all but senseless.

Only when he heard voices did the silver dragon stir. Investigating the noise, his own crew was coming.

Instinct made him shift rapidly into the guise of Captain Salvus. The moment he had transformed, Shield stood. Immediately, though, the dragon in minotaur form felt injured

and light-headed. When he clutched his temple, he noticed a sticky moisture—blood.

Summoning magic, he sealed the wound as best he could, then he stumbled groggily as far away from the cave as he could get before the humans arrived.

He had to rest, to think. The nightmare he had confronted in the lair left him confused. All Shield knew was that he had to keep the cave a secret from the crew. If they discovered the totem, what might they attempt to do? Who knew what chaos might ensue? Volcanus might take revenge on Starlight; his beloved might forever be doomed to the world of the undead. Shield could not allow that to happen; he had failed her twice now and would not do so a third time.

A shape abruptly materialized in the dark ahead of him. Lost in his pain and fears, Shield almost ran right into his first mate.

“Captain?”

Shield quickly focused. Jek.

“Captain, we have been looking for you. You left camp without letting any of us know—” Jek leaned forward, peering at Shield. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. I—I just fell. Stunned myself for a few moments.” Even as he uttered this clumsy explanation, dizziness overcame him. Shield tottered.

The first mate started to reach for him, then withdrew his hand. Shield had planted one palm against a tree and stood there until the throbbing in his head lulled.

More voices could be heard. Jek looked to the right, where shadowy figures emerged. “Here! Over here!”

Several warriors, including Commander Drako, joined the pair. Most looked warily about, as if expecting an attack.

“You found him!” Drako growled. He looked past Shield. “What was that sound, Captain? Sounded like a hundred catapults striking at once! Were you tracking the rebels up in these hills?”

The silver dragon had to steer the crew away from the hills. "No. Nothing. There's no rebels . . ."

"I heard some kind of beast," interjected one crew member, waving his ax around. "Sounded huge!"

"Aye!" snarled another. "Didn't sound like no lion or wolf, though! More like a meredrake, I'd guess!"

"It'd be the world's biggest meredrake!" argued the first.

"Enough babbling!" Jek barked. "Everyone back to camp! No good will come from trying to hunt through these woods in the middle of the night, eh, Captain?"

Straightening, Shield nodded. "No good at all. All you heard was a big blast of lightning hitting the ground, right near me. You know how strange the weather's been." He looked at the first mate. "That's why I fell. Head was too fogged up to remember that until now."

"You heard the captain! No rebels tonight! Maybe you'll get to blood your blades tomorrow! Now, everyone back to camp!"

As Shield started forward, however, his left leg buckled. It was not Jek, nearest to him, who came to his aid, but rather the quick-reacting Drako and another marine fighter.

"Easy now, Captain," urged Commander Drako. "From the looks of that bump on your skull, you'll be lucky if you don't need a few days rest."

"I'll be all right," Shield insisted.

Drako glanced at the first mate. "You've got mender training, Jek. Maybe you better look at it right now."

Jek took a step back, shaking his head. "My skills are paltry. Best if Orin takes care of him when he gets back to camp."

Drako snorted. "Come along, Captain," he said, shifting so Shield could put more weight on him. "No arguments! After all the wounded lads you've carried back to safety, you deserve to have it done for you for a change . . ."

Shield would have argued, but again the world spun out of control. He felt his legs buckle and heard in the distance the

concerned voices of the crew he had planned to abandon this night. The dragon felt a pang of regret about his crew, but then the image of his mate appeared in his muddled brain. She looked so beautiful but lost, her silver eyes filled with uncertainty and pain. As unconsciousness claimed Shield, her image receded.

As she vanished, he heard Volcanus laugh.

A brightness stirred Shield. He tried to cover his eyes, but his arm refused to move. The more the dragon tried and failed, the more urgent his desire became.

“Easy, Captain! Easy!” grumbled an aged voice.

Blinking, Shield opened his eyes. Gradually his gaze revealed a grizzled minotaur with a blunt muzzle and deep brown fur rapidly greying. One horn had been cracked in half at some point in the past. Scars covered the right side of the face, narrowly missing the eye. In one hand the figure was holding a square-bottomed oil lamp.

“Orin . . .”

“Aye, Captain Salvias, it’s old Orin.”

The elder minotaur wore a red badge near his shoulder, the symbol that all minotaur menders wore. He acted as healer and surgeon aboard the *Crimson Dagger*, doing his best with the skills learned by his people through centuries of battlefield emergencies. Orin was one of the more competent menders, even in Shield’s opinion. He saved more lives than he lost, a rare boast in his trade.

Testing his arm, the dragon again found it unresponsive. Neither his other arm nor his legs could move much, either. Someone had bound him to the sandy earth. “Orin?”

“You were struggling wildly in your sleep, Captain Salvias.” Orin bared what remained of his teeth in a minotaur grin. “A damn strong one you are! Jek was afraid you’d hurt yourself too much, so he reluctantly gave the order. It took

three sailors to keep you in place while two more wrapped your wrists and ankles! Quite a sight to behold!" The mender took a dagger from his kilt and cut the cloth bonds.

Sitting up, Shield rubbed his wrists. He still felt weak and sore, but he could move and think. The first thing he noticed was that the camp was nearly empty. All the minotaurs were gone somewhere.

The cave suddenly flashed in his mind. "Where is everyone?"

"Easy now, Captain Salvas." Orin put a soothing hand on Shield's shoulder. "Jek's got them spread out over the island, searching it top to bottom as per Imperial dictum. We've done our duty, even with you a day-and-a-half unconscious—"

A jolt coursed through the dragon. "A day and a half?"

"Aye! Easy! You don't want to open up that head wound again! I've had to redo it twice!"

The dragon touched the spot gingerly, surprised that the wound had not healed better. If Shield was suffering this much in his mortal guise, then truly Volcanus had injured him. Not enough to cause any permanent damage, of course, since the red sought his body, but enough to convince Shield of the folly of standing against him.

That thought left the silver dragon bereft. What could he do against such power, except acquiesce to Volcanus's monstrous offer? Shield would have to sacrifice himself, give his body to his despised foe . . .

While he was thinking these dire thoughts, Orin had been looking over Shield's wounds. The mender paused in his ministrations and peered over his captain's head. "Ah! Good! Jek and the others are back early!"

Shield stiffened. He glanced over his shoulder, seeing the first mate standing at the outer perimeter. Jek had paused to adjust his breast plate. The officer looked up and met his captain's intense gaze, then dipped his horns respectfully. Behind the first mate hurried several more of the crew. Jek waved them in, then headed over toward Orin and Shield.

"Did he manage to rip free his bonds?" Jek asked Orin.

"Nay. He slept docile enough at the end. I cut him loose when he woke."

The first mate nodded. To Shield, he said, "Captain, we've been searching the island, leaving pickets to ensure that no one is slipping around. By day's end, most of the hills will have been covered, Captain, but we find no tracks or fresh campfires, nothing out of the ordinary. I'm thinking there've been no rebels here for months, if ever."

"Too bad," the dragon responded mechanically. He had no interest whatsoever in rebels, mythic or otherwise.

"I searched around the hills myself."

Despite himself, Shield could not hold back a sharp glance at Jek. Trying to recover, he asked casually, "Find anything?"

"You're right about something huge striking the base of one of them high hills. Trees shattered and ground torn up. What else could do all that except lightning? You're damn lucky you survived, Captain."

"He's survived worse," put in the mender. "Remember fighting those blue-skinned brutes just off the colony of Tengis? Captain Salvus should've been cut to ribbons, but somehow he still managed to beat them back onto their own ship and saved three of our crew at the same time!"

"Aye," murmured Jek. "I remember. I was one of those he saved."

"So you were. I forgot that."

Shield felt uncomfortable being reminded. He had done what he had done. Now, his charade was over. One way or another, his life among the minotaurs was at an end.

Then he thought of what Volcanus might do to the crew of the *Crimson Dagger* once he had given him his new body.

No matter what else they were, Shield had discovered his minotaur crew to be as honorable as almost any other race on Krynn, even the elves or the Knights of Solamnia. Those who had served under Shield had been, with few exceptions,

worthy of even a dragon's respect. They had followed him loyally into life-threatening situations, giving their blood at his command.

No, he could not leave the minotaurs to Volcanus.

Thinking fast, Shield looked up at Jek. "Forget the rest of the search. If there were rebels, they would have attacked us by now. Round up the crew and let's leave in the morning. The weather looks like it'll hold out."

"Leave?" asked the first mate. "Our orders are to search everywhere! We're almost done. Besides, we should spend a few days restocking. There's food and water to be found here."

Shield gave Jek the fierce stare that had served him so well in command, ever since first he had begun this masquerade. Jek met that stare for several seconds, then finally looked away. "As you say, Captain."

"Better that we sail to an imperial port nearby as soon as possible, give our report and move on to greener pastures. Command will want to know this area is clear of rebels." Shield considered further. "In fact, we should start sending the longboats back to the *Dagger* this evening."

"But—why?"

"I want everything set so we can sail immediately come the dawn," the silver dragon in minotaur guise answered adamantly. He had his plan now. He would remain aboard for a day or two, then when no one was watching, the captain would vanish overboard—and fly back to the island to meet his fate. "I want everybody ready."

Jek's eyes finally narrowed in understanding. "The crew all ready to depart . . . aye, that makes sense."

"Good, then that's settled." Shield tried to rise, but Orin put a hand against his chest and pushed him back down gently.

"Nay, Captain Salvus. It would be best if you ate some food, then rested more. You'll need your strength."

Shield did not debate the issue. He felt depleted, both from the encounter with Volcanus and the stress of returning

to his mortal form. He needed to be at his best when he faced Volcanus. The few days at sea would give him time to recover. The silver dragon still retained the desperate hope that he would come up with some strategy whereby he might defeat the malevolent red spectre.

"I'll get the captain something to eat," Jek offered.

While the first mate went to see to the food, Shield resigned himself to another inspection by the mender. After satisfying himself as to his captain's improving condition, the elder minotaur shook his head. "Nothing keeps you down long. Truly you are the pride of the minotaur race! You should've become a champion in the Great Circus!"

"This is the only place for me," Shield replied. The dragon thought of all the years he had spent in minotaur form, prowling so many islands, looking and waiting.

Misunderstanding him, Orin said, "Aye, that's the blood of our people calling! You'd think there was sea water in minotaur veins!"

To Shield's relief, Jek returned with a wooden bowl brimming with some brown mixture. Shield knew the odor well. Salted goat in a sauce made from dark rice, a staple on imperial ships. The first time that he had smelled it, it had been all Shield could do not to give himself away through his revulsion. After so many years, it, like so much else, was something he had grown to accept as normal, even pleasant— all part of the masquerade. Shield ate with as much gusto as any of the crew would have.

The food had a little more bitterness to it than usual. Jek saw his expression and looked apologetic. "Damned cook was experimenting with some herbs he found on the island."

Shield devoured the contents. Almost immediately, he felt both relaxed and sleepy. It was good to have food in his stomach. His thoughts calmed and hope returned.

"Best you rest now, Captain Salvas," the mender suggested.

Laying back, Shield saw his first mate still looming over him. Jek wore a look of concern that he tried to hide when he noticed his superior eyeing him.

"I'll see that everything's taken care of while you're sleepin', Captain. I promise you that."

The dragon nodded, drifting off. Whatever happened, at that moment he realized he would miss Jek, miss the entire crew of the *Dagger*. They had been his life for so long.

Yes, he would have to make certain they were out of danger before he confronted Volcanus. Shield owed them that much and more . . . even if they would never know the truth about him.



At first his dreams were serene, even wonderful. He soared among light, golden clouds, Starlight by his side. Slimmer, more aerodynamic than her mate, she coursed through the heavens with an ease he could never match. Her laughter reminded him of a rainbow, so dazzling was it. In midflight she glided under him, nuzzling the underside of his muzzle with the top of hers . . .

Then a darkness overtook the dreams. Suddenly he was flying through the unnatural storms covering much of the world, calling out her name. She cried out his, pleaded with him to find her, but each time Shield thought he had sensed the direction, her cry came from elsewhere.

Then the clouds reshaped, transforming into a monstrously huge dragon tinged red by bolts of lightning streaming through his body. His laughter was deafening thunder. When the red dragon spread his wings, hurricanes beat at Shield, driving him away from the pleading voice . . .

In his dream Volcanus stretched forth a grotesquely large paw with talons like elongated teeth. The paw grew larger and larger, enveloping Shield. He struggled, but although his prison proved oddly pliable, it did not break. It tightened

around him, trapping his wings and legs. Shield could not breathe, could not even open his mouth—

Then he awoke—to find his nightmare was reality.

Still in his minotaur form, once again Shield lay bound, some sort of net swallowing and constraining him. It was night. He twisted and turned, growing more desperate and confused. Beyond him, the dragon heard sharp voices, some of them vaguely familiar.

“He’s waking! Hold him tight! Keep that net sealed! Harkum, you lose that line again and I’ll have your horns!”

Through the fog remaining from his nightmares, Shield recognized Jek’s voice. Why was his first mate giving such orders?

“That’s it! Get the beast bound tight before—!”

“Just cut his head off and be done with it!” roared Drako from elsewhere.

“Not until we know it’ll be a killing stroke! You want a blood-crazed dragon tearing everyone apart?”

Dragon . . .

So they knew the truth.

How it had happened, Shield did not know, but that hardly mattered. What did matter was that his crew, the same minotaurs he had sailed with for years, now sought his death.

If he perished, there would be no hope for Starlight’s spirit. She would remain trapped in Volcanus’s prison forever.

That very thought filled the silver dragon with uncontrollable rage. From his mouth came a roar no minotaur could have ever uttered, a roar that sent the crew into a fearful frenzy.

“Hold him tight!” Jek demanded. “Hold him—”

Shield did the only thing he could think of to free himself. The minotaurs might believe their ropes capable of holding him, but could the bonds stand up to the strain of containing a body many times larger?

The dragon transformed, filling the net to overflowing. It strained against his body, burrowing into his flesh—

The ropes snapped.

Something bounced off his now-scaled hide. Jek's voice rose above the others, but what the first mate said, Shield could not make out.

The dragon roared as he spread his wings wide and flew up. Thunder seemed to echo his outrage. Arching his long, sinewy neck, Shield glared down at the tiny creatures.

He made out Drako's marine fighters organizing into a coherent force. Shield flapped his wings, creating a wind that whipped the minotaurs together and left them in a jumbled pile.

Strands of rope dangled over the dragon. He shook violently, sending the remnants raining down on his would-be captors.

Then his baleful gaze alighted on Jek. Ax in hand, the first mate stood ready for whatever final attack Shield might mount. Jek had always been one of those willing to sacrifice himself for his fellow crew members.

Because he recalled such things about a once loyal comrade, the silver dragon hesitated. Instead of snatching up the minotaur in his jaws, the silver dragon rumbled, "How? How did you know what I am?"

Seeing that he would face no monstrous assault, Jek dared answer, "I noticed you gone the other night, but at first it meant nothing! Then when you didn't appear after a time, I thought rebels had caught our captain! None of the crew would stand for that and we went in search." His eyes bulged. "I found the trail and went ahead of the others—and heard the roar of a dragon . . ."

The first mate had nearly reached the hills when he heard the cry and saw the huge form drop from the sky, watching in awe as a dragon collided with the earth.

Fascinated despite the danger, the minotaur had stared at the stunned beast. Then, someone had called out and the leviathan had stirred. Jek had nearly fled . . . but froze as his disbelieving eyes witnessed a mind-numbing sight.

The dragon had shifted form, shrinking rapidly and losing his wings. Fur had replaced scales and two huge horns had sprouted out of his head.

“. . . and to my horror, I saw the beast become the captain to whom I had sworn my life . . .” The first mate looked bitter. “I almost beheaded you then.”

He had not. Torn between loyalty and fear, Jek had struggled with his decision. After bringing his captain back to camp, he had gone back, searched the area by the hills, finding a large broken piece of the dragon’s silver scale. When he had presented his proof to the others, it turned out there were two other witnesses to the unnerving events. Those two crew members had feared to come forward, certain no one would believe that the captain in whom they all trusted was, in reality, a silver dragon. Jek and the other two had convinced the other minotaurs—and they had decided to overpower their captain in his sleep.

“You put something in the food,” Shield snapped. “The taste was different.”

“To make you sleep until something could be done,” the first mate replied defiantly. “I thought the net would be able to hold you and keep you from changing back into a dragon. I see I made a fatal mistake.”

Shield surveyed the gathered force, seeing all the faces with which he had grown familiar. Much of his fury abated; they had merely done what any brave minotaur would have done, under the circumstances.

“I would never have harmed you,” he declared to them, hovering above them.

Jek did not believe him. “You wanted us all aboard the ship so you could slay everyone at once.”

“Is that what you believed? Jek, I could have done that easily at any point in the past!”

The first mate looked slightly uncertain. “This was no chance discovery! You know this island! Your old lair must be here! I saw a cave above. For some reason you needed us

to bring you here, you had no more use for us!"

Shield heard the anger in his second's voice. Betrayal was a grievous crime among minotaurs; silver dragons loathed betrayal too. He landed gently, with the minotaurs swiftly edging away. He folded his wings in an attempt to look less imposing and replied, "No . . . I wanted you aboard so you could all sail away to safety. I would have left the boat once we were out of sight of this island. You are not a part of what I must do here."

Jek snorted, but Orin dared pipe up, "Safety from what?"

"Safety from one who is beyond even my power, I fear. If I fall to him, he would want to keep his lair secret, and that would mean destroying the *Dagger* and all aboard."

"So we're caught in a feud between dragons . . ." snarled Jek.

"He is more than any mere dragon now. More important, he is the one who slew my mate and the only way she might enjoy peace is if I go to him and surrender my life. I did not know any of this until the other day, but you have no part in what must happen, save as innocents." Shield swung his head low, which made many of the minotaurs jump with alarm. However, when they saw him drop his head level with the first mate's, they cautiously relaxed, listening. "Jek, you are captain now! Take all aboard immediately, sail away from here, and forget this island! I was wrong to bring you all here—"

"This is a trick," the new captain muttered uncertainly.

"I could destroy you all right now if I truly wanted to."

Even the minotaurs could see that. Jek suddenly lowered his ax, the others imitating him. Without taking his eyes off of the behemoth, Jek called, "Everyone to the longboats! Grab your gear and move out! Now!"

There was hesitation at first, but then one by one they obeyed. Shield watched as the minotaurs quickly and efficiently gathered up everything and broke camp. A curious sense of pride filled him.

“Jek . . . the one I face will be weary for a time after . . . if he takes me. Use that time. Head to the nearest imperial port. Once you reach it, you should be safe.”

The minotaur who had served him faithfully for ten years nodded. Seeing the others were ready, he stepped away. As he turned away, Jek harnessed his ax on his back. It was as much a sign of trust as the dragon could expect.

The crew began to push the longboats out into the sea. Shield felt oddly empty inside. They were ephemeral creatures, minotaurs, living out their brief lives in what seemed like mere minutes to a dragon, and they were an especially violent race, but they were honorable and ambitious. Their departure should have meant little, but still Shield could not help but watch until the last of the boats had safely reached the warship. He could still make out certain individuals. Drako, then Orin, then Jek were the last to climb aboard.

Finally turning away from the sea—and the life he had lived—Shield gazed up resignedly at the distant hill.

There was no more reason to delay.

Starlight—and Volcanus—awaited him.

He landed at the base of the still dark cave. Without further hesitation, Shield folded his wings and charged inside.

“Volcanus!” he roared, his voice and body filling the chamber. Shield unleashed the spell he had been preparing, focusing all the might of his pure energy at the totem. The emerald forces bathed the foul artifact, cocooning it. It shook, wavered, seemed ready to burst—

Then the dark crimson aura sprang to life, effortlessly burning away his spell. The aura shot forth, surrounding Shield. He could not move, could not breathe.

From the totem arose the familiar, malignant shape of the red dragon. The burning embers that were Volcanus’s eyes

fixed themselves with amusement on the hapless Shield. The ghost dragon's maniacal laughter filled his ears.

Futile dreams . . . again . . . you are nothing if not consistent . . .

The silver dragon could not answer. Agony swept through his body. He yearned for death, so great it was.

Just when Shield thought that Volcanus would grant him that sweet relief . . . the pain ceased, and he was still alive.

As he slumped to the floor, Volcanus hissed, *I would not want to badly injure my future body . . .*

"Never!" Shield automatically roared.

Then Starlight remains mine . . .

From the totem arose the mournful cries of the red's victims.

Shield could not stand the foul chorus. "Stop! Stop! What must I do to satisfy you?"

You must willing open yourself up, give way to my spirit . . .

To make matters simplest for the red then, Shield had to will his own death. For Starlight, he was willing to do just that.

"Promise her freedom and I will give you what you want."

He felt Volcanus's excitement building. The spectre shimmered and swelled. *When you are mine, she will be released.*

"No! Starlight must be freed first!"

There was a pause, then Volcanus said, *I can wait for another body to come along; it is you who have no choice. Give me your body and I will grant her peace . . .*

Shield cursed. He did not want to let his beloved stay in torment any longer. "We give at the same time."

An equal sharing . . . clever . . . very well . . .

Filled with misgivings, the silver dragged himself toward the totem. The voracious Volcanus towered over him. Shield glanced away, focusing on Starlight's skull.

Open yourself up to me . . . give me entrance . . .

Lowering his head to the floor, Shield obeyed. He immediately felt the intrusive touch of the red. Volcanus's presence was like a sickness invading him. Shield's will began to fade, his strength disappearing.

From the totem, the foul aura spread over the prone dragon. It covered him like a huge blanket, permeated him. Shield felt his life force losing its hold.

He stirred enough to demand, "Starlight! Set her free!"

Volcanus's laughter echoed shrilly in his head. *Fret not . . . you will both soon be together . . . forever . . .*

It had happened, Shield realized weakly. The betrayal he had expected—yet he could do little now. The silver dragon summoned what willpower remained to him and fought back at Volcanus's treacherous conquest of him.

Although he somewhat hindered his foe's advance, there was still no question as to the outcome.

Give in and it will be less painful for you . . . and for her . . .

Shield fought on, weakening. "Let her go and I will spare you the effort! It is little enough to ask!"

When I will soon have a new body and more power at my command than ever before? The crimson aura that was Volcanus filled up Shield. These years of playacting as a minotaur have disgraced you. You cling to mortal illusions you could not possibly fulfill! I will be doing you a favor when I rid you of your earthly concerns . . .

The skulls in the totem wailed. Volcanus grew more fiery, more horrific. The pain was unbearable.

Then a shout rang through the lair. One shout, then more. The sounds stirred Shield in a way he could not quite comprehend. The dragon managed to twist his head just enough to see a sight that confused and emboldened him.

Minotaurs were pouring into Volcanus's lair. They brandished war axes, long swords, even spears. The crew of the *Dagger* rapidly spread out, foolishly ready to take on an enemy that was bigger and more dangerous than anything they could possibly have imagined.

Jek was in command. The shaggy minotaur turned his eyes to the totem. He studied it and the dragon for but a single breath, then shouted, "There! Take that down! Hurry!"

An astonished Volcanus swept upward. He stared at the tiny figures.

Foolish little bugs! You must be swatted . . .

His aura shot forth, seizing three of the crew standing too close together and hurling them against the stone wall with such force that their bones audibly cracked. They collapsed like rag dolls to the ground, their weapons still clutched in their broken hands.

The others seemed unfazed. Several closed in on the totem. Drako shouted orders at several other marine fighters, sending them at Volcanus from three different directions at once. Even old Orin was among them, the mender dashing around trying to aid the fallen

Away with you! Volcanus commanded disdainfully. Red lightning flashed leaving four burnt minotaur corpses in its wake. The red ghost dragon liquefied the ground underneath two more fighters, drowning them in rock.

Still the minotaurs advanced and maneuvered. Several had managed to get within reach of the totem. The artifact suddenly shimmered though, and when Jek tried to chop at it with his ax, his weapon was repelled harmlessly.

At that moment Shield suddenly felt a weakening of his own torture. Protecting his totem while fighting the minotaurs and attempting to take over Shield's body was putting Volcanus under tremendous strain. Though the ghost dragon did not recede from Shield's body, his magic was wavering, which gave the silver dragon an idea.

Shield gathered his will and resisted the presence of Volcanus with all his remaining might. The red reeled mentally, then Volcanus recovered and fought back. Again Shield sensed that, more than anything, his foe did not want to give up this chance of new life.

The aura around the totem was shimmering erratically. Jek roared in pleasure, pointing with his ax. Several others began hacking at the red dragon's totem, and although it pained Shield dearly to see them chipping and breaking the skulls, the dragon knew it had to be done.

Volcanus sent out a fiery claw that crushed flat the minotaur standing next to Jek. A tendril also shot out at the first mate, but Jek managed to dodge and roll away.

The red's attacks intensified, but they were wilder and off-target. Everywhere it seemed there were minotaurs, and the crew of the *Dagger* continued to strike the totem. Drako threw himself against it. The skulls shifted. With a roar, Volcanus swept down on the marine commander, freezing Drako in stone. However, others, including Jek, took up the dead fighter's example. While some continued to batter the totem, the rest pushed and shoved against it, using their formidable bulk. Under the onslaught, the huge skulls began to budge and slide.

Nooo . . . Shield suddenly felt Volcanus withdraw from him. The red dragon had come at last to realize that defending the totem was most important. The totem itself was losing power under the relentless destruction. He had drawn too much from that power trying to claim Shield's body.

As the ghostly form withdrew, Shield acted instantly. Understanding now, the silver dragon concentrated all of his power on the totem. Every iota of strength Shield had left went into his spell. The force he unleashed struck the skulls where the weakening and damage was already at its worst. The totem flared bright red, then glittered gold.

Volcanus screamed. With a heart-rending wail, the totem teetered then collapsed. The pieces tumbled everywhere. The monstrous aura that was Volcanus flickered.

The silver dragon gasped from his exertion. Had Volcanus any power left to try to seize his body, Shield could not have prevented him now.

Volcanus, however, could do nothing but scream. His shape grew smaller, more chaotic, and finally—a sight that stunned Shield as much as the gaping minotaurs—glittering tendrils rose up from the scattered skulls. They spiraled around Volcanus, their multi-colors those of all the many dragons he had slain—the dragons of Krynn.

They swirled around the red aura. The embers that were Volcanus's ghostly orbs darted around frantically.

The cave filled with the triumphant, ear-splitting roars of many, many dragons. The tendrils wrapped tighter and tighter around their former killer and captor . . .

Volcanus burst into flames.

He struggled, screamed, sought to escape. Nothing, though, saved the sinister spectre from the justice of his victims. Volcanus burned and, burning, lost all form.

At last, with a long singular wail of his own . . . the red dragon became a wisp of smoke that faded to nothingness.

The tendrils now wrapped around one another, creating a display that filled the cavern with a multitude of oscillating colors. It mattered not what foes they might have been in life; the many different dragons had all suffered in death as Volcanus's victims, and that bound them together.

Then, one by one, they gradually dissipated. Each time, a struggling Shield thought he heard a whisper or sigh. In the end, only one tendril remained, a beautiful silver array of miniature stars.

Shield felt her loving, grateful caress in his mind - then Starlight, too, faded away.

With her departure, the silver dragon had no more reason to hold onto his bare consciousness. Shield let his head slump. His eyes shut tight. He thought he heard the voice of Jek, but that did not matter. Starlight was free. She could rest now.

And so could he . . .

How long he lay there, Shield could not guess, but when he awoke, it was to discover he was not alone.

Jek sat nearby on a rock. A blanket lay next to the minotaur. The first mate puffed on a long clay pipe. When he saw that the silver dragon was staring at him, Jek pulled the pipe out of his mouth.

"I wondered if you'd live," he remarked.

"I find it a surprise myself. Why did you not finish the job, end my suffering?"

The minotaur looked insulted. "There is no honor in striking down one in such a state . . . then again, you are my captain."

Shield raised his head. His body still ached, but he believed he had slept long enough to recover—perhaps to be able to fly. "How long have I—?"

"Three days . . . 'tis night again."

Shield looked around the cave. Without Volcanus's magic, the place would have been dark, save for the torches now stuck in the wall. The dragon's eyes narrowed when he realized something was missing.

"The skulls—"

Jek doused his pipe and rose. "I did as I believed you'd want. They were brought outside and burned properly, the remains buried with honor . . . all but one." He folded the blanket and stuffed it under his arm. "Look."

The silver behemoth did—and beheld the fragmented skull he still recognized with his higher senses as being hers. Starlight's. How?

"It was the one from which the last, silver strand rose, the one that stayed at the end, when the others left. I knew it had to be her, the one you sought."

"I—" The dragon was confused. "Jek . . . why? I told you to leave. This did not involve your people. You all risked your lives."

"You said it yourself. You could've slain us all at any moment you wanted. By the time we reached the ship, we

realized the truth of that, so we turned right around. You tried to protect us even after we attempted to kill you. We all owed you." The first mate's nostrils flared. "Some of us have owed you many times over for years . . ."

"But now several of your own race have died—"

Jek bared his teeth in a grin. "In glorious battle! Can you imagine the tales we can tell when we reach home?"

Despite himself, Shield returned the grin. He knew Jek's family, knew most of the crew's loved ones in one fashion or another. Being minotaurs, they would marvel at the yarn, honor those who had lived and those who had fallen.

"Where are the others?"

"The dead have been given proper services. Orin's mending the wounded. The crew is encamped on the beach, captain."

Shield shook his huge head. "I am not captain. You are."

"You'll always be our captain." Jek picked up the last of his belongings. "I'll always be proud of the years I served under Captain Salvas, lost in battle against the savage red dragon."

The silver dragon, just gathering Starlight's remains in his huge paws, replied, "My name is not Salvas. I am Shield."

"A good, proud name." Jek's chest swelled as he backed up to let the dragon pass. "I'll honor it with those of my kin."

Dipping his head in respect to the minotaur, Shield held Starlight's skull close. He moved toward the entrance. "I could carry you to the beach."

This brought a huge snort from his companion. "If minotaurs had been meant to fly, Sargonnas would've granted us wings—no offense to you, Captain."

"Then I bid you farewell, Jek . . . and thank you."

Shield's thoughts were not on his past . . . but his future. Starlight was at rest at last; giving the skull proper rites would aid his own peace of mind. But as he burst through the cave entrance into the night, he nearly lost hold of Starlight's remnants, so startled was he by what he saw. The

storm had lifted . . . and in its place a clear sky and a multitude of stars in familiar constellations greeted his astounded gaze. They were all there, all but two. Nowhere could he see that which represented Paladine —

Nor could he see the one which represented Takhisis . . . and that, he felt, meant more.

A horn blared. Shield pulled himself away from the incredible vision and looked down at the beach. Torchlight illuminating their encampment, the minotaurs stood at attention. The moon reflected on his scales.

As one, the crew raised their weapons and roared in salute, five times in all, their sign for good fortune.

Dropping lower, Shield dipped his wings toward them and unleashed a triumphant roar. Then his heart filled with renewed hope—not just for himself but his world—and the silver dragon flew off into the starlit night.



THE DRAGON'S CHILD

NANCY VARIAN BERBERICK

Raven Thorn grasped the last handhold on the cliff face with a bleeding grip. He thrust the toe of his boot into the final foothold and pressed himself to the stony mountainside. Cold wind lashed his cheeks; his fingers had grown dangerously numb. He tilted his head back and sighted the mouth of the cave, wide and dark above a broad ledge. Hung between the pale winter sun and the desert below, he filled his lungs with cool air then made the muscle-wrenching climb to the ledge. He levered himself up until his forearms rested on solid ground, then he scrambled the rest of the way. He turned to look at the world below. Sanction lay to the east and south; beyond the city Kill Gulch lurked, the den of thieves and lair of contract killers. That was Raven's home, Kill Gulch. A few miles outside Kill Gulch, the mountains began their march until they joined the Lords of Doom, the sleepy volcanoes.

Raven ducked into the cave. In the sudden stillness of wind he tucked his hands under his arms and crouched, listening. Behind him wind hissed across the desert, an icy old song. Before him, the quiet breathing of the mountain sighed. The breathing had no rhythm, but it was a constant presence, for the mountain was riddled with caves and tunnels made by the Shadow People, legendary folk whose existence

was marked now only by a network of ancient passageways. Raven didn't worry about legends; he worried about realities, and lately people had been saying that draconians haunted the caverns and ran in the tunnels, rogue bands who'd begun to prey on the population of Neraka. Most heartily, Raven didn't want to run across those misbegotten lizardmen, for tonight he crouched at the head of the road that he expected would lead to his fortune.

Raven twisted a humorless smile, thinking of the task ahead.

Dragons used to make lairs inside the mountain in the days before the war, but no one had it good at the end of that fighting, not even dragons. The great beasts summoned to the last battle had been forced to abandon their clutches of eggs when they were called to defend the armies of a dark goddess. Many of the red dragons and blacks who had lived in the mountains of Neraka had not come back. In the taverns people talked about the destruction of two generations of dragons, the one killed in the war and the generation abandoned in stony nests.

Bad luck for dragons and good luck for Raven. It used to be the shell of a dragon's egg was worth nothing, a curiosity no sensible thief would risk his life to pursue. These days, however, with the gods come home to Krynn and magic back in the hands of mages who were again seeking spell components, the shells of dragon eggs were worth a lord's ransom. Raven was no lord, but he was a thief in need of ransom. He had bar bills long unpaid and a landlord who'd last night kept what he liked of Raven's few possessions as payment for back rent and thrown the paltry rest into the gutter. Those debts and losses he could survive, but the evil-eyed dwarf Ferrous Earthfast didn't have so tender a heart as the landlord. Raven could run out on the bar bills and the landlord, but he was under no illusion that he'd survive running from the gambling debts he must pay the dwarf in only a few days' time. Earthfast put hard men on the trail of

anyone foolish enough to think fleeing Kill Gulch would be the answer to indebtedness—inevitable as death itself, those hunters. If they had to track the dwarf's defaulting debtors across the very Plains of Dust and beyond, they always came back to Kill Gulch with the kind of stomach-tossing trophy that offered unquestionable proof that the luckless wretch was dead.

Raven had heard whispers in dark quarters that two of the dwarf's hunters had been celebrating the likelihood of work. He quickly refined his idea of how sensible the risk of raiding a dragon's clutch of eggs would be and slipped out of Kill Gulch just before dawn.

Raven checked the short sword at his hip and weighed his fat leather water bottle. He counted the brands in the bundle on his back. He had a packet of oil-soaked rags in the small pouch at his belt and a good steel and flint in his pocket. Inside the sack slung over his shoulder lay another pouch, this one stuffed with goose down, for it must safely hold the treasure of dragon eggs he went to find. He swiftly made and ignited a torch. The reek of fish oil stung his nostrils as orange light leaped brightly. He put his back to the desert and stepped into the whispering darkness.

The cave reached high and stretched wide. Underfoot the ground ran rough, littered with rocks and small stones. The whine of the wind fell away, the soft sigh of the mountain's own breathing dropped into the background. Raven listened for sounds more dire—the guttural growl of draconians, the distant rumbling of a brooding dragon.

Something rustled in the darkness behind him. He turned swiftly, flaring the torch—a thin scratching on stone as a hunch-backed black rat scurried into the shadows beneath the jagged edge of a rock. Green eyes glaring, it darted into an impossible crack and seemed to vanish into the cave wall.

Raven spat and went on. The way became a steep climb then grew level again as he came to a crossroad of two

passages running into the mountain at angles. One rose, the other dropped, and that one channeled the cold air along it. Raven chose the downward path. The torch's flame floated on the air. The way turned again, but gently and still down. He wasn't ten paces into this new corridor before he felt a change in the ground and stopped suddenly.

Beneath his feet yawned a cavity, like a cistern in the floor. Long white marks scored the dark stone sides, the scars where a great she-dragon had clawed out a stony nest for her clutch. Within, some the color of dried blood, others the color of rubies or fire, lay the shells of four broken eggs.

Raven's palms itched as they always did when he saw something worth snatching. He ran his tongue over dry, cold-cracked lips. He lifted the torch even as his neck prickled warning. These weren't all the remains of shells broken by the emergence of the she-dragon's wyrmlings. Three had been broken from without; one smashed by a rock, and the stone had crushed the spine of a nearly hatched infant; another was likewise destroyed. His fingers closed around the grip of his short sword. In the dirt at the bottom of the nest he saw the broad, deep impression of a heavy, taloned heel. Raven's belly tightened. Whatever made that mark was a draconian of some sort, a winged lizardman walking upright. By the look of the print, broad and deep, the creature stood a head or more taller than him.

"Damn lizards," he spat.

No love had ever been lost between draconians, the spawn of magically altered dragon eggs, and dragons themselves. Raven looked at the signs of killing around him and cursed his luck that draconian hatred was playing out in the ruin of fortunes in valuable shells. He doubted whether the witless brutes even knew the worth of what they were destroying; if they did, no draconian had the patience to gather and sell or the cunning to negotiate even the poorest kind of deal. Hit, snatch booty, and run—that was their style.

It was the last egg that drew his attention, the one closest

to the side of the nest, perhaps hidden in shadows, maybe just lucky. This one had the burst look of an egg from which a wyrmling had emerged.

Swiftly Raven looked around for sign that the maker of the print wasn't lurking near. Satisfied, he set down his sword, his steady hands giving the lie to the excitement he felt as he snatched one half of the burst shell then the other. The price he'd get for one of these fine pieces alone could repay Ferrous Earthfast five times over. One would be enough, he thought gleefully; the rest would make him rich as a lord in Kill Gulch of the Thieves.

Those thoughts were dangerous distractions now. Raven tucked the two pieces of shell safely into the down-lined pouch then secured it and the outer sack with sharp tugs.

Shadows moved; something sharp scratched stone.

Raven jerked around, firelight ran up the wall. A shadow leaped high, sharp wings and a scaly crest ruffling up to the ceiling.

Raven's heart crashed against his ribs; the torch fell from his hand. Scrambling, he snatched it up and held it high again. Breath left his lungs on a harsh curse. At his feet he saw the shadow-caster, a scrawny wyrmling about as long as his leg. In the light of the hissing torch its scaled hide gleamed like new-spilled blood. It lifted its head, eyes glaring, teeth like needles in its jaws. The sight of the thing turned his stomach with revulsion. In Raven's mind, the words dragon and death were the same.

Wings stirring, thin tail lashing, the wyrmling bared its teeth again. Raven didn't bother with his short sword. He lifted a booted foot to crush the dragon-child.

The creature hissed. Just then steel and fangs and the dry, lizard-reek of draconian filled the passage behind Raven. Snarling came to him from the stony corridor he had not chosen at the crossroad.

"Poppin' eggs," a harsh voice growled. "Fine thing when yer told to be wardin' the ways into the mountain."

Another voice rumbled rough laughter and said the smashing of dragon eggs was more than fun. "More like a public service. It kills the stinking wyrms in the egg."

Raven's torch hissed. Sudden silence fell in the instant before the wyrmling flew up with a screech. The cavern suddenly rang with thunderous voices. Lurid torchlight ran on green scales, bat-like wings stretched and flared as three Baaz draconians charged at Raven from the cross-way, two more from the passage that was his only way out of the mountain. Howling, they all seemed to catch sight of him at once.

"Spy!" one bellowed, beady eyes ablaze with outrage. Raven dropped the torch and grabbed his sword. "Filthy human spy!"

Another loomed behind the howlers. A copper-skinned Kapak, taller by a head or more than the others, bellowed, "Kill him!"

The acrid stink of poison hung in the air, the breath of the Kapak a green mist. Wide wings spread, powerful legs pushed up. Green saliva dripped from fearsome fangs. Wings thrusting, short sword in its taloned fist, the Kapak soared over the others. Spittle dropped from its fangs; the acid of the creature's venom splashed by, just missing Raven's heel, and began swiftly eating stone.

The Kapak swooped low. Raven ducked and turned, stumbled to one knee and leapt up again. He thrust his sword up, his blade clashed against the Kapak's, turning it.

The wyrmling, for a moment forgotten, breasted an infant war cry, a chattering shriek, as it flew up into the Kapak's face, wings flashing against the draconian's eyes. The Kapak swatted at the wyrmling, dashing it to the ground. Raven took his sword in a two-fisted grip. His blade ripped through a leathery wing and bit lizard flesh. The Kapak roared, infuriated.

Raven snatched the fallen torch and ran the only way he could, deeper into the mountain. Curses followed, the

Kapak's dire imprecations and promises of death. Steel clashed against stone as growling Baaz shoved past each other to pursue the intruder.

The mouth of the corridor narrowed, and the ceiling dropped as Raven ran, until the way became a low tunnel into the mountain. Ducking his head and taking care to preserve his torch, Raven turned sideways and squeezed into the tight opening.

"By dead Takhisis!" screamed the Kapak. "Get them!"

Behind Raven, the thin screech sounded again. Something sharp tore his cheek. Small, barbed wing-claws drew blood. The wyrmling staggered in the air, spiraled a little down again, then lifted, keeping pace at Raven's shoulder as he fled into the mountain.



Wings wide, the red dragon long known as Inferno sailed down the sky, relishing the updrafts over the Lords of Doom. Her scaled hide the color of blood, her wings black as midnight, she breathed the chill night air and relished the sulfur scent of volcanoes below, as though asleep and dreaming. In flight, part of her mind did dream, fierce dreams of battles won, of the cries of the defeated, of fire searing bright paths through the armies of the enemies of Takhisis. In those bygone days, when the Dark Goddess lived, Inferno had been one of her brightest dragons, the lusty veteran of three wars. Now there was no goddess, there was no war. Now there was only a shambling, stunned peace between nations, and a generation of dragons scattered and nearly destroyed.

Nearly. The nests of dragons had become the graves of much of a generation, but not Inferno's nest. She'd laid her clutch late in the season, and she had been one of the fortunate and few who returned from war in time to tend her eggs.

Inferno left the Lords of Doom behind and began the long spiral down, circling wide and low until she saw the mouth of the cave where her eggs lay hidden deep in the safe darkness. She folded her wings, her great hind legs touched the broad stone ledge, and she stepped inside the cavern.

The stink of draconian greeted her in this cavern she'd thought too high to be at risk. Inferno's nostrils flared, thin flames curled in the darkness. She breathed again, and the flames grew stronger. In this carefully chosen place, in a mountain no human had been known to scale, the foul, surprising stench of human mingled with the reek of draconian.

Fear ignited rage when the dragon saw her despoiled nesting place. All around lay a ruin of eggs, the shells scattered, one little rat-gnawed wyrmling corpse splayed on the stone as though in final agony.

Mother-grief howled in the caves, raw and terrible as a savage wound. The stink of misbegotten draconian and wretched human fouled her lair, then another scent came to Inferno on a cool thread of air from the back of the cave, this twined with the others. The dragon stilled her grief and concentrated on what her senses were telling her. The third scent was the rough, dry smell of a dragon-child. Someone had murdered three of her children and—Inferno roared again—the murderer had stolen her only surviving child.

The dragon knew the mountain well. She couldn't track the murdering kidnapper through the narrow tunnels, but there were other ways. Temples ran like dark jewels strung through the world beneath the mountains, all the way to the Lords of Doom. These had been made to accommodate not only puny humans and foul draconians. These temples, once resplendent and now abandoned, were made to accommodate the dragons who worshiped Takhisis and carried out her cruel will. For the sake of those dragons, the temples could also be entered from the high peaks.

Inferno cried out once more. Every creature of the caves, the bats, the rats, the newts and the small, blind fish in secret pools, bolted for cover. The red dragon leapt to the sky, her black wings blotting out the feeble light of the watery winter sun.

When the passage echoed with a mighty roar, Raven's heart crashed into his ribs. His torch died without gasp or sigh. His ears rang with the sound of a dragon's rage as darkness fell like a weight. Icy sweat ran down his neck, the roaring came again, and then came no more. His breath jerking to the pounding of his heart, Raven fumbled blindly for another wad of rags from his small supply. He pawed through his sack for flint and steel. The flint slipped through his fingers; he cursed as the steel followed, clattering onto stone.

"All right," he said, trying to calm himself, to steady his hands. "Don't get crazy, think. No dragon could get through the tunnel. Take your time . . ."

Draconians could still get through. Raven cursed the steel and flint again and lost the one while trying to strike the other. He looked over his shoulder into darkness, trying to hear something over the thundering of blood in his ears. Draconians were probably loping along the tunnels even now. With an effort of will Raven stilled his hands.

Slender flame blossomed brightly in the dark. Raven jumped.

"Son of a bitch!" The imprecation bounded harshly off the stone walls.

The wyrmling's shadow loomed; the little creature itself was hovering right there in the air. Raven had a sudden impression of red reptilian skin stretched tight over fragile bones, then the flash of understanding that the creature hadn't much lung power to sustain the effort.

"Damn well next to useless," he thought, even as he hoped the wyrmling could keep up its feeble pyrotechnics.

Wings trembling, the wyrmling filled up little lungs and breathed again. Raven thrust his brand to the faltering flame. The rags caught, sending the reek of fish oil through the tunnel. Sputtering, hissing and ready to fail in moments, the torch illuminated the walls.

Raven's every muscle tightened. Unless they were worshippers of the Dark Goddess, the legendary Shadow People hadn't been the only ones to use these tunnels. Upon the walls, he now saw, were images of five-headed dragons in bas-relief. Some were large, some small; all were icons of the dark goddess Takhisis.

"She's dead," he whispered, but very carefully, as he would if he'd been walking around the edge of a graveyard where ghosts might linger. Raven was no follower of gods, but he wasn't fool enough to irritate any of them—even the dead ones.

The wyrmling flew up and hovered out of swatting range. A creature of the evil goddess, its immature crest ruffled as though in homage to a deity it never knew.

The sight of this spawn of deadly dragons at prayer to a dark deity affected Raven with the same sudden loathing of one who'd come unexpectedly upon a venomous snake. Without thinking, he slipped his sword from its sheath. Back in the stony nest a handful of dragons had died in their shells. He knew no reason to let this one live. Steel glinted fiery in the torchlight. The wyrmling turned its head, and in that instant Raven heard behind him the hiss of a blade coming free of its sheath.

The tunnel ahead filled up suddenly with the light of torches and the howling of draconians.

"Derzak!" shouted one, pointing. "There!"

Torches fell to the ground, steel sang from scabbards and the tall Kapak, Derzak, leapt strongly over the four leading the pack. There was no wind to lift his wings, yet his

powerful legs carried him high, the spread wings themselves keeping him at a glide but irregularly. Raven's sword had torn the leathery right wing a long gash.

Wielding his own torch as a weapon, Raven stabbed up at the Kapak, missing wing and breast. The flaring light and swirling shadows sent the Baaz into momentary confusion. Raven looked around for a way past them and out. Before he could find escape Derzak dropped low, with one taloned claw grasping and lifting Raven by the collar of his frayed shirt. Legs thrashing as though he were still running, feet dangling above the stony floor, Raven twisted sharply. His torch fell, spinning away to join the others sputtering on the ground. He twisted again and the violent motion flung the Kapak off balance. Raven tumbled to the ground, hit stone hard, and felt not the smashing of eggs in the down-lined pouch tucked inside his sack as he'd feared. Almost as bad, he felt the sack fall from his shoulder, the strap cut by the talon meant to rend his flesh.

Raven yanked his sword free of the scabbard even as he staggered to his feet with a curse. Light now came up from the ground; the fallen torch was still burning strongly. Brandishing the sword in a roaring charge, whirling it as a dwarf would his battle axe, Raven kept all comers at bay while he searched frantically for his dropped sack of treasure and at the same time for a way out.

"Gods' curse you!" he shouted at the rising Kapak.

"Ah, treasure," the draconian growled. Laughing, it held Raven's sack in a brutal claw. On the heels of Raven's curse came another. Screeching infant dragon outrage, the wyrmling surprised them both by flying up, fastening its needle teeth onto the Kapak's snout. Its talons did worse. Blood ran green from Derzak's eye socket.

Derzak alighted, effortlessly smacked the dragon-child to the ground, and snarled as the blind kick he aimed at it fell afoul of the little beast's flashing flight. Raven grabbed up the torch and followed the wyrmling's lead as it darted

through the tunnel, heading back the way they'd come, and taking the first turning.

Through stony darkness, lighted by his flaring torch, Raven overtook the dragon-child and ran hard, hoping to make enough noise to lead the draconians think fear spurred him. Fear did not, anger did. He'd been robbed!

Robbed, he thought as he ran, robbed he'd be as good as dead the moment he emerged from the mountain without a way to pay his debt to Ferrous Earthfast. He did not doubt that the dwarf's hard-hunting men were sharpening their knives even now.

Raven ran until he found another turn, took it and kept on going. The sounds of pursuit followed; he ran harder, taking every turn he could, right and left and right again until he had to stop to catch his breath. Only then he realized that the wyrmling still kept up with him. The little beast sat gasping and shuddering on a pile of rubble at his feet.

Raven looked around the tunnel, listening. He heard nothing of draconians, saw no gleam to indicate their torches. Well enough. He'd wait until he was sure they'd given up pursuit and then back track. He'd find them. Soft-footed, he'd follow them to wherever they laired; nimble-fingered, he'd steal up on that thieving Kapak Derzak, take back his treasure and replace it with cold steel through whatever it was draconians claimed for a heart.

He glanced at the dragon-child. A cold thread of fear snaked through his belly as he remembered the rock-shaking roar that had heralded a dragon's loss. The wyrmling's mother could not come into the mountain in pursuit, but he did not doubt it lurked outside.

"That worry's for later," he said. Not until he heard the hollow echo of his words did he realize he'd spoken aloud.

The dragon-child looked at him with its flat reptilian gaze. Raven spat and looked away.

He jogged his water bottle, still fat and full. He unstopped

it, and water dribbled from the mouth of the bottle, sliding down the leather sides, finally dripping onto stone. The wyrmling stretched its neck and licked the dribble from the dust. Raven watched. Sight of the creature made his skin crawl, even as he remembered how it had taken a bite of the Kapak and stole one of its eyes. He grinned sourly, recalling Derzak's fury.

"All right, little wyrm," he said, grudgingly. "For that, you get some water."

Raven poured a small amount into his hand. Black eyes shining, the dragon-child lifted its head to the water, but at the last moment Raven shuddered to think of its raspy tongue on his skin as it lapped. He turned his hand, the water slid from his palm.

Darting, the wyrmling moved so that its open mouth caught the water. It ruffled its crest as though to give thanks. Raven snorted in disgust and got to his feet.

"Now we go hunting," he muttered, and he didn't note the pronoun. "Come on, you. Let's go."

They went, back along the passage, taking one turn and another, each as Raven believed he recalled them. In time he lost track of the draconians, finding no mark of their run through the tunnels, no way back to the passage where the walls bore images of five-headed dragons. A creature of a world where time and direction are marked by sun and moons, by light and shadow, he had no sense of either. Beneath the mountain, he recognized no landmark; nothing looked familiar, no turning or pile of stones. He walked a long time, and finally hunger and weariness stopped him.

Raven was lost.

Inferno flew the night through, alighting upon one peak after another, searching for a way into the mountain. Some of the old entrances had fallen in on themselves; others

had been purposely blocked. She found no way into the mountain before dawn, and none by noon when she had to rest.

She could no longer smell her stolen child or the thief who had murdered the rest of her brood, not across all the distance, not through all the rock of the mountain, but she smelled them in memory. Need and a lust for vengeance fueled her. She lifted up again and resumed her search. At dawn of the next day, in the north she caught a glimpse of the Temple of Luerkhis, the monument shaped like an enormous dragon's head. Behind the head at the highest point, the maw of an extinct volcano yawned. That way would never be shut up or filled in; that gate would never close.

Inferno soared, wings wide she flew north and west. It was a way into the mountain, and no matter if she had to tear down temples, no matter if she had to break the mountain itself. Inferno would have her child back. Theft and murder would be avenged by the reaver's death, and the penalty marked paid in his blood.

Raven walked until he could not walk any longer, until his legs would not lift and his belly groaned from hunger. He no longer swatted at the ever-present wyrm; he didn't want its company, but now he didn't want it to go flying off and attract the draconians.

The clean tunnels Raven had encountered since first entering the mountain had given way to narrower ways less cared for. Several turnings were blocked by rockslides; another tunnel was made impassable by a collapsed roof. Herded by these disasters, Raven kept to the safest ways, but he didn't know if he was heading north or south, if he would find a way out or die in the heart of the mountain. He took another turn, the torch heavy in his hand. When

the path dead-ended in a rough wall, Raven stopped and groaned, too tired to back track. The wyrmling settled, looking weary as he, then suddenly vanished. Raven lifted the torch, the muscles of his arm aching, and saw a wide crack in the wall. Beyond the wall lay a small cave. He squeezed into the opening, found a place to sit where he could be out of sight of the passage yet observe it.

Raven's head flopped back, hit stone, and he hardly felt it. The torch flared when he dropped it, settled and burned on the ground. He thought of a campfire but didn't know how to find fuel and kindling. He thought of food and knew there wouldn't be any. Exhausted, cursing his luck, he nursed the torch. He still had a few brands, but he had only one more wad of oily rags left, and the flint and steel lay a long way away, back where the Kapak lost its eye.

The wyrmling alighted near his face; he couldn't see it, but he felt the air move before the motion of its wings, a slow rhythm like breathing. Thin flame issued from its mouth as it ignited the fallen torch. Flitting around the little cave, it rose and swooped on thin currents of air, making high chittering noises as though proud of itself.

Raven snarled, "Shut up, you—"

The wyrmling dropped a wriggling pale fish from its taloned grasp.

Startled, Raven snatched the fish, cut its throat and gutted it. He fell upon the slim meal and didn't give himself the chance to wonder whether he'd like the taste of it raw. His belly felt inside out with hunger. Out the corner of his eye, as he ate, he caught a sudden flash of gold, no more than a blink. He looked harder, saw nothing but the dragon-child.

A flash of red gold blinked again, and a small girl sat where the dragon-child had been.

Raven gasped, then coughed out a fish bone. The little child winked one gold-colored eye and vanished, replaced by the wyrmling.

Raven reached for his sword, then stopped, feeling foolish.

"Don't do that again," he snapped. "Things aren't crazy enough around here for you?"

The wyrmling preened its—her, he supposed—wings. Pitching a small stone in her direction, Raven snarled a curse. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he watched the wyrmling fall upon the nearly transparent bones and scales of the fish and devour them. Nothing was left to show they'd been here, nothing in the little creature's behavior indicated that she had, a moment before, been a rosy-gold girl-child.

"Damn dragon."

She had fed him, but even as he acknowledged that Raven wanted to be rid of the little beast. Magical seemings and pretty masks didn't change his mind about the creature. A dragon is a dragon. He could kill her, leave her here under a makeshift cairn of rubble and stone. He'd be free of the flitting and chirping. He saw his short sword out of the corner of his eye.

The wyrmling sank upon a flat stone. Her skin rippled, as though she shivered. Raven supposed so small a reptile wouldn't withstand cold as well as an adult. This spawn of red dragons needed sun, and strong golden pools of warmth and light. Too bad—he didn't care.

Orange torchlight and dusky shadow abruptly fell across the narrow entry to the cave. Raven quickly smothered his own light as taloned feet scraped stone, and the wyrmling flew up. Before she could utter the first warning screech Raven grabbed her by the neck and clamped her mouth shut with a hard hand. His eyes went wide with pain as little sharp protrusions bit into his hand, infant spiky horns over the wyrmling's eyes.

Motionless, gritting his teeth, Raven held on and listened as two draconians stopped, one growling, the other cursing. They'd come to the dead end.

"Teeth of Takhisis," the growler said. "Who mapped these tunnels, a blind rat?"

They shuffled around a bit, perhaps checking to be sure there was no way past the wall. Raven held his breath and held onto the wyrmling until he heard them leave and their voices grow faint. Finger by finger, Raven loosed his grip on the wyrmling.

He jabbed a bloody thumb at her and mouthed the words, "Keep quiet, you."

She settled on the stony floor of the cave, shaking her head sharply, stretching offended jaws.

Raven waited till he heard no sound, not even the mere whisper of a talon scraping stone. Satisfied, he squeezed out of the little cave, the wyrmling sullenly behind. He went lightless, feeling his way carefully until he came to the turn in the tunnel. Faintly, the piney tang of the draconians' torch hung in the stony passage, but unmoving air gave him no clue as to which way they'd gone. He took one step, then another. Rubble turned under his boots, he steadied himself and tried to remember whether the way they'd come was rough or smooth. He couldn't, and he took a few more steps and rounded a turn.

Pale light drifted down from the ceiling in the cross corridor, sifting through jagged cracks in the stone, stress marks made by the violent eruptions of one or more of the Lords of Doom. The light had traveled far to reach here, so pale Raven didn't know if it was dawn light or the light at day's end. Whichever it was, he knew he was farther east into the mountain than he'd imagined, miles away from Kill Gulch.

The wyrmling flew up, and before Raven could swat her still, she shot ahead, winging for the light. For an instant, watching her fly, Raven felt an ache to follow. He'd been long underground; even the faint gray light seemed sweet, but the impulse died. He lost sight of the wyrmling in the high shadows. With no pang of regret for the departure of his small companion, the provider of his last meal, he thought, "Good riddance."

She would find a way out or die.

A thin finger of moving air touched the back of his neck. Raven stood still, nostrils wide, scenting pinewood torches. It came from up ahead, the lighted corridor. He loosed his short sword, moved cautiously forward until his eyes adjusted. He scanned the walls, the ceiling of the tunnel near where light shafted down. No wyrmling in sight, none to swoop down out of the shadows. Tugging a small, satisfied smile, he went forward into a kind of shadowless twilight. The Kapak Derzak had stolen a treasure from him worth more than he'd ever imagined having. A thief robbed, he couldn't let that theft go unanswered.

He was again a hunter, and he had draconians to trail.

The falling late light of day shone on the mountaintops, red light dancing on the desert below. The light glinted from Inferno's wide wings. She flew with grief and rage, and these made her wings light, her vision keen. Tireless, she continued to hunt for a way into the mountain, for the scent of her last child remained with her, fresh and compelling as though she'd just smelled it moments ago. Mingled as it was with the scent of a human, the sight of her ruined nest, it made a clarion call in her, a driving urgency.

When she found what she wanted at last, all the cold reptilian blood surged in her, growing hot.

Like a mouth gaping, the high entrance to the Temple of Luerkhis, the ancient portal dragons had known for long years before the death of their goddess, loomed. Like a cry of welcome, the wind swelled under her wings.

Inferno descended from the starred sky, eyes alight, a burst of flame from between her fanged jaws searing the night. Wing-folded, she dropped into the ancient crater of the extinct volcano, though she didn't enter the temple at once. She found a ledge around the rim. Just beneath the opening, above the temple itself, she waited.

She recalled the scent of a human in her despoiled lair, but she didn't detect it here. Perhaps the human had nothing to do with the draconians or the kidnapping. Perhaps it had met a draconian and been killed. Inferno switched the tip of her thick tail. The great red dragon sent little flames flickering over the ledge. Only shadows moved below, but so thick was the draconian stink that Inferno knew more than one or two of the vile creatures had frequented the temple. The temple reeked of the misbegotten things.

Inferno shifted, making herself comfortable on the ledge. No need to rush down or try to find a way through to tunnels that would not accommodate her bulk. The lizardmen had entered this way and would soon be back: Rosy sunset light glinted off their piles of armor, long edges of swords, the sharp beaks of war-axes. All this was valuable booty from battles the draconians had joined or instigated. Among these weapons lay objects lovelier, though of less worth in a world where steel and weaponry was deemed precious. Necklaces hung with rubies and sapphires, emeralds and amber; the spoils of highway robberies, hapless folk waylaid in dangerous passes lay in the shadow of steel.

No robber would leave this hoard long alone. Inferno only need wait for a draconian or two, perhaps the lone human, to return. From any intruder she encountered she would wrench news of her stolen child even as she ripped them bone from bone.

Raven followed the gray light, watching it grow faint with each yard he covered. It was last-light, then, not the glow of dawn. He'd be caught in blind darkness soon unless he ignited a torch. He'd use stone and blade to strike a spark if he had to, but he would hold off as long as he could; light and smoke would betray him to his prey.

After a while of walking he heard a marching patrol of

draconians, half a dozen Baaz, all making the kind of racket that warned Raven of their presence long before he saw the dark bulk of them approaching. Hiding in a crack in the wall behind a pair of boulders—squeezed in and invisible as a vanished rat—he became aware of a chill space opening behind him, a cave, another tunnel perhaps, in the twisty maze beneath the Lords of Doom. The skin between his shoulder blades itched as a cool finger of air touched his neck. Outside his hiding place the draconians stopped, the light of their torches splashed into the space between the boulders.

Raven didn't breathe.

One of the Baaz shouted, the tunnel filled with the sound of another group marching, stomping feet, rattling steel, curses that might have been greetings.

"Find 'em?"

"Didn't find nothin' and I'm sick of lookin'. That bastard Kapak wants 'em, let him go find 'em."

The other snorted. "You gonna go back and tell him that?"

"Might be I am. Might be I'm just goin' back and he can figure it out for himself."

Raven shifted farther back into the crack, scraping his shoulders and hoping he wouldn't gouge himself too badly and give the draconians blood to smell. He had someone to follow now, someone to lead him to the Kapak, his sack and treasure of dragon eggs.

The two patrols parted, but orange light remained, the torch in the clawed fist of the dissenting draconian. Finally he moved off, then Raven gave him time to get well ahead before slipping into the corridor. He didn't light his own torch; instead he followed the faint glow of the one held by the Baaz. He went carefully, choosing stealth over speed. The floor of the tunnel ran smoothly here. He navigated off the walls, following sometimes the dim glow of the distant torch, sometimes only the scent and taste of the smoke.

He made two turnings, and after the third one the light grew stronger, the blaze of cresseted torches along each side of the passage. The path grew wider, becoming an entrance to a vast chamber. Raven hung back, keeping to the darkness beyond the torches.

The air coming from the chamber smelled of outside, wind and cold desert. He caught a glimpse of starred sky stretching over a gap in the ceiling. Below that gap lay a broken dais, around it a shattered throne whose pieces suggested it had been fashioned in the shape of a five-headed dragon. Cold superstition touched Raven, an icy finger on the back of the neck. Takhisis had been invoked here; her clerics had practiced dark rites in this chamber.

He looked farther afield to see arched doorways leading out of the chamber into the mountain, each like the one before him, and none led anywhere but back into the mountain.

A scream of terror echoed around the tunnel, torn from a strangled throat, a thin, high shriek of pain. The wyrmling Raven had believed gone was struggling in the grip of a stocky Baaz. Her little teeth were clamped onto the draconian's wrist, while fire surged through her jaws. The draconian held the wyrmling by the tail, howling with anger. His fellows cheered him on as he flung her against a wall where a defaced image of a black dragon decorated the stone.

The dragon-child bounced off the wall and hit the floor, but she snapped up instantly, her nose twitching, and spotted Raven in hiding. She loosed a high screech.

As one, the draconians turned.

Raven cursed the wyrmling. Behind him, the tunnel echoed with the full-throated cries of the two patrols he'd seen only a short while ago, six of them running towards him with steel and torch. He had no way back and nothing to do but yell a pathetic battle cry of curses and throw himself into the three who'd been tormenting the dragon-child.

Surprised by his rapid attack, one of the Baaz howled in pain as Raven's dagger plunged into its neck from behind. Green blood burst from the wound, and Raven yanked his dagger free before the thing fell. Dead, it would turn to stone and keep the weapon rooted in it. He turned on another, but before that one was dead he heard the thunder of booted feet. Baaz were pouring into the chamber. The voice of Derzak bellowed.

"Kill the intruders!"

Even in his panic, Raven couldn't help but notice the heaps of armor and weapons, the jeweled necklaces and other ornaments. Amidst the treasure lay Raven's sack, sagging against the broken dais as though it had been carelessly flung there.

The wyrmling staggered into flight and wobbled in front of Raven's face, endangering his eyes with her wing-claws. He snatched her out of the air, held her close to keep his eyes safe, then turned and ran. Scaly hide shivering, the little creature tried to flap her pinned wings; it changed from dragon-child to a rosy gold human child in Raven's arms as he darted around the dais where the fallen throne lay in shattered pieces, desperately heading for a doorway at the back of the temple, leading into more tunnels.

The curses of draconians filled the hall in full voice. The Kapak lifted from the pack of his Baaz followers. Wings thrusting powerfully down, listing a little for the rent in one wing, as it rose above the others. Green spittle splattered to the ground, and one of the Baaz yowled in agony as the venom hit an eye.

Derzak slashed low with his sword, howling, "Human spies!" as it swooped toward Raven and the changeling in his arms.

Raven ran, but he did not get halfway across the chamber before the light from above suddenly exploded in white brilliance then just as quickly vanished.

There was an instant of silence before one of the Baaz

screamed, "Inferno!" and the outraged cries of draconians dwindled to mewling before a sudden, deafening roar.

Gold light blinked in front of Raven's eyes, as in his arms the dragon-child shifted shape again. The little human girl became a sharp-toothed wyrmling again, spitting fire not at the fleeing draconians but at the enormous red dragon, Inferno, dropping from the sky.

Raven looked wildly for a place to hide. The dragon folded her wings, plunging low over the fleeing draconians. With one wing she swept a half dozen into the nearest wall, their bones crumbling to dust before their corpses could change to stone. She dashed the Kapak to the ground and turned her back on it as its bone-crushed corpse melted into a pool of venom. Two Baaz stumbled into that mess and died shrieking.

Fire from the red's great maw shot through the doorway where most of the others had retreated. Then she thrust down with powerful wings, rose again to nearly the height of the ceiling. Raven's heart lurched. His eyes met the terrible fury in the eyes of the dragon who saw her child gripped—imprisoned—in the arms of a human. The great she-dragon's bellowing deafened him, the wind of her wings flinging Raven to the floor.

The wyrmling broke free of Raven's grip as he fell, small wings struggling to give her altitude. Her high screeching voice rang thinly around the temple chamber. Enraged, Inferno paid no attention. With a sweep of her mighty tail, she sent Raven tumbling across the floor. He fetched up against the piled corpses of three Baaz draconians just then turning to stone. The breath was blasted from his lungs. He tried to scramble away from the bodies. Almost he made it. The tip of his scabbard brushed against one, then instantly held fast as the corpse became stone.

Death and the dragon loomed. Jerking at the scabbard's belt buckle with shaking hands, Raven heard the wyrmling screech again. She flew up, thrusting hard, the needle teeth and talons that had torn a draconian's snout and deprived

him of an eye flashing. Little spurts of fire erupted from her mouth, and the dragon at last heard her child.

In the silence suddenly fallen, Raven heard a voice like none he'd heard before. Deep and resonant, he didn't hear it with his ears; he heard it—or felt it—with his mind, and it was like the echo of earthquake under the mountain. *Fly up, my bright little Flinder!* Like a flinder thrown from a fire, the wyrmling spiraled up to meet her mother.

Inferno knew her child, greeted her with a trumpeting of deep, stern joy. The chittering and screeches that meant nothing to Raven seemed to have immense significance for the mother-dragon.

Then the wyrmling, dancing in winged spirals of delight around her mother, trimmed her wings and dropped down beside Raven. The great red alighted among the draconian corpses turning to stone. Her wings lifted and fell, moving the air in the temple like a bellows. Raven closed his eyes, his only preparation for death a single, darkly amused thought: the dwarf Ferrous Earthfast could send his hunters out anytime he liked; they would not find Raven, not his corpse, nor even a bent silver coin to repay the debt.

So, said the mother, red Inferno stretching out her long neck until her horned snout pressed against Raven's chest. Her breath smelled nauseatingly like burned blood and bone. The spines of her crest and those along her neck were like fierce spears lifting. Raven shuddered. So, are you a kidnapper, a murderer or . . . ?

Flinder's little wings were lifting and falling urgently in some sort of reply. The screechy voice that had so irritated Raven seemed like balm to the great red. She closed her eyes, her breath puffing foully from mouth and nostrils.

No, not savior, Inferno said, the mental voice like a rush of canyon wind, but not killer or kidnapper, either.

Her great glittering eyes opened. Belly weak, knees turning to water, Raven saw himself reflected in the gleaming mirror of each black pupil. He looked tiny and very fragile.

Flinder flew up to the dragon's shoulder then down again to stand before Raven. Inferno's eyes half closed as though Inferno considered something.

What will you have, human?

My life, Raven thought with a giddiness, this close to the red dragon's fanged maw.

He jumped when the dragon said, *You already have that. For befriending my child.* The mental voice had a deeply ironic tone, for it seemed Inferno knew just how reluctantly Raven did the befriending. *For that, you may name something more. If I can grant it, I shall.*

Raven breathed carefully and tried to see past Inferno's mountain of a shoulder. His glance alighted on the pile of stolen weapons, certainly a hoard of some value. It slid over the jewels and fastened on his sack. He allowed no worded thought of the contents, not even an image. He could not deceive a dragon. Her mood changed like a storm sky.

You would profit from the death of my children?

"No," Raven cried. His voice sounded strange in his ears. "I didn't kill them. I came looking for . . . the shells."

Inferno weighed the response, her eyes grown cold. Flinder spoke again in the language only her mother knew, and the dragon said she was weary of the matter.

We will end it.

Raven's blood ran like ice through his veins. The dragon shifted her bulk. She lifted one foreleg. A talon as long as Raven's arm glittered in the starlight drifting down from the ceiling. He hoped it wouldn't hurt, the ripping and tearing that talon would do.

Inferno reached toward the loot the hapless draconians had piled against the wall. With that deadly talon she hooked the strap of Raven's sack. Very gently, for the contents had held the hope of a ravaged generation of dragons, she set it at Raven's feet.

With shaking hands Raven hung the sack carefully over his shoulder. In it lay the fortune that would satisfy old

Ferrous Earthfast and more than satisfy Raven himself. He longed to check the contents of the lined little pouch within, and he knew at once that would be a dangerous gesture.

Go.

His voice strangling in his throat, he said, "Wh-where? How?"

Inferno had been one of the Dark Queen's own dragons. On the wings of a thought, she gave him what information he needed to know to get safely out of the mountain. She said no more. Her child in attendance, she lifted from the broken floor of the ruined temple. Her wide wings blotted out the starlight, the temple plunged into blackness, then drifted back to starlight as Inferno cleared the crater.

Her thunderous voice was gone from his mind; there remained only an echo. Lurking behind that, though, he heard another small voice, and he thought it must be the dragon's child, brightly piping as she strove make a word he could understand.

Friend, he thought he heard. Or maybe she said wind, for there was a wild, tumbling joy in the word.

"Damn little wyrm," he muttered. "Follows you all around and even into your head."

Hands growing steady, Raven checked the sword at his belt, the water bottle, and the sack on his shoulder. He had a few brands, a wad of oil soaked rags. If need be, he'd strike a spark with blade and stone, but he wouldn't need a torch for long. Inferno had told him a way out of the world under the Lords of Doom that was much shorter than the way in, though it was already looking like a long hard trek alone.

Damn dragon-child.



FOUR ENDS

JOHN HELPERS

The terrified woman burst out of the alley and ran down the deserted street, dragging a small boy along with her. The boy stumbled along at her side, trying desperately to keep up. He did not cry or whimper, just panted for breath.

Behind her, the woman heard the flapping of leathery wings. Smothering a gasp, she pulled the child into a recessed doorway, melding with the darkness.

"Not a breath, not a sound," she whispered to him.

The woman scanned the lane, praying for someone to come along, yet knowing bleakly was no hope of rescue in this town.

The flapping noises grew louder. She could see by the silver moon the hideous shadows of three winged beast-men flying toward a deserted intersection at the far end of the street. The draconians had not seen her. As the wing beats faded, the woman slipped from the doorway, and pulling the boy with her, headed in the opposite direction.

"Just a few more blocks, and we'll be safe."

The little boy did not reply, just kept up with her as best he could.

The pair hurried past empty, boarded-up shops and homes that had fallen into ruin. The woman cast an occasional

glance over her shoulder, watching for any sign of pursuit. Rounding a corner, she saw a tall rectangle of candlelight spilling out into the night. A chorus of off-key, raucous singing came from the open window. Sobbing in relief, the woman picked up the child and ran for the door of the tavern. The warm welcoming light grew brighter as they approached, a golden sanctuary from their hunter, who had been thrown off the trail. Three buildings away . . .

Two . . . Now just one more intersection to pass—

A winged body flew out of the dark alley. Claws gripped the woman by her shoulder. She screamed and struggled, hoping that someone in the tavern would hear. The laughter and singing were either too loud or those inside chose to ignore the screams. In this town, such sounds were nothing new.

The draconian dragged the woman away from the safety of the beckoning light. She kept fast hold of the child, who seemed to have been struck dumb with terror.

“Let us go!” cried the woman loudly. She cast a backward glance at the tavern. “If my master sees you, he’ll make you pay for harming me!”

“Hah!” The draconian gave a snort, though he did look back over his shoulder. “You’re just another serving wench to him, and everyone else in this wretched town is too scared of him and his pirate friend to lift a finger to help you.”

He picked up his pace, however, and hurried the woman along. They moved so fast that the boy tripped and fell. The draconian halted and with a muttered curse scooped up the child in his clawed hand. He tucked the boy under one scaled arm, grabbed the woman, and hauled her along at a trot. Two more draconian soldiers waited for them at the end of the alley.

“You have me. Let my son go,” the woman pleaded.

“The boy is insurance,” the draconian answered, “for your cooperation.” He tossed the child to one of the soldiers.

"Here, take the brat."

"Yes, Captain," said the other, grabbing hold of the child, digging sharp claws into his shoulders. Still, the boy made no sound.

"I will cooperate," said the woman. "You don't need the boy."

"You're right." The draconian captain gripped her arm tightly. "You will cooperate."



Threxellex sprawled on his treasure hoard, rolled about in the heavy milled gold coins and glittering gemstones, enjoying the way they clinked against his burnished red scales. He lay back then rolled over again, listening to the shower of coins and precious jewels cascading off his back and unfurled wings, ringing and jingling on the cavern floor.

"Master." A reptilian voice interrupted his idle play.

The red dragon turned to see Relk, his Sivak draconian captain, bowing low in the entrance to the main chamber of the dragon's enormous, underground lair.

"Ah, Captain, you're back," Threxellex said. In contrast to his fanged, horned, scaled, clawed appearance, the dragon's voice was smooth and sonorous, like gleaming oil on a honed sword blade. "Was your mission successful?"

"I have the human female as you ordered."

"As you suggested, Captain. An excellent idea, I must say. Do you have the boy, as well?"

"Yes, Great One."

"Bring them both at once."

"As you command, Great One," Captain Relk said, bowing again.

Threxellex repositioned himself to receive his guests, drawing his legs underneath him into a crouch and shaking off a few coins and a gemstone or two.

Moving shadows at the cave entrance announced Relk's return. Threxellex curled his tail around his body and sat back on his rippling haunches. Extending his neck, he poised himself to loom over his new visitor.

The woman stumbled inside the cave, shoved from behind by the Sivak officer. She fell forward on her hands and knees. Looking up at the dragon, she froze in terror as the dragonfear enveloped her. The draconian dragged her to her feet. Gasping and moaning, she tottered into the cave, her eyes squeezed shut.

"Where is the boy?" the dragon demanded.

"Here, Great One." The captain issued a command and another soldier carried the boy into the cave and dumped him onto the floor.

The woman opened her eyes at this. She tried to reach out to the child, but the draconian captain intervened. He gave the woman another shove, sending her closer to the dragon. He remained standing behind her, his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Open your eyes, wretch, and look at me," ordered the dragon.

Shaking with terror, the woman complied, her pale blue eyes meeting the red dragon's glinting gaze. "Please, let my boy live." She clasped her hands together. "You can do what you want to me. Devour me, but don't harm him—"

"Devour you." The dragon grimaced. "I've never understood this love some of my kind have for human flesh. Personally, I've always found it too salty. No, wretch, you are here to serve me in another capacity. "

The woman looked startled, wary.

"According to Captain Relk, you are a serving maid at the Four Ends tavern where that minotaur bandit Gul and his crew hang out, right?"

"Yes, Great One," she said in a small voice.

"And the pirate, L'Arth, is your lover."

The woman's head drooped. She didn't answer.

"I take that as a yes." Threxellex brought his head close to her, so close he could smell her fear. "I've noticed of late that the amount of tribute these two pay me has fallen off. According to Captain Relk, those two have been holding out on me. I find that distressful. To think, these two I have trusted . . ." The dragon heaved a sigh. A gout of flame erupted from his nostril. He moved his head even closer to the woman.

She shrank back from the snapping jaws that could have cleaved her in half.

"Captain Relk says that human mothers will do anything to save the lives of their children. Is that true?"

The woman shuddered. "That is true," she gasped.

"Good," said the dragon. "Captain Relk will explain the plan." Threxellex sank back onto his treasure pile, shutting his eyes in preparation for a nap.

As the woman started to leave, one of the dragon's eyes popped open. "The boy stays with me."

The woman kissed her son on the forehead. "Do not fear," she said softly, through her tears. "He will not harm you."

"That depends on you, wretch," said Threxellex.

"I understand, Great One," she replied and followed the draconian captain out of the cavern.



Gul drained his tankard of ale and rubbed his aching head. He'd been visiting his dear friend and ally, L'Arth, on his ship yesterday, when the boom had swung round and given him a hard crack right beneath his horns. Fortunately the minotaur's skull was thick. A knock like that would have killed a human. L'Arth claimed it had been a freak wind that sent the boom swinging, but Gul wondered. He'd never known a pirate he could trust.

A knock on the door broke his bleary concentration. "Damnation, come in!"

One of his minotaur comrades came in dragging a bedraggled, lank-haired human woman with him. "Here's the one you asked to see. L'Arth's girl friend." The minotaur snickered.

"Good. Leave us" Gul said. "Lock the door behind you."

The woman flattened herself against the door, her gaze on the floor, the walls, anywhere but on him.

"Well, lass, Brial tells me you were gone from the kitchen last night." His voice grew softer, more insinuating. "L'Arth claims you weren't with him. Where were you?"

"I—I was ill, stomach pains—it won't happen again."

"Were you now?" Gul rose from behind the table, his shadow from the candles enveloping the woman.

"I heard a different story," he continued. "It seems that you were seen going off with a draconian last night, you and that brat of yours. You took the east road towards the mountains. There is only one thing to see in the mountains and that is that twice-cursed monster Threxellex. What were you doing at the dragon's cave? And why are you still alive to tell about it?"

She opened her mouth, but Gul didn't give her a chance to answer.

"You know what I think?" he thundered. "I think you're a damn spy!"

"You're right," said the woman calmly, raising her head to face him.

"I am?" The minotaur was at first astonished, then angry. He drew his knife. "By Sargas, I'll slit you—"

"Listen to me!" the woman pleaded. "I had no choice! The dragon holds my son hostage! I had to promise to do what he asked. I'll tell you everything!" Her terrified gaze fixed on the knife. "Everything."

Gul put the knife down on the table but left it in plain sight. "Go ahead."

"The dragon suspects you're holding out on him," the woman replied.

"Me holding out!" Gul roared. "I've given that foul beast every last steel piece he's demanded. I'll show him the account books . . . Wait a minute." He eyed the woman, who was shifting uncomfortably. "Wait a minute. Someone is holding out on the dragon, isn't he?"

The woman shook her head. "No, no, Gul, L'Arth wouldn't—"

"L'Arth!" The minotaur slammed his hand down on the table. "He's been holding out on the dragon, and that means he's been holding out on me. We're supposed to be partners in this! I'll see him swing on his own yardarm—"

The woman at last lifted her eyes. "No, that won't work. Threxellex is pleased with L'Arth and the tribute he's brought to him. If you kill L'Arth, the dragon will be furious. He'll slay you and everyone in Four Ends."

"You're right," Gul muttered, lowering his aching head into his hands.

"There is a way," said the woman.

Gul looked up. "Yes?"

"You must kill the dragon first. Then you can double your profits and do what you want to L'Arth. No one will dare stop you. You will be the ruler of Four Ends." She lowered her voice. "I have been to his lair and see how it could be done."

Gul's eyes squinted. "You're L'Arth's woman. What's your game, woman?"

"I am his slave, nothing more," she said bitterly. "Most important, the dragon now has my son. I can advise you how to slay the dragon, but you must promise to save my son!"

"You better worry about saving yourself, woman," said Gul, picking up the knife. "Let's hear your plan."

"While I was in the cave I noticed that I could hear water," she said. "After the dragon released me, I did some exploring and found an underground river flowing through the cave. I followed it to the other side of the mountain where it empties into the sea. I can draw you a map."

"So you're saying that me and my warriors could follow the river, sneak into the dragon's cave and catch him and his draconian flunkies by surprise. Maybe while they're sleeping, huh?" Gul pondered the idea.

"And save my son," the woman said. "You must promise me that before I'll draw you the map."

"I promise," said Gul, grinning.

L'Arth entered his cabin. Wiping the back of his hand across his sweating brow, the pirate captain headed straight for the wine bottle. Uncorking it, he raised it to his lips and took a swig. Only then did he notice the woman standing in the doorway.

"What do you want?" he said. "I don't remember sending for you."

"The dragon has taken my son hostage—"

"So? What's that to me? He's your brat. Not mine."

"I know, L'Arth, it's just that—the dragon told me to spy on you in return for my son's life."

L'Arth glared at her. "Spy on me? What for?"

"He thinks you've been holding out on him." The woman shrank away as he swung toward her, his fist clenched. "Don't blame me! I'm only trying to save my son! Everyone knows that it's Gul who has been cheating the dragon—"

"And cheating me into the bargain. And now he's got me in trouble with Threxellex!"

"I—" The woman stopped and looked away.

"You what?" L'Arth demanded.

"I was at the tavern last night. I overheard the minotaur talking to his men. I think they're plotting something—"

"Against me?"

"No. Against the dragon."

"Ah! Good. I'll warn Threxellex and get back into his good graces—Why are you shaking your head, wench? What's wrong with that?"

"There's a better way," she said.

"And that would be—"

"Let Gul kill Threxellex. Or let Threxellex kill Gul. If the dragon and the bandits go at each other, you might be lucky. Both might die, but just in case—"

"—I come along and finish off whoever's left! Yes, but what if it's the dragon?" L'Arth asked, having second thoughts.

"He'll be so weak he won't be able to put up much of a battle. You have three ships with ninety men, easily enough to slay a wounded dragon. You could get the dragon hoard and the town of Four Ends while removing both your enemies at the same time."

"Sounds easy enough," said L'Arth. "Maybe too easy. What do you get out of this?"

"My son," said the woman, a tear sliding down her cheek. "You must promise to save my son. Do that, and I'll tell you Gul's plans."

"Oh, very well," said L'Arth, without the least intention of keeping his promise. Let the brat look after himself. "Now talk."



Gul led his small caravan through the foothills of the mountains. Escorting the wagons containing the monthly tribute were thirty of his strongest—a mix of humans, hobgoblins, and minotaurs. The war party was armed with razor-sharp long spears and swords.

Cracking his whip, Gul urged the team of oxen up the steep trail that led to the cave opening on the side of the mountain. He could see the draconian, Captain Relk, standing there, watching out for them. Although Gul could see Relk from here, the draconian couldn't see them, hidden among the boulders.

Gul called a halt. He motioned for his lieutenant.

"I'll go on up with the loot. You take the boys and go on around until you find the river. Here's a copy of the map that woman gave me. I'll meet you there in a few hours. Don't move until I get there."

The minotaur nodded. He whistled twice and the double column of men jogged off behind him. Gul twitched the reins again and the wagon lurched towards the cave mouth. Spotting the wagon, the Sivak walked down to meet it.

"Ah, Gul, it is good to see you. I trust everything is in order?" Relk walked about the wagon, peering at the treasure, taking a mental count. The Sivak frowned. "Seems a bit sparse."

"Ships have begun to stay away from this area," Gul explained apologetically. "We may have to lay low for a while."

"I don't think Threxellex is going to like to hear that," Relk said, frowning, "especially as L'Arth was telling him just the other day that the pickings had been unusually good . . ."

"L'Arth says what the dragon wants to hear," said Gul. "I tell him the truth." Gul could hardly wait to confront his treacherous "partner." He'd rip off L'Arth's head with his bare hands. "Anything else?"

The Sivak stared at him for a moment, and for a heart-stopping second Gul thought he suspected him of treachery. "No, nothing else."

Relk signaled to several draconians at the cave mouth, who came forward and began unloading the cargo from the wagon.

The minotaur nodded, picturing to himself slicing open the draconian's head. "Till next time," he promised.

An hour later, as Lunitari's red orb was rising high in the black sky, Gul reached the rendezvous point where his men were waiting. Here was the cave and the river, just as the woman had promised. His lieutenant held his leader's huge double-bladed battle-ax. Gul hefted it, exulting in the weight.

"Let's go kill ourselves a dragon."



Several hours later, the group, with Gul in the lead, picked their way up a hillside of glacier-deposited boulders thousands of years old.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" his lieutenant asked, staring at the towering boulders that had them surrounded. "Looks like a dead end to me."

Gul squinted in the moonlight, trying to see the map. "This is the way she drew on the map. See. There are the two spire rocks that we passed through and there is the topped fir and here—"

"—is the dragon."

A sibilant, silken voice echoed all around the group. A massive shape rose up from behind the wall of rocks. Gul dropped his ax. The men behind him whined and trembled as the dragonfear surged over them.

Threxellex sighed, a hot gust of sulpher-tinted breath. "I keep thinking you're smarter than this, Gul. You keep disappointing me. You've disappointed me for the last time."

Threxellex's jaws opened wide. The dragon yawned, as if bored with the whole affair, then a jet of flame blasted over the group, the boulders acting as a natural channel for the golden-orange-red fire. The smell of burnt flesh and fur lingered in the air for days.



L'Arth stood at the helm, keeping watch as his small fleet rounded the northernmost point of Ergoth. He looked down at the map he held in his hands, looked back up at the landscape sliding by.

"Just about seventy-five more leagues," he said to the man at the ship's wheel, "then we should be at the river, and just in time."

They sailed under cover of darkness using black sails and

no running lights. L'Arth thrust the map in his belt, rubbed his hands in satisfaction as his ships cut through the inky seas. Not long now and he would be the master of Four Ends.

"Captain?" his first mate interrupted his blissful reverie.

"Eh?" L'Arth asked.

"Do you hear that noise?"

Amidst the creaking of the sails and the cries of the sailors, L'Arth heard the slow beat of huge wings. Flames spewed from the darkness, and a small cutter burst into fire. The flames consumed boat and crew in an instant, so that most did not have time enough to scream. Before L'Arth could move or think, another of his ships had become a floating funeral pyre. Then the dragon turned his head their way.

The pirate captain's crew had all jumped overboard by now, and only L'Arth remained on the deck. The huge shadow of the dragon passed over him, the flames from the once proud pirate fleet reflecting off its dully-gleaming underbelly. As it flew past, a huge paw reached out and grabbed L'Arth, plucked him off the deck of his vessel that was foundering on the smoky sea. The dragon lifted the pirate captain high above the tallest mast.

"View's spectacular, isn't it?" The dragon peered out over the water. "I think I can see your house from here. My, you're a slippery fellow. I almost dropped you. What was that? The woman? Yes, she betrayed you. Betrayed your friend Gul, too, if that's any comfort. Why would she do that? I have her son, of course. A mother's love . . . I'll be sure to kill him first, so she can watch.

"I didn't quite catch that." Threxellex was flapping his way inland. He bent his head to hear the pirate's shriek. "Where am I taking you?"

Flying over the cliffs that fronted the sea, the dragon opened his paw and let loose. He watched the screaming

man tumble head over heels until his body splattered on the rocks below.

"To the Abyss," answered the dragon.

The first rays of dawn lit the eastern horizon by the time Threxellex returned to his cave. Stopping at the entrance to his lair, he turned around and looked toward the coast. Miles away, a faint column of smoke drifted into the air from the charred remains of the pirate ships.

Dropping to all fours and folding his wings, Threxellex walked through the large corridor that led from the entrance to his inner sanctum. He noted immediately that something was wrong. The cavern was unusually quiet. His draconians, who were usually here fawning all over him, were nowhere in sight.

"Lazy bastards. Probably overslept, which is what I intend to do. Slaughtering people does take a lot out of a fellow."

Reaching the heart of his lair, the red dragon paused for a wing-cracking stretch, then ambled over to his treasure pile. He had just settled down when a voice spoke from the shadows.

"I have given you what you wanted. Now give me my son."

Threxellex lifted his head, his keen eyes spotted the woman standing near the far wall. "Certainly." He raised his voice to a booming shout. "Relk, bring the brat!"

The tall Sivak strode through the tunnel, dragging the woman's child along side.

"Relk," said Threxellex, "I was going to do this myself, but I'm too tired. Cut the brat's throat. Then cut hers." The dragon shut his eyes, settled down on his treasure pile, and waited for the delightful sounds of screaming.

Nothing. Silence. The dragon opened his eyes and frowned.

The woman, the draconian, and the boy all stood there, watching him.

"Relk," thundered the dragon, "why haven't you obeyed me?"

"Because first," said the woman, "I'm going to tell you a story."

"Eh?" The dragon was astonished and he realized, suddenly, that none of the three seemed the least affected by dragonfear.

"I once lived in a small village on the southern coast, a day's journey from Gwynned," the woman said. "Ten years ago the pirate L'Arth raided Four Ends. He killed my parents and my sister and laughed as he watched them die. I grieved for them, but the years passed and I started a new life. I married and had children of my own. Four years ago the minotaur, Gul, arrived. He killed my husband and sold my two children to the ogres. He sold me to L'Arth. Again, my life was taken from me. This time, I did not start over. I had nothing. Everyone, everything I loved was gone. Then you came, Threxellex, and made your diabolical pact with those fiends. It seemed that hope itself was dead."

Threxellex caught himself actually listening to the woman. He was starting to feel a twinge of unease. "Go on."

"Hope was dead," the woman repeated, "and then I met someone, someone who had lost two of her four children. Only in her case, she'd lost them to a red dragon."

Threxellex lifted his head from the treasure pile. "You set me up!" He was so angry he sputtered bits of flame, so angry he had only half-heard her last words. "L'Arth, Gul—"

"—never betrayed you. As far as bandits and pirates can be honest, they were honest with you, Threxellex, and honest with each other." The woman shrugged. "It was easy to cause them mistrust each other, though. Greed did the rest. Now Four Ends is freed of them. All that remains is to free Four Ends of you."

“You used me!” The dragon gasped. He reared up off the treasure pile. “I’ve heard enough of this tale. Kill her, Relk! Kill her and the boy!”

The Sivak and child both continued to stare at him, and it was then that Threllex saw their eyes gleam silver. Only then did he begin to fully understand.

As the dragon watched in horror, the bodies of the boy and the draconian captain shimmered and shifted, transforming into the shining shapes of ancient enemies. The lustrous forms of two enormous silver dragons stood before him, one on either side of the woman.

As the two silvers began stalking him, one circling to the left, the other moving to his right, the woman continued, “You thought you took my child, Threxellex, but my own children are long dead. I offer you these two children as a substitute. I know their mother would approve.”

Threxellex had only one chance, and that was to flee. He ran for the tunnel, his claws scrabbling on the hard stone floor. If he could just make it outside, he would be able to lose the silvers in the mountains, but even as he lunged for the way out, a gleaming winged shape appeared in front of him, blocking off the sunlight and his escape.

A third silver dragon, larger than the other two, glared at him from the tunnel mouth. A blast of chilled breath frosted the ground in front of her, and as the three silver dragons closed in on him, their gleaming fangs bared in anticipation, the woman’s words echoed in his ears.

“It was her idea from the beginning.”



AT THE WATER'S EDGE

JAMIE CHAMBERS

By mid-afternoon on the warm autumn day, most of the townsfolk were determined that something should be done about the elf. The “pointy-ear” was an unwelcome sight in the human community, and those who lived and worked in the heart of the grubby little town felt it would be best if he would just leave. The elf wasn’t doing anything patently offensive; he had been standing like a statue for hours on one side of the muddy street, near the butcher’s and baker’s shops, occasionally glancing up at the sky to check the sun’s position. This odd behavior served to convince the townspeople that the elf was either lost or crazy.

Anar Sovralian of Qualinost ignored the angry mutters and obscene gestures. He shrugged off the taunting by some of the town’s youth. After everything he had been through, the elf had learned not to unnecessarily waste his energy.

For months he had been alone, following rumors and leads—and too often lies. Always thin, he was now gaunt from his time on the road, and though his skin was deeply tanned from days spent in the sun, still his poor diet gave him an unhealthy pallor. Deep shadows hung under his eyes, a testament to months of nearly sleepless nights. Thus it had been ever since the day he had woken up alone, the

bedroll next to him empty save for the faint, lingering scent of lilac.

Anar glanced up once more at the sun's position in the sky, and then finally spotted his contact and made his move, stepping into a rancid alley between the butcher's and baker's shops. The smells of filth and rotting meat assaulted his nose, but he had smelled far worse in his time.

Another figure warily entered the alley, a short human with a large paunch. As the man approached Anar, he stared at the elf with piggish eyes, nodding to himself then taking a bite out of some hideous-looking plug held in his left hand. The man chewed with an expression of satisfaction for a moment before spitting out a glob of discolored slobber onto the butcher shop's back wall.

If the man was hoping to see Anar flinch in revulsion, he was disappointed. The elf betrayed no emotion.

"You must be the elf what's looking for me," the man said, pointing with a fat finger that rather resembled one of the sausages hanging in the butcher's front window.

In reply, Anar pulled out a small leather pouch. Each coin inside was stamped with the visage of Gilthas, now often called the "Beggar King" of the elves. The sight of the money—the last bit of his family's coin that Anar and his wife had carried out of Qualinost—seemed to reassure the man, who rubbed his thick fingers together with anticipation.

Anar's use of Common was tainted with a thick accent, and so he spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. "I have been led to believe that you had dealings with a group of elves who came through town several weeks ago."

The man nodded eagerly, then released another spit-projectile, this one nearly hitting a rat that was scurrying through the alley. "Yes, they came trading goods. Man-made. Stolen, no doubt about it. A gang of thieves, these was."

Anar slid his fingers into the pouch and brought out a steel coin. "What sorts of goods?"

The man chewed and pondered. "Bits of this and that.

Bolts of cloth, dining silver such as rich folk might eat with, barreled ale, all jumbled together in an old wagon." The man reached out with surprising speed and plucked the first coin from Anar's grasp, then continued. "Most of the town merchants told the elves to go straight to the Abyss. Times are hard, but buying cheap from elven thieves isn't gonna buy anyone favor with the gods." He glanced heavenward before releasing another spitwad in a long arc over the elf's head.

Anar repressed his desire to get as far away as possible from this filthy human. "You don't mind dealing with elves, so I'm told," he suggested, pointedly sliding the coin between thumb and forefinger.

"Not at all! I am an entrepreneur, and to make money during these times one has to be open-minded—"

"So you purchased the goods from the elves, then sold everything to those more inclined to deal with humans?"

The man nodded with a snaggle-toothed grin. "Mutually profitable arrangement," the man said smugly.

Anar's heartbeat quickened. "Among these elves you did business with . . . was there a female about my age with them?" In his muted voice there was no hint of the longing he felt for the woman in question.

The stout man's eyes seemed to glaze over. "Could be, could be, but I didn't take any special notice. All you fair folk look the same age to me." He chortled. "All elves look like women."

Anar swallowed his irritation and disappointment. "So these elves left town after selling to you. Do you know where they were headed?" Anar pulled two more coins out of the pouch, letting three dance before the greedy man's eyes.

After a short pause and another vile glob of spit, the man fixed his watery eyes on Anar. "I was paid extra, you see, to not tell anyone where to find them." The man stared hard at the coins, which were quickly joined by a fourth and fifth. "Also, they threatened to come back and gut me if I told." The

man forced his eyes away from the coins and followed instead the alley rat, which had returned to forage in the garbage.

The moment the man's eyes left his, Anar traced a pattern in the air with his fingers, while whispering the words of a simple spell. "*Suh tangus moipar, ast akular kalipad.*" The human blinked, returning his gaze to Anar.

"—but for you, and for a few coins, I might tell. No harm could come of tellin'. After all, you're one of them."

One of them, indeed, Anar thought. "Very good, my friend. Please, accept two more steel coins." The remainder he slipped back into the bag, knowing he would not be needing them again.

"Course I don't know what business you elves have lairin' with a dragon, but that's your own business, I suppose."

Anar raised an eyebrow. "A dragon?"

"The black, the one who called himself Nightshadow. His cave is back toward the great forest, but it can be found. They told me were they were going, told me there would be more cheap goods to be gained if I visited them with more coin. I've thought about it . . . but to visit a black's lair? There are less painful ways to die."

Terrible thoughts rose in Anar's mind. Tales of Ebon Nightshadow, who once served the great green wyrm Beryl, were well-known to him and his kind; making any kind of pact with such an evil dragon was foolhardy. After all this time spent tracking the rogues who had snatched Anar's wife from his side, the elf wondered for the first time if she might be intended as a sacrifice, if she might even be dead.

Anar forced his attention back to the conversation at hand. "Be grateful that we met, friend. I'm sure that you would have walked into a deadly trap. You are far safer here, away from the forest, dragons, and elves."

The man looked at him quizzically.

"All elves except myself, of course." Anar smiled glumly. "You may trust me in all things."

The ensorcelled man grinned. Only later would he wonder

why he had taken such an uncharacteristic liking to the elf or why he had given up the potentially valuable—potentially dangerous—information for just a few steel coins.

Anar raised his hand in farewell. "May the sun always shine upon you," he said softly, a traditional Qualinesti farewell. He walked away, leaving the man smiling at his back.

The information was promising. It seemed the final leg of his journey, for good or ill, had begun at last.



Sleep brought the haunting dream, as it did every night. Surrounded by his kinsmen, their auras radiating brightly in his elvensight, the elf felt smothered by the claustrophobic darkness. The tunnel walls seemed to shrink in on him with each hurried step; the smells overpowered him—of earth, of dwarven sweat, and the waste left behind by the monstrous, tunneling worms.

The tunnel was an eternity of running steps, the sobbing of women, the crying of children, all in darkness. At junctures, the group would pass a lantern-wielding dwarf who ushered them down different branches of the underground system. Despite the cacophony of noises all around him, all Anar could hear was the pounding of his own heart. He choked on the stagnant air but gasped from the exertion of running through the darkness. He felt only his own misery—the sense of loss for those left behind—and the hand that he clutched tightly in his own. A soft, smaller hand.

Anar awoke from his dream in the gray, pre-dawn light and lay quietly for a few minutes, staring at the wisps of smoke curling from the ashes of his campfire. He focused his mind on his mission, the goal at hand, for it was too easy to slip back into the dark memory of the dwarven escape tunnel, to feel enveloped by panic and loss.

Within an hour he was back on the trail, skirting the southern rim of the Qualinesti forest. The local landmarks told him he must be close. He had been slogging through the wilderness for weeks since leaving the human town; soon he would reach the lair of Ebon Nightshadow, the evil dragon who had served the monstrous tyrant Beryl before her death.

It troubled him to think that any elves of Qualinesti would ally themselves with a creature who had killed so many of their kin. Some elven rebels, though, many of whom were former resistance fighters who had served under the leadership of The Lioness, were determined to re-gain their former homeland at all costs. They stole, it was told, hired mercenaries, spied, threatened innocents, and killed when necessary. Some even believed they kidnapped their fellow elves and coerced the captives into aiding their efforts—or used them for even darker purposes.

Such a group had passed through the elven encampment that had briefly served as home for the tattered remnants of Anar's family. He vaguely remembered them stirring up some excitement within the camp, attempting to recruit members for their cause. Those days were a blurry haze in his mind. Though relatively safe in the elven camp, Anar found no joy in life; the food had no taste, and the sun provided no warmth. Anar did not feel his own heartbeat until the morning he woke up alone, the only person left alive who still mattered to him snatched from his side.

Anar saw marks in the earth where wagon-wheels had dug into the mud. It was true: the elven trail led directly toward Ebon Nightshadow's lair. By mid-afternoon he could see the cave-entrance, but he kept a safe distance, crouching in the woods—until darkness gave him cover.

The waiting seemed harder than the journey, but slowly the sun—beloved of his people—sank in the west. The sunset was a gorgeous blend of red, orange, and purple, but Anar's gaze was fixed upon the cave entrance, oblivious.

The mouth of the cave was narrow, and Anar imagined a dragon would have to squeeze through it—and that might buy him enough time for escape if the dragon came after him.

The tired, determined elf used the last waning light to review his spells. Though the Sovralian family were only woodshapers and practitioners of minor magic (none of his kin had taken the Test since before the time of the King-priest), Anar fondly remembered the three huge volumes of spells that had been the centerpiece of his family's library. Those huge books now rested beneath the cursed waters of *Nalis Aren*, for no one in the family had attempted to take the books with them; no one could have guessed that the moons of magic would return to Krynn's skies. Anar's collection now consisted of a few scrolls, crude notes scribbled upon ripped parchment, and pages torn directly from a nameless mage's spellbook. As little as they truly were, the spells were a treasure to him.

Once the arcane words and gestures were burning in his mind, he checked his pockets and pouches for the necessary components. As he completed his ritual, the final hints of light faded from the sky. The evening was chill, and Anar's breath misted the night air. The elf steadied his nerves, then crept slowly and quietly toward the cave's entrance.

He saw no guard was posted at the entrance, a fact that baffled Anar. He hid nearby for some time, thinking furiously, before muttering an arcane phrase while passing one hand over his eyes. No, as he suspected, there was a small rune painted on the cave wall nearly fifteen feet inside the entrance. Anar's spell allowed him to see the aura surrounding the rune, which was ready to sound a magical alarm warning of trespassers.

Moving carefully, Anar edged into the cave and flattened himself against the eastern wall, mere inches from the reach of the magical rune. He could spot firelight from around the next bend. Voices also echoed from within, perhaps a dozen people talking quietly. He listened intently for a few

moments and did not hear the breathing or movement of anything large enough to be a dragon.

Then, edging forward, he tripped on something low to the ground. He caught himself on the wall before he completely lost his footing. Anar silently cursed as he looked down and saw a tripwire suspended bare inches above the cave floor. He had not made much noise, but elves are known for sharp eyes and ears, and he heard footsteps coming in his direction.

Anar quickly pulled out a small misshapen lump of wax from his pouch. Waving the wax in the air, he whispered an arcane phrase.

He conjured the sound of boots striking the stone floor which, with a gesture, he sent scurrying away from him. He directed the ghostly sound out into the cave. Smiling grimly, he peered around the corner.

As he had hoped, the false footsteps distracted the Qualinesti rebel—a youth who looked roughly same age as Anar's own son—who had come to investigate. "Hey, there's someone in here. I can hear him but I cannot see him!"

Anar sent the phantom footsteps deeper into the cave. Although he couldn't extend the spell too far, and soon it would fade away, the distraction would buy him some time.

More elves appeared, rushing around, attempting to subdue the unseen figure. Leaning out to observe them, Anar saw an elfwoman standing in the center of the cave, watching the others with a dissatisfied frown. Her golden hair—once long and flowing—was cropped short, revealing her especially long and pointed ears. Once a lady who wore gauzy dresses and diaphanous gowns, she now dressed in form-fitting leathers. She was dirty and disheveled, yet in the torchlight she seemed achingly beautiful.

Anar was unable to help himself. "Kerasina!" he shouted.

The elven woman's eyes swiveled and instantly met Anar's, her mouth opening in surprise. She looked as if she were going to yell back, then closed her mouth again.

Anar raced toward her, all thoughts of stealth gone. He circled an arm around his wife's waist. "Quick! Come with me—"

Anar whirled, glimpsing a dark-clad figure wielding a short club.

Then all went black.

With sleep came the blackness and the dream again. Once again he was in the tunnel, escaping the doomed city of Qualinost. Again, Anar found himself surrounded by a crowd of his cousins, neighbors, associates, friends, and strangers, all pressed around him in a terrified mob. They were a frightened herd streaming through the darkness.

Anar was just as afraid as any of them, just as panicked, but he held his wife's hand tightly. She was his lifeline, his link to the life that was, their home, their son they had been forced to leave behind. He had always loved Kerasina, but never before had he fiercely needed her as he did in the darkness of the dwarven tunnels.

Running for their lives, the couple paused for breath in the light of a hanging lantern. Kerasina looked up at Anar, her large almond-shaped eyes fixed on his.

"Why are you here?" she asked in the dream.

A rough hand slapped him on the side of face, the shock of the blow jarring him out of sleep. Before Anar opened his eyes, he could feel his hands bound behind his back with thick rope. His feet were also tied together in front of him. Another slap, this time on the other cheek.

A feminine voice spoke, familiar but colder than he remembered. "Really, there is no need to hit him."

Anar opened his eyes to see two figures kneeling in front of him. One was Kerasina, his wife of seventy-four years. The other was a stranger, the dark-clad elf who had knocked him unconscious.

“Why are you here?” Kerasina repeated the question.

“I came . . .” He looked up at his wife, forced himself to see her as she was at this moment, not as the long-haired beauty he had been married to for the better part of a century. “I came to rescue you,” he finished lamely.

The dark-clad elf snorted. He looked at Anar’s wife with amusement, but she raised a hand in warning for him to walk away. The elf stared hard at Anar before shrugging his shoulders and leaving to speak with the group who stood leering nearby.

There were a hundred things to say, even more to ask, but jealousy unexpectedly colored his first words. “Who is your friend?” he asked, nodding toward the dark-clad figure who still watched with eyes glittering in the torchlight.

“His name is Ealthan. I doubt you would remember him.”

“I remember,” Anar answered grimly. “He is a dark elf, exiled less than a decade before the Chaos War, a thief and a murderer. You keep interesting company, Kerasina.”

She shook her head. “A dark elf. Just what *is* a dark elf, Anar? An exile? Someone who may never go home?” She gestured toward the back of the cave, where in the torchlight Anar could see the small band of elven rebels. A few were young men, but others seemed vaguely familiar—peers who once lived and worked in Qualinost just as he did. “The way I see it, my husband, we are now *all* dark elves. We can never return—until we take back our homeland.”

Anar felt his throat tighten, because he was angered and frustrated by her words.

“Our home?” he replied disbelievingly. “The grandest army in the world will never bring back our home, Kerasina! Our home lies under the Lake of Death. We will never see it again, no matter what you—and your new friends—do here.”

Their raised voices drew hard-eyed stares from the small band of elven rebels. The dark elf named Ealthan glared at Anar with undisguised loathing.

“I have seen our home, husband.”

Anar looked at her, questioning. "How is that possible? The dark knights—"

"Currently have their hands full, dealing with the foul human mercenaries and fighting goblins in the southern forest. They are disorganized, weak." Anar could hear the desire, the passion in her voice. "Don't you see? If we strike soon, our homeland can be restored to our people!"

"You said you have seen our home, Kerasina."

"Ealthan took us there. We had to travel by night, hide by day, but we reached the Lake of Death. No one ventures there, not even the dark knights and their mystics."

For the first time since he had ventured into the cave, he saw sadness mar his wife's features. "I have stood at the water's edge, Anar. It is a haunted place, the Lake. You can feel the anger of the dead, their sadness and outrage. They are dead and our city is drowned, because of the tunnels that *we* used to escape while they fought and died!

"I have stood at the water's edge," she repeated. "I have stood close enough to throw a stone out to the spot where our house once stood. Where we raised our son . . ."

Anar remembered Gaweyen, strong, brave, and so young that he assumed he would live forever. The haunted lake was his tomb. He was among the thousands who sacrificed their lives for those who escaped in the dwarven tunnels.

"Our son fought so we might live," Anar said quietly, "not so we would throw our lives away in hopeless battle." He gestured at the handful of elven rebels. "Is *this* your army?"

Kerasina shook her head angrily. "We are but one small group. There are many others, Anar, hundreds of us and growing."

"The dark knights number in the thousands, the goblins even more. This is a doomed cause!"

"No one is saying it will be easy or quick, but if we do nothing, our people are doomed. How will the next generation

fare? Will they live in the cities of humans? In the warrens of the gnomes? Or in the sewers with gully dwarves? The Qualinesti will not last another generation. The elven race will die out entirely if measures are not taken!”

Anar took a deep, slow breath. “Kerasina, listen to me! You have changed, but you are right in at least one respect. You are a dark elf—because you have chosen to act like one! In following you, I’ve learned what you do to gain money and supplies. You lie, cheat, steal—and worse!”

“No worse than has been done to us,” she replied coldly. “Survival calls for desperate tactics. Have you obeyed all the laws of E’li since our exile?”

Anar thought back on months of hardscrabble survival, of doing what had to be done. “I try to do what’s right,” he began weakly.

Kerasina raised her hands to cut off his pleading. “Get some rest, husband. I have to discuss matters with my friends. We will speak again in the morning, I promise.”

The dark elf Ealthan returned, impatiently. Kerasina nodded to her compatriot, then knelt down and gently touched Anar’s cheek. “In the morning,” she said again.

Ealthan then did something surprising—loosening Anar’s bonds to make him more comfortable. The dark elf sat down across from him and smiled—almost apologetically.

He reached into a pouch and offered Anar a strip of smoked meat, but the smell repulsed Anar—who refused. Ealthan nodded. “My, but you must hate me, Anar Sovralian.”

“True elves do not hate. By the laws of E’li—”

The dark elf chuckled. “By the laws of E’li? Do not speak to me of gods, brother. The gods have come and gone twice in a lifespan. E’li, Paladine, or whatever name he might once have gone by is now cast down from the heavens.”

Anar frowned. He did not want to be goaded into an argument. “I do not suppose there are many laws that you would care to obey, from heaven or otherwise.”

The dark elf spread his hands wide, as if accepting

the statement. "I have committed crimes—some of them terrible— but I will not lie to a kinsman.

"We are all brothers and sisters now, all of us. The Qualinesti have lost their home to dark knights and goblins. The Silvanesti know their former homes are serving as rutting pens for the minotaur nation. Even the Kagonesti—their homeland has been frozen solid by the great White, and now they live as we all must—wanderers, exiles. All of us, one way or another, dark elves."

Anar kept his eyes fixed on Ealthan. "Do not assume that misfortune turns everyone into someone like you."

"Of course, brother. While some of us only fight to reclaim our lost homes, some fight for greater causes. Love, for instance." Ealthan glanced meaningfully at Kerasina.

"You're right," Anar said. "I do hate you."

The dark elf only laughed. "It's a pity, you know. You've already shown yourself to be quite resourceful and talented—a tracker, spy, and magician. Can you handle a sword as well?"

Anar smiled tightly. "Would you like to find out?"

"All in good time, brother, but I have no interest in spilling elven blood—especially my own."

A blue-eyed Qualinesti boy, obviously no older than thirty, walked over holding steaming bowls. A tantalizing aroma filled the air, pushing aside the dank smell of the cave. One bowl was set in front of Anar, and the youth cut the bonds around his wrists.

Ealthan gestured to Anar's bowl, even as he picked up his own. "Eat up, brother. Perhaps this will be more to your liking than trail rations." Anar looked down to see a traditional vegetable stew, an elven mainstay. The dark elf wasted no time in eating from his own bowl.

Anar saw no reason to deprive himself. The stew was the most delicious thing he had tasted in months, washing away the taste of dust and tears, its light spiciness leaving a warmth in his mouth between bites. He looked around the cave and

saw, for the first time in far too long, elven camaraderie, conversation, and laughter. It made his heart ache to see it. As strange as it seemed, this place had—at least temporarily—become a sanctuary, if not a home for these elves. There was no den of criminals here, no evil wizards, no dragons—

Anar looked up sharply from his stew. “Where is your dragon master, dark elf? Aren’t we sitting inside his lair?”

Ealthan smiled patiently. “You mean Ebon Nightshadow, the notorious Black Marauder? He’s long gone—and good riddance, too. We found his cave emptied, his hoard moved as well. There are stories that say the dragon fled like a coward after he learned that Beryl was slain by elves.

“The cave may not be much, but most of the world does not know its location and the rest fear the dragon. Wild creatures still smell the wyrm’s stench and stay clear, serving us well.” The dark elf finished the last of his stew with a gulp, then licked his lips in satisfaction.

“As serviceable as this is, it’s not home. Elves are not meant to live in caves, gnome warrens, or human cities. The homeland of our ancestors lies close by. With numbers, work, sweat, and blood it can be ours once more!”

Anar looked up at Ealthan, intrigued despite himself.

The dark elf continued. “You are just the sort we need, Sovralian. You want it all back—the past, your home. You want to hear the wind whisper through the aspens, feel the rush of the White-Rage river as you swim in its chill waters, breathe truly fresh air again. To bite into crisp apples, smell the blossoms of cherry trees . . .”

For a moment Anar found his heart beating faster. He did long for all of those things, more than he could ever express in mere words. Ealthan was speaking of a dream-*Qualinesti* that broke his heart, but the dark elf was so caught up in his own vision that he momentarily had dropped his guard.

Thus the elven intruder whispered spidery words and made a few precise gestures. “*Ajukan tangani hantu.*”

Rhapsodizing about sparkling elven wine and mushrooms seasoned with ginger, Ealthan didn't notice his furtive act.

Anar reached out with a tiny, invisible hand created by his spell. Ghostly fingers seized the dagger around Ealthan's belt, and suddenly the blade flew into Anar's hand of flesh and blood. He lunged, toppling the dark elf.

Anar pressed the blade to Ealthan's throat. "Please do not make any sudden moves, 'brother'," Anar said. "I do not wish to spill any elven blood—even yours."

By the time Anar had raised himself and his captive into a standing position, the other elves were closing in to free their leader. "Please stay back!" Anar shouted. "I have no wish to hurt any of you. I only came for my wife."

The elven rebels exchanged surprised looks, even as Kerasina stepped forward. "Husband—what are you doing?"

Anar gripped the dagger tightly, though Ealthan seemed less frightened than annoyed at being threatened.

"Kerasina, I am taking you out of here."

Ealthan cleared his throat. "There is no need for this, Sovralian. No one is being held prisoner here."

"No?" Anar asked loudly. "Why was it, then, that when your group camped with us for only a single night, my wife was gone in the morning? Admit it, you kidnapped and brainwashed her."

A Qualinesti youth—the same who had served the stew—rushed forward to grab Anar's arm. "*Kalith karan tobanis-kar!*" the elf cried, and a bolt of magical energy shot from his free hand. The young elf fell down, clutching one knee painfully.

"I do not want to hurt any of you!" Anar said. "My next spell will be lethal, I promise you." Anar hoped his lie was convincing, for his magical energies were spent. There were no deadly spells, no spells at all left to cast.

Kerasina stepped closer, almost within arm's reach. "Husband, I'm sorry, but the one you have hurt is right. I am here of my own accord. I am no one's prisoner."

Anar gripped the dagger so tightly, his knuckles turned white; he was afraid his hand would start to shake. He could feel white-hot tears forming. With a voice both angry and wavering, he asked a simple question. "Why?"

The elfwoman looked at her husband sadly. "We left our home, Anar. We said goodbye to our son, who died to save us and all of our kinsmen. We left behind our heirlooms, our clothes, our marriage bed. We entered the tunnels to escape with our lives. We both entered the tunnels, but only one of us came out reborn." She sighed, seeing that Anar did not understand.

"You are still there, husband, stuck in the darkness. Along with your home you left a part of yourself behind. For months we had been together, wandering with our cousins, trying to survive, but you were like one whose soul was asleep. You did not seem to taste your food, to care where we were, or even to respond to my touch."

Anar closed his eyes for a moment as if that could block out the truth in her words. "I was just trying—"

"No, husband. You *stopped* trying. I am sorry for abandoning you, but when Ealthan and his group joined our camp, he told me he was taking a small group into the forest, to see the Lake of Death—and there to mourn the past and begin the future.

"We all heal in different ways, Anar. I knew that in order to accept everything that has happened to us, I had to walk along the water's edge. I have said a prayer to whatever gods still care at our son's grave. Now I am doing what I can to help re-claim our homeland for our people."

Even as his lips quivered and the first tears stung, Anar felt an ache deep in his gut as real as if he had been punched in the stomach.

Ealthan spoke. "Sovralian, put down the knife and listen to me. We have all made mistakes, committed crimes, wronged our loved ones, but we are desperate people trying to cope with terrible loss. Wounds can heal, sins can be forgiven. Perhaps I can restore your wife to you—"

It was the wrong thing to say. Blinded by rage and tears, Anar tossed the dagger aside, whirled Ealthan around, and punched him squarely in the face. The dark elf reeled backwards, caught in the arms of his comrades, several of whom immediately advanced to subdue Anar.

The former woodshaper lost all sense of reality and purpose. Feet and fists beat him down to the bare cave floor. His world exploded in pain.

“Stop!”

Suddenly the hands he felt on his arms were small and delicate and familiar. His wife traced the lines of his face and body, made sure nothing was broken. Through swelling eyes he saw his beautiful wife holding him.

“Kerasina . . .”

“Hush, husband. It is now time for you to rest.” Her hands smoothed out his hair as he rested his head against her breast. As he relaxed, he heard his wife’s soft voice hum an ancient elven tune, a Qualinesti hymn to the sun.

With each shuddering breath, the pain seemed to recede. The only thing that remained were his wife’s arms holding him and the sound of her voice.

With sleep came the dark dream, as always, but this time Anar and his wife could spot light streaming in from the end of the tunnel. Though they had to wait behind a long line of jostling refugees, the sight of the light and the slight breeze of fresh air, alleviated their anxiety.

Some women were still crying over their losses, while other groups held hushed conversations about what they would do next. Children had to be restrained, for they wanted to rush ahead to escape the unaccustomed confinement of the tunnels.

Hand in hand, Anar and Kerasina followed the other families, each step bringing them closer to the light.

A boot to Anar's shoulder jarred him out of sleep, pulling him from the dream. The boot nudged him again, not gently.

His head pounded, his eyes felt swollen shut, and his entire body was bruised and sore. He squeezed open his eyes as best he could manage, dazed and confused.

Anar lay in a refuse-strewn alley, a pile of unidentifiable garbage as his pillow. It was morning, and the odor of freshly baked rolls wafted in from the baker's shop, mingling with the foul smells of the alley.

A town guardsman kicked his shoulder once more. "I said, get *up*, elf! We've already run one group of you beggars out of town. We don't want your kind here."

Anar nodded and staggered to his feet, his head throbbing. He looked around the alley and remembered. He raised his hands to the human, placating.

"Go on, now!" the guard said sternly. "I don't want any more trouble out of you."

Not quite sure just where he was going, Anar stumbled out of the alley and into the daylight.



LAKE OF DEATH

DAN WILLIS

IN CONFUSION, THERE IS PROFIT

The iron-rimmed wheels of the handcart slipped into a rut in the road. The abrupt stop caused the cart's handle to slam into Tendek's ribs as the big knight tried to push the laden cart.

"Damn those pointy-eared devils," Tendek cursed, rubbing his side. Normally he wasn't a man to complain, but as this was the fifth time in as many minutes that the handcart had gotten stuck in the muddy road, he was beginning to lose his patience.

Tendek pushed against the handcart's handle with his strength, but the little wagon wouldn't budge.

"Well, don't just stand there, you sawed-off runt," he yelled towards the rear of the cart, "push!"

"What do you think I've been doin', you jackass?" came the indignant reply. "The wheel's jammed."

Tendek set the wagon's handle down and wiped the sweat from his face. His companion, a sword-wielding kender named Wylinger, trudged wearily around the little cart to join him.

"What does this road have against us anyway?" the kender inquired of no one in particular, as he leaned on his knees to catch his breath.

"Maybe it doesn't like rodents," Tendek replied, rotating his shoulders to work the stiffness out.

"Rodent is it?" Wylinger sneered up at the big knight. "Well, don't forget whose idea this little treasure hunt was. You'd still be picking yer nose with Mina's other followers if it weren't for me."

Wylinger thumped his chest for emphasis.

"Don't push me, kender," Tendek replied edgily, cracking his knuckles. "Your idea of picking up the valuables the elves left behind on the Plains of Dust was good, but now that we've got 'em we might not need you anymore."

"Ha!" The kender laughed, genuinely amused. "You couldn't find the New Sea if you were ankle deep in it, to say nothing of getting all the way to Palanthas. Even if you did get there, who's going to sell all this," Wylinger waved his hand at the laden handcart, "you?"

Tendek growled and fingered the oiled leather grip of his broadsword.

"I'm sure Don can take care of that," he muttered dangerously.

"Oh ho," Wylinger chuckled. "I can just see your sister at the bargaining table; *'Give me my price or I'll cut your ears off and feed them to you.'* "

As irritated as he was by the kender, Tendek had to stifle a smile. His twin sister Donnala and he had been Knights of Neraka during the war. Though she lacked Tendek's size and brute strength, she easily made up for it with her raw aggression and precise swordsmanship.

Tendek was about to defend his sister's honor when a sound made him turn. Wylinger heard it too, and they both had their swords half drawn before they recognized Donnala standing a few feet from them, her arms crossed over her armored chest.

"I thought you were scouting ahead," Tendek muttered, slamming his sword back in its scabbard.

"It wouldn't make much difference the way you're

carrying on," Don replied coolly. "An Orkish war band could've marched right up to you, and you'd never know."

"We just stopped for a bit of relaxation," Tendek sneered back at his sister.

"The wheel's jammed," Wylinger added, jerking his thumb at the cart. "Fifth time today, I can't figure it out."

Don cocked her head at the cart then clanked around to the rear. Unlike Tendek, who only wore his chain shirt, Don wore her full-battle armor; its enamel was chipped and it bore signs of recent battles, but Don seemed to feel at home in it despite its condition. They both had abandoned the knighthood when the truth about Mina and her god had been revealed, but Tendek couldn't help wondering if Don regretted it. His sister was always the serious one of their pair, and Tendek knew she took her knightly oaths very seriously indeed.

"You're following the ruts," Don said, as if that explained everything.

"What's wrong with that?" Wylinger shot back.

"We must be in elven lands," Don explained. "The elven carts that made these ruts were built to a different standard than human carts like ours. Their wheel base is slightly narrower, look."

Don pointed at the wheels, and Wylinger and Tendek moved to the rear to see. Sure enough, as Tendek stood behind the cart, he could see the wheels being pulled inward by the narrow ruts.

"How does she know all that?" Wylinger whispered in Tendek's ear.

"Her head's full of stuff like that," Tendek whispered back. Ever since they were squires in the knighthood, Don had picked up all kinds of useless information.

"That's spooky," the kender whispered back as Don approached the mired handcart.

"You're lucky you didn't break the axle," she said, grabbing the side. "Help me lift it out."

It took a good deal of effort, and a barrage of well chosen curses from Tendek, but eventually the cart popped free from the muddy rut.

“So why did you come back?” Tendek asked Don, after they’d all sat panting in the grass a while.

Don took a long pull on their waterskin before she replied.

“I wondered what was keeping you,” she grinned, passing the skin to Tendek. “I also ran across something I thought would interest you.”

“Oh?” Wylinger prodded, as Tendek passed him the water.

“You boys up for a little exercise?” Don’s eyebrows arched mischievously.

“What have you found?” Tendek pressed.

“Get your armor on, and I’ll show you.”

An hour later, Tendek found himself crouching in the bushes at the edge of a small clearing. It had taken him a good half an hour to work himself into this position without being heard, but he’d managed it. Don’s surprise lay ahead in the clearing, a few dozen feet away—a band of goblins.

“What are they doing here?” Tendek whispered to Wylinger.

The kender was the only one of their group who spoke any Goblin, and his was shaky at best.

“Seems they had the same idea we did,” Wylinger hissed. “They’re part of a larger group that’s been collecting treasure and raiding in this area.”

Tendek saw that while the goblins may have been scavenging on the Plains of Dust, they clearly didn’t have a good eye for treasure. They seemed to have picked up anything brightly colored or unusual looking. Tendek spotted an intricately woven and painted wicker chair that he certainly would have left behind.

Tendek’s group collected only the best booty. Only cast-offs with jewels, precious metals, or exquisite workmanship,

were granted space in their tiny cart. Not for the last time, Tendek wished for a wagon. The elves had brought much of their wealth with them when they fled their homeland, but they had soon discovered that a sack of water is worth more than a sack of steel on the Plains of Dust. To make room for the water, most of them had simply abandoned their valuables amongst the cacti.

Tendek had a pain when he thought about what their tiny handcart had forced them to leave behind.

"What are they doing now?" Don's whisper brought Tendek's attention back to the present.

"They're arguing about leaving," Wylinger supplied the translation. "That big one there is the leader," he went on, indicating a goblin who approached man-size. "He's saying something about being late to meet their brothers."

"Maybe we should leave," Tendek interjected. "I don't want to be here if the rest of their clan shows up."

"Coward," Don grinned at him.

"They're not meeting here," Wylinger went on, "It's somewhere west of here."

"What's the big deal about a goblin raiding party?" Tendek asked Don.

Don winked at Tendek and pointed at a location on the far side of the little camp.

"That," she whispered.

At first, Tendek didn't see anything more than the goblin's small pile of loot, which included the wicker chair. After a moment, however, the pile moved and Tendek's heart leapt.

"A donkey," Wylinger exclaimed, a bit louder than he should have.

"Can we sneak it out of their camp tonight?" Tendek asked, licking his lips at the thought of never pulling the handcart again.

"Not if they leave today," Don reminded him. "I say we take it now." She drew her sword part way from the scabbard.

"Are you crazy?" The kender hissed back. "There must be three o' those things for each of us."

"Four actually," Don shot back, her enthusiasm undaunted.

Tendek wavered, even as Wylinger and Don's eyes turned to him. A dozen goblins against two knights and a kender would be risky, he knew, but having a real live donkey to pull the cart was hard to resist.

The big knight slipped his sword silently from his scabbard.

"I'll take the big one," he whispered, taking command easily. "Once he goes down, some of the little ones might run for it."

"I'll keep the others off your back till you get him down," Don volunteered.

"What about me?" Wylinger protested. "I won't last a minute out there."

"Stay down and shoot as many as you can," Tendek answered.

Wylinger nodded and shouldered his crossbow as Tendek and Don rose up on the balls of their feet.

The ensuing fight was short and ugly. Don and Tendek charged without a word into the midst of the camp. The goblins were taken so completely by surprise that Don had two of their heads off before the others managed to draw their weapons. A goblin leapt at Tendek as he closed with the leader, but Wylinger's crossbow shot him out of the air.

The goblin leader turned out to be a challenging opponent. He was a far better swordsman than any goblin had a right to be, and he was fast to boot. By the time Tendek had the leader down, the other goblins were swarming him, trying to drive the armored knight to the ground with the press of numbers. In this situation, Tendek's prodigious strength was a great advantage and he tossed goblins off as fast as they piled on.

Tendek could hear the sound of the goblin's teeth and claws as they scrabbled for purchase on his slick metal

armor. Their swords clanged off the plates and slid along the edges, seeking seams or gaps where they could bite. For his part, Tendek slashed and chopped at the writhing mass, hacking the foul creatures away in bloody lumps. He felt one jump on his back and begin wrenching at his helmet, but before he could get a hand free, one of Wylinger's bolts swept the creature off.

As quickly as the battle had begun, it was over. In response to some unspoken signal, the remaining goblins broke and ran. Wylinger sent a bolt after them, but Don and Tendek didn't bother. They knew from experience that very few things were faster than a routed goblin.

"Anyone hurt?" Wylinger called, tramping out of the bushes.

"Nothing I can't live with," Tendek responded, surveying his armor. The goblins had scratched him through the gaps in his armor, and his shoulder was bleeding slightly. Nothing felt serious, though, so he shrugged them off.

Predictably, Don was fine. Tendek doubted if the goblins had managed to get anywhere near her.

Wylinger stepped over the goblin corpses and made his way to the donkey. The sounds of battle and the scent of blood had made the beast skittish, and the kender had to approach it slowly.

"What do we do with all this junk?" He asked, once the donkey was docile.

Don looked over the collection of colorful furniture with a critical eye.

"Cut it loose," she answered, "unless you think any of it's valuable."

Wylinger gave the bundle a quick look, then took out his knife and cut the ropes holding it on the donkey's back. With a clattering crash, the load fell away and the donkey heaved a great sigh of relief.

"Relax, my girl," Wylinger patted the donkey's flank. "You belong to us now, and we'll take good care of you."

You'll pull our little wagon, and we'll make sure you have rest and lots to eat."

The donkey snorted, and began nuzzling the kender's topknot as Wylinger continued.

"She understands me," Wylinger exclaimed, stroking the donkey's head affectionately.

"It's just a dumb animal," Tendek replied, his shoulder beginning to bother him. "See if the goblins kept any grain for her, and let's get out of here."

"He's right," Don confirmed. "Those goblins who ran are bound to go looking for the rest of their clan. I don't want to be here when they get back."

THE LAKE OF DEATH

The addition of the donkey made the next few days much easier for Tendek. Freed from the task of pulling the handcart, he had taken to wearing his full armor and scouting ahead with Don. They hadn't seen a goblin since their battle for the donkey, but Tendek was taking no chances.

Besides, Tendek reminded himself, scouting kept him away from the kender and his incessant chatter. With only Tendek to talk to, Wylinger hadn't said much. Now that he had a captive audience in the donkey, however, the kender prattled on to the beast as if it could understand every word. Tendek wondered if Wylinger was doing it simply to annoy Don. She had almost strangled the kender when she heard him patiently explaining to the donkey why he had to keep the wheels out of the narrow ruts. To Wylinger's credit, however, the donkey had stayed away from the ruts ever since they'd had their little talk.

The creak of the cart's wheels snapped Tendek out of his daydreaming. Don, as usual, had gone to scout ahead, leaving Tendek to wait for the kender to catch up.

"All clear?" Wylinger inquired as the cart lumbered up to Tendek.

"Don says there's a big lake about a mile ahead," the knight reported, falling into step beside the kender.

"Can we cross or do we have to go around?"

"Don't know," Tendek admitted. "Don's looking for a port, a ferry, or something."

The lake turned out to be an enormous body of water stretching from horizon to horizon. A newly cut road ran along the shore, but there was no other sign of habitation.

"What kept you?" Don asked from the shelter of an enormous tree.

"I don't want to tire out Leslie," Wylinger said defensively, patting the donkey. "She can go all day as long as we don't go too fast."

"Leslie?"

Don's exasperated look warned Tendek, so he changed the subject.

"Did you find anything, sis?"

"Yes and no," she replied, shifting her focus back to her brother. "There's a burnt out building a mile or so down the road that looks like it was a ferry station once. Now there's goblin signs all over the place."

Tendek's hand strayed involuntarily to his sword. "What about the ferry?"

"It's still there, a little the worse for wear but still floating," Don reported with a shrug.

"Let's take a look then," Wylinger urged, starting down the road. "C'mon Leslie."

Don muttered darkly as the little cart bumped down the road, then she clanked after it. Tendek followed, loosening his sword in his scabbard.

The ferry station was a rough two-story building with a dock extending out into the waters of the lake. Its roof was gone, and one of the walls had fallen in, but the rest of the structure remained.

"There's the ferry," Don said, indicating a large flat vessel with a stubby mast drifting at the far end of the dock.

"It's perfect," Wylinger exclaimed, leaving the cart and hustling down to the dock.

Tendek hadn't done much sailing in his young life but he was pretty sure that 'perfect' was far too generous a term for the ferryboat. It was certainly big enough for them and their cart, but it had no railing, no sail, and it was listing strangely to one side.

"Why didn't the goblins burn it?" Tendek wondered aloud.

"Maybe they use it for something," Don suggested. "There's a sign by the dock, but I can't read it."

Tendek saw the sign, little more than a broken board tied to a twisted stick by the dock. On its face were crude characters, written in what looked unpleasantly like blood.

"Wylinger!" Tendek yelled at the kender. "Take a look at this."

The kender broke off his observation of the ferry and ran back to shore.

"It looks bad," the kender declared when he reached Don and Tendek, "but it's still sound. All we have to do is use our tarp for a sail, come up with some oars, and we're in business."

"Don't go into business just yet," Tendek said, turning Wylinger towards the sign. "What does this say?"

The kender stared hard at the sign for a few moments, whispering to himself as his fingers traced the dark red letters.

"Lake of Deat," he concluded finally.

"Never heard of it," Don admitted.

"Maybe it's a goblin term," Tendek suggested.

"It won't matter much what it is," Wylinger observed, "if the goblins who wrote it find us here."

"Can you pilot that thing?" Don nodded towards the ferryboat.

"Just leave everything to me," Wylinger grinned excitedly.

It didn't take anywhere near as long as Tendek thought it would to get the ferry ready to sail. Tendek hauled the

flat-bottomed craft up onto the bank, and he and Don nailed down the loose boards. Wylinger cut their tarp into sections and tied the pieces to the ferry's stubby mast. By supper time they were ready to load the little craft.

"You and Don pull her back in the water and tie her to the end of the dock," Wylinger instructed. "We should be able to just roll the cart out onto her."

"Shouldn't we wait till morning to load the cart?" Don asked, as she and Tendek manhandled the raft back in the water.

"I figured we'd get started tonight," Wylinger explained as the ferry slid free of the shore. "There's some cold chicken left over from last night that we can eat out on the water."

"How will you know where to steer?" Tendek wondered as they tied up the raft.

"Easy," the kender laughed. "We'll just follow the stars. The dragon's tooth is always north."

"How do you know that?" Don pressed.

"I did some sailing before we met," Wylinger offered vaguely.

"Is there anything you haven't done?" Don asked, genuinely impressed.

Wylinger cleared his throat and fixed Don with a leer. "Now that you mention it . . ."

"Finish that sentence, kender," Don warned, her voice turning to ice, "and I'll feed you your tongue for dinner."

"Maybe if I got her drunk," the kender murmured, once Don was out of earshot.

"I wouldn't," Tendek chuckled. "A minstrel tried that once during the war. When Don figured out what he was up to, she went after him with a knife."

"She killed him?" Wylinger asked, not the least surprised.

"No," Tendek admitted, "but he sings soprano now."

Wylinger winced and cast a fearful glance to where Don was repacking their cart. "How do you sleep with her around?"

"Easy," Tendek replied, clapping the Kender on the shoulder, "I don't make passes at her."

The loading of the cart went as easily as Wylinger had predicted. Tendek simply pushed it along the dock and onto the ferry where Don tied it down.

The hard part turned out to be loading Leslie. Wylinger led her up to the dock, but the animal would go no further. The kender begged, cajoled, and pleaded to no avail. The stubborn beast simply stood there, lock-legged, and shook her head, sending her ears flapping.

When Tendek finally came over to take matters into his own hands, the donkey sat down and resisted all his attempts to pull her forward onto the dock. Finally, with Tendek and Wylinger tugging, and Don whacking the beast with the flat of her sword, they managed to get her onto the ferry.

"I don't get it," Wylinger admitted as he cast off. "It's like she's scared."

"Maybe she can't swim," Don observed, unpacking her armor.

"I wouldn't wear that," Wylinger cautioned. "It's hard to swim in armor."

"I wasn't planning on going swimming," Don growled, hesitating.

"Then I hope you don't sleepwalk," the kender retorted before turning his attention to the sail.

Don grumbled to herself as she repacked her armor and Wylinger began unfurling his crude sail. Tendek wasn't sure what he should be doing, so he watched the dock and the burnt-out ferry station slip gradually away. Once Wylinger's sail was up, Tendek was amazed at how fast the land receded. By the time the last rays of sunlight were coloring the sky purple, the shoreline had vanished completely.

Dinner consisted of the previous day's chicken and some fried bread Wylinger had made the week before. Tendek liked cold chicken and bread, but the rolling of the raft on the open water had taken the edge off his appetite. After

the pace they'd been keeping, he was grateful for the opportunity to rest, so he propped himself against the mast and watched the stars come out.

Tendek was almost asleep when he heard Wylinger get up and move to the side of the raft, then the unmistakable sound of him urinating over the side. The big knight was about to join him when the kender screamed and stumbled back from the side.

Tendek sat bolt upright but Don, who was leaning against the cart's wheel, didn't budge.

"What is it, kender," she grumbled, "feeling inadequate?"

"T-there's something in the water," Wylinger managed to squeak.

THE MIST OF DARKNESS

"What did you see?" Tendek asked, peering into the water, sword drawn.

"I don't know," the frightened kender admitted. "It looked like a hand or a claw, and it reached up out of the water right at me."

"Well there's nothing there now," Don observed, peering over Tendek's shoulder.

"Check the other side," Tendek instructed his sister, as he prodded the water with his blade.

"Nothing here either," she called back after a brief search.

Whatever Wylinger had seen, Tendek could find no sign of it. Normally he wouldn't have given it much thought. After all, the rolling surface of the lake moved in all kinds of strange ways in the dim light. Something about Wylinger's face, however, made Tendek edgy. Kender were notoriously hard to scare, and Wylinger was white as a sheet.

"Have a drink," Tendek offered, handing his flask to Wylinger. "This'll calm your nerves."

While Wylinger drank Tendek cast his eyes around once more. The shoreline had long since vanished, and their raft was like a tiny island in an unending sea.

"Something wrong, brother?" Don inquired, scanning the placid sea for whatever Tendek was looking at.

Tendek hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. "Why do you ask?"

"You've got that look," she replied. "You always get that look when you sense trouble. What's bothering you?"

"The waves are getting smaller."

Don scanned the horizon, then looked up at Wylinger's makeshift sail.

"The wind's died off," she reported.

"That's normal," Wylinger interjected, handing Tendek back his flask with a still trembling hand. "It'll probably pick up again in a few hours."

Tendek didn't answer. That little whisper of danger that he'd heard at the sight of the terrified Kender was now a roaring shout in his mind. He couldn't explain it, but something about the black water rolling gently beneath them was setting his hair on end.

"What's that?" Don asked, pointing off in the distance where white wisps of fog were beginning to form.

"Just mist comin' off the water," Wylinger assured her, sounding more like himself. "That happens when the sun's just set."

At first Tendek could barely see the mist in the distance. As he stared at it, however, it became gradually clearer, more distinct.

"If there's no wind," he asked, nervously, "then how come that mist is coming closer?"

They all stared for a moment as the reality of what they were seeing sank in. The wind was still, yet the strange fog was rolling inexorably towards them. As if to punctuate the tension, Leslie snorted nervously and stamped hard on the deck. The noise snapped the companions back to reality,

and as one, they drew their weapons. They stood back to back under the limp sail and waited as the mist enveloped them.

The fog was cold, with the tang of salt air. Somewhere above, the moon must have risen, for the mist was radiant, glowing with a pale light. There was no sound to be heard; even the slapping of the water against the raft's sides seemed muted.

The donkey snorted again, rolling her eyes nervously. Tendek waited for something to happen, but the minutes crawled by, and nothing did.

"We're letting ourselves get spooked," Tendek observed at last, though his voice held little faith in the statement.

"There's something out there," Wylinger insisted. "Leslie can sense it. That's why she didn't want to get on the barge in the first place."

"Don't be ridiculous," Don snapped. "She's just a dumb jackass."

Wylinger turned to argue, but at that moment Don leapt forward with a yell. A figure had emerged from the mist, humanoid but with stubby wings and a long scaly tail. Don charged the draconian, spinning her blade over her head and down through the creature's leathery neck.

The draconian did not fall. Don's blade had passed through the creature effortlessly, yet it came on towards them, seemingly unaffected. It turned, and Tendek's bowels froze within him. The entire side of the creature's head was missing, as if eaten away, and the bones, tendons, and brain matter were exposed. The apparition regarded them for a moment then resumed its course through the mist. As soon as it had vanished other specters appeared: elves, dark knights, and more draconians. They were all decayed and horribly wounded like the first, and they came and went without a sound.

"What devilry is this?" Don's terrified voice sounded like thunder in the unnatural quiet.

"Lake of Deat," Wylinger muttered, his voice dry and horse. "Why does that sound familiar? Lake of Deat . . ."

"You idiot," Don screeched, slapping the kender on the back of the head with enough force to drive him forward a pace. "It's 'Lake of Death!'"

There was a stunned silence while the companions took in the enormity of Don's statement.

"What do we do?" Tendek asked, pressing his back to the mast. "I don't want to stay here until the ghost of old Beryl herself visits us."

"There's nothing we can do," the kender shot back as a headless elf drifted by, its disembodied head clutched under its arm. "Maybe if we just do nothing, they'll go away."

Before Tendek could respond the donkey suddenly screamed in terror. She reared away from the headless elf, crashing into the cart and straining against the ropes that bound her to the raft. Wylinger rushed to calm her, but the donkey reared, lashing out with her feet.

"Tie her down before she sends the cart overboard," Tendek roared, grabbing one of the donkey's lead lines.

Tendek pulled with all his might while Don and Wylinger got hold of the other ropes. They had almost managed to restrain the panicked beast when Tendek felt something cold touch him. He started, jerking around to find himself confronted with three ghostly people, their dead eyes fixed on him and their mouths hanging open in mute supplication. They reached out for Tendek, and the knight felt their icy hands clasp his jerkin and burn into his flesh. He cried out, dropping the rope, and stumbled back from the ghastly vision.

As Tendek drew his sword to menace the ghosts, he saw others in the mist turning towards him, apparently attracted by the noise. Tendek heard the donkey panicking behind him, but he couldn't take his eyes off the advancing dead. He was faintly aware of Don calling to him and of Wylinger trying desperately to calm the donkey, but it wasn't until he

heard a muffled curse and a splash that he managed to tear his gaze away.

Don had let go of the donkey's rope and was peering over the side.

"Wylinger!" she called, reaching into the dark water.

Tendek could feel the chill fingers of the dead reaching out for him as he raced to Don's side.

"The donkey kicked him overboard," she explained as she searched the darkness for any sign of the kender.

"We've got bigger problems." Tendek grabbed Don's shoulder and turned her to face the advancing ghosts.

Before Don could react, the donkey went wild. It charged the ghosts, and Tendek was forced to dive out of the way to avoid being trampled. The donkey reared and kicked at the ghosts, sending Wylinger's gear overboard.

As Tendek made a dash to save their food supply, he was caught in the shoulder by a flailing hoof and knocked headlong into the murky water. Sputtering and cursing he grabbed for the raft, catching it before it could drift away into the mist. He tried to haul himself back on board, but his shoulder was numb from the blow and refused to support his sodden weight.

Above him on the raft, Tendek could hear the donkey rampaging across the deck, braying in terror and lashing out madly. Tendek was about to try boarding the raft again when something flew over his head and landed heavily in the water. A quick glance revealed Don's unconscious form slipping beneath the water. Tendek grabbed for his sister with his good arm and managed to catch her tunic.

"Wake up, Don," he implored, straining to hang on with his numb arm.

There was a large purple bruise spreading across the side of Don's face, but to Tendek's great relief she was still breathing. The pain in Tendek's arm was becoming intense. He tried to heave Don onto the deck but nearly lost his own grip on the raft.

As the minutes slipped slowly by and the chill of the water soaked painfully into Tendek's joints, he feared the lake would claim them as it had the kender. Just when he was sure he could hold on no longer, Don's eyes snapped open and she flailed for her own grip on the raft.

"Welcome back," Tendek gasped, gripping the ferry with his good arm. "What happened?"

Don rubbed her face tenderly before replying. "That damn jackass kicked me in the head," she sputtered, between clenched teeth. "I swear I'll slit its throat."

Don grabbed the raft and heaved herself out of the water. As soon as she lifted her foot onto the deck, however, the donkey charged her and drove her back into the lake.

"Cursed beast," Don glared at it, "I'm not a ghost."

"Hey," Tendek exclaimed looking around. "There's no mist down here." He hadn't noticed it before but the mist and the ghosts that inhabited it floated just above their heads.

Every time Don tried to board the raft, the donkey bore down on her, kicking out in all directions and braying in terror.

"Stop antagonizing her," a voice came from the far side of the raft. "She's bound to kick the wagon overboard."

"Is that you, kender?" Tendek called, still clutching the raft with his numb arm.

"Yes," Wylinger called back, "I'm still alive."

"Your donkey is making me angry," Don growled, her eyes glittering dangerously in the dark.

"You won't be angry when you see what I've found," Wylinger teased.

Don fumed, and turned to her brother. "Maybe I'll feel better if I just go over there and kill him." Tendek put a restraining hand on her arm.

"Can you calm the donkey down?" Tendek yelled back at Wylinger. "Maybe if you talk to her she'll let us back on the raft."

"I'll try," Wylinger replied, though his voice didn't hold much hope.

For the next hour or so Wylinger talked, begged, wheedled, and cajoled with all his skill, but it was no use. When Tendek nearly got his hand smashed by a stamping hoof, they decided to give it up. The water wasn't so bitterly cold, so Tendek and Don tied themselves to the raft with their belts and settled in to wait for morning and hopefully the retreat of the restless dead.

Don hadn't spoken for a while; his sister was just floating beside him with her hair plastered across her face like a half-drowned rat. The image was a stark contrast to the proud knight who had marched under Mina's banner.

Tendek tried to speak but the salt from the water had dried his throat. "I'm sorry," he managed at last.

"For what?" Don asked, fighting to find her own voice.

"You never would've left the knights if it weren't for me," he explained. "Being a knight was everything to you and I convinced you to break your oaths."

For a long moment Don didn't answer, staring instead at the dark, rolling lake.

"It had to be done," she declared at last. "Mina's god turned out to be a lie. Everything, our whole world, turned out to be a lie."

Tendek wanted to reach out to his sister, to comfort her, but his arms were too numb and weary to obey him.

"We did what was right, Tendek," she continued, turning to face him. "An oath to a lie isn't worthy of keeping."

There didn't seem to be much to talk about after that, so Tendek let his mind drift while he waited for the sun. After what seemed to be several separate eternities, Tendek realized that he could see the stars. The death fog had withdrawn and a smear of pale orange tinted the horizon. He realized the morning couldn't be more than an hour off.

THE SPLIT

By the time the sun was fully up, Leslie seemed to be her calm and docile self once again. Appearances, however, were deceiving. No sooner had Tendek tried to exit the water than the donkey resumed rampaging. Tendek slipped quickly back into the water, but not before Leslie had kicked the cart and sent a sack of silver tableware sailing over the side.

"The damn animal's doing this on purpose," Don fumed after making a vain dive for the lost silver. "I swear I'm going to make steaks out of her!"

"Don't say that," Wylinger advised from the far side of the raft. "You'll just make her mad."

"She's a jackass, you jackass," Don exploded. "All she understands is eating and pulling the cart!"

"Leslie is smarter than you think," Wylinger replied after Don had calmed down. "She knew the lake was dangerous and she tried to warn us not to go."

Don shot her brother an annoyed look. "He's delirious."

"No I ain't," the kender called back.

"At least he still has his hearing," Tendek remarked dryly, then he turned towards the kender. "Okay, what do you mean the donkey tried to warn us?"

"When we tried to get her to board the raft she was shaking her head," Wylinger explained. "Then when the ghosts first appeared, she knocked us in the water where the ghosts couldn't get us."

"She was just scared, Wylinger," Tendek admonished. He did remember the strange head-shaking motion the donkey had made on the shore, but he wasn't willing to attribute it to unusual intelligence.

"Watch," the kender called back, "I'll prove it to you."

Then, with a soft, even voice, Wylinger addressed the donkey.

"I know you're scared," he told her, "and you're probably

mad at us for bringing you out here, but I need you to let us back on the raft."

Don rolled her eyes as Wylinger began easing his way onto the deck. Leslie was calm at first, but as the kender pulled himself up, she snorted and stamped at him.

"Are you ready to listen to reason?" Don snarled as the kender hustled back into the water. "Just keep her busy over there, and I'll climb up and slit her throat."

Wylinger's face was outraged, but before he could protest, Leslie turned and charged straight at Don. The donkey lashed out with her front hooves at Don's hands and head, forcing the knight to let go of the raft completely.

"I told you she can understand us," Wylinger grinned once Leslie had calmed down and Don had regained her hold on the raft. "I've got an idea, so don't try anything stupid."

"More stupid than talking to a donkey?" Don muttered, too softly for the kender to hear.

If Wylinger did hear, he ignored her. He continued talking soothingly to the donkey.

"It occurs to me," he began as if he were bargaining in the market, "that you don't really have anything to gain by helping us."

Tendek wondered what the crafty kender was up to, but he held his tongue.

"We'll make a deal with you," Wylinger continued. "If you let us back up on the raft, I promise I won't let Don hurt you. Also, we'll give you an equal share of our treasure."

"What are you talking about?" Tendek shouted, outraged. "You can't give part of our loot to a donkey."

Surprisingly, it was Don who waved him silent.

"Let him make whatever deal he wants," she advised, with an exasperated look. "It's a donkey."

"Don't pay any attention to them, Leslie," the kender persisted. "I promise you'll get an even share if you let us out of the water. What do you say?"

To Tendek's great surprise, Leslie snorted and nodded

her head, then retreated to the center of the raft. After a few seconds, Wylinger risked climbing on board. If Leslie noticed him, she gave no sign.

"I'll be damned," Tendek whispered, then he too hauled himself onto the deck.

"Told you so," Wylinger said from where he'd collapsed.

Tendek was tempted to make a rude gesture at the kender, but dangling all night in the cold lake had sapped his strength. He was vaguely aware of Don crawling out of the lake behind him as he lay on the deck gazing up at the sky.

At length the sun warmed Tendek enough for him to feel his limbs again. He sat up tentatively, every muscle complaining, and surveyed the raft. Wylinger appeared to be sleeping, curled up in a ball. Don was awake but showed no interest in moving.

Tendek got heavily to his feet and nudged the kender.

Wylinger uncurled and stretched. The motion reminded Tendek of a cat. It wasn't the kender's stretch that caught Tendek's attention, however, it was what he held in his hand.

"What's that?"

"Like that, do you?" Wylinger replied, holding up a jewel-encrusted cup that appeared to be made of gold. "When Leslie knocked me in the lake, I fell on this. It was tangled up in some floating seaweed."

Tendek took the cup and turned it over in his hands. It was an exquisite find. Purple-red rubies circled the rim with a row of emeralds around the bottom. Between the layers of jewels, a pastoral scene had been engraved into the cup. Through the trees and valleys, elven warriors were depicted armed with spears, swords, and bows. As Tendek inspected the object, he knew instantly that it alone was worth more than their cartful of loot.

"By the vanished moon, kender," Don whispered, looking over Tendek's shoulder. "I take back some of the things I said about you."

"Thank Leslie," Wylinger replied modestly. "If she hadn't sent me overboard at just the right moment, I never would have found it."

"You're not suggesting the donkey knew about this too?" Don asked, too focused on the chalice to be very irritated.

Wylinger shrugged, staring out at the blue surface of the lake. "I don't know," he admitted, "but so far Leslie hasn't steered us wrong."

Tendek was about to scoff, but at that moment the kender's head snapped up and he began pointing into the distance.

"Land!" he exclaimed, pointing wildly. "We've made it across."

Sure enough, in the distance, Tendek could see a strip of green above the blue of the lake. Hurriedly the companions stowed the chalice and secured the gear Leslie had knocked around during the night. Tendek took the tiller and guided the raft according to Wylinger's directions. Within an hour they had made landfall along a lush green bank.

Without the advantage of a dock, unloading the raft was more difficult. Wylinger had to convince Leslie to swim the last few yards, then Tendek and Don hauled the raft as close to land as possible with the cart on it. Don and Wylinger guided the wheels while Tendek manhandled the cart off the raft, through the muddy shallows, and up onto dry land. When at last everything was done, they all collapsed into the grass.

"I could sleep for a week," Tendek admitted, staring up at the sparse tree canopy.

Wylinger mumbled something that suggested that he was well on his way to doing just that. After a minute Don sat up.

"We should move on from here," she said, getting heavily to her feet.

"Why?" Wylinger groaned, levering himself into a sitting position.

"This is still goblin territory," Don explained. "We need to get moving and find out what the countryside's like."

Don tramped away and began rummaging through her gear for her armor. Tendek got slowly up and stretched.

"Your sister is very annoying, Tendek," Wylinger groaned as he got to his feet.

"She's often right," the big knight declared.

"I know," Wylinger admitted. "That's what's annoying."

The kender went to don his leather armor and hitch up Leslie. Tendek found the sack with his armor and began putting it on. Without help it took the better part of an hour. When he was finished, Tendek had to do some stretches to work the kinks out of his muscles and reenergize his exhausted body.

"You ready, big brother?" Don's voice came from behind him.

Tendek turned to say that he was as ready as he ever would be, but the sight of Don made him stop short. She had tied her hair back and donned her armor. She had also painted a white stripe across her black breastplate from shoulder to hip.

"What's this about?" Tendek asked, genuinely puzzled.

"We left the knighthood, brother," she explained, holding out a small pot of whitewash to Tendek. "We might as well announce that we're free swords."

Tendek took the paint and brushed a similar stripe across his armor.

"This could get us in trouble if we run into some of our former brethren," Tendek admonished, passing the paint back to Don.

"No more than if they found us with a kender and a cartload of treasure," Don countered. After a pause, she continued, "The first chance we get, we'll get our armor enameled white."

Tendek put his arm around his sister and they walked back to the cart. Wylinger had the donkey hitched up and

ready to go, he'd even scrounged some jerky and cheese for them.

"What should we do with Leslie's share of the loot?" Wylinger asked between mouthfuls of cheese. "We should get her something nice."

"If you think I'm giving this stinking beast anything," Don sneered, "you're crazy."

At that moment, the donkey snorted and sat down.

"I'm just kidding, Leslie," Don amended quickly. "We'll get you some nice oats and maybe some carrots."

Leslie got back up and snorted impatiently. Wylinger stuffed the last of the cheese into his mouth and led Leslie away. Don walked beside the wagon and Tendek fell in behind, tired but with a feeling of accomplishment. As they crested a little rise and began to press through the sparse forest, Tendek noticed that Wylinger had forgotten to pull the tarp down over the back of the cart. He could see the gold chalice glittering at him in the subdued light of the forest. Perhaps his eyes deceived him, but it seemed to Tendek that the rubies were more purple than red and the emeralds were dull and black. Even the faces of the fair elves seemed gaunt and hollow in this light.

Reasoning that most things looked better in bright light, Tendek pulled down the tarp to secure it in place. He felt a momentary chill and shivered.

"What's the matter?" Don asked, observing Tendek shiver.

"Nothing," Tendek shrugged, tying off the flap. "Just the chill of shade after lying out in the sun all morning."

"Don't let it throw you, brother," Don said with a mischievous grin. "After all, you just lost a third of your loot to a donkey."

"Me?" Tendek countered as the cart clattered off down the road. "What about you?"

Don was about to protest when Wylinger chimed in.

"Let's not forget whose idea it was to bring Leslie along

in the first place. I'm the genius."

"I'd like another opinion on that," Tendek chided as the wagon crested a little rise and began its descent into a green, fertile valley.

"Maybe Leslie will back you up," Don said.

Wylinger patted the donkey's neck, but for her part, Leslie kept her own council. Truth be told, she didn't have an opinion, one way or the other.



THE DRAGONSLAYERS

DOUGLAS W. CLARK

In the mountains beyond Hylo, at the bridge leading to Trader's Lot, a farmer with a cartload of onions stopped arguing with the town guard about the amount of levy owed for the privilege of selling his goods in the marketplace, and both men turned to stare instead at Skerrith's approach. Skerrith arranged his expression in his most professional scowl. His distinctive red leather vest was clearly visible, as were the items outfitting his wagon, but just to make sure his calling was clear he propped a booted foot, clad in similar blue leather, on the forward rail of the wagon where it too could be seen. He nodded tersely to the two men ahead as he drove his team onto the bridge. The farmer's jaw sagged open, creating an additional attraction for the flies that had gathered around his harness-galled, sway-backed horse. Despite this eager swarm, the farmer's cavernous mouth remained agape all the while Skerrith approached. The farmer did, however, have the presence of mind to rummage hurriedly about in his cart for a prize specimen from his harvest, which he offered as Skerrith passed. Skerrith accepted the proffered onion with the solemnity of a man being presented with gold or jewels. The guard, meanwhile, stared with huge, round eyes, quite forgetting to challenge Skerrith's arrival. Instead, he broke into a run, overtaking

Skerrith at the far end of the bridge in his hurry to shout the news to the town.

"A dragonslayer! The gods be thanked, a dragonslayer is here!"

A crowd quickly gathered around Skerrith, buzzing as eagerly as the farmer's flies while various individuals pointed to the new arrival and his wagon. "Look, his vest!" a man cried. "I'll lay odds that leather's from the hide of a red dragon. Must have given him quite a fight."

"What about his boot, Father?" a boy asked. "Is it from a dragon as well?"

The man nodded. "Taken from the wing of a blue, I imagine. Look how smooth it is."

Then the townspeople swarmed too thickly around him to make out individual voices as they all pointed to the necklace of dragon's teeth Skerrith wore, to the scaly dragon hide covering the wagon, to the clusters of dried claws dangling from the tailgate, and especially to the ornate lance mounted on one of the wagon's sideboards. As news of the last item passed through the crowd, everyone grew suddenly silent. "Is that . . . ?" a young woman asked at last in a hushed voice.

"A dragonlance," someone else finished. "Must be. How else could he have killed all those dragons?"

That was when the tribute began pouring in—a ham here, half a dozen eggs there, two heads of cabbage from yet another, all offered with silent awe. Some handed over hard goods—a length of cloth, a spool of satin ribbon—but these were rarer. One little girl even pressed a flower into his hand, a daisy freshly plucked from the side of the road. Whatever the gift, Skerrith granted each person a nod but said nothing. He drove the wagon through the throng, which parted reverently before him, and reined in at last at the town's only inn—a tidy looking establishment whose sign proclaimed it "The Boar and Stag."

"Here, boy," Skerrith said to a stablehand, giving him the reins and stepping from the wagon. "See to my horses, and

mind nothing happens to that lance. My grandfather brought it home from the war, when he fought alongside Tanis Half-Elven and Caramon Majere and the other companions, and it's been handed down proudly to each generation since." At that, Skerrith strode into the inn without a backward glance at his thronged admirers.

Once inside the door he paused, allowing his eyes to adjust to the relative gloom. Several patrons sat around tables or stood at the long bar that dominated the far end of the large common room. A striking, dark-haired young woman passed among the tables, serving food and drinks. In one corner of the room, a shrewd-eyed man in travel-stained gear shuffled walnut shells around on a tabletop while several onlookers bet on the outcome. The gambler lifted his hands from the shells and studied his audience, his gaze forming a lazy dare. A burly farmer hesitated then pointed to the middle shell. The gambler raised it, revealing empty table beneath. He grinned. The farmer shook his head and started to hand over something that had the clink of coins.

"Oh lookee," exclaimed a passing kender, momentarily distracted by the game. He pointed to the gambler's left hand. "There's the missing pea, under your little finger."

"What!" bellowed the farmer, wrenching open the gambler's hand to reveal the pea cleverly palmed. The farmer stood up and yanked the gambler across the table.

"Not in here!" shouted the dour-looking innkeeper from behind the bar. "Take it outside."

The farmer and other members of the group obliged, dragging the protesting gambler through the door past Skerrith and into the street. Moments later, a series of thuds could be heard, followed by cries of pain. The remaining patrons in the inn continued eating and drinking, blithely ignoring the commotion outside.

"It's a good thing I was here," the kender announced to no one in particular as he crossed the room in search of some new attraction. "That stranger might have looked for his pea

all day under those shells and never realized he was holding it in his hand.”

The disturbance, meanwhile, had drawn the attention of the inn's patrons to the door and thus onto Skerrith, who decided it was time to make his entrance. He swaggered across the room to the bar. “A mug of your finest ale,” he announced to the innkeeper, aware of every eye resting on him.

The innkeeper drew a frothy mug from a barrel behind him and plunked it on the bar. “My finest ale, my worst ale, the only ale I sell,” he said. Skerrith reached for the mug, but the innkeeper kept his grip on the handle. “Let's hear the ring of your coins on the counter first.”

Skerrith pulled out a purse. “My good man, I can do you even better than that,” he said, pitching his voice so all could hear. Opening the purse, he withdrew a blue dragon scale, shimmering with iridescence, and placed it on the bar. “A token of mortal combat,” he said. “Surely such an item is worth more than mere coins.”

“Maybe,” the innkeeper said, his hand still on the mug and his eyes never leaving Skerrith's face. “But not in here. My ale is for those who show hard money.”

“Is that a dragon scale?” the kender said, suddenly appearing at Skerrith's elbow. “Ooh, how exciting! Let me see.”

He reached for the scale, but the innkeeper slapped his free hand over it. “Rag, get lost. Ruby,” he called to the tavern maid. “Do something about this wretched kender.”

Rag pulled a small leather bag from one of his innumerable pouches and poured coins into his hand, ignoring the innkeeper. “Is it for sale?” he said to Skerrith. “I'll buy it from you.”

“Hey!” exclaimed a man across the room. “That's my purse!”

“Is it?” Rag asked, looking innocently at the bag. “You must have misplaced it. Lucky for you I found it.”

The man growled and lumbered over to retrieve his possessions, grabbing bag and coins so forcefully the kender cried out in protest, as if his arm had been wrenched half out of its socket.

“Hey!” Rag complained. “You should thank me. No need to get huffy.”

In answer, the man drew back a fist, but before he could loose the blow, the tavern maid stopped him with a hand on his upraised arm. “Come now, Targe, you have your purse back and there’s no harm done,” she said in a soothing tone.

The man grumbled but lowered his arm. “Best see that it doesn’t happen again,” he muttered as he retreated to his table.

The tavern maid turned to Skerrith. “So, how much for the scale?”

“Ruby Columbine, what are you doing?” the innkeeper demanded. “How are you ever going to buy this place from me, if you continue to squander your money on riffraff.”

“Riffraff?” Rag said, looking around. “That sounds interesting. Where?”

Ruby met the innkeeper’s eyes. “How am I ever going to buy this place on the pittance you pay me, Uncle?”

The innkeeper muttered under his breath and glanced away. Ruby turned her attention back to Skerrith. “How much?” she repeated.

Skerrith stared into her soft brown eyes, meeting them with his own hardened gaze. “Normally, I’d only part with so valuable a token for five steel, but for you I’ll settle for two.”

“One,” she said, her eyes never wavering.

The kender’s attention went from Ruby’s face to Skerrith’s, then back again, his eyes widening at some private thought. He mouthed a silent “O” and grinned.

Skerrith, ignoring Rag, hesitated under Ruby’s soft gaze. Finally, feeling particularly dry from the road and anxious

for a drink, he accepted the proffered coin. Ruby removed the dragon scale from beneath the innkeeper's hand and gave it to the kender, who accepted it with glee, still regarding Ruby and Skerrith with a knowing smirk.

"Ruby, you're a greater imbecile than Rag," the innkeeper snarled, but he took the steel from Skerrith in turn, and made change in bronze and silvers. Skerrith drank deeply from the mug, listening as others who had seen him arrive now pushed their way into the inn after him, crowding the common room. Casually, he turned.

"The name's Skerrith Dragonslayer," he told the assemblage. He winked. "I guess I didn't have to tell you that latter part, did I?"

No one said anything at first. Then a ruckus started at the back of the room, near the entrance. "Make way, make way," a man's shrill voice commanded. The press of bodies rippled to either side of someone's advancing path, like grain parted by a gust of wind. Soon, a short, fat man stood before Skerrith, self-consciously smoothing the lapels of his elegant coat. "I'm Borstan Dunnerth, the mayor of Trader's Lot," he said in a high, reedy voice. "You say you're a dragonslayer?"

Skerrith took another pull from his mug, set it on the bar, and wiped his lip. "That's what I said."

"Wonderful! Because we've got trouble with a dragon."

Skerrith choked on a swig of ale that went down wrong. "Dragon trouble?" he asked, recovering quickly.

Borstan nodded, setting his multiple chins aquiver. "We're offering a substantial reward to whoever can help us."

Skerrith deepened his scowl. "I didn't think there were any dragons here in Northern Ergoth."

Borstan shook his head, his chins giving him the look of a rooster flapping its wattle. "Normally there aren't. We're one of the few parts of Krynn not under the dominion of one dragon or another, but it seems a black dragon—"

"A green," someone interrupted.

"It's a red, I tell you," said another voice.

Borstan shrugged. "As you can see, no one's gotten close enough to be quite sure, but whatever its color, it was apparently injured in the War of Souls before the dragons abandoned the fighting. It made its way here into the mountains beyond town, and it has been feeding off our livestock while it heals."

"Why bother it then," Skerrith asked, "if it's just getting the occasional cow or pig?"

"Occasional?" one man bellowed. "You call half my flock of sheep in one night 'occasional'?"

"Now, Grot," Borstan soothed. "I'm sure the man didn't mean that the way it sounded." He turned back to Skerrith. "Naturally, everyone around here is pretty upset about the loss of livestock, but we're even more afraid the creature, driven to extremes by pain and rage, will prove dangerous to the town's residents as well."

Skerrith cleared his throat. "You want me to deal with it."

"Yes. Kill it, drive it off—anything, as long as the creature isn't a problem any longer—but whatever you do, do it soon."

"Today," Grot said.

"Right now," the man next to him added.

"Right now?" Skerrith glanced through a window to take the measure of the sun. "Well, I'd like to get started right now, I really would, but there isn't nearly enough daylight left."

"Not enough daylight?" said Grot. "Why, there must be a good three or four hours yet!"

A murmur of agreement passed through the crowd. Skerrith held up his hands for silence. "Now, everybody just calm down. After all, I'm a professional when it comes to matters such as this. You've got to trust me; I know what I'm talking about. I'd no sooner wander into a dragon's lair without

adequately scouting out the lay of the land than—well, than anything I can think of. What I propose is that first thing in the morning, I'll head up into those mountains and see what there is to see. Then I can get rid of your dragon problem correctly, with minimal danger to property and lives.”

There was considerable grumbling at this, with Borstan looking especially displeased. Abruptly, Ruby pushed through to Skerrith's side.

“Really, you all disappoint me,” she said, addressing the crowd. “Yes, you do. Thoroughly disappoint me. Here you put up this big reward, hoping someone will help us out with the dragon, and now that help arrives, you want to tell him how to go about his business.” She tapped her foot angrily, hands on her hips and shaking her head. She made, Skerrith thought, a fetching picture. “Well, speak up. What do you have to say for yourselves?”

This resulted in much foot scuffing and averted gazes on the part of the crowd. “Ah, Ruby, we didn't mean anything by it,” Borstan said. “We weren't thinking, is all—”

“No, I should say you weren't,” Ruby interrupted. “Now why doesn't everyone just let this man do his job and try not to interfere?”

No one said anything at first, then Borstan, like a true politician, chose to capitalize on Ruby's effect over the crowd by switching to her side. “Yes, and while you're here, permit us to make you our guest,” he crowed to Skerrith.

“Why, thank you, Mayor,” Skerrith said. “I'd be honored.”

The crowd, still somewhat embarrassed, took this opportunity to disperse, with Borstan officiously leading the way out the door. Only a few repentant souls remained, and they seemed determined to make up for the town's earlier distrust by buying Skerrith all the roast pork he could eat and all the ale he could drink.

The whole time Skerrith ate, Rag hovered at his elbow, still sporting a self-satisfied grin as if he knew something Skerrith didn't. Skerrith found it vaguely unnerving, but did

his best to disregard the little fellow since the pretty tavern maid was so obviously fond of him.

Rag, meanwhile, pretended to work at the inn as well, wiping the table at every opportunity with a cloth he produced from one of his many pouches. His efforts were industrious, though haphazard, for every time he wiped up one spill, in the process he caused at least two others. Skerrith had to keep one hand firmly on his mug to prevent it from being knocked over, while his other hand remained protectively curled about his bag of dragon scales, guarding it against appropriation by the kender.

By the time Skerrith finally belched and pushed back from the table, Rag was dancing from foot to foot, his topknot flapping, with barely constrained curiosity.

"Ruby," he called out, "come hear." Then to Skerrith, "Tell us an adventure. Tell us how you killed a dragon."

"Well, there've been so many," Skerrith said, picking his teeth with a shard of bone. "It's hard to know which time to relate."

Out of the corner of his eye, he noted with satisfaction that while Ruby didn't exactly join those prepared to listen, she did draw closer to his table, where it would be easier to overhear.

Rag pointed to Skerrith's blue boots. "Tell us about that one."

"Oh, that." Skerrith laughed dismissively and pulled his feet from under the table, studying the boots as if he had forgotten them. "Why, that encounter barely amounted to a brush with death, hardly worth considering as an adventure." He paused, and was rewarded when the kender's eyes grew even rounder. Other listeners drew their chairs in closer. "But if you insist. That little incident happened in the Vingaard Mountains during the recent War of Souls. I was heading up a band of resistance fighters who were trying to free Palanthas from the dragon overlord. We were out one day, doing reconnaissance—just put that new tankard here

by my hand," he said to Ruby, "and you can take the empty one away as you go—when one of Skie's blue dragon minions caught us out in the open. Well, my team figured we were done for, let me tell you. They just stood there and watched that blue swing around as it prepared to blast the whole meadow we were in with its lightning breath, but I wasn't giving up without a fight. Grandfather's lance was out of reach, but I did have my knife . . ."

Ruby rolled her eyes and walked away, but the rest of Skerrith's audience awarded him their rapt attention.

So he passed the afternoon and evening, relating one battle after another, from the red whose hide had provided his vest and on through the spectrum of chromatic dragons. Throughout the telling, Rag stood rooted beside the table, occasionally entreating Ruby to rejoin them. It was the only time Skerrith had seen a kender remain still for so long, staring up at him with open mouth and shining eyes. One by one, other patrons dropped into the inn, swelling Skerrith's audience, for though newcomers were added, no one left the circle of listeners. As his audience grew, so did the pile of gifts in front of him, for as each new person arrived he or she silently placed some token of appreciation on his table. It was a display of gratitude Skerrith was used to experiencing in the towns he visited, whether threatened by a dragon or not, and would be regarded as remuneration over and above whatever reward the town was offering for solving its current trouble. Such was the effect a dragonslayer's reputation had on people. If nothing else, their gifts always bought the locals a riveting tale or two. Tonight, Skerrith noticed with regret that most of the goods he was receiving consisted of produce that wouldn't keep, although some items such as the salt-cured fish would hold up to extended travel.

The whole time, he fixed one eye on Ruby as she hurried back and forth, filling an ever-growing number of orders, but he never managed to catch her attention; that Ruby seemed to save for Rag and her customers.

Finally, Skerrith let his words trail into silence at the end of a tale. On the hearth, the fire crackled low. "Well, if I'm going to take care of your little dragon problem, I'd best be getting to bed," he said at last. "I'll want to make an early start of it in the morning."

"Oh no, don't leave yet," Rag pleaded. "Tell us just one more. Ruby, stop working and come listen."

Skerrith held up his hands. "Not any more tonight." Then, seeing the kender's downcast look, he winked and added, "But come tomorrow night, I should have a brand new tale to tell."

Rag grinned. "Ruby, did you hear that? Tomorrow, he's going to kill the dragon."

Ruby patted Rag's topknot as she hurried past, but said nothing, being much too busy delivering food and drinks to stop for idle chatter.

Skerrith turned the job of loading his booty into his wagon over to a couple of volunteers from his audience, then he strode off to the room he had been given. He regretted that he couldn't take Ruby with him to warm his bed, for he was grateful to the girl for coming to his defense earlier. Tonight, alas, necessity required that he remain alone. He started up the stairs, leaving Rag still prattling to Ruby in the common room and showing her the moves he would use if he ever encountered a dragon, telling her how he was going to become a dragonslayer just like Skerrith. The whole time, he slashed and jabbed about with his hoopack, using it for a dragonlance in a way that endangered everyone around him. Skerrith smiled. Then the smile slipped as he considered the little fellow's inevitable disappointment. Ah well, no harm in giving him something to dream about in the meantime.

In his room, Skerrith pulled off his boots and vest but otherwise remained fully dressed as he lay down on the bed. He blew out the candle and listened to the inn grow quiet for the night. Downstairs, he heard Ruby finish cleaning up. There

were muffled goodbyes, then the outside door opened and closed as the pretty tavern maid left, followed by the sound of the door's bolt being shot. Heavy footsteps ascended the stairs and trudged down the long corridor outside Skerrith's room, marking the innkeeper's passage as he sought out his own room. Skerrith wondered briefly where the kender slept— probably the kitchen.

He waited another hour, then he soundlessly sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He shrugged on his vest, its red leather gleaned from a dragon carcass he had come across in the region around Khur during his previous career as a smalltime peddler and occasional petty smuggler. At the time, Skerrith had harvested the dragon's remains, thinking the items he gathered might be worth something in the towns he encountered.

Once into his vest, he cautiously slipped on one boot then the other, their leather scavenged from the body of another dragon Skerrith had found, this time in the Vingaard Mountains, where it had evidently dared to rebel against Skie before the great dragon's death and had been killed for its presumption. The remains of these two dragons, together with other artifacts he had been able to pick up in his travels as well as a "dragonlance" specially made for him by a discreet smithy who owed Skerrith a favor, and a knowledge of the beasts acquired from the library in Palanthas, had opened the way to an entirely new calling for Skerrith, who had bestowed the surname "Dragonslayer" on himself in honor of the transformation. Since then, he had been careful to stay well clear of lands actually inhabited by dragons. He didn't want his new profession put to the test; he just wanted to earn a decent livelihood from the renown that went with it. So far, he had been successful.

Until today, that is.

Cautiously, Skerrith stole from the room and headed for the stairs, freezing every time the floorboards creaked. Once outside, he would creep to the stable, harness his team, and

make good his escape. He didn't want to end up pummeled like the gambler he had seen earlier in the day. Halfway down the stairs, however, someone began pounding on the door of the inn. Skerrith started to turn and hurry back up the stairs, then remembered the innkeeper's room was down the corridor from his own. Instead, he bounded down the stairs two at a time, risking his neck in the dark. He just had time enough to reach the bottom, and squeeze into the narrow space beneath the stairs, when he heard the innkeeper's steps hastening down behind him.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," the innkeeper bellowed, but the pounding never faltered. The man stumbled through the common room, crashing into tables and chairs. "What is it?" he demanded as he flung open the door, revealing a wiry little man whose bearded, scrawny face (as Skerrith could see from his secret vantage) was garishly lit by a torch.

The visitor pushed past the innkeeper and rushed into the room, gasping for breath. His torch guttered in a wind that had picked up outside and that took this opportunity to accompany the man inside through the open doorway. The cold blast smelled heavy with the promise of rain. Before the innkeeper could close the door, other townspeople, still pulling on robes and cloaks, pressed in behind the newcomer, evidently roused by his passage through town. Rag, too, wormed his way in, rubbing eyes bleary with sleep. Apparently, the kender didn't sleep inside the inn after all.

"The dragon," the little man who had created the uproar panted, relinquishing his grasp on the torch when the innkeeper, perhaps fearing the way it was being allowed to dangle, snatched it from him. "It struck again. Took Betsy."

"Your wife?" the innkeeper asked.

The little man snorted. "Would that it had. No, it took Betsy." Then, seeing only incomprehension on the innkeeper's face, he added, "My best milk cow!"

A gasp of horror rose from a dozen throats. "Where's the dragonslayer?" someone called out. "We have to do something now."

"What's this all about?" Skerrith said, forestalling the crowd's movement toward the stairs by stepping into the torchlight. "Did I hear something about the dragon?"

The news bearer nodded vigorously. "Took my favorite cow," he said with indignation in his voice.

"Are we going after the dragon now?" Rag asked, dancing from foot to foot. "Are we, Skerrith? Ruby, are you here?" Indeed, she was, there in the midst of the crowd, Skerrith noticed with a pang. "Say goodbye to Skerrith and me. We're going after the dragon."

"Yes, let's go now," said someone in the crowd, taking up the cry.

Skerrith's stomach churned queasily. "Now, you know I can't go up there at night. I'll have to wait for morning, like I said."

There was grumbling at this. "All right, but in the morning, we'll form a posse and go with you," someone said at last, causing scattered agreement.

"Yes," cried Rag. "You'll need lots of help." The calculating expression again crossed his face. "We should bring Ruby, too. You'll need her help as well."

"It's dangerous business, and I only work alone," Skerrith said. "The best thing you all can do to help is to stay out of the way."

"Skerrith," said Rag, looking crestfallen and glancing from him to Ruby and back. "You'll need Ruby and me, really you will."

Others in the crowd, however, looked happy to be denied the opportunity to face the dragon.

"I mean what I say," Skerrith said to the room at large. "If you want me to handle this problem, you have to let me do it my own way."

"I know what," said another voice. "We'll hold a silent

vigil here in the inn to make sure nothing else disturbs the dragonslayer's sleep tonight."

This produced a much more enthusiastic rumble of agreement from the crowd than had the suggestion of accompanying Skerrith. The innkeeper began pouring drinks as the crowd settled in to wait. Skerrith had no choice but to slink back up the stairs to bed. There would be no chance to escape tonight.

Whatever the crowd's intentions, silence wasn't the result. Well into the night, the sounds of boisterous conversation and singing and occasional arguments from the common room penetrated the thick wooden walls of the inn, reaching the chamber where Skerrith was supposed to have been asleep. He was tossing and turning anyway. He fretted through the rest of the night, wondering how to avoid having to confront an actual dragon and cursing his luck for landing him in Trader's Lot. At last, a gray, dismal half-light marked the beginning of a new day. Skerrith groaned and rubbed eyes that felt gritty with lack of sleep. Downstairs, everyone had succumbed to quiet as the revelers finally lost consciousness, either from fatigue or too much ale. Skerrith shivered in the cold morning air and tiptoed down the stairs, hoping to reach the stable unobserved.

He was disappointed, however, when he ran into the innkeeper, who was kneeling before the fireplace, blowing on the few remaining ash-covered coals. "Where is that worthless scoundrel of a kender when I need him?" he growled between breaths. "This fire should have been going an hour ago." Then he paused, catching sight of Skerrith.

Skerrith felt his face flush, as if caught with his hand in the till. "I, uh, think I'll go out and, uh, check on my equipment," he stammered. "See what I'll need to take with me into the mountains."

The innkeeper grunted sourly and returned to the coals, at last coaxing a wisp of flame from the tinder he was trying to ignite. Skerrith slipped out the door and headed for the

stable, slapping his arms for warmth and forcing himself not to run. He mustn't let on that he was about to take flight. He didn't want what had happened to the operator of the shell game to happen to him, but the heavy, overcast sky only increased his sense of apprehension. There was a storm coming, and Skerrith longed for nothing so much as to be well on his way before it broke.

Halfway across the inn yard, he passed Ruby on her way to work. She gave him a smile, surprisingly, and Skerrith's head swiveled to watch her while he continued walking, his mind full of lascivious thoughts. Suddenly, he collided with the inn's signpost. For a moment, he stood there, rubbing his head and wondering what had happened. Seeing that he wasn't hurt, Ruby laughed good-naturedly and went inside, leaving Skerrith to shake off his embarrassment.

Inside the stable, he began quickly harnessing his team. Then, as he noticed the side of his wagon, he stopped. Something wasn't right. Still, it took him a moment to realize what was amiss. Then he had it.

The "dragonlance" was gone.

Just then, he heard Ruby hurrying back toward the stable, calling as she ran. "Rag! Rag, where are you?" She darted around Skerrith and began poking into the dim corners of the stable.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," she said, "but no one has seen Rag since late last night. He should be at his chores already. I thought he might still be asleep here."

A cold wave flooded Skerrith, not a sensation caused by the icy wind, but one brought on by the dread in his belly. "The kender sleeps here in the stable?" he asked with dismay

Ruby nodded.

"The dragonlance," Skerrith groaned. "He's taken it and gone into the mountains. He intends to face the dragon alone."

"Oh no!" Ruby exclaimed. "Poor Rag. We have to stop him before he reaches the dragon's lair."

Before he could protest she had grabbed him by the elbow and was heading back to the inn, calling out her news. If she anticipated a stampede of rescuers to aid the kender, she was doomed to disappointment.

"Poor little beggar," Borstan said, shaking his numerous chins. "Already a dragon's breakfast by now."

"What do you mean?" demanded Ruby, turning on Borstan in rage. "He may not have gotten that far yet. We have to go after him. We have to try."

Neither Borstan nor any of the others dared to respond, all eyes studiously trained on the floor. Secretly, Skerrith agreed with the mayor, but he kept his opinion to himself. No need getting Ruby further riled. He kept wondering how he was going to shake her grip on his elbow.

"I don't believe you people," she cried. "What happened to your courage of last night? Where is that determination to hunt down the dragon now?"

"Aw, Ruby, don't go on like that," Borstan said. "We just see things a little differently by light of day. Besides, it's certain to be too late to rescue the little fellow now." He turned to the others in the room, several of whom appeared to be nursing hangovers in the weak morning light. "Isn't that right?"

"Well," Ruby said, her lips tightly pursed in disapproval, finally dropping Skerrith's arm to plant her fists on her hips. "I guess Skerrith and I will just have to go after him ourselves."

"What?" exclaimed Skerrith, who had been about to break his fast with a mug of the innkeeper's ale. He rubbed his elbow. "What are you talking about?"

"You and I must hurry after Rag," Ruby explained none too patiently. Then, when Skerrith didn't immediately move, she added, "I said hurry up, get ready. We've got to catch up with him before he reaches the dragon's lair."

Skerrith was aware of all eyes in the room on him now. "Well, I guess it's up to me to go," he agreed slowly, thinking he could still make good his escape if they all thought he was

heading toward the mountains. "Like I explained last night, Miss Ruby, I only work alone."

Ruby's eyes blazed. "I'm telling you he's my friend. He needs my help and I'm going with you!"

"But—"

"Hurry! We don't have time to argue."

So it was that five minutes later, Skerrith found himself out in the bitter wind, with a big storm moving in, heading for the last place on Krynn he wanted to be. Making matters worse, Ruby stuck determinedly beside him, preventing him from doubling back and sneaking out of town.

The two toiled uphill, following the kender's trail. Fortunately, Rag's footprints in the soft forest soil gave sufficient indication of his passage, showing every withered weed that had caught his attention and every rock that had momentarily diverted his aim. Together, they pursued his winding, zigzag path against the brunt of the wind.

As they climbed, the forest gradually changed from maple and oak to fir and spruce, and the air grew ever colder as they gained altitude. In the distance, Skerrith heard the rumble of thunder. Occasional flashes of lightning lit the mountaintop with garish brilliance. Skerrith tried lingering over the twists and turns in Rag's path, hoping to delay their pursuit long enough for the storm to overtake them. Never before had he so eagerly hoped to be caught outdoors in an icy downpour. It was the only way he could foresee avoiding a confrontation with the dragon, but every time he tarried, Ruby hurried him along mercilessly.

Frequently, Rag's trail not only zigzagged, but it doubled back on itself, costing them (as Ruby put it) valuable time. Skerrith, grateful for these little reprieves, was perfectly content to continue rambling and digressing, but when they came to the half-devoured remains of a pair of sheep, Ruby called a halt.

"Let's forget Rag," he thought he heard her say, to his astonishment. She had to yell in his ear now to be heard over

the howling wind. "I say we head straight up the mountain-side, making directly for the lair."

Skerrith shook his head. "The way he's going, he may never make it to the dragon's lair. Let's try to catch up with him first."

"But this way we might be able to cut him off before he does reach it."

"Yeah, and risk antagonizing the dragon ourselves by showing up on his doorstep unannounced."

She looked at him, her gaze even colder than the wind. "You know, you don't sound much like a dragonslayer."

I'm not, Skerrith wanted to say. I'm not any kind of a slayer at all, so can we please stop this foolishness and go home?

He didn't. Instead, he kept his mouth shut, his lips pressed in a grim line.

Ruby turned from him in disgust, grabbed up a well-gnawed leg bone from one of the carcasses, a few gobbets of flesh still dangling from the joint, and marched fiercely up the slope.

"What's that for?" Skerrith shouted, pointing to the bone.

She paused. "If I have to, I'll use it for a club."

Skerrith snorted. "That's no kind of weapon."

She gave him a withering glare. "Well, I don't see that you've provided us with anything better." When Skerrith had no answer, she resumed climbing.

Stubbornly going his own way, Skerrith soon found where Rag had become intrigued by several stones rounded from being tumbled down a streambed and had stacked them neatly before continuing on. A little further along, Skerrith noticed a series of fresh cuts in the bark of a tree about knee high. These puzzled him until he realized Rag had been practicing with the lance, jabbing it at what to him would have been waist level. The realization brought a wave of discomfort Skerrith finally identified as guilt, an unfamiliar and altogether unwelcome emotion, along with a determina-

tion to find the little fellow before he came to harm. Then he and Rag would locate Ruby, hopefully before she was hurt as well, and abandon this dangerous pursuit. Skerrith made up his mind that when they all got safely back, he'd come up with some other calling, one that in the future wouldn't risk anyone's life or limb—not least himself.

The wind, meanwhile, had worsened and was now spitting the first fat drops of rain, stinging Skerrith's cheek. He pulled his cloak up higher around his neck and hurried on, occasionally dazzled by lightning and deafened by thunder. So dazed were his eyes, in fact, that at first he almost missed the little figure crouched under a tree, seemingly immune to the weather as it assembled some curious structure from a stack of twigs. Only when the figure waved to him did Skerrith realize it was Rag. On the ground at his side lay the lance that had caused all this trouble.

"I'm designing a cage for the dragon," Rag shouted above the wind as Skerrith drew closer. "That way we won't have to kill it. We can capture it, take it on tour."

Skerrith decided not to mention that wooden beams, regardless how massive, would be incapable of holding an acid-spewing black dragon, and he merely nodded. He wiped freezing drizzle from his face, considering how to persuade Rag to give up his quest, when a puzzled expression crossed the kender's face. He peered about anxiously.

"Where's Ruby? She's supposed to be with you. That was the whole point."

Before Skerrith could ask him the point of what, he was cut short by a scream from further up the mountain.

Evidently, Ruby had found the dragon's lair.

"Oh, there she is," Rag sang cheerfully. Then he frowned. "Although she doesn't sound very happy."

Skerrith, meanwhile, had already taken off at a run, plunging up the mountain, panting with exertion and quickly out-distancing Rag's shorter legs as the kender struggled to keep up. In a small clearing, in the middle of which lay a bubbling

mud pit, Skerrith found Ruby—and his quarry. Even the wind couldn't blow the stench of sulfurous fumes from the clearing, fumes that were replenished with every huge bubble that swelled and burst in the pit. A dragon, darkened from snout to tail with encrusted mud, sat in the midst of the pit, where it had evidently been soaking an injured wing in the healing ooze. At least, that's what Skerrith assumed it must have been doing, for one wing bore a still-livid scar, discernible even under a layer of mud. At the moment, however, soaking the wing had been forgotten, for the creature had Ruby pinned to the ground with one claw while it gnawed on her mutton bone with the other.

The creature was enormous, far larger than Skerrith's research had prepared him for. It towered above him, forbidding and impregnable, completely unconcerned by his paltry presence. And it stank even worse than the mud pit's mineral stench.

Skerrith froze, overcome by dragonfear. His stomach roiled with it, his muscles turning to water. For long moments he stood frozen, immobilized with dread. How, he wondered in some distant portion of his mind, did he end up in this predicament? How did anyone ever dare to go up against such a creature, even armed with an actual dragonlance?

The sight of Ruby, struggling helplessly against the beast's clutches, proved stronger than the paralyzing effect of dragonfear, and Skerrith forced himself to circle the creature warily. He had to rescue her somehow. The dragon, still chewing lazily on the bone, tracked his movements with a malevolent glare, although it was hard to be certain of the creature's expression, for the clouds now darkened the landscape as though it were dusk. Who could be sure of a dragon's expression anyway?

Shivers ran the length of Skerrith's spine every time the sheep bone snapped as the dragon crunched it with his powerful jaws. Each bite exposed teeth as long as Skerrith's arm.

The teeth used for Skerrith's necklace must have been some dragon's baby teeth, he realized miserably. They were nothing like the adult version!

Just then, Rag ran into the clearing and stopped. "Wow, a real dragon!" he gasped with obvious delight. Then, seeing Ruby trapped, he called to the beast, "Hey, you can't do that. Let her go, big bully." When the dragon failed to comply, he turned to Skerrith. "What do we do now? I guess forget the cage. We'd better slay it."

The dragon rumbled, making the ground tremble.

Skerrith picked up a fallen tree branch and resumed circling, still struggling against his terror as he sought an opportunity to free Ruby, who was interspersing her screams with encouragement for his bravery. Rag, apparently unaffected by dragonfear, hurried to the edge of the mud pit and began poking with the lance at the claw that held Ruby captive. The dragon snorted and knocked the kender aside with what remained of the mutton bone. Rag tumbled head over heels several times before coming to a stop in a heap.

"Hey!" he cried indignantly. He struggled to his feet and brushed himself off. "That wasn't very nice." He grabbed up the fallen lance and ran back to the mud pit. "We're going to slay you, so you'd best cooperate." He began jabbing at the dragon again, and got lucky; the lance tip struck a soft area, and nicked between the scales.

With a roar, the dragon let go of Ruby and rose to its full height, spreading its great wings and appearing ready to strike the kender. Its head soared high above the tallest trees encircling the clearing, and its wings, which it flapped several times, produced a sound more terrible than the loudest thunder. Rag cocked his head, watching with fascination. Ruby, now freed from the dragon's claw, attempted to regain her feet, saw the dragon looking ready to emit a deadly blast of acid at Rag, and dove back into the mud in dread. Skerrith, terrified for her, rushed forward and took a whack at the dragon with the branch, just as the rain began pelting the

clearing in earnest, further dimming the scene. The dragon's roar continued unabated. To Skerrith, however, it sounded as much like crazy laughter as a bellow of fury.

Lightning struck the clearing, illuminating the dragon amid the pouring rain. Mud sluiced off its glittering scales, revealing their color, while the creature's roar rose to a crescendo that matched the violence of the storm. For the first time, Skerrith saw the beast clearly. He stood, tree branch dangling and forgotten, his mouth open with awe as the rain drenched him. Slowly, his mind absorbed the significance of what he had seen. Then, with a flap of its wings that sent Skerrith and Rag sprawling in the mud with Ruby, the dragon launched into flight and soared away.

Two years had wrought considerable change to the inn, now renamed "The Dragon's Final Breath." Dragon memorabilia that had once bedecked Skerrith's wagon now adorned the common room, with dried claws and sun-bleached skulls and iridescent scales ornamenting every available surface and wall, and a vast dragon hide rug prominently featured in the center of the floor. But the place of honor on the mantel above the huge hearth was reserved for the famed "dragonlance," known to all for leagues around for its role in eradicating the dragon that had once plagued Trader's Lot.

Time had brought changes to the inn, along with three new owners. Ruby, who now had a different last name, had blossomed literally and figuratively, with a toddler to watch out for and that maternal plumpness that bespoke another on its way. Skerrith, too, had rounded during the past two years, although his was a case of eating well and living comfortably with his growing family.

The greatest transformation had come to Rag, who now preferred to go by his full name of Ragweed Pollenflower

Esq. He had taken to wearing what he considered the latest in high fashion, mixing satins and silks, velvets and brocades, all in a riot of contrasting colors, with plenty of lace reserved for his collars and sleeves. He liked to strut about the town by day with the air of importance once reserved for Mayor Dunnerth, basking in the awe his fellow citizens now bestowed on him, or to stand before the inn's fire of an evening, one blue-booted foot propped regally on the edge of the hearth, regaling his eager listeners with tales of daring in the dragonslaying trade.

On this particular night Rag stood just that way, gesturing toward the mounted lance and telling a rapt audience the oft-told tale of how he single-handedly wielded the weapon that killed the dragon that had endangered the town and in the process had rescued Ruby and Skerrith.

Skerrith, who had learned to stand close to Rag when the kender began telling stories, leaned against the other side of the hearth, measuring the crowd over his partner's topknot. It was another night of good business at the tavern Ruby had induced the other two to purchase with her, using the reward for slaying the dragon (which never reappeared in the vicinity to dispute its reported death). She had overcome Skerrith's initial resistance to her suggestion of a partnership in the inn, by pondering aloud, ever so innocently, about the fate of the shell-game operator who had preceded Skerrith into town.

"What," she had asked of the air, "would the townspeople's reaction be to learning of an even greater deception?"

Skerrith hastily agreed that owning an inn was just the sort of retirement he was looking for. Marriage had followed soon thereafter, an arrangement Skerrith had found surprisingly natural and to his liking.

Even now, well after the incident on the mountaintop, patrons still gathered eagerly to hear Rag and Skerrith recount their differing versions of how they killed the creature before they "retired" and settled down as respected

citizens of Trader's Lot. For her part, Ruby merely smiled contentedly as she looked on from the corner of the room while Skerrith and Rag told their stories.

"And so I killed the dragon," Rag concluded. "Oh, and Skerrith and Ruby helped." He grinned. "I'm the one who got them together, you know."

Tonight, the kender didn't stop his story where he should have. He looked lost in thought for a moment instead, an expression guaranteed to make Skerrith uneasy. "You know, it's funny. In that final lightning burst, the dragon looked almost copper rather than bla—"

Skerrith cut the kender's musings short by clamping a hand over his mouth. "Go tell the cook she wants to see you," he growled and firmly propelled Rag in the direction of the kitchen.

"A copper?" asked Targe from the crowd, picking up on the kender's surprising words. "Aren't coppers friendly dragons with great senses of humor?"

"Kender!" Skerrith exclaimed, shaking his head. "Wouldn't you know they'd turn out to be colorblind on top of everything else?"

Targe looked as if he were about to say something more, but just then Ruby spoke up from the sidelines. "Drinks for everyone," she said, just loud enough for all to hear. "On the house!"

If Targe had anything to add, it was lost in the rush for the bar.



INVENTORY

JEAN RABE

Clink.

“Twelve hundred and eighty-six.”

Clink.

“Twelve hundred and eighty-seven.”

Clink.

“Twelve hundred and eighty . . .”

“Hey, Gaspar, whatdaya think this is? Think it’s magical? Whatdaya think you can do with it?”

A young black-bearded dwarf was holding up a crystal roughly the size and shape of a large pear. Sprouting from its top were spiraling bits of gold and silver filigreed wires festooned with yellow beads that flickered on and off like fireflies.

“You’d have to set it high on a shelf where the little ones can’t get it. I think it’s kind of pretty. Something my Aunt Cherty would like. You know, a . . .” He paused and scrunched his face together as he desperately searched for the correct word. “Knickknack!” The dwarf balanced the crystal gingerly on his palm and stared at his shattered reflection in its myriad facets. “If it’s magic, you wouldn’t call it a knickknack, would you? It’d have a special, important name, like . . . The Great and Powerful Glittery Pear of Elder Thane Darkhammer the Fourth. I wonder who made

such a thing? Wonder what it's worth? Gaspar, whatdaya think you do with it?"

"I'll tell you what to do with it if you interrupt me again, you dumb Neidar-nugget!" Gaspar's face took on an angry scowl. A Hylar dwarf from a venerated Thorbardin clan, Gaspar was considerably thicker in girth than his companion, and his skin was paler because he spent most of his time under the Kharolis Mountains rather than on top of them. He resembled a tree trunk, squat with heavily wrinkled skin that looked craggy like bark. The lines around his eyes grew more pronounced when his scowl intensified. "Twelve hundred and . . . damn. You made me lose count." He cantankerously waved a stubby arm and knocked over several stacks of steel pieces, then uttered such a long string of curses that he finally had to pause to catch his breath. "Look what you made me do you . . . you . . . you . . ."

"I don't appreciate any name-calling. As you well know, my name's Skarn, Skarn Ironskull of the . . ."

"I don't care what clan you hail from."

The young Neidar dwarf sucked in his lower lip. "A perfectly respectable clan."

"Give it here." Gaspar settled back on his rump, released a tremendous sigh, and held out a hand. His palm was thick with calluses from working in the mines, but he still could register the coolness of the crystal which his companion gingerly placed in his paw. The filigreed spirals pleasantly tickled. "I don't know what it is or what it does," he grumbled after a moment's hesitation. He grew even more irritated when he found himself admiring the thing.

"So whatdaya think I should list it as?"

Gaspar shrugged his broad shoulders. The gesture set his chainmail shirt to jangling and the crystal's filigreed spirals to glowing in the light of the few dozen torches that ringed the cave. "List it as a bauble, I guess."

"Bobble?"

"Yeah, a bauble. Magical knickknacks I list as baubles."

The Neidar dwarf leaned close over a stack of parchment nestled between his spread legs. He dipped a quill in a big bottle of ink and registered the item:

One magical pear-shaped crystal bobble

"Whatdaya think it's worth? I gotta put an estimated value on it."

"Call it two thousand," Gaspar said with a measure of authority. "Yep, one magical crystal bauble, value two thousand steel."

"How do we know it's magical?" Skarn persisted.

"The beads blink. It looks magical. It smells magical."

"I guess you've been around long enough that you'd know better than me. Why, you gotta be on the far side of two hundred, huh? Your beard is as silvery as your armor." Skarn didn't notice Gaspar's scowl deepen further. "Tell me, how'd you settle on two thousand?"

"Call it three thousand if you want to. Call it four. Call it one. I don't give a hen's lip what it's worth."

"But we have to get it right. Who knows what will happen if we don't get it right."

"Then stick with two," Gaspar groaned. "One magical crystal bauble, value two thousand steel." He tugged on his gray beard. "Maybe I ought to be doing the writing."

Skarn noted a value of *two thousand steel pieces* on the sheet. "We tried that last night, remember? You said your fingers were too thick for this quill."

"Well, maybe *you* ought to be counting the steel pieces. The Forge knows it's your fault I keep losing track of the count. You constantly interrupt me."

Skarn looked thoughtful for a moment. "You should put the coins in piles of one hundred, then count the piles and multiply."

"I've been doing just that," he said wearily, pointing to the piles of coins that surrounded him, "but after a while I lose track of the number of piles."

"Oh." The younger dwarf frowned. After another moment:

“What should I say this magical crystal bobble does? I’m supposed to list a function, too.”

“You can say it makes Neidar-nuggets ask too many questions.”

Skarn improvised a function: *catches dust*.

“Gaspar, when will this inventory ever be finished? There’s just so much . . . so much . . .”

“Treasure,” Gaspar finished with a wistful voice.

“Yeah, treasure.”

The cave was immense, and it was filled with treasure—coins, gems, pieces of jewelry, sculptures, paintings, urns, statues, rare tomes, swords, shields, various types of armor, and things the dwarves couldn’t easily put names to. No spot of stony floor was bare. The flickering torchlight caused it all to flash and gleam, and the mirrors, silver platters, and crystal balls reflected the light back in colorful motes that dizzily swept around the walls. There were exceptional oils, unguents, and perfumes that scented the air with lilac and cinnamon. There were great iron-banded sea chests with heavily rusted locks, coffers brimming with pearls and ivory belt buckles, and leather satchels bursting at the seams with who knew what.

Skarn carefully set the pear-shaped bauble on a wooden tray and picked up an ebonwood carving of a dolphin dancing on a wave. “Hey, Gaspar, whatdaya think this is?”

“Now that’s definitely a knickknack.” Gaspar sniffed the air just to make sure. “Nothing magical about it.”

“Value, thirty steel pieces,” Skarn decided all by himself. “My Aunt Cherty would like this, too. Shame I can’t give it to her. Real shame it doesn’t belong to us.”

Gaspar nodded. “Damn shame it all belongs to a damnable . . .”

“Dragon?” The word sounded like the hiss a kettle makes when it’s left too long to dangle over a fire. It came from the far reaches, where an opening hinted that there was vastly much more to the cave complex. A head poked out, followed by a neck and then the rest of the dragon.

It was a red dragon, and though very large compared to the dwarves, not very large as far as dragons went. A young one, her scales were crimson, and in the light of the torches they shone wet like fresh blood. Pale ochre horns swept gracefully back from atop a head that was vaguely equine-shaped. Her eyes were either black or sapphire blue, or perhaps they shifted between the colors. Her teeth were white and perfect, deadly sharp-looking and proudly displayed for the benefit of the fearful dwarves. She glided toward them, her clawed feet making 'shushing' sounds over the mounds of coin and jewels. Her tail undulated from one side to the next, brushing up against gem-encrusted candlesticks and mithril tankards.

"How goes your inventory?" she asked. A rumble began from deep in her chest when the dwarves were not quick enough with an answer. Flames licked around the corners of her mouth and steam escaped from her nostrils.

"F-f-fine," Gaspar said. His fingers were quivering, and he felt ashamed that he hadn't adjusted in the slightest to her aura of dragonfear. With some satisfaction, however, he noticed that Skarn was positively quaking. "But th-th-there's just so much treasure here, that it's going to take a while."

The dragon offered the approximation of a smile. "That's why I chose you," she purred. "You have time to spare. Of all Krynn's mortal races, dwarves and elves are the most long-lived."

Skarn found his voice. "W-w-w-w-w-why didn't you get some elves? They live even longer than dwarves."

The smile took on a malicious curve. "Dwarves are not so tasty as the fair folk, and I did not wish to be tempted into eating the help. I desire my hoard cataloged."

"F-f-fine," Gaspar repeated. "The inventory is going fine."

The dragon settled down to watch just how fine it was really going.

Gaspar whispered to Skarn that they should record the assortment of woodcarvings in a big merchant crate. They weren't easily breakable, so the dragon likely wouldn't punish them if a couple of pieces slipped through their trembling fingers. By the time the dwarves were done with that task, they had better mastered their fear then moved on to more delicate things.

Skarn caught a sideways glance of himself in an oval-shaped mirror the size of a kite shield. To his surprise he saw other images in the mirror: a centaur, a sorcerer, and three men-at-arms. Near the mirror lay a double-bladed dagger that oozed syrupy green venom; a leather belt with many notches on it . . . no doubt marking "kills," and an open case with a garrote, highly-polished thieves-picks, and three long needles that the young dwarf was certain had been crafted for no-good.

The dragon appeared to be slumbering. Skarn's attention returned to the strange mirror. "Hey, Gaspar. Whatdaya think this is? Other than just, you know, a mirror?"

Gaspar took a step toward him, then he stopped when the young dwarf touched the mirrored glass and instantly disappeared. Now the images showed a centaur, a sorcerer, three men-at-arms, and a helplessly confused and terrified Skarn.

The dragon opened one eye, growled long and low, and in that sound Gaspar thought he heard disparaging words about "the help."

"Kranidoor," the dragon said plainly, and Skarn popped out of the mirror.

Gaspar was quick to place the mirror facedown on a layer of steel pieces.

"Do not play with the magic," the dragon cautioned sternly. "Just inventory it."

"B-b-b-b-b-b-b-but how are we supposed to inventory it if we don't try to discover what it does?" This came from Skarn, who was quaking even more than before.

The dragon growled again. "Do your best. Your lives depend on it." His eye closed again.

Skarn turned to a small glass bowl filled with rubies. Next to it rested an emerald the size of his fist. "Aunt Cherty would really love this," he mused softly.

Meanwhile, Gaspar concentrated on a case of ivory pens with diamond tips.

"A crystal ball," the dragon suddenly stated after several minutes had passed. "Bring me one. Any one will do."

"Y-y-y-y-y-y-y-y-you do it," Skarn managed to gasp, giving Gaspar a pleading look. "P-p-p-p-p-p-p-p-please, you do it. Besides, I'm still busy counting these gems."

Gaspar gave Skarn a withering look but drew himself up proudly, trying to suppress his fear. He recalled seeing a half-dozen crystal balls near a pile of plate mail pieces. He shuffled over. "Haven't inventoried these yet," he said, picking one up, talking as much to himself as to the dragon. "Haven't gotten to this part of the cave." He then carefully made his way to the dragon, careful not to look the great beast in the eyes, careful not to drop the ball in his trembling grip.

The dragon hissed as Gaspar placed it between her front claws.

"Get back to work," she said.

Gaspar was quick to do so. He'd seen a dragon once before this one, about a hundred years ago. It was a large bronze creature, and it was perched in the Kharolis Mountains, overlooking a merchant trade route that came in from the Plains of Dust. That ancient dragon was more impressive than the young red in this cave—though the bronze had been much farther away. He suspected that shortly after the Chaos War, on the few occasions he and his friends poked their heads up from the mines, what they saw flying far overhead were dragons. They might have been some other flying beasts, though, and in any event they were too distant to concern him.

Here in the cave the dragon was always so close. The red had a real stink to it—sulfur and something like the acrid tang of burning wood. It overpowered the pleasant lilac and cinnamon, and he constantly gagged. The smell settled in his throat, made his mouth go dry and his tongue swell.

Maybe she won't stay long this time, Gaspar thought. The last time she came into the chamber she only did so to give us a little frightening. Then she left and left us alone.

"To work, I said!"

"Yes, d-d-dragon," Gaspar said as fast as his thick tongue allowed.

He and Skarn moved to another area of the cave—farthest from the dragon—and began separating weapons, armor, magical baubles, gems, coins, and other objects into different categories. They sneaked looks over their shoulders as, behind them, the dragon touched a talon to the crystal ball and craned her head so she could gaze directly into it.

"Cousin Gloomshade," the dragon stated, in a voice clearly audible and distinct to their ears. "My dear, dark cousin, where can you be?" She gingerly tapped the crystal ball again, and was rewarded when the visage of a black dragon emerged. "Ah, there you are."

The black dragon narrowed its yellow eyes, and a strand of acidic saliva spilled over its lower lip. "You dare wake me from my afternoon slumber?"

"Yes," the red replied snidely. "I dare, for I'm wont to gloat."

The black raised an eyebrow.

"My treasure," the red continued. "I have found an absolutely marvelous means of inventorying my treasure, to prove, once and for all, which of us has the greatest hoard."

The black's expression changed, and he seemed genuinely curious. "Tell me, cousin red, what method of counting and categorizing so much treasure, have you devised?"

"Dwarves," she said smugly. "I captured two dwarves, and

they are doing the work for me. Perhaps you should find some lizardmen with passing intelligence to do the work for you. That is . . .” she let a length of silence settle “. . . if you really do want to know just how much wealth you’ve amassed.”

The black seemed to study her. Then he gave a snort and opened his eyes wide. “I’ve not the same need to know precisely what I have. I have more important concerns. There are mountains of coins and gems in my lair, more than you could ever itemize.” There was another length of silence. “In the event I should want to know in the future . . . where did you get these clever dwarves? What village do dwarves who specialize in accounting hail from?”

“No village,” she answered. “They were simply walking along a certain trail high in the mountains early yesterday morning. That is when and where I plucked them. Of course you have to scout dwarves out carefully, otherwise you’re just as likely to get stuck with numbskulls.”

The dragons lowered their voices and continued their conversation.

“She’s saying she plucked us just like you’d pluck cherries off a tree.” Skarn looked offended.

“That’s exactly what she did, you dumb Neidar-nugget. She plucked us all right.” Gaspar closed his eyes and held his side. It was still sore. His chainmail shirt hadn’t been much protection against the dragon’s crushing grip, and he suspected he had a couple of cracked ribs thanks to her. How Skarn had fared better was a mystery to him. Perhaps the Neidar’s youth and nimbleness had protected him, or perhaps the dragon simply hadn’t squeezed him as hard.

They had been walking along the same trail in the upper peaks of the Kharolis Mountains. They didn’t know each other, and with typical dwarf suspiciousness they hadn’t even exchanged pleasantries; it wasn’t until later they learned they were from very different clans and backgrounds. Both had been going to a festival in a quaint dwarven town. It was an annual celebration in honor of the

god Reorx the Forge, and the acting mayor of the town had invited a representative from Gaspar's clan. The food and ale were to be free and plentiful, so Gaspar volunteered to go. He hadn't realized it would be such a long walk from the mine to the town—which he never reached and only barely caught sight of. Because his feet were aching and his stomach growling, he was in a foul mood and uninterested in the young dwarf sharing the trail. He had fallen several yards behind the Neidar so he could be miserable all by himself.

If he hadn't been so preoccupied with his feet and his stomach, he might have paid more attention to his surroundings, and he might have realized that the shadow that slashed across the trail was not a fast-floating cloud but a dragon. He might have been able to dart into one of the numerous crevices, and from safety he might have called to the young dwarf to run for cover.

But Gaspar wasn't paying attention, and so he was the first snatched up in the red dragon's claw. Maybe because he struggled, the dragon squeezed him tight. Then the Neidar was caught and held, in seeming shock, in the other claw.

Gaspar remembered praying fervently to Reorx that the dragon would swallow him swiftly and that it would be a relatively painless death. He recalled every word of his prayers, as the plucking happened only yesterday after breakfast. Perhaps Reorx was listening, as Gaspar was neither killed nor eaten. Reorx hadn't listened close enough, or Gaspar hadn't been specific enough in his prayers, as he and the Neidar now found themselves prisoners of the red.

The dragon wasn't looking for tasty morsels but was instead bent on acquiring accountants.

"Hey, Gaspar. Whatdaya think this is?" Skarn was pointing at what looked to be an ale barrel, but it was made entirely of metal and had six insect-like metal legs.

"You can put that in a pile all to its lonesome," Gaspar said. "It's a gnomish thing—something magical or mischievous about it." He sniffed it to be certain. "Whatever it is,

I'm sure it doesn't work, at least not the way the builder intended."

"I don't understand."

"Neither did the gnomes who created it. Leave it alone."

Under his breath: "Gnomish inventions are as dangerous as dragons." That was when an idea began to percolate.

"And this . . .?" Skarn was holding up a single black glove.

"What's it look like?"

"A glove."

"Then write it down as a glove, and start a pile for clothing."

"Is it . . .?"

A sniff. "Yes." No question about it, Gaspar had a nose for magic.

"Wonder what magic it does." Skarn put the glove on his right hand, while his left continued to poke through a mound containing arrowheads, ancient coins made of gold, and colorful buttons gathered on strands of yarn. "I wonder if . . . uh oh." The fingers of the glove were extending and wagging like the tentacles of an octopus.

Gaspar skittered back a few steps, knocking over some stacks of steel coins.

The glove-fingers continued growing, until they were about ten feet long.

"Gaspar . . . !"

"Don't ask me for help. I didn't put the blasted thing on. Hylar dwarves know better than to mess with unknown magic."

He watched with dismay as the Neidar dwarf, not long out of childhood he guessed, struggled with the unwieldy glove, whose thumb now spun about and thwacked him on the forehead. Two fingers twirled and became entangled in his beard. Skarn somehow managed to bat the thumb away, but the fingers not twisted in his beard started flailing away at the offending hand.

"Oh, please stop," Skarn practically bawled.

Amazingly, the fingers did. They froze in the air then slowly undulated like snakes.

"That's better." Skarn wiped at his face with his free hand. "Now if they'd only retract."

The fingers did just that.

"Wow. Hey, Gaspar . . . it's listening to me. I've got magical powers!"

Gaspar opened his mouth to warn Skarn then snapped it shut without uttering a word. He looked over at the dragon, snoring gently. Let the fool Neidar get himself into trouble.

"Watch." The young dwarf scrunched his face and squeezed his eyes shut. "Bring me that pewter goblet. The one with the long stem."

The fingers complied, extending even farther from the dwarf, until they were fifteen feet long, then twenty. They gently wrapped around the goblet then retracted.

"This is wonderful!" Skarn looked happier than Gaspar had ever seen him . . . not that he'd ever seen him before yesterday, so he had anything to compare his blissful expression to. "This is really wonderful. It can maybe help with the inventory—get to things we can't reach."

"Don't see how you can be in such high spirits," Gaspar muttered just barely loud enough for the Neidar dwarf to hear. "We're in a cave somewhere in the mountains, held prisoner by an evil red dragon, we're being forced to itemize all the dragon's loot, and you're playing with magic. I'm hungry and thirsty. If you keep interrupting and fooling around, we're never going to finish this job."

Skarn frowned. "You're right, Gaspar. It's a big job."

The fingers released the pewter goblet and shot forth again, this time digging through a pile of coins and closing on a large jar filled with pickles.

"Still it is pretty wonderful!" Skarn beamed.

Gaspar glanced over his shoulder, noting that the red dragon had woken up, crawled away, and disappeared.

Good. He hurried forward, grabbed the jar away from Skarn, and swiftly unscrewed the lid. His thick fingers dug in and pulled out the biggest pickle.

“You’d better not eat that!” Skarn argued. “We’ve got to inventory it. The dragon said we have to inventory everything.”

Gaspar was chewing on the pickle. It was tough and a little salty, but he was too hungry to complain. And it was definitely a pickle. Unmagical pickle. “Mmfdn anemmft jah.”

“What?”

“Mark it down as an empty jar.” Gaspar reached for another pickle, then offered one to Skarn.

The Neidar dwarf paused only a moment before he too dug into the pickles.

“Now we have that glove find us some ale, then we’ll get back to work.”

After a brief nap they decided to tackle a whole area filled with swords. There were long swords, broad swords, short swords, falchions, scimitars, rapiers, and great swords that were better than five feet in length. Some were simple in design, though their edges were keen, and an especially sharp one sliced off the little finger of the octopus glove . . . thereby apparently ending the thing’s magic.

One four-fingered octopus glove, formerly magical, Skarn recorded forthrightly.

Value: *likely worthless now. Very sorry.*

Some of the swords had exquisite pommels fashioned into the shapes of coiled serpents, griffon claws, and more. They were decorated with precious stones and inlaid with gold, silver and mithril, and Gaspar handled them reverently as he assessed the workmanship and instructed the value of each that Skarn should list. A few were magical, including a scimitar that whispered it was meant to slay giants. One had the keenest edge he’d ever spied. Another gave off a faint blue glow. One felt so lightweight that it seemed he was wielding a feather.

It was better than a week before they were finished with the heap of swords, then they launched into the daggers. After that came the warhammers—glorious hefty weapons that could cave in the thickest skull. An especially large hammer had a cherrywood haft that was carved with the images of pegasi and eagles. The hammer part was made of polished steel that reflected as well as the finest mirror. Gaspar studied his reflection and noted the lone tear that was crawling down his cheek. The elder dwarf was achingly sad—that he was a prisoner of a dragon, confined to a cave, that all these magnificent weapons were passing through his hands. What was going to happen when the job was done? They might well die here. The dragon never even thought to bring them enough food nor often enough. They had to rummage on their own.

“What’s that hammer worth?” Skarn broke into Gaspar’s musings.

“Priceless,” Gaspar said tersely.

He gently set it down and reached for another hammer, this one with a head carved from stone in the image of Reorx the Forge. For the briefest of moments he cursed the god—it was the deity’s fault, after all, that they were ensconced in this beautiful, horrible place. If the town high in the mountains was not having a festival to honor Reorx, and if the acting mayor of said town hadn’t invited a representative from the Hylar clan, and if Gaspar hadn’t been enticed by the notion of free food and ale . . . and perhaps some unattached dwarven women close to his age. Well, then, he wouldn’t have left the mines and struck out on the trail, and he wouldn’t have been snatched up by the . . .

“Damnable dragon,” he muttered.

Skarn cocked his head. “You know, Gaspar, I’ve been thinking. Maybe there’s a weapon here among all this pile, with which we might slay the dragon.”

Gaspar laughed. It was the first time the Neidar dwarf had heard him do so. Gaspar laughed loud and long, clutching

his side. He laughed until he had to stop for a breath.

“Slay the dragon? You couldn’t get close enough to that dragon to give it the slightest nick. Red dragons breathe fire. She’d open her mouth, and your beard and the hair on your thick head would be the first to go up in flames. Then the rest of you would follow so much kindling.” He paused. “That is if she didn’t decide to step on you first, smash you flat like a caterpillar.”

Skarn swallowed hard.

“The worst of it would be then she’d go looking for more dwarves to do her accounting. Two or three or four more victims ’cause she’d have to replace us . . . burnt, squished, destroyed us.”

They unhappily went back to work. It only took three days to catalog all the warhammers, eight days for the various bows, arrows, crossbows, and lances, and another five for the flails, maces, spears, halberds, shields, and helmets.

They were starting on the various, multitudinous pieces of armor when Gaspar felt his stomach rumbling and decided to look for something to eat. It was getting harder and harder to find anything edible in the cave. He’d wandered fruitlessly around much of the chamber yesterday—while Skarn, who had less of an appetite, took a magical carpet for a quick ride. The Neidar smacked his head against the ceiling and was out cold for several hours. Although he didn’t find much to eat, he took advantage of the peaceful solitude and stashed handfuls of rubies, diamonds, and pearls into his pockets. The “chinking” of his chainmail covered up the noise the stones made. Maybe he’d never get out of this cave alive, but still a dwarf could dream.

One opening off this chamber led into a larger hollow where the dragon usually slept and where more treasure was scattered. Beyond that was a long slit in the rocks that obviously led to the outside. He could feel the intermittent breeze. The barely visible slit seemed large enough for the dragon, therefore it was more than sufficient for a thickset

Hylar dwarf. It was dark in the hollow, and the dragon always seemed to be lurking there. Whenever he ventured a step inside, sure enough, the dragon slid out of the darkness and ordered him to get back to work.

She loomed in the treasure chamber now, snapping him and Skarn back to reality. He felt the aura of dragonfear wash over him. He was almost getting used to it, and for once his fingers didn't tremble. Skarn, he noticed with some satisfaction, was shaking visibly from tip to toe.

"How goes your inventory?" the red asked.

"Fine," he answered, "but . . ."

"But what?"

"But we're hungry and thirsty, and we're not going to be able to inventory much longer if you don't start bringing us more food every day. We need to eat."

She snarled, but nodded. "I will pluck you a few goats tonight."

"Thanks, and . . ."

The red narrowed her eyes.

"I was wondering, you're young as far as dragons go. You're like this Neidar dwarf compared to me, I figure. How does such a young dragon get so much . . . treasure?"

Smoke poured from her nostrils. She opened her mouth, and for an instant Gaspar thought she would breathe on him and Skarn, then fly off in search of more accountants.

"Sooner or later dragons die," she answered. "When they're very, very old."

No wonder there's all this treasure, Gaspar thought, centuries worth. She must have come upon it when another of her kin passed away. All the more reason they were doomed. Even if they spent years here and finished the inventory, she couldn't let them leak out the location of her lair and word of all the valuables she hoarded. "Burnt and squished," he muttered.

"Your inventory," the dragon said abruptly. "Show me the list so far."

She had asked many times before, and she took a great pleasure in the growing list. Gaspar looked over his shoulder at the Neidar dwarf—who was pale and sweaty, his knees knocking together.

“P-p-p-p-p-p-p-p-please, Gaspar, you do it,” Skarn implored. “P-p-p-p-p-p-please.”

Gaspar grumbled and trudged through the mounds of treasure to reach the stack of parchments. These he carefully arranged on a large tray and brought it over to the dragon. He met her gaze this time, stealing himself now more than ever against the swelling dragonfear.

“Our inventory,” he said. His throat was going dry again.

She stretched a talon to the tray and carefully flipped through the pages.

Until she reached the bottom.

She saw herself reflected in a mirror that Gaspar had passed off as a mere tray.

There were images in it—a centaur, wizard, and three men at arms.

A moment more, and there was also the image of a red dragon. Gaspar swiftly turned the mirror over while barely managing to avoid looking into it.

“She’s gone!” he bellowed, his deep dwarven voice bouncing off the cave walls. “She’s gone, and now this all is ours.” He quickly explained to Skarn—who was looking around in puzzlement for the vanished dragon—how he used the magical mirror to trick the red.

The young Neidar dwarf joyously threw his arms around Gaspar, then he quickly bent to stuffing his pockets and sacks and satchels. They could barely walk by the time they’d loaded themselves up with riches. Staggering under the weight of their treasure . . . which was after all only a very small fraction of the dragon’s horde . . . they made their way out of the cave and found a trail. In silence they traveled all through the night and into the early morning hours.

Then the trail branched and became familiar. They recognized it as the one they had been taking, lo those many weeks ago, to the festival of Reorx the Forge.

"Praise Reorx," Skarn said. He didn't have the energy to say much else, as he was exhausted from hauling so much loot.

Gaspar nodded. "We'll find a place to stash this outside the village. Go in, get cleaned up and get some decent food." He paused to catch his breath with a sly grin. "Then maybe we'll go back and get more."

"And more again," Skarn managed to gasp.

They were so engrossed in their find that they didn't see the fast-moving shadow pass over the trail, and they didn't notice the dragon until it had plucked up each one in its sharp-taloned claws. Their bags of treasure slipped from their fingers as they were borne aloft.

"Dwarves!" Gloomshade pronounced triumphantly. "I've found my own dwarves to do my counting. Alone and on this very trail, precisely where the red said it was best to catch them." The black dragon winged away toward the distant swamp. "Dwarves to inventory my hoard!"



SPECIAL DELIVERY

JEFF GRUBB

It was raining pianos in Flotsam.

The first one hit shortly after dawn, splintering in a chord of eighty-eight keys inclusive as it collided with the city's largest fountain. The second rebounded off one of the long-abandoned legal buildings, scraping alongside the length of its stonework façade in a glissando of ivory fragments. A third came in at a low angle, registering as a staccato of grace notes as it bounced up Market Road before finally coming to rest against one of the innumerable statues of Lord Toede.

Edger Nunce looked up from his morning breakfast (beer-brined sausage, buttered sourdough toast, and a modest side of spiced potatoes) at the sound of the first instrument striking the city. He watched the devastation from the window of his second-story quarters, and with a sudden, sinking sensation that had nothing to do with the quality of his repast, promptly lost his appetite. The gnomes, he realized, were early.

It was not just pianos falling into the city, though they were the bulk of the first volley. Other heavy objects now plummeted into the city: a loom, a set of winches, a printing press. These outsized articles were followed by a barrage of stout wooden barrels, steel kegs, and reinforced crates, all impacting and dancing devilish-like along the cobblestones.

By the time the spring-powered loom unwound noisily on the street below, Nunce had his rucksack out from beneath the bed. By the time the printing press exploded down the street in a burst of typos, he had loaded his worldly belongings into it and was heading down the narrow stairs, humming a favorite tune. He paused at the door, waiting for the shelling to subside. There was a pause, and he counted to ten. When he reached five there was the unforgettable noise of a harp de-stringing itself as it crashed into an abandoned warehouse. He started counting again. When he reached ten without further incident, he took a deep breath and swung the door open.

Directly on the other side was a pair of all-too-familiar minotaurs of the large, dour-faced, and heavily-armed variety. The slightly taller one opened his mouth to speak.

"I know," sighed Edger, "My presence is required at Court, and you're supposed to take me there."

Inwardly, he made a mental note that next time (if there were a next time) he would flee at the first note, risking the raining instrumentality of the gnomes rather than having to enter the Lord's Manor House once again.

It had seemed like such a good idea at first, like all disasters in the making always seem. At its inception this particular idea seemed shiny, new and wonderful, and it would make a name for Edger Nunce (pronounced EDJ-er, not Ed-Gur) in the Lord's Court—maybe even grant him an Official Position, a Permanent Portfolio, a Sinecure, and if he were lucky and quiet, a Pension. There was a fly in the ointment, though, and that fly was a gnome—or rather a large number of gnomes.

Edger, before he found himself in the position of being held responsible for gnomish machinery landing in the middle of the city, had been a tax collector, charged with

the unpleasant task of roaming the countryside surrounding Flotsam, seeking out uncontrolled revenue and assessing correct tariffs. It was a task that he found as odious to his own nature as it seemed to those he visited.

His displeasure was not because he had any particular problems with the idea of squeezing the localities of their hard-earned steel. Far from it. He would gladly have pocketed his weekly take and headed for warmer climes, were it not for two muscular "assistants." Said assistants were supposed to ward off robbers and encourage prompt restitution for revenues earned, but Edger knew his companions were there primarily to make sure he, Edger, didn't skim any off the top.

Life on the road as a circuit collector did not suit Edger. When it wasn't clueless kender, it was surly farmers, and when it wasn't the farmers, it was would-be robber knights or sword-wielding youngsters fed on the legends of the Heroes of the Lance and figuring to help the poor (meaning themselves) at the expense of the powerful (meaning Edger, though he didn't feel particularly powerful). They invariably had weapons, and all he had was a tally-pencil he always kept behind one ear.

One day, when Edger and his assistants/minders encountered the gnome at the roadside, he was curious. Flotsam did not have a gnome population—they counted kenders as their resident irritation. The gnome in question was seated on a pair of large cases and seemed to be waiting for someone like Edger to appear. Also, curiously, the gnome showed no fear, hostility, or worry about the tax-collecting human on his sway-backed mule with two armed guards. In fact, the gnome smiled at him and bowed slightly.

Had Edger Nunce known what lay ahead, he would have swung his mule about and spurred it southwards, abandoning his money, position, hopes for the future and the slower guards, but he did not know at the time, so he hailed the small creature and inquired as to its business.

The gnome's name was Manifew, It was a much longer

name, but after the first three syllables Edger's attention wandered, and when the gnome inhaled a deep breath to continue its name, Edger calmly asked its business in the lands claimed by the Free City of Flotsam.

The gnome was looking for a home—not for just itself, but for its people, a large throng who were camping in the wilderness (an indefinite hand wave to the west, and Edger half-expected the aforementioned gnomes to suddenly manifest over the next rise). Their previous experiences with human cities made them wary of scaring the humans off with their sudden appearance. Hence, Manifew had been designated an advanced scout.

Edger had heard more than enough gnome stories to know the dangers of consorting with these creatures. Inevitably in these tales, it is the humans who suffer where gnomes are involved, and that hardened his heart more than normal. He interrupted the gnome from his tale of woe and began to explain that Flotsam had no need of gnomes.

At the first negative sound out of Edger's mouth, the gnome leapt to his cases. The startled guards reached for their sword hilts, but Edger held up a hand to warn them from any sudden moves. If the gnome pulled a weapon, then he would stand back and let the guards handle matters, but alas, the gnome had aroused his curiosity.

If the gnome was looking for a weapon, he certainly took his time about it, first opening one case, rummaging about, then opening the other, then opening a set of drawers along the side of the first case.

At last the gnome pulled a small container the size of a human fist. He turned and brandished it, shouting "Ahah!"

The guards went for their weapons again. Edger once more waved them down. The gnome walked towards the tax collector, beaming, the box thrust forward.

Edger took the box from the gnome gingerly, examining it like it was a live serpent. He turned it over in his hands,

looked at the gnome (Manifew was smiling expectantly), and gritting his teeth, thumbed open the hasp lock.

The box did not spring open as expected. Rather, the lid gently raised and Edger heard the soft whirr of a spring unwinding within it. The whirring stopped and was followed by a soft metallic tinkling. A song, as gentle as rain and as attractive as a young girl's glance, spun out of the box.

The tune wrapped itself around Edger's mind and suffused through him, starting at the ears and working inwards. The long muleback miles, the surly farmers, scheming kender, even his watchful and sullen traveling companions did not matter to him. The song danced sprightly along but seemed to have a calm center to it, a warmth that, for the first time in many weeks, made Edger feel good about the world around him.

Edger allowed himself a smile and exhaled. The gnome beamed. The guards themselves relaxed. In the distance, a gray jay rattled a challenge to the box. The box changed its tone, responding to the jaycall, and answered in a bitter-sweet minor key.

When the song was completed, the box whirred shut on invisible hinges, and Manifew the gnome explained that his people worked on such devices, great and small, as well as other bits of clockwork.

Edger's mind, for its part, shifting back into a practical gear with the box's closing and now whirred of its own accord, as he calculated with mental precision his chances of this discovery taking him away from circuit taxation and into the warm hearths of the Lord's Manor and with it, the aforementioned Tenure, Sinecure, and an Official Position.

"Hmmm," said the tax collector, shaking off the last of the good feeling off imparted by the song. "I think your talents would be greatly appreciated in Flotsam. You will come with me."

“OK” said the gnome, cheerily. He said it in two tones a perfect third apart.

Yes, it all seemed like such a good idea at the time, and eschewing the rest of his circuit, Edger brought the gnome into Flotsam.

To call the Flotsam of that time a ruin would be to insult all true ruins. The depredations of the great dragon Malys as well as later plunderers had left the city a shell of its former self. Most of the Lower City and warehouses were abandoned; the former Dragon Army Barracks was occupied by a group of minotaur and human pirates who used the city as a base of operations. Said raiders, led by Raeja of the Crimson Sails, an overlarge example of the minotaur breed, were the not-so-secret masters of the city. They had bullied the local government into rebuilding the landward curtain wall, and Raeja himself sat on the Lord's Privy Counsel. Most of the native population had retreated to the southeastern parts of the city, far from the minotaurs, and near the headland.

If one thing had survived the dragon, pirates, and other misfortunes, it was the strongest structure in the city—its bureaucracy. Crafted by his Lordship to withstand a hundred Malyses and a thousand Raejas, the Flotsam bureaucracy stood like a bastion against outside reality. Even the minotaurs left the ranks of clerks, supervisors, and yes, tax collectors alone, for fear of depriving the civic government of its lifeblood.

Edger moved through those layers of bureaucracy, Mani-few in tow, music box in hand. Once the (hopefully former) tax collector had convinced the lesser clerks to stop cowering behind their counters at the sight of the gnome, they were enchanted by the music box. They in turn saw the advantage in bringing Edger Nunce to the attention of their superior clerks, who in turn brought Edger Nunce to the

attention of the section heads, who in turn brought Edger Nunce to the attention of the lesser members of the Court, who led to the more impressive members of the Court, and finally to a presentation before Lord Toede and his Privy Counsel.

The Lord's Manor, the seat of the government and the Lord's Court, had been renovated over a dozen times in the past hundred years, usually in an involuntary and catastrophic fashion. It had sprawled in different directions with each restoration, and now it resembled not one building but at least a dozen rival buildings, each one trying to consume the others in a dogpile of conflicting architectural styles. There were minotaur guards at the doors.

The Lord's Reception chamber was beneath a great dome at the hub of the overlapping structures, its floor made of imported black granite veined with gold. Within the chamber stood a dais of black stone with a black throne of jet erected atop it. To one side of the throne was the thin, almost skeletal form of the Lord's Chamberlain. On the other side, sprawled on a great wooden chair almost as massive as the throne itself, was the hulking bulk of an armored minotaur, who regarded both man and gnome with baleful red eyes. On the throne itself was the Master of Flotsam, Lord Toede.

Toede looked to Edger's unbiased eyes like a white raisin, an ancient and desiccated humanoid form that once was a hobgoblin but had lived longer than any of that race was ever known to. Lord Toede had been reported dead at least a dozen times that Edger knew of, sometimes for as long as five years, yet every time the wrinkled hobgoblin would return from the dead, punishing anyone who got in his way. The story was that the Good Gods did not want him, and the Evil Gods were afraid he'd take over. As a result, he was effectively immortal.

Yet even the mighty Toede was apparently bowed by political realities. Flotsam had been weakened, and when Raeja's pirates had offered their "protection," the Lord's

Court accepted. As a result, Raeja's men replaced the guards, Raeja's spies watched over the bureaucracy, and Raeja himself sat within an arm's length of Toede himself. The Lord of Flotsam was kept on a short leash, immortal though he may be.

By the time he had reached the audience chamber, Edger had learned more about Manifew and his people. There were about three hundred gnomes in all, currently set up dangerously close to the Necromancer's lands to the south and wanting to move north. Parts of their group were originally at Mount Nevermind, but they kept heading eastwards, hoping to find a group of humans who hadn't met enough gnomes to be suspicious.

Edger also learned about the gnomes' specialties and devices, as well as the contents of the rest of Manifew's cases. The music boxes were the most portable of the devices, but he carried with him scale models of the rest of his people's work. Mostly they were ornate devices that produced music, pressed paper against inked plates, spun cloth and wove fabric at a greater rate than any single human could manage. Some of the music-machines were powered by steam from a small boiler, but other than that there wasn't an explosive in sight. Edger made that a selling point in his presentations.

His followers did not like explosives, Manifew explained. They had sensitive ears, and explosions were hard on them. That was why they weren't always comfortable with other gnomes.

Manifew's people were also adept box-makers and coopers, having picked up the craft in making barrels and crates in their travels, usually for delivery of their work over uneven ground. They could do that in a pinch as well, a skill that would be useful in a port city.

It was the instruments that carried the day. The fine music boxes were an instant hit, and Edger had been correct in his assumption that the devices responded to other songs around them. Manifew said something about ambient

resonance and convergence harmonics, but it was all gnome-talk as far as Edger was concerned.

The working models of larger instruments, which Manifew carried in his case as well, proved to be equally intriguing as he snaked his way up the court hierarchy. There were traditional harps of copper-wound whale gut, of course, but the gnomes turned a harp frame on its side and fitted it to a row of keys made from thanoi tusks. Striking a key resulted in the particular string being plucked. This harpsichord produced glassy, glittering music and was followed by a version that struck the key instead of plucking it. This device they called a clavichord. Finally, Manifew himself refined the process by wrapping the mallets in soft felt and placing felt blockers to stop the vibrating strings, producing short, sharp notes. In typical gnome fashion, he called his latest incarnation a Soft-and-Loud, a *pianoforte*.

It was a pianoforte music box that Edger presented to Lord Toede (in the presence of the Chamberlain and Raeja of the Crimson Sails). The wrinkled hobgoblin seemed delighted by the first soft tones that emitted from the crate-like housing of the device. Manifew had explained that the tune was encoded on a spring, which was wound and inserted into the side of the pianoforte, but the Lord of Flotsam waved him silent.

The tune started low and quiet, quickly built to a crescendo, then subsided again. Toede clapped his scaly paws in appreciation and the pianoforte picked up the clapping sound, altering the tempo to match his applause. Toede laughed and the pianoforte responded with a series of tittering eighth-notes in the higher register. The minotaur let out a growl and the box countered with a slightly minor key. Within five minute the Lord of Flotsam was shouting joyously at the device, in what Edger only later recognized as singing, while the pianoforte matched him, note for note.

Edger noted that the Chamberlain, a rail-thin man, tapped his foot in agreement with the melody, soft enough

not to draw attention to himself. The minotaur in blood-red armor merely scowled and tried not to make any further noise for the box to mock.

As the tune played, Edger felt again the pull of the song. It might alter to fit the noise around it, but its core remained the same. He later tried to reproduce it from memory but always failed.

When the piece was finished, the white raisin on the throne clapped his hands and said something in a string of hushed, slurred syllables—a breathy, garbled whisper. The Chamberlain leaned forward to catch his words, nodded, then turned to the man and gnome.

“His lordship,” said the Chamberlain, a man with an eye for the obvious, “is most amused.”

The minotaur let out a chuffing snort, but Lord Toede continued to elaborate in a breathy whisper inaudible to Edger. The Chamberlain translated, “He would like to reward you for this amusement and grant the gnomes their request for sanctuary.”

The minotaur let out a bellow and was on his hooves in an instant. “Gnomes? Here?” thundered the great bull-headed creature, “You would allow gnomes here? Have you gone mad? Has age finally claimed your senses?”

The Chamberlain visibly quailed at the outburst, but his Lordship seemed nonplussed. He let out a string of mangled syllables.

“His Lordship has declared,” the chamberlain gulped, “That Flotsam is a free port, and there is plenty of room for gnomes in the wreckage of the market district.”

“There is no place safe in a city that has gnomes present!” snarled the minotaur, “Where there are gnomes, there is madness! Where there are gnomes, there is noise! Where there are gnomes, there is chaos! Where there are gnomes, there are explosions.”

“Actually,” said Manifew softly, “We don’t like explosions. We have sensitive ears.”

Edger wanted to hold his tongue. While he himself agreed with the minotaur's trepidations, he did not like the creature's tone. More importantly, the minotaur was standing between Edger and his own just reward. Despite himself, he spoke up, "They make music, not noise."

"Yes, and this . . ." Raeja searched for the correct insult, eventually settling on "Music." He looked like he wanted to spit. "Soft and weak it is, not proper music at all. It has no value to us or this city. I think gnomes are a danger to the safety of the city, and I will not stand for them to be admitted."

Another set of calm burbles, translated by a trembling Chamberlain, "It is his Lordship's decision," said the Chamberlain with a weak smile.

"His Lordship put ME in charge for civil order! Me, Raeja of the Crimson Sails, mightiest of the Blood Fleet! Without me, other pirates would have leveled this place with their raids. Without me, your wall would be in shambles. Without me, you would no longer have your throne!"

Raeja lumbered forward as he spoke, towering over the throne. The Chamberlain took two steps back. Lord Toede looked up, still unperturbed. Edger thought the old wrinkle was drooling. Toede muttered something calmly.

The chamberlain gulped and said, "His Lordship recognizes your contribution to our security . . ."

More soft burbling, ". . . and welcomes your input."

"No gnomes! None of their soft music!" snarled the minotaur.

"Perhaps a compromise," said the Chamberlain quickly, "Let them camp nearby."

"Not within one hundred yards of our walls!" snarled the minotaur. "Not a single gnome in Flotsam!"

Toede let out an indignant belch, and the Chamberlain took that as an assent. "Agreed. If you will let . . . if you think that putting the gnomes outside the city is the safest course of action, I am sure that the gnomes will agree to this."

Manifew looked at Toede, looked at Edger, and finally at the huffing, impatient minotaur, and said simply, "OK."

The gnome's voice sounded like two adjacent notes from his pianoforte machine, and minor notes at that.

Manifew returned to his people to set up a semi-permanent base, and Edger settled into a semi-comfortable position as the gnomes' official sales force. News of the presentation at the Lord's Manor quickly spread through the city, and everyone who was anyone (and a large number of people who were no one in particular) had to suddenly have musical soft-loud machines. In addition, orders poured in for other mechanical devices, including weaving machines, printing presses, and anchor hoists. The city itself placed large orders for the bulkiest items, including a handful of full-sized pianofortes. Even with only a small amount of skimming on the scrupulously-kept books (Edger's tax background served him well here), Edger was making money on his commissions hand over fist.

Even more delightful, said moneys were delivered graciously, even enthusiastically, by people who would otherwise hide the silverware and dig out the old clothes when they saw him coming. Lodgings were offered, dinner invitations made, eligible daughters introduced. Edger was a rising star, waiting only for some permanent position within the upper bureaucracy to guarantee him a safe tenure and a life of eternal leisure.

Despite his growing social obligations, Edger found the time to ride out once a week to the gnomish encampment to check out the work. The gnomes had settled in quite nicely—the land provided had once been a quarry, its stone long-since mined out, crowned at one end by a great tor of a hill. A great hall constructed by the gnomes dominated the tor, while smaller residences and workshops ringed the quarry itself.

Each time Manifew gave Edger a tour of the proceedings. Things went slowly as first, as the gnomes set themselves up, started gardens, erected buildings, and in their spare time worked on the various promised devices. One experiment Manifew showed Edger was of a device consisting of goblets spinning about their long stems, each nested within the next. The goblets were of differing sizes, and when a wet finger was touched to the rim of the spinning glasses, a bone-piercing tone was produced. Edger recommended refinements as best as he was able to comply with human musical tastes and filed that one away for future presentation to the Court, once the interest in musical soft-louds diminished.

Finally, on the first of the month, the promised deadline for the first shipment, Edger rode out of Flotsam on his ancient mule (now more of an affectation than a real mode of transportation) to accept the first shipment. As he rode south, the ground rose slightly away from the city and the bay. Ahead he saw a line of large haywains along the ridgeline ahead. Edger was pleased—the gnomes had anticipated his arrival and were heading out to meet him, coming as close to the city as was permitted.

Edger was surprised when the first of the wains, stuffed with large crates that contained the ordered machinery, began to roll forward of its own volition. No, not of its own volition—there were a gang of gnomes behind it, pushing the wheels with great levers. The first wain topped the rise, and began to roll downhill, slowly at first, then picking up speed as it descended towards Flotsam.

The rolling wain was apparently unmanned, or rather ungnomed, and once started on its way, hurtled downward at a surprising rate of speed. A second wain was already tipping over the top of the rise, and a third was rocking back and forth under the levers of the gnomes.

Edger let out a cry and kicked his mule forward, hoping to stop the gnomes before they released any more wains. The

mule moving uphill slowed, while the descending wagon increased its speed. While not a gnome himself, Edger quickly calculated that he would never ascend the hill in time to stop the line of wains, and more importantly, that the cascading wagons were directly between him and gnomes, bearing down on his position.

Cursing and pulling hard on the reigns, he pulled the mule Flotsam-ward. The thundering of the wagon wheels now rippled the ground beneath the mule's hooves, and the mount needed no encouragement to surge forward, down the rise and swiftly towards home.

Flotsam's gate guards were minotaurs (any human guards having long-since been sent to the hinterlands), but they were no fools. As Edger approached, they were aware both of him and the now-nearly dozen wagons that sped behind him like oversized baby ducks. Having no immediate defense against oversized wagons carrying musical instruments, the guards did what they thought was best.

They began to close the gates.

Edger screamed and pictured himself as a vellum-thin bureaucrat lodged between the wains and the city wall. He dug his heels into the mule's sides, but the swayback needed no real encouragement. It leapt forward with a speed that it had apparently saved up from years of plodding along the tax-collector's circuit. The gates brushed both sides of Edger's knees as he hurtled into the rapidly-dwindling gap.

The guards had just gotten the gates closed when the wain hit, but they failed to secure them with the iron-shod crosspiece. They were just sliding it into position when the first wagon struck the gates with the force of a small bomb, its musical contents sounding a mournful, sour chord.

The gate ruptured under the force of the blow, the wain shoved halfway through its iron-wrapped timbers. A hundred feet further into the city, along the Southwest Plaza, Edger turned on his mount, and looked at the wain, now stuck half-way through the gate.

Then he remembered what was coming next, dismounted, and dragged the mule by its reins to a safe alley off the plaza.

The second wagon struck the back of the first, slamming to through the remainder of the gate. The third wagon struck the second at a slight angle, sending it spinning into the plaza itself. The fourth hit the third, tumbled it end over end. The fifth hit the fourth and lofted into air, cutting off a statue of His Puissant Lordship at the knees before coming to rest in a park.

So it went for each of the wagons in turn, each striking with the sound of a very large cat landing on a very delicate keyboard. Edger no longer cared where the wagons landed or what they struck, as long as they landed far away from him. After thirty seconds of relentless and discordant impacts, the assault stopped. The stunned minotaur guards quickly organized a sally against the invaders, but the bulk of the gnomes had already disappeared, save for Manifew, who was waiting for them atop the hillside.

Manifew and Edger, for the minotaurs from the gate recognized him and found him quickly enough, were escorted to the Manor for an immediate audience with the Lord's Court. The Chamberlain looked sweaty and nervous on one side of the throne, while Raeja was thundering and angry on the other. The minotaur stood, since he had apparently already destroyed the chair he previously rested on.

"My gates! My precious gates!" the minotaur bellowed. "They nearly caved in the walls as well! I told you these gnomes were dangerous! Let us send them away at once! Drive them from the land!"

His lordship burred something, and the Chamberlain, pale-faced, casting numerous glances at the minotaur, said, "His noble lordship would like an explanation, gnome. How did you come to assault the city in this fashion?"

"Orders," said Manifew, cheerily.

The Minotaur leader let out a throaty cry and seemed

about to make a leap for Manifew's throat. Toede muttered a few inaudible words, which the Chamberlain failed to translate. The minotaur calmed only slightly.

Manifew continued, nodding now. "We follow orders well. You said we can't come within one hundred yards of the city. We found some old maps with elevations, and figured the top of the rise was one hundred and three yards away, so we figured out how to deliver our goods and obey the rules." The gnome looked quite pleased with himself.

"Yes, you can't enter the city," shouted the minotaur, "but that doesn't mean you can send big wagons to attack my gates!"

The possessive pronoun was not lost on Edger.

"Deliver," said Manifew, "We didn't attack. We delivered."

"You destroyed the merchandise in the process!" snarled the minotaur. "What kind of delivery is that?!"

"Contents may settle in handling and delivery," said Manifew, "We will gladly replace them with a new delivery, at the start of the month."

"You're not going to threaten our gates again!" snarled the Minotaur. "You're not going to harm our walls. I don't want any of your transports coming within a hundred yards of the city."

Lord Toede grumbled something too low for Edger to make out.

Manifew nodded at the minotaur and said, "OK," in his odd, two-toned way. The gnome seemed distracted, and it was unclear to Edger who Manifew was talking to.



Now, almost a month later, Edger Nunce was once more before the throne of Flotsam. His High Lord White Raisin was as unperturbed as always, apparently completely unaware that his city had been shelled by orchestral components. The hobgoblin turned over Manifew's music box in his hands.

As Edger timidly approached the ruling dais, Raeja the "protector" of Flotsam, stomped down its broad stairs, picked up the tax collector bodily and shook him.

"Where is he?" said the minotaur, his breath hot in Edger's face, "Where is the little vermin!"

The Chamberlain pulled ineffectively on the minotaur's shoulder, but it was more boredom than concern or common sense that made the raider finally drop Edger.

Edger pulled himself up from a heap on the ground and managed to gasp, "I don't know."

"You don't know?" cried Raeja, and Edger was afraid the minotaur was going to assault him again, "Why don't you know?"

"Because I was unaware they were going to do this today," said Edger in a strangled voice, "They are early."

"Do you know WHY they are early, perhaps?" snapped the minotaur.

"Um, no," said Edger in a small voice, then added, "Perhaps, they, um, are very efficient in their work."

Edger thought the Minotaur could turn no deeper shade of red, but Raeja surprised him by at least three shades. The bovine captain sputtered out a string of harsh epithets that could only be minotaur curses.

"I fear there is ANOTHER problem," said the Chamberlain, in his own mild voice.

The minotaur captain turned a baleful eye towards the Chamberlain.

The Chamberlain chose his words carefully. "One reason the gnomes may be early is that this was not a complete shipment. Even given the extensive damage, it was but a fraction of the orders placed, even counting the replacement items from the previous month."

"You mean . . ." said the minotaur slowly, "They have more?"

The Chamberlain managed a serious nod, and the minotaur captain exploded.

“THAT is where they went! They went to reload! They won’t be content until they bury my city under a pile of their stupid music boxes and gewgaws! I will not stand for it!” To one of the nearby minotaur guards he shouted, “Summon our forces! We will march to the gnomish encampment and solve this problem once and for all!”

Cursing, and without waiting for Lord Toede’s leave, Raeja burst from the room, taking his minotaur guards in his wake and leaving Edger, the Chamberlain, and the wrinkled Lord of Flotsam behind.

Edger let out a deep sigh. He had dodged a lightning bolt here, or rather an angry minotaur. If the guards were pulled from their station to attack the gnomes, then perhaps he could easily make his way out of the city unnoticed. It was many leagues to anything else resembling civilization, but he did not want to be in Flotsam when Raeja returned.

Then Lord Toede opened the music box, and its lingering counter-time filled the room. It was the same thin, haunting melody that defied memorization but left the listener with a feeling of peace.

Edger realized he had been humming it when he was first packing this morning.

Edger took a deep breath, and said, “By your leave . . .”

Toede looked up, almost surprised that Edger was still present. The Chamberlain said, “Yes?”

Edger felt himself on the cliff’s edge. All he had to do was take a step away, and he would be safe. All he would have to do is bow and depart and never be seen in Flotsam again.

Instead he said, “I would like to go warn the gnomes of Raeja’s intentions. Perhaps they will decamp and go elsewhere.”

Toede looked at him with great, watery eyes, and burped something. The Chamberlain said, “His Lordship approves. Go with his blessing.”

The white raisin on the throne burbled a slurry of vowels.

“Edger Nunce?” said the Chamberlain.

“My Lord?”

“Regardless of the outcome, his Lordship wishes to thank you for your help in all of this,” said the Chamberlain, cryptically, “he wishes you the best of luck and thanks you for volunteering.”

Edger pushed his mule hard, hoping that the minotaurs would be slow to gather all their forces, pick up stragglers, shine their armor and sharpen their horns before going to war. As it was, he reached the encampment with no sign of immediate pursuit.

Manifew met Edger at the edge of the gnome quarry. The gnome was delighted to see him. Behind the small humanoid was a clutch of other gnomes watching Edger intently.

Edger approached the small gnome, “About your most recent delivery . . .” he started.

Manifew cut him off, “No one was hurt, I hope?”

Edger blinked, “Well, no, no one was hurt.”

Manifew turned back to the other gnomes and balled his fists in front of his chest, his thumbs upraised. The other gnomes broke into polite applause and began congratulating each other.

“No, see here . . .” started Edger again, “You’re going to have to run, or fight, or probably both. You’ve made Raeja very, very angry. His forces are coming to punish you.”

Edger expected the gnome to be frightened or at least concerned. Instead Manifew nodded and smiled. “Excellent,” he said “Everything is ready, then. Come to the Great House and I will show you.”

Edger warily followed the gnome. The foundries alongside the quarry were bustling now, and Edger guessed that more than a hundred new arrivals had swelled the original group’s ranks. A great ramp was leading out of the quarry up to the Great House itself.

Now that he was aware of it, yes, there was music in the

air—strange, haunting music that did not sound like anything he had encountered before, music from before the start of music. It had the same feeling as the pianoforte song but was deeper, earthier. Was this what the gnomes made and shoved into wooden boxes with steel springs? Could music be mined and refined like silver or steel?

The Great House was a thin barrel-shaped longhouse, situated with one thin end pointed towards quarry and its wide access ramp. Since the last time he was there, the gnomes had bored a hole through the second floor, and now two sets of windmill vanes, one on each side of the building, turned in the late afternoon breeze.

Within the Great House the gnomes were incredibly busy, wrapping all manner of machinery (musical and otherwise) with burlap sacks and fastening them to triangular sledges. No wheels, Edger noted, which would make the manner of delivery less dangerous than any of the earlier forms. Still, they were huge, and Edger could not figure how the gnomes planned on getting them out of their Great House.

Overhead the rafters hung with springs, larger versions of those that piloted the music boxes, and the space above them, under the eaves, was criss-crossed with harpsichord wires. The walls looked thick enough—perhaps if they sealed off the Great House, they could hold out against the minotaurs and their axes?

Manifew motioned Edger to follow him towards the front of the house, towards a glassed-in balcony overlooking the quarry and its loading ramp.

Manifew sat down in one of two overstuffed chairs facing the balcony window, and motioned for Edger to take the other seat. Next to each seat was a coil of heavy rope.

“The minotaurs shouldn’t be mad,” said the gnome, “We’re only following their orders, after all. They said stay away, so we stayed away. They said send stuff, so we sent stuff. We wouldn’t have to send things in if they had let us near the city in the first place.”

"I think Raeja meant you weren't supposed to get near the city unless you were making your deliveries," he told the gnome.

The gnome blinked, "But he didn't SAY that."

"Well, he didn't feel he had to," said Edger, "and now he's got a small army of his fellow minotaurs coming down on top of you."

The gnome blinked again, "So they are heading straight here?"

Edger nodded.

The gnome brightened up at once, "Excellent! That means the plan will work after all!"

"Plan?" said Edger.

The gnome stood up and shouted "Prepare for delivery!" A cheer went up within the depths of the Great House.

Somewhere behind him, there were shouts and firm shuttings of doors, of small feet running and great wooden switches being thrown, of springs tensing against metal and taunt wires thrumming with tension.

Manifew picked up the rope next to his chair and started to lash himself in.

Edger half-rose from his seat, and the gnome looked at him, concerned. "You better tie yourself in, too."

"What is going on?" asked the human.

Manifew said "We must make one more delivery." Within the heart of the Great House, a heavy bolt was pulled, and above him the springs in the rafters began to unspool, causing the rafters they hung from to start to rotate. Not rafters, Edger realized, but rather axles, hooked through gears and pulleys and wire to the great windmill vanes themselves. Outside, he heard the huge sailcloth vanes beating the air of their own volition.

"What is . . ." started the human again.

"Sit down, Edger Nunce," said the gnome, "We're about to . . ."

The sudden blow hammered Edger into the cushioned chair with a force that would have toppled the chair, had

it not been securely nailed to the floor. Nunce shouted in surprise as he planted his face into the soft cushion.

“What?” Edger tried again.

“Piano launcher,” said the gnome, in a clipped tone, “Big enough to the launch the Great House itself. Works off springs. No explosives! Too much noise!”

Edger twisted in his seat and managed to think *Launch the Great House where?* Before it suddenly became obvious.

The gnomish Great House was shot off its foundation and now slid at great speed down the ramp towards the floor of the quarry. The windmill vanes on either side were a blur as the released springs drove them forward. The end of the ramp was rising, as gnomish pulleys curled up the end in the gentle upward curve.

To Edger it didn't look like a curve, but rather a wall at the bottom of the ramp, and despite himself, he clutched the chair tightly and closed his eyes. It was not the position he would choose to die in, but it was apparent that he was not being given a choice in the matter.

Edger felt the bottom of his stomach drop out and his heart skip a beat. He felt a heavy, invisible hand press himself into the cushions, and he strained for breath. Then suddenly, the pressure was lifted, his stomach returned to its normal position in his body, and he felt the blood rushing to his ears.

He opened his eyes and saw that they were soaring, very, very fast, over the farmlands south of Flotsam. Ahead, the city was a low smudge on the horizon, with a reddish sea beyond it. Between them and the city, on the first hill, was a mid-sized gaggle of largish beings: the minotaurs, pirates and their supporters.

It was like being on dragonback, Edger assumed.

“We're flying?” he asked.

“No,” corrected the gnome, “We're falling, but we're doing it very slowly. It should be some time before we hit the ground.”

The image of the Great House, loaded with harpsichords, clavichords, and soft-loud pianos slamming into ground filled him with dread. In a strangled voice he said, "You're going to . . ." Edger said quietly.

"Yes," said the gnome, "We're supposed to deliver this load to Rajea of the Crimson Sails. Gift from his Lordship, previously ordered, but we didn't know how to deliver so big an order without entering the city. Now that he is coming out to us, we can bring it to him from the Great House. We have the floor hinged so when we pass overhead, all the deliveries will arrive."

Edger made a gurgling noise.

"Do not worry, human," said the gnome, "We wrapped everything in heavy cloth this time, so it would not be damaged.

The gnome barked out a new set of orders, and the great house yawed. New springs were unlatched, and the great vanes beat harder, clawing their way through the air. Ahead, the minotaurs were clearing the southern rise, and some were already pointing at them.

The minotaur force had no idea what was happening until Manifew gave the order for delivery. Gnomes leaned on heavy oak levers, and the floor fell away in sections, the pianos, presses, and looms following in quick precision.

The gnomes were accurate with their deliveries. The first piano smashed into the lead of the group, crushing one minotaur and throwing a half-dozen more to the ground. A pair of clavichords bracketed the main van of the assault, churning the farmland with long furrows as they skipped through the raiders.

Already the human supporters were breaking and running, but the minotaurs pulled together in a tight defensive knot. Edger heard thumping noises striking the walls of the airborne house, and he realized that some of the minotaurs had brought bows.

They were over the minotaurs now and bearing down on the city itself. Manifew bellowed at the other gnomes, and

the vanes on one side were counter-rotated. The building slanted precipitously to the right, well clear of the walls, and bore back on the raiding party.

The gnome snapped out another set of orders, and more instruments, winches, looms, and machinery spilled out of the belly of the flying beast. Without the fear of accidentally delivering something heavy to a non-minotaur, they now pounded the hilltop with weighty objects. Some of the minotaurs themselves were breaking now, leaving Raeja in their midst, screaming for order.

They were overhead again, now no more than fifty feet above the hilltop. There were no more arrows striking the walls from below. Manifew shouted orders and the huge house pulled up again, spinning and coming in very low.

There were shouts in the rear of the Great House, and Manifew looked at Edger. His expression was one of disappointment. "One of the hinges failed to open," said the gnome, clearly mortified, "We cannot make the last delivery if we cannot get it out of the Great House."

Edger smiled, "Yes you can," he said. "Just deliver the house along with it."

On the ground, Raeja of the Crimson Sails, de facto protector and power-behind-the-throne of Flotsam, bellowed at his troops as they fled in all directions. He turned to see the huge bulk of the Great House bearing down on him, dropping further with every moment. He managed half a curse, and then was gone, the Great House slamming into the very top of the hilltop and starting a long, clockwise spin down the hill towards the city, leaving a deep furrow in its path. Edger held onto his chair as it spun around thrice, before coming to rest at last against the gates themselves.

The gnomes let out a cheer and spilled out of the Great House, hoping to inspect the quality of their delivery.

They were ushered into Lord Toede's presence. His Lordship had the music box open, and to Edger's ears the tune seemed brighter, dancing off the polished black marble and gold inlay. His Lordship looked up and burred a few quiet words.

The Chamberlain said to Edger, "The great and wonderful Lord of Flotsam wishes to express his thanks to you and your gnomish people for coming the city's rescue against the raiders. It will be a long time before any pirate, raider, or would-be protector thinks of Flotsam as easy prey."

Another set of burbling and the Chamberlain translated, "In the absence of Rajea of the Crimson Sails, his Lordship also wishes to rescind the order banning the gnomes from the city proper. Though we wish that they continue to work in the old quarry, we will welcome them to make their deliveries."

A sharp set of consonants from the Lord of Flotsam, and the Chamberlain reddened slightly. "Provided those deliveries are made in a more traditional fashion than that previously agreed to."

"Previously agreed to?" said Edger, and looked at the gnome.

The gnome looked almost hurt, "Of course. You were standing right here when delivery was specified."

"By whom?" started Edger, and the gnome nodded at the wizened figure on the throne.

Toede let out a string of blurry, almost imperceptible vowels, with nary a recognizable consonant in the lot.

"His Lordship says," said Manifew, "that gnomes have excellent hearing. Provided they don't stand too close to too many explosions."

Lord Toede gave a wide, almost crocodile-like smile and nodded at the Chamberlain. The official took a deep breath and addressed Edger directly.

"Edger Nunce," said the Chamberlain, "For your . . . participation in all this, his Lordship wishes to reward you with an Official Position with his Lordship's government."

Edger tried to keep his face straight, but his heart leapt within his vest. The safe sinecure was at last his, and his future assured. Perhaps he could even take Raeja's place on the Council.

"Effective immediately," said the Chamberlain, barely containing his amusement. "You are the ambassador to the Quarry Gnomes of Flotsam. You will make your residence there and accompany the deliveries, no more than once a month, into Flotsam itself. Congratulations on the honor!"

Edger's jaw dropped open, his heart sank, and he could not find any words. A shocked silence overtook him and he just stared at the frail, ancient hobgoblin.

Toede smiled and slurred a few words, and the Chamberlain broke into laughter. Edger turned to Manifew and stammered "What?"

"His lordship wishes you the best of luck," said Manifew, smiling and twitching his sensitive ears, "and he thanks you for volunteering."



MARINE SKIES

LUCIEN SOULBAN

Brysis barely avoided the thrust of the large, silvertip shark that barreled through the water in a sudden, agitated burst. The sea elf swam in corkscrew spirals and dove deeper, far from the waning sunshine, where reds faded and blood turned green from tricks of light. Deeper still, Brysis' golden hair and deep blue skin appeared ashen gray from water-filtered daylight.

The shark pursued her, undeterred, splitting the waters.

The other sharks in the coral lagoons had been aggressive but not this belligerent. Some had tried nudging the Dargonesti elf earlier, to "taste" her before attacking, but Brysis slipped easily past their snouts. The silvertip, however, had proved stubborn, chasing Brysis to the coral fields jacketing the ocean floor.

Brysis arced up from her dive and skimmed over gigantic coral beds and between skeletal-branched sponges. The silvertip gained rapidly, shortening the gap. Brysis had little choice left. The shark would soon overtake her. It was inevitable.

Brysis spun around and faced the silvertip, which was now seconds away. Her heart thundered and she bit her lower lip; she pulled her shell-dagger from her thigh sheath. The silvertip closed in.

A knife is no match for a hungry shark, Brysis thought, but what could she do?

The shark was near enough that Brysis could distinguish its heart-shaped, serrated teeth, capable of seizing an opponent and sawing through flesh. The shark's widening mouth eclipsed her vision.

Then a second sea elf seemingly appeared from nowhere. He trailed a mane of long white hair and held a trident carved of ebon coral in his vein-covered hands. He rammed the roof of the silvertip's snout with the trident's handle, driving the shark straight into a coral's lacerating branches. Brysis barely avoided the collision that swept past her. Shark's blood quickly stained the water, and the silvertip thrashed wildly before bolting away, gravely injured. The coral had scored a series of fine, extended slashes across its thick body. The silvertip bled profusely.

"Swim, damn you," the old sea elf hissed to her.

Brysis darted off through the coral fields; the other sharks would smell the blood and swarm within moments. Her savior vanished, swimming in the opposite direction to confuse the sharks. The silvertip's blood had touched him, but the old elf was a fast, wily swimmer. Brysis wasn't certain whether she herself had been tinged with the silvertip's blood. Glancing over her shoulder, she worried that she might be leading the sharks back to the very expedition she was trying to protect.

One thought preoccupied Brysis; it was the realization that this was no longer a familiar ocean. She was no longer at home . . .

The underwater cavern was a barren hollow in the otherwise fertile system of reefs and exposed coral islets that stretched just beyond Habbakuk's Necklace . . . in a marine realm once called Goodlund—now more aptly named The

Desolation. The peninsula was a scarred legacy of the dragon overlord Malystriyx, who had rendered Goodlund's plains into ashen fields and shattered its mountain peaks with volcanic craters.

Brysis knew little of the strife above the ocean, but she understood how it touched the undersea. She had seen much of it firsthand. She drifted down, through a hole in the cavern's ceiling, and she was met by a rush of excited clicks and squeals. A dark gray shape darted toward and swirled around her.

"Hello, Minnow-Tyrant," Brysis said with a grateful grin. She petted the blunt-nosed dolphin, careful not to scratch his sensitive gray hide, which scarred easily. As one of the royal dolphins from the stables of the Blood Sea city of Istar, Minnow-Tyrant had been a near-pristine gray specimen when the expedition began. Now, white lines and symbols covered half his body. Minnow-Tyrant had become a living map of lightly engraved scars, detailing the shores and currents surrounding The Desolation.

This was Brysis's first mapping expedition since the three moons returned to the heavens. With the great upheavals that introduced new land masses, quelled the Blood Sea's vortex, and altered celestial alignments, the oceanscape had changed dramatically. Everywhere there were new currents and formations. The Dargonesti no longer recognized their homeland.

Brysis was part of one of many such expeditions.

"Where were you?" a woman's voice demanded, a slight quiver betraying her agitation.

The entrance was dark, but Brysis could see the entire cavern ahead in all its brilliant hues, despite the filtered light. To her, the older Veloxua stood out clearly with her dark blue skin and her short hair a shade greener than kelp.

Veloxua swam up to Brysis, looming over her. Brysis wasn't intimidated, however. "I needed you here to tend to

the dolphin," Veloxua said. "I cannot map its skin otherwise. It squirms too much."

"That is because you are mapping him without the proper salves," Brysis replied. "I had to look for more firefish toxin. My guess is you neglected to remove the poison sacs. Even Quayseen doesn't know all the steps."

"Well? Did you find any?"

"Barely—enough for another day or so. Nothing's where it used to be, and there's a surprising number of sharks in the area."

"If we must proceed, then we shall do so without your salves."

"No," Brysis said, her voice even and measured. She tired of these cartographers, with no care for their medium. "I will not subject Minnow-Tyrant to needless pain."

"Perhaps you prefer to serve as my canvas?" Veloxua said, trying to goad Brysis. "I have plenty of charcoal to thread through your skin."

"The firefish toxin I gathered should suffice for now. I'll find a paralytic to numb Minnow-Tyrant's skin." With that, Brysis swam to a cluster of weather-worn and smoothed rocks to prepare her salve. Minnow-Tyrant joined her, happy for her sorely missed company.

"What is that you said about sharks . . .?" Veloxua asked.

"The water's thick with them."

"My maps indicate no sharks in this area."

"Time to amend your maps," Brysis said, before stroking Minnow-Tyrant's skin. She knew she was annoying Veloxua, who bristled at anyone touching her "canvas."

"It would do little good," said an aged voice. The old sea elf dropped into the cavern, his trident by his side. The knots of muscles stretching his skin were impressive for a Dargonesti male of his years. His physique resembled that of a human, with the still-slender touches of his people.

"Why do you say that, Quayseen?" Veloxua asked, her voice less imperious.

"The sharks are moving . . . migrating . . . or perhaps more accurately, something is forcing them to go elsewhere. They will not settle here."

"I know what it is," Brysis said. "The coral. It's dying."

"Dying?" Veloxua asked. "From what? The flow of the new arteries?"

"It is possible," Quayseen said with a shrug.

Brysis removed several vials of hollowed whale bone from her pouches.

She extracted softened sponge from one and proceeded to masticate it. She then removed the tiny firefish toxin sacs from their vial and chewed them as well, mixing the concoction in her mouth. As the expedition's alchemist and apothecary, she was relatively immune to many sea-born toxins, including firefish, having poisoned herself deliberately and repeatedly over the years as part of her training. Brysis spit the mixture back into the vials and flushed the residue through her gills into the water. Her gills numbed briefly to the toxin's touch.

Quayseen swam over to Brysis.

"What you were doing out there," he whispered to Brysis, not wanting to give Veloxua the satisfaction of hearing his rebuke, "was reckless. I told you not to draw blood—"

"You drew blood," Brysis countered.

"—unless your life is in peril. I told you never to draw blood with your weapon. I forced the shark into the coral, but I never bloodied Three-Tongue," he said, patting the trident to emphasize his point. "Had you stained your knife, the sharks would have chased you till the sun caught one of the moons."

"I was cornered."

Quayseen sighed. "You did well to lure the shark away from the pack, but next time, figure out a way to wound it and flee. If you have to cut it with your blade, leave the weapon behind and claim it later. With luck, the other sharks will forget you and chase their companion. Remember—"

"I know," Brysis said. "Cut one shark, draw a dozen."

"Stop interrupting," Quayseen said, a shallow smile on his lips, "and remember . . . swim like a dolphin. The shark was all the more attracted to you because you were kicking your legs so wildly. You appeared in distress."

Brysis nodded. "I'll be more careful next time."

"Yes, and next time leave the fighting to me. That is my responsibility and role here."

Veloxua, drifted over, curious and suspicious. "Something I should know?" she asked.

"No," Quayseen said, his expression blank. "We will rest here a while and continue after you have transcribed those new deep arteries we discovered."

"Good," Veloxua said. "We need to explore Goodlund's coastline more closely."

"No. With the currents changing so abruptly and the sea life already migrating, we must continue our investigation here to understand why."

"We already know why!" Veloxua said, her words clipped and fast. "The three moons vanished for over forty summers before returning. That alone should be enough to affect the currents."

"Were that the only thing altering the ocean streams," Quayseen mused, "but I believe something else is at work here."

"What else?" Veloxua said, her arms crossed and thoroughly unconvinced.

"Let us go to the surface," Quayseen said, "and look."



Veloxua tried harder to be gentle as she traced light patterns over Minnow-Tyrant's skin with sea urchin spines. Brysis' salve eliminated much of Minnow-Tyrant's discomfort, though she still held the dolphin's head between her hands, comforting him with a soft lullaby as Veloxua did

her work. The dolphin's eyelids floated half-closed; he was content . . . at peace and dreaming of open green oceans and harrying large schools of fish.

Minnow-Tyrant was special, perhaps the most valued member of the expedition. Like other blunt-nosed grays bred and charmed by the Dargonesti, he could handle the deep waters of Istar and Watermere and survive for days at a time underwater. The Dargonesti were close to the blunt-nosed grays and treated their dolphin companions more like children than pets.

"A moment longer," Veloxua said. "I need to wash its skin with—"

"Him," Brysis interrupted. "Minnow-Tyrant's not your canvas or tool. It is a him."

This was an old argument. Veloxua was ready with a sharp word, but she refrained. This small act of restraint surprised Brysis.

"I know that, of course," Veloxua whispered, applying a coat of crushed jellyfish tendrils to portions of Minnow-Tyrant's flesh. The solution would welt the skin enough to raise some of the scars, providing depth to the map's peaks and shores.

"Then why do you keep calling him it or dolphin. He has a name."

Veloxua again met Brysis's gaze. "Dolphins are loyal animals," Veloxua said.

"Yes, they are."

"What is a dolphin's duty on our expeditions?"

"To serve as living maps and as guides to the region they visit."

"We can do that," Veloxua said. "We could simply ink maps on treated seal skin and carry them in pouches."

"Should anything happen to us," Brysis said, carefully, "then the maps would be lost as well. We train the dolphins to return home should any tragedy befall us. At least, then, our mission would survive."

"But this one is loyal to you, above the expedition."

"Your point?" Brysis finished, annoyed at whatever wisdom Veloxua was trying to impart.

"My point," Veloxua said, "is that if I fall to danger, Minnow-Tyrant will not hesitate to flee. It does not love me. I have made sure of that, but you . . . you offer it nothing but affection, and while it is an enviable quality in your character, it is also makes this expedition vulnerable."

Brysis hesitated, staring into Minnow-Tyrant's eyes. He chirped back, happy.

"He does love me," Brysis admitted.

"And dolphins are loyal animals," Veloxua said. "If you are imperiled, it will choose you over the expedition's needs. It will not flee as it must do, especially if you keep indulging and spoiling . . . it."

Brysis fell silent and Veloxua, to her credit, offered nothing further either, not even a smug smile. A moment passed before Veloxua sheathed her spines in a whale-skin pouch. She stored them in a long bone tube containing map hides—copies of those in Watermere's great library and etched with a paste of seashell pigment and clay—which Veloxua used to dye parchments of otter and seal skin. A coat of pulped hysil-fish provided the preserving finish that protected the maps from the seawater.

"Nearly done," Veloxua said. "Begin the lesson."

Brysis nuzzled close to one of Minnow-Tyrant's small earholes and uttered a series of clicks while Veloxua traced her fingers over the nascent scars. This way, Minnow-Tyrant would understand the word, its relation to the scar, and where each landmark or artery lay in the ocean.

"This is a new artery of water," Brysis said. "We've called it the Ice Spear."

Minnow-Tyrant squealed, happy at the attention.

"This is a new artery of water," Brysis repeated. "It's called the Ice Spear . . ."

Brysis and Veloxua broke the ocean surface, the barrier between wetness and sky. Quayseen pointed at the setting sun, indicating they should observe it in silence. Both women obliged, watching the sky as well, though unsure what they were watching for. Somewhere beneath them, Minnow-Tyrant dove and surfaced, playfully.

Brysis always marveled at the dry world and its alien sensations. She hated that her skin constricted because the air dried the salt. She felt awkward, breathing exclusively through her mouth, her gills pinched shut against her flesh. That Brysis couldn't soar up into the sky or even touch what she saw saddened her. The seemingly infinite ocean was hedged and brought to an abrupt, choppy end by the barren heavens. No wonder the surface dwellers had lost faith in the gods when the three moons vanished. There was nothing about their ugly world that imparted the radiant majesty of creation. The Dargonesti never lost their faith. How could they? They swam in the blood of their gods every day, and marveled at its fertile abundance.

"The sun is almost gone," Quayseen said. "Watch the horizon."

Brysis and Veloxua obliged, watching the dusk sky as the sun touched the distant ocean and sank. Veloxua inhaled sharply, while Brysis marveled at the scarlet glow that spread outward, swallowing the horizon and unfolding across the water's surface. She'd never seen anything so red. Sea life boasted a dazzling array of crimsons, but this was the first time Brysis saw light with such rich depth that the air appeared stained.

Even after the sun had fully set and the purple array of night had settled in, the red horizon remained, ebbing slowly. It was a perpetual, blood twilight.

Brysis spoke first, searching for words to describe such majesty. "How can the light be so . . ."

"Breathtaking?" Quayseen asked. "It is a thing of beauty, but a tragic herald as well."

"How so?" Veloxua asked. "Can we discuss this beneath?"

Quayseen glanced once more at the horizon before slipping below the waves. Brysis and Veloxua joined him, grateful for their liberty again. They dove deep, pushing far away from the reminder of their boundaries and limitations. Minnow-Tyrant pulled alongside Brysis and playfully nudged her.

"The red sky?" Veloxua asked, prompting Quayseen.

"I've seen such skies twice before. Once, when the three volcanoes known as the Lords of Doom erupted and again some thirty-five years ago, when the dragon Malystriyx rent open Goodlund with fissures."

"What does the red sky mean?" Brysis asked.

"It means the world is injured and bleeding," Quayseen responded.

"And with it comes death's chills."

"Of course," Veloxua said. "In the year following an eruption, the sunsets grow redder and the dry sky turns cold, chilling the waters . . . as though the ocean were on death's door. Minor veins of water also grow sluggish, though the deepest arteries remain strong."

"Are the waters colder?" Brysis asked. "I hadn't notice."

"Nor would we," Veloxua said. "We live in the deepest cold, where sunlight lacks the courage to venture. We would not feel such minor inconveniences."

"Correct," Quayseen said, "but the shoal elves do."

"The Dimernesti?" Brysis asked.

"How do you know? Our cousins shun us," Veloxua said.

Quayseen sighed. "Not all of them do, just as not all Dargonesti spurn the outside world."

"You traffic with shoal elves?" Veloxua asked, surprised.

"With some, yes," Quayseen said. "No race is nearer to the shores than the Dimernesti. They say the red skies are

a common sight these last decades. The ocean's surface is likewise cooler."

"Be that as it may, that should not weaken the coral, and that doesn't account for the new arteries we discovered, unless . . ." Brysis said, before uttering a string of clicks that brought Minnow-Tyrant racing to her side. She stilled the eager dolphin and traced a finger over several lines adorning its flanks. "These arteries here . . . they are birthed tributary flows."

"We know," Veloxua said. "I inscribed those, myself."

"They converge here," Brysis said, pointing at the Bay of Balifor.

"What of it?" Quayseen asked.

"The new arteries are unusually strong. It's nothing that fish cannot fight, but what of krill and algae? These new flows may pull such tiny creatures with them, robbing the coral of its sustenance."

"The Dimernesti mentioned the same," Quayseen reflected, "though they spoke of something else cooling the waters."

"What?" Brysis asked.

"Two rivers wending their way through the Desolation. Both straddle several volcanoes and ash seas. The shoal elves say that ash despoils the rivers and pushes silt into the ocean . . . this ocean."

"Ah," Veloxua said. "That too would account for the dying coral. Ash and silt clouds the water, blocking sunlight from reaching the coral. It's dying because the sun's strength is diminished—"

"And because the water is colder," Brysis said, "and because the new arteries draw away the clouds of living notes."

"What accounts for these new arteries?" Quayseen finished, "We must venture to where they converge, because according to the map, they all flow toward the Bay of Balifor. We travel west, to the abandoned settlement of Mycaisa."

The night waters felt . . . odd, oddly familiar. Although they had only traveled four days west, the ocean was distinctly warmer, but the sense of being buoyed upward, toward the surface, was also unexpectedly strong.

"Even the water tastes different," Brysis said.

Quayseen opened his mouth, inhaling a gulp of water that he siphoned through the gills behind his ears.

"Salt," Quayseen said. "It is as strong as I would expect it to be at least several hundred fathoms deeper."

Brysis smiled. "It tastes like home," she said, and allowed herself to take a deep breath, filtering through her gills. The water's salinity was indeed stronger than might be expected. Salt was heavy and sank; thus the deeper one swam, the saltier the ocean currents. Coupled with the cold waters of the depths, the deepest oceans provided more buoyancy and upward lift than the warmer, less salty waters near the surface and coasts.

In this case the opposite was true.

"This could be why sea life is migrating," Quayseen said. "Many sea animals are not accustomed to this much salt—"

"What could be causing it?" Brysis said. "I sensed nothing out of the ordinary on our journey here."

"There are counter currents running deeper down. Perhaps the confluence is drawing water west and carrying the saltier waters east?"

"Perhaps Veloxua will have a theory," Brysis said.

"Yes," Quayseen said, "and I prefer not leaving that woman with Minnow-Tyrant. Let us be done with this chore and return, for his sake."

"Very well, though . . . Veloxua intends Minnow-Tyrant no harm," Brysis said helpfully.

"I know that," Quayseen said, assessing Brysis under a sloping white eyebrow, "but since when did you become an advocate for our cartographer?"

Brysis shrugged. "I understand her a little more these days," she said then dove deeper underwater. She purged the stored air in her lungs to reduce her buoyancy and the pull toward the surface.

Quayseen followed Brysis, swimming down through turbid waters filled with suspended particulates and sluggish clouds. Night within the ocean was dark indeed, but filled with near-invisible swarms of firefly motes that glowed when agitated, creating a soft nimbus of green that covered everything that moved. Currents of water glowed and pulsed to gentle light, but the glow was fleeting. Brysis and Quayseen swam through the glowing motes that adhered to their skin and illumined their forms with a ghostly veneer. Brysis marveled at the light that faded and vanished in the wake of her movements, but Quayseen was far more suspicious of beautiful things. He nudged Brysis forward. She complied, with grudging reluctance.

The pair finally reached a silt-covered plain that faded into a swirling gray mass of ocean dust and darkness. A few jagged rocks and coral blooms broke the heavy layer of ground sediment, but otherwise, the submerged and stark desert held little attraction. A giant manta ray, outlined by glowing motes, drifted into view before vanishing. No doubt, there were many more fish about beyond the cusp of their vision.

"What do we seek?" Quayseen asked.

"Devil-tail gliders, blue-strata snakes, whip-clouds or firefish. Any of these will do."

Quayseen nodded and slowly sailed over the plains with Brysis in tow.

Their pickings for such species had remained thin and dwindled each passing day. Less scarce was food, though the expedition had noticed a significant decline in sea-life outside this warm, salty bubble of ocean. Quayseen now searched for Brysis' ingredients and for something edible.

Finally, Brysis sighted the exposed wing of a spotted ray

hiding beneath the sediment, the glowing motes on its skin fading from recent movement. Quayseen noticed the creature as well. What they couldn't see was its serrated tail and accompanying poisonous spines, though they were acutely aware of this feature of their prey. The spotted ray was not the most dangerous of the species, however, and Quayseen motioned for Brysis to stay back before positioning himself well above the ray, his trident angled down to impale the ray with a diving thrust.

Quayseen dove, his trident leading the charge and streaming threads of light from agitated motes. He aimed at the head, as far from its tail as he could afford. With a powerful lunge, Quayseen drove the trident straight through the unsuspecting ray, impaling its body. A spastic death-shudder shot through the ray, but then, instantly, the waters around Quayseen exploded.

Brysis watched in horror as Quayseen and the ray vanished in a cloud of agitated sediment highlighted by an expanding, glowing nimbus. More frightening still, the entire sea-floor seemed to erupt at the same moment, with a legion of lit clouds blooming in all directions. Suddenly, the silt clouds burst open as dozens of glowing rays tore skyward, panicked by the death throes of their compatriot. Brysis cursed and tried swimming upward as well. Rays were attracted to warm seas and waters with high salinity. She knew this, should have expected this. Now she raced with nearly a hundred rays scattering in all directions.

The faster spotted rays, spanning ten feet across, swam past her first, catching her in their turbulent wakes and with unintended slaps from their beating wings. Following them were smaller rays, their numbers greater by far. They pushed and jostled Brysis before she felt the first whiplash of a serrated tail strike her back thigh. She screamed, wounded to burning agony from the toxic sting. Another whiptail lacerated her exposed back, immediately drawing blood. And another lashed across her arm . . .

Brysis stumbled, her heart slowing and her gills straining to filter air. Immediately she regretted her pause. Giant mantas, their wings spanning thirty feet and beating slow, ponderous strokes, were almost upon her.

She counted at least eight, though her injuries brought on increasingly fevered and blurred visions. Despite their gentle nature, the mantas would barrel through her, leaving her unconscious or too injured to handle the extremely poisonous bluespotted rays keeping pace with them. Brysis had no choice. She drew her knife just in time to lodge it into the white belly of the first passing manta. The manta shrieked and bolted, flapping wildly as it tried to dislodge the knife. Brysis held on, her strength ebbing in each finger. Still, the other rays scattered as the wounded manta bucked and reared, but not before they lashed out with their tails in panic, drawing blood from Brysis and the bucking manta.

Brysis felt cold and numb with pain. Anyone else would have died by now, but Brysis possessed a high threshold to devil-tail venom.

Brysis felt the manta ray shudder and finally fall limp. It plummeted, and she was caught up in its whirl. She released the knife through supreme effort, hoping she would remain buoyant enough to float free, but the manta ray was atop her, its wings her sky. It fell and pushed her down as well.

Brysis, her consciousness narrowing into slits, turned her head. At the corner of her vision, she could see the ocean floor rushing up to greet her. She was too far gone to tense against the impact. Instead, she watched the ground approach, then pass her as they continued plummeting. The cliff walls of the continental shelf streamed past, and Brysis fell off the edge of the shallow world into the abyssal dark.

The pressure gripped and squeezed her lungs painfully, anchoring her on the edge of catalepsy. Seconds away from complete unconsciousness, Brysis vented the remaining air in her body through her gills and mouth, and inhaled sea water to fill her lungs and organs. In the deepest oceans and

trenches, it would protect her innards against the crushing depths.

The agony briefly subsided. Then darkness rushed up to meet her . . .

Voices filtered in and out of the mists between hammering heartbeats and long gaps. Brysis fought to awaken, her eyelids fluttering under the strain. She fell between the heartbeats again, and another day passed before her eyes opened. Veloxua and Quayseen stared back, their faces fatigued by worry.

“How . . . ?” Brysis managed to gasp.

“You fell too deep for the sharks to reach, but they hovered nonetheless,” Quayseen said. “That’s how I found you, following the sharks.”

“Poisoned . . .” Brysis said.

“You were, and with enough to kill a whale,” Quayseen said, “but thanks to your inbred resistance and my humble remedies, you survive. I may not have your acumen concerning the properties of sea life,” he added, “but I know enough to have survived these oceans for many, many years.”

Brysis nodded then drifted away again.

Brysis remembered little of the journey to the confluence of arteries and Mycaisa. She remembered swimming with or being dragged by the faster currents, and she remembered the perpetual ache nesting deep within her leaden muscles. Even breathing produced a throbbing soreness, and she rarely slept, instead falling into the kind of exhausted black-outs that swallow dreams. Finally, after the passage of several days, she awoke, broken but fully aware and alive. The toxins had finally unburdened themselves from her system.

Brysis examined her surroundings. She was in the submerged room of a building shaped by fossilized brain coral.

This must be the Mycaisa settlement, Brysis thought, though she did not remember arriving here. She lay on a mat of interwoven seaweed in otherwise spartan accommodations. The shelter was enough to house the four travelers comfortably, and it provided the necessary walls and ceiling to protect them from large predators. Looking around, Brysis realized she was alone in the room, with the entryway leading to more darkened chambers. Veloxua's equipment lay in a corner.

Quayseen often spoke of ruins such as Mycaisa. Most such settlements lay abandoned, a legacy of the Dimernesti before the great Cataclysm drove them to a nomadic existence. Many of their shallow-water cities remained relatively intact, but only because coral overtook them, cocooning what lay beneath. The Dargonesti and Dimernesti used them for stops on their travels, but rarely lingered for memories were, in themselves, powerful ghosts.

Slowly regaining her faculties, Brysis realized that a slightly noxious taste permeated the waters. The salinity was certainly high, but of sharper distinction was the presence of minerals including sulfur and chlorine. The other tastes were unfamiliar but unpleasant nonetheless. It was more difficult to strain air from the surrounding environment; the waters were also unusually warm. Brysis instantly longed for the deep's cooling touch.

After exploring two different chambers, Brysis swam up through a partially collapsed ceiling and past the thick plug of coral. She floated above a vast coral field shaped to irregular angles and patterns by the buildings beneath it. The coral was dying, however, its colors bleached by strange new minerals. Few fish still made their homes here.

A high pitch squeal tore through the waters as Minnow-Tyrant nearly tackled Brysis. She nuzzled the blunt-nose dolphin and noticed the new cartography scars on his skin.

They were red and tender, judging by the way Minnow-Tyrant winced at her touch. Brysis cursed under her breath and fumbled for her pouches, hoping to produce a salve with which to alleviate his discomfort.

Veloxua and Quayseen arrived as Brysis was pulling a vial of treated whale blubber from her pouch. Brysis locked angry eyes with Veloxua and immediately swam up to her, intent on confronting her about the dolphin's treatment. Quayseen stepped between them, however, gently holding Brysis back at the shoulders.

"You should have waited!" Brysis shouted at Veloxua.

"We could not," Quayseen responded.

Brysis shot Quayseen a wounded look, but his stare was uncompromising.

"Its pain is minor in consequence to its duties," Veloxua said.

Quayseen silenced her with a glance, before addressing Brysis gently. "I told her to proceed with mapping, and Minnow-Tyrant endured. He knew what had to be done."

"We could not wait for you to recover," Veloxua said, never one to remain silent. "Every delay increases the danger to this expedition."

"What is done is done," Quayseen said.

Brysis turned away, staring at Minnow-Tyrant. She pointed to a new, ugly looking scar. "What's that?" Brysis asked, knowing it must have hurt Minnow-Tyrant to endure that mapping.

"We called it Salt-Wound," Veloxua said. "It is a new deep cleft in the ocean that I believe opens a large salt vein. That, we believe, is why the waters have changed."

"The region around the rent is too salty, even for us," Quayseen said. "We could not approach it without terrible discomfort. Nothing grows there. Nothing sinks."

"What of the waters here?" Brysis asked, motioning around her. "What poisons them so?"

"We can show you," Quayseen offered.

Quayseen had named it The World-Gash. The coral field at the edge of Mycaisa ended abruptly, then the world dropped away as though cleft by the hand of Abbuku, the Fisher God. The cliff edge ran in both directions for sight unseen, coral and buildings sheared off, the edges of the precipice crumbling slowly. The darkness beneath was utter and profound, a mixture of shadow and sediment clouds as thick as any storm-laden sky. The clouds spun slowly in unraveling braids. It reminded Brysis of water falling through the mouth of a funnel.

"We are the first to map this . . . perhaps the first to see it," said Veloxua in a hushed, angry voice, "It is as though the sea bed . . . collapsed."

"Have you entered it?" Brysis asked.

"Not yet. I believe the water breathable, but . . ." Quayseen stopped, trailing off.

"You need my help to determine that," Brysis said, her voice grim with realization.

Veloxua moved closer to Brysis. "We must enter. It is our responsibility. We must determine the cause of this rent in the ocean."

"But . . . ?" Brysis asked, knowing that Veloxua was not done.

"But Minnow-Tyrant cannot join us. It must return."

"Return?" Brysis said. "It's not safe for him to travel alone."

"It is safe enough. We would only slow him down," Quayseen said. "He needs to leave now, to protect what we learned thus far."

"I already copied its map," Veloxua said, patting her pouch. "Abbuku willing, one of us will reach Istar to tell them what we found."

"We do not even know what this place is," Brysis said, desperate to keep Minnow-Tyrant under her protection, sensing the weakness of her own argument.

"He cannot come with us, and we cannot leave him here," Quayseen said. "It is better that he leaves you, believing you safe, than to wait for our return from something we may not survive. Otherwise, he might be confused or panic."

"Brysis," Veloxua said gently, "this is for its safety, more than ours."

Brysis sighed, feeling crushed and defeated. "Very well," she said, sadly, "but it's better I deal with Minnow-Tyrant."

Veloxua and Quayseen nodded and waited while Brysis swam away with Minnow-Tyrant. They heard the fading clicks uttered between the two, and understood the difficulty of what was being said. But Minnow-Tyrant was well trained and prepared to do his duty. Brysis assured the dolphin that she was not in any apparent danger. He would leave now and await her return to Istar.

"We should tarry a while," Quayseen whispered to Veloxua. "I do not want him to see Brysis entering this dark place. If this world has a gullet, then we have found it."

A couple of hours passed before the three sea-elves approached the edge of the cliff. Minnow-Tyrant was long gone, using the undercurrents to return to Istar. Quayseen tapped the cliff-edge with his trident, easily dislodging brittle coral and rock.

"Over the edge, then?" he asked, preparing a long length of braided seaweed.

"In a moment," Brysis suggested. "The water stings. I can only imagine what poisons those clouds carry. We should avoid breathing its waters. Store air in your lungs."

"We shall remain above the cloud until you study it," Quayseen told Brysis. "I will anchor you with this rope. If you wish us to join you, pull on it twice. If you need help," he said with a grin, "pull it repeatedly."

"If my suspicions are correct," Veloxua added, "the cloud should be of limited depth, its sediments caught in balance. Too heavy for the waters above it, too light for the waters below."

The trio filled their empty pouches with stones, to counteract the buoyant effect of the reservoir of air in their lungs. Finally ready and weighted down enough to walk on the sea-floor, they stepped out over the black abyss and dropped.

The cliff walls, comprised of porous and pockmarked rock, drifted by them during their lazy fall. Brysis tasted the minute traces of ammonia filtering through her gills; the roof of the black clouds approached rapidly, surrendering no secrets as to what lay beneath.

The roof of abyssal clouds was barely two meters away when the trio halted their descent. Brysis nodded to the others, unable to speak lest she squander the reserve of air in her body. Quayseen tied one end of the long rope to her hand and the other to his wrist. Brysis then dropped into the tides of the black cloud. The deep waters gripped her chest, trying to crush her lungs, but she endured.

The black clouds enveloped Brysis, lightly stinging her skin and immediately blinding her with biting ash. Brysis fought the currents that swirled around her. Her mouth and gills burned at the touch of sulfur, ammonia and chlorine, and Brysis slowly siphoned the air in her lungs, closing and protecting her gill slits. Hopefully, this would last long enough for her to discover the cloud's thickness, if the heat did not overwhelm her first. The temperature was rising.

Brysis continued falling through the sediment layer, briefly opening her gills to sample the waters. The acrid and metallic tastes lingered, and Brysis realized she had already expended a substantial portion of her air. With a heavy heart, Brysis untethered the stone-laden pouches from her belt and prepared to kick upward. She opened her already tender gills one last time, expecting to recoil from the acrid

taste, but this time the water lacked its anticipated punch. Brysis opened her eyes, and though the ocean irritated her eyes, she found she could see and breathe properly. She had dropped through the sluggish whirlpool of clouds above her head, into the intermediate sky above the collapsed sea floor.

Brysis pulled on the rope and waited for the others to join her.

Quayseen arrived first, to find Brysis staring sadly at the shattered mirror of ocean floor ten fathoms beneath her. He looped the long length of seaweed rope around his arm as Veloxua followed soon after.

The sea floor was black and cracked like overcooked glass, a broken landscape to reflect broken times. Giant knives of obsidian fragments jutted out in all direction, while between the blossoms of black rock lay deep fissures through which super-heated steam poured and condensed rapidly back to water. The ocean was now hot beyond the experience of the three, who felt far more comfortable in the chilling depths.

"We cannot stay long," Quayseen said. "If we exert ourselves too greatly, the waters will not cool us. It will trap the heat and cook us from within."

"What has happened here?" Brysis asked.

"I know not," Veloxua said sadly, "not without greater study."

"Hazard a guess," Quayseen said. "Stop waiting for the certainties!"

"Volcanoes!" Veloxua snapped back. "We might be inside a crater. Eruptions could have collapsed the sea floor beneath Balifor."

"No wonder the animals are migrating in such great numbers," Brysis said.

"Another legacy of the dragon Malystriyx," Quayseen said, nearly snarling at the thought. "It was not enough she ravaged Goodlund. She had to poison its coasts as well?"

"Those vents below us add the venomous minerals to the water," Brysis said, pointing at the shattered landscape.

"We are fortunate that Malystriyx does not understand the oceans as we do," Veloxua said.

"How so?" Quayseen asked.

"The crater keeps the poison cloud trapped, preventing it from drifting out into the seas," Veloxua replied. "The undercurrents rise up above the cliff's lip, but it drops the heavier sediments back into the crater."

"Can you be confident of this?" Quayseen asked.

"Well, the same holds true for the Miremier Sea. High ocean cliffs at its entry separate it from the surrounding waters. It is far saltier because all but lighter surface water passes over it, into the ocean. The heavier sediments strike the cliff and remain inside Miremier."

"Is it a permanent condition?" Brysis asked, "Already this cliff disintegrates because of corrosion."

"If enough of the cliff collapses," Veloxua replied, "it could create a slope over which the undercurrents flow and draw the poisons of Balifor into the Courrain."

"We must warn Istar and Watermere," Brysis said.

"Is this crater responsible for the new arteries, then?" Quayseen asked. "Make a guess."

Veloxua shrugged. "Cold water follows hot," she said. "If the waters are very hot, as evidenced here, it may draw colder currents to it like a mating call. This, or other craters, may be responsible for pulling the waters, though I cannot be certain without investigating its true size. I suspect this crater acts like a hole, sucking cold water in."

A panicked, hurried series of clicks and squeals interrupted the trio.

Brysis looked upward, to the black sediment clouds and a descending figure. "Oh no," she said. She recognized the urgent cries.

"Minnow-Tyrant!" Quayseen shouted. "Damn it!"

"I told him to leave," Brysis said, "I told him to leave!"

Veloxua said nothing, but by her expression alone, this is what she feared would happen. She stared at Brysis, a cold, accusing gaze.

Minnow-Tyrant broke through the last of the clouds, hurt and frightened by the sediment layer. He bore straight for the trio, his entire body slowly turning scar-white from acidic waters. Brysis fumbled for her pouch, trying to find an unguent for his skin, but Minnow-Tyrant was agitated and moved around her frantically. He stammered out urgent squeals. Quayseen clamped both hands around the dolphin's head, to quiet him.

"No!" Veloxua cried, noticing Minnow-Tyrant's skin. "The cloud! It's an abrasive. We are losing the maps!"

"Damn your maps," Brysis shouted back, rubbing Minnow-Tyrant with dolphin skin oils. "He's in pain."

"He was supposed to return to Istar," Quayseen said to Brysis. "You are his handler! Why is he here?!"

Brysis shook her head. "I know not. Something is frightening him . . . I, I barely understand his words. He wants to leave. He wants us to leave now!"

"The map," Veloxua said urgently, trying to study Minnow-Tyrant. "How much of it has survived?"

Brysis shot Veloxua a look, but Quayseen quieted her with a steady hand on her shoulder. Brysis nodded.

"The map is faded, but the unguent should stop the scarring from turning everything completely white."

"And the journey back?" Quayseen asked, nodding upwards.

"This unguent should last through the sediment clouds, but I have some remaining in case."

Quayseen sighed. "This settles matters. This is too great a task for us alone and Minnow-Tyrant is in danger of losing all the valuable maps we have gathered. Veloxua's copies are all the more vital."

"We must go back and report what we've discovered," Veloxua finished, exasperated.

Quayseen released Minnow-Tyrant, who immediately began chattering. Brysis rested a quieting hand on his head.

"We are leaving," Brysis whispered to Minnow-Tyrant, before looking at Quayseen. "Something worries him."

"Then let's go," Quayseen said. "Make whatever final observations you—"

That was when a deep, unceasing rumble tore through the sea floor, vibrating the waters. Minnow-Tyrant erupted into more panicked squeals. Several cracks across the already brutalized vista widened, releasing heat vapors. The four companions were far enough from the hot vents to avoid the boiling plumes of condensing steam but not far enough that they did not feel the heat wash over them. Off in the far distance, toward the crater's heart, a reddish glow shone through the ocean . . . like the sun rising beneath the waves.

"Eruption!" Veloxua shouted.

"Swim!" Quayseen cried. "Protect Minnow-Tyrant."

Quayseen and Veloxua tore at the weighted pouches on their belt as they swam, dropping them away. Brysis swam upwards as well, toward the poisonous black cloud, Quayseen's rope still anchored on her wrist. She did not have time to consider cutting it loose. Minnow-Tyrant swam abreast with Brysis.

Off in the distance, Brysis could see the blurred glow of red filament-like veins where magma fissures had opened. They winked in and out of sight, magma and water colliding violently into roaring hisses and boiling, bubbling columns.

Brysis entered the cloud. Immediately, the poisons stung her eyes, forcing them closed. She swam in the dark, feeling the whirlpool jostle her with greater intensity. She felt Quayseen pull and tug on the rope, dragging her along, ensuring she was still there.

Unexpectedly, Minnow-Tyrant swerved into Brysis, violently pushing her to the side. Something in the darkness then rushed past the pair, dropping into the depth

and displacing water. Brysis instinctively opened her eyes and cursed when the sediment stabbed at her sight. For a moment, she thought it was Quayseen who had fallen past her. She expected to follow him, pulled by the rope, but nothing happened.

Brysis kicked harder now, until Minnow-Tyrant again brushed against her, pushing. This time Brysis complied; another "something" rushed past her in the dark cloud. Brysis realized Minnow-Tyrant could "see" whatever was hurtling past. He was protecting her, but Brysis' air was nearly gone, her lungs aching for another breath, her gills fighting to open despite the need to keep them closed.

"Look out!" Veloxua shouted from somewhere above Brysis.

Brysis peered through blurry, stung eyes while her gills flared open for desperately needed air. They were finally above the cloud, but the volcanic thunder had rent away large portions of cliff wall. An avalanche of debris rained down on Brysis and Minnow-Tyrant, many pieces larger than both of them. As they dodged and scrambled, falling rubble divided the pair and her sight remained hindered. She swam through the gaps of detritus, making split-second decisions in the deadly hail. She darted over a tumbling building wall from Mycaisa and pushed off it, past a large boulder that nearly pulled her down in its wake. Brysis fought free of the drag.

Minnow-Tyrant managed to avoid several pieces of falling cliff but dodged straight into the path of a plummeting, ship-sized mass of brain coral that loomed in his sky. Brysis was scant meters away and saw his peril, but she was too far away for the moment.

She saw a white-haired blur move through the water, then Quayseen set his shoulder into Minnow-Tyrant's flanks, pushing him from the debris' path. Brysis saw the giant coral rush past her, swallowing Quayseen beneath it, his face wide in shock before he vanished.

Quayseen had traded places with Minnow-Tyrant, but the giant coral's drag now pulled Brysis and the dolphin down. Brysis screamed as Quayseen and the large coral fragment vanished in the agitated sediment storm, the seaweed rope unraveling in lazy loops. In a few seconds, the rope would go taut and drag Brysis to the bottom. She swam nonetheless, fighting the drag and kicking with fury.

Brysis struggled free and bolted upward. She waited for the rope to snap tight.

It never did. It simply drifted on her wrist, loose and seemingly unencumbered.

Veloxua, Minnow-Tyrant and Brysis finally reached the top of the cliff, above the rain of debris. Brysis tore at the rope, trying to furl it again, hoping to discover some tension on the other end. The other end eventually appeared, however, sliced cleanly after at the knot.

Quayseen had sacrificed himself twice that day.

"We have to try to rescue him!" Brysis shouted. She was angry and raw with mounting grief.

"He is dead," Veloxua responded, "and if we do not leave, then our fates are shared!"

"Have you no thought for him?" Brysis cried.

Veloxua swam to within a nose's breadth of Brysis.

"You selfish brat!" Veloxua said. "I care for Quayseen, but the poisons in the water are building in strength, and they will overtake us."

Brysis began to say something, but she stuttered. The stench of sulfur and chlorine was becoming unbearable, and Minnow-Tyrant was behind her, solidly nudging her forward, siding with Veloxua, forcing her to flee.

"If I could trade fates with Quayseen," Veloxua said, "I would, but without Quayseen, I need your help all the more. Watermere . . . Istar, they must know what happened here. If we die now, we condemn others to share our fate. We must collect the maps and leave . . . now."

Brysis was silent a moment before she nodded. This was not defeat.

This was necessity. Veloxua began swimming, but paused for Brysis and Minnow-Tyrant to join her. Brysis cast one look back into the World Gash, where the cliffs continued to break and shatter, and muttered a prayer to Quayseen. If they ever returned, thanks to him they would have a map and be more prepared for the horrors that faced them in this fast-becoming-alien sea.



WYRM'S CLAW INN

MIRANDA HORNER

They simply cannot do this!" The burly innkeeper reread the official notice in his hand. "Really, they're going to let Tam Ceary, of all people, insult and threaten me!"

"Perhaps they did not view it as a threat, and I hear they care nothing of insults." The thin woman on the other side of the bar from the innkeeper continued to sweep the old rushes up from the stone floor. "Besides, Ceary's an important council member. He has sway over them."

"Bah! I didn't have any real trouble until I told Ceary to pay up his bill, or he couldn't have any more brew from THIS inn! Now he wants to put a stop to all my customers, and sending a cleric to rid us of the, oh, how did they put it, 'endangerment to patrons and nearby premises, if not the whole town' . . . Who's gonna pay for the cleric, I'd like to know! Yours truly. Why, all that ghost has done is throw some pots and pans around and burn old Narrow's beard. This bedeviled town council is good for naught, I say, and Ceary's the worst of the lot!"

The innkeep pounded his hand on the surface of the dark bar just as knocking sounded at the door. "Get that, will you?" he jerked his thumb. "It's probably that cleric already. Who else could it be? The blasted 'closed for exorcism' sign is

on the door. Ceary must've *loved* putting that up." His voice trailed off to grumbling while the woman almost drifted to the door, broom in hand.

The man who stepped into the room was a very tall, very solid man with his dark hair tied back, a brown cloak, and simple clothing beneath it. His eyes swept quickly over the woman and then roamed the room, meticulously noting the placement of every object, every piece of furniture, before finally coming to rest, with unsettling intensity, on the innkeeper.

"Argus Thornton? Owner of Wyrms' Claw Inn?" he asked in a deep voice.

"Yes, that's me." Trying to put a bright face on things, Argus gestured to the cleric, invitingly, he hoped. "Would you care for something to drink? Eat, perhaps? We've plenty right now."

The cleric stepped into the room, and Argus caught the shine of a heavy mace dangling at the man's waist. The holy symbol of Kiri-Jolith, ready for action, hung from his other side.

"I am Elthan. Your town council requested that I pay you a visit and take care of a certain ghost problem. I'm told it is a most dangerous entity and poses a serious threat to the whole town. Perhaps you and your . . . uh . . . barmaid had better leave while I perform my work."

Argus gave Elthan an appraising look. "I thank you for the seriousness with which you are treating this threat, sir, but I fear that you have been misled. The ghost is more of a nuisance than a problem, though I do admit the weeping and wailing sometimes sends patrons out of the inn in a fright. Frankly, Tam Ceary is more of a threat to this inn. He drinks too much, doesn't own up to his responsibilities, and has violent tendencies. He's worse than any child ghost."

The cleric frowned. "A child ghost who cries and puts fear into folks. What else does it do?"

"Throws utensils, food, drink, plates, and more, when in the mood, and she also sets things alight," came the woman's

voice from behind the cleric, where she was slowly sweeping. "Got Tam quite angry, the little ghost did. Upset his peaceful drinking a couple of times."

"Elthan, this is Brell. She's my new housekeeper and barmaid. Others got scared away," Argus admitted. "She does a good job of it and knows the sharp end of a dagger well enough."

"Yet despite this so-called child ghost, you both stay," Elthan noted. "Why is that?"

Argus adopted a steely expression. "Though the council may think otherwise, I'm a good man and I believe in hard work, finishing what you've started, and dealing with things myself instead of running away. This ghost, though hardly good for business, is not something that is going to drive me away from here. In spite of that ghost I've been running this place for seven years—ever since the dread incident!" The steely expression changed to a more doubtful, sad look. "But my sister's taken ill, and I was thinking of heading out to help her family until she gets better. Bad pregnancy. Her husband's got more than he can handle, too, caring for *his* sister's farm on top of his own. Maybe this whole ghost problem and the official closing gives me an excuse to go."

Elthan's expression softened a bit. "Sometimes leaving for a while helps things settle down a bit," he said.

"That's what I've been trying to tell him," Brell noted. "He's got a stubborn streak, though." She glanced up from her sweeping, and gave the cleric a steady look. "Told him maybe he should forget all this bother and just sell out the place. Go and help his sister."

Argus snorted. "Things aren't that bad. I've no call to sell out. Besides, I'd like to collect my due from Tam Ceary. That man really irks me, calling council meetings and sending clerics over here, when all he's really mad about is I won't serve him any more ale until he pays up."

Cocking an ear, Brell stopped her sweeping for a moment.

"Did you hear that just now?"

Elthan stared at Brell. "I heard nothing unusual. Why?"

"Like something knocking on the kitchen door, maybe?"

Brell put down the broom. "I'll go look."

Argus shrugged. "The kitchen door probably came unlatched again."

Brell went into the kitchen. When, only a moment later, she burst back into the room, throwing open the swinging doors with enough force to make them crash heavily into the walls, they gave a start.

"What is it?" they both asked.

"Cleric Elthan, you're needed!" She grabbed a lit lantern from the bar and ducked back into the kitchen.

They followed. The fire in the hearth and Brell's lantern illuminated the stretched-out form of Tam Ceary, lying on the large wooden table in the middle of the room. He was still breathing, though two kitchen knives stuck out of his stomach. He was staring at something overhead, and his mouth opened and shut, though no sound came out. Argus followed his stare just in time to see a short sword—*his* short sword—plunge downward. With more agility than he'd had in years, Argus flung the closest thing at hand to knock the sword from its path.

The short sword and a crock full of flour crashed on the ground on the other side of the table. Flour drifted up in a faint cloud, and Argus saw Elthan wave his holy symbol in the air, toward where the sword had been hanging. "I command you to . . ." he started in a measured tone.

"Cleric! Heal Tam first! The ghost isn't here anymore," Brell yelled. She set the lantern on the table where Tam lay wounded. "He's not doing good! Got at least two bad gut wounds."

With a frown, Elthan stopped his exorcising and switched his attentions to Tam. The man was extremely white, shivering uncontrollably, with blood bubbling out of his mouth. Opening his jaw, Elthan saw that Tam's tongue had been nearly cut out.

The sight made even Argus feel sorry for him.

"Pull out the knives quickly," the cleric ordered. "You're right. He's near death."

Argus and Brell set to work pulling out the knives and staunching Tam's stab wounds as best they could. Once that was done, Elthan began to pray over the moaning form of Tam, and some of the wounds slowly closed up.

"Get him out of here," the cleric murmured exhaustedly, after the healing had begun. "He can walk now, but there's nothing I can do about that missing tongue. He's very weak. The ghost must have drained him of some life force." He looked at Argus sternly. "Your ghost is more dangerous than you suspect, and it appears to dislike Tam as much as you do."

"Something sure stirred things up. Brell, this isn't any place for you. Get Tam to the temple. Might be the safest place for him," Argus commanded.

Nodding, Brell steered the moaning Tam toward the door. "Wait," she said, turning around at the door. "Tam, sit down on the step." He sluggishly did as he was told. "More trouble," said Brell, almost calmly, pointing outside.

Elthan and Argus pushed by Brell and Tam, heading down some steps into the inn's back yard. Out in the herb garden, in the pale light of the setting sun, they saw the stiff, motionless form of a woman. She was covered in blood, and though she swayed, she seemed rooted to the spot.

"Is he . . . dead?"

"Are you okay?" said Elthan, hurrying toward the woman. "Did the ghost attack you, too?" he asked concernedly.

The woman looked confused. "He . . . he spends half his life here, and I'm tired of all his drinking. He was sneaking in to get some drink, but I stopped him good!" she declared with sudden fierceness. "I stopped him!" Her eyes were wide in her blood-smeared face.

"That isn't her blood," Brell said, in a strange tone. A look passed between the two women.

"Elthan, that's Tam's wife there," the innkeeper explained.

Elthan pried out something bloody from the woman's hands. "His tongue! The ghost must have possessed her and caused her to take a knife to her own husband!" He pushed up her sleeves to check her arms. "Bruises. Some look old, but some are new," the cleric noted.

The woman simply stood there, half in shock, looking from Brell to her husband. "He won't be coming here all the time any more, then coming home drunk. Enough is enough."

"Poor thing. Usually she stays at home," Argus said in a low voice, "but she sometimes comes and rescues her husband from his drunken stupors. The Radley boy helps her get him home. She usually wears a hooded cloak, even on the warmest of days. She's been like this for at least seven years."

The cleric frowned. "Her husband's got a violent temper, you say?"

"Yes, he's jovial enough until he's had too much to drink and someone challenges him. Then he's a mean drunk. He has been thrown out of my common room many times. I never let him stay overnight in one of the upstairs rooms, so one way or another then he goes home."

"He's a mean one, alright," Brell said, gesturing at Tam, who sat on the steps motionless, looking as though he were a million miles away. His face was slack, his eyes dull. "Maybe the ghost guided her hand, though I wouldn't be surprised if she did it of her own accord."

Both Elthan and Argus looked up at her, surprised. "Ghosts sometimes serve as catalysts for the subconscious, Mistress Brell," Elthan reproved her. "I doubt she was acting on her husband's abuse today, of all days—too much of a coincidence, considering my arrival. No, the ghost must have lured them both here. Brell, get that Radley boy to help you or find someone else. Let's get them safely away, take them to the church, then we can take care of this ghost."

Brell nodded. "Radley lives close by," she said, before guiding the dazed husband and wife off into the deepening darkness.

Warily, Elthan and Argus headed back inside. Elthan asked all manner of questions about the ghost, noting that the ghost had long been relatively docile if mischievous. It had grown more active and threatening only within the last month. "Something is provoking its anger," Elthan mused, then stopped dead in his tracks, noticing something different about the kitchen.

"What is it?" Argus asked, bumping into him from behind.

"We have a tidy ghost," Elthan murmured, gesturing.

The fire in the hearth had gone out, but by the light of the lantern they could see the kitchen was very clean indeed. The scattered flour had been swept up, and they could not see any shards of broken crockery; all the blades had been returned to their places, with one exception.

"Where did my short sword go?" Argus asked, peering around the room.

"LEAVE NOW!" came a little girl's shrill voice.

Argus heard the sword before he saw it, and he barely managed to duck out of the way as it hit the door behind him with a thud. It stuck there, wavering wildly.

Elthan grabbed his holy symbol and peered around the room. "If you're in here, ghost child, show yourself!"

With a grunt Argus pulled the sword out of the door. "Better in my hands than an angry child's," he muttered.

A breeze stole into the room then swiftly grew into a rushing wind. With an abruptness familiar to Argus from the ghost's past antics, the light in the lantern went out, plunging the two in darkness. A small, glowing shape materialized in a corner.

“LEAVE!” the ghost-girl demanded, even before she was fully formed.

The cleric held out his holy symbol and drew breath to speak.

Just then Argus heard a loud pounding on the front door, and the girl disappeared. Light swiftly returned to the room, and the coldness vanished.

Elthan let his breath out, putting away his holy symbol. “It’s getting warm again. She’s gone.”

The pounding at the door stopped rather abruptly. The two in the kitchen dashed into the main room of the inn.

The room was dim and shadowy, but Elthan and Argus had a fleeting sensation of movement. “Light, Argus!”

Argus ducked back into the kitchen for the lantern and came back into the main room. The room was as clean as the kitchen, and the front door was gaping into the deepening twilight.

“Someone else was here,” Elthan stated, “and is gone.” He had his holy symbol out again.

Argus shook his head. “Same ghost, likes to pop around between rooms.”

“Sirs, are you here?” came Brell’s voice from the kitchen. Both Elthan and Argus jumped.

“What?”

Brell stepped into the room. “My! You two have been busy, it appears. Well, less cleaning for me. At any rate, Master Argus, the cleric at the temple told me to tell you she has received bad news from your sister. Your able-bodied relative has also fallen ill, and so the family needs you right away, desperately. Said you should plan on staying for several months.

Argus groaned. “Can’t very well leave now,” he muttered.

Elthan looked at Argus sympathetically. “The sooner you leave, the better for your sister, Master Argus, though I warrant you shouldn’t travel by night. First thing in the morning, you’d best get on the road. This ghost is tricky

and dangerous. You're better off closing down for a few months."

Argus looked extremely torn. "Family is important, and it's true I'm not a ghost-chaser, but I'll sleep on my decision. I think the ghost is done for tonight. Brell, you set the cleric up in one of our rooms. After that, you need to think about going away, too. I'll give you your wages and a bonus of some sort, but I can't pay you enough to risk your life." Turning to Elthan, he confided, "Brell has quite a bit of experience with daggers and the like. Been handy to have around these last three months. Most barmaids are scared of undead creatures. Not her."

He reached wearily for another lantern.

"You could stay and run the place yourself for a while, Brell," Argus said, lighting the second lantern and heading upstairs. "You certainly know the routine. Elthan," he added, stopping and turning around briefly to address the cleric, "if you take care of this ghost, I'll gladly tithe to your temple."

He went up the steps. In the hallway to his room, Argus stopped to admire a painting he had put up on the wall, staring at it distractedly. It had been a gift from a woman he had intended to marry several years ago, but sadly her life had been cut short by a dreadful accident with a dark knight's horse. The painting was of green meadows speckled with flowers and a lone tree. As he stared, it seemed almost as though the flowers were stirring in a breeze. He blinked, but the flowers kept stirring until, upon closer inspection, he realized what he saw were slight misty swirls within the air between him and painting. He slowly continued down the hall. He heard the voices of Brell and Elthan, following him from downstairs, and a coldness from the breeze.

How could that be? "My window," he muttered to himself, as he remembered. He'd left the window in his room open that day. He stopped at his door. It stood ajar slightly. As he leaned forward to push the door open, the floor made an

eerie creaking. As the door swung open noiselessly, light from his lantern flickered around the room and illuminated his sparse quarters.

A large bed stood directly opposite the entrance, and against the right wall was a chest of drawers topped by a mirror. There was a rug on the floor just inside the door, which covered the half of the room that contained his bed. A wardrobe with its doors ajar stood next to a window, which gaped open. Once again he felt a breeze and the coolness of the night air.

As he stepped into the room, however, several shoes from his wardrobe shot through the air toward him, striking him soundly in the face and chest. Argus moved to dodge the flying shoes, but the rug became unaccountably tangled up under his feet, causing him to stumble backwards, still holding onto the lantern. It seemed then that everything from his drawers and wardrobe came flying out at him in a blur, and he was whacked on the head by his work boots and a stiff scrimshaw-backed brush he owned. His cries for help were punctuated by yelps of pain.

Brell and Elthan must have heard his shouts and stumbling-around, though, for he heard their running footsteps. He managed to keep a firm grasp on the lantern and had just ducked a heavy backpack hurled at him, from his long-ago traveling days, when the two rushed into the room.

“What’s happening—”

“I think the ghost is still here,” Brell said to Elthan, as she knelt beside Argus.

“I’m fine; just help me out from under all my things,” he muttered, while trying to back out of the room with one hand up to protect himself. The other hand held tightly onto the lantern.

Holding his holy symbol up, Elthan stepped past Argus and began to inspect the room.

“Brell, Argus—get out of here now.”

“I’ll take that lantern, Argus,” Brell murmured, helping

the confused innkeeper. "Why don't you grab some of your stuff and put it into this bag of yours? It's like the ghost is telling you to hurry up and leave this place, Master. Makes it kind of convenient, don't it?"

Following her advice, Argus stooped down and quickly stuffed clothes and a few other items into the backpack. "Don't need much else. Let's go," he said, as he turned to go.

Brell was frozen. She looked past Argus and Elthan, pointing, her face paler than ever.

Both men stared. The misty form of the child ghost had materialized and was advancing on the cleric. He brandished his holy symbol, waving it at the form.

"LEAVE NOW!" the ghost cried out shrilly.

The cleric shouted, "By the will of Kiri-Jolith, I command thee, foul spirit, to . . ."

The mist receded and evaporated.

"Wait!" Brell called out. "Now she's over there." She pointed to a corner near the window.

A small girl stood there, weeping silently. Without warning, the girl cried out with such heartbreak, such anguish, that the room fell silent. Argus had lost his nerve and turned to flee, but he tripped on the rug again. Brell and Elthan stood their ground. Again Elthan brandished his holy symbol. Again the girl vanished. All of a sudden, a short sword skittered out from underneath the bed. A large adult form briefly materialized and used the hilt of the weapon to give the cleric a sound swat on the head. Elthan's knees buckled, and he collapsed to the floor.

Argus knew he ought to help the cleric. "Brell, get out of here!" he cried.

"No, you take the holy one and get out of here," Brell announced, while pulling out a ring that hung from a thin chain around her neck. She ripped the chain off with her free hand and placed the ring on her finger, while holding the lantern aloft. "This is my most treasured possession, a ring of wishes. I've saved the last wish for years, but I'll

sacrifice it today and gladly! I wish these ghosts would move on to their just rewards and abandon this mortal plane!”

The sword-wielding adult ghost dispersed instantly, its weapon thudding onto the rug. A warmth coursed through the room, and the slight chill from the open window felt natural.

“I think it worked.”

Argus knelt down next to the cleric, trying to rouse him. “I’ve had enough of this place. Farming is definitely the life for me.” Elthan shifted with a groan.

Brell ran over. “Maybe I should send for village healer?”

He shook his head slightly, winced, then raised a hand to where the sword hilt had struck him. His hand came away bloody. Despite this, he stood up shakily.

“Brell had a magic ring and wished the ghosts away,” Argus explained proudly. “Not that this makes a difference to me. I’m leaving tonight. I’m not taking any chances they might come back.”

“I don’t know how long the banishing will last,” Brell admitted to Elthan. “Perhaps you could bless the inn, offer a consecration, or whatever you clerics of Kiri-Jolith find appropriate.”

Elthan frowned, looking a little groggy. “Yes, let me cast a few spells over this place, but then I must travel to my superiors and seek their advice on what to do next. I am going to have to recommend to the town council that the inn remain empty until such a time as my church may declare it spirit-free.” Elthan pulled out some holy water. “I will begin with this room. If the two of you could follow and assist me, this shouldn’t take too terribly long, then we can leave.”

After praying and anointing each room with holy water, Elthan ended up in the main room of the inn. As he spoke

the last prayer, he slumped wearily. Beside him, Brell and Argus sighed.

"Doesn't the place feel warmer?" Brell said. She gestured to the room. "And . . . cleaner somehow! The inn has been blessed, and it will be a long time before that ghost returns!"

"I hope you're right," Argus said. "Now, Brell, I'll leave everything up to you. You close up the place, and I'll bring Elthan to the town healer. I'll write—you'll hear from me."

Elthan had collapsed on a nearby chair. "Thank you, brother Argus."

Brell nodded. "You've done enough, Master Argus. Go ahead now. I'll put boards on the windows, bar the doors, close the stable down. It's sad, but it has to be done. The council was right. The inn has to be closed until we know for certain that the ghost will never return. Good luck helping your sister. Don't worry about me. I still ain't afraid of them ghosts!"

"Take care not to undo what I have done, Mistress Brell," the cleric cautioned as he was helped out the door.

"I'll be careful," she assured him.

"It was a lucky day when Brell walked into my inn . . ." Argus was telling Elthan as they left.



Later, after the cleric had hung a plaque on the front door, marking the final condemnation of Kiri-Jolith, and the inn had grown dark and silent, Brell rocked in her favorite cushioned chair in front of the fireplace of the common room. She smiled at the ghostly little figure playing with a doll, who was seated in the wooden chair next to hers.

"I'm sorry my trip took so long," she said in a sweet voice, "but the ones who ruined everything are all gone now. I took care of them all."

Another, more manly form stepped into the dim light of the single candle Brell permitted herself. "Ah, husband, you've come to join us?" The hesitant nod she received from the male ghost was enough to make her eyes glitter happily. "The knights who destroyed our lives so many years ago are dead by my own hand, or some were killed in the war; but the inn is now ours again. Now that Mommy's home, everything will be better no matter what we decide to do."

The adult male gazed ruefully at Brell, looking a little ashamed.

The girl ghost brushed her ring finger.

"Yes, I wore my wedding ring around my neck all these years, little one, but it's back where it belongs now, and you knew just what to do, like we planned. It took longer than we expected, but it's over now. You should keep Kiri-Jolith in your prayers tonight, little one." Brell glanced affectionately at her husband, then shifted slightly in her chair. "I can tell you of my journeys. Perhaps I should start with the sights of the great city of Palanthis. I learned many songs there for you, daughter." The scent of mildew drifted up around her, but Brell paid it no mind as she started to sing one of the lullabies from Palanthis she had brought back for her beloved child.



COIN OF ADAMANT

KEVIN T. STEIN

In the distance were two lines of new buildings on both sides of a main road. Brek shielded his eyes with his hand, peered at the town ahead. He chewed the end of a twist of black lakrak, said, "Our patrol passed here, hey, wülfbunde? A day ago, maybe half again."

The black wolf lowered his muzzle to the ground. Yawned, he huffed winter steam.

"The patrol wants us to join the White Lady, as they have, Soldier. They seek our answer. She seeks our prayers." Brek smoothed the fur on the wolf's neck. "Unless we join her also, the patrol will abandon us forever."

Brek looked into the morning sky, saw the twin green stars of Canus in the godhome. He lowered his head, closed his eyes. "In the Age of Might, the Dark Queen brought us the word of Canus. Canus is the faithful. Canus is the guard. Canus is the hunter. Canus brought us the Bond, between wolf and man, wülfbunde and master, both loyal to the Corps. Nothing can break this Bond. Nothing can come between this Bond. No force can sway this Bond. Not even death."

Soldier pressed his ear against Brek's side, rubbed his head against the leather of the scout's trousers. Brek opened his eyes, pushed the wolf away, scratched where the wolf

wanted it most. Soldier lolled his head in contentment.

Brek said, "The White Lady wants us to break faith with the Dark Queen and follow her, but you and I will always follow the Dark Queen. We will not break faith, even if it means we stand alone when we fight Chaos."

With a plume of steam, the wülfbunde barked agreement.



Hand on Soldier's neck, Brek and the black wolf paced through the town. The sun was in mid sky. Shopkeepers sweeping snow from their storefront porches stopped, watched the pair walk past.

A clutch of children played queenshand in the middle of the road, bouncing the black ball, scooping up bronze jacks. The black wolf poked his head over the shoulder of one of the girls, huffing steam on the game. The girl froze, then squealed and grabbed the wolf around the neck. Adults inside the stores heard the girl and rushed out, halted at doorways. Brek peered over the wolf at the game.

"Hie, Soldier, what have you found?"

The black wolf coughed. Timid, the other children wanted to pet the wolf. The first girl patted Soldier on the neck.

Brek knelt, picked up a bronze jack. "Queenshand is the Dark Queen's story. Every jack is a Queen's desire, the ball is the black moon, each bounce another Age. One jack first, then two, then more. Easy to get what you want first, not so easy later."

Brek picked up the ball, bounced it, scooped a handful of jacks before the ball touched the ground. He missed two. The children laughed. Brek dropped the jacks and ball, stood, placed his hand on the black wolf's neck. The wolf yawned, pulled away from the girl.

"Come away from there." A man in a worn cloak motioned. The children picked up their game and laughing, ran.

Brek faced the shopkeeper. "I seek a valley. Near here. It is called Chaos."

The man said, "I've never seen you before. How do you know about the Chaos valley?"

"We scout." Brek's quick half-smile revealed fangs.

The shopkeeper drew back, lowered his eyes. "Man and wolf, wolf and man. I served in the Dark Queen's army. Your kind were almost legends. The bündesphar. The wolf soldiers."

Brek hugged Soldier's head against his thigh. "We scout."

"The Dark Queen's armies are scattered now," the man said, meeting Brek's eyes again. "People at war for generations are friends again. Even the Solamnics are finally confident in their own strength. Why do you continue?"

"We scout," Brek said.

"I don't understand."

Brek said, "I am not used to long conversation. I seek the valley."

"No one who has gone there has returned," the shopkeeper said. He dug into his pockets, took out a piece of leathery smoked beef. Offered it to the black wolf. Soldier took the beef in his jaws, then looked at Brek. From the wolf's jaws, Brek tore off a piece of the beef for himself, nodded. Soldier chewed loudly.

"Make it myself," said the man. "Learned in a Neraka training camp."

Soldier lifted himself on his hind legs, draped his forelegs over the officer's shoulders, clasped the man's throat between fangs. The man froze. Blood left his face. His jaw moved to speak, his mouth did not open.

"Likes you," Brek said, smoothing the fur between Soldier's ears. Half-smile. "Playing. Pet him here." The man smoothed the fur between the wolf's ears, the wolf's eyes steady on the man's face. The wolf growled. The shopkeeper smoothed faster. Brek said, "Others have gone to the valley?"

“Yes, others,” the man said. “First, warriors, then mercenaries, then treasure-seekers. No one returned.”

“There is fire?”

“Fire. Much fire.”

“What else?”

“The Chaos spirit there destroys everything. At first it stayed in the valley, but now it’s spreading. It’s grabbing more territory.” The shopkeeper tried to pull away from the black wolf’s jaws. Soldier growled and the man stopped. “Our town is not far from the valley. It’s only a matter of time before it comes here.”

Brek said, “We are here to destroy it.”

The man said, “There were others. Others like you. Wolf soldiers.”

“How long?”

“Oh, I don’t know, if I had to guess,” the shopkeeper said. Soldier growled again. “A day and a half. Definitely.”

“They went to the valley?”

“Definitely. To the valley. Definitely.”

“Hie, Soldier, let him be,” Brek said. The wolf stopped growling, released his jaws, dug his muzzle under the man’s throat. Licked him once and dropped to all fours.

Brek offered a long twist of black lakrak. “Make it myself.”

“The valley is not for the weak of heart.”

“‘Be then strong in faith,’” Brek quoted. “The valley?”

The man pointed. Brek and the wolf moved in that direction.

Brek chewed slowly on the lakrak, eyes on the shallow valley. The black wolf lay on his stomach, panted, looking where his master looked. Brek tore a piece of lakrak from his own, offered it to the wolf. Soldier turned his head, accepting, chewed loudly.

In the valley called Chaos, heat-shimmer rippled the air, landscape of burning ground, rolling hills of scorched rock. There was a disk-shaped temple to Takhisis. Thirty-three pillars holding the convex roof. Buildings, some old, some out of place, all ruined. Towers stabbing the sky at wrong angles. Flat buildings half-sunk. Inside a dancing wraith, thread from the cloak of Chaos, changed to a man, changed to a warrior, changed to flame. The valley was a circle of fire and smoke in the winter cold.

“Hie, wülfbunde, where are the others?”

The wolf stopped chewing, looked at his master, then back to the valley.

“The patrol must be here.”

Soldier kept chewing, gave no answer.

“One problem at a time. We can’t destroy the wraith and worry about the patrol. We must find them first. Find our fate.” Brek looked around the valley edge. Said, “Another turn.”

The black wolf stood, stretched. “Another turn, wülfbunde. Another score if must.”

The wolf yawned. Brek lifted the rod and lash. Soldier dipped his head and turned, walked back in the path of their own tracks. Light snow from the previous day mottled the ground, trees defiant green against the sudden cold. The black wolf coughed, dug his muzzle into the ground, snuffed.

Brek knelt, brushed snow with his fingertips. Evidence of the other scouts’ passage. “We must be wary, Soldier.” Brek smoothed back the fur between Soldier’s ears, patting the wolf on the neck. “Fresh meat when we’re done here, hey, wülfbunde?”

Half the perimeter of the valley took more than an hour to round. The wolf and his master were quick and light. Bolts of flame like lightning shocked the black sky orange, then red, then nothing. Lit their way. Breath burst from Soldier’s muzzle in short-lived clouds. The two kept each other in sight, scouting everything, behind, before. Signs

of the fire-wraith were everywhere: burned trees, scorched ground. Left the valley. Seeking. Extending.

Brek stopped at a point opposite their start. Soldier trotted up, took his place next to his master, sat, dug his forehead into his master's side. Brek put his hand in the fur under the wolf's ear. The fur under Brek's hand rose. The scout sniffed the air.

"Hie, wülfbunde. What's in the darkness?"

Five scouts and their wolves walked out of the woods, surrounded Brek and Soldier. Brek saluted the patrol's captain. He set a fresh twist of lakrak between his teeth and put a hand on Soldier's neck.

Captain Arana returned the salute. "The White Lady came to us. She told us the Dark Queen is dead. Punishment for breaking faith. We know that to be true. We know in our hearts."

The patrol nodded. The wolves whined and whimpered.

"The White Lady praised our work. Chaos is the enemy of all. The White Lady promised her aid. We agreed. The patrol is together on this. You are the last. We wait for your answer, scout. What is your decision?"

"By dagger and fang, my faith belongs to the Dark Queen and no other," Brek said. He produced a worn steel coin. He pressed the steel hard between his palms. "Remember what we pledged. This coin for sole payment. For the Dark Queen and the Bond."

"Hear this lesson of the White Lady, then tell us again you will not join her," Arana said. She sat on the cold earth, gestured. Brek lowered himself. Arana put a hand on her wülfbunde's neck and produced a coin of gray-silver adamant in the other. Flames overhead lit the sky.

"The Light and the Dark were used by the High-God as the bricks of creation. During the Age of Might, the warring gods forged the living Light and living Dark into weapons to use against each other. Takhisis used the Dark, but it slipped from her control and threatened to desroy creation.

She hunted the Dark. During these hunts, she found Canus, and the Bond was forged between them.”

Brek said, “I know this, but continue.”

“Some of these weapons of the Dark could not be destroyed. What Takhisis could not undo, she imprisoned in the Abyss, in places even more secret, deep in the heart of Krynn’s earth. During the Summer of Chaos, these creations returned. The wraith in the valley is one.”

“The Bond is proof against the Dark.”

“The Bond is broken. The Dark Queen dead,” Arana said. “When these great forces arise, we will need allies.”

“The White Lady, of course.” Brek stood.

Arana stood. “Without the White Lady’s help, none of us can defeat the fire-wraith. Even with the Bond. In return for our faith, she gives us strength and power.”

“She buys our faith for strength and power. The Bond and faith in the Dark Queen have provided in the past, and will always provide. My faith is with the Dark Queen and no other. My faith will not be bought.”

“You follow evil, then?”

“I keep my word,” said Brek.

The captain made a motion.

The wolves jumped on Soldier’s back, bit his legs, pinned him, kept the black wolf immobile. Waited the command to tear out his throat.

The scouts surrounded, closed in on Brek. Brek moved to draw his daggers, saw Soldier’s danger, and stopped. Was held by three scouts.

“To follow the White Lady is to preserve. Even if you will not take her in your faith, she still desires you to be saved.” Arana dropped the silver-gray adamant coin into a pocket on Brek’s tunic. “From the wraith, only the White Lady can protect you. Ask for her help. She will come.”

To the scouts, Arana said, “When you are finished with his lesson, place him in the valley. If he chooses then to follow the White Lady, we will come and destroy the wraith

together. If he chooses to keep his faith in Darkness, he will die, and we will destroy the wraith ourselves.”

Arana nodded an order.

Brek was tough. It took the scouts a long time, even using dagger-hilts, to beat him unconscious.

Soldier's fangs bit into Brek's hand. The black wolf chewed lightly, stopped, poked his muzzle in the scout's face, but he couldn't revive him. Soldier paced around his master, bared his teeth, growled at the flame-lit darkness. The wolf saw the dancing wraith, the warrior of flame, saw rolling hills of scorched rock. Towers stabbing the sky at wrong angles. The flames drew close.

Biting into Brek's collar, Soldier dragged the man across the ashen ground, hauling him behind a small half-buried building. Keeping low and peering from behind the building, the wolf saw the flames dancing in the distance, turning to a man, to flame again. There were other figures in the distance, animal shapes the size of the wolf, loping through ashes, muzzles to the ground. Rolls of thunder in the sky.

Soldier nudged Brek's head, licked blood. The scout groaned, head lolling to the side, stayed unconscious. The wolf yelped, paced, lifted himself on hind legs, dropped onto Brek's chest. The wind left the man's lungs. He coughed, eyes fluttering, head dropping the other direction. Soldier walked his forepaws over Brek's body. Brek gasped for breath, hand brushing away the blood at the side of his mouth.

Slowly propping himself on his elbows, he said weakly, "Hie, Soldier."

The wülfbunde yelped, coughed. Bit into the scout's collar, dragged him up to sit cross-legged. Stood behind the scout, propped the man's body with his own. Brek reached inside his tunic, bit hard on a piece of lakrak. He ground the refined root between his teeth, the taste of mint and smoke and

something spicy mixed with wakefulness. He pressed fingers against bones, ribs, his head. Nothing broken. He spat out the lakrak, spat blood with it, took another piece, held it between his teeth. Brek slowly lifted himself to his feet, putting most of his weight on the wolf's back.

He couldn't straighten. Dagger-hilts bruised his stomach and sides, tightened muscles, left a ringing in his ears. He sank against the wall of the building, knocking loose dust, ashes. He took out a twine-tied packet of leaves, put some of the crushed herbs in the palm of his hand, rubbed it over his bruises. Licking a finger, he put the moist tip into the red mix, rubbed it over his bloody gums. He retied the packet. Soldier stood, draped his forelegs over the scout's shoulders. Brek hugged the wolf around the neck, buried his face in the wülfbunde's fur. Started to speak, stopped. The scout pushed the wolf away and drew his curved daggers.

The howl of the wraith. Man and wolf turned toward the distance. "We cannot leave. We must destroy the wraith. First, we must choose our killing ground." Brek pointed. "There. The temple to the Dark Queen."

Scout and wülfbunde moved toward the temple, Brek's injuries forcing him to limp slowly. A line of blood fell from his mouth as he labored to breathe the hot air. Chest convulsed with coughs he tried to stifle. Their passage kicked up brief clouds of ash despite their efforts to keep hidden.

A hundred paces from the temple, a stream of boiling water and orange-hot rock cut across their path. The two were caught here in the open, without cover.

"Wülfbunde, jump."

Soldier panted, licked his chops. Didn't move.

"Find a path for me to cross. I can't jump as I am."

The black wolf paced in front of the river of fire then stepped back. Danced away at his first attempt, moved away, ran hard. Bound taking him safely across. Then the crowing hate of the wraith howled behind Brek.

Brek sprinted three paces, jumping. Talons of flame cut up, raked his back, pushed him far enough to cover the stream's distance. Bündesphar and wülfbunde dashed around rocks, huge foundation stones. Brek heard the heat of the wraith's anger scorching the rocks, didn't look back. Dove through the temple entrance. The wraith blazed past and lit the temple with orange flame.

The wolf broke his master's fall, Soldier's legs buckling under the weight. Brek rolled off him, groaning. Soldier dragged Brek further into the darkness, toward the back of the temple. New blood from the scout's charred back matted the wülfbunde's fur.

"Daggers," Brek whispered.

Scout searched the temple, peered outside the entrance. Brek's weapons were gone. The wolf returned to his master's side, sat guarding.

"We are in a bad way, hie, wülfbunde?"

Brek tried to remove his tunic. Couldn't raise his arms because of the bruises and the new wounds. He shrugged his shoulders inside his shirt to dislodge the blood-heavy cloth. Scout tore the fabric with his fangs. The coin of adamant fell from Brek's pocket.

"We are not wholly alone, hey?" Brek rolled over, forced himself to his knees. Picked up the coin. The temple shook. Outside, pillars holding the temple roof cracked, melted. Brek and the wolf froze into silence. The shaking stopped. The temple entrance grew brighter as a conflagration drew closer.

Brek gripped the coin and whispered. "What do we do? Beg?"

Soldier coughed. Brek picked up his bloody tunic. "All this spilled for the White Lady?"

Coin slipped from burned fingers. Its metal made a dull sound, brought the wraith to the entrance. The wraith crowed its hate, talons gouging stone.

Brek scabbled, found the single steel coin that was pay-

ment for the corp. With it he scratched a symbol in the floor—a diamond crossed through the center by intersecting lines. He placed the worn coin in the glyph where the lines crossed. Said, “My life for yours, yours for mine. Blood for payment. For the Dark Queen and the Bond.”

The wraith surged through the doorway. Flames filled the temple. Soldier stood before his master, fangs bared. The wraith grew to fill the temple, high as the ceiling, hot as a pyre. Its maw breathed fire, engulfing master and wülfbunde.

Flames falling like water over smooth glass. The wraith unhinged its jaws, to bite, to swallow the two.

From the glyph scratched by Brek, twin daggers, curved and new, raised from the floor. The scout took them, turned and attacked. Brek forced his two daggers into the roaring body of the wraith. The world tilted, smoldered, knocked him off balance, right hand brushing the wraith’s muzzle, left arm buried up to the shoulder itself in the wraith’s body.

Brek fell backward, knocking into Soldier. The black wolf’s jaws passed through the wraith’s body, broke, charred, flaked away. Soldier’s fur immolated. Brek’s clothes smoked, also his flesh and hair. The bones in his right hand fused. His left arm fell to the ground. The wraith pushed itself forward through the bodies of wülfbunde and bündesphar, tearing itself against their bodies, straining against the Bond.

The Bond tore back.

The White Lady found Brek and wülfbunde in the empty, calm valley. She touched her gentle hands to Brek’s wounds. Brek had lost his left arm. His legs were scorched, clothes burned off. The fingers of his right hand clenched scarred around a dagger, and he could not drop the weapon. Soldier lay nearby, lower jaw gone, exposed flesh charred.

Brek awoke. "Hie, White Lady," he said. Spat blood.

"My poor scout. My poor, dear wolf," the White Lady said. "Pain as this you would never have known if you had followed the others and accepted me as your new queen. On nothings you have spent your faith."

Brek said, "The Bond provides, White Lady. How little you understand."

"How little I understand, bündesphar? My beloved consort and I forged the weapons to fight your queen's dark powers. In the Age of Might, we cast light against shadow. You say I do not understand?"

"If you would seek to have me, White Lady, then the Bond you do not understand," Brek said.

Brek's left eye clouded with milky blood, his face spasmed. The goddess cupped his face in her hands. The clouding stopped. She wrapped her arms around the dying scout. Pressed his body against her own and rocked. Said, "You argue with a god, when yours lies dead in the arms of her last faithful?"

"We are the faithful, White Lady. My wülfbunde and I."

"Would you seek to be whole?"

"Aye, White Lady, we would," Brek said, "but not at the cost of our faith."

"My path leads also to the war with the minions of Chaos, aye. I would give you greater help than ever gave the Dark Queen, who abandoned those who trusted in her." The White Lady lowered Brek to the ground. "She was not deserving of such a faith as yours. In your faith is found the greatest strength. Would that I could earn it."

The White Lady touched her lips to where Brek's arm had been. "I gave you the daggers, not your Dark Queen. Will you not serve me? Will you not serve Mishikal, goddess of light?"

Brek choked again, coughed dirt and bile. Soldier pawed the air, feeble, dying. The scout pushed himself up, clothes flaking to ash. He staggered. Bent. Between little finger and

thumb, around the dagger, took up the adamant coin. He lifted Soldier in his arm, cradled the wolf. Slowly he stood, nearly buried by the weight, lowered his head. Draping the moaning wolf around his shoulders, approached the White Lady. Lifted his eyes to point out the night.

“There, White Lady. The twin green stars of Canus, the Faithful. As long as they look down on the world, my faith is true.” As best he could, Brek returned the coin of adamant. He walked away from the White Lady, the flame scarred earth.

The White Lady stood in the light of the dawn sun, wülf-bunde and bündesphar chasing the twilight. She said, “Keep your loyalty, my poor scout. You know a goddess admires your honor and trust, even if it is misplaced.”

The White Lady said a brief prayer of healing over the man and wolf. “Krynn’s secrets are coming to destroy us, bündesphar. We will need you all.”



THE BOX

PAUL B. THOMPSON

No one paid much attention when they first arrived; an old man, on an old cart, with an old dog by his side was nothing to notice on a busy market day. The cart driver wore a long wool redingote that covered him from ankles to ears. The nondescript brown coat was much the same color as the two-wheeled cart. Even the dog was an unimpressive shade of brown, distinguished only by a spreading patch of gray on his muzzle.

The cart, seemingly ordinary and shabby like the driver, was nonetheless stoutly built, roofed over with heavy planks. The high wheels on either side were solid disks, not spoked. A large iron lock secured the rear door. Pulling this contraption was a single dusty, swaybacked old mare. The traces were worn shiny where the aged nag had long pulled hard against the weight of the cart.

Sighting the market square ahead, the old man turned down a side street away from the crowd. Children unwillingly darted out of the way of the ponderous cart. Jeering, boys pelted it with pebbles. One bounced forward off the box roof, hitting the old hound on the head. He winced, looking mournfully back at his tormentors, but he did not bark.

Unfamiliar with the town, the old man soon was stymied

by the narrow, winding lane. Unable to turn sharply enough to negotiate his way through the warren of houses, he eased the cart backward and promptly hung his left wheel on a slab of sandstone laid down as a stoop. Though the carter snapped the reins and clucked his tongue at his big horse, the tired old animal could not budge the cart forward or backward.

Faces appeared in the windows overlooking the lane, drawn by the sounds of the struggle below. Tart-tongued housewives offered rude suggestions how to get the cart free. The old man ignored them all. Before long, a trio of sturdy men in their shirt sleeves came sauntering up the alley, singing a ribald song. Spying the stuck cart, they hailed the driver.

"Old man! Move that thing!" called the biggest of the three, a sunburnt fellow with long, dirty-blond hair.

The driver grunted, working the reins again. Gamely the old beast leaned on the traces. The wheel rose, hovered on the edge of the stone block, then fell back again. Full of liquid bonhomie, the two smaller men offered to help the animal on the next try. Their pushing was to no avail.

"C'mon, Dunnar. You're stronger than both of us!" they chided the big man.

"I might strain my back," Dunnar replied petulantly.

"We'll never get to Vasko's tavern at this rate," complained the bearded man.

"All right, all right." Dunnar grumbled. "Hey, old man! Wait till I tell you, then give that walking dogmeat the whip, why don't you?"

All three men braced their right shoulders against the rear of the cart. Above, the women made saucy comments about the view. Dunnar's friends slanged back at them.

"Ready, old man? Now, go!"

The driver had no whip, but he stood in the box and snapped the reins as hard as he could. Snorting, the aged mare braced her massive shoulders against the load. At the back, Dunnar and his friends heaved with all their might.

In a rush, the wheel climbed over the stone slab and banged down on the other side. The men stumbled forward, almost falling on their faces. Gales of laughter rained down from the windows.

"Come down here and laugh, wenches!" Dunnar growled. "I'll give you something to laugh about!" In answer, assorted rancid vegetables rained down.

"That's some load the coot's hauling!" said Bolly, the bearded one. "What's in there? Stone?"

"I seen a cart like this once, in Sanction," said the third man, gray-headed Agaran.

"Yeah, what was it carrying?"

"Bullion."

Dunnar perked up. "Gold?"

Agaran shrugged. "Sometimes gold, sometimes silver. Whatever was brought in by ship for trade. They build heavy carts like this in Sanction to carry metal to the city mint."

The old man climbed down to lead his animal on foot through the tight alley. Before he could get away, however, Dunnar squeezed between the cart and wall, and hailed him.

"Wait! Hold! Where are you headed, old man?"

All he could see of the cart driver was a sunken pair of eyes, a long, beaky nose, and the suggestion of a white beard between the folds of the coat collar. The carter wore a flat drover's hat made of brown felt, stiff from years of sweat, dust, and harsh sunshine. Something about the old man's hostile stare stopped Dunnar in his tracks.

"Uh, don't thank us for getting you out," he said nervously. With a deep grunt, the peculiar old man turned his back and led his horse up the street.

Bolly and Agaran chafed at having to mark time behind the slow cart. Dunnar quieted them.

"Let's see where he goes," he muttered. "He might need our help again . . ."

That brought stares from his cronies. Around town

Dunnar was known for many things, but helping out his neighbors was not one of them.

The old man paused at every intersection, looking left and right. By trial and error he found the riverfront, where most of the inns and taverns were clustered. He avoided the larger, more populated watering holes, choosing instead a dingy little hash-house in a dead-end alley. Bringing the cart around until the horse faced the open end of the street, the carter got down and tied his reins to a hitching post. He snapped his papery fingers and the hound jumped from the box to the ground. Together man and dog went into the hash-house, under the sign of the Three-Legged Hare.

At the mouth of the alley, Dunnar and his cronies watched the old man leave the cart. Slapping Bolly in the chest, Dunnar said, "C'mon!"

The alley was quiet. Most of the buildings facing it were windowless facades of larger establishments on the strand. No one noticed the three men creeping up on the cart.

Dunnar set Agaran to watch the door of the Three-Legged Hare. Turning his wrist over, the big man drew a slim iron rod from his leather wrist band. The tip had a small right-angle bend. He inserted this into the lock hanging on the back of the cart.

"Now," he said, "bloom for me, iron flower!"

He worked and worked it, feeling inside the stout case for the lock's hidden mechanism. The secret eluded him. His pick could find nothing to catch on, nothing to turn.

Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. Bolly kept glancing at the entrance to the alley. He said, "Hurry up!"

Muttering, Dunnar shoved the pick back in his wrist band. He plucked the knife from his belt. He poked the tip of the knife into keyhole.

Agaran cleared his throat. "Dunnar!"

"Not yet!"

"Dunnar!"

Footsteps thumped toward the open door of the hash-house. At that moment Dunnar's knife caught something. Anxiously the burly man twisted. There was resistance, lots of it. Dunnar's knuckles turned white.

Voices. Someone was leaving the Hare. Agaran stood in the doorway to block them from coming out.

With a snarl, Dunnar wrenched the knife around as hard as he could. With a *tink* the blade snapped. The broken end gashed the palm of his hand. Blood spurted everywhere.

Impatient river boatmen finally shoved Agaran aside. They didn't give the men loitering by the cart a second glance. Cursing his luck, Dunnar wrapped a dirty handkerchief around his palm. Bolly examined the lock. He turned the keyhole to the light, and peered inside.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Somebody filled the works with lead!"

"What?" Dunnar shoved his crony aside. He too saw the gleam of gray metal inside the lock. Why would anyone fill a lock with molten lead? It was impossible to open now—

Agaran returned. "What happened?" he asked, wide-eyed. Bolly explained. "I guess he don't want this cart opened!"

"Is that old man still inside?" Dunnar asked. Agaran nodded mutely. "C'mon."

Dunnar filled the low doorway of the Three-Legged Hare. The room was typically tavern-dark, with only the light from the door and flicker of low flames from the hearth to relieve the gloom. Two sweating boys, naked to the waist, turned a half-calf on a spit. Most of the diners were bargemen. Two kender were running a shell game in the corner, and a sucker was losing good brass to them. A plain-faced young woman played a mournful tune on a four-string lyre.

Dunnar spotted the old man in a rear corner, sitting with his back hard against the wall. From there he could survey the entire place, and no one could sneak up on him. The dog, oddly enough, did not lie on the floor at his master's

feet but sat on a bench beside him, resting his furry chin on the table.

"Grab a seat," Dunnar muttered.

The Hare was half empty, so they chose a spot near the door. Agaran waved to the barmaid. Weaving her way expertly through the haphazard archipelago of tables, she brought the three men tall jacks of beer without asking.

Bolly and Agaran drank deep. Dunnar merely sipped. The cut on his hand throbbed. Glowering over the rim of his mug, he watched the old man as he sat, head down, devouring a well-heaped plate of grub.

"Listen," he said, "we're gonna see what's inside that cart if we have to take it."

Bolly choked on his beer. "What? Why?" He was not above a little thievery, but he didn't think the cart was carrying bullion.

"The way I see it, that old man has some real treasure out there," Dunnar explained. He held up a thumb. "There's the cart, for one thing. It was made special, for heavy hauling, and we know the thing is loaded up with something." Up went a second finger. "The lock's been sealed so no one, not even the carter, can open it. Whoever hired him doesn't want him pilfering, so the cargo must be especially valuable." Lastly he raised his middle finger. "Then there's the driver himself. Why hire a ragged old man to deliver a precious cargo?" Dunnar smiled, showing white teeth in the darkened room. "Why not an escort of mercenaries, twenty strong?"

Neither Agaran nor Bolly dared answer. Dunnar punched the older man on the shoulder. "To avoid attracting attention!" Dunnar declared. "Who'd look twice at a worn-out old ragbag like him?"

"We did," Agaran said, wincing and rubbing his shoulder.

Lowering his voice to a whisper, Dunnar outlined his plan. They would hire horses and follow the old man out of town. At some lonely point they would ride ahead of the

cart and lie in wait. The three of them ought to be enough to waylay a lone carter and his fool dog.

Four jacks of beer later, the old man finished his meal. He scraped the trencher clean of gravy and shoved it forward. The hound lowered his head and dolefully licked the greasy wooden platter. Planting his flat hat on his head, the old man stood, dropped some coins on the table and started for the door.

"Bolly, run to the High Street and hire three horses," Dunnar whispered. "Agaran, go with him. I'll stay with the old man."

"How will we find you?"

Dunnar snorted. "That cart doesn't roll any faster than I walk. You'll have horses; check the gates out of town. Try the east gate first." The old man had been heading east all day, threading through the town.

Trailing an aroma of roast beef, onions, and brew, the carter stalked past Dunnar's table. He didn't give his rescuers from the alley a second glance. The dog did. Tongue lolling, he paused, gazing at Dunnar with sad, limpid eyes.

"Get away!" Dunnar snarled at the animal. When the hound didn't move, Dunnar stomped his foot, causing the creature to flinch. From the door of the tavern, his master whistled. The dog loped away.

Dunnar waited until he heard the cart rolling before he rose, dispatching his two friends to their task. He leisurely paid the bill and sauntered to the door. The lyrist was busy plucking low, lingering notes. At the table where the kender were running their shell game, the mark, a young man with more money than common sense, finally found the pea under the walnut shell.

"I win!" he cried. The second kender lifted his purse when the young mark raised his hands in triumph.

From the door of the Three-Legged Hare, Dunnar spotted the cart trundling up the lane, still heading east. He stepped out into the sultry afternoon. It was too late to get their

usual work, unloading barges on the river, and Dunnar had his sights on a bigger payoff today.

The old man kept the sun to his back as he wound his way through the unfamiliar streets. Soon the town wall was in view, and there was still no sign of Bolly or Agaran. The cart creaked through the open gate. Beyond lay the open road to Dargaard, Kalaman, and points east. Still no sign of his cronies. Dunnar hesitated at the gate. If he followed the old man, it would be obvious he was stalking him. There was no cover outside the wall, no plausible reason why he should be trailing the silent carter. Dunnar fidgeted, watching the ponderous little wagon grow steadily smaller with distance.

At last Bolly and Agaran appeared from a side street, jouncing along at a canter. They had just two horses.

"Where in the Dark Queen's name have you been?" Dunnar growled.

"Hiring horses," Agaran stammered. "We only had coin enough for two—"

Dunnar took the bridle from Bolly's hands. He had the bigger horse, so Dunnar ordered him to give it over.

"What do I ride?"

"Ride double, or stay here!" Dunnar swung onto the saddle.

The old man was out of sight by now, lost in the trees lining the Dargaard road. Dunnar thumped his heels into the animal's flanks. Bolting through the gate, he left Bolly and Agaran scrambling to keep up.

They caught up easily enough. Falling back, Dunnar watched the burdened cart roll along, the driver oblivious to everything but the road ahead. Sometimes the old man's head lolled, dozing with the reins in his hand. Like many old horses, the swayback nag kept plodding ahead.

The old man was so heedless it began to get on Dunnar's nerves. Why would anyone hire such a dotard? A band of street urchins with slingshots could overcome him and his mangy dog.

After a while Bolly and Agaran came puffing up. "What goes, Dunnar?" the latter boomed. He was riding in front, leaving the taller Bolly to rattle his teeth loose on the pillion.

"Shut your hole!" The two horses fell into shuffling step, side by side. "The old fool just sits there!" He lowered his voice further. "At this pace he'll reach Giddy Crossroads by sundown. We'll take him before then."

"Why not wait till night? He'll be asleep then," Bolly suggested.

"He sleeps now, on the road!" Dunnar spat dust. "He might overtake a caravan and join it, or if he gets to Giddy's, he'll join a leaguer."

At regular intervals along the major trading routes, travelers formed defensive camps for the night to ward off bandits. Any traveler could join a leaguer or circle of wagons. That would complicate Dunnar's plan. Giddy's Crossroads was a major intersection of roads from Maelgoth, Dargaard, and Throthl. Every sunset there, a large collection of travelers holed up for the night.

They bided their time, content to shadow the old man from afar. He had to stop sometime, Dunnar reasoned. No one could down so much beer without paying the price.

Sure enough, three leagues out of town, the cart suddenly left the road. Dunnar and Agaran reined up, watching. The old man headed toward a thin stand of poplar trees forty paces from the road.

"This is it!" Dunnar urged his mount forward. At a trot, he circled wide around the poplar copse. When he saw the cart halt, Dunnar stopped too, lest their hoofbeats warn the old man. He jumped down, tied his horse to a sapling, and reached under his vest. Hanging there by a thong Dunnar kept a short wooden club. It was his only weapon, now that his knife was broken.

Bolly and Agaran clumsily dismounted and likewise groped for impromptu weapons. Bolly had a tool of his trade, a cargo hook. Agaran carried a mallet weighted with

lead. Crouching low, the three men crept forward, but the cart seat was vacant. Head down, the ancient draft horse was cropping fresh grass. Where was the old man? For that matter, where was the dog?

With curt gestures Dunnar directed his companions to spread out and look. None too quietly, Bolly crawled away. Agaran also went on his hands and knees, muttering loudly every time he encountered a sharp stone or rough tree root. Dunnar despaired of their stupidity.

Raising his head to check around, Dunnar found himself gazing directly into the face of the brown-clad carter. All that beer downed at the Three-Legged Hare had indeed driven him off the road to seek relief. He was staring down at the burly Dunnar, who clutched a cudgel in his fist.

Both men started, but Dunnar recovered first. Jumping up and seizing the cart driver by the lapels of his long coat, he shoved the edge of his club hard against the old man's neck.

"What's in the cart?" he snarled. "Tell me quick, or I'll crack every bone in your body!"

The old man gazed at him, strangely unafraid. For a brief moment Dunnar felt uncertain. Who was this dusty old fool, anyway?

Whatever doubts he might have had vanished when he heard the hound baying in the trees. Driving the old man backward to the center of the copse, he saw Bolly running, knees high, with the dog nipping at his heels.

"Quit fooling around!" Dunnar snapped.

"Tell the stupid beast, not me!"

Bolly dodged behind them, and the dog followed. Dunnar aimed a kick at the creature's bony ribs. He missed, but for the first time the old man betrayed emotion. He muttered something deep in his throat.

Sensing his fear made Dunnar bold. He kicked the old man's feet out from under him and planted a boot on his chest. He said, "Bolly, if the coot doesn't start talking, kill the dog!"

Agaran appeared. Bits of leaf and cobwebs decorated his head. He joined Bolly in trying to catch the hound. It circled and dodged them warily, keeping just one leap ahead of the two until Agaran dropped his mallet and lunged, using both arms to tackle the creature.

The old man struggled under Dunnar's foot. "Easy, friend," Dunnar said. "Tell me what I want to know, and your dog won't get hurt."

All the aged carter would do was grunt and groan. Helping hold the hound, Bolly called, "Maybe he can't talk."

Dunnar put more weight on his captive's chest. "Is that right, old fella? You can't talk?" The old man nodded briskly. In answer, Dunnar drove his boot into the man's ribs. Air exploded from the carter's chest, along with a common curse.

Dunnar kicked him again. "This is your last chance—tell me what's in the wagon!"

The driver had curled up under Dunnar's blows, and now he uncoiled—with a dagger in his hand. Agaran bleated a warning. The tip of the dagger ripped through Dunnar's leather jerkin and scored a shallow cut across his stomach. Dunnar seized the old man's wrist with both hands, easily stopping a stab aimed at his belly. Laughing, he slowly bore the elderly man's hand back until he heard the aged wrist snap. Groaning in agony, the old man dropped the dagger. Dunnar caught it, reversed his grip, and drove it in to the hilt, in the carter's heart.

Shocked, Bolly and Agaran forgot their four-legged captive and stood up, gaping. The dog promptly bolted. Neither man bothered to chase him as he raced off.

"By thunder, Dunnie!" Agaran said. "You didn't have to kill him!"

"He tried to gut me," Dunnar complained, breathing hard. Grimacing, he pulled the dagger out and threw it away. "Anyway, he can't speak out against us now!"

He told his comrades to drag the body out of sight. Agaran and Bolly each took one of the old man's feet and hauled him

away. They spied a bramble-filled ravine and decided to roll the corpse into it. When they returned, Dunnar was rooting around under the driver's bench.

"Find a key?" asked Agaran.

"No key can open that lock," Bolly opined, "not filled with melted lead."

"This one will." Dunnar held up a large cold chisel he'd found secreted under the seat. "Bring your mallet, Ag."

It took more than twenty strikes before the massive lock yielded. On the fifteenth blow, the hasp felt loose; by twenty, chips of lead were rattling out of the keyhole. On the twenty-second blow, the lock fell apart, the box landing at Dunnar's feet. The black hasp was left dangling.

Bolly and Agaran pressed forward. "Get back!" Dunnar snarled. "Don't crowd me!"

He flicked the hasp away, and swung the door open. A dark box completely filled the space inside. Dunnar reached in and felt metal—lots of metal, cool and hard. It wasn't gold or silver, though. It felt more like iron.

"Here! Give a hand!"

All three men grasped a large ring on the side of the box and heaved. The object was reluctant to move. Dunnar planted a foot on the wagon sill and took hold of the ring with both hands.

"Pull, damn you! Pull!"

Scraping loudly, the cargo ground forward a short span. When enough was exposed to get a good look at it, Dunnar and his cronies paused.

The secret haul was an iron box nearly as large as the interior of the closed cart. Bolly and Agaran were disappointed. Dunnar was not.

"It's gotta be a strong box, right?" His face glowed with greed. "There must be five hundred ingots inside!"

Bolly put a long arm inside, running his hand over the sides of the box. "No latch or hasp," he reported. Feeling about more, he announced, "No hinges, either."

"Probably on the far end," Dunnar replied. With another concerted heave, they dragged the box free. It crashed to the ground, startling the old horse. The old horse trotted away, but Agaran ran after it, grabbing the lost reins and halting the spooked beast.

Dunnar squatted by the box. It was iron all right, polished smooth and oiled against rust. The workmanship was astonishing. Every seam was tight, every corner sharp. Other than a sling-ring being set in the each of the four vertical sides, the box had no other features—no hinges, hasp, lock, or latch. From the outside it resembled a cube of solid metal.

Bolly scratched his head. "How does it open?"

Dunnar didn't know, but he was surer than ever that its contents were valuable. No one built such a strong box to hold something worthless.

He circled the box, banging on the sides and top with Agaran's mallet. He tried every ring, pulling and twisting on them to see if they operated some secret mechanism. The iron box remained shut. He tried the edge of his knife along the seams, but the seams were forged air-tight. Frustrated, Dunnar dropped to the grass and stared at the stubborn container.

Agaran said, "Do you think it holds gold?"

"Maybe gold, maybe jewels," Dunnar said. "Maybe something else. I don't know."

"What'll we do with it if we can get it open?"

Bolly and Dunnar looked up at their older companion. Agaran shrugged. "I mean, once we get the swag, we have to dispose of it, and you don't just walk into a Dargaard counting house with several hundredweight of gold and say 'coin this for us, please.' We'd be arrested before we got out the door."

"He's right!" said Bolly, paling.

"There is a way," Agaran went on. His eyes shifted from side to side, as if strangers nearby could hear him. "There's a man I know. He deals in, ah, found merchandise."

"A fence, you mean," Dunnar said bluntly. Agaran nodded.

"Sometimes goods fall off the boats I'm loading," the older man said. "Wastage and spillage, you know. Anyway, I take things to this fella, and he pays me for them."

"What's his name?"

"Umram. Umram the Chiseler, they call him."

Umram had a stronghold hidden in the hills northwest of Throthl. It was lawless country, occupied and fought over in the recent wars until all decent folk had abandoned it. Umram had inherited a former Nerakan outpost and made it his stronghold.

It was dark when Dunnar and company arrived. The old fort was ringed with a brick wall with timber hoardings on top. A bonfire blazed inside the gate. Spear-toting guards stood watch, and challenged the newcomers as they halted before the barred entrance.

"What do you want?" bawled a harsh voice.

Agaran ambled forward on his hired horse. "We want to see the Chiseler. We've got goods to offer."

"It's late. Come back tomorrow."

Dunnar, driving the cart, stood up and bellowed, "We have some serious treasure here! Open up right now, or we'll take our trade elsewhere!"

A rotund figure appeared on the wall, backlit by the crackling bonfire. A very deep voice said, "Who gives orders to my men?"

Agaran waved. "Hai, Chiseler! It's me, Agaran! We've got something big for you!"

Dunnar could not see the man's face against the glare of the flames. Planting his hands on his wide hips, Umram said, "Only thing big down there is your friend's mouth."

Dunnar sat down. "Let's go, boys. What we have is too

much for this fat fool! We'll find another dealer to handle it—"

He had the cart half turned around when the gate opened and six armed men dashed out. They surrounded the cart and Dunnar's friends on horseback, spears leveled. Slowly the bulky master of the outpost lumbered up to them, bearing a torch.

"Not much of a negotiator, are you?" he said to Dunnar. Up close, Umram had a unpleasant, fleshy face, with a bulbous red nose and protruding lips. His skin had an oily sheen. Limp black curls lay flat on his skull and thick neck.

"What have you got?" he said, patting the side of the cart. "Must be heavy. Bullion?"

"We don't know for sure," Dunnar said, embarrassed to admit it. "There's an iron box in back that we can't open. It's very heavy. I think it's full of gold."

Umram's serpentine eyes gleamed. "We'll see. Come inside, gentlemen. Let me offer you the hospitality of my humble house."

Ringed with spears, they didn't have much choice. Bolly and Agaran rode through the gate while Dunnar got the awkward cart turned around. Once inside, the massive timber gate was closed again and barred. The sound of the heavy oaken beam sliding into place made Dunnar flinch.

The outpost compound was about a hundred paces square, enclosed by the single wall. Against the interior of the wall was lined the clapboard sheds and shanties where Umram's hired guards lived. There were three freestanding buildings in the bailey. Largest was a brick keep topped by a squat, flat topped tower. On either side of it were two log-framed structures. One was a workshop, judging by the clang of tools coming from its open windows. The other long, single-story building smelled like a stable.

With the Chiseler guiding him, Dunnar drew the cart up in front of the workshop. Umram's mercenary guards gathered round, and the shop gang, led by a soot-stained dwarf,

filed out to see what their boss had brought them. After a cursory examination of the iron box, the dwarf, whose name was Hundel, ordered a boom erected over the cart. Using a block and tackle, his work gang hauled the heavy box out. It dangled twice its length off the ground while Umram, Hundel, and the rest inspected it.

"Forged solid," said the dwarf. "No way to open it."

"Ever seen a strongbox like that before?" asked Umram.

"Only once, in the court of a great lord. He couldn't open his, either."

Dunnar tingled with excitement. Great lord? His dreams grew bigger.

"Can you crack it?" he said.

Hundel pursed his lips, blowing breath through his long mustache. He yanked the knot securing the tackle, and the box crashed to the ground. The impact would have sprung most containers, but not this iron box.

"Sledgehammers. Steel chisels," he ordered. Bare-chested workmen dashed inside to fetch the necessary tools.

A chorus of loud metallic blows rang out as the shop gang fell upon the box with hammers and chisels. The noise was terrible, and once it became clear they weren't accomplishing anything Hundel growled for them to stop. He ran a practiced hand over the box. The smooth metal wasn't even dented.

It likewise resisted saws, prybars, and a chain vise that could ordinarily crush metal cases like acorns. Hundel got so frustrated he smote the side of the box with a sledgehammer. The blow made a dull, metallic sound. Hundel cocked an ear, listening.

"It's full of something, all right. Sides no more than finger-thick!"

Umram yawned. "It's late, Hundel. Can you open it or not? If you can't, I'm for bed. You can try again in the morning."

The dwarf tossed his hammer to a waiting worker. "Hundel Hundel's son will open it, you'll see!" He ordered

his helpers to carry the box into the open square before the keep. Next he called for seasoned firewood, six cords' worth. This he had piled neatly around the box and on top.

Dunnar understood. He was going to heat the box in a bonfire, either to draw the temper of the sides or loosen the joints. If all else failed, heat might burst the box like an egg laid on a bed of coals. He worried that fire might damage the treasure inside. At worst, gold or silver bars might melt into a single mass. Gems would take the heat better. Anyway, Dunnar reasoned, the contents were useless unless they could open the iron box.

While fire licked at the sides, Dunnar and Umram haggled over shares. The Chiseler, true to his name, offered Dunnar and his companions one tenth of the value of what might be inside.

"A tenth!" Dunnar sputtered. "Count your teeth, boys, this fella wants to steal everything we've got!"

"Don't be foolish," Umram replied smoothly. "I'm betting blindly, you know. What happens if I spend my valuable time and discover the box contains sand, or something equally worthless?"

"No one builds a box like that for sand!"

"I agree, but the risk is there. Plus, I must dispose of the goods discretely, and that cuts into the margin of my profits."

"Fifty percent," said Dunnar. "We'll split the value equally."

Umram laughed, a deep rumble from far down in his fat belly. "Ho, ho! You amuse me. Why not demand a hundred percent and be a complete idiot?"

So it went, until they finally agreed on thirty percent for Dunnar and his two friends and seventy for Umram. Hundel would also take a cut but from his partner's share.

Wine was brought, and a toast was drunk to the deal. Seeing the dwarf standing alone, staring into the fire now wrapping itself all around the iron box, Dunnar refilled his cup and went to him.

"Here," he said, holding out the cup. "To a rich harvest!"

"I don't drink," Hundel said. His eyes narrowed, but not at Dunnar. "Can you read, townsman?"

"Me? No. Why?"

He called out, "Umram! Come here!"

Following his gaze, Dunnar spied large letters on the side of the box. They were hard to make out due to the flames and piled up tinder, but some sort of script plainly showed where none had been before. Umram, drinking out of a very large tankard, ambled to the agitated dwarf.

"What is it, Hundel?"

He pointed. Umram squinted into the fire. "What is that? Dwarf-script?"

"Nay, it's the common tongue, writ in the letters of the old empire." The dwarf scratched his ash-flecked beard. "It says, 'Zetan sleeps within.'"

"What's Zetan?" asked Dunnar.

"Don't you understand? The writing wasn't there before the fire. There's some kind of protective spell on the box!" the dwarf said, alarmed.

"Sounds like a label, not a warning."

"Labels are done in paint, not fire!"

For his part, Umram was unconcerned. He'd been in this business a long time and often encountered all sorts of spells and curses placed on valuable objects. Most of them were transitory and could be negated by the proper counter-spell. Umram knew several tame sorcerers who would exorcise any object for the right price.

"It's a minor matter," he said, sipping wine, "but for safety's sake, no one's to touch the box or its contents until I say so."

"It'll be too hot for half a day," Hundel added. "Nobody'll want to touch it, but I like this not!"

The dealer was so casual about the whole matter that Dunnar and his friends decided not worry. Eventually they

drifted back to Umram's keep, where they drank more wine. Someone produced a pair of dice, and they gambled far into the night. Dunnar won a tidy sum off Umram. As he nodded off later, well-steeped in wine, Dunnar decided his life had turned a corner. Things were looking up.

He woke with a sour taste in his mouth and a dull ache in his head. Standing up, the room reeled. Dunnar groaned, shutting his eyes. He felt around his waist for the cloth purse he wore there. It felt empty. Last thing Dunnar knew, he had thirty-six gold coins there, what he'd won off Umram. He smelled a big, fat rat. Umram must have put something in the wine.

Agaran and Bolly were sprawled on the bench, one face down, the other face up. Bolly's chest was stained with spilled wine. The table was cluttered with overturned cups, and the room reeked of sweat, vomit, and the Chiseler's cheap vintage.

Wincing at the light, Dunnar staggered outside. It was just after dawn, and the walled compound was eerily quiet. Gray smoke hung in the humid air. Dunnar gulped down great drafts of fresh air, fighting off nausea. His head cleared, and the tang of wood smoke reminded him of the iron box and the dwarf's bonfire.

He knew something was wrong as soon as he saw the remains. The pyre had burned down to coals right enough, but then the iron box had come apart. Not burst, but each side had neatly separated from the other, leaving six slabs of sheet iron lying in a heap amidst the smoldering ashes. Mindful of the heat and a possible curse, Dunnar poked about in the ashes, looking for melted gold or silver. He found no such thing. Instead, under the top slab he found shards of some kind of bone-colored material. Thinking it was ivory, his hopes fell. Fire ruined ivory.

Going to Hundel's workshop, he returned with a coal rake. Dunnar stirred the remains of the bonfire, and found nothing but more scorched scraps of ivory. He raked out a piece the size of his hand. Gingerly, Dunnar tried to pick up the ivory fragment. Surprisingly cool to the touch, he realized it wasn't ivory. It was far too light, porous. Something about the stuff seemed familiar . . .

He heard footsteps behind him. Rising, he spotted Umram, cloaked to the chin against the morning damp. A pair of grim-faced mercenaries followed close behind him.

"The fire did its work," Dunnar said, trying to sound worldly. Given his smell and the fact that his voice was a low croak, he didn't pull it off. The hired soldiers leveled their spears at him.

"Murdering swine!" Umram hissed, adding a few choicer epithets.

Dunnar tried to bat the spear heads away, but the soldiers evaded his hand and pressed the sharp tips against his chest. "Don't be hasty!" he said, drawing back to ease the pressure.

"Why did you kill Hundel?"

Dunnar had first thought he was referring to the old man he'd slain to get the box. Mention of Hundel confused him, until he remembered the dwarf's name.

"Hundel's dead?"

At Umram's nod, one guard jabbed him enough to draw blood. "You yourself butchered him! Do you deny it?"

Dunnar grabbed the shaft behind the head, and with his considerable strength forced it away from his neck.

"I haven't hurt a hair of the dwarf's beard," he said, glowering. "My men and I spent the night in your hall, senseless!"

That made some sense to Umram, so he relented and ordered the guards back. Still suspicious, he said, "Come with me."

He led him through the dark, silent workshop to a suite of

rooms on the back side of the building. Dunnar could smell blood long before they reached Hundel's bedchamber.

Holding his cloak to his face, Umram pushed the door open with his foot. From the door sill to the wall six steps away was a veritable lake of blood, already congealing. Dunnar thought himself a tough character, but when he saw what had been done to the dwarf he lost his composure completely. Rushing out of the workshop, he was sick on the cobbles outside.

Umram and his escort retreated with him. Eyes narrowed over his cloak, the fence muttered, "I can't figure out what happened to his head." Dunnar, for his part, did not know or care.

"I'm leaving," he said, scrubbing his mouth with the back of his hand. "If there was anything in the iron box, the fire ruined it. You've got a killer in your midst. I'll get my men and get out!"

He was halfway to the keep when Umram said, "What, the box was empty?"

"See for yourself!"

He had to douse Agaran and Bolly with a pitcher of water each to rouse them. Groaning and gasping, the two blinked and tried to stand. Neither could do so without Dunnar's help.

"The dwarf is dead," Dunnar said in a low voice. "Strangely murdered. We're getting out of here."

"What about the treasure?" gasped Bolly.

"There ain't none. Let's hurry!"

They never even got to the stable. Umram and four guards stopped them at the keep door.

"We have unfinished business," the Chiseler said unpleasantly.

"We're quits," Dunnar countered. "There was nothing in the box."

"Maybe, but you owe me some money, and someone's killed by partner!"

“Money? What money?”

The Chiseler smiled, showing rotten teeth. “You lost at dice last night. Sixty gold you owe me.”

Dunnar’s big hands knotted into fists. “Cheat! Liar! You drugged me—all of us!” Behind him, Bolly and Agaran could only nod and grimace weakly in agreement.

“It’s not my fault you can’t hold your wine,” said Umram. “As for Hundel—”

A scream cut their argument short. It was a prolonged peal of pain, not a cry for help. Without waiting for their master’s orders, the guards raced toward the sound. Dunnar brushed past the portly Chiseler and followed them, leaving Bolly and Agaran to catch up.

In the alley behind the workshop, Hundel had stored the raw materials needed for his operations. Their daily fare was smelting stolen gold, recutting precious stones, or otherwise disguising the booty Umram acquired in his illicit trade. Amid the piles of cordwood and barrels of flux they found the body of one of the dwarf’s workmen (one soldier said his name was Vorick). He’d been savagely done to death, ripped from neck to heels with great vertical slashes. What had been done to him above the neck no one could say, for his head too was gone. The guards knew the body by the fact that Vorick had lost a finger in a refining accident years ago.

His awful wounds were still streaming blood. “This just happened!” Dunnar exclaimed. “Spread out—the culprit must be near!”

Quickly the whole camp was aroused. Workmen and mercenaries filed out into the smoky dawn, scratching their sides and wondering what all the commotion was about. Word quickly spread about the two murders. Hundel’s workers retreated into their shop, barring the doors and windows. The guards mustered in front of the keep in full battle gear. Umram kept half with him and sent the rest to hunt the killer. Dunnar accepted a sword, but Bolly was too hung over to do much except hold his head. Agaran shook

off the Chiseler's narcotic and armed himself with a stave.

Umram's stronghold was not that large. It didn't take long for the guards to cover it from end to end. They found no sign of an intruder. They reported back to their master, who listened through the wicket of the keep's thick gate.

"Search again, harder!" said Umram. "The killer must be here somewhere, you fools! Find him! What do I pay you for? Any one of you—even I—could be next!"

"The iron box," the guards' captain said, leaning on his spear. Umram prompted him to go on. "What did the writing say? 'Zetan sleeps within'? Maybe we're hunting for this Zetan—whatever it is."

Umram said to Dunnar. "Tell us again how you came by that box."

He repeated the tale as he first told it, again omitting the fact that he'd killed the old man to get it.

Paling, Umram backed away. "There must have been a monster in that box, and we've set it loose! Captain, I order you to find this thing. Kill it or drive it away, I don't care which!" He looked at Dunnar. "And you! This is your fault! You brought this curse down on us!"

"You were perfectly willing to chance opening the box last night!" Dunnar spat. "It's your problem now, Chiseler! My men and I are gone."

Gathering the sick Bolly, Dunnar and Agaran stalked to the stable. When Dunnar flung back the sliding door, however, and sunlight flooded the eight stalls, he saw all the horses were gone.

Guards came up, ordered to detain the men. Their faces fell at the empty stalls. Besides the three horses Dunnar had brought with him, the mercenary company kept six animals of their own. The door Dunnar opened was the only exit, and it had been latched from the outside. The only other way in or out of the stable was a window at the opposite end of the building. It was only three spans square, hardly big enough for a horse to pass through—

Yet the window sill was covered in dark, sticky blood. Dunnar's hands balled into fists. Somehow the horses had been taken out this way.

The soldiers bolted, shouting, "Muster the entire company in the courtyard!" Dunnar grabbed one man by the arm and begged the mercenaries to help him and his friends get away.

"Fend for yourselves," was the cold reply. "You brought this evil upon us!"

When he heard the news, Umram refused to open the keep and let the rest of soldiers out. They were hired on a year contract, and they had been paid, he insisted. They must stay and defend him and his property.

"If we stay, we may all be dead soon!" Dunnar shouted through the thick door. He described what happened to the horses. "If it can get in through a window that small, kill nine horses without making a sound and drag their bodies out again through the same little opening, do you think we can keep it out anywhere?" The door swung open, and the guards inside came running out, over Umram's frantic protests.

In ragged order, twenty soldiers marched to the main gate. Seeing the guards leaving, the workers came piling out of the shop, armed with hammers, crow bars, and other tools. "Take us with you!" they cried.

Two men unbarred the gate. It swung inward, stirring up a cloud of flies. Perched neatly on the ground facing the gate were two severed heads, Hundel's and Vorick's. Behind them in a heap were the nine dead horses.

Instinctively, a shout went up for the gate to be shut. The mob of terrified soldiers and workers hurried back to the tower. The Chiseler, though grateful to have his hired blades back, wrung his hands.

"Block up every window," he commanded feverishly. "Every opening, no matter how small! Yes, even arrow slits and drain holes! We don't know what we're dealing with, so take no chances!"

With small stones and lumps of brick, they blocked up every arrow slit and storm drain in the tower. On higher floors they closed the heavy shutters on all the windows and braced them from inside with balks of timber. Though it was not yet midday, deep gloom filled the keep. Men stood in the shadows, wide-eyed and sweating.

Dunnar went to the parapet atop the tower and surveyed the sunlit scene below. The only sign of life was a sparse ribbon of smoke rising from the foundry chimney, at the back of the workshop.

Agaran and Umram joined him.

"Any sign?" asked Agaran.

"Nope." Dunnar looked down. "Quiet as a grave."

Umram gripped Dunnar's wrist with a fleshy hand. He was about to wrench free of the fat man's clammy grip when he realized Umram had gone white with terror. Following the man's paralyzed gaze, Dunnar peered over the parapet into the deep shadows made by the stockade walls converging behind the workshop. Something was moving there—he saw it. It blended into the angular darkness so well it was impossible to make out what it was—just an impression of size and animate motion. It was big, bear-sized at least, and it seemed to move on all fours.

"What are you two staring at?" said Agaran.

At that moment the thing lifted its head and met their staring eyes. The shape was still vague, just a suggestion of a narrow head on a shortish neck, but with eyes bright and clear. They were shield-shaped, as big as trenchers. Vertical slit pupils shone in the center of the pearly white orbs. The menace, the pure malevolence, emanating from those eyes was terrifying.

The Chiseler broke the spell by screaming. "Did you see that thing? Did you see its eyes? We're as doomed as poor Hundel!"

Cursing, Dunnar kicked the parapet. He said, "We've got to get out of here!"

"Go! Do as you like," Umram said. "With luck, it will follow you three and leave the rest of us alone!"

Dunnar and Agaran stomped downstairs to find Bolly. Along the way, Dunnar thought hard. What was that thing? Why was the old man transporting it? And why in an iron box? He remembered the brittle ivory-like shards he found in the remains of the bonfire. The truth slowly arose in his mind. Of course! Merciful fate—had they loosed one of *them* on the world?

Shouts filtered down from the floors above. More cries, followed by screams, echoed down the length of the tower. A squad of armed mercenaries came storming by, calling encouragement to their master above. Dunnar joined the pack, keeping to the rear. He found Umram standing behind two archers, who were loosing arrows toward the base of the keep.

One of the bowmen said shrilly, "It came right up the wall! It came right up the wall!" The monster apparently had run straight up the tower, snatched two unwary soldiers in its front claws, and disappeared with its victims.

"What did it look like?" asked one of the guards.

"It's a dragonlet," Dunnar said, to general astonishment. He explained how it had dawned on him; the burnt shards in the ashes must be fragments of the newborn dragon's egg.

Umram's oily face was pale and sweating. "You brought a dragon to my stronghold?"

Dunnar could see fear and hatred in the eyes of everyone on the parapet. The guards plainly wanted to kill him. Umram had a subtler idea.

"Maybe the beast will spare us if it gets the right offering," the Chiseler said, trembling. "Maybe if we give it a sacrifice, it will leave the rest of us alone!"

With a concerted shout, the guards seized Dunnar. His arms were bound with rope. A noose was tied under his arms, and he was dragged struggling and cursing to the parapet's edge.

"Hear us, dragon!" Umram boomed. "Accept this sacrifice, and go in peace!"

They shoved Dunnar off. He plunged down until the rope caught, jerking every bone in his body. He dangled halfway down the tower, hip scraping against the coarse bricks.

Nothing happened. The dragonlet, wherever it was, did not seem interested in the single morsel Umram had presented to it. Despite his terror, Dunnar found himself laughing loudly.

"You can't buy it off, Chiseler!" he called. "Pull me up! You'll need every hand you've got to defend the tower!"

Jeering, some of Umram's guards pelted him with garbage. Dunnar remained slack, letting the humiliating debris bounce off his head. After a time they tired of this sport. He heard one say Dunnar must have passed out. In time that is just what he did, with his lower limbs going numb and his own heartbeat roaring in his ears.



Brandy stung his parched lips. Dunnar coughed and opened his eyes.

He was lying on his back. It was night. Stars played hide and seek among streams of billowing clouds.

Bolly and Agaran knelt around him. "Dunnie?" whispered Bolly, shaking him. "Do you know us?" Dunnar replied with a rude comment about his crony's brains.

"He knows us," Agaran muttered.

They helped him sit up. Dunnar took the flagon from Agaran and downed more brandy. "What hour is it?" he rasped.

"Near midnight." A burst of rough laughter from below made Dunnar flinch with fear. "The men have found a cache of Umram's wine," Agaran explained.

Discipline died when that happened. The mercenaries, keyed up all day by their terror of the hidden dragon, were flouting the Chiseler's orders and abandoning watch in

order to drink. When Umram protested the plundering of his property, his soldiers beat him up and locked him in a cupboard.

"Where's the beast?" asked Dunnar.

"There's been no sign of it since it took the two archers hours ago." Bolly looked past the other two to the pitch-black compound below. "The soldiers think it's gone. I don't."

Dunnar staggered to his feet. "I'd rather try to escape than die here. Who's with me?"

Bolly and Agaran were eager to go, awaiting Dunnar's leadership. Dunnar looked around, wondering aloud if they could make it down to the ground without arousing the drunken guards and workmen. Bolly said they'd managed to find a secret back stairway.

The spiral steps were narrow. They crept down, past the raucous room full of drunken, singing warriors. Two levels from the ground, a loud boom sounded through the tower. Dunnar, in the lead, stopped. It was completely dark in the spiral well, as close and hot as a velvet womb.

The great boom rang out again. "The main door!" Bolly said. "The thing's trying to get in!"

Agaran and Bolly reversed direction and started up again. In vain Dunnar tried to call them back. The pounding also drew the attention of the revelers. With much scraping of chairs and tramping of feet, Umram's people halted their merry-making and headed towards the sound.

Sweating, Dunnar stayed put. He couldn't think of any place in the keep safer than the secret stairwell. Through the plank wall he heard the soldiers reach the ground floor. The beast was continuing to hurl itself against the front door. The workmen and guards called for a barricade. Furniture and spare timber was dragged pell-mell to the first level hall and piled against the door.

Fools! Dunnar wanted to shout. They're building their own tomb!

The dragonlet had panicked the men inside the tower into

barricading the door; all the other openings in the keep were blocked, and that was the only way out. Now they were at its mercy.

The pounding abruptly stopped. Then a silence punctuated by scrabbling sounds. For the first time, the monster gave voice. A high, throaty growl rose above the screams of the men. Dunnar recognized the voices of Agaran and Bolly . . . as his riverfront cronies died.

Don't move. Don't make a sound. Dunnar heard various thumps and crashes. Through the wall he heard some of the men rouse themselves to fight. Umram's hired guards shouted defiance at the monster as it descended through the keep, while terrified workmen tore at the barricade they had helped erect only moments before. Dunnar sweltered in the close darkness.

The scrape of the dragonlet's claws on the main stairs grew louder. He became aware for the first time of the thing's smell, a fetid reptilian odor like a den of snakes.

A loud crashing, followed by frantic yelling, told him that the creature had found Umram bolted inside his cupboard. Though it was already dark in the stairwell, Dunnar clenched his eyes shut and put his hands to his ears to block out the Chiseler's final screams.

Numb, Dunnar started up. Bent low, he crept up the winding steps.

The dragonlet and the guards, he could hear, met in the hall at ground level. With a ragged shout, the hired warriors charged their foe when it appeared on the main landing. Four floors above, Dunnar could envision the terrible scene. The beast roared at his attackers with what sounded like pain. In such close quarters, surely some of the guards' blades had struck home?

By the time Dunnar emerged on the parapet, the whole tower was shaking, the screams and bellows of men and beast blending into a single awful sound, like the howl of a great storm. Dunnar looked over the edge. It was more than

thirty paces to the ground. How could he get down?

The sound of battle below him suddenly ceased. There was a rattle, and then the screech of the main door being opened. Dunnar rushed to the battlement and looked down.

A lone figure, a workman, staggered outside. He didn't make two steps before falling on his face. A scaly claw came out, seized the man by one ankle, and yanked him back inside.

Dunnar turned his back to the sight and slid down, drained.

Why did I steal that box? he asked himself. *I stole it because I'm a thief. It's what I do. That thing down there likes to kill people. That's what it does.*

Below, he heard a dull metallic clang. Wrung out with terror, Dunnar managed to stand up. His sword hung limply from his hand. Another stray noise rose from below, coming nearer.

He climbed atop the brick rampart. The Chiseler's stronghold spread out before him—the workshop, the wall, the sparse forest outside. If he dared to leap, it would surely be to his death.

A rattle like metal on stone snatched Dunnar's morbid thoughts away. To his horror, he saw the dragonlet scaling the outside of the tower, its hard, dagger-eyes fixing him with an unforgiving stare. Dunnar froze with fear and something else—resignation of his fate.

Still well below, the small dragon leapt toward him. Dunnar felt razor claws brush against his chest, and he spun away, falling to the parapet. At first he thought the beast had merely knocked him down, then he saw the blood welling out of his shredded shirt.

Breathing hard, heart hammering, Dunnar looked up at the sleek reptilian, nose to nose. Spreading its burnished lips to reveal a horde of gleaming fangs, the monster seemed to smile.

Then came a tremendous blow. Whirling through the air, his last view was of the keep, spinning away against a swatch of blue sky. Crazy thing, Dunnar thought as the world went dark. Though severed from his body, his head lived long enough to see itself falling from Umram's tower.

Some time later, its wheels creaking, a well-worn cart rolled through the open gate of Umram's stronghold. Seated in the driver's box was an old man, garbed in a shabby brown coat despite the heat of summer. At his side sat a lean hound whose muzzle was going gray. The cart was drawn by a single horse, once a powerful animal, now bowed down with age.

The air reeked of death. Nothing stirred in the compound. Flies and crows were the only inhabitants of the fort.

Coming upon the remains of a large fire, the old man reined up. Stiffly, he climbed down. The dog followed, close on his heels. Scratching a scruffy, bearded cheek, the old man prodded the blackened iron plates lying akimbo in the long-cold ashes.

"Shouldna used fire," he remarked. "Fire makes 'em fast and fierce." He lifted his rheumy gaze to the tower. "Reckon they're all dead?"

"Does a hatchling ever spare any?" said the dog. The old man shook his head. "How many eggs left to distribute?"

"Twenty-two—nay, twenty-three." When the eggs were all gone, he would be free of his duty, his curse. When you dared to rob the treasure of a great dragon and failed, there were penalties worse than mere death.

The hound, catching a scent, trotted away. He found a body, head separated but lying close by.

"Here is the one who stabbed you," said the dog.

The old man stood over the corpse. "Yes, that's him. Poor fool. Why do they always think there's gold in a sealed box?"

“Why did you?” countered the hound. The old man did not reply. He opened his coat and felt the wound where Dunnar had plunged a knife through his heart. He patted the dog’s head. There were advantages to having one’s soul trapped in another body.

“Day’s a-wasting,” the old man said.

The hound clambered to his place on the driver’s box. Slowly, the old man got the heavy cart turned around. With a snap of the reins, he rolled out the stronghold gate toward the next town down the road.



THE ALBINO

DOUGLAS NILES

I made my lair in the belly of a volcano. The mountain was not quite awake, but neither was it completely slumbering. The seething fires in the heart of the world, far below my own cave, warmed the place even in the depths of winter. If there was the threat of explosion, of instant annihilation, within those fires, that was a chance I was willing to take—for it was only a chance. So long as that eruption did *not* occur, I could survive in this shelter for many years.

Outside, beyond the sheltering walls of my lair, death was not just a possibility—it was a certainty. These were the days of the dragon purge, and the great Overlords sought me and my kin with an unnatural hunger that was all the more terrifying for its strangeness. In appalling and rapid succession, every one of my nestmates, as well as my sire and dam, perished in the grip or the breath of the great green, blue, and black dragons who fought for primacy in western Ansalon. Alone, with an urgent need to nest, I found a secure refuge.

The mountain lay near to the shores of the Newsea, and it was this factor that first attracted me. Like all black dragons, I cherished the presence of water. Here there were sea caves along the shore, long submarine passages the extended under the mountains of the land.

Atop the greatest of these summits, I discovered a crater with a narrow chimney in the base that extended deep into the world. It was too narrow to fly into, so I crawled downward to search for vast caves. Within the depths I found a grotto, a large chamber limned in the fire of liquid rock. That lava was far below the surface, but the crimson glow seeped through several wide cracks in the floor. A pool of sulfuric liquid gurgled in an alcove off the main chamber, and I sweetened this with the nectar of my own searing spittle. Fumes of toxicity floated throughout the vast cavern, potent protection against most intruders.

A narrow crack gaped in the grotto walls, away from the lava and the acid, barely wide enough to allow the passage of a horse. I found that I could compress my sinuous form enough to pass, and to my delight I discovered a small chute descending all the way to a chamber filled with brackish seawater. This liquid was elixir to me, and I wallowed in the fetid water that had been warmed by proximity to the great subterranean fires.

I probed and swam, diving and exploring until I stumbled upon the most cherished truth! A water-filled passage extended beneath the foot of the mountain, airless and lightless, twisting through the underworld until it emerged beneath a great shelf of stone on the very shore of the Newsea. For more than a mile it made a perilous swim, airless and narrow, but we black dragons have the capacity to swim long distances. This connecting passage was at the limit of my endurance, but it also represented a genuine escape route.

By the time I had made these discoveries, the urgency of nesting was upon me. I laid my eggs near an alcove with a bubbling acid pool, where the fumes could serve as a tantalizing lure to the treasured nestlings. My clutch numbered twenty and one. All of them looked normal, and I inspected them well and thoroughly—even though at that time I had no cause to suspect any one to be different from its siblings.

I coiled atop those eggs and spent thus a quantity of torpid years, until I felt the telltale squirmings of new life beneath me.

Twenty little wyrmlings did I count, each like an oily snake-of perfect blackness. Wings plastered to sinuous flanks, these tiny ones bore little resemblance to the great dragons they might one day grow to become. In many ways they were pathetic and weak, mewling and hissing, blindly seeking sustenance. I should have felt only contempt—indeed, that was my first reaction, and it was very pronounced. The creatures were angry and aggressive, snapping and clawing at each other with feeble blows and bites, lacking even the barest of talons or fangs capable of penetrating a newtling's skin.

Their very helplessness also aroused in me compassion that I did not know I possessed. It was this natural reaction that brought a bilious mass from my gut, regurgitated into the very bowl of the nest. Immediately the little serpents grew still, quietly sipping the life-giving nectar.

It was then that I noticed the last egg, floating now in the greenish-black pool of nourishment. Only the faintest poking and prodding dented its leathery skin, but to my attentive eye it was clear that the last of my wyrmlings was striving pathetically for release. Apparently, it lacked the strength to make the initial breach in the wall of its birth-prison.

There was no thought of hesitation, no reluctance in my gesture: I reached forth a forepaw great enough to fully enclose that small sphere and extended a single claw. With the tip, I scored a cut in the face of the egg. Immediately a columbine head emerged, flailing from side to side, breaking through the last membrane of restraining mucus. Finally it was free, and the newt pulled itself through the gap, slithering into the tangled mess of its nestmates. It was then that I perceived the truth, a reaction that brought an altogether different kind of gag to my throat.

For this wyrm, the twenty-first of my brood, was ivory white, as pale as the belly of a snail. Squirming there, amid the perfect blackness of his mates, he seemed to be the very essence of something obscene. I recoiled, whipping back, rearing high with wings spread stiffly in alarm. Unbidden, a hiss escaped from between my taut, leathery lips, and my tongue jutted straight out, tips quivering.

I studied the pale, sick-looking thing through narrowed eyes. It twitched and squirmed with distinct energy, even opened those colorless jaws to snap blindly at the coiling, seething mass of its nestmates. My initial revulsion slowly settled into a disquiet that, while it roiled in my gut, did not compel the lethal strike that had been my first impulse. Slowly I settled into a crouch, the broad wedge of my viper's head, so characteristic of my kind, looming over all of the little ones. Tiny drops of acid splattered downward from my jaws, vanishing into the tangled nest, provoking the wyrmlings into an even greater frenzy of feeding.

Soon they were all coated with the slimy mess of the nourishing bile. Strands of goo clung to tiny limbs, draped snouts, flanks and tails in a slick pattern of ink-stained green. In this tangle the white one vanished, indistinguishable among his siblings as they once again settled down and placidly fed.

I took heart from that uniformity, and convinced myself that the Albino was, in truth, naught but a different shade of black.



The newts thrived in the sheltered lair, growing prodigiously during the first few years. They subsisted entirely on the nourishing sustenance I regularly vomited into the nest. In due time, of course, they grew too large for the original bowl in the rocky cavern floor. Though this depression still served as a feeding trough, my offspring now slithered throughout the lair, creeping up the walls, even clutching to

the jagged outcrops of the ceiling as they passed overhead. They were active and aggressive, and I was pleased.

Even the white had become tolerable in my view, though I could not help but curl my lip at the weird sight of his alabaster skin. He reminded me of some kind of salamander or sea-worm, whereas his nestmates were like slick vipers. Also, he was retarded in size and strength in comparison to the black wyrmlings, though I had to acknowledge in him a more than ample quantity of ferocity and courage. Indeed, he demonstrated a quick ruthlessness—he would lash out at a sister, biting hard to back her away from some moldy crumb, or leap upon a brother's back and rake his sibling with needle-like claws, his vengeance for some perceived slight. This viciousness pleased me, for it is a trait of the greatest of our kind.

There were nineteen blacks and the albino now. One of the nestlings had perished in the second year out of the egg, drowned in the acid pool during one of the brood's frenzied baths. Such a fate is not uncommon, for though we black dragons can hold our breath for a significant duration, we are air-breathing creatures and must eventually obtain that precious gasp simply to stay alive. On this occasion I found the dead wyrmling tangled in the coils of two siblings, the albino and one of the black females. I had to drag the latter two out of the pool and press their slender chests repeatedly in order to get them breathing. The third was already dead.

After the first year their wings separated from their sinuous flanks. Following a period of gauzy molting they reached the stage where they could flap hard enough to drum up a gust of air, while emitting a droning buzz of sound. Their teeth were long, especially the two prominent fangs jutting downward from the prominent upper jaw. Even when the mouth was closed, these twin daggers showed, wickedly curving along the muzzle.

Though the blacks closely resembled each other, I could tell them all apart and had even given them names. There

was Dagger, the largest of the males, always strutting, preening and bullying about the lair. I took delight in snapping my jaws over his tail when he was engaged in some sort of harassment, whipping him around my head in a circle, then releasing my grip to send him sailing into the acid pool. Sputtering, he invariably emerged in a frenzy of rage, and I was pleased when he fearlessly attacked me—though I was still ten times his size! I would hold him down and purr approvingly until at last he calmed.

Another of my favorites was Diamond, a supple female named for the repeating pattern of scales along her back. She was a sly one, a mistress of diversion. Often did I watch her feign interest in some arcane part of the lair, drawing the attention of all her mates. When the curious wyrmlings were thus engaged, she would slip away to gnaw privately on some small morsel.

The white one, alone among the wyrmlings, I never named. He was simply the Albino.

All of them were constnatly hungry, fierce, and vicious. As they grew, they became more solitary in their pursuits, frequently dispersing throughout the network of caverns as each lay claim to their own small fiefdoms—an entire grotto for the most powerful, or a mere patch of level ground between two rocks for the least.

I brought them together to train them in the ways of black dragons. They walked and climbed with great agility, and soon it was time for them to swim. To this end one day I led my children down through the long, spiraling cave toward the watery chamber at the very base of my lair. One by one I threw them in.

Here the Albino demonstrated that stubborn streak which I was learning to know so well. He utterly refused to enter the water, hissing aggressively and fleeing when I made to seize him and throw him in. I pursued him upward, but he slipped away. Further compounding my rage, I returned to the water to find that Nightshade had drowned—due to my

absence and inattention, I admit. All the other blacks had become quite at home in the water, like sinuous eels slipping through the shallows, diving deep, learning to remain submerged for a very long time.

On each successive visit to the water cave, the white one would slip away from the brood long before we drew near to the water. This was vexing behavior to me, and after yet another swimming interval with the white failing to cooperate, I resolved to address the problem. First I searched in his private corner, a small cavern littered with square blocks of stone. I knew that he spent his time creating these stone blocks. First he scored lines in the bedrock with a delicate stream of acid. Then he removed the pieces, one at a time, to reveal blocks cut as squarely as by any human mason. It was an odd activity, to be sure, but it kept him occupied and did no harm. I was surprised to note that he had assembled such a large pile of these square stones, but there was no sign of him here.

Restlessly I prowled elsewhere among the caves, finding each savage newtling in its place, but the Albino was still missing. I searched fruitlessly, sought answers from the others of my offspring.

"I have not seen the White One for a long time," Diamond declared, "and when I do, I will bite him in the snout for the theft of my stone!"

"Where was he the last time you saw him?"

"Down near the water, cutting his rocks again."

I snorted, vexed. I knew that the Albino had claimed another space in a dark cave no one else wanted, deep in my lair. I went looking farther.

"He is afraid to come in here!" boasted Dagger, coiled in the middle of a small, dank grotto. "I sent him squealing away with a spittle of acid in his eyes!"

"Where did he go?" I pressed.

The wyrmling scowled, and I sighed, suppressing the urge to lash him with my tail. Dagger was big, but he was not the brightest of dragons.

"Away," he finally answered.

I turned away in disgust and began to sniff the air. I caught no scent of spoor at first, but when my tongue licked across the slick stones I tasted the Albino's bitter, acrid footstep. Surprisingly, it seemed as though he was moving toward the subterranean fires that fed the volcano—

And created the passage to the outside.

No! Would the Albino be so rash as to emerge into the open air, where one of the dragon overlords could make of him a quick snack? There were plenty of other possibilities—huge caverns, deep passages, secret tunnels that were too small for me but might tempt a solitary wyrm.

I could not take the chance.

For the first time in the many years since I had come here to lay my eggs, I started to climb outward and upward, into the long, hollow column of the volcanic shaft. The heat was intense, worse than I remembered, rising in waves from the pulsing sea of magma so far below. The rocks were slick, but the shaft was too constricted for me to spread my wings, so I was forced to climb like a lizard, digging my talons into the soft, crumbling surface, pulling myself upward in short, steady bursts.

The sky was far above me, a small circle at the end of a long tube of rock, but already I could see that it was daylight outside. Nervously my tongue swept back and forth, and I hissed in frustration when I again detected that telltale taste. The little runt had gone this way, toward lethal daylight and the terrible danger of a world controlled by the dragon Overlords.

Higher and higher I climbed, feeling the strain of my exertion in my lethal paws, whose strength kept me clinging to the wall. The circle of light overhead steadily expanded, assailing my eyes with unpleasant brilliance.

My body cried out for rest, and my mind roiled in growing fury. It was not just his own life that the Albino risked—his discovery by Beryl or Khellendros might lead the Overlord

to the lair, and that would be the end of the whole brood and of me as well. I growled, acid boiling behind my jaws.

Finally the narrow chute gave way to wider space, as I emerged from a hole in the base of a deep crater. Here there was room to stretch, and I buzzed my wings tentatively. The sun did not feel as bad as I feared against my smooth black scales, for there was a cold wind swirling around, but I felt terribly exposed.

As soon as I caught my breath I spread my wings, flexed my legs, and sprang into the air with an explosive leap. My wings pulsed downward, legs pressed flat to my flanks, as I slid forward and up. The broad pinions easily captured enough air to raise me, and the skill of flight remained a pure instinct.

At first I flew circles within the crater of the volcano, taking care to remain below the rim. When I neared the summit of the vast caldera I alighted upon the steep interior slope of the crater, making sure to stay out of sight of anyone beyond the crest. Once again I began to flick my tongue along the ground, seeking the spoor of the Albino.

Instead, I tasted proof of rainfall and snowmelt, the hooves of mountain sheep and the dung of eagles. These were unaccustomed sensations, and pungent, and I quickly despaired of finding the trail of my renegade wyrmling. I forged ahead for a hundred paces, then two hundred, still barely beginning to traverse the rim of the vast crater.

It was then that I noticed the sole irregularity in that wide circle. Some distance away from my position, the shelves of rock had been eroded by ice and water to create a deep notch, a pass through an otherwise imposing ridge. The passage was deep but narrow, and it occurred to me that any creature bound to travel by foot—and my newt was years away from the age of flight—might see that as an open route.

With that thought, I spread my wings and leaped away from the sloping inside wall of the crater, diving down through the caldera, my momentum carrying me back

upward to the level of the narrow pass. Then, once again, I settled to the ground and crouched out of sight. The passage was just barely wide enough to allow me to enter. It was guarded to the right and left by a pair of cliffs, jagged rocky ledges rising steeply toward the rim of the crater.

Cautiously I raised my head, snaking my tongue along the boulders piled within the gap. Immediately I found it—the Albino's taste, greased along the sides of two boulders. I hissed, my fury intense enough to produce a splash of acid, droplets that hissed and burned on the calcified surfaces of the rocks. To advance would be to reveal myself—a prospect tantamount to suicide—not that I suspected the dragon overlords were watching for me. Rather, I knew them to have spies and agents, legions of them throughout Ansalon, and any one of them, be he a draconian, dwarf, goblin, ogre, or most likely, human, might glance up at this mountain and see me.

I noticed the shadow of the mountain growing long across the plain. If I delayed my pursuit for a few hours, it would be fully dark. Still spitting in frustration, I backed out of the gap and settled down to wait as daylight faded with the onset of dusk. I pictured the Albino on his reckless wanderings, and a part of me hoped that he would meet with some quick accident—a mire of quicksand, perhaps, or even the tender mercies of a pack of dire wolves. If the wyrmling was killed and disposed of, my problems would be solved.

Another part of me resisted that notion. I was furious with the young one, but his punishment should be in the manner of my own choosing, not the vagaries imposed by his ignorant disobedience.

I watched the first stars blink into view, and though the sky was still a pale blue in the west, I decided I could wait no longer. I slithered through the pass and down the mountainside beyond. Slinking along the floor of a deep ravine, I was screened to view from east and west, and the steady darkening of the sky gave me additional comfort. My

tongue and nostrils confirmed that the Albino had come this way—following this hidden route down the mountainside.

Moving swiftly, I soon reached the lower slopes, where the incline became more gradual, and a concealing canopy of pines formed a dark green skirt around the hem of the volcano. The ravine evolved into a wide, shallow valley, carrying a stream of runoff over smooth shelves of rocks, gurgling through the woods. I padded along beside this brook, a huge dark shadow amidst the lightlessness of the forest floor.

The woods were alive around me, and I sensed each bough, each trunk and needle of the evergreens, even the sway of the grass and the light tremors of the ferns that grew thick along the banks of the stream. There were few animals here—birds, mice, rabbits, deer— all sensed my approach and shrank, trembling, into the deepest and most secluded bowers until I was well past.

I knew their fear, and I was pleased.

But I had fears of my own, so I pressed ahead as quickly as I dared, while still taking care against making any untoward sound. The sensations of the surface world bombarded me, surprising me with the recognition that I missed this world of cool air, plants, loam, and sky. Some of the blossoms and certain bushes laden with sticky berries had an almost sickly sweetness to them, but I reveled in the thick black mud that collected in the shallow eddies of the stream and in the musk that arose from the crumbling fiber of a rotten log. All in all, it was a far more complex world than the deep-down realm that had been my virtual prison for so many years.

My reverie was interrupted by a sharp sound, a sturdy blow echoing from somewhere in the forest before me. Immediately I grew taut, tail extended, wings stiffly folded against my flanks; I lowered my neck until my chin rested upon the cool, moist ground. Very carefully I continued to move forward, though now I strived for utter silence, took care before bending so much as a blade of grass.

The sound was repeated, and again—each a loud *crack* that spoke to me of violence, damage, destruction. I quickened my pace, until a nearby tree, bent by my passage, creaked loud enough to remind me of the need for stealth. Creeping again, I sniffed and tasted, caught the scent of smoke that was somehow lighter, paler than the brimstone effluence of my lair. Wood was burning, I realized, remembering that smell clearly now.

An explanation for the sharp blows occurred to me: humans used metal tools to attack wood, I knew, often smashing away at a piece until it broke into lengths short enough for use for various purposes. Perhaps the noise had been made by a man attacking wood.

An orange glow was rising from some unseen source to brighten the treetops and drive back the chill of the night. Barely moving, I oozed a few inches at a time between the trees, slithering across the ground like a monstrous—and very lethal—snake. By staying low, I found that I could push my head underneath the lowest branches of the pines, and in this manner I was able to press forward enough that I could see a fire blazing in the small clearing. I held back, fully concealed by shadows, careful so that not even a glimmer of reflection might shine in my hooded eyes.

The first thing I saw was a man, a human who looked rather tall and sturdy—for that scrawny species, in any event. He wore a breastplate of steel emblazoned with the sign of the rose; my tongue thrust in stiff agitation when I saw that long-hated sigil of my enemy. The man was feeding logs into his fire. Nearby were his horses, two swaybacked old nags and a powerful warhorse, half again as large as the two lesser beasts.

Even the horses hadn't sensed my presence, which I took as high tribute to my canniness. The charger tossed its head and whickered nervously, ears pricked upward, eyes cast in all directions. Though uneasy, the animal still had no idea that I was so near.

I was about to withdraw into the shadows, leaving this fellow and his mounts to continue on their way, when the man spoke, turning his head to address an unseen listener at the edge of his camp. He used the common tongue, and I understood his words.

"Where do you belong, then? A little fellow like you—and half starved, I'll warrant, from the way you finished off that deer. It's a dangerous world these days for your kind."

I could not see the target of the man's words, but their meaning was clear. A spittle of alarm trickled from my jaw, landing with a sizzling splash on the pine needles of the forest floor. The warhorse neighed frantically, rearing high, thrashing the air with his great, feathered hooves.

I exploded from the woods, a stream of pure, killing acid spuming from my jaws, directed at the three horses. Caught full by the corrosive blast, all of the animals tumbled to the ground, writhing and kicking as the caustic spittle burned through fur and skin, ate away at muscle and flesh. Within moments they were dead, and within a minute they would be unrecognizable as horses.

I then loomed over the human, sneering in contempt as the dragonfear overwhelmed him. He fell to the ground, squirming and gibbering in terror, as I swiveled my head, searching. Very quickly I saw that which I sought.

There was the Albino cringing beside a woodpile, a short distance from the fire. His small wings bristled stiffly, an instinctive reaction to the shock of my sudden appearance. Eyes narrowed, tail lashing in agitation, he glared at me in a mixture of challenge and alarm.

I was surprised, and not entirely displeased, to see no trace of fear in that rigid posture. Of course, I would teach him to fear me—the lessons would intensify and last through the rest of his time in the nest—but at the same time I noted that this small wyrm might be one of the bravest of the brood.

Then the Albino's eyes turned to the human, and I saw

the eagerness, the cruelty, the hunger there. I glanced down contemptuously and was startled to see that the man was gradually recovering his wits. He had shaken off the terror with remarkable speed and now rose to his feet to confront me. He made a lunge for his axe and, curious, I let pick up the tool. He backed toward the Albino, waving the iron blade before him.

“Begone, Snake of Blackness!” the man declared.

Swiftly tiring of the display, I was about to kill him when the wyrmling suddenly leaped forward, bearing the man to the ground, biting at the base of his neck. Blood pooled around the human, and he made a gurgling noise, but at least his annoying thrashing had ceased. In a minute, so too did the sounds he made.

In the meantime, the pale snakeling ignored the dying man, instead keeping his reptilian eyes watchfully upon my looming self.

“Fool!” I snapped.

A slashing forepaw sent him tumbling away from the wood pile, and I angrily kicked at the logs, sending them crashing around him. Squirming, he wriggled from beneath the pile and crouched, stiff legged and bristling, glaring at me. Then—proof of both his courage and foolishness—he hissed at me.

Rage boiled in every fiber of my flesh. I spat a gout of searing acid, the liquid streaking that pale white skin, running off to burn and sizzle on the ground. The blast would have destroyed most mortal beings, even dragons of clans other than my own kin-dragons. To a black, however, the shower was excruciatingly painful, but it wouldn't kill.

The Albino shook off the lingering sheen of caustic bile. Still hissing, he turned and fled into the forest. I leaped after, crushing aside trees, tearing up great chunks of ground with my gouging talons. The wyrmling was nimble, though, turning a sharp corner, diving under a massive, downed trunk, racing through an opening with a blur of churning limbs.

There was no subtlety to my pursuit. Now I had no cares of other beings, any humans, who might be in these woods. I wanted only to punish my insolent offspring. I smashed the felled trunk with the weight of my forepaws, but the Albino had already slipped away. More trees toppled as I followed him through the narrow gap. In the open at last, the advantage of my size came into play—with the aid of one downward push of my wings I soared like an arrow over a fifty foot gap and pounced.

My forepaws came down on the wyrmling's tail, and my jaws closed—none too tenderly—around that scrawny body. With a wrenching twist, I threw him threw the air to crash against a large boulder jutting from the forest floor. Finally stunned, he slumped downward, wings trailing limply. One leather-lidded eye was open, but now there was a glimmer of alarm—if not exactly fear.

“Do you know the risks you took?” I spat. “To expose the lair to danger and discovery? If you ever do that again, I will kill you! Now—go to the mountain, and go back to the lair! I will follow you and try to see that we are not discovered.”

Both eyes were open now, yellow slits glittering thoughtfully. Finally, he spoke. “I go now, to lair.”

With that he was off, making good time through the underbrush—though I could see that he limped a bit. Too, the acid soaking had left his white scales looking rough and patchy, with several ugly red wounds. I was pleased; I felt certain that my lesson was one he would remember for a very long time.

Within the lair, the passage of time slowed to a crawl. Even the growth of my wyrmlings was a matter of little note to me, so gradually do these changes occur. Dagger retained his ambitions, proclaiming himself lord of the lair—when he didn't think I was listening—and bullying his other siblings

whenever he could. Diamond grew more aggressive, and her leadership drew the female nestmates and even a few of the males to her. All the wyrmlings seemed to take sides between these two factions.

All except the Albino. For years the black wyrmlings had treated him simply as another nestmate, but after his excursion to the outer world; the others had regarded him with something like awe. They avoided him, and since this meant they did not bully him, he seemed content to while away much of his time alone. He spent more and more time in his dank cellar, breaking off pieces of rock and gathering them into a great pile of square blocks.

For my part, I spent agonized months in worry. I knew that the human's death would not go unnoticed, and that anyone who examined the scene of the combat would have little doubt that a black dragon had done this killing. Word might even reach one of the Overlords. Finally I convinced myself that we had escaped discovery, this time. I made a point of reminding the Albino of the dangerous episode every time I saw him; my lessons took the form of a stream of acid spewed into his face, a rake of talons across his flank, or a slap with my mighty tail, a blow that inevitably sent him tumbling across the wall until he smashed into some solid object.

At the same time I saw less and less of him. He liked to hide in secret corners of the lair, timing his emergence to feed when I was in some other chamber of the vast cavern network. Certainly, he realized that I was punishing him for his own good and that I took only a little pleasure from these increasingly infrequent attacks.

The rest of the brood, now seventeen sleek and serpentine blacks—a third, Adder, had fallen into one of the fiery chasms one day when he and a band of siblings were pursuing and harassing their pale nestmate—were developing into splendid dragons. Each was at least twice the length of a human now, with wings nearing the stage of flight. Now

every fight, each squabble, was marked by the agitated buzz of those taut membranes, humming in a vibration that cast a strong wind and in the drier parts of the lair raised stinging clouds of dust.

All the blacks were splendid swimmers, veritable water snakes in the briny chambers at the base of the lair. They slithered from cavern to cavern, remaining submerged for long stretches at a time. Dagger even ventured far enough to kill a small dolphin near the outer entrances; proudly he dragged the bleeding carcass back to his mother, and my breast swelled with pride at this proof of his lethal power. It was a long distance to swim—he was the only one, besides me, who would could hold his breath long enough to swim the entire length of the escape cavern.

Only the Albino avoided the water cave. Once I seized him by the scruff, intending to drag him bodily to the shore and cast him in. He started to bite and claw, however, thrashing as one gone mad. Finally he gouged my foreleg, then spat acid into the wound, and I had had enough. I cast him aside, sending him tumbling over the floor until he lay stunned, perilously close to one of the cracks leading to the fiery bowers of the underworld. May the memory of Takhisis forgive me—at that moment I would not have cared if he had toppled in and perished.

Fate had other plans for this strange wyrmling. He remained significantly smaller than his nestmates, and though he displayed no other physical signs of deformity, I became increasingly convinced that he was fundamentally different from the clan of black dragons. Still, I allowed him to live, even to claim some of the precious food that would otherwise have gone to his ever-hungry nest-mates.

Until once again he disappeared, vanishing from the network of caves without leaving a trace. Worried that he had slipped outside again, I sought him in the lofty chimney, but there was no taste of his spoor—fortunately, he had not gone that way. I probed along the well-drafted tunnels

extending like a web from the central cavern, and though I found his siblings lurking in those passages, there was no sign of the white. I explored the various tunnels around his own quarry-cave, just above toward the briny sea cave. There was no indication of him in these reaches either.

My gut rumbled and seethed, acid boiling there as my rage grew over this new transgression—but so did my fear. Why did this wretched pale one behave in such a vexing fashion? Where would I find him? How would I punish him? It was this last question that, at least, gave me some pleasantness to contemplate. Each tactic I pondered was more inventive, more painful, than the last, though they all involved some measure of acid bath.

While I was making my way back to the main lair, my nostrils twitched at the awareness of that familiar spoor, the trail of the Albino. There it was! He had slipped down a narrow side passage, one that was uncomfortably hot. Even as I tasted the white one on the rocks, I recoiled from the furnace blast of dry air rushing against my face. My eyes dried uncomfortably, forcing me to drop my gauzy, protective inner lids. I could survive this way, but it also meant that I viewed the world through a grayish murk.

I pressed onward and downward, facing head-on into the furnace blast of air rising from below. In places the spoor of the Albino was a palpable essence, steaming from the rocks as the dry air baked every trace away. I hurried, compelled by twin realizations: that he was not very far ahead of me and that the trail would be lost if I allowed too much time to pass.

In another hundred paces the downward passage ended—not in a wall, but in a gap opening into a vast, enclosed cavern, one I had never explored. The floor was far below, and in the glow of the pale red light that seemed to be coming from beyond the horizon, I could see that it was basically flat—as if this place had once been liquid but during some forgotten era had cooled enough to solidify into a smooth expanse.

Something moved through the air, a winged shape of ghostly white. I blinked, shook my head incredulously, and snorted an involuntary alarm. The Albino was trying to fly!

Somehow those small, even stunted-looking wings spread wide enough to capture the air, to lift the white wyrmling, giving him the means to dive, curl, bank, and even to climb. I watched as he flew a graceful spiral, steadily ascending through perfectly matched circles. Clearly, this was not his first attempt at flight. How many times, I wondered, had he come here and practiced?

Far above me now the Albino tucked his wings and plummeted into a fearless dive. Like a spear he plunged into the depths, dropped past my vantage and continued downward, shrinking into a tiny spot of whiteness.

It was then I noted another shape moving in the cavern, compelling my attention as it launched itself from a hidden ledge. Broad wings, a span greater than my own, gave proof of another dragon unknown to me, and I stiffened in fear. This was a huge serpent, far larger than me, of a murky color indistinct in the shadowy view.

The white one seemed to anticipate the danger, for he spun out of his dive, banked around the edge of the great cavern, and started climbing for all he was worth. The large dragon tried to intercept, but it couldn't match the little one's speed. A bellow of rage shook the air, and a cloud of flames erupted from those widespread jaws, an oily fireball that seethed, churned and crackled in the air barely a wingspan of distance behind the Albino's tail.

So this was a red. My upper lip curled, an instinctive reaction of hatred. The reds were powerful, violent, dangerous bullies who made no secret of their disdain toward the rest of dragonkind. They were known to feast on the young of the other clans. Despite his initial escape, it looked as if my reckless pale nestling was going to meet just such a fate.

The Albino didn't give up, I grant him that. He flew upward at a steep angle, somehow found the energy to buzz his wings and continue to lift himself higher. The red, still in pursuit, fell farther behind. Eyes narrowed, I studied that hateful form, smelled the lingering brimstone from that lethal, fiery breath. It was huge, a male, I was certain, and if it could devour my wyrmling in one bite, it could break my back or crush my skull with the same power.

Only then did I perceive what the Albino was doing. The wretch was flying directly toward me! No doubt his intention was escape—he was simply aiming for the entrance to this vast cavern—but he was leading the red straight to me. Hissing softly, I shrank back into the cavern, started edging back up the steep passage that had carried me to within view of the flying chamber.

All too soon I hear the scrabble of tiny claws on a stony ledge, the Albino reaching the passageway and was clawing at the solid ground. He sprang upward, fear evidently driving him to extraordinary lengths.

I noticed an alcove to the side, a large grotto accessed through a narrow entry. Without thinking, I slithered through the entrance and curled around to face the outer passage. There was no other way out—if the red discovered me here, I was doomed. Holding the air in my lungs, frozen as still as a statue, I hooded my eyes and scrutinized the tunnel.

Soon the white raced past, crossing my field of vision like a streak of light. Blinded by his own predicament, he took no notice of my presence on his flank. Now I heard the heavier steps of the red, crunching rocks, casting aside boulders with the brutal force of those powerful talons. It pressed up the passage quickly, gaining on the fleeing youngster with every slithering step. The great, wedge-shaped head came into view, feathered whiskers trailing, glowing smoke puffing from huge, gaping nostrils. There were the great forelegs, rippling with muscle, terminating in talons that were half again as long as my own.

My reaction was instantaneous and instinctive. The spume of acid emerged from my mouth in a direct stream, perfectly aimed. It struck the red at the base of its neck and seared a caustic line along its crimson flank, even as the wyrm's headlong rush carried it past. The bile tore through the sensitive membrane of that folded wing, burned away the scales protecting the huge, sinewy haunch.

The red's roar was an explosion of mingled pain and rage, terrifying in might—but now I had no time for fear. I burst from the side cavern, my talons raking terrible wounds along the red's flank, my jaws closing around the back of that serpentine neck. Fire exploded; a blast of flame billowed along the wall of the corridor, burning one of my own wings.

The crushing grasp of my jaws deflected the brunt of the fireball enough to save my life. The red tried to roll, to bring its own talons into play, but I tumbled with it, twisting onto my back with my enemy clutched on top of me. His legs and his lethal breath could only strike upward while his enemy writhed below.

Grimly I held on, crushing through that neck with all the power of my jaws. If the red had been able to twist free his great strength would have prevailed—he would have killed me in whatever manner he desired. The blast of my acid breath had been a powerfully damaging blow—not fatal in itself, but debilitating enough to sap the dragon of his magnificent strength.

Gradually the red's struggles grew weaker, until finally the creature slumped motionless. Even then I clutched it hard, strangling it for another hour, making sure that my enemy was dead. Only then did I pull myself away, feeling anew the gouges and burns of my own wounds.

Limping, trying to tuck my charred wing protectively against my flank, I made my way groggily back to the lair. My pain, fatigue, and shock were such that I lacked even the energy to confront my wayward nestling.

Much later, after I had recovered my strength, I returned to pull down a massive landslide of boulders and rocky strata, effectively choking off a long section of the access tunnel, insuring that my youngster could not return to the vast cavern. Nor, more significantly, could any vengeful kin-dragons of the slain red make their way from the fiery bowels of the mountain into my own lair.

When the time came for my black nestlings to fly, I took them to the great chimney extending up to the caldera of the volcano. Though this would expose them to view of the sky—for the first time in their lives—I intended to keep the lessons far down and safe within the well of the deep pit.

The white nestling meekly came along with the rest as I led them through the winding passages, gradually ascending toward the world of light and sky. At last we came to the rim of the great ledge, and I watched with pride as the black wyrmlings crept forward, gaping upward in awe and a mingling of excitement and fear. I saw them quivering, leaning forward, wings erect and starting to buzz, and I knew they were indeed ready.

I leaned forward and gave Dagger a nudge with my broad snout. He barked in alarm, scrambling at the ground as I pushed him off the lip of the precipice. Only when he started to fall did his wings truly start to buzz, and I stiffened in alarm as he tumbled away, spiraling chaotically downward. Had I misjudged? Was it too soon to bring them here?

Dagger was merely a tiny spot of darkness in the depths when, at last, understanding dawned. I saw his spirals grow wider, until it was clear that he was circling. Then, very slowly, he began to climb back up toward me, straining audibly, his body straight as a spear, while his wings buzzed so fast they blurred. He only made it about halfway up before he came to rest on a ledge, panting hard, but I was no longer worried; I knew that as soon as he caught his breath he

would be back in the air, climbing ever more efficiently with each successive flight.

One by one I prodded the rest of my nestlings off the ledge, though several—including the formidable Diamond—took to the air on their own initiative. Most of them caught on more quickly than Dagger, and soon the broad chimney hummed with the sounds of young dragon wings beating and thrumming through the air.

Only then did I think of the Albino, looking around for that pale youngling with growing alarm. He was nowhere on the ledge, nor did I see him consorting with his nest-mates, but when I looked to the sky, I saw a single pale shape climbing steeply away from me, wings bearing him steadily toward the forbidden sky. Snorting angrily, I sprang upward, raised my great body with powerful wings-strokes. Violently did I roil the air, and several of the black wyrmlings tumbled away, squawking in alarm. I left them to their own budding skills and continued my single-minded pursuit.

In the open air of the crater at last, I saw the Albino far above, his wings carrying him beyond the rim of the great mountaintop. Now I could take a better angle, and I flew through a climbing spiral, rage slowly getting the best of me.

The Albino had disobeyed me for the last time. This time there was no doubt in my mind but that I would catch and kill him. I came over the top of the volcano's crater, scanning the skies, quickly spotting the tiny white shape against the backdrop of a dark storm front. I gave frantic chase, the rest of my nestlings forgotten.

The great storm, towers of dark clouds, swelled to the east, the clouds roiling in the white wyrmling's path. The small dragon's speed was impressive, and I gained on him only slowly. The day seemed strangely dark. The sun was high, but the massive storm front seemed to soak the daylight right out of the air.

The Albino flew toward that front with all possible speed. Beyond him curled the great thunderhead, a dark cloud of

cumulous extending from the thick of the mass, rising into the sky, spanning the eastern horizon. Seconds later he vanished into the wall of cloud.

I snorted in frustration, trying to spot his small, pale shape, but instead something very large moved within that cloud, something massive, smoky . . . something red. Abruptly the wall of murk broke apart abruptly to reveal the maw, the neck, and the body of a red dragon so massive as to make me feel like a mere wyrmling myself. My blood turned to ice, and my wings stuttered in momentary paralysis. I tumbled downward several hundred feet before recovering my wits, turning around, and fleeing for my life.

Malystryx the Red! What was she doing here, so far to the west of her usual haunts? It didn't matter. She was the greatest, the cruelest, the mightiest of all the Overlords, and she had seen not just my pale offspring, she had spotted me. She was coming towards me fast now, a missile of crimson death streaking through the skies.

Desperately I had reversed course, flying with all speed toward the volcano. The great red was closing behind me as I soared over the rim of the volcano. Instinctively I dipped and landed, clinging to the slope just below the crest. Malys flew past, momentum carrying her into the crater.

A second later fire blossomed, a billow of oily flame erupting upward, obscuring my view, but I could hear, and the sounds were horrible: squeals of pain and terror as my black nestlings, every one of them, perished from that awful fiery breath. I roared my pain and grief, and once again Malys turned her huge eyes toward me.

Instinct took me then, a pure desire for survival. I sprang over the rim and dived away from the mountain's crest, noticing in the flash of an instant that the Albino was crouched there, hiding from the great dragon, watching my distress with bright, glittering eyes. Then I was gone, diving along the slope of the great peak, desperately winging toward the shining blue water of the Newsea's shore.

I cast one glance up. That horrific maw, a visage of crimson red hatred, filled the skies, and I could only flee. The water beckoned, and I splashed through the surface, swimming strongly into one of the submerged tunnels at the base of the lair. Drawing a deep breath, submerging myself deep in the recesses of the water filled cave, I propelled myself through the darkness. My escape hatch would lead me into the lair again, and the Overlord would not be able to follow me here.

For a long time I swam, propelling myself through the submarine channel down the passage that would lead to the air-filled cavern at the base of my lair. When my lungs began to strain, I knew that I was close. I kicked, using my tail to propel me—and came up hard against a wall of rocks.

Frantically I pushed and tore at the barrier, desperate for air, but the wall was solid and had obviously been built to withstand the force of my fury. The stones were square, chiseled by acid, perfectly formed to block this channel, to trap a desperate swimmer here, a fatal distance from the next breath of air. Even as I tore away and felt the crushing power of airless water closing around me, I heard the Albino add another rock to the pile.