

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®

FORGOTTEN REALMS™

Shadowbane

Eye of Justice

ERIK SCOTT DE BIE

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ALSO BY ERIK SCOTT DE BIE

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Shadowbane

Eye of Justice

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Welcome to Faerûn, a land of magic and intrigue, brutal violence and divine compassion, where gods have ascended and died, and mighty heroes have risen to fight terrifying monsters. Here, millennia of warfare and conquest have shaped dozens of unique cultures, raised and leveled shining kingdoms and tyrannical empires alike, and left long forgotten, horror-infested ruins in their wake.

A LAND OF MAGIC

When the goddess of magic was murdered, a magical plague of blue fire—the Spellplague—swept across the face of Faerûn, killing some, mutilating many, and imbuing a rare few with amazing supernatural abilities. The Spellplague forever changed the nature of magic itself, and seeded the land with hidden wonders and bloodcurdling monstrosities.

A LAND OF DARKNESS

The threats Faerûn faces are legion. Armies of undead mass in Thay under the brilliant but mad lich king Szass Tam. Treacherous dark elves plot in the Underdark in the service of their cruel and fickle goddess, Lolth. The Abolethic Sovereignty, a terrifying hive of inhuman slave masters, floats above the Sea of Fallen Stars, spreading chaos and destruction. And the Empire of Netheril, armed with magic of unimaginable power, prowls Faerûn in flying fortresses, sowing discord to their own incalculable ends.

A LAND OF HEROES

But Faerûn is not without hope. Heroes have emerged to fight the growing tide of darkness. Battle-scarred rangers bring their notched blades to bear against marauding hordes of orcs. Lowly street rats match wits with demons for the fate of cities. Inscrutable tiefling warlocks unite with fierce elf warriors to rain fire and steel upon monstrous enemies. And valiant servants of merciful gods forever struggle against the darkness.



A LAND OF UNTOLD ADVENTURE

PROLOGUE

12 HAMMER, THE YEAR OF THE SECOND CIRCLE (1470 DR)

WE MUST FIND THE SWORD OF SHADOWBANE.”

In the wake of her words, muted disapproval filled the great council chamber of the Eye of Justice, dancing along the carved walls to reach every one of the fifty assembled knights. They were malodorous, ugly men and women with cruelty in their eyes. They did not listen but amused themselves with trivialities: some counted and recounted their ill-gotten coin, some sharpened blades, and some even dared to bring hired company to the council.

It sickened her, but after seven years under Uthias Darkwell, had Levia truly expected anything else?

The Vigilant Seers were even worse. The five cold-faced men on the council sat in enigmatic silence, their unsympathetic eyes fixed upon the supplicant with her impossible quest or wandering to other diversions. Few of the Seers had any honor left, and none of them cared about the Eye anymore.

After a moment, someone rose to speak against her: Watcher Haran, the big half-Shou swordsman from Elversult. Of course he challenged her—he did so every time she

addressed the council. He rose from where he sat beneath Lord Darkwell's throne and waved at Levia as though to disperse a puff of dust.

"Every year, you bring before us the same request," he said. "Do you never tire of hearing your own words, Levia Shadewalker?"

Haran's booming voice and thick shoulders more than dwarfed the plain half-elf woman in the center of the council chamber they shared, but she refused to concede. Levia was made of harder steel than Haran of Elversult. The laws of the Eye granted her a voice and put her on the same level as her far-more-popular opponent: a rising star in the order and on track to sit on the council of the Vigilant Seers. Indeed, Haran had earned a fair stake of his clout in the Eye by his way of vociferous opposition to her agenda. He was Uthias's stooge through and through, and the words he spoke might as well be the High Seer's own.

No matter. The wind howled outside the chamber of the Eye, matching the fury she kept carefully locked in her heart. She would speak, and although they might not listen to her, they would *hear* her, gods-be-burned.

"Every year, I ask the same question, yes, because every year, the call for it is greater." She gazed around the chamber at the grubby rabble that infested the Eye of Justice. "Can you not see Gedrin's legacy crumbling around you? We sit in our cavern of stone and count our coins while thieves grow bolder in the streets of Westgate. We call ourselves bringers of justice, yet the lawlessness in the city grows by the day. Can we not undertake this simple task?"

"Simple task?" Haran stopped where he had been pacing around her and turned an incredulous expression in her direction. "The search for Gedrin Shadowbane and the

sword of Helm is no mere trifle. The old man has been gone for a decade, lass!”

The word “lass” grated on Levia, but she bore it with the cool detachment Gedrin had taught her. Gedrin Shadowbane had been her teacher and—in the latter years—a father to replace the one she had never known. She owed him everything and resolved not to disappoint him now, even if he had abandoned her along with the order he’d created so long ago.

“His lengthy absence is all the more reason to search,” she said. “We must discover what has become of him and reclaim the sword that was lost. It is the blade of our god and must—”

“*One of our gods.*” The oldest of the Vigilant Seers, Lord Sephalus, roused himself just long enough to impart some of his sagely wisdom, his head perched on his hand. “The first to pass from us. There are three gods we follow, and Helm is far from the most potent. Why do we focus upon him, and not our living lord?” His eyes drooped again and he snored.

“My Lord Seer speaks true,” Haran said. “All affection for your father aside—”

“He was—*is*—not my father,” Levia said. “Gedrin Shadowbane is my *master*, and master of us all. Or have you forgotten whose voice stirred us out of depravity and set us on the path of the righteous? How the Eye of Justice brought order after the chaos of the blue fire?”

“That was eighty-five years ago, before any of us yet drew breath.” Haran seemed to reserve his most incisive counterstrokes just for her. The man did not bear the nickname “Saer Harangue” for nothing. “I admire Gedrin as much as any of my brother and sister Seers, but he must be more

than a hundred years old by now, if he is even yet living. Ways must change, lass.”

Levia wished he'd stop calling her that. “We have strayed from the path . . .”

“And besides,” Haran continued unabated. “The Eye lacks the blades to reach the whole of the Dragon Coast, much less a fruitless scouring the length and breadth of Faerûn.” He stood face-to-face with Levia and crossed his arms. “This, lass, is why you will never rise in the order—you simply refuse to see beyond yourself, much less to the whole of the matter.”

“Aye,” said a woman's voice from beneath Lord Sephalus's throne.

Watcher Rsalya of Selgaunt was squire to Sephalus, his obvious heir, and some said she was much more. Few women claimed membership in the Eye of Justice, and many who did were not knights but rather harlots who rose to prominence using their bodies rather than their swords. Rsalya was one such, and Levia hated her for it. She disliked beautiful women, because they possessed that which she did not have and never would. The world seemed so easy for them.

“I wonder if Sister Levia can even see herself.” Rsalya wrinkled her nose. “Perhaps she'd stop insulting us all with such awful hygiene—or is that an *attempt* at her hair, do you think?”

The barb drew laughter from the men gathered around the chamber, and Levia bristled. She bit her lip to keep from countering. To seem a hysterical woman would not avail her cause.

Had Levia truly expected victory here? In the Year of the Second Circle, the Eye of Justice lay sick, infected with fools

like Haran and fops like Rsalya when it deserved heroes like Gedrin or even Sephalus as he had been before age replaced his gray matter with cake batter. The council was not on her side, and she could count not a single vote among them to back her cause.

She turned, as she did every year, to Uthias Darkwell, chief of the council and highest of the Vigilant Seers. He was a man of powerful stature and impressive sword skill, and he at least deserved her respect, even if he had been the one to succeed her master Gedrin ten years earlier, after the paragon's disappearance. Uthias had watched the proceedings silently, his sharp eyes and ears catching the minutiae even Levia herself missed. None of it mattered, however—she knew his answer even before she asked the question.

Levia fell to one knee before the High Seer. "Please, my lord," she said. "Hear me—"

At that moment the great doors of the council chambers gave a thunderous groan and swung open as though blown inward by the tempestuous wind. A figure stood in the door, seemingly frayed around the edges like poorly cut paper. He wore rags and carried no weapon, but his eyes—so pale they almost seemed white—might as well have been a burning sword and a gleaming shield. Two Justice Stalkers made to bar his way, but the man—little more than a boy, Levia realized—cut them off with a look.

"I seek the Eye of Justice," he said.

His youthful voice somewhat undermined the impact of his sudden appearance. Chuckles broke out among the crowd. Haran scoffed. He shoved past Levia and raised his hand crossbow casually toward the youth's chest. "I suggest you leave this place, boy, before—"

Without hesitation, the youth with the pale eyes reached

out, seized the crossbow, and smashed it into Haran's chin. Stunned, the odious man fell back and the youth pointed the stolen weapon at his chest. "The Eye of Justice. Now."

This made the confrontation all too real. Around the chamber, members of the Eye stirred from their lethargy. They dropped their coins and whetstones and set aside their hired lads and lasses. It was the brief hesitation from the youth's dramatic entrance that saved his life, or else he'd have been riddled with crossbow quarrels and thrown daggers before he spoke another word.

"You have found the Eye." Levia strode forth. "Why do you seek us?"

The youth turned his resolute gray eyes on her. "Who are you?" he asked as though he weren't fifteen years her junior.

Levia scrutinized him. Such arrogance, to burst into this chamber and make demands of her—of *any* of them! He wore rags and smelled beyond awful—a concoction of sweat, dirt, and the bitter rain of the Dragon Coast that she could smell across the ten paces between them. She reached for her mace, resolved to teach this beggar boy a lesson.

"Ah, ah," said a feminine voice near the door. "I wouldn't be doing that, me lady."

A scrawny halfling wielding a crossbow in either hand stood out against the storm. She pointed her weapons at either side of the council chambers, covering the whole of the Eye. The knights looked stunned to see her, and a few raised their hands in surrender. Cowards.

"Answer my question," the scraggly lad said.

Levia straightened. "I am Levia Shadewalker, first apprentice of Gedrin Shadowbane."

The name struck the youth, and—although he made no move to lower the crossbow—he reached into his pocket.

He tossed her something tiny. "This is yours, I believe."

She caught the object and drew in a sharp breath upon examining it: Gedrin's ring.

"Lord Shadowbane wanted you to have it back," the strange lad said. "He died well, and I would avenge him if I could."

The delay allowed the gathered knights to snap free of their indecision, and blades and bows came out. The half-ling hissed a warning. "Kalen! Blades!"

Through it all, the youth's eyes remained upon Levia. His crossbow, however, rose toward Uthias Darkwell himself, provoking gasps of alarm.

"Wait," Levia said. Then, louder: "Wait! Down bolts and listen!"

She had never been well-liked among the Eye, but the knights heeded her now and stayed their weapons. A good thing, too, as otherwise the youth might have fired his crossbow.

Haran stood fuming just behind her, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Who is this cur?"

"I come by the will of Gedrin Shadowbane, to fulfill his final command," the youth said. "We spoke only a moment, but it was long enough for him to send me on a quest. I seek ordination in the Eye of Justice."

His last word rippled through the chamber like sizzling water on a bed of coals.

"What a jest," Haran said. "Surely—"

"Silence." Uthias Darkwell's powerful voice shut Haran's mouth and stilled the anxiety in the chamber. He waved to Levia.

"The lad speaks the truth," she said. "He . . . Gedrin sent

him. I know he did.”

“I will find the sword whether you send me or no.” The youth looked to Uthias. “But out of respect to Gedrin, I would have your blessing.”

Levia felt suddenly unbalanced and uncertain. Not since a roving Gedrin had called her out of her life as a scullery maid and occasional thief on the streets of Neverwinter had she seen such confidence—such fixity of purpose. He truly would pursue this quest for Gedrin’s sword, whether for the Eye, for Gedrin’s sake, or only for himself.

And what did he know of her master’s fate? That he’d “died well” and that the boy would avenge him if he could. She clasped Gedrin’s ring tightly.

Uthias Darkwell regarded the boy with a calculating gaze. “Interesting.”

Haran sputtered. “My lord, he is a boy, not a knight-errant. You cannot be serious!”

Levia tightened her hand around the ring, her decision reached. “He is Gedrin’s apprentice and heir to Vindicator,” she said. “The Eye has chosen him.”

“Gedrin Shadowbane was a mad old man who couldn’t tell a swordsman from a tree stump,” Haran said. “We all know this, and yet you expect us to consider allowing this boy to undertake a quest no member of the Eye of Justice has ever accomplished?”

Levia stood her ground. “This is his will, the will of our master, and the will of the Threefold God.” She looked up at Uthias. “My lord, allow him to try.”

The High Seer rubbed his gray beard.

“Gods, you might as well kill the lad right now.” Haran sneered. “What makes you think a beggar boy can succeed where hundreds of sworn knights have failed?”

“For just that reason,” the boy said. “I am not a sworn knight, and so I will do that which must be done—without a good godsdamn for your code or your order.”

That stole the triumph from Haran’s face and replaced it with spreading ruddy blotches in both cheeks. “Enough, you insolent pup.” He drew his sword. “Halfling or no, Levia or no, I—”

“Why?”

Uthias’s resonant voice rippled along the dusty walls. The one-word question stilled Haran where he stood, and he eased his blade back into its scabbard. Uthias Darkwell, High Seer and master of the Eye of Justice, rose from his seat and spread his hands across the tabletop.

“Why do you wish this?” he asked. “You are a lad and have many paths yet open to you. You say you spoke with Lord Gedrin for all of a moment—why do you follow him?”

For a moment, Levia thought the question was too much for Kalen. He straightened and his bushy eyebrows came together as though reflecting confusion. His eyes darted toward the door, as though planning a quick escape.

Then Levia saw something come over him that changed everything. It was that same glowing-hot resolution that had inspired a servant girl to rise above her station and serve a purpose greater than herself—greater than any of them. Kalen gazed straight at the man he had been menacing, and lowered the crossbow. He spoke, and his words rang throughout the hall.

“Because shadow and darkness must be pursued in every form,” he said, “through every street, down every path, no matter how dark, until it is wiped from the world.”

The words—Gedrin’s words, turned into the vow all knights of the Eye took upon their initiation—filled the

council hall like a thunderstorm. Inspiration dawned on the faces of disinterested Watchers Levia had not seen speak up in years. Knights lowered their blades, unable to cross the boy's steely declaration. Rsalya stopped her incessant picking at her nails and paid rapt attention. Old Sephalus had tears in his eyes; and even Haran looked stunned.

Levia's stomach churned even as her heart leaped. "Three Watching Gods," she prayed under her breath. "He is the one."

"Very well," Uthias said, breaking the silence left by Gedrin's mantra. "We have much to discuss. Levia, see that the boy and his companion eat something. They look half starved—"

"Kalen." Every eye turned to the young man, and he looked a little uncertain for the first time. He clenched his fists. "Kalen Dren. And my sister, Cellica."

"Kalen Dren, then." Uthias nodded slowly. "Interrupt me again, and I shall have you removed by force, quest or no quest."

Kalen gave the Vigilant Lord a curt bow, but Levia could see that strength lingered around him. The lad bore the kind of pride—an overwhelming certainty of purpose—that only Gedrin had known. How could one so young be so sure of himself?

Levia wandered from the Hall of the Eye in a daze, hardly aware of the guards as they closed the door behind them. Her eyes remained on Kalen, who stalked with unassuming grace from the great stone chamber. They passed into a sitting room, where prisoners of the Eye traditionally awaited their judgment. Levia felt unsettled—like both Kalen's captor and a fellow prisoner of this strange course of fate. Rain hammered at the glass window, and Levia could

hear thunder rolling.

“So you’d be her, eh?” Kalen’s halfling companion presented Levia a beaming smile, showing pearly white teeth that belied her otherwise filthy exterior. She looked as hard lived as her companion and a little older.

“Cellica, yes?” She shook the little woman’s arm. “I’m Levia.”

“Oh, I be knowing all about *you*,” Cellica said. “It’s all me brother’s been about for days. ‘Find Levia Shadewalker,’ ‘give her this ring,’ and all. He can be single-minded.”

“I can imagine.” Levia glanced over at the lad, who was wandering around the room, inspecting the walls as though for spy holes. “You said he’s your brother? How—?”

“Not by blood, but he’s me brother, be sure.” She had pieces of an accent, which Levia understood she was working to overcome. “You take what family you can in Luskan-town.”

“Luskan.” The last letter Levia received from her master said he’d heard of a dark council in the den of thieves on the Sword Coast, and she’d heard nothing since. All her pleas to visit the city had fallen on deaf ears once Uthias had taken over the council. “How long—I mean, how long ago did he . . . ?”

“Seven years,” the boy said.

The women looked over to where Kalen leaned against one of the wood tables. Within a dozen breaths or so he’d grown comfortable in the room, and now looked as though he belonged there. And if his story and Levia’s own instincts held true, he did.

“Your father came to me seven years ago as I begged for coin on the street. He charged me never again to beg for anything and bid me carry the sword.” Kalen’s fingers

traced his cheek. “He clouted me a good one to remember, as well.”

“That sounds like him.” Levia couldn’t help smiling even as a lump rose in her throat.

Cellica backed away from the conversation, an eye turned toward the kitchen. “I’ll just be seeing what’s on the simmer,” she said. “We’ve had naught but roots and berries for days.”

Levia nodded, then turned her attention entirely to Kalen. The halfling might as well have ceased to exist as far as she was concerned.

Kalen Dren had the awkward proportions of a boy not yet a man. Levia estimated his age at fifteen winters, although he’d clearly lived a hard life, and as such could be much younger than he looked. Levia saw the structure of hard muscles built into his frame. Coupled with his intensity and raw physical presence, he would be an impressive specimen in a few years.

“What took you so long?” she asked. “If you met Gedrin seven years ago . . .”

“I ran,” Kalen said without a hint of guile. “I refused the burden he offered, hawked the sword and ring, and ran.” He closed his fists at his sides. “Now I am finished running.”

Something about those words struck Levia, and she understood. She felt a kinship with the lad, despite the years and layers of grime that separated them. The boy truly was filthy: mud clung to his straggly brown hair and several coats of road dust shrouded his face. Levia saw a fresh, deep cut on Kalen’s hand, livid through the caked dirt.

“Torm can heal you.” Although he flinched like a startled cat, she took his wounded hand between both of hers and gasped. “Your hand’s like ice.”

“No.” Kalen pulled his hand away as though from a snake. “No magic. It’ll heal.”

“But—doesn’t it hurt?” Levia asked.

His face might have been chiseled of stone. “No magic.”

The years that separated them fell away, and Levia felt suddenly as though she were facing a man grown, rather than a lad without whiskers on his chin. It kindled warmth in her breast, and for what would not be the last time, she chided herself as foolish to let a mere boy impress her. Though, when this lad became a man, such certainty of purpose would have quite the effect on any number of ladies. He was no pretty boy, but he was striking. He bore mystery in his face with its long-ago broken nose, small scar across his brow, and enigmatic frown. The marks of teeth stood out around his mouth and fingers. The wounds were long-since healed and—Levia realized—self-inflicted.

“You don’t feel them, do you?” she asked. “Your teeth. When you gnaw yourself.”

His eyes cut into her like chips of ice. He nodded slowly.

“I am sorry,” he said, “that I could not save your father.”

Levia couldn’t breathe. Tears welled in her eyes despite her attempts to fight them, and she wept for the first time she could remember.

With the scrape of wood on stone, the door to the council chamber opened. Haran’s face was red and his eyes furious, but when he spoke, he kept a civil tongue. “The Vigilant have seen and conferred. You will leave as soon as you are ready, and, with the blessings of the Eye, you will return with Vindicator by any means necessary.”

Levia’s stomach lurched, and she found herself filled with profound relief. Haran nodded stiffly, and Levia could tell by the words he left unspoken that Kalen had made an

enemy today.

Once the council had shuffled out, she looked over to Kalen. The boy had turned to Cellica and they were conferring quietly, using a mixture of words and gestures known only to them. “Well,” Levia said. “You’ll need to be invested, and then there are rituals to be done to start your quest. Perhaps we could clean you up first? A hot bath?”

Kalen shook his head. “No need for the rituals, the bath, or the quest.”

He held out his hand to Cellica, and the halfling produced a necklace with a sword-shaped pendant. Levia knew immediately that magic hung around the piece—she had not detected it earlier because Cellica had worn it, and Levia had possessed eyes only for Kalen.

“What is that?” Levia asked.

Kalen murmured a word under his breath, and the medallion grew in his hand, swelling in a heartbeat to the span and breadth of a hand-and-a-half sword. The edge of the blade gleamed and a worn sigil adorned the hilt: the eye-in-gauntlet of Helm, the long-dead god of guardians. Levia knew the sword well—she had tried to wield it once before, although she and Gedrin both had decided she had no facility for edged weapons.

She recognized Vindicator.

“You had it the whole time,” she marveled. “You demanded the quest as a ruse.”

“If I had walked in those doors with this sword”—Kalen ran his fingertips along the flat of the blade—“would I have walked out again?”

Levia was impressed. “You don’t trust anyone.”

“I trust her.” Kalen nodded to Cellica. “And now I trust you.” He fixed Levia with his white gaze, weighing her.

“Have I chosen well?”

Levia considered. The youth was fearless—that much was certain—and wise as well, which he would need to be to navigate the treacheries of Westgate and the Eye. And even beyond these things, she saw in him a hunger to prove himself and to redeem whatever dark life he had left behind in Luskan. Levia felt the way she imagined Gedrin must have felt when he looked upon her for the first time, and knew why her master—her father—had chosen this one.

“Yes.” At length, she answered his question. “You’ve chosen well.”

“Good.” He gave a curt nod. “When does my training start?”

Levia smiled. “Right now.”

PART ONE:

DEADLY HOMECOMINGS

A traditional dance of the Dalelands, “Deadly Homecomings” has its roots in a time of near constant invasion, when heroic youth would return from war, but some would have sold their loyalties to dark foes: the Zhentarim, or worse. Dancers keep a careful eye upon one another, and many of the movements look but a shade away from violence.

Shalis Ptolexis, Celebrant of Sharess
Wanderings in Love’s Name,
Published in the Year of the Bow (1354 DR)

FPO

CHAPTER ONE

*DAWN, 24 FLAMERULE, THE YEAR OF DEEP WATER DRIFTING
(1480 DR)*

KALEN DREN AWOKE SLOWLY, THE LAST VESTIGES OF HIS dream slipping languidly away. As ever, his body slept longer than his mind. It was the nature of his illness—even as it made him stronger and more durable day by day, so, too, did it slow sensation. As he waited, eyes closed, he relished the feeling of disconnection before the needles of his numb flesh crept back in to stab him.

I will make of myself a darkness, he thought. A darkness where there is only me.

The words let him focus.

A moment before, he'd dreamed about his first arrival in Westgate, ten years before, as a shaking boy of fifteen winters. On that night, he had sought out the Eye of Justice, but this time, Threefold God willing, he would not see any of them. Levia might prove an exception; he would not mind seeing her again, although considering the manner of their last leave-taking, he suspected matters would be far from simple between them. An important task brought him to the city of Shadowbane's birth, and he would see it

through and leave as quickly as possible.

When sensation finally filled him once more, he realized a certain pressure weighed upon his midsection, as if something—or someone—was poised there. When he opened his eyes, it was to a feminine face not a hand's span away from his own. Iridescent sapphire eyes studied him in exacting detail, and deeper blue lips provided a sharp contrast to her gold-tan skin. Her vibrant blue hair in the morning sunlight seemed to glow against the gray sky.

“Myrin,” he said to the woman straddling him.

“Kalen.” His name was kitten's purr. The intensity of her gaze—as though he were a new spell she wanted to learn—vaguely unsettled him.

The dagger in her hand was also disturbing, in a more immediate sense.

She raised the blade, and he rolled to the side, throwing off her aim so that she cut only dirt. A year before, when Myrin had been starved and frail, his move might have sent her flying. However, she'd since filled out into increasingly distracting curves, and rolling over merely spoiled her attack and put her beneath him. The knife skittered loose.

They struggled together in the grass for a pair of breaths, each going for the knife and each managing to pull the other back into the grapple. Ultimately, Kalen caught her wrists and straddled her. Myrin's chest heaved with exertion.

“Very well!” Myrin said, sounding disappointed. “I yield—I yield!”

Kalen, breathing heavily, loosened his grip, although not enough to let her go. “What are you about? Why did you attack me?”

“You said ‘always attack by surprise.’ So . . .” She grinned awkwardly. “Surprise?”

“A pleasant morn to you as well.”

“I just wanted you to see that I take your lessons seriously.” She looked forlornly at her lost dagger. “It seems, however, that I still have a good deal to learn.”

“Ah.” With the fog of sleep lifted, Kalen remembered their ongoing bladework lessons. “But why did you attack me when I was asleep? I’m teaching you to fight, not to murder.”

“I waited until you woke up,” Myrin said.

“Hmm.” He couldn’t argue with that logic, even if it missed the spirit of his question. The wizard could be very literal in her thought processes, and he could never say for certain whether she actually or *purposefully* misunderstood. At least until she smiled, and he knew this time it was a jest. She was an odd one, but Kalen found her eccentricity refreshing. “Very funny.”

“I thought so.” She gave him a curious look, then nodded to where he yet lay atop her. “Were you, er, going to get off—?”

Kalen climbed to his feet, then helped her up. They turned their backs to each other and adjusted their rumpled clothing in silence. Kalen sneaked a look over his shoulder and saw Myrin fussing at her hair, which had grown long in the year since they had met. Gone was the girlish waif he had rescued from the machinations of confidence artists and assassins in Waterdeep, and in her place stood a woman who grew lovelier by the day.

Lovelier and more powerful.

“Speaking of murder, I’m afraid I tried cooking our morningfeast.” Myrin nodded to a blackened pot whose sides boasted impressive floes of burned sludge. “It was just the rabbits and bits from yestereve as a simmerstew. I can’t

imagine where I went wrong.”

Kalen could. He imagined Myrin spreading her fingers wide with her thumbs touching and summoning fire magic to expedite matters. And knowing her, the comparatively small flame of that spell would hardly serve when she could create an entire ball of flame that would quickly turn their morningfeast to gray rubbish. Hence, murder.

“I’m not hungry,” he said. “Perhaps a little blade practice?”

“Perfect.” Myrin smiled, retrieved her knife from the grass where it had fallen, and took up the position of the apprentice before the master.



They sparred until the sun cleared the mountains of Aglarond far to the east. He’d promised a year ago to teach her daggerwork, and their trek to Westgate provided the first opportunity. An excellent student, Myrin absorbed instruction with rapt attention and demonstrated great potential. Half of bladework was in the mind, and although Myrin could be scattered, she had quick wits. Kalen suspected they would need all of them in Westgate.

In Luskan, someone had sent them a blood-soaked challenge, and he knew their unknown opponent would be waiting and watching. To this end, he’d acquired new, non-descript clothes in Neverwinter and had taken passage with a variety of caravans and barges to get them to this point. They would hike the last few leagues into the city and enter as refugees, offering the best chance of avoiding identification. So long as she avoided using magic, they might pass freely.

“Be observant,” Kalen said. “See where I will move before I do.”

“Right,” Myrin said.

They circled like wolves, testing each other’s defenses. Myrin fought like a novice—her moves obvious and easily blocked—but she was learning. In truth, it wasn’t a fair fight at all, even if she’d been fighting as long as he had. Kalen simply had a knack for seeing through deception, and bluff as she might, Myrin could not strike unless he let her.

“Look beyond my face,” he said. “Eyes tell you much, but a trained liar will keep them blank. Look to my throat and ears—see my blood pulsing. Feel my body.”

“Feel your body,” Myrin said. “Definitely.”

Kalen frustrated her for a full thirty count, then left an opening under his right arm, inviting her practice blade. He could tell she knew it for a trap, but her emotions got the better of her. When she thrust, he brought his arm down, pinned her wrist against his side, and caught her throat lightly with his free hand. She looked up at him with both shock and defiance.

“You rely too much on the blade,” he said. “A duel demands your hands, feet . . .”

“I’m just doing what you said.” Myrin pressed closer against him. “Feeling your body.”

“There is no mirth when you are fighting for your life.”

“It’s not fair, Kalen!” She disengaged from him, her shoulders heaving from the exertion of their fight. “You’re a far better grappler than I. If I could use a little magic . . .”

“We talked about this. You’re distinctive enough without drawing attention the way magic will. Not many in Westgate wield your powers, and many will try to exploit you.”

“But what if no one’s here to see?” Myrin asked. “No

one's watching us now. We could exploit my powers right now. Do anything we want."

Kalen pushed away a possibility or two that flashed through his mind. He saw the way her eyes lingered on her pack by the fire, where she kept the orb of glass Liltan had given her. The orb that pulsed with an inner blue mist. Kalen didn't trust the elf, and he trusted his gifts even less.

Kalen stepped between Myrin and the pack. "You need to be able to get along without it," he said. "Magic is a tool too easily relied upon. If it breaks, you break with it."

Myrin's attention shot back to him. "If you'd let us walk the shadow paths the whole way, then maybe you'd see its value." *My* value, her eyes added.

He sighed. Myrin had wanted to use shadowwalking magic to speed their trek, but Kalen hadn't relished a forced march through a nightmare reflection of the land he knew, even if it would have reduced their journey to a fraction of the time they'd spent on the road. And ever since Myrin had wielded dark magic against the swarm demon in Luskan, he'd been loathe to push her. Haste was of the essence, though, and he'd agreed to a compromise: sparing use of the magic to cut their journey to a tenday and a half.

Also, her magic had proved useful in keeping Vindicator hidden from prying eyes. Over the past year, Myrin had developed a spell for expanding the confines of a belt pouch without changing its size as seen from without. She'd carried Vindicator, wrapped up and safe, since Luskan, though he had other plans for the blade going into Westgate. He needed it closer at hand.

He touched the sword-shaped amulet at his throat and considered. "Myrin . . ."

"Kalen." Myrin stood defiant, her arms crossed and her

practice dagger tapping against her elbow. It was one of Myrin's flaws that she felt the constant need to prove herself. Had Kalen not already demonstrated how much he relied upon her? After what had happened in Luskan, he could hardly think of anyone he'd rather have beside him in battle.

He put his free hand on her shoulder. "I value your magic, Myrin, and I trust you," he said. "I haven't trusted many people in my life, but you're one of them."

She seemed at least somewhat satisfied with that, returning an ambiguous smile. She swatted his dagger with her own. "Maybe you'll let me win one of these days, eh?"

"Unlikely." Kalen chuckled. "Although you're getting better. In a month or two, I won't be *letting* you do anything."

Myrin murmured something that sounded like "such a shame." When she saw him looking, she flushed a bit and cleared her throat. "If I'm making such progress," Myrin said. "Maybe we should forget the blades and you can teach me to use *that*."

She pointed at the weapon Kalen had been wielding while he kept Vindicator hidden away: an ugly black axe that leaned against a nearby tree. Its blade was jagged and warped, a thing meant for inflicting pain rather than engaging in honorable battle.

Sithe's axe.

"Let's start with the dagger. Slow steps." Kalen turned to their packs by the ruined morningfeast. "Maybe we should get moving . . ."

He sensed her attack before he could properly see it. He felt it in the displacement of air and the tiniest crunch of her leather shoe against the dirt. Without the time to

turn, he trusted to faith to dodge. He went one way, and Myrin's dull blade skipped off a mantle of gray force that surrounded his hip like a plate of steel. The Threefold God's power.

He turned to face her, and Myrin stabbed at his arm. He caught her dagger with his own, but she twisted her attack and threw herself inside his guard to land a solid slash on his torso. A plate of gray energy appeared, softening the impact of the knife, but she'd caught him off his guard and he staggered. Startled anger rose in him.

"Ha!" Myrin exclaimed in triumph. Her mirth went away when she saw his expression. "Kalen? Are you—Gods!"

Enraged, Kalen lashed out at her, and his knife sent hers ringing from her hand. Runes gleamed to life across her golden skin as she raised one hand to parry aside his next strike with a shield of shimmering golden magic.

It no longer mattered that she shouldn't use her spells. She had loosed his fury, and he saw only how best to defeat her.

He struck wide to lure her shield aside, then grasped her arm and twisted it behind her back. He pulled the wizard tight against him and his blade went to her throat.

They stood that way, panting in the morning air. Myrin trembled in his martial embrace but did not struggle against it. Indeed, she pressed herself back against him a little, drawn to his warmth and support in such a taut pose.

Then, unexpectedly, she laughed—a light chuckle that built into full-throated mirth.

"I did it," she said. "I hit you, Kalen—not once, but *twice*."

Kalen's anger faded, and he felt a smile pull at the edges of his mouth. Even if her accomplishment came at his

expense, he took pride in her progress, and her guileless joy pleased him. Nevertheless, he tapped his practice dagger against her chin as a reminder. “In a real fight, you’d still be dead.”

“In a real fight, my foe wouldn’t have had a dead god’s magic to shield him, so he would be on the ground bleeding.” Myrin gave him a sly look over her shoulder. “Or are you saying magic is good for something after all?”

Kalen nodded in concession. He started to let go of Myrin, but she groaned and relaxed. He had to grasp her tighter to keep her from falling. “Are you well?” he asked. “Dreams again?”

She nodded sleepily. Ever since she had absorbed a hoard of memories from the doppelganger Umbra, visions had kept her awake more often than she could sleep. Kalen couldn’t explain how she had come to lose her memories, much less how she absorbed visions from others. He accepted it as he did many other incomprehensible things about Myrin.

“My mind’s working so hard to make sense of it all,” she said. “I keep reliving things from another life—another world. Just yestereve, Umbra and I were together, fighting off a dozen creatures with squids for heads.”

“Mind flayers?” Kalen asked dubiously.

She shrugged, which felt rather good as he held her. “I summoned a stone monolith to crush them,” she said. “Could I have been so powerful, Kalen? And how . . .”

She trailed off, but Kalen knew her thought: “How can I wield that power again?”

He had no good answer for her. The Myrin of her visions—if that was even her name—wove spells of incredible power. The Myrin of today bore echoes of that skill,

and on occasion invoked some terrible spell she'd wielded in her forgotten past. Considering how to awaken the old Myrin once more made Kalen uneasy. Would she see the world the same way? Would she even be the same woman?

Myrin sighed. "One lesson at a time, I suppose," she said. "You're a great teacher, Kalen. I can see why Rhett admires you."

That name took all the warmth Kalen felt and dashed it into icy bitterness. At the same instant, Myrin also seemed to realize what she had said and her body stiffened. They pulled apart, and neither could meet the other's gaze. The reminder of why they had come to Westgate always seemed to put a stop to any intimacy.

Kalen thought of Rhetegast Hawkwinter, his apprentice by deed if not by agreement—the handsome and charming lad who'd won him over in the end. He'd sent the youth away for safety and better training, only to plunge him into danger. Once again, Kalen saw a red-stained parcel—felt the cold, dried blood on his hands—and read the word scrawled in blood on shards of a broken sword: WESTGATE. He could not say for certain whether the gruesome missive had been written in Rhett's lifeblood or that of another, but he knew he'd failed the lad as surely as he'd let down his former apprentice, Vaelis.

Now he returned to the city of his youth—where Shadowbane had been born—but to what end? Would Rhett be waiting here, or merely some terrible doom?

"We'll find him, Kalen." Myrin busied herself adjusting her pack for the last leg of their journey to Westgate. "It will be all right. You'll see."

All this time, Myrin had spoken of finding Rhett alive and well, training with the Eye of Justice in Westgate and

oblivious to any nefarious plot. The blood on the sword, she'd said, was not his. Did she truly believe that, or was it merely hope?

"We'll find him," Kalen agreed.

In his gut, Kalen knew that when they did find the lad, it would answer no questions. Dead men, after all, rarely spoke but only stared with accusations he could hear all too well.

Regardless, if there was a chance he could keep what happened to Vaelis from happening to Rhett, he had to try.



As the moment came and passed, the spy in the shadows smiled wanly. How close the knight and the wizard had become in the last year and how quickly they had broken apart at the mere mention of another man's name. If only they weren't both such cowards . . . but alas.

It was doubly a shame, considering that the next tenday would shatter them completely. Of this, the woman many called "Trickster" was absolutely sure.

"Oh, Saer Shadow," she murmured. "How I've *waited* for this."

The two moved apart to don their packs for the final steps to Westgate. The Trickster took this opportunity to summon dark magic and trace a door between worlds. She stepped into the shadows and was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

TWILIGHT, 24 FLAMERULE

THEY ARRIVED IN WESTGATE JUST BEFORE SUNSET.

The gateway to the Savage Frontier was neither the cosmopolitan wonder of Waterdeep, City of Splendors, nor the ravenous squalor of Luskan, City of Sin. Rather, it fell somewhere between the two—a den of vice and scheming, where hard coin could buy anything and everything. The city displayed its wealth in great edifices and spiraling towers that cut the clouds, sprawling palaces and seemingly endless shipyards, and the unparalleled spectacle of the coliseum. Despite Westgate's riches, however, beggars and thieves choked the streets, driven into the shadows under the boots or cudgels of merchant bodyguards.

In a way, Kalen found he preferred a city like Luskan, where the folk were scum and didn't hide it. Even in Waterdeep, light and darkness wore more transparent guises, and he rarely had difficulty separating the just from the corrupt. In Westgate, on the other hand, one could never be certain of anyone or anything. The kindly merchant who offered a free apple by day might deal in slaves by night, and the good-looking stranger in the bar might be searching for a

convenient opening to plant a knife in a trusting friend's gut.

Conversely, Myrin seemed to love the city. She walked with her head high, drinking in every intriguing sound and smell, openly smiling at people on the street. Kalen wondered if she liked cities in general or whether Westgate held some particular appeal. She seemed at home.

"You're drawing too much attention to us," he murmured when they stopped at a fruit stand so Myrin could browse the colorful assortment on display.

"Am I?" The wizard selected a blood orange and turned it in her fingers. "Does anyone look the least bit inclined to cross my stern-faced bodyguard?"

That Kalen knew for truth. He did not carry Vindicator, but the black axe he wore on his back encouraged folk to keep their distance.

Still, the second they'd pushed through the eponymous West Gate into the city's west quarter, he felt decidedly uneasy. He might have preferred to enter through the smaller Mulsantir's Gate, but fewer travelers passed that way, making it harder for Kalen and Myrin to blend in. He'd also considered circumventing the city to South Gate instead, but that would require passing through the built-up area that was the domain of House Bleth, whose castle provided the bulwark of the new south quarter. He wanted to put off crossing the Fire Knives for as long as possible, and attempting to sneak past them might prove more trouble than it was worth. The River Gate would be even farther, much as he would have preferred the east quarter of the city—anywhere but the west end.

The Eye of Justice was housed so close.

Behind him, Myrin laughed at something the fruit

merchant said. Her overt happiness eased his mind. Despite dwarf assassins, Sharran slayers, and demons, she found time to laugh.

“You’re sure I can’t get you something?” Myrin was looking quizzically at her purchase—an orange from the stand.

“No.” Worries about the Eye of Justice had stripped him of any appetite.

“Damn,” she said. “I was hoping you’d eat one of these things and show me how.”

“You don’t remember eating an orange before?”

“Is that what it’s called?” She shook her head. “This is very frustrating, you know—these gaps in my memory.” She considered the orange. “Any suggestions?”

“And spoil my chance to watch you figure it out? Unlikely.”

Hesitantly, Myrin brought the orange to her lips and bit in, rind and all. “Ugh!” she said.

Kalen chuckled. “You have to peel it first.”

“Too late.” Myrin gave him a disapproving look and tossed the orange aside. “We’d best find Rhett quickly. He’d never have let me do that.”

That brought Kalen’s mirth to a dead halt. “Let’s move on.”

They walked east along the King’s March, one of Westgate’s main roads, through the warehouse district. A few city watchmen trooped along both sides of the street—hard-faced men in leather armor with clubs, small blades, and nets to capture disagreeable folk. The tried and true methods of civic defense hadn’t changed much in the three years since he’d left, as he suspected they hadn’t in a century.

A clamor arose among the warehouses to their left. A Tethyrian merchant was arguing prices with a pock-marked,

dark-skinned man in the garb of a Calishite. Near the merchant stood two bodyguards wearing the symbol of House Thorsar: a blue hand holding an ear of corn. Hands rested on steel, and if Kalen had to name a winner of the likely fight, he'd put his coin on the warriors from Calimshan with their heavy robes and scimitars.

Such a fight was not to be, however. As Kalen watched, the doors of a nearby fortified keep opened, and four cloaked warriors trooped out. They carried swords, wore studded leather and brigandine armor, and stilled conversations around them. Upon seeing them approach, the merchants arguing in the street concluded their business as quickly and quietly as possible.

Myrin pointed out the sigil tooled into the men's armor. "Is that the symbol of Helm?"

"How did you know that?" Kalen asked.

"It's the same as the one on your sword."

"No," Kalen said. "I mean, how did you know that name, *Helm*?"

"I've been studying," she said. "Ever since Rhett asked me about that word 'Mystra' back in Luskan, I've read everything I could find about the dead gods."

"Reading what—? Ah." Kalen shook his head. "The gang library. Of course."

The Dead Rats had resembled their namesakes in more ways than one, and their hoard of useless odds and ends had been impressive. Their library was the envy and jest of uneducated Luskan. No doubt Myrin had raided it for books and scrolls.

"Did you know Mystra was the goddess of magic a hundred years ago? I've been swearing on her name this whole time and never thought twice about it. Isn't that

fascinating?”

Kalen found that a touch unnerving, actually, but he nodded anyway. There were plenty of folk who swore on the names of dead gods—if anything, most believed it safer than invoking a living deity like Cyric or Bane and drawing unwanted attention. Kalen, on the other hand, knew that dead gods slept but lightly. Wielding Vindicator had taught him that.

“Those are Knights of the Eye,” he said, indicating the men who had cowed the merchants. “That castle once belonged to House Thalavar, but now it houses the Eye of Justice.”

“The order that trained you?” Myrin asked. “Where you sent Rhett?”

“We have a history, yes,” Kalen said. “And if they recognize me, it wouldn’t go well.”

“Why would it—?”

“They’re coming this way.”

Sure enough, the four knights had seen them and started in their direction. This was exactly what Kalen had hoped to avoid, but he should have known a confrontation would prove inevitable. And in this, the Eye of Justice’s own neighborhood, he could not refuse them a search if they wished to conduct it.

“We need a distraction to avoid them,” Kalen said.

“Why not just talk to them?” Myrin asked. “I can be demure and unassuming.”

“At least one of them will be able to detect magic, so they might find this.” He fingered a sword-shaped medalion around his throat.

“Oh. Well . . .” Myrin’s fingers twitched. “I could light them all on fire?”

“Don’t think that isn’t tempting,” Kalen said. “We need—”

At that moment, a curious pair appeared between them and the four knights—a noblewoman and her bodyguard, who held a parasol to keep her in shadow. The hired muscle was a dragonborn bedecked in plates of red-dyed steel; his arms and legs looked bigger around than Kalen’s entire body. The woman he escorted was tiny in comparison—thin as a blade and all sharp angles and serene posture. Her summer veil hid her eyes, but Kalen thought she was looking at him.

They appeared around the warehouse at just the wrong moment, so that the lead knight—Kalen recognized him as Jhorak, a Watcher of the Eye—walked right into the dragonborn and fell flat on his backside. A lesser man might have been jostled, but the big bodyguard hardly even staggered. He bobbed the parasol, which narrowly missed his noble charge as she stepped gracefully aside.

“Hey,” said the bodyguard. “Watch yourself, human!”

“Watch *yourself*, dragonborn!” Jhorak righted himself with the aid of one of his men. “By Torm’s blade! Do you have any idea who we are?”

“Does it look like I give a drop of godsblood?” The bodyguard raised fists that bristled with wickedly barbed gauntlets. A single punch of those could rip a man open.

The Justice Knights drew back, their hands going to their sword hilts.

“Vharan, love.” The noblewoman laid a delicate hand on her bodyguard’s hip. She had an elf’s voice, like a spring breeze over the sea. “ ’Twas an innocent mistake, I am certain.”

Her sweet words drew the attention of all four of the

Justice Knights, who looked upon her with awe. She stepped toward Jhorak, speaking too quietly for Kalen to hear.

This was the distraction Kalen had needed. As all eyes went to the exchange—even Myrin watched with rapt attention—Kalen stepped subtly around a set of storage crates. He unclasped and palmed the sword amulet that hung around his neck, hidden under his shirt. It was Cellica's amulet, in which Vindicator was concealed. Cellica had regularly concealed a crossbow or other blade, and it pleased Kalen to think of the halfling's guile. Moreover, he had found he could summon the sword out of the amulet without trouble—before he'd confirmed this, he had worried the magics would interfere with one another. He could abandon the sword here and recall it at need.

"Thank you, Sister," he said. "You may be gone, but you still save us."

He stuffed the amulet out of sight between two crates and returned to Myrin's side.

"Mystra, look at her." Myrin nodded toward the noblewoman, who had thoroughly charmed the Justice Knights. "She has those men begging like hounds for a pat of her hand."

"They aren't the only ones." Kalen coughed when Myrin looked at him sidelong. "They'll come this way next. Just nod and do whatever they ask."

The noblewoman had the Justice Knights laughing by the time she took her leave with her bodyguard. The peculiar pair came toward Kalen and Myrin, and Vharan glanced at them and scoffed as they passed. The noblewoman moved in a way Kalen found familiar, and he thought he had recognized her voice. Something about her called to him, although he couldn't quite name it. Either way, she walked

past them with a graceful stride, not sparing them even the slightest glance.

The four Justice Knights talked quietly among themselves. Jhorak cast a fleeting look in Kalen's direction, but the men seemed to have forgotten them and passed on without incident.

Myrin frowned. "Shame. I was rather looking forward to being demure."

"You?" Kalen asked. "Demure?"

She nudged him.

They moved on, past the spot where he'd hidden Vindicator. Kalen reached into the niche, but found nothing. He furrowed his brow. Sure enough, the sword-amulet was gone. How could someone have taken it in the thirty-count he'd left it there?

"What's the matter?" Myrin asked.

"Nothing," Kalen said.

It was no matter, as he could always summon the sword back into his hand. He wondered, rather, who had taken it and why. Like as not, the theft hadn't been random. Even if an opportunist had been tailing them since the city gates, the amulet had been hidden under his shirt until just before he hid it. That meant the thief was either very lucky to see the amulet at just the right moment, or he had expected them. If so, said thief might lead him to the man—or woman—who'd sent the blood-scrawled note that had brought Kalen to Westgate.

Moreover, perhaps not having the sword was a blessing in and of itself. Like Myrin's magic, Vindicator drew attention. He'd felt uncomfortable carrying Vindicator before Luskan, and he'd felt entirely *too* comfortable with it since. Perhaps he was well rid of it, at least for now. Either way,

there was no sense worrying Myrin about it.

The wizard looked to be concentrating hard.

“What troubles?” Kalen asked.

“I know that woman . . . Did you sense it?”

“She did seem familiar.”

“Not that,” the wizard said. “She’s spellscarred. Can’t you feel it?”

Kalen didn’t feel it. His spellscar practically sang in the presence of Myrin’s powerful mark. His broken soul yearned for Myrin’s, like an unfinished half calling for its remainder. It hadn’t felt the same with the veiled woman, or any other spellscarred people, for that matter.

He began to suspect the woman’s abrupt appearance and the sudden theft of Vindicator were no coincidence. He peered down the King’s March, trying to see where she had gone, but alas, she had vanished. No doubt, if she had taken Vindicator, they would meet again.

“I don’t understand,” Myrin said as they walked. “Why didn’t you welcome those knights with open arms? Didn’t you train with the Eye of Justice? Aren’t they allies?”

“Not quite,” Kalen said. “Whoever killed Rhett—”

“You mean *kidnapped* him,” Myrin said.

Kalen shrugged. “I think someone in the Eye might be behind this. If we reveal ourselves before we know, it could be dangerous.”

“So we keep a low cloak for now?”

“Exactly.”

“Hmm.” Myrin crossed her arms over her stomach. “That thing I had before—an orange, you said?—that was awful, and now I’m starving. Westgate must have decent food somewhere.”

Kalen smiled.



They put some distance between themselves and Castle Thalavar before Kalen settled on a window booth at the Black Eye for a repast. The tavern stood a block south of the entrance to Tidetown, where steep streets lined with recently built houses led down to the Sea of Fallen Stars, which had been much higher once upon a time. Fare at the Black Eye wasn't very good and the atmosphere—sweaty dockhands and painted coinlasses and lads—left much to be desired, but Kalen and Myrin were running low on funds.

The central locale did provide Kalen a chance to tell Myrin about the city, particularly which districts would not do for casual exploration. The Eye of Justice operated in the west end, where they had entered. At the east end of Westgate lay the Shou district, claimed by the Nine Golden Swords—a gang of Shou warriors who had grown in power in Westgate recently. First Lord Jaundamincar Bleth counted most of the city south of the Black Eye as his power base, but the east lay beyond his reach, and Tidetown proved a frequent battleground. When Kalen had left Westgate three years ago, a gang war had been brewing, and based on the widened territory markers—the distinctive Shou music and the scripted lanterns that hung on Shou-claimed buildings—it seemed the Nine Golden Swords had made no small gains since his departure.

Myrin listened patiently as Kalen outlined the balance of power in short declarative sentences, but she did not seem to be absorbing the lesson. At one point, she seemed to remember her platter of bread and sea chowder and set to it with zeal. Between bites, she stared out the window at the

falling night. Just when Kalen thought she had forgotten about him entirely, she spoke so suddenly it caught him by surprise. “What of the Masks?”

“Masks?” Kalen furrowed his brow.

“Something I remember. Something about a thieves’ guild—the true rulers of Westgate.”

Did she mean the Night Masks? They were a century-old story—a relic of history—but she spoke of them in almost a colloquial tone, as though they were the matter of the day. It disturbed him. “You mean the Fire Knives?”

“No, I don’t—” Myrin’s expression was uncertain. “Perhaps. Tell me of them?”

Kalen leaned closer to her across the table. “The Fire Knives are an assassin’s guild—the hands of House Bleth. Their allegiance to the First Lord is an open secret.”

Myrin looked unconvinced. “Why doesn’t the Watch do something?”

“The council of lords owns the Watch, and the First Lord owns the council. Bleth provides half the warriors on the Watch himself. The Fire Knives are here to stay—for now.” He wondered if the Nine Golden Swords were going to take over Westgate entirely one day.

“No, that sounds wrong.” Myrin went back to looking out the rain-streaked window.

“We should think about where to stay,” Kalen said. “It might not be safe to stay in the city, and I’m not sure we can afford it, anyway.” He rubbed his eyes. “We passed half a dozen inns outside the gate. Perhaps we should try one of those. Attract less notice.”

“I don’t think so.” Myrin’s voice was dreamy. “I think we’ll stay . . . there.”

She was staring across the street at a decrepit black

fortress. Moss encrusted the stone walls, and ivy hung down from spines carved in the shape of black stars. A palatial structure rose in the center of the complex, with a single tower that stood at its westernmost corner. The dark windows and run-down atmosphere gave the impression of having been vacant for decades.

Kalen had passed by that building often enough during his training in Westgate, but to his knowledge no one had lived there for a century, much less rented out rooms to coin-shy travelers. No one climbed behind those walls—not even thieves looking for scraps left by a long-ago lord of the castle. That the place had seen no overt residents was uncommon but not unknown in Westgate, a city built for many more folk than currently huddled behind its walls. One would have expected an enterprising lord to make use of the castle, or at least the land. Perhaps the occasional stories folk told of phantom footsteps and unexplained disturbances kept greedy would-be owners at bay.

“Myrin, that isn’t—” Kalen realized she had left while he was looking out at the building. He glanced around, but she was nowhere to be found, either in their booth or in the Black Eye. Finally, he saw a flash of blue hair outside the greasy window. “Damn.”

He dropped some of their last remaining coins on the table and shoved himself to his feet. The effort made his heart race, but he resolved not to let his spellscar debilitate him—not when Myrin needed him. His legs fought him, but he pushed through the numbness and out into the cloudy Westgate night.

The cold rain cut visibility either way down Silverpiece Way to a daggercast. Clouds blocked the light of the full moon, painting the people around him into bleary shadows,

long-faced caricatures of themselves, monsters rather than men or women. But as the spellscar numbed his body and blurred his vision, his other senses sharpened to make up for it. He took in the stale aroma of the docks—spilled beer and spoiled fish, moldy wood and sweaty bodies—mingled with the scents of cruelty beneath—spilled blood, spent bile, and the salt of unanswered tears. Westgate’s vileness was almost palpable in the air—this city that pretended at civilization but was, underneath, as corrupt as Luskan. In the rain, it all seemed rotten.

He opened himself to the hungry curse inside his body and let it reach for Myrin. No other spellscar he had encountered made his scar ache the way hers did. And yearn after her it did, leading him around the ivy-draped wall of the abandoned keep. Beneath a dripping overhang, he saw a heavy iron gate wrought in a series of interlaced black stars, long ago sealed by rain and rust.

Before this gate stood Myrin in her familiar pose: one elbow clasped behind her back, biting her lip, and digging one toe into the ground. Rain plastered her blue hair to her forehead and neck, and her clothes clung to her frame.

“Myrin?” Kalen touched her arm.

The rain eased and died away.

At first, Myrin did not seem to notice his touch, as though she had grown as numb as Kalen. Then she shook off her stupor and met his eyes. “This,” she said. “I know this place.”

“Do you remember this?” Kalen asked. “This manor house?”

“I don’t,” she said. “But Umbra does.”

Kalen remembered the doppelganger king of the Dragonbloods of Luskan. Myrin had absorbed his memories at a

touch, drawing so much from him that he turned to dust.

Myrin slowly nodded. “His memories—he remembers coming here with me. We passed this way together. I think . . .” She stepped toward the gates and raised one hand.

Abruptly, the gate shivered as though to shake off a deep-set sloth. It made a sound simultaneously like that of rusted metal twisting and of a weary man sighing, and the iron curled into something like a human face.

Kalen knew little of magic, but he recognized a gate-keeper ward when he saw it. Myrin’s eyes were wide—her expression amazed.

“Well met, Mistress Darkdance.” The gate twisted itself open with a groan.

Myrin turned an incredulous look to Kalen, who nodded. Even more than the ward keyed to her, the name confirmed it for both of them. He unbuckled his axe and followed at her side.

Inside the courtyard stood an ancient, overgrown garden, its grasses all gone to weeds. Willows hung over the mossy, cobbled path, tracing their fingerlike branches across Kalen and Myrin’s faces and shoulders. Shapes that might have been statues lurked in the shadows of the trees, poised to lunge upon them at the least provocation. If not for the moon filtering dully through the brooding clouds, the courtyard would have been completely dark.

“Easy.” Kalen’s eyes scanned the garden around them.

“I’m not afraid,” Myrin said. “This is my place. I belong here.”

They came to a set of stone steps leading to a very old set of oak doors twice their height. Stone braziers stood outside the doors, caked with dirt and filled with brownish water. Rainwater dripped off the eaves far overhead to spatter the

stone at their feet.

“Will someone answer if we knock?” Myrin asked.

“Unlikely.” Kalen saw no lights in the whole of the palace, although he’d heard stories of passersby who’d seen things. He shrugged, then pounded his hand firmly on the oak.

The sound echoed away into nothing, and silence reigned between them. They stood upon the threshold of the closed manor and waited. “Perhaps—” Kalen let the word trail away.

They heard it at the same time—quiet footsteps from inside the door. Kalen tensed and raised the black axe. Myrin, by contrast, only stared.

Finally, wood dragged against stone and one of the oak doors edged open. There was no light inside, but the moonlight filtered down to illuminate a squat figure. An ancient dwarf peered up at them with muddled white eyes. He was blind. Nonetheless, the dwarf turned to Myrin and offered his hand in silence.

“I—” Hardly breathing, Myrin kneeled and put her head under his hand.

His expression seemed at first mournful, then relaxed into contentment. He reached down with heavily wrinkled fingers to brush her cheek. Kalen saw bright azure runes spring into being on her skin and trail down her throat, deep into her road-dusty leathers.

It lasted only three breaths before the contact broke. Myrin’s eyes fluttered and tears traced down her cheeks, parallel to the line of runes on the left side of her face.

“He . . . He was holding me as a babe. I . . .” She rose and threw her arms around the dwarf. “This is Elevar, seneschal of my family’s estate—Darkdance Manor. I’m home.”

In the dwarf's embrace, Myrin shut her eyes tight and sniffed. "I'm home."

Kalen felt warmth kindle in his chest and a great weight slide from his shoulders. A tenday past, finding the path of Myrin's memories had seemed so important and so impossible. Now he sighed, and for the first time in more than a month, the sound was peaceful.

He looked up into the dark, cloudy sky and traced shining Selûne's progress with weary eyes. Finding Myrin's lost past was of great import, but so was the quest that had brought them to Westgate. An apprentice Kalen had let down. A mistake to be corrected.

He had work to do this night.

CHAPTER THREE

MIDNIGHT, 24 FLAMERULE

THE MAN IN BLACK CROUCHED AMONG THE CARVED DRAGONS that guarded the House of Winds, the temple of Gruumsh the Destroyer, the god that the people of Westgate still called by his human name of Talos. Rumor had it that these fearsome rooftop edifices took life on certain dark nights when the full moon hid behind looming storm clouds—nights much like this one. In truth, far darker things patrolled the dank streets and moonlit rooftops of Westgate.

Things like Shadowbane.

Rain traced rivulets down his cloak and dripped off into darkness. He waited, motionless among the statues, and gazed out over his quarry. Across Eastgate Way stood the well-guarded network of taverns and warehouses that were the dominion of the Nine Golden Swords. With the influx of Shou into Westgate over the last century, it was no surprise they had managed to insinuate themselves in the chambers of power in the city. House Thorsar had intermarried long ago, and its heirs were half-Shou and fully supportive of the Nine Golden Swords as a consequence.

After years spent quietly building their power, the gang had risen up and carved out their kingdom. Today, everyone knew it was death to cross them within its bounds.

Smoky torches warded off the shadows as the sentries took their watch duties seriously. They were anxious that night, moving with greater speed than usual, which would make access hard but not impossible. Getting in would be dangerous, but he had yearned for action in this—his city—for so long. This was his moment, which he had been awaiting and dreading in equal measure. Three years had passed since Shadowbane had skulked along the rooftops and alleys of Westgate, taking vengeance upon the guilty. He needed to make an impression.

A statement.

A group of haggard men stole down the road from the west, guiding two whickering horses that pulled a wagon behind them. By the way its wheels rolled lightly over the cobblestones, he knew it was empty, but he doubted it would remain so. The men wore deep cowls, but when one of them spoke to a sentry, the Chondathan accent came across clearly. These were servants of House Bleth, out to make a deal.

Shadowbane would have something to say about that.

He wasn't sure he'd earned that name—not until just recently—but now he wore it proudly. It was a name of fear and of justice. He put his hand under his cloak and remembered that he did not have Vindicator. Summoning it now would not suit his plan. The sword was better left in the wind for now. He could make do without.

The sentries turned away, and it was time at last.

He threw himself out into the night, the rain tumbling around him. He slid down the sloping rooftop of the

Temple of Winds and tensed his legs as he neared the edge. He leaped across the intervening distance to the hard wood roof of the nearest building—a brothel called the Roaring Dragon—and landed in a roll. He crouched on all fours, tense and unmoving while he listened for cries of alarm, but he heard nothing from the sentries and only muted speech from within. Keeping low, he stalked toward the window in the roof. There, he wiped away some of the filth and peered into the gloom.

Half a dozen Shou—five warriors of the Nine Golden Swords and the long-bearded Old Man Tay, a lieutenant in the gang—waited inside a sumptuous sitting room. Tapestries of stylized dragons billowed from the walls and intricately carved statuary adorned the many tables of varying heights. A sort of magic imbued the room, Shadowbane recalled, the kind of ward that muffled the words uttered within, giving conspirators a sense of privacy. As expected, the Fire Knives pushed in through the opposite door, their bodies communicating wariness.

“Please.” Tay gestured to the couches. “Sit. Let us talk business.”

The Knives leader grunted dismissively and sat on the couch opposite him. Shadowbane knew this man as Yaeshl the Ripper, a stupid, lesser cousin of House Bleth and a lieutenant in the Fire Knives. Street work was his trade, and he took his name from the barbed chain he kept wrapped around his arm.

Slender serving women in colorful silks came to pour tea, but Yaeshl dismissed them with a glare. “Business *without* your steaming venom.”

Several of the Shou bristled at the accusation, but Old Man Tay simply shrugged. “You think after the last three

years, you are in any position to make accusations? As I understand it, you wish to declare yourselves our allies.”

Yaeshl grunted. “Conspirators, you mean. Our guilds have waged war for too long. Jaundamicar is a broken man and the Fire Knives are dying with him. The Nine Golden Swords have become something you do not even recognize. The powers that be quake.”

“When we gather our strength together, the powers that be will become us.”

An alliance between the Fire Knives and the Shou intrigued Shadowbane. The guilds had been at each other’s throats for years now, culminating in the destruction of much of House Bleth’s power in the city. Now, two powerful lieutenants met to forge an alliance to end the gang war and cement their own power in the process. But was this an earnest offer of alliance or yet another trick?

Regardless, Shadowbane saw an opportunity to expedite matters. He tensed, ready to—

“Fire Knives, Nine Golden Swords,” a musical voice said. “You men and your blades.”

The room erupted in a flurry of startled shouts and blades scraping free of scabbards. They cast about, looking for the source of the voice, and settled with widening eyes upon a slender moon elf in black leathers and a half mask standing in the corner of the room, poised as casually as though she had always been there. Her pale face contrasted with her dark garb and her midnight hair. At first Shadowbane thought her mask had no eye slits, but then he realized her eyes were simply the pure black of velvet.

In response to the threat, her silver-painted lips curled. “Surely you can see I’m unarmed and mean no violence.”

“Well, *I* mean it.” Yaeshl gestured to his men, who drew

steel. The captain himself began unwinding his chain. “Name yourself at once, elf, or suffer the consequences.”

Tay made no such threat or gesture, although several of the Shou palmed their weapons.

The elf seemed untouched by the threat. “No need for steel. I am simply a woman with a proposition. Would the soon-to-be leaders of Westgate hear it?”

She stepped forward and gracefully eluded the nearest Fire Knives thug who took the opportunity to reach for her. Like something not quite mortal, she twisted under his grasp, caught his wrist in her gloved hand, and pulled him over her leg to crash dazedly to the ground. The movement took less than a heartbeat and did not break her stride. The others backed away.

“So eager to refuse my bargain, and you haven’t even heard it.” Her impenetrable black eyes scanned them. “I’d reserve judgment, were I unfortunate enough to be you.”

She set a small, sword-shaped medallion on the table between the respective lieutenants and drew away with the same unnerving speed. Although she wore no visible weapon, the enforcers gave her a wide berth nonetheless. Half in the light, she was easier to see: she wore a laced black bodice, long leather gloves, and breeches laced with scores of buckles up the side of each leg. Her midnight hair was long and bound in a tail with silver cords.

Now that he could see her face fully but for the mask, Shadowbane realized he knew her—not by name, but he remembered her very well indeed. They had met once, briefly, a year ago on Greengrass, the first night of spring. Was it fate that brought her to him? He almost interceded in that moment but managed to restrain himself.

Both lieutenants stared at the medallion but neither

made a move to touch it.

“What is that?” Yaeshl asked.

“Something you want.” The elf gestured to the table.

“*And which of us is it really for?*” Tay asked in his eastern language. Shadowbane could pick up a few of the words—enough to understand the thrust of the question, particularly with the suspicious way he glanced at the Fire Knives.

“*Whichever will give me what I want.*” The elf made the fluid Shou tongue particularly smooth. She put her gloved hands together and offered the old lieutenant a slight bow. “But do not take my word for it. See for yourselves.”

She spoke a word of command, and the medallion shimmered on the table. It rattled back and forth with a life of its own, then rapidly grew into a gleaming sword.

Shadowbane’s eyes widened in recognition: Vindicator.

“This . . . this is the sword of Shadowbane.” Yaeshl’s tone was reverent. “The Eye of Justice will not move against us if we hold this. They cannot risk it.” He looked at the elf with increased wariness. “How did you steal this?”

She shrugged. “By your tone, you imagine it was difficult.”

Yaeshl scowled. “This stinks of a trap. What treachery? Who is your master, woman?”

“I’m just a free-roaming fox.” She smiled. “But enough about me. Can we deal or no?”

Yaeshl started to say something, but Tay spoke over him. “What would you have of us?”

“Nothing. I’m in Westgate on business. I wish only that you stay out of my way.”

Tay nodded, considering, but his counterpart in the Fire Knives returned a sneer.

“I’ve heard enough,” Yaeshl said. “If neither Tay nor I knows you, that means you’re some noble wench who thinks she can frighten us with tricks your hired mage cooked up, or you’re an independent who doesn’t truck with the guilds, or—worse—you’re an *adventurer*.”

All those present shuddered. “No need to get nasty,” said the elf.

“Either way,” Yaeshl continued, “I’m not about to give you anything, woman.”

Across from him, Old Man Tay wore an expression of benign disapproval, as though he were a teacher watching Yaeshl make a mistake.

“Also.” The Fire Knives lieutenant grinned, exposing twin rows of yellowed teeth. “Seems to me you gave up all your leverage when you gave up the sword.”

Although her posture remained consistent, abruptly there was nothing easy or relaxed about the elf. Her former mirth lapsed, and her expression became deadly serious. “I came to you in friendship. Remember that.”

“Oh I’ll remember. It’ll make a fine story.” Yaeshl signaled his men toward her.

Two Fire Knives struck at her from either side, but they hit nothing but darkness. Even Shadowbane, who had been watching carefully, had no idea where she had gone—until she appeared behind one of the men, grasped his wrist, and used his captured rapier to run the opposite man through. The Fire Knife collapsed, his eyes wide in surprise.

The man she was holding shot an elbow back into her face, and the elf flinched back. She let the momentum send her to the floor, where she swept the man’s legs from under him even as she sprang back to her feet. She pounced on him like a cat and hammered his head against the floor with

the pommel of her stolen rapier. She kneeled atop him and wiped away a trickle of blood from her nose, where her foe had struck. The shadows roiled around her feet.

She looked up, fearsome joy on her face. “Come, lads. Don’t you all want a turn?”

Shadowbane could restrain himself no longer. He asserted his will, and Vindicator glowed with gray light where the elf had set it on the table. The Fire Knives were watching the moon elf and so did not see the blade reacting, but the Nine Golden Swords enforcers did, and they hesitated. Perfect.

Shadowbane tensed his arms and pushed himself upward, swinging his legs high.

Oblivious to the glowing sword, the Fire Knives captain obliged the elf’s seeming lust for violence. “Kill that woman!” Yaeshl shouted, and his remaining men raised their blades.

Glass shattered and shards rained down as Shadowbane broke through the skylight and descended upon them. His entrance startled the Fire Knives as well, who faltered in their rush at the elf. He landed on one of the Shou warriors, driving him into the floor, and kneeled on the stunned man, his cloak flying around him. He looked up in challenge.

“Shadowbane!” cried one of the Fire Knives. The Shou might not have faced Shadowbane three years ago when he was last in the city, but the Fire Knives would certainly remember his armor and helm all too well. “Strike! Strike before—”

Shadowbane raised his hand, and Vindicator boiled away into gray smoke. It reappeared in his hand, blazing with divine energy. Then he hurled himself at the nearest Shou warrior and brought Vindicator down into the man’s chest.

The battle was joined.

Shadowbane slashed and cut, letting each attack follow through in a looping circle that parried seeking strikes. Every strike turned into a defense, which unfolded into another attack. He had learned swordwork well, but the holy sword of justice made it all too easy. Vindicator sang around him, an unstoppable scythe of death that sent thief after blood-spattered thief tumbling to the floor. He praised the foresight of the Shou adepts to imbue the room with a silencing ward, as otherwise he suspected the racket of the battle would have drawn the whole gang pouring into the chamber.

One of the warriors hurled a carvestar in his direction—a steel disc forged to five razor-sharp points—but Shadowbane batted it aside with a screech of metal. The star dug into the foot of a Shou behind him, who dropped his sword low in shock. Shadowbane took advantage of his faltering defense and beheaded the man with a vicious backhand.

Shadowbane glanced back, over the rushing blood from the man's opened neck, to see the black-eyed elf moving among the Fire Knives, her rapier darting back and forth to set them on their guard. She led one into making a misstep, then kicked his closest leg out from under him and leaped over his falling body to engage the next of the Fire Knives.

At his teacher's behest, Shadowbane had recently been learning the graceful bladedance style, but he didn't much care for it. It was fraught with too much misdirection, like a cat playing with a mouse. He much preferred the way Vindicator let him fight—dealing death without giving his opponents false hope. Still, to watch the elf fight like that thrilled him. Just like when they had first met, Shadowbane found himself impressed by her and also challenged.

He would enjoy seeing what else that body could

accomplish.

The last of the Nine Golden Swords warriors—Old Man Tay himself—stalked cautiously toward him, a three-pointed knife in either hand. He thought they were called *sai*. Shadowbane easily parried a thrust of Tay's left-hand *sai*, but the weapon tangled around his sword and wrenched it aside. Shadowbane pulled, but even with both hands he couldn't twist Vindicator free.

"Farewell," the Shou captain said, and he thrust his other *sai* at Shadowbane's throat.

Shadowbane moved faster than any man should have been able to move. He flinched aside to let the *sai* go past, then removed a hand from Vindicator and caught Tay's throat. The old man's eyes widened as Shadowbane began to squeeze.

He should have killed the old dastard—choked him until his tongue bugged from his mouth and his eyes rolled up in his head—but the elf cleared her throat with feminine grace behind him. Shadowbane brought his helm crashing into his captive's face with a wicked crunch of cartilage as Tay's nose shattered. Knocked senseless, the old man slumped to the ground and his *sai* scraped free of Vindicator's blade.

Shadowbane turned to the elf as she stood among the downed Fire Knives. The elf had stunned her foes, rather than slain them as Shadowbane had done. Recognition was written upon her face. She knew his armor and helm. Good.

"One left," she observed.

Yaeshl the Ripper stood between two foes, glancing at each of them with equal trepidation. He'd unwound the barbed chain from his arm, which boasted a long steel bracer to keep the ugly thing from cutting into his flesh.

"I think a man's weapon reveals a good deal about his

character,” the elf said, her words cold. “What does this one say, I wonder? Does he like being tied up, perhaps?”

“Shut up, you fey-blood tart,” Yaeshl spat at her. “Think you can come in here, making demands, and have your hiresword enforce them?”

“Hiresword? Surely you know Shadowbane, the scourge of Westgate.” She looked at the corpses at Shadowbane’s feet. “Somewhat more brutal than I expected.”

“Dress your jack up however you like, he’s your man, sure enough.” Yaeshl’s focus remained on her. “Don’t even have the salt to kill, do you, wench?”

The shadows stirred at the elf’s feet. “I fight my own battles.”

Shadowbane saw what she was doing—distracting Yaeshl—and he took full advantage. He leaped two paces forward and brought his blade down in an overhead chop. Startled, Yaeshl managed to bring his chain up to tangle around Vindicator, which he wrenched from Shadowbane’s grasp with surprising force. The blade clattered against the far wall.

“Too slow, would-be Shadowbane.” He drew the weapon back for a swipe. “Now—agh!”

His words cut off in a cry of pain as the point of a rapier appeared through his upper arm, just above his protective bracer. Not only did the strike spoil his windup, but the uncontrolled chain lashed across his leg. The barbs bit into the leather and blood welled.

Behind him, the elf danced back, her bloody sword dripping Yaeshl’s blood. She smiled.

The Five Knives lieutenant roared and swung his chain at her, but Shadowbane grabbed his arm and wrenched him back. “Fight me, Knife.”

Even as he spoke, he stretched out his will.

“Pretender!” Yaeshl swiped at Shadowbane, but Vindicator reappeared in his hands just in time to block. The Fire Knives lieutenant gasped. “Gods.”

Shadowbane thrust Vindicator’s pommel forward and slammed it into his chin. The Fire Knives captain staggered back, right into the elf’s blade. He stopped short of the actual point, however, as though the shadow of her sword struck him and not the sword itself. Regardless, his leathers parted and blood welled. She drew the blade back, and he fell into a heap at her feet.

They stood in the unmoving room for a moment, listening to the groans of the wounded—sounds that would not escape through the magic warding the chamber. Before Vindicator’s gray flames, the shadows around the elf parted for a heartbeat, revealing her own shadow: a bulky, gnarled thing twice the size of an elf. It *was* her shadow and yet not.

He remembered this from a year before, and it chilled and excited him.

“Saer Shadow,” the elf said in greeting.

Shadowbane said nothing. She knew his other face—his other self. The unworthy one.

“Interesting,” she observed when he remained silent. She kneeled to check on Yaeshl, who lay still. “He’ll live. Perhaps we—”

Shadowbane stabbed at her, and she twisted so that his blade cut along her side rather than through her heart. He came around for another blow, but the shadows coalesced around her, and she vanished just before Vindicator cleaved through the air where her neck had been. Shadowbane cast about and saw her step from the shadows on the other side of the room. She touched the wound on her side and her

hand came away bloody.

“Again, interesting,” she said as she fell into a defensive stance.

Shadowbane said nothing. She might know his voice—or, worse, *not* know it.

A gasp of pain drew their attention to a man crawling toward the door. One of the Nine Golden Swords enforcers had come around, and he was pulling himself along a trail of blood that stained the rug. He managed to pull the door open, ending the silence effect on the chamber, and cried out to his fellows in the language of the Shou.

“Another time, then,” the elf said.

He lunged toward her, Vindicator singing, but she danced into the shadows and vanished.

Shadowbane cut Vindicator through the air a few times, in case she had turned invisible, but he hit nothing but air. The sword glowed brighter, as though to express its frustration at her escape, but no matter. His blade would bathe in her blood soon enough. Something far away tugged at the sword—a distant summons that reminded him of his most important task. He hoped there would be time to hunt his quarry later.

After all, now that Kalen Dren—the pretender to his name—was back in town, the man called Shadowbane would have his work cut out for him.

He tossed the smoking Vindicator to the floor with a clash of steel on stone. The sword clattered to a rest, then boiled away into gray motes of smoke. Then and only then did he speak, addressing his words to his far-off nemesis.

“I will make of you a darkness,” he murmured. “A darkness where there is no one.”

Feet pounded on the stairs outside the sitting room, and

his head rose. Other warriors had mustered, drawn by the cry for help. The door shattered under two heavy blows, and Nine Golden Swords enforcers stared—shocked—at the man who stood among the corpses. He had made his statement, indeed.

Beneath his helm, Shadowbane smiled. He drew two long daggers from his belt.

CHAPTER FOUR

MORNING, 25 FLAMERULE

LADY MYRIN DARKDANCE AWOKE SUFFUSED IN WARMTH and transcendent softness. She had slept the stormy night on thick feather blankets and pillows like magic. All in all, she felt as though she'd never slept in a more comfortable bed.

Not that she remembered, anyway.

A dream swirled in her mind, one that left her tingling, and she focused upon it, striving to remember. It was one of Umbra's memories, with its hot desire and bleary consummation. They had been lovers, after all, and those memories dominated the ones she had absorbed. She resented the fact that she could only experience their lovemaking through the doppelganger's body—she could only imagine how it had been for *her*.

Caught in the last traces of the dream, Myrin stretched her hand languidly toward the other half of the bed, but her heart sank. The spot was cold and fully made—no one had slept there. Of course she wouldn't find Kalen beside her. She'd made the first move back in Luskan—kissing him the way she had—and he hadn't so much as mentioned it in all

the time since. She had no reason to think he had the slightest feelings about her whatsoever.

Except, of course, that she wanted it so.

There came a discreet knock at the door—one, two, three taps of flesh on wood. The room was dark, but she flicked her fingers and conjured a heatless golden torch flame to float in the middle of the room. With its illumination, the chamber revealed itself as well-appointed, if faded with age. A summer breeze crept through the cracked window and rustled the crimson drapes. A desk with a mirror stood in one corner, remarkably clear of dust considering its age.

The knock came again—the same precise three taps. Myrin wiped her nose. “Yes?”

At her word, the door swung open and Elevar carried a steaming tray into the room. The smells of morningfeast filled Myrin with an altogether different sort of longing.

“Oh, many thanks,” she said.

Elevar inclined his head as though the service were a matter of course. Although the old dwarf could neither see nor speak, his ears seemed to work perfectly. With careful precision that belied his blindness, he set the legs of the tray on either side of her lap.

It was damned inconvenient, however, that his lack of words meant he couldn’t answer any of her thousand questions. During the hours they’d stayed up trying to communicate the previous night, she’d managed to learn that he’d been her family’s steward and seneschal since the last Darkdance family had left the manor, caring for the scores of rooms and dusty chambers. When Elevar touched her lips with his gnarled hand, then traced the shape of her face, she realized that he’d recognized her by her voice.

As near as she could determine, her family had left the

manor house some years earlier, although Elevar didn't know exactly how many. He hadn't left the manor house since, and in his sightless world, Myrin imagined time meant a very different thing to Elevar than it did to her. When she asked after the events that had seen the family's departure, he had shaken his head and offered no direct answer. The expression that came across his withered face was one of deep unease, as if he were faintly remembering the traces of a long-forgotten nightmare.

His response only served to increase Myrin's desperate curiosity.

The memories she'd absorbed from him hadn't been much help. As she'd suspected, he hadn't provided anything she could see—only impressions that lacked any detail: the laughter of a little girl. Myrin bumping into things. Myrin tracking mud through the manor. The memories never had visions, and yet she clung to them like treasures.

After their late night, Myrin ate greedily of the fruit and seared vegetables he had brought, as well as the toasted bread with gravy, although she gave the rashers of ham a miss. An egg stood atop a silver stand in the center of the tray. When Myrin poked it experimentally with her spoon, it cracked and oozed red-yellow yoke. She passed on that, too. Over the last year, she'd taken to not eating meat or eggs.

Elevar stood patiently at attention. Much as she was starting to like the old dwarf, Myrin felt self-conscious about having her own personal servant.

"Have you seen Kalen?" she asked, wiping her mouth. "Er, I mean, not *seen*—"

Elevar nodded his understanding.

"The man with me yestereve," Myrin said. "Did he sleep

here last night? In the house?”

The dwarf shook his head. He wore a patient, nonjudgmental expression that suggested he was accustomed to failing to understand the relations between his employers and their visitors. Myrin, who hardly understood her relationship with Kalen herself, was glad.

Elevar took away her tray, bending his nose to sniff at the remains of the meal. She could almost see him making a mental note of which things she had eaten and which she had avoided, so he could bring the right food next time.

”I’ll need some clothes. The ones I wore should do—”

Elevar drew up tall and a derisive shadow crossed his features. Looking vaguely ill at her suggestion, he indicated instead her favorite scarlet dress, which hung on the back of the door. The dwarf gestured to his eyes, then made a wide gesture as if to encompass the entire manor. By this, Myrin understood that he was going to search for more suitable attire elsewhere. Then he nodded and took his leave.

Alone again, Myrin threw off the blankets and crossed to the bright red dress. It was worn in places, but Elevar must have stitched and cleaned it during the night. It looked as lovely as the day she had first donned it, a year ago in Waterdeep.

”Well,” she said, considering the color and cut. “It should make quite a statement.”



Between the blue hair, the tattoos, and the sharp lines of her sleek red dress, Myrin attracted quite a few speculative eyes as she strolled up Silverpiece Way toward the market.

It didn’t hurt that the dress had been fitted for her a year

past when she'd been a half-starved waif. By contrast, now it clung tighter to her womanly frame than she thought was entirely proper. It had a slit high up the leg and left her arms and entirely too much of her chest bare. She attracted interested glances from a number of men and, indeed, more than a few women who winked and whispered to one another behind their hands.

“So much for keeping a low cloak,” she murmured.

Elevar, drafted into accompanying her, trailed in her wake. He'd mutely indicated his desire to carry a parasol for her, but she'd rejected the offer out of hand. A mistake—at least that would have blocked some of the stares. And, all things considered, conjuring a magic shield would probably be worse.

“Walk easy,” she told herself, feigning Kalen's gruff voice. “You're Lady Darkdance. Act like it.”

That helped a bit, as did Elevar's dour presence and the heavy purse he carried. Apparently, the last Lord Darkdance—her father, perhaps, or her grandfather?—had left quite a bit of gold for the maintenance of the house and the eventual disposal of a miraculously returned heir such as herself. She wasn't sure how much, but from what Elevar had indicated with his fingers, she could no doubt buy anything she wanted.

Westgate's market stood at the heart of the city where the major roads met and diverged. Paved with stones worn smooth by nigh-constant use, the triangular quarter played host to a sea of folk shopping at tents of every color and pattern. The rain from the night before kept down a good deal of the dust. Her exotic looks drew less attention at the market, and the merchants seemed equally indifferent to her as to anyone else.

Myrin reminded herself that it would not do to lower her guard. Kalen had warned her that this city was not like Luskan, where everyone who approached you was a thief, and even less like Waterdeep, where a pickpocket might take your gold but do you the courtesy of not cutting you open. Westgate, he had said, was far more dangerous than either. The folk in the market that morning seemed rather sunnier than his warnings had led her to expect, but she kept her eyes open as he had taught her during their dagger lessons.

Also, even though she knew Kalen would disapprove, she kept her hand near the belt pouch where she kept the orb Lilten had given her.

“Only as a last resort,” she promised him silently.

At an armorer’s stand, she saw a woman dressed in leather breeches and a white silk tunic that looked very comfortable against the rising summer sun. Her expressionless, inhuman face drew Myrin’s attention, with its rectangular purple-and-white patterns. Myrin spent a breath or two trying to figure out which color had been painted across which. The mottled woman noted Myrin’s gaze and appraised her with an otherworldly sort of majesty. When Myrin smiled at her, the woman turned back to her business.

“Did you hear?” Myrin overheard a man ask at a nearby stand that sold leather goods. “Shadowbane’s back in town.”

“Him with the flaming sword?” came the reply.

“The same,” the first man said. “He done pushed a Golden Swords meeting, busted some Fire Knife heads, and kicked off a gang war. All in the same night!”

Myrin beheld two men dressed in black leathers who looked as though they’d neither shaved nor washed for a tenday. One of them caught her looking and smiled, but

she turned away with a smile and walked on. Kalen certainly did make himself known, and quickly.

Mindful of her experience with the orange, she avoided the fruit stand and instead followed her nose toward the aroma of steaming bread. The merchant baker—a stout dwarf with a beard shaped like a fresh-baked loaf—greeted her with a forced smile. He pitched his goods to her with a canned speech. “We have fresh oats and wheat from Dragon Coast fields, as well as Cormyrean barley and rye. Or maybe you’d like more exotic grains, imported from as far away as the Chultan peninsula. Tell me, young lady, have you ever tried quinoa—?”

To Myrin, his voice and the noises around her suddenly fell away, and a chill settled around the base of her neck. It was the feeling of being watched, she thought, and she suddenly remembered a year ago, when a clean-shaven dwarf assassin named Rath had held her prisoner. Abruptly, her hands started to shake, and try as she might, she couldn’t hear the bread merchant’s words. Neither could she speak nor do anything more than nod weakly, then stagger away from the stand while she tried to still her racing heart. In the square surrounded by strangers, she realized she’d outdistanced Elevar, and now she was alone—alone and afraid.

She recognized the two men she’d seen before, one of them pointing to her and whispering to the other. She felt itchy and uncomfortable.

And that strange purple-and-white woman was staring at her.

She had never felt like this before, and with no prompting but a look at the merchant’s face. He looked only vaguely like Rath, and yet all of a sudden he had *been* the dwarf, and she’d relived the fear of that night all over again. Rath

had broken into her room while she slept, and her friend—Kalen’s adopted sister, Cellica—had come in to comfort her. Then Fayne, in the guise of a sun elf, had distracted the halfling while Rath had hurled his knife into Cellica’s gut. The blood and the sour smell of bile . . .

“My lady?” A gentle hand touched her wrist, which she jerked away. “Apologies. You looked unwell.”

A gnome stood beside her, dressed in dandy attire with colors so bright they set her off-balance. He wore a rapier sheathed at his belt, although his white-gloved hand was nowhere near its hilt. He boasted an incredibly large nose and the most impressive set of ears she’d ever seen: like serrated daggers, studded with a dozen rings each. His face seemed both trustworthy and a touch mischievous.

“Did you need some aid, lovely lady?” he asked. “I am—”

“No, but thank you.” She backed away, her hand shaking on the hilt of her dagger.

The two knaves with bad hygiene seemed to have followed her. They stood at the bread stand, eyeing her thoughtfully. One of them flashed her a wink and a toothy grin that made her vaguely ill. Myrin had the sudden and powerful urge to draw her orb and blast the smarmy look right off those knaves’ faces, but her unprovoked magical aggression might prove difficult to explain to the Guard. And, secondarily, it would be wrong.

Not watching where she was going, she ran straight into a woman at a jewelry stand, and nearly fell over. “Sorry!” she said.

She caught at the woman’s bare shoulder for balance. At her touch, runes lit on her hand.



The woman at her feet screamed, her voice loud and resonant in the shuddering halls. Black stone shook from thunderous explosions around her. The shock threw Myrin—or whoever she was—from her feet and she caught herself on the stone floor.

“Mistress,” Myrin said, her pale hands pawing at the woman’s thighs. She didn’t know what to do, but she had to try. “It—it’s well. Just—”

The dark-skinned woman with the huge belly opened her iridescent blue eyes wide. “This is all your fault, little fox,” she cried. “All that’s happening to my husband, and to you—” Her words cut off in a cry of pain.

The woman moaned and thrust her head back against the stone, either to dull the pain or awaken herself to it. Her babe was coming, its blue-fringed head crowning . . .



The contact lasted only an instant, but it was long enough for Myrin to see into the woman’s memories. Weakness seized her, and she sank down on legs that would no longer support her body. She had just seen . . .

Had she just seen herself being *born*?

The woman from whom she’d taken the memory—a slim moon elf dressed in an elegant black gown—looked down at her through bright gold eyes. She was clutching at her side as though at a pain, where Myrin had slammed into her.

“Wait,” Myrin said as the gold-eyed elf turned to go. “I—”

Abruptly, Myrin’s hand burned as though she’d grasped an iron pot by the cherry-hot base. Her flesh swelled and

pain pulsed up and down her arm. It brought tears to her eyes, but she would not cry—not in front of all these people. The skin near her left eye itched—she could feel a new tattoo burning there. A new memory.

“Lady?” The gnome stood before her again, meeting her at eye level now that she had fallen. “Lady, I must insist you allow me to aid you in your distress.”

“Who—?”

“I am called Brace, Lady Blue,” he said as he helped her rise. “But I shall conduct formal introductions shortly. Pardon me half a moment.” He stepped past her and drew his rapier. “Come, dogs spawned of Cyric’s worst shit!” he shouted. “Draw your steel if you dare!”

Startled, Myrin looked over her shoulder at the two ragged men who’d been following her. The gnome’s sudden vehemence took them by surprise and they froze midstep.

“Poxy, stlarning whoresons!” Brace continued, fairly frothing at the mouth. There wasn’t a trace of fear or hesitation on his face. His rapier split into two identical swords, one for each of his would-be foes. “I shall wash your filthy guts from my blades with your blood! Which of you will face me first? Which?”

Startled at the sudden breach of calm, everyone in the square stood dumbfounded. Myrin noticed the purple-and-white faced woman she’d seen before. She still wore no expression, but she stared hard at the muggers, her hand on the hilt of her rapier. Deciding whether to intervene?

Confronted with the short madman and also by the purple-and-white woman, the two would-be thieves exchanged a look, then took their leave. They shoved away through the watching crowd, which grew with every word that spilled from the gnome’s mouth.

“Run, you curs!” Brace shouted after them. “Run back to your mother’s teats! And tell her Brace the Bold enjoyed last night, which he spent tugging her every way to Uktar!”

When they were good and gone he sheathed his swords and turned back to Myrin.

“My sincerest apologies you had to hear that filth, Lady Blue.” Brace seemed quite polite outside of battle. “Proper banter is but the first weapon a swordsman must wield. With it, he crushes his foe’s will to fight even before steel is drawn.”

That struck her as something Kalen might say, although he would surely disapprove of Brace’s peculiar practice of the principle. “You seem to excel at it,” she said.

“My father, the imminent genius Merle the Maker, said I had the voice and bravado to make a fine bard,” Brace replied. “But I rather like swordplay more.”

“Eminent,” Myrin corrected absently. She looked past him for the purple-and-white woman, but she seemed to have disappeared in the confusion.

“Pardon?” Brace asked.

“Your father. I think you meant *eminent* genius.”

“If I had meant that,” he replied, “no doubt I would have said it.”

Myrin couldn’t dispute that logic. “You are an odd little man.”

Brace got a sly look in his eye. “Not so *little*, truth be told, but enough about such common matters. You are a well-born lady and hardly have the ear for such talk.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Would I?” Brace considered. “I’m difficult to surprise, other than by the radiance of your beauty.” He inspected her gown. “That color upon you is simply dazzling—although

I suspect it would be positively stunning on my floor. And not as a rug, I mean.”

“Oh?” Myrin raised one eyebrow. “Are you flirting with me?”

“That depends,” he said. “Are such attentions welcome?” She shrugged. “I don’t mind.”

“That’s a relief.” Brace blew out a thick sigh. “Unrepentant flirtation is a character flaw of mine, I’m afraid. Please, Lady Blue, take no offense.”

“Indeed not. And call me Myrin, as that’s my name—Lady Myrin Darkdance.”

“And I am Brace, as I mentioned.” He bowed dramatically. “A penniless swordsman, tragically impoverished by fate, without a coin to my name, seeking a patron such as yourself to aid me in rectifying those circumstances.” He looked up at her speculatively. “What say you?”

Myrin looked up at the sun high overhead and thought about it. Kalen was the only swordsman she needed, but had she not been thinking just this morn about whether he really wanted to stay with her? Perhaps she should stop relying upon him.

She’d also tried to get a sense of the gnome from his face and the language of his body, as Kalen had taught her, and he seemed genuine.

“I think that your speech is three times redundant,” she said, “and you’re henceforth a man-at-arms in my service. So long as you stop the flowery speech. And continue the flirting.”

“As you wish, my lady.” He grinned. “Myrin.”



Hiding just around the corner behind Baker's Knots, the woman in the shadows watched the odd exchange between the gnome and the blue-haired girl with no small annoyance.

"This was not part of the plan, Hessar," she said.

"Oh, I know," her contact said behind her. "This Myrin Darkdance is a willful girl."

The Trickster looked over her shoulder but knew she would not see him well. In the shadows, the man could hide even from her. "She stumbled almost right into our meeting, at the appointed place and time," she said. "Are you certain no other shadows are watching?"

"Just me." Hessar's gold eyes gleamed out of the darkness. "Does that reassure you, Trickster?"

"Well, if it was anyone but you, then maybe." She scowled at Myrin's smile in the square. "She nearly recognized me. I didn't think we'd cross paths so early, but sure enough—"

"Our mutual master does play the strings of fate like a master harpist, eh?"

The man pressed up to her shoulder, and the Trickster felt his sucking cold darkness as though he were a statue of ice. She pulled away a little.

"If she's seen you, she might grow suspicious if she spots you again," Hessar said. "Perhaps the time has come to join her gathering band." He nodded at Brace, who was even now leading Myrin back among the stands. "The gnome is a suitable target."

"Ugh, *please*." The Trickster stuck out her tongue.

Hessar looked bemused. "You mean there's someone you can't—or won't—seduce?"

She laughed. "I never took you for a bard, to spout such

nonsense.”

Hessar clicked his tongue. “This is not a jesting matter,” he said. “The master is moving, his blades collecting, and when all the forces clash, it will be a sight to behold.”

“I know what to do, shade. Spare me the melodrama.”

To that, Hesar never responded. He simply vanished, leaving her alone in the shadows to watch Myrin and the gnome. Whether he had even heard her reply, she did not know.

The woman in the shadows narrowed her eyes, considering how best to make her next move. It could not be immediate—no. If that came to pass, Myrin would grow suspicious. She looked at the gnome in specific, a plan forming in her mind. At long last, she would have her revenge, and it would be sweet indeed.

The Trickster smiled. “Tomorrow, then.”

PART TWO:

OLD FRIENDS AND NEW

For young noble scions in Suzail, one of the most important duties is the noble's social, a particular type of event orchestrated to force participants to dance with friends, both old and new. This allows eligible lads and lasses to meet new and interesting potential mates. More than one death-defying adventure has been known to erupt from such liaisons.

Garen Thal, Loremaster of Cormyr
*Land of Preening Dragons: Words of a Retired Wizard of War,
Published in the Year of the Starving (1381 DR)*

FPO

CHAPTER FIVE

HIGHSUN, 25 FLAMERULE

SOME WAYS DISTANT, KALEN IGNORED A NOXIOUS ALE that looked like harbor water and waited. He wore his cowl low so as not to attract notice, particularly because he was so close to Castle Thalavar and the Eye. He'd also left Sithe's axe at Darkdance Manor, because the weapon was extremely distinctive. As far as anyone was concerned, he was just another patron at the Rotten Root tavern.

One of Westgate's oldest institutions, the Root had festered like a persistent sore on Silverpiece Way's south flank for at least a hundred years. And in all that time, it had never lost its well-deserved reputation as a grimy dive frequented by only the worst of the worst. The smoke-stained sign over the door depicted a malicious humanlike tree, its bark black and green with mold and red-glowing eyes leering from the end of every branch. The drink was bad, the food was worse, and the clientele would cut a man's throat just to flavor the evening. Even during the day, when only half the tables hosted patrons, Kalen could feel the forbidding atmosphere of the place.

He liked the Root a great deal.

Before he had left Westgate three years ago, the Rotten Root had been Kalen's favorite place to do what his teacher Levia had called "insightful watching." They would sit together at one of the tables and appraise the common room with open eyes and ears. They would keep their scrutiny surreptitious, of course. The first time they'd done this, Kalen had provoked a brawl by staring too long at one of the unsavory patrons. He'd since learned better.

Later, safe in their chambers at the Eye of Justice, Kalen would tell Levia all he had observed and learned: which rogues were casing which city building, which servants were cheating their masters out of coin, which knaves bore watching as they moved up through the ranks of Westgate's underworld. There were judgments, too: what a drunken sot's limp said about his swordwork, or which thieves fresh off a take would be the weakest and most likely to break under interrogation.

Kalen observed these things with increasing skill as the years passed, although he had never grown adept at identifying the subtle matters Levia often asked after. She would want to know which barmaid nursed a broken heart, or how to turn a potential asset without the use of blades or manacles. Kalen had never had an ear for such things, although he wished now he'd paid more attention. If he had, perhaps Myrin wouldn't bewilder him so.

He shook the memories away. That had been years ago, and his current business in the Rotten Root would demand his full attention.

One rumor in particular caught his attention. A group of Fire Knives meant to "teach a lesson" to Dolarune, the innkeeper at the Rosebud Tavern at the edge of the Shou district, for failing to pay her tribute on time. That in itself

hardly registered with Kalen, but then the four of them leaned in closer and spoke in hushed tones, and he heard the name “Shadowbane” mentioned. He focused on that table, intrigued—seeing as he’d not operated in the city in a few years—but at that moment his barmaid came around, observed his untouched ale, and gave him a speculative look.

“Will you be wanting else?” She had hair that was too yellow to be natural—almost the luster of gold. She put one hand to the buttons of her shirt, suggesting the offer included more than just food or drink.

Kalen shook his head. “I am waiting for someone.”

She shrugged, her look souring to indifference. “As you will,” she said, and she left to ply her charms on a pair of youngbloods sitting in one of the private booths. Smoke billowed forth when she pulled the curtain aside, and they grinned at her with yellow teeth.

Kalen looked out the window, but his contact was still nowhere to be seen. He really did hope to find a new lead, as all his others had soured.

He’d spent the previous night asking around and spilling coin in taverns like the Root to no good effect. No one would have recognized the name Rhett, of course, and Kalen had the foresight not to drop that name, anyway. He’d sent the boy to train with the Eye of Justice, and there was no way Levia would let him use his own name openly. But none of the sources he’d asked had been able to identify the boy by the description Kalen provided: a young man with red hair and an enthusiastic manner, easy to look at but somewhat dull in the wits. Everywhere he’d gone, Kalen had met with the same lack of response.

His only option at this point was to do what he’d wanted

to avoid at all costs: go to the Eye of Justice directly. And so, he waited.

He heard a commotion from across the common room, toward the back. The blonde barmaid stood on the threshold to the back alley, the two knaves she'd propositioned on either side. They were arguing, and Kalen saw one of them strike her once they got outside. She fell back against the far wall of the alley as the door banged shut. Kalen looked around the common room, but none of the other patrons seemed to have noticed, let alone expressed any interest.

He got to his feet.

The ill-fitting door creaked open as he pushed out into the alley.

One of the men held the barmaid by the shoulders up against the alley wall, while the other fondled her. "Don't see no need to pay," he was saying, "when we can just—"

Kalen had no need to speak. His mere presence drew their attention to where he stood, his cloak swirling around him in the midday breeze, and their pleased expressions turned uneasy.

They let the barmaid stagger free and stepped into the center of the alley. He expected them to flee, but instead they pulled back their cloaks to reveal swords emblazoned with the eye of Helm.

"Justice Knights." He looked at the barmaid. "You've kept in practice, Levia."

"Shadowbane." The woman pulled off her gold wig, revealing mundane brown hair cropped short to frame her plain features. Without the wig, her slightly pointed ears were obvious. She gave him a slight nod—the only sign of respect either one paid the other.

The ten years since their first meeting had hardly

touched Levia Shadewalker, for which Kalen credited her half-elf blood. She dressed in the same dark green cloak and brigandine armor he remembered, and wore the same flanged mace at her belt. She looked as ageless and constant as he remembered; she was the one he could always rely upon in times of need.

Also, considering the two Knights of the Eye she'd brought along, he could always rely on her paranoia. "You would lure me into a trap?" Kalen asked. "Force my hand? Why?"

Wordlessly, Levia directed the Justice Knights to strike. They drew their short swords, giving no quarter to their unarmed opponent.

Kalen caught the first one's sword arm and let the blade slide past his head. He pulled the man around and threw him toward his companion. The second knight pulled back to avoid the hit, and Kalen lunged with his stolen short sword. The man's eyes went wide and he parried desperately, but Kalen slapped his sword aside and smashed the pommel of the sword into the man's face in the same motion. Even as the knight stumbled back against the wall, Kalen reversed the sword for a deathblow.

The ground roiled under Kalen, throwing off his aim. He stabbed the blade into the wall behind his opponent, then fell to one knee and struggled to keep his balance. Levia let her earth-shivering magic subside and turned her glowing mace toward Kalen. "Yield," she said.

The gray flames of the Threefold God surged in Kalen, and suddenly surrender was not an option. He rose to his feet and raised one hand high over his head. Magic burned, and Vindicator materialized in his hand. The Justice Knights fell back, gasping, and Levia's eyes went wide. In

the hesitation, Kalen cut the blade from one man's hand and blood bloomed in the greasy alley.

They had forced his hand. If Kalen let them go, then the Eye would know he had returned to Westgate—the very thing he'd wanted to avoid. The alternative, however . . .

Then something happened that Kalen had not expected.

“Lord Shadowbane.” Levia fell to one knee, and the others followed her example.

“What is this?” Kalen turned Vindicator slightly so it illuminated the knights.

The men raised their hands, palms toward him, and tattoos appeared on their skin: the stylized eye that was the symbol of Helm—the symbol of Vindicator. The symbol appeared only a moment, then vanished once more.

“Leave us.” Levia gestured, and the knights slinked back into the shadows. “Have no fear. The Eye tattoo marks them as loyalists to Gedrin and the Threefold God.”

Kalen crossed the alley between them in a heartbeat and shoved her back against the Rotten Root. He wedged Vindicator against the wall across Levia's throat, so that pressing in would behead her. “Why did you attack me?”

“I had . . . to be sure,” Levia said. “I had to be assured you were you.”

He brought his face closer to hers. “And are you assured?”

She stared into his eyes, unblinking. “I am.”

They stood there another moment, their bodies close together, before Kalen finally pulled away.

“You summoned Vindicator,” she said. “I saw Gedrin do that, once or twice. I didn't realize you could as well.”

“Only recently,” he said.

“When someone put out the flag that set a meet for the Root, I didn't dare to think—” Levia shook her head.

“Thank the Threefold God you’ve returned.”

“Not for the Eye of Justice,” he said. “I need your help.”

Levia considered that a moment, then nodded. “Ask me.”

“I need to know about the boy,” he said. “Rhetegast Hawkwinter.”

“Who?”

That one word told him much. So Rhett had never found Levia—he’d met his fate before he had the chance. “He is . . . my apprentice. I must find him.”

Curiosity broke through Levia’s cool expression. “Another wielder of Vindicator?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” The softness passed and her face hardened like frosted stone. “Why should I help you? You’ll just take what you need and leave again.”

He had never read Levia particularly well, and that day proved no exception.

Kalen leaned against the opposite wall. “So what do you want?”

“It has never been about what I want,” she said. “The Eye of Justice needs you.”

Kalen had feared this. He’d hoped their friendship would forestall this subject, but he remembered how they had parted three years ago.

“I swore an oath never to return,” Kalen said. “I am here to find the boy, nothing else.”

Levia looked uncertain. Then she sighed. “You’re certain he’s here in Westgate?”

Kalen imagined the bloody parcel, which contained shards of jagged steel—the broken blade and hilt. Upon the largest of the pieces stood a single word scribed in blood: WESTGATE.

"I'm certain," he said.

"Then I'll find him."

This was the Levia that Kalen remembered: confident, practical, and determined. She did not mince words or show any hesitation. He set the sword against the wall and reached into his pack. He drew forth the blood-spattered sack, which he had kept since the sewers in Luskan. It was the only clue he had, aside from Vindicator itself.

"Is this his?" Gingerly, she took the stained cloth.

"I believe so, but perhaps not. If you can work your divinations on that blood and find its owner, that might be a good starting place."

It had occurred to him that Myrin could do such a thing, but he didn't want her to find Rhett before he did, particularly if only a torn corpse remained. There *was* a great deal of blood.

"What is this?" She turned the bloody parcel over in her hands. "Who gave this to you?"

"An invitation to Westgate—and a challenge," he said. "I had it from a gold-eyed elf."

Levia nodded. "I will do this straight away. But if I do, will you at least consider—?"

"Levia, do not ask me this," Kalen said. "It's bad enough your men have seen me. Word will be all over the Eye within the day that I am here."

"They owe you their fealty," Levia argued. "You are the wielder of Vindicator, the true heir to the Eye of Justice. They will not betray you."

"They are men, and neither of us is foolish enough to believe otherwise." Kalen slid Vindicator into the empty scabbard at his belt. "I will watch for the Eye's hunters at my back."

Levia conceded that point. “You would rather fight the entire Eye of Justice than return?”

“If I must,” Kalen said. “Find the boy. He is as much a true wielder of Vindicator as I am—more so, even. He will redeem your precious Eye of Justice. I want no part of it.”

Levia shook her head. “It’s been so hard without you, Kalen. You haven’t seen what the Eye has become these last years.”

“I saw what it was becoming,” Kalen said. “And that’s why I left.”

“That was the only—?” She trailed off without finishing the question. They both knew what she had meant to ask, and neither was inclined to voice it.

He turned and walked away. To his relief and sorrow, Levia didn’t follow.



Levia waited until Kalen—gods, *Kalen Dren!*—had turned the corner out of the alley before she sagged back against the wall and tried to steady her suddenly rapid breathing.

She pressed herself against a stack of crates, out of view. As a sworn priestess of the Eye of Justice, she could hide as well as any street thief. Gedrin had taught her that skill, and she and Kalen had spent many excellent nights testing each other’s sneaking abilities.

Kalen.

Even when she’d seen the red flag hanging from the gnarled tree outside Castle Thalavar—a signal to meet that only Kalen would know—she had dismissed it as a foolish hope. But now she had seen him with her own eyes, and

she had been shocked. Of course he hadn't wanted to talk (when did he *ever* want to talk?), but it was enough that he had returned.

Enough, at least, for the moment.

And just as it had been three years ago when she had seen him last—indeed, just as it had been the whole of the time they had known one another—there was work to be done.

“That’s your man, is it?” Hessar melted out of the shadow of the Rotten Root, startling her. “Quite the specimen, isn’t he?”

“Belt up and stow it.” She could never quite grow accustomed to the way the sorcerous monk slinked about. Then again, that was the very quality that made him useful. “What news?”

“Good for us. Shadowbane’s attack shattered any hope for peace between the guilds. Their war continues, and they will not intercede in our business.” Hessar nodded after Kalen. “What of him? What do we do?”

“Leave him to me.”

“Truly?” As if to indicate his disappointment, cold shadow magic swirled around him. “Possessive, aren’t we?”

A Calishite by birth, Hessar was one of the few members of the Eye of Justice who used arcane magic, seemingly unfazed by the order’s stated distrust of the Art. He kept his magic hidden from most other than her, buried under a strict pattern of meditation and focus that earned him a good deal of respect from the more staid members of the organization. He was also entirely too good at moving unseen and unheard, as though the shadows embraced him as one of their own. Ironically, he was also Levia’s best and only reliable ally in Castle Thalavar.

“I’m more concerned about this ‘gold-eyed elf’ that

Kalen mentioned,” Levia said. “Do you think it’s the same one I’ve had you following?”

“I only know of one gold-eyed elf in Westgate. She stands out.” From under the folds of his black robe, he produced a sheaf of thirty papers or so and handed it to Levia.

“I see.” Levia paged through sketches and reports scribed in multiple hands, from looping runes to barely legible scrawl. Some of the papers were very old. “All this for one elf?”

“A former adventurer turned merchant, now a criminal on the run. She’s wanted in Waterdeep for the murder of a Sunite priestess, and there are rumors of Netherese ties.”

“Is that why you know so much about her? A shared history?”

His eyes flashed yellow. That Hessar was a shade was a well-kept secret between them. Likely, some of the other Justiciars of the Eye would not take kindly to a former Netherese agent in their midst. Other, less savory knights might try to recruit his loyalties for themselves.

“These tales date from before my time,” he said, his expression unreadable. “I also included known associations, but most of those are dead. Apparently—”

He reached across and touched Levia’s hand. The instant of contact distracted her, as did the proximity of Hessar’s well-muscled body. More than once, Levia had considered suggesting they take their relationship beyond the professional. She had never done so, of course.

“Apparently, she even knew your father. Gedrin, I mean.” Hessar turned to the last few pages of the report. “In 1390—praise Gedrin for keeping a precise journal in the archives—they adventured together in search of ‘Neveren’s Daughter.’ A person, or perhaps an object of some sort. The

journal is unclear.”

“And who is this elf?”

“She has many names, but most recently, she has gone by Ilira Nathalan.” Hessar turned to the very first page, which bore a picture of a good-looking elf woman with gold eyes. “And she owns a boutique right here in Westgate.”

Levia nodded. “Good work, Hessar.”

“Shall I scout her out for you?” he asked. “Perhaps a little confrontation?”

“No.” She laid her gloved fingers on the portrait, then looked after Kalen. “I’ll deal with her myself, when the time is right.”

“Because the beautiful elf with the shadowy past stalks your old lover?”

Levia glared at him. “That was long ago, and we were never lovers.”

“As you say.” Hessar turned his yellow eyes after Kalen. “Does he know?”

“No. Our secret is still safe.”

“Your boy is being clumsy, letting rumors spread. It was a high profile moot he foiled last night. Did he think that would go unnoticed?”

“Believe me, I will upbraid him for it.”

“No doubt.” He nodded after Kalen. “What of him? You don’t mean to tell him, surely.”

“I’ll consider,” Levia said. “I shall need a day or two to decide.”

“Take no longer.” The shadows swirled around him like living things. “He abandoned you and the Eye of Justice once. Do you truly think he won’t do so a second time?”

“It’s my decision, shade. Not yours.”

Hessar’s only reply was a mocking smile to go with those

unsettling eyes. Then the darkness swallowed him and he was gone. Alone, Levia sank back against the wall and sighed. She looked down at the burlap sack Kalen had given her, stained in old blood.

If only she could tell Kalen what had come to pass in Westgate. If only she could tell him the truth about Shadowbane and the Eye.

About the *new* Shadowbane.

“Burn the gods, Kalen,” she whispered, bunching up the bag in her hands. “Why did you have to come back?”

She let the bloody sack fall to the ground, then slipped out of the alley.



Kalen returned straightaway to Darkdance Manor and saw that the gates stood wide open. He resisted the impulse to summon Vindicator—he’d risked enough by revealing the sword to Levia without also showing it to everyone on the street.

The signs of an ambush were there, but he strode right through without fear. The voidsoul genasi Sithe had taught him many things, but hesitation was not one of them. To fight by faith, one must trust absolutely in the power of one’s god.

He reclaimed Sithe’s jagged black axe hidden under a rosebush in the overgrown garden. The dark steel felt cool and not a little violent, as though it yearned for battle. An unfamiliar voice rose in words he didn’t understand, coming from inside the open manor doors.

He came upon Myrin and a gnome dressed like a rake sitting idly on the steps of Darkdance Manor. Inside, Kalen

could see Elevar sweeping furiously. The sunlight on Myrin's face made her eyes gleam like jewels, and he momentarily forgot why he'd come. The gnome was helping Myrin go through a stack of envelopes adorned with flowers and delicate script.

Kalen didn't see danger, but he would not relax until he was sure.

"So to clarify," the gnome was saying. "You're on a quest to find your lost memories, in which you were a powerful sorceress? And these memories are secreted in people who knew you from before? That sounds needlessly complicated."

"Could be worse," Myrin said. "We could be hunting seven lost pieces of a staff scattered across the multiverse, each more difficult to find than the last."

"True."

"Well met," Kalen said.

Myrin bolted up. "Kalen!"

"Stay!" The gnome leaped to his feet, his magic rapier splitting into two in his hands. "Down arms right there, you Shar-pissed cur of a mangy dog!"

The sudden explosion of odd insults startled Kalen into a defensive posture.

"It's well, Brace," Myrin said. "Kalen, this is my retainer. Apparently, a woman of class needs to have servants, and he's my first. Er . . . second, counting Elevar."

"And you think you can trust him?" Kalen asked.

"Brace the Bold, sellsword of Westgate and contracted to Lady Darkdance," the gnome said, his tone chivalrous and very proper. "I assure you, my credentials are all in order."

"You have to trust people, Kalen," Myrin said. "And besides, if he gives me any reason to distrust him, well, I have you and your axe to deal with him. Or I could set him

on fire.”

Brace nodded. “Quite right.”

“Are those invitations?” Kalen pointed at the envelopes.

“Apparently, as a noble heiress of the house who has returned after a long absence, I’ve attracted some attention.” She showed him half a dozen letters announcing this or that revel at a noble manor or some other exotic-sounding location. “You wouldn’t happen to be available this eve, perhaps? I mean, strictly as a bodyguard, of course—”

Kalen ignored the question. “Why did you leave the gate open?”

“Well, the gates only open to a Darkdance, and you needed to get in somehow, if you were ever coming back.” She smiled. “I’m glad you did, by the way.”

Kalen cleared his throat. “Can I speak with you?” he asked Myrin.

“You seem to be doing quite well so far,” Myrin said. “Speaking to me, that is.”

He crossed to her, took her arm, and drew her away from the gnome. “What happened to keeping a low cloak?”

“Whoever has Rhett wants you, not me.” Myrin crossed her arms. “You can keep whatever cloak you want, but I see no reason to hide myself away. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“You don’t think Rhett’s . . . kidnapper knows we are allies?”

“All the better.” She stepped closer, putting her face in front of his. “I’ll draw as much attention as I can, and if our foe comes for me, I’ll crush him. Isn’t that exactly what we want?”

“You—” He trailed off, thinking.

“Is this the part where you tell me I’m a foolish girl and you need to protect me?”

Kalen shook his head. "It's a good plan. Only one thing: we face him together."

Myrin gazed into his eyes, considering. "Agreed."

Kalen bit his lip. There was more, but could he tell her? "I need to say else—"

"Yes?" She stepped a touch closer. She was very warm, and her sapphire eyes sparkled.

Kalen couldn't bring himself to tell Myrin that her daring plan was in vain. Levia's ignorance of Rhett's existence had only convinced him more firmly of the boy's demise. He knew in his heart they would find a corpse, not a living Rhett. He had wanted to confirm that Rhett was dead before telling Myrin, but maybe it would be better to tell her everything, rather than give her false hope. "Myrin—"

"Ahem." Eyes averted, Brace looked like he was pretending not to notice how close Kalen and Myrin were standing. "I could hardly help but overhear, despite your attempts to thwart me—fey ears, you know." He flicked his pointed ear. "You said 'Rhett,' a name I recognize. A man I know."

Myrin looked at the flamboyantly dressed gnome. "You know Rhett?"

"I know *a* Rhett, my lady," Brace said. "Someone at the Timeless Blade—my bladedance school—goes by that name. Bit of a berk, actually, but that's quite certainly his name."

"Young? Red hair?" Kalen asked.

Brace shrugged. "To be plain, I gaze more upon the ladies than the menfolk. Also, bladedance students wear masks."

"You go to a school?" Myrin asked.

Brace's ingratiating grin slipped a touch. "I am a former student at the Timeless Blade, my lady," he said. "And I bout there on occasion, to pass my otherwise impoverished

time, yes.”

Could it be so easy? This stank of a trap, but Kalen couldn't ignore it. “Let's go.”

“Alas,” Brace said, “the Timeless Blade is not so timeless as its name implies.” He looked up through the open ceiling at the advancing sun. “Lady Rujia will have closed its doors by now. I can take you there in the morn.”

“Or now,” Myrin said. “Between the two of us, Kalen and I can get in, open door or no.”

“Alas again, my lady,” he said. “This Rhett of my acquaintance will certainly have left for the night, and I do not know where he might have gone. Although”—he winked at Kalen—“I could no doubt direct you to the personal residences of some of the more attractive lady bladedancers who are seeking patrons of their own.”

Myrin smiled. “See? And you were worried we wouldn't find him.”

Kalen had not been reassured, and he felt hollow to see her face bright with false hope. If this was Rhett, why would he use his name so obviously in connection to the school? This stank of a trap. But what choice did he have?

“Very well,” Kalen said. “We're agreed—we'll go on the morrow.”

“Outstanding.” Brace looked around the manor's ballroom. “So where do I sleep?”

CHAPTER SIX

DAWN, 26 FLAMERULE

DEEP IN THE BOWELS OF CASTLE THALAVAR, AMONG THE dust and vermin spoor, a trapdoor swung open on well-oiled hinges. Levia climbed through, guided by the heatless white flame of her everburning torch.

A simple spell obscured her footprints and kept the room as dusty as ever, so that none would find her secret egress to the sewers. Like a shadow herself, she kept to the obscured nooks and roundabout passages she knew well, and in so doing bypassed guards on the way to her chamber. Gedrin had taught her well, and the fools and dullards the Eye of Justice recruited these days would never catch her.

Outside her cell, a group of men stood arguing. Chief among them was Seer Haran, tragically advanced over the last decade to a position on the council itself. The position should have gone to her, but such was the Eye of Justice under Lord Uthias Darkwell's continuing rule.

The men held a junior recruit up against the wall while Haran stood berating his cowardice and weakness. The scene was a common one, with thugs among the order's upper ranks delighting in teaching new recruits "the facts"

of the Eye of Justice. Gedrin never would have tolerated this behavior, but the Eye had fallen far indeed.

Levia had all but given up trying to redeem the order since Kalen had left, but now that he was back, new bravery filled her. “Stop that,” she said.

Her words startled the Knights, but Haran looked only a little surprised. “Sister Shadewalker,” he said. “You do creep about, don’t you, lass?”

Levia hated to be called “lass,” particularly by Haran, over whom she had at least five years. Her elf heritage kept her looking young, at least, if not pretty—never pretty. The mirror reminded her of that every morn, as did the dismissive glances of her fellow Justiciars. She had neither the loveliness of youth nor the dignity of age but was caught ever in the middle.

“You’re wasting valuable time,” she said to redirect their aggression. “I heard in the Rotten Root that the Nine Golden Swords are planning to hit the Vhammos docks tonight.”

The Seer crossed his arms. “So?”

“By the Threefold God, you truly do not see?”

“Careful upon what you swear,” Haran said. “We serve Torm, and no one else.”

This was another of the “facts” of the Eye. Many in the order sought to do away with the “old heresy” of the Threefold God and referred to their divine patron as Torm alone. Those who held to Gedrin’s teachings of three gods in one—like Levia—were increasingly marginalized. Levia doubted a formal measure would come to pass, but she let the point fall away.

“Lord Vhammos is on Westgate’s ruling council,” she said. “His son Vaulren is one of your fellow Vigilant Seers

and his House is a stout ally of House Bleth.”

“Vaulren is a fool dulled on nightshade.” Haran grunted derisively. “And we certainly don’t serve at the pleasure of the Fire Knives.”

Levia suspected that wasn’t quite true—like as not several members of the Eye of Justice owed loyalty to Bleth—but she held her tongue. “I mean only that there’s sure to be a reward,” she said. “And if you want it, you’ll need to move. Soon.”

Haran looked at her speculatively, rubbing his thin moustache. He was dissecting her words in search of a lie. Levia, however, had a talent for falsehood, and the stupid half-Shou brute could only shake his head. He grumbled an order, and he and his men took their leave. The new recruit they’d been harassing gave Levia a half-grateful look and hurried off.

Though Levia hadn’t expected more, she would have appreciated a smile.

She pushed into her cell with a sigh, letting in a rush of air from the hall that stirred the cluttered wall of papers and reports, which waved to bid her greeting. Sketches of the hard-faced men and women of Westgate’s underground adorned the walls, some of them crossed out with red ink. Pins and colored string denoted connections, both real and suspect, between folk and reports. She had schemes in place to bring down dozens of individuals across the city, although she could never quite gather the evidence she needed to act against them directly.

Now that Kalen had returned to Westgate, what good were all her carefully laid plans? What did it mean that now there were *two* chosen wielders of Vindicator? And where was her student, anyway? He’d made such a mess in the

east end.

It was too much for now. Levia needed sleep and time to think.

“Stay safe, Kalen,” she prayed as she sank into the single, well-worn chair. “Don’t go looking into mysteries better kept secret. Wait, and we’ll go together.”



The sun crested the horizon of the Sea of Fallen Stars beyond the River Gate as two figures stole through alleys and side streets into the Shou quarter of the city. Brace took the lead, while Kalen followed behind. Unsurprisingly, the two didn’t exactly hit it off.

“Pardon, Sir Dren,” the gnome asked with a yawn. “But wherefore do we come to be walking the streets of Westgate so early? I mean, without our mistress?”

“You know that as well as I.” Kalen found the gnome’s eternally sunny disposition exasperating. Probably, Brace’s attitude was what made Myrin like him.

“Lady Darkdance, aye.” The gnome seemed oblivious to his tone or rhetorical devices. “She does tend to attract attention, particularly with that hair of hers. And the tattoos.”

“And the magic.”

“Ah, true. I should like to see some of that!”

After much discussion the previous night, Kalen had finally convinced Myrin that he and Brace should go to the Timeless Blade alone. Subtlety, she conceded, was not one of her strengths, so she agreed with their plan—for now. After a night spent in three separate bedchambers, Kalen and Brace had risen early. Elevar set out a brief

morningfeast before their departure, his silence seeming to support their decision. Kalen checked himself for wounds suffered during the night, as he did every morning, then left without waking Myrin.

In retrospect, Kalen suspected Myrin had argued so strongly because his decision looked like protecting her from a suspected trap. Such couldn't be further from the truth: if anything, he hadn't brought her along in order to protect everyone else from *her*.

Brace continued chattering about nothing in particular as they passed over the River Bridge and under the gently waving banners of the Far East that marked the Shou quarter.

Entering the quarter was like stepping into a different world. The architecture twisted in the curves favored in far-away Kara-Tur, carved dragons loomed over every crossing, and the smells of exotic spices wafted down the streets. The faces all over Westgate bore the mark of a century of intermarriage, but here the Shou were the clear majority. Also, Kalen couldn't forget they were in Nine Golden Swords territory: he saw plenty of gang tattoos and curved swords.

"Sir Dren," Brace said among the prattle.

Threefold God, did the gnome ever shut up? "What?"

"I could not help but notice the way you and Lady Darkdance look upon one another," he said. "And I was curious whether you're her—husband?"

"No," he said.

"You're not?"

"No."

"Are you her consort?"

"No."

"Kept man?"

“No.”

“Doxy? Bed warmer?”

“What? No.”

“Fancy uncle?”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

Kalen followed Brace’s lead through the mazelike network of buildings, tuning out the gnome’s dozen other suggested relations to Myrin. Kalen would have been happy to narrow it down, but in truth, he didn’t know himself. What was Myrin to him, or he to her?

Perhaps after this business with Rhett was done, they could sit down and discuss it. If it turned out in such a way that allowed her to speak to him ever again.

The Timeless Blade sat atop a small rise not too far north of the Old Beard Tavern. White-blooming cherry trees filled its tranquil courtyard, and the ethereal song of Shou wind chimes wafted down three score paces to the raging waves of the Inner Sea. When the sea level had fallen a century ago, the waters at the south end had exposed a sheer cliff face rather than beach where Tidetown could extend. The waterfall where the River Thunn drained into the Inner Sea provided a backdrop for the studio that might have been beautiful, were the water not fouled by Westgate’s sewers.

Kalen heard the ring of steel as they approached and saw a score of men and women in practice leathers standing in respectful silence around two duelists in the center. The pair cut and thrust with blunted practice swords, honing their craft under the eye of their instructor—an imperiously tall woman with purple-and-white-striped skin. She wore white-dyed leathers with wings of gold fabric at the shoulders and she carried a sword at her belt.

“Mistress Rujia,” Brace said, following Kalen’s eye. “She’s

a deva—a creature spawned of divine power, always getting reborn when she expires. Just appeared about a year ago and founded this school, saying she was *meant* to do so. None have ever seen her fight, but she must have centuries of experience as a hundred different warriors. Here she comes.”

Rujia approached, a dueling mask in her hand. Her lack of expression reminded Kalen of Sithe, but she carried herself with a regal air the genasi had lacked—like a queen or goddess among mortals. By contrast, Sithe had always seemed to move like a hunting panther.

“Master Brace,” she said quietly. “You are late to lessons.”

“A thousand apologies, Mistress of a Thousand Lifetimes,” the gnome replied. “My ankle has taken a bad turn, and I was unable to move with my usual alacrity.”

“I see.” She might have been talking to Brace, but her considering gaze lay upon Kalen. He thought her face held the slightest glimmer of recognition. If Brace had spoken truly and the deva knew multiple lives, it might very well be so. In any case, Kalen did not know her.

“This is my friend, Sir Dren. He has gladly agreed to fill my place today.” Kalen raised a dubious eyebrow at the gnome, but Brace beamed up at Rujia. “He was earnestly hoping to meet an acquaintance of his—one Rhett, by name?”

“Indeed.” Rujia gestured toward the dueling ring, where a cry went up and applause broke the silence of the bout. “He is the defending champion of the day and awaits a challenge.”

Sure enough, one of the duelists had taken a knee to the other, who nodded in victory. Kalen considered the man’s shoulders and stance, wondering if they might be those of

Rhett, but the practice leathers and dueling mask made identification impossible.

“Aye,” Kalen said. “I’ll face him.”

Rujia nodded and handed him the mask she carried. This Kalen donned, glad to keep his identity secret for the moment. This way, he would determine if it truly was Rhett before he confronted the man.

“A challenger.” Rujia’s cool announcement cut through the courtyard. “This is Saer—”

“Galandel.” Kalen gave her the name of Rhett’s superior officer in the Waterdeep Guard. “No sir.”

The deva nodded. “Galandel claims right of challenge.”

If the masked man recognized the name Kalen wore, he showed no sign. He flexed his arms and saluted.

They stood across from one another in the dueling circle, wrapped in watchful silence. Kalen tested the weight and balance of the blunt rapier Rujia had given him and found it mediocre. He favored heavy swords, but he’d trained with all sorts of blades and knew how to fight in the fashion of the bladedance bravos. He saluted and took up a defensive posture.

They fought slowly at first, circling to learn how the other moved, jabbing to test the other’s defenses. Kalen wished he had paid more attention to how Rhett had fought in Luskan. True, he had been wielding Vindicator and a shield at the time, but still his movements would have given Kalen a sense. This Rhett wound up too much strength behind his strikes, suggesting he was used to a heavy blade. Kalen thought they were evenly matched.

This he thought, at least, until the would-be Rhett exploded into motion and lunged in a progression of three long steps to strike at him. Kalen barely parried his attack

and had to leap back immediately to avoid Rhett's follow-up attacks. He struck viciously, offering no quarter and giving Kalen no chance to riposte. The brutal slashes made Kalen's blade vibrate. He fought defensively as he retreated, first back and then to the side when he reached the limits of the circle. Rhett hounded him, striking and cutting with only heavy breaths to punctuate the silence.

Finally, Kalen threw himself to the ground and thrust to halt Rhett's advance with a warding blade. The youth barely stopped in time. A silent heartbeat passed between them in which they regarded each other—one man on the ground, one standing.

Kalen almost said the boy's name. Indeed, he drew in air and his lips formed the words.

Then Rhett sent Kalen's rapier ringing to the side with a smash of his own sword, and brought it immediately back in line with Kalen's face. The point of his practice rapier tapped the front of Kalen's mask.

"Point," Rujia said. "We have a victor, and it is—"

"Rhett." Kalen rose to his feet and pulled off his mask. "Rhetegast Hawkwinter."

All eyes turned to him, including those of his opponent. The youth fell back a step. The rapier fell from his open hand and he stared at Kalen, seemingly dumbfounded.

"Rhett—" Kalen started.

Abruptly, the would-be Rhett turned from Kalen and ran. He shoved his way through his fellow students and tore across the courtyard as though a dragon bit at his heels.

Momentarily startled at this unexpected reaction, Kalen let him get a dozen paces away before he pushed himself up from the grass and followed. "Sir Dren—" Brace was saying, but Kalen couldn't hear. He chased his masked

opponent out the doors of the Timeless Blade and into the Shou district.

They shoved through crowds and dodged carts along the labyrinthine streets. The youth threw over a small wagon, dumping the elderly couple inside in a shouting tumble. Kalen leaped over them, hardly slowing. They ran up Eastgate Street, sidestepping an upset cage of squawking chickens. Blood thundered in his ears but Kalen ran on, shoving through to clear a path.

The youth seemed to know an open chase on the cobblestone road was doomed, so he darted across Eastgate right in front of a passing carriage toward Silverpiece Way. Kalen had to pull up short to avoid being trampled. When the street had cleared, he continued after the youth, who left a trail of upset folk in his wake.

If this was Rhett, Kalen thought, then the boy had an athletic ability he had not demonstrated in Luskan. The youth bounded over a pair of homeless Shou and scaled the side of a building, leaping from it to the other across the alley. Kalen called upon the magic of his boots and sailed into the air. He gained the rooftop just in time to see the youth reach the other end and leap across to the next building, the Black Boot Inn. Kalen followed.

A weightless moment later, three ravens squawked and took off from their perch as Kalen landed heavily. The shingles groaned under his weight, and rain the previous night had made them slippery. His balance shot out from under him, and he fumbled to catch hold before he could slide off. This far from Myrin, his spellscar was discontent, and it chose that moment to deny him feeling in his fingers. He narrowly caught himself on the edge and hung over the street. The river's waterfall thundered off to his left.

The youth had paused at the edge of the rooftop and was looking back at him. Whether he did so out of concern or hope that Kalen would fall, the mask did not reveal.

One of the birds Kalen had displaced pecked at his fingers. He pulled himself up, shoed the raven away, and looked across the roof.

The youth was gone.



Levia awoke to the sound of her window being picked open. She had fallen asleep at her desk, and a most unlady-like trail of drool connected her cheek to the topmost report. Levia made no obvious movements, such as reaching for her mace or sitting up. Instead, she palmed a crossbow she kept strapped beneath her desk for just such an occasion, and she opened her eyes.

The man who almost fell through her window, exhausted, chased her caution away, replacing it with confusion. She shed all pretense of slumber and rose to face him. “What are you doing here?” she asked. “What happened?”

The man in dueling leathers gave her what could only be a withering glare. She couldn’t read his expression through the dueling mask, but his anger was clear.

Shadowbane’s wrath was always clear.

“Can’t you guess? Kalen Dren chased me across half the gods-burned city.”

Fear grew in the pit of Levia’s stomach. “He saw your face?”

Shadowbane leaned heavily against the wall, breathing hard. He shook his head.

His show of weakness emboldened her—that, and the

reassurance that their secret was safe. With that clarified, she could loose her anger. “What the Hells have you been doing? Attacking the Fire Knives and the Swords? It’s like you *want* him to know about you.”

“I do. But at a time and on a battlefield of my choosing.” He slumped down against the wall. His hands clenched and relaxed, over and over. He barely contained his rage.

“What of Vindicator?” Levia noted the sword’s absence. “You said he bequeathed it to you, but I saw him summon it into his hand. If he wields it, then—”

“Gods *spit* upon what you saw. Vindicator has chosen both of us. But only one of us will wield it. Me.” The dueling mask turned toward her. “Or do you doubt this?”

“You are Shadowbane. Why else would you have come?”

He put out his hand, and a dull gray radiance spread around his fingers. Levia recognized this—it was the same as when Kalen had summoned the sword. Of a sudden, she wished she had taken the crossbow from under the desk after all.

“What does he know?” Shadowbane asked. “Kalen Dren.”

Levia shook her head. “For all he knows, you’re dead.”

“But does he know there is another Shadowbane in Westgate? Tell me.”

“No. Although after the Knives and Swords, it’s only a matter of time before he hears and puts the puzzle together. He will know of you soon enough, and he will seek you out.”

Shadowbane rose and glared at her. Despite her resolve, Levia backed up a step.

“You’d better gods-be-damned hope he isn’t playing with you,” he said. “And hope that you’re half as good a liar as

you think you are. Now listen, and do exactly as I say.”

The young man laid out his plan. Levia heard his words, nodding.

“Are you certain this is what you want?” Levia asked. “You’ll not kill him, will you?”

“Are you with me or with him?”

Levia bowed. “You are my student and Gedrin’s heir. I will stand by your side.”

“Do not forget.”

With that, the shadows coalesced around the man, and he vanished into the darkness cast into the corner of the room.

He left Levia wondering. Perhaps Kalen suspected nothing, but Levia could not say the same of herself. She’d been teaching the boy to become Shadowbane since he’d come to Westgate. She believed him the chosen one, come to redeem the Eye of Justice.

But was she wrong?



“Passing strange,” Brace said as they came upon the gates of Darkdance Manor. “You’d think this ‘Rhett’ fellow would have been pleased to see you. I mean, I’ve only known him a short time, but I never conceived the impression that he was *insane*.”

Kalen shook his head, not knowing what to think.

“Well, at least you’ve an answer,” Brace said. “You found your friend.”

“Perhaps,” Kalen said.

He hadn’t been able to tell if the youth had been Rhett based on his fighting style, but he thought it possible.

When he'd taken off his mask to greet the would-be Rhett, though, the last thing he'd expected was for the youth to run. If he wasn't Rhett, he would have acted with confusion and the whole incident might have been mildly embarrassing. And if he *was* Rhett, why would he run from Kalen rather than welcome him? It made no sense.

"Either way, we say nothing to Myrin."

"Are you quite certain?" the gnome asked. "She's a smart woman. No doubt she—"

Then Brace trailed off, his eyes drawn into the courtyard. Kalen saw it, too, at the same moment: a hulking warrior in thick plate armor with barbed war-gauntlets.

They drew steel.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HIGHSUN, 26 FLAMERULE

MYRIN AWOKE SHORTLY AFTER BRACE AND KALEN LEFT. She knew this, because she felt Kalen's spellscar moving away from her. She shook her head in a long-suffering fashion. Kalen's plea for subtlety had been valid, but also an obvious excuse. Even if she suspected he was leaving her behind to protect her—as usual—to chase after him would only expose her own insecurities.

Instead, after morningfeast, she spent some time in the library, scouring the books for anything of use. Her ancestors had stocked all manner of historical treatises on a variety of subjects: ancient empires like Athalantar and Netheril, military tactics from far-flung realms such as Amn and Rashemen, and tomes of magical theory. These Myrin set aside for later. She also found a set of familial histories, but they were incomplete. The last volume trailed off about two hundred years ago with a Lord Malderen Darkdance, a privateer captain. There was a place for a subsequent volume, but no book on the shelf.

She was levitating in the library, sending gusts of wind to blow the dust off the top row of tomes, when silvery light

swept along a crack in the stone wall behind the shelf. Her eyes traced the fading path of the sweeping light, which had come from the stairs. She slapped shut the tome she was holding—*Ecologies* by some archmage she couldn't remember ever hearing of—and willed herself to trace the line of light back. Mastering flight magic made life *so* much easier.

She followed the silvery radiance back down the stairs into the open ballroom, warmed by the light of the rising sun. It ran along the wall to the front doors, and she realized it indicated a visitor. Also, she realized why Elevar hadn't answered the door already, as the announcing light made no sound, and the dwarf wouldn't have seen it.

Myrin alighted on the ground near the door and pulled it open.

An elf woman stood on the threshold, her face partly blocked by a lacy black parasol. Her porcelain skin contrasted sharply with her elaborate bun of midnight hair. She wore a sleek black gown that left her shoulders bare but otherwise covered her head to toe. A star-sapphire bracelet was the only touch of color on her, apart from her eyes. Myrin also knew that the elf was spellscarred—she could feel the azure fire in her soul, burning toward her.

The elf had been looking around the courtyard, her posture rigid, but as soon as the door opened, she turned, her pupil-less gold eyes fixed upon the wizard's face. Her stance softened. "It's you," the elf said, her face both confused and relieved.

"It's me?" Myrin asked. "Who—?"

The question faded away before she voiced it, however, and they stared at one another in silent recognition. Myrin *did* know this woman. She had seen her across a crowded fashion studio a year before in Waterdeep, seen her in a

vision from a shapeshifter called Fayne, and seen her twice in the last two days. She'd been the noblewoman who distracted the Justice Knights that first day in Waterdeep, and Myrin had run into her in the market. She'd absorbed a memory from that contact: a memory of herself being born.

"I know you," Myrin said. "You're Ilira Nathalan."

Ilira bowed, her eyes never leaving their shared gaze.

Neither of them seemed capable of more words but could only stare into one another's eyes. Myrin wanted to speak, but there was something about this elf that captivated her. Perhaps it was her face, with its hint of danger as well as promise, or perhaps it was the blue fire that burned within her to match Myrin's own. The silence between them seemed unbreakable.

Unbreakable, at least, until a soft growl rose up the steps from the overgrown garden. A hulking dragonborn in beaten and scored armor glared up at them, tensing his spiked fists. Myrin recognized the dragonborn bodyguard—Vharan, Ilira had called him.

Magic simmered in Myrin's hands. Ilira's face gave no indication of her intentions, but Vharan's aggression was clear enough. Was this an attack?

Myrin heard footsteps on the floor stones behind her. Elevar stepped to her side, his unseeing eyes fixed on Ilira. For her part, Ilira returned his empty scrutiny and inclined her head.

"Master Elevar," she said, eyes on Myrin. "It's been far too long."

The dwarf took her proffered hand, and pressed his lips to her silk-wrapped knuckles.

Myrin marveled. Blind as he was, how had he known she'd raised her hand? The greeting must have been an old

ritual between them, which banished Myrin's anxiety. If Elevar knew Ilira, then Myrin had naught to fear. And if Ilira knew Elevar, then perhaps she knew things Myrin desperately needed to know.

"Won't—" Myrin said. "Won't you come in?"

"Vharan, stand here awhile. The young Lady Darkdance and I have words to share." Ilira stepped inside with the sinuous grace of an accomplished dancer.

They sat in the garden at the center of the ballroom, on the weathered benches Elevar hadn't yet refurbished. With the sun out for the first day since their arrival, Myrin realized that the hall was—in reality—a grand arboretum. Sunlight cascaded down through the open roof onto a raised platform of marble wreathed in vines and flowers. In however long it had been since a Lord Darkdance had last dwelt here, the garden had withered somewhat. Curiously, the marble platform in the center evinced no sign of deterioration and stood like a pristine altar among the weeds. Myrin could feel magic radiating from the stone, but did not know its nature. Upon this they sat in silence, neither certain what to say, until Elevar appeared with chilled summer wine and trays of cakes. It seemed as though he'd anticipated guests.

Ilira broke the silence. "Apologies for my escort. Vharan can be very protective."

"I know the sort," Myrin said, thinking of Kalen. He would want her to be observant, so Myrin applied the full weight of her perception upon the elf, both to anticipate an attack and because she was just fascinating.

"You have the advantage of me, Lady Darkdance. You know my given name, but I do not know yours." A smile quirked at the edge of her lips, and Myrin thought knowing

less than someone was not a common experience for Ilira to have.

“Oh, it’s Myrin,” she said. “Myrin Darkdance.”

“Myrin,” Ilira said. “Not—?”

She trailed off and held her wine glass to her lips, inhaling the aroma while scrutinizing every bit of Myrin. The wizard found her piercing gaze a touch unnerving, but also exciting.

Finally, Ilira nodded. “You’re wearing me.”

“What?” That, Myrin had not expected.

“The gown helps me remember you.” Ilira gestured to Myrin’s red dress. “That’s one of mine, no? You purchased it a year ago at the Menagerie in Waterdeep? I see it’s held up well.”

“Oh.” Myrin felt at the hem. The dress had served her well for a year, both for utility and for remembrance. “I like it. Rather a lot.”

“How do you like the secret pocket in the bodice? I thought that quite clever.”

Myrin nodded. “What’s it for?”

“Love notes, trinkets, the like—small blades. I call it the murder pocket.” Ilira narrowed her eyes. “Wasn’t that the dress you were wearing in the market yesterday?”

Myrin flushed. “I don’t have anything else, actually—any more dresses, I mean.”

Ilira nodded in easy acceptance, as though she’d known that already. “I’ll have to make you another,” she said. “One that’s in better condition and more suited to a wizard.”

“My thanks,” Myrin said. “I can pay. I mean, I have the coin—”

Ilira waved such a concern away. “I heard someone had moved back into the manor house,” she said. “I am . . . an

old friend of the Darkdance family, from long ago. I didn't know Nev had any living descendents, but you certainly have his look."

"Nev?" Myrin asked blankly.

"Neveren Darkdance. Apparently, your great—great?—grandfather." Myrin could tell Ilira was guessing at her age—something Myrin herself did not know. "He was my teacher once, until he died in the Year of Shadows." She set down her goblet, only barely tasted. "That was a score and a century ago. Can it have been so long?"

Myrin had read her share of history, and knew the Year of Shadows: 1358 by Dalereckoning, the year the gods had taken mortal form and waged war upon the land. She marveled that Lady Ilira, who looked no older than a human woman of thirty winters or so, could have lived so long. A tiny flicker of jealousy stirred in her breast.

"You seemed to recognize Elevar, and he, you," she said. "You've met before?"

"Yes." Ilira smiled. "He was seneschal when I was here. He seemed old even then."

Myrin marveled. She'd known Elevar was old, but could he be *that* old?

"I made my home in Westgate under Neveren's tutelage, and I had the honor to stay here in the manor with him and his wife, Shalis of Mulhorand, the land that is now High Imaskar. They were like a father and mother to me, when I had none." She gestured to Myrin. "I suppose that's where you get your dark skin and fey features: Nev was a half-elf, Shalis a Mulan human. Their blood runs true, it seems."

"They're my ancestors?" Myrin asked.

"You sound surprised. You knew none of this?"

"I—" Myrin hesitated to tell Ilira of her blank memory.

In her head, she heard Kalen telling her to be cautious. She knew nothing of this elf but what she claimed. "I think you said a hundred and twenty years."

If Ilira noticed her pause, she made no sign. "You are a perceptive woman."

"My thanks," Myrin said, a bit surprised. Kalen would never praise her like that.

"I can tell you seek to develop your perception," Ilira said. "Someone has taught you how to read the bodies of foes, to predict their next moves. Is this not true?"

"Yes." She particularly liked reading Kalen's body during their lessons.

"I can teach you more," she said. "Would you like to read a woman's intentions on her face—hear her thoughts between her words? Determine if she lies or speaks the truth?"

"You can do that?"

"Sometimes." Ilira raised one hand and put the tip of her forefinger and thumb together. "It helps to have a focus. It sharpens the mind, even as it allows one's perception to expand."

"Fascinating," Myrin said. "A hundred twenty years. Has no one lived here that long?"

"And you persist." Ilira smiled. "Even when I try to distract you."

"Indeed." Myrin burned with curiosity. It didn't seem possible. After all, in the first memory she had absorbed from Elevar, he had been holding her as a babe, and that couldn't have been more than thirty years ago, at the very most.

"I couldn't say for certain," Ilira said at length. "I was away from Westgate for many years, and only returned last

spring, after—” Her words trailed off and her face grew dark.

“After Waterdeep.” Myrin remembered the foul murder of Ilira’s companion, Lady Dawnbringer, at the hands of Rath, the dwarf assassin. “I’m so sorry.”

Ilira’s gold eyes searched her face. “My thanks.”

Myrin remembered the broadsheets that had appeared the following day, accusing Ilira of the murder and of a dark, violent history. She knew Ilira was innocent of her friend’s blood, but as to the rest . . . Regardless, dangerous as she might be, Ilira might prove a font of the information Myrin so desperately craved. Or would they all be lies? Was this a trick?

The uncertainty must have showed on Myrin’s face, because Ilira nodded smoothly. “You’re wondering if it’s true,” she said, her voice as serene as ever. “If I really knew your family, or I was ever here, or any of this.”

“A bit,” Myrin said. “I’m sorry, lady, it’s just—”

Ilira rose fluidly, and—heedless of Myrin’s surprise—crossed to the center of the marble platform, not a pace from where Myrin sat. She held out her gloved hand, which Myrin took. The elf drew her to her feet. Then she spoke, her voice clear and crisp: “*Zhavah!*”

At first, Myrin thought the word gibberish, but it awakened a long dormant memory in her mind, of a language much like Elvish but far darker. This language was made for twisting tunnels and deep, shadowy holes in the earth. It was, she realized, an old dialect spoken by the drow in their lightless cities. And, moreover, she knew what it meant: “rise.”

The marble platform gave a shuddering sigh and pulled loose from the captivity of the floor and floated into the

air, obeying Ilira's command. Now Myrin understood the purpose of the great opening in the ceiling, through which the platform slowly rose. Shouts of folk in the streets rose and horses whinnied as Westgate spread out around them in all its fantastic squalor. Finally, Ilira spoke another word, and the platform stopped.

"They took to calling these earthmotes after the Spellplague," she said. "But Neveren had this stone enchanted even before the Time of Troubles, to serve as a romantic escape for himself and whomever he brought up here." She smiled in reminiscence. "Of course, he married Shalis soon after, so I suppose that was decided."

"Amazing." Myrin marveled at the viewing platform. It rested ten paces above the manor house, and she really did feel cut away from the rest of the world on an island with only Ilira. No doubt Kalen would have gone mad over the risk she was taking with the unknown elf, but Myrin found it exhilarating.

"You don't know me, and I don't know you." The elf looked away, grasping one wrist in front of her. "But somehow, I feel I can trust you. As though—ah, gods, I cannot explain it."

Myrin reached for Ilira's face. She couldn't say exactly why she did it—perhaps it was to seek more memories, or perhaps she wanted something else. There was a heat between them that she didn't quite understand, and Ilira seemed to feel it, too. Something deep inside her burned with curiosity, yearning to touch the woman's skin and—

A commotion below drew their attention to the front door, startling Ilira from her stupor. She saw Myrin's hand coming toward her face and caught her wrist deftly. Her gold eyes were unreadable, but the expression on her face

was one of horror. The shadows at her feet writhed.

Instantly, Myrin felt her cheeks redden. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“No, it’s well.” Ilira released Myrin’s hand. “It’s not you, it’s me.” She stepped away, mindful of the marble’s edge. “*Dhoraht*,” she said, and the platform sank back toward the floor.

“Those words,” Myrin said. “They are High Drow, are they not?”

Ilira gave Myrin a bemused look. “I told you Neveren was half an elf, but I neglected to mention what *sort* of elf, no?”

Myrin couldn’t quite decide what to think of that. If this Lord Neveren had been a half-drow, did that mean she had the blood of dark elves as well? The very possibility enthralled her.

There was something odd about Lady Ilira, and as the platform settled, Myrin finally determined what it was. Myrin could not tell for certain, but as Ilira moved, her shadow did not quite match her. The shape was wrong, and it seemed to shift restlessly even when she stood still.

They heard shouts outside, and Elevar was headed in that direction when the doors flew open and a heavily armored body—Ilira’s guard, Vharan—tumbled through, blazing with gray light. The ancient seneschal hadn’t quite reached the threshold, so he was out of harm’s way, but a piece of wood from the broken latch dashed him senseless to the ground.

“Elevar!” Myrin cried, and she stumbled off the platform to run to the dwarf.

Kalen and Brace crossed the threshold, their faces set in the grim lines of battle. Brace had summoned two rapiers

from one, but Myrin knew Vindicator—which Kalen held blazing in both hands—had been responsible for sending Vharan through the door and (albeit inadvertently) stunning Elevar. Kalen pointed the burning sword at Ilira, who stepped in front of Myrin. Was the gesture a protective one?

“Stand away from her,” Kalen said to Ilira.

Although Ilira herself stood unmoving, Myrin could see her shadow seeming to rage upon the floor stones. This was no dainty elf shadow, but rather that of a hulking man bristling with spikes, shoulders wide as an axe handle.

“Saer Shadow.” Gone was the serene charm Ilira had used with Myrin. Now, her voice was full of deadly steel. “I hadn’t thought our reunion would come so soon.”

Kalen stared at Ilira, offering her a silent challenge that she did not hesitate to return. He drew his sword back, ready to lunge toward the elf. Myrin watched the gray flame of his faith flicker around him. He went from simple soft leather clothes to a full suit of armor in a heartbeat.

“Interesting,” Ilira observed. Myrin saw her eyes had turned utterly black, no longer gold. “I really would like to make you a new dress, my lady. Another time.”

She put her gloved hand on Myrin’s back, and the wizard stiffened at her touch. Ilira leaned forward, and for a heartbeat, Myrin thought with mingled fear and desire that their lips would meet. Then the elf stepped into her—through her—and vanished into her shadow.

As though she’d stepped through a door between the two, Ilira appeared out of the shadow of Vharan, who was rising as though to aid her. She wrapped an arm around him and—with a last look at Myrin—they both vanished into the shadows of the nearby wall.

This time, Ilira did not reappear.



Kalen stood stunned in the wake of the elf's shadow magic. When he'd seen the dragonborn in the yard, he'd assumed the worst, and then, to find Myrin in the thrall of a suspected murderess and known fugitive . . .

Now they stared at one another, wordless in the great hall. Myrin wore a dreamy sort of expression, as though the encounter had shaken her firm possession of her wits. This only made Kalen burn hotter inside. What had Lady Nathalan done to her?

"Well, lay me to sleep in Hanali's bountiful bosom!" Brace said, his voice startlingly loud. "What the Nine Hells was that?" He raised an eyebrow. "And is she coming back?"

"Shadowdancer," Kalen said. "And let's hope not."

Seemingly shaken from her daze, Myrin gave Kalen a dark look. She kneeled beside Elevar, who was coughing his way back to his senses. "Are you hurt?"

The dwarf waved away her attentions and gave her an expression that clearly showed his disinclination to make a fuss. He climbed to his feet, dusted himself off, and limped off toward the kitchen. Invariably, he was off to fetch them tea.

"Myrin." Kalen crossed to her side. "Are you—?"

"Of course I'm all right!" Myrin shouted, taking Kalen by surprise. "What were you doing, chasing her away? She knows my family! She—she has memories, Kalen! *My* memories!"

Brace looked completely lost. "Memories?"

"To replace those I've lost!" Her face was furious. "And she was telling me all about myself until Kalen, here, barged in like a big dumb oaf and chased her away!"

“Perhaps you’ve forgotten, but that woman is wanted for slitting her best friend’s throat.”

He remembered a horrible scene a year before in Water-deep—Ilira standing over a crumpled priestess who lay in a pool of her own blood. What Ilira had said afterward—the way the shadows themselves had flared in response to her will . . . That still haunted him.

“She murdered her best friend,” Kalen continued, “who was a noblewoman, just like—”

He couldn’t say it, but in his mind, he saw the murder again, but this time, it was Myrin who lay crumpled and bloodless on the floor.

“Oh, Cyric’s Piss!” Myrin said. “You know she didn’t do it. *Rath* did!”

“I *don’t* know that.” Kalen shook his head. “I didn’t see what happened. But I do know that innocent women don’t run from justice.”

“And innocent *men* do?” she snapped. “What about the Guard chasing you, eh?”

That cut him deeply. “I’m not innocent,” he said. “But you don’t understand—”

“No, I *don’t* understand,” Myrin said. “You deny me the chance to talk to an *accused* criminal, but you don’t mind me cavorting with a cold-blooded murderer when it’s *you*.”

Kalen reeled. They fought often, it was true, but it had never been like Myrin to argue so *viciously*. Was this anxiety about Rhett? Something more?

Something Ilira had done to her?

He looked across toward the kitchen, where Elevar stood with his sightless eyes discreetly averted. No doubt he’d heard arguments before and ignored them with a capable servant’s long-suffering patience, but Kalen thought he

looked uneasy even so.

“Go,” Myrin said, turning her back on him. “Go do something useful. Be Shadowbane—or better yet, find the *actual* Shadowbane. Find Rhett, godsdamn it!”

Finally, Kalen could hold his temper no more, and he said something he instantly regretted. Even Brace winced when Kalen spoke those three words. He wasn’t sure he quite believed them, but he’d had enough of her fantasy. If he’d been less angry, he wouldn’t have been as harsh, but there it was. “Rhett’s dead, Myrin.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes flaring with barely contained magic. “You don’t know that,” she said. “You didn’t see it, and right now, I trust what I know more than what you haven’t seen.”

“Lady,” Brace said, trying to moderate. “Perhaps it’s best that we—”

“You speak as though you know anything about anything,” Kalen said to Myrin. “As though you *remember* anything—” That, he realized, was also a mistake, but he had spoken without thinking.

Myrin gave him a horrified glare. He saw her thoughts clearly on her face, and was himself startled that he could be so angry as to throw her amnesia in her face.

“Get out,” she said.

Kalen wanted to apologize, but anger choked off the words. “Fine,” he said.

“Good.” Myrin turned, stomped up the stairs, and disappeared through a set of doors that led to the library. The doors slammed shut behind her.

Elevar gave Kalen and Brace a long, empty look, then shook his head. He carried a tray of steaming tea up the stairs in pursuit of his mistress.

“Harsh,” Brace observed.

“Fair.” Kalen stretched his aching legs. He’d come back to tell Myrin about losing to the imposter at the Timeless Blade, but she didn’t feel like talking to him, and he felt the same.

He looked down at Vindicator, summoned into his hand, and felt faintly ill. He stepped into the garden and set it on the marble platform. Somehow, even though he’d reconstructed the broken blade with his holy power, it still had the long flaw in the steel. Would he ever forget a single one of his mistakes?

“I’m going now. I don’t know when I’ll be back.” He paused at the threshold. “And if you volunteer to ‘comfort’ Myrin while I’m away, I may have to forget that we’re friends.”

“Not to worry.” Brace’s eyes were fixed upon the shadow into which Lady Ilira had fled. Kalen thought he’d quite forgotten about lovely Lady Darkdance.

With a sigh, Kalen pushed back out into the dilapidated garden. Storm clouds were brewing over Westgate, plunging the city into a premature darkness, even at highsun.

“Fitting,” he murmured as he moved off into the streets. It began to rain.



Alone in her chambers, Myrin leaned against the door and waited for her rapid breathing to subside. She hardly knew what had happened. She’d shouted at Kalen, but why had she been so angry? And once she’d provoked him, what he’d said to her . . . Gods! She pressed one hand to her breast to feel her racing heart.

Yes, he had ruined her latest and best chance to find something about her past, a path that had been hidden from her since she'd absorbed Umbra's memories back in Luskan. Perhaps that was the source of her overwhelming rage. That, or the feeling that once again, he was treating her as an inferior—with poor judgment compared to his own.

“Mother Mystra,” she said. “What’s it going to take, Kalen Dren?”

Something felt strange, and she shifted her fingers along a hard edge under the silk of her crimson gown. Sure enough, there was something in the secret pocket of her bodice—what Ilira had called the “murder pocket.” Myrin drew out a twice folded scrap of parchment, marveling at it. When the elf had touched her, she must have placed this note. How deft her fingers were! Just the thought made Myrin start to blush again.

“Oh, stop it,” she said to herself.

The note contained six words, written in an elegant, feminine hand.

Purple Lady. Tomorrow. Midnight. Come alone.

She read it again, excitement rising. Kalen hadn't chased off Lady Ilira at all. Cyric burn him, she could do this on her own. But she wouldn't be foolish about it. Nay.

She would go prepared.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DUSK, 26 FLAMERULE

AY,” A GRUFF VOICE SAID. “YOU.” Ignoring him, Kalen leaned against a rain-weathered stone wall and stared down at his hands. They seemed clean, and yet he couldn’t help feeling that he should be wearing Myrin’s blood on his knuckles. The things he had said to her . . . It had been as though every bit of frustration over the last tendays—all the words he’d bottled up about Rhett and about his own feelings—had boiled over and he’d lost control. He needed time to reason this out.

“Push on, stranger,” said the voice. “Or we’ll do the pushing for you!”

Time was what he needed—time, and *this*.

Kalen turned toward the four Fire Knives gathered in the alley behind the Rosebud Tavern with the express purpose of burning it to the ground. It seemed the innkeeper Dolarune hadn’t paid her tribute for months and was taking a stand against First Lord Jaundamincar Bleth in the name of civic fairness. Apparently, disobedience to Bleth had grown increasingly common, as the Nine Golden Swords challenged his authority in Westgate. The Fire Knives had come

to teach her a lesson—her, and anyone trapped inside her establishment or the tallhouse next door.

Kalen didn't bother with grandiose threats or ultimatums. He stepped away from the wall, revealing Sithe's black axe leaning against the stone where he had stood. He was glad he'd left Vindicator behind in Myrin's garden. The sword was too pure a weapon for this business, but the ugly axe would prove just the tool.

The men hesitated, their eyes drawn to Kalen's armament. "That's not him, is it?" asked one man. "The one that did Yaeshl the Ripper two nights back? Shadowbane?"

"Can't be," said another. "Shadowbane carries a sword, and—"

Kalen heard these words, but in his growing rage, their significance flew past him. He focused on the first of the assassins, poured all of his rage into that one man, and knew his enemy. He swore a silent oath to the Threefold God, raised his axe, and lunged.

The Fire Knife barely managed to raise his short sword in a vain attempt to block. The axe sheared clean through the steel and bit into the man's shoulder, parting his leather armor like fresh bread. Blood bloomed in the fading daylight and the man staggered away.

His attempt to flee only redoubled Kalen's vehemence.

The other men drew their blades, but Kalen slashed the axe in a circle, filling the alley with gray flames that warded them back. He lunged after his sworn foe and used the axe's haft to sweep the man's legs out from under him. The assassin went down with a cry, and his head struck the cobblestones with a satisfying, jarring thump.

"Next," Kalen said.

One of the assassins risked a thrust at his back, but gray

armor appeared and deflected it. That made his decision for him. He looked over his shoulder and fixed the man's square face and terrified green eyes in his mind. That done, he swore a new oath to the Threefold God: this man would join his companion, then the others.

He took down this second one and the third brutally and efficiently, and reveled in doing it. His gray armor of faith drove back their strikes, and flames swirled around him to keep them at bay as he beat them down one by one. He beat the second man senseless and cut off the third man's breathing until he stopped squirming. He had no need to kill. Even in the depths of his anger, he wouldn't murder unnecessarily. He'd seen enough bloodshed to last several lifetimes.

Not that he minded inflicting pain, for which Sithe's axe was marvelously efficient.

"Shadowbane! Mercy, please!"

The fourth Fire Knife stared as Kalen choked his last companion into unconsciousness with the haft of Sithe's axe. As he held the man, Kalen looked up into the last assassin's eyes, assuring him silently that he would not escape the Threefold God's vengeance. Terror in his eyes, the man backed away, his hands shaking so badly his twin knives clattered to the cobblestones. He turned and fled.

The battle done, Kalen could finally think clearly. They'd seemed to recognize him, but he'd not been in Westgate for three years. Had his legend persisted so strongly for so long?

Kalen might have gone after the man, but a shadow moved behind him. Without thinking, he let Sithe's axe fall, seized a throwing dagger from the belt of the man he'd just knocked out, and hurled it in the same motion. The blade plunged into rough stone of the Rosebud. His eyes shifted,

and he caught sight of the shadow as it danced up the wall. It skipped over the crenellations, and Kalen saw a flicker of black fabric flow out of sight onto the roof.

He leaped, his boots flaring with tiny blue-white flames as they carried him upward. He pushed off one wall, caught the escape ladder on the tallhouse, and swung up onto the tavern roof. He'd left Sithé's axe in the alley, but he put out his hand and summoned Vindicator in a swirl of gray flame. He felt a slight pull in the other direction, but the sword materialized regardless. Its flames illumined the roof. "Show yourself," he said.

A figure clad in black leathers stepped out from behind a chimney—an elf woman with dark hair and familiar golden eyes. Ilira Nathalan.

"You." Gray flames surrounded him, and he beckoned her forward.

Drawn by his unwavering faith, she staggered toward him, seemingly not in control of her own limbs. Kalen drew back Vindicator in anticipation.

Ilira smiled at him, and her face dissolved as she approached. Her body contracted into a flat image, then expanded into a hulking brute of a giant, rather than an elf.

Startled, Kalen faltered in his aim, and Vindicator passed harmlessly through the shadow without biting into it. In the split-second of silence that passed, the shadow man gave him a look that was nigh impossible to read, but looking at him, Kalen felt a swell of pity. For himself, for the shadow—for everyone.

Then the shadow's fingers wrapped around his throat and lifted him into the air. The darkness strangled him even as its chilling touch sucked the life from his body. Vindicator tumbled from nerveless fingers and slipped down the

shallow incline of the roof. A black leather boot trod upon the blade, keeping it from falling. Its gray flames died slowly away.

The wearer of that boot paused, then stepped over Vindicator toward them. Kalen noticed the elf cast no shadow over the sword, even though the moon was full. Her shadow was too busy strangling him. “I was hoping,” Ilira said, “that we could finish the conversation we began with those significant glances.”

Kalen tried to choke out a reply, but the shadow’s hold wouldn’t permit him enough air.

“Oh, no,” Ilira said. “I’ll talk. You just listen.”

Although he recognized her easily, Ilira hardly looked like she had earlier today. Instead of an elegant gown, she wore black leathers buckled down the sides of her arms and up the sides of her legs with a score of straps each. Rather than the noblewoman’s hair style, she wore her blue-black hair in a single long braid. She bore no weapon he could see, but if Kalen remembered anything about her from a year ago in Waterdeep, he knew she needed no other. Her touch alone could kill. Last but most significant, she wore a black silk mask over her eyes and brow: a mask of night.

“I’m in the city looking for someone, and you’re obviously looking for someone yourself,” she said. “If we can find our respective quarries without finding one another, that would be well enough by me. If not . . .” She gestured.

The shadow lifted Kalen in both hands and slammed him down onto the roof.

“You should stay out of my way,” Ilira said. “It’d be best for both of us.”

Kalen coughed. “Stay away from Myrin,” he managed, “and I will.”

Ilira opened her mouth as though to reply, then paused. Ultimately, she shook her head. “I cannot,” she said. “She is . . . well, you’ve a spellscar as well. You must feel it.”

Kalen knew with a start what she meant. The way he felt around Myrin—the way his spellscar sang in her presence—he had thought their connection unique. Did Ilira feel it, too?

“I have no desire to hurt you,” Ilira said, “but if you force my hand, I’ll not hesitate.”

“Then kill me now.” Kalen coughed, struggling to breathe. “Because we will fight again. On that, you’ve my word. I swear it by the Threefold God—by Helm, Tyr, and Torm.”

From their first meeting a year ago, Kalen had found Ilira nearly impossible to read, but his use of those three names gave her pause, as though she’d heard them assembled that way before.

“Very well,” she said, and she turned away. The shadow squeezed again, harder this time.

The chilling touch only lingered a moment, before Ilira uttered a sharp hiss. She stared at something Kalen could not see. At her signal, the shadow ceased its assault and slinked away.

Ilira gave him a last lingering look. “See you again, Saer Shadow.” Then she was gone.

Kalen tried to rise, but he could not catch his breath. His spellscar raged in his body, making his chest feel like dead stone and his lungs burn. He lay struggling to breathe, expecting to fail. He might once have tried to heal himself with his divine power, but it didn’t work that way any longer. He was a destroyer, not a savior.

As consciousness fled, he thought he saw a man in black

standing over him, Vindicator in hand. A paladin without faith—an avenger without a cause. Shadowbane.

“You,” he said. “You killed Rhett. And Vaelis. And Cellica. And all the rest—”

He might as well have been talking to himself.

The sword rose, catching the faint threads of moonlight. Then, before Shadowbane could bring it down, gray flames surrounded the blade and it vanished from his hands. His head rose, as though to acknowledge a challenge.

The shadowed figure receded as Kalen’s vision failed, and darkness took him.



Far away, another pair met under different but no less deadly circumstances.

The tension in the chamber was not obvious to an onlooker. If anyone could see the gold-skinned elf with his feet perched gamely on the thick darkwood desk for what he was—and he’d ensured that no one could—that might have provided a hint as to the danger in the room. But the elf called Lilten wore illusions as comfortably and plentifully as other men wore layers of wool in cold weather, and so he seemed completely and totally at ease. Dressed in the eminently fashionable and colorful garb of a dandy, Lilten wore a bemused smile.

From his mirth, one might imagine the next few moments did not threaten hundreds of people—perhaps the entire city of Westgate. What purpose had the game, if it lacked stakes?

An exotic game board lay on the desk at his feet, fully arrayed with tiny carved figures that demonstrated

astounding attention to detail. He'd shaped them himself, over the years—both the figures themselves and the players they represented. The game was *coroniir* in Elvish, or—roughly, “crowns” for its resemblance to a Crown War battle between two coronals—and was the root of what humans called lanceboard or castles. Like all great things in Faerûn, the elves had invented it first, then humans had brutalized it. In his youth in old Siluvanede, his people had called it *siadiir*, and he remembered he had always defeated his older sister when they played. Ah, how he didn't miss her after that business with Myth Drannor. Alas.

On one side stood his pieces of ivory and on the other stood those of his opponent, carved in obsidian. No other substance could quite capture his would-be nemesis: obsidian was darker than midnight, and yet it cast its own distorted sort of reflection. Someone had to stand in front of that dark mirror, and he supposed it might as well be him.

Ironic. Over his long life, he had worn many cloaks, but none of them white.

He did not have to wait long, because his opponent appeared shortly, stepping out of the shadows near the wardrobe. Long accustomed to such a mode of travel, the elf merely smiled and extended the bottle of elverquisst he held in his left hand. “Drink?”

The creature in the shadows—which may have been something like a man once—narrowed his black, gleaming eyes. “You called me here, Lilianviaten Changecloak, and I have come.” He drew a rapier of pure blackness and pointed it at the elf's golden face. “Tell me why I should not kill you this very instant.”

“Oh, come, Kirenkirsalai, I think we're better friends

than that, yes?” Liltan said. “I’m too clever for you to kill, and your blundering is too entertaining for me to do the reverse.”

Kire lowered his blade. “Then why have you called me?”

“I thought you might indulge me in one of my favorite games from my youth.” Liltan swept his hand across the lanceboard. “Apologies it’s not *sava*, as I daresay you would prefer.”

Kire picked up one of the obsidian pieces and turned it over in his fingers. “You would play games with me, Changedcloak?”

“We are already playing, my old friend, and have been for some time,” Liltan said. “We have desires that contradict each other, and over the last century we have worked at cross-purposes to no good effect. You came close to your goal in Waterdeep, but the knight in shadow foiled you. Then your clumsy bounty in Luskan, and now the inept way you manipulate the Nine Golden Swords—tsk, tsk, dear *boy*.”

“Not a boy.” Kire closed his fist around the carved piece and ground it to sand. “You know what I want. If you would only stand aside, I would have her, and all would be well.”

“As you say,” Liltan replied. “But surely we can play this as men—”

“Shar piss on you and your game.” Kire struck the table, knocking some of the pieces over, then swept half the army of white and black across to shatter against the far wall. “Step into my path, Changedcloak, and however many centuries you have over me, I will end you. I will bathe in your soiled blood and leave your desiccated carcass at my feet.” And with that, he vanished, dancing back into the shadows as through an open door.

“How rude.” Liltan wiped elverquisst off his handsome face. “It’s *millennia* I have over you, not centuries.”

Liltan rose from the chair, ready to go, but his eye fell on the lanceboard. His lovingly crafted pieces lay scattered and mostly broken, but a few had survived the shadow man’s wrath. There was a white *armathor*—“knight,” in human parlance—and a white piece humans usually called “sorceress,” but he knew by its ancient Elvish name: *Srinshee*.

His focus fell, however, on the black reaver: a female elf that rose in a leap, two blades drawn, her long tail of hair whirling out behind her. Many ages ago, when he’d been a boy in lands quite unlike those of Faerûn in the Year of Deep Water Drifting, this piece had been called the *savalir*, or “murderer,” and was the Coronal’s royal assassin. Liltan had always earned praise from his opponents for how well he used the murderer.

“Aye, my love. You simply cannot help yourself.” He set the black reaver on the board. “You have already begun breaking them all apart.”

PART THREE:

SHIFTING ALLIANCES

A dance of treachery and of taking sides, the waltz called Shifting Alliances pits first the lords against the ladies, then mixes all anew. Madness, naturally, ensues.

Catalan the Mad
Waterdhavian Etiquette: A Guide,
Published in the Year of the Plotting Priests (1458 DR)

FPO

CHAPTER NINE

MIDNIGHT, 27 FLAMERULE

LONG BEFORE THEY CAME CLOSE, MYRIN HEARD THE music of the Purple Lady Tavern and Festhall filling the warm Westgate night. The dancing had spilled out into the street, and men and women pressed against one another and swayed in time. Braziers blazed to keep the porch and alley warm, coating the dancers with a thin sheen of sweat. The total effect was like something out of a temple of Liira, goddess of the dance, or perhaps Sharess, goddess of lust.

“Er,” Brace said at her side. “Not a complaint, but are you sure about this?”

“You’re not going to turn goblin on me and run?”

“A gentleman walks, never runs, but I take your meaning, Lady Myrin,” he said. “And in point of fact, I would not be fleeing, but rather . . .”

Myrin smiled slyly. “And pass up the chance to see Lady Nathalan again?”

That got him. Brace bowed in silent acknowledgment of her superior rhetoric.

In truth, Myrin wasn’t sure about any of this. She’d have felt better with a dose of Kalen’s chiding, but he hadn’t come

back the previous night. She'd come to regret the harsh words she'd thrown at him—particularly blaming him for Rhett's disappearance. Now she didn't know how to feel. She both wanted him back and hoped he'd stay away.

Either way, until he did reappear, she would just have to do things without him, and that meant confronting Lady Ilira on her own. She had to find out what she could.

Shrouded in sheer purple curtains, the revelry inside the Purple Lady dwarfed the dancing and flirting outside. The festhall was packed to the rafters with dancers, jesters, and romancers. Stunning wait staff in diaphanous purple robes picked their way through the crowd of folk who kissed, caressed, fondled, and did all sorts of other exciting things to each other. Unmoving statues attired in daring gowns (or less) dotted the crowd, and Myrin took them to be fashion dummies similar to those she had seen a year ago in the Menagerie in Waterdeep. When one moved, however, she realized they were real people: servants of the festhall who shifted to show their gowns in all their glory. Surrounding all was an ear-splitting wall of sound fostered by a band of dark-skinned Chultans who pounded a series of tribal drums and blew resonant tones through long trumpets carved of horns.

Myrin had seen such a revel only once before—a year ago at the temple of Sune—and even that had maintained a veneer of respectability. Here, the atmosphere was exotic and almost ritualistic. The patrons reveled in life and pleasure without regret. Brace looked distinctly flustered, but Myrin took it all in stride.

Even in the noisy, crowded festhall, it was not difficult to find Lady Ilira Nathalan. She occupied a private corner of the Purple Lady, surrounded by purple silks that fell like

water from the rafters. Myrin saw her silhouette first—the unmistakable shadow of a lithe woman dancing, slowly and sensually. She danced alone, as though out of true love for the dance.

Myrin wanted to go in that direction immediately, but she also saw the shadowed bulk of Ilira's bodyguard, Vharan, who glared at anyone and everyone who approached.

"Aye," Brace said. "Tall, thick, and scaly is going to be our first hurdle, no?"

"Indeed. Ilira is no doubt expecting us, but as Kalen would say, this could be a trap."

"No fear, Lady Myrin." He was watching Ilira's graceful movements. "Leave it to me."

Myrin realized someone was watching her, and she looked around to see the purple-and-white woman she'd seen at the market over at the bar. She grasped Brace's sleeve. "Do you know that woman?"

"That's Rujia," Brace said. "My teacher at the Timeless Blade. She's a deva—purple and white, immortal, eccentric. You'd like her."

Myrin nodded. He'd told her about confronting the supposed Rhett, who'd unexpectedly run away without revealing himself. No doubt Kalen was simply off pursuing that lead. It made her feel a little better, actually, to have a firm idea of what Kalen might be about.

"What would she be doing here?" Myrin asked.

"Mayhap she likes drinking. Or dancing." Brace shrugged. "Rujia's an odd one, and one can never really say why she does anything. But no doubt there *is* a purpose, albeit one that goes beyond the scope of our lifetimes. Ah, there she goes."

The strange woman—Rujia—was gone. She seemed to

have vanished into the very air.

“She does that, from time to time,” Brace said. “And now, to yon lovely shadowdancer.”

The gnome broke away from her and headed toward Ilira’s private booth. He donned a brilliant, ingratiating smile—no doubt inspired by his awe of the elf.

“Outstanding,” Myrin said. “This will end well, no doubt.”

She looked into the shadows where Rujia had been leaning against the wall, considering. Something about the deva was familiar to her, but she was sure she’d never seen anyone like her before. At least, she could not remember such a creature, but then, she could remember so little. Had one of Rujia’s previous lifetimes and the past Myrin crossed paths?

Musical laughter drew Myrin’s attention over her shoulder. “Mother Mystra,” she said.

Inexplicably, Brace had not only managed to get to Ilira, but indeed, he was dancing with her. Mostly, she was dancing and he was watching, but regardless, they were together.

Myrin couldn’t say what Brace had done, but somehow Vharan seemed not to have noticed him. He stared off into the common room, coughing and rubbing his snout. Any moment, however, he was going to turn and see the gnome, so Myrin had to intervene.

She stepped in that direction, but found herself face-to-breast with a tall barmaid in one of the sheer purple gowns. The woman gave Myrin a wink and a smile, then pushed past her.

Too late. Ilira laughed again at something the gnome said, drawing Vharan’s attention. The dragonborn turned, and Myrin could hear him growl even halfway across the room. He rose like a raging bear and closed one massive fist

around Brace's neck. "You."

"Ah," the gnome said. "Pardon, Lady—"

The words cut off when Vharan wrenched him off his feet and up against the ceiling.

"Wait—" Myrin reached for the crystal orb at her belt.

Brace gave Vharan a smile, then seemed to blur. Colors wavered around him like a cloak, and the gnome faded away. The dragonborn dropped his hands, searching for something unseen.

"As I was saying 'ere we were interrupted, lady," Brace's voice said. "We have some business this night, and if you'd kindly call off your gods-pissed meat-shield, I won't have to do something we'd both regret." And so speaking, he faded back into view at her side, his rapier at her most excellent chest. "Deeply, *deeply* regret."

Ilira looked down at the sword more as a challenge than anything else, then looked over at Myrin. For the first time, Myrin got a good look at her in her gown. It was black, like the other, but considerably less conservative. For one thing, the neckline hugged her breasts, revealing what looked at first like a broad black necklace. Myrin realized quickly that this was in truth a line of runic tattoos inked into her skin—much like Myrin's own markings. The sigils were in Dethek, the dwarves' script, which was odd. One would have expected an elf to have a tattoo in graceful Espruar, the language of her people. Myrin wondered what the significance might be. She suspected little about Lady Ilira Nathalan was not significant.

"I am pleased you accepted my invitation, Lady Dark-dance. Vharan, leave us."

"But my lady." The dragonborn pointed at Brace. "At least let me hurt that one."

Ilira donned a reproachful expression, and Vharan shuffled off, casting Brace a warning look as he went. The gnome returned the challenge with a grin.

Ilira looked down at the sword set to her chest. “You have a firm hand, Brace Lenalice,” she observed. “I like that in a man, no matter how tall.”

“You know me, lady? No one uses that name. None but—” The gnome’s eyes widened.

Ilira said nothing but fixed him with her golden gaze. She raised one gloved hand and tapped the tip of Brace’s rapier. He shivered, flushed, and put the steel away.

Another day, Myrin might not have understood, but now she did. She remembered Ilira telling her the day before about perception, and her senses opened up. Of a sudden, she understood the interplay between the two, and she realized Ilira might not be armed, but her will dominated the gnome as though she held a sword at his throat. Myrin had to intervene.

“You’re very trusting,” Myrin said. “What if we *had* come to attack you?”

“I see no need to be wary.” Ilira spread her hands. “But it’s not because I’m trusting.”

The shadows coalesced around Brace’s feet, but before Myrin could speak, long-fingered hands of blackness seized his ankles. The gnome was so startled he couldn’t elude the shadow as he had Vharan. As Myrin watched, paralyzed, a humanoid creature of inky blackness loomed around Brace, holding him firmly in place with icy cold fingers.

“Release him!” Myrin said.

“Why should I do as you ask?” Ilira asked. “I asked you to come alone and you did not.”

“No, I didn’t.” She nodded at Brace. “Release my man.

Or I'll *make* you do it."

Ilira considered her a moment, then shrugged. "As you wish."

The shadow released Brace, who slumped coughing to the floor.

"Good." Myrin's impulse was to kneel at Brace's side and aid him, but she would stand firm, like Kalen. "I'd like some answers, please. Who you are, what you know of my family and me, the like."

"No," Ilira said.

"No?"

"Not *yet*." Ilira gazed at Myrin in a way that could not be easily defined. Thoughtful. Anxious. *Dangerous*.

Regardless, Myrin stepped closer to her—trying not to feel like a moth drawn into a deadly flame—and Ilira matched her step for step until they stood face-to-face. They were of a height, the two women, and although Ilira had seen many more years than Myrin, the elf suddenly did not seem older at all. Focused on those gold eyes, Myrin expanded her awareness, as Ilira herself had suggested to her the day before. They battled for dominance without words.

Myrin heard Brace's sharp intake of breath and saw him at the very limit of her peripheral vision. The gnome's face was white as he stared at them, fascinated. Even the otherwise clueless swordsman could feel the tension between them.

Finally, Myrin reached for Ilira's bare cheek. Her runic tattoos tingled into being up her arms in anticipation of memories to be gained. A spellscar lit inside Ilira in answer, and Myrin saw a shudder go through the elf. Whatever effect it had upon Ilira, she did not elude Myrin's touch as she had before. She stared, trembling.

A roar of pain rippled around them from the alley behind the Purple Lady. Ilira drew away before Myrin could touch her. Her eyes turned jet black and shadows gathered.

“Vharan.” Ilira turned away, and Myrin saw a flash of gold on her mostly bare back—another tattoo. Ilira vanished into the shadows.

Myrin shook herself. Brace was still staring at her, dumbfounded. “Come!” she said.

They rushed out the back into the alley. Although summer had come to Westgate, the air still felt chill from the winds off the Inner Sea. After the humid closeness of the Purple Lady, the night relieved Myrin’s sweaty skin and chilled her bones. That sound . . .

They saw the two immediately: Ilira kneeling over Vharan, who lay shaking in a pool of his own blood. It was much as Kalen described seeing her standing over Lorien that night at the temple of Sune in Waterdeep. This time, though, there was no question as to whether she could have been responsible. The dragonborn leaked dark blood from half a dozen deep gashes, carved open by a sword—something Ilira did not have.

“Who—?” Brace asked, but Myrin laid a hand on his shoulder and shook her head.

A shadow moved on the rooftop above them: a man in dark leather with a sword that burned in the moonlight. Perhaps Myrin had just imagined it.

The way Ilira stared up into the sky, she had seen—or imagined—it, too.

Slowly, Ilira kneeled over Vharan. “It’s well,” she said. “You go now into the clearing beyond the veil, old friend. Rest well among the trees.”

Vharan coughed, and blood spattered Ilira’s unflinching

face. She did not seem to notice.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’d ask one . . . one last boon . . . my lady.”

“Anything, Vharan.”

“A kiss.” Then, to forestall her next words, he growled. “Aye, I know . . . I know what I ask. But if I’m to die, then . . .” Tears leaked from his eyes. “I’d just as soon it be you.”

Ilira smiled weakly, and beating veins appeared at her temples. She seemed, in that moment, much older. “Aye, then,” she said softly. “As you wish.”

She pressed her lips to his bloody mouth, and a deep sigh rumbled up from his throat. At first, all seemed well, and Brace sighed at the sad romance of it all. Myrin held her breath.

Then the *burning* started.

Where Vharan’s scales came into contact with Ilira’s skin, a sickly blue flame spread across them, leaving only ashen death in its wake. His flesh unraveled and came apart, stretching painfully over his bony jaw. His body shook but he did not cry out, even in the heat of the excruciating torment of her touch.

Finally—after three heartbeats that had seemed to last hours—it was over, and Vharan slumped dead to the ground. Ilira pressed her face to his, and although Myrin was prepared for more of the burning agony, nothing happened. Ilira simply wept into Vharan’s dead cheek.

Finally, Ilira looked up at them, her golden eyes shining in the moonlight. Tears streaked her pale cheeks. “Come,” she said. “I have much to explain.”

CHAPTER TEN

DAWN, 28 FLAMERULE

AWARENESS CAME BEFORE SENSATION, AS IT ALWAYS DID, and he lay for a time wondering if he had died. The room was dark around him and he could breathe only in short, warm gasps.

“Kalen?” a voice asked. “You’re awake.”

Levia sat beside him, looking exhausted. Her bloodshot eyes rested in deep hollows in her homely face, and her rumpled clothes looked as though they’d not been changed in days.

His body awoke slowly, a thousand tiny pinpricks of sensation creeping back into his numb flesh. He tried to speak, but could not yet collect enough breath. He slowly closed, then opened his eyes to indicate an affirmative.

“Thank Torm. I found you, raving in and out of consciousness. You’ve been feverish a day and a night gone. I found both Vindicator and that awful black axe.” She gestured to the table, which held both weapons, Vindicator wrapped in linen. “I thought you might want them.”

“I see . . .” he managed. “I see you still can’t wield it. Vindicator.”

Levia shook her head. “Only that once. I am not Shadowbane.”

Kalen remembered that night three years ago, when assassins had cornered them in the alley by the Vhammos shipyard. They’d fought their way free, but only after Levia had picked up Vindicator to defend him. He’d left Westgate that night, although he could not say for sure what had driven him away: watching Levia wield Vindicator or learning that the assassins had been Justice Knights. Or, perhaps, what Levia had done afterward.

He also could not say how she’d managed to find him in a rainy alley far from Castle Thalavar. “You’ve been watching me.”

“Of course.” She put her hand on his wrist, which he could barely feel. “Who did this?”

“An elf,” he managed through lips that felt like lead weights. “Ilira—”

Darkness filled Levia’s face. He knew that look, as did enemies who subsequently came to fear her wrath. “Ilira Nathalan.”

“How—?” Kalen wet his lips. “How do you know that name?”

Levia wore a circumspect look that gave nothing away. “You’re still the student, Kalen, and I’m the master. Did you think I wouldn’t learn you chased her here?”

That wasn’t quite true. When he came to Westgate, he’d been chasing Rhett. His interest in Ilira was more recent. “And you know something of her?”

“I know she’s a wanted murderess.”

“*Alleged* murderess. She may not have done the deed.”

Levia gave him a dubious look exactly like the one he’d given Myrin when she’d offered the same defense. She

withdrew her hand from his wrist.

Strength finally returned. Kalen sat up, letting the bedclothes fall away from his naked chest. Levia immediately averted her eyes. Kalen remembered their parting three years ago and understood her awkwardness. He drew on the robe she had set out for him.

He was beyond hungry—he could feel it even through his numbness. “Is there food?”

“Bread and cheese.” Levia gestured toward the table.

Two days of inactivity had stiffened his muscles, but he managed to stagger over. As he ate, he tried to place himself: a cramped, well-used chamber, a small, boarded-over window.

“Where are we?” As he flexed his numb arms, a terrible thought came to him. “This isn’t Castle Thalavar? I told you I wanted nothing to do with the Eye.”

Levia shook her head. “I brought you to a safehouse.” She turned her attention to Vindicator, which lay upon the table near the bed. “Kalen, are you lying to me?”

“What do you mean?” He rubbed away the tension in his brow.

“Shadowbane,” she said. “First you took out the Fire Knives and Golden Swords three nights back, then you attacked those thieves by the Rosebud. What are you doing?”

Kalen furrowed his brow. “I’m not,” he said. “That—”

With the certainty of a blade clicking into a scabbard, he suddenly understood. He knew why Levia hadn’t seemed surprised to see him, and neither had her Justice Knights. He understood now what the thieves had been saying before he attacked them. And then again, just before he had slipped into oblivion, he realized that the dark figure he had

seen had been no illusion, but a man of flesh and blood.

Once more, Shadowbane stalked the streets of Westgate as it had been years ago—but he was not Kalen Dren.

“Another one,” he said. “That’s who sent me the sword. He knew I could reconstruct it, because he can, too. He—”

Kalen closed his hand around Vindicator’s hilt. He felt a distant pull, but it relaxed immediately. He had felt this before, but hadn’t until now realized what it was: the other Shadowbane’s connection to the sword.

“It’s chosen both of us,” Kalen mused. “And now it wants us to decide.”

Levia stared at him, her face blank. “Decide what?”

“Which of us will be Shadowbane,” he said.

She listened as he ate and told her all. He spoke of the events in Luskan, and the mysterious package he had received—in more detail than he had dared before. The bloody sack he had given her had contained shards of Vindicator smeared with blood—Rhett’s blood, it seemed—and a single word: WESTGATE. At first, he had despaired, but then he embraced his drive for vengeance and awakened a deeper power in himself. The sword had answered his call—rebuilding itself in his hand.

Levia nodded, but her lips were pursed. “A deeper power?”

Kalen kept one hand tight on Vindicator and held out his other hand. At his call, gray radiance flowed around his fingers, resolving itself into a heavy steel gauntlet made of light. His faith girded him.

“Watching Gods Above and Sleeping Gods Below,” she said with genuine wonder in her eyes. “Even Gedrin couldn’t do that.”

Kalen nodded grimly. “There was a woman, in Luskan.

She changed me—”

“A woman?” Clearly, Levia had not meant to speak, but the words escaped her.

“Not in that way.” Kalen fumbled a wedge of cheese to his lips. His fingers still felt like dead sticks. “I am a paladin no longer. I renounced that path long ago, and only recently have I found another.”

“And what are you now?” she asked.

“I am the blade of the Threefold God—his vengeance given flesh. The guardian he demands.”

“An avenger, then,” she said.

“It is as good a name as any.” The food was helping. Kalen felt almost like himself again.

He told her more. He spoke of his time in Waterdeep: days spent as a sickly guardsman, nights spent as Shadowbane facing those criminals the law could not capture. In return, Levia told him of the developments in Westgate: the scheming of House Bleth, the rise of the Nine Golden Swords, and most recently, the crippling of the Fire Knives. Apparently, the Golden Swords had proved ruthlessly effective in weakening their rivals, and the organizations had been involved in a brutal gang war for the last year. Rumors abounded of a shadowy power behind the Golden Swords, which had inspired their recent success.

They spoke as old friends, complimenting each other’s deeds and wincing at the recitation of scars gained. It felt relaxing to unburden himself. Kalen did not, however, see through to mentioning Myrin or the quest for her memories. Hinting to Levia that he had returned only to leave Westgate again would sour the mood. And somehow, he did not feel comfortable discussing another woman with her.

“Are you going to tell me what happened here?” Levia touched one finger to Vindicator’s blade, letting its gray flames stir around her hand. She traced the flaw in the steel.

Even as Kalen’s will had restored the blade, the flaw that marked his failure to save Vaelis remained. That was another matter that would only cause pain between them—or worse, pity. He shook his head. “Levia, I—”

Footsteps in the hall interrupted Kalen’s words. He forced himself up.

“Kalen—” Levia started, but he shushed her.

A shadowy figure pushed in through the door, and Kalen brought Vindicator sweeping at his head. The man ducked and flowed backward into a roll that knocked Kalen’s legs out from under him. He moved with a monk’s fluidity. Kalen bounced back up and thrust Vindicator forward. Yellow eyes flashed and one dark-skinned hand slapped the seeking blade away. Kalen saw a black moon tattooed on the monk’s wrist, making his loyalty clear: Shar.

The monk danced back and came down in a tight fighting posture. Shadow magic swirled around the hand that beckoned Kalen to try again.

Magic, Kalen thought, was definitely *not* like a monk.

“Kalen, hold!” Levia said. “That’s enough, Hessar!”

“And you must be Levia’s hero.” The monk—a muscular Calishite in plain gray clothes—cast Levia a sly glance. “So passionate.”

Kalen stood, but he kept up his defensive posture. Levia might trust the man, but Kalen had faced enough foes in the guise of friends over the last month.

“This is Hessar,” Levia said. “He’s a friend, and a true knight of the Threefold God.”

“What does that mean?” Kalen kept Vindicator raised.

“It means, lovely boy”—the Calishite swept to one knee in a graceful bow—“that those of us who honor the Threefold God of Gedrin grow few, but I am one of them.” He revealed the eye-in-gauntlet sigil tattooed into his palm. “I see you and know you, Shadowbane’s Heir.”

Kalen relaxed slightly, but kept his eye on the monk. “Has the Eye of Justice fallen so far that it employs shades—and sorcerers of the Dark Moon, at that?” He nodded to Levia. “I saw his eyes and his mark of loyalty. He may hide his nature with magic, but I can tell.”

“Impressive.” Hessar drew his sleeve over the tattoo on his wrist. “My loyalties to Netheril ended long ago, and the Dark Moon did not approve of my . . . proclivities.”

“Oh?” Kalen asked. “And what might those be?”

“I enjoy life entirely too much for their more nihilistic tastes. But tell me truly.” He nodded to the axe on the table. “Does truck with the followers of Shar truly bother you?”

Kalen tightened his jaw. Of course Hessar would recognize Sithe’s axe. The genasi Sithe had been a follower of the Lady of Loss, and he had learned more from her than anyone other than Gedrin and Levia. “The Eye has lost its faith, then?”

“It is not so bad, but close to it,” Levia said. “Gedrin’s words have faded, and few recognize the Threefold God any longer. Instead, they invoke the name of Torm the True.”

Kalen narrowed his eyes. “And they pay no honor to our other patrons—to Helm and to Tyr? They forget their sacrifices?”

“So one could say,” Hessar replied. “The Vigilant Seers even now consider forbidding worship of the Threefold God on pain of heresy.”

“Gods.” Kalen’s hand trembled, which he only just now

noticed. He stilled it.

“Why do you ask?” Levia crossed her arms. “You told me you wanted nothing to do with the Eye, and I have honored your wishes. Unless your heart has changed?”

Kalen opened his mouth, but in truth he did not know. He heard the pain in Levia’s voice as she described even that bit of the Eye’s faded faith. He could tell there was more to that tale.

“I must do what I came to do,” he said finally.

“Find your elf?” Levia asked. “Hessar and I came across some clues as to—”

“No. I am looking for Rhett, my—apprentice.” The word tasted bitter. “He may or may not be this imposter Shadowbane, or a prisoner of his. Either way, that is our next goal—find the imposter and beat the information out of him, if need be. Nothing else.”

Levia’s face was still dark. “But you told me the elf drew you to the city. We must—”

“The elf has naught to do with this.” Indeed, Kalen wondered if Lilten was even in Westgate. It would not surprise him. Unless Levia meant Ilira? Either way, it made no difference. “This is how it will be. I am going to find the imposter Shadowbane, whether you aid me or not. And”—he fixed her with his gaze—“I would much prefer your aid.”

Levia looked startled at his request, but ultimately nodded. “You say we’re going nowhere near this gold-eyed elf of yours?”

Kalen wondered why she was so fixated on finding Lilten. “Not at all.”

“Just you and me, finding this pretender?”

“That’s the theme.” Kalen looked over at Hesar. “And the shade, if you truly trust him.”

The Calishite bowed. "As your lordship will have it."
Kalen felt uneasy, but he nodded. "Levia? What say you?"
The half-elf bit her lip, then nodded. "When do we start?"



Silence reigned in Darkdance Manor that morn.

The night before, after the passing of her bodyguard Vharan, Ilira had promised many words, but she had instead fallen into silent brooding. She took the mug of tea Elevar prepared for her—the dwarf seemed to know what was needed before anyone asked—and then she kneeled on the rug in Neveren's study to stare into the fire kindled on the hearth. She did not drink, but rather held the mug as though she craved only its warmth. The flames danced in her metallic gold eyes, and her face bore absolutely no expression.

It was a silent vigil, Myrin understood, for her lost friend.

Much as he liked the elf, Brace argued vehemently against letting her stay in the manor house. Myrin waved away his concern. Ilira was hardly a danger to them, even if she could burn them at a touch. To demonstrate this, Myrin went into the study to sit with her and wait. Bowing to the demands of honor, Brace had done the same, and quickly fell to snoring softly in the corner. For her part, Myrin found sleep elusive.

She kept thinking back to that shadow she's seen on the rooftop above the alley. It couldn't have been Shadowbane, but it had *felt* like him. Could Kalen really have killed Ilira's bodyguard? Why? What was going on?

Sleep must eventually have claimed her, for Myrin shook

herself to find morning light filtering in through the thin, sword-shaped window. Brace still snored contentedly in the corner. The cold tea mug sat upon the rug, but Ilira herself seemed to have vanished.

Myrin reached out with her spellscar, and the warmth of her inner blue flame directed her gaze to the lone window, where Ilira leaned against the wall, arms crossed, looking out into the city. Her shadow—the great hulk pooled at her feet—was active and moving. It made expressive hand gestures as though involved in a silent conversation with Ilira, who did not respond. Perhaps the shadow reflected the elf's thoughts. Either way, the dynamic fascinated Myrin.

Moreover, Myrin felt relieved to see Ilira had remained, though she couldn't quite say why. The hope of secrets and memories was there, true, but there was something more.

Myrin rose as silently as she could—sure the elf would hear—and crossed to stand beside her. “It was your spellscar, wasn't it?”

Ilira gave her a sidelong glance, and Myrin knew she was right.

That was why the elf had staved off her touch at the manor, and why Myrin had felt pained after their brief contact in the market. Her spellscar unmade living flesh at a touch. And—

“It burns whether you will it or no,” Myrin said. “That was what Vharan wanted. He loved you, but could never touch you without—”

“Yes.”

Myrin nodded solemnly. “A fitting end, then.”

“As you say.”

“Nyah!” came a cry from the corner.

Although Myrin had been talking much more loudly, it

was Ilira's words that stirred Brace, and he rose with a start, his swords in his hands. "Where?" he asked. "I'll get you, Shar-spawned sons of poxy whores! I'll get—oh." He trailed off when Myrin laughed and even Ilira formed a tiny smile. The gnome cleared his throat. "Morningfeast?"

A discreet knock sounded at the door, and Elevar entered with three steaming platters of food. The gnome stared at the offerings with longing, and Myrin waved to him to start. She felt hungry as well, but she was more interested in Ilira. For her part, the elf continued to stare out into the city, indifferent to the demands of the flesh.

Westgate had awakened long before the cock's crow, with thieves going about their dark deeds in the early hours. But as the sun rose, the rest of the city stirred from beds and alleys. A new day of business and intrigue dawned.

"How did it happen?" Myrin asked. "The spellscar, I mean."

Ilira shrugged. "Mystra died, I suppose."

"You—you were there? I mean, you lived then? Did you see the blue fire?"

Ilira nodded slowly.

Myrin tried hard to control her excitement. She'd read all about the goddess of magic and the Spellplague, but she'd never met anyone who'd actually lived through it. If Ilira had been scarred in the first waves of the Spellplague, then it stood to reason her scar was deeper and more powerful than most others Myrin might encounter.

"And you've never learned to control it?" Myrin asked.

"No," Ilira said. "No matter what I do. For a century, I have been unable to touch man or woman without unraveling flesh—and leaving a horrific scar for the experience."

"No exceptions?" Brace asked from the table, his mouth

full of food.

Ilira shrugged.

“You can’t—Seldarine-in-their-Wisdom, have you tried *not* burning someone?” he asked, to which she nodded. “What of magical wardings? Surely there is some ritual that could take it away. I mean, just for a limited span of time?” He pursed his lips. “I mean, hypothetically, such as a night? If you take my meaning.”

Myrin blushed—she took his meaning full well—but Ilira dismissed his nervous suggestion with a wan smile. “I understand, friend gnome, and trust me, if I could find a cure—or even treatment—for this curse, I would certainly have used it by now, and we’d be far too busy with . . . other matters, to have this conversation.” She gave him a sly wink.

“Noted, dear lady.” Brace swallowed a sizeable morsel of food. “Noted.”

“And no,” she said, addressing his unspoken question, “I’m not hungry. Feel free.”

“Oh.” The gnome slid Ilira’s plate across to himself. He turned his attention to the food, casting Ilira speculative glances every so often.

Sighing, the elf looked back out the window.

“Is the spellscar why you came to me?” Myrin asked.

Ilira regarded her uncertainly. “You feel different to me. Your scar—it’s so much brighter and hotter than mine. I—”

“You think I can help you control it.”

“Yes . . . and no. There is more, but . . .” Ilira’s eyes sparkled with approaching tears. “I don’t know.”

Myrin stepped closer to her and took Ilira’s gloved hand in both of hers. “Accept it.”

Ilira’s eyes widened, weeping forgotten, and she stared at Myrin incredulously. “What?”

“The first step upon the path of mastering your magic is to accept that it is part of you, forever more,” Myrin said. “Then you can explore—”

“No.” Ilira pulled her hand away.

Myrin was stunned. Even Brace looked up from his morningfeast, startled at her sudden vehemence. Ilira’s shadow writhed as if in agony on the floor.

“Accept that I will never again touch anyone except to do murder? No.” Ilira shook her head. “I never asked for this, I never did anything to deserve this, and I won’t accept it. *Ever.*”

“That isn’t what I meant. I—”

Ilira stepped toward her, just as she had that first day in the great hall, and vanished into her shadow. Myrin felt a deep chill, as though winter herself embraced her, but it passed.

“Is she upset or something?” Brace was almost finished with Ilira’s food.

Myrin ignored the gnome and looked instead down at her feet. Ilira had vanished without her shadow, which swayed slightly as though in a breeze. It had no eyes, but Myrin could swear it was staring at her. Finally, the shadow flowed toward the door, and Myrin followed.

“Wait—” Brace looked down at Myrin’s food. “Hmm.”

Before she left the room, Myrin saw the gnome take her unclaimed plate for himself.



When Myrin found her, Ilira stood among the overgrown ruin of the courtyard. Elevar had done well maintaining the manor in the intervening years, but he was a dwarf and had

no skill for trees or flowers. Ilira kneeled in the dust, heedless of her sleek black dress, and ran her gloved fingers over a cadre of roses that had begun to bloom. Where Myrin had expected to find Ilira angry or in tears, she came upon an unexpectedly peaceful scene, and that gave her pause.

Ilira spoke without looking at her. “Elf I may be, but I am rubbish with growing things. Even if I weren’t—” She drew off her glove and touched one of the roses, which instantly shriveled away to blue-tinted ash. “This. *This* is what you want me to accept about myself?”

Myrin didn’t know what to say. Ilira was in too much pain for any words to be of comfort. Instead, she told her what she did know.

“My scar absorbs things. Magic, spellplague, anything—memories. I already took one from you, that day in the market.” She remembered being born into chaos. “A dark memory.”

“I see.” Ilira slid her glove back on so she could caress a rose’s petals. “I would be happy to lend you some more. I have a hundred and eighty-three years worth of dark memories.”

“You—” Myrin smiled mirthfully. “You don’t look a day over a hundred and fifty.”

“Flattery. Interesting.”

Myrin chided herself for her anemic attempt at humor. “The memory I took from you was of me being born. That’s how it works, you see. I absorb memories of myself from another’s eyes. So even if you don’t remember me, you were there when I was born.”

“Was I?” Ilira’s eyes were closed, but Myrin had the clear sensation that the elf was scrutinizing her in minute detail.

“My mother called you ‘little fox,’ I think,” Myrin said.

“Gods above.” Ilira’s eyes opened wide and she stared at Myrin. “Then it *is* true.”

“What is?”

Ilira’s face betrayed nothing concrete, but Myrin had the damnable sense that the elf had realized something about her that she was not about to share. When Ilira spoke, her voice was soft and thoughtful. “You are thinking that if you took *one* of my memories, there might be more. But you hesitate, because if you touch me, I’ll burn your flesh to ash.”

Myrin thought immediately of the memory she’d glimpsed a year ago in Fayne’s mind, which had featured Ilira. Had she already been spellscarred in that vision? She must have been. She had burned Yldar at a touch. Not Fayne, though, so there must be some exceptions.

“I—that wasn’t why I tried to touch you,” Myrin said truthfully.

Ilira met her eye. “No?”

“I’d like—” Myrin set her jaw. “I’d like to try to absorb your scar.”

“You—” Ilira looked startled. “That’s ridiculous. Even if you could do that, I’d burn your hand off in the process.”

“I’d like to try anyway,” Myrin said. “It’s worth it, just to give you a chance to touch someone. And who knows? I might be able to help you control it.”

Ilira looked at her warily. “Why would you do this?”

“Because—” Myrin hung her head. “Because I know what it is to be alone. And you’ve been alone so much longer than I have. I . . . I’ll understand, if you say no.”

Ilira looked at her a long while, her gold eyes unreadable in the growing sunlight. Myrin started to feel self-conscious, as though Ilira could see right through her dress, her

flesh, and even her bones. Unconsciously, Myrin reached one hand behind her back to grasp the opposite elbow. It was a nervous habit of hers, but it comforted her.

Finally, Ilira nodded. "I'll help you."

"Help me?" Myrin asked. "How?"

"Find your lost memories. That is why you're in the city, is it not?"

"Yes." Myrin thought of the missing Rhett. "Among other things."

"Well, I just so happen to specialize in finding lost things." Ilira smiled mysteriously. "Only one question: your man, this Shadowbane. What of him?"

Myrin was taken aback. She hadn't thought about Kalen at all since the previous night. Being near Ilira gave her peace from thoughts about Kalen.

"He has his quest," she said finally. "I have mine."

With a satisfied nod, Ilira put out her gloved hand, which Myrin took in her own. She could feel the blue fire in the elf surge in response to her touch. This was right.

"It will take some time—two days for me to confirm what we need. But first." Ilira eyed Myrin up and down. "There is something we must do. Desperately."

"Oh?" Myrin's stomach turned over.

"Indeed." Ilira gave her a suggestive smile. "We simply *must* get you out of that dress."

"Um." Myrin's knees quaked. "I, that is—"

"And into the one I made for you." Ilira smiled. "I hope you like blue."

Myrin beamed.



The Bent Mermaid Inn at the edge of Tidetown was a Westgate institution, known as much for its awful service and swill as for the lascivious figurehead of a sea vixen bent almost double. Only pirates, freebooters, and other such refuse frequented its common room, paying in blood more often than silver.

The Trickster's body drew more than one eye as she passed through the creaking front doors of the ramshackle inn. She'd made no attempt to hide her identity other than her outward disguise, and she took some satisfaction in how many speculative eyes she drew. She crossed the common room, her heels clicking on the ale-drenched floor, and used the agreed-upon knock to gain entrance to the back chamber.

"Ostentatious?" Hessar lounged on the couch with a handsome coinlad on one side and a coinlass on the other, both of whom he dismissed immediately. "That look hardly suits you."

"Perhaps." The Trickster slid into a padded chair and folded one leg over the other. "Did you have something to ask me, or has it just been too long since you looked upon me?"

"Rude as well as attention-seeking." He rose and peered out a crack in the boarded-up window. "The Darkdance girl must be an idiot if she does not suspect something."

"Then she is an idiot," the Trickster said. "I know her far better than you do, and I know exactly how to play her. This will be simple."

"As you say." Hessar shrugged. "I have enough to worry about dealing with Levia and her once-student. Who would have thought he'd be so difficult to remove from our path?"

"He does seem rather stuck on the little mageling. That

was the problem between us.”

“Us?” Hessar’s yellow eyes narrowed. “You’ve a history with this Kalen Dren?”

“That hardly matters,” she said. “I’ve my task, and you’ve yours.”

“That I do.”

He crept closer to the edge of her chair and she stood, unsettled by his presence. “Maid of Misfortune,” she snarled. “I hate it when you do that.”

“I know.” He settled into the vacated seat. “Our mutual master has another task for you. A certain item he wants recovered from the place Lady Darkdance is going next, in two days’ time.” He passed a piece of parchment to her. “That shouldn’t be too difficult to arrange.”

“To steal it from under her fingers? Nay, that should be simple.” The Trickster unfolded the parchment and scanned the contents. “What is this? Magic of some sort?”

“Nothing to concern you. Only that our master wants it, and what he wants—”

“Yes, yes, but answer me, anyway. What—” The monk was gone. She sighed.

She folded the parchment and stuffed it in her bodice. She rose to go, then thought better of putting on her coat. She had two days, he had said—why not make the most of them?

“Maid! A drink!” Then, eyeing the lovely young woman: “And possibly some entertainment as well.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NIGHT, 30 FLAMERULE

TWO DAYS LATER, MYRIN, ILIRA, AND BRACE HEADED down the Silverpiece Way under the watchful walls of Castle Vhammos to the south. Ilira led them toward the River Bridge that connected the Shou quarter to the rest of Westgate.

After she'd agreed to help Myrin, Ilira had said she needed to acquire information and equipment, and told them to be ready. She wouldn't tell them exactly what they would be doing, but Ilira had assured them it had to do with Myrin's lost memories. For his part, the gnome had been less than enthusiastic about the trek—at least until Ilira had appeared that night in a tight suit of black leather that flattered her quite well. After that, Brace offered no objections.

Ilira had also brought Myrin a gift wrapped in waxed paper that smelled distantly of flowers. The wizard caught her breath when she saw the contents: a figure-clinging gown of deep blue fabric that looked like silk but felt like warm sunlight.

“Zlathas, harvested with silver sickles under the full

moon in a Feywild grove,” Ilira had explained. “Mortals call it ‘feyweave.’ It takes no dirt nor suffers easy damage, and has an enchantment or two as well, as you’ll no doubt discover.”

Myrin marveled at the amazing, perfectly tailored gown. “It’s beautiful.”

“It was originally a gift from a . . . friend.” She donned an enigmatic smile. “I altered it to suit your figure. I have an eye for a lady’s measurements.”

That made Myrin blush. “I can hardly accept—”

“Please.” She put her gloved hands on Myrin’s shoulders. “I am glad to see it worn once more, to honor he who gave it to me.”

Now, two hours later, Myrin imagined that conversation—and thought about the way her new-made dress made her feel absolutely heroic. Silvery mithral laced the sleeves, woven in the shape of stars that gleamed in the moonlight. She looked up into the dark night sky and wondered if she had donned a piece of the heavens itself. She felt *heroic*, in a sense, as though everything she’d done up until now had been the work of an apprentice, but now she had grown into a proper wizard.

If only she could see the look on Kalen’s face now. Myrin’s neck tickled, as though someone was watching them from a distance, but she said nothing of this. Most women, she suspected, would feel unsettled to find themselves watched in this manner, but she felt relieved. Not because she needed—or wanted—Kalen following her, but it meant he was safe.

“Same old Kalen,” she murmured to herself.

They came to the River Bridge, but instead of crossing, Ilira led them over a fence of stout logs and down a rocky

outcropping around to the space under the bridge. The river thundered over the precipice at their feet. Nearby, a sealed grate covered what looked like a sewer opening. That, Myrin realized, must be their destination, and she started toward it.

“Wait.” Ilira put out an arm to ward Myrin back. Shadows coalesced around her fingers. “Come out now.”

A figure rose from behind the rocks—how Ilira had seen her, Myrin couldn’t begin to guess—and stepped out of the shadow of the bridge. The shadow had one hand on the hilt of a sword sheathed at her belt, and she kept her white, pupil-less eyes on Ilira, offering a challenge.

“All’s well, lady!” Brace stepped between them. “I asked Rujia to meet us here.”

Myrin recognized Rujia now, although she’d never seen the deva quite so close. Her purple-on-white skin (or was it the reverse?) seemed to gleam in the moonlight, but otherwise she looked like a normal woman. Somehow, Myrin had expected her to project an aura of divine majesty, but she felt very mortal—made of flesh and blood like them.

“I thought we could use another sword,” Brace said. “And Rujia’s grown bored at the studio over the last tendays. Methought she could help.”

Rujia inclined her head. “Well met, Ladies Darkdance and Nathalan.”

“Well met.” Myrin bowed.

Ilira weighed the deva with her eyes. Myrin used the same technique Ilira had suggested to her that day at the manor: selecting a single focus—in this case Ilira’s haunting gold eyes—to let her perception expand. She picked up the elf’s wariness, surely, but also an undercurrent of genuine animosity. Myrin saw Ilira’s huge shadow coursing at her

feet, reflecting her anxiety.

Amazing, Myrin thought, how Ilira had opened her perception. With just those brief words, she'd expanded tenfold upon the lessons Kalen had taught.

"Right," Brace said, oblivious to the tension between the women. "I would have gone first, but—" He gestured to the chain and lock that secured the grate.

Taking her eyes hesitantly from the deva, Ilira kneeled at the door, drew out two metal wires, and set to work on the lock. "I have some oil in my bag. Work on the hinges, would you?"

"With pleasure." Brace grinned. "I shall oil anything you ask, my lady."

The work seemed to come as naturally to Ilira as scrawling her name or using a spoon might to Myrin, and why not? A century of practice at anything probably made it into a habit.

As Ilira worked, Myrin saw Rujia watching her. "Well met," she said again.

"Lady." Rujia nodded. Myrin wondered what lurked behind the deva's otherwise impenetrable eyes. Rujia seemed more a mystery than Ilira, which was saying much.

"So . . . you've come to help us because Brace asked you to?" Myrin asked.

"No."

"Oh?" The deva hadn't tried to lie to her. "Then why are you here?"

"Someone has to keep Brace out of trouble."

"Ah." Myrin had only known the gnome a matter of days, but she understood quite well. "Welcome, then." She offered her hand in friendship, but Rujia only looked at it blankly. Myrin withdrew her hand. "Right."

The lock clicked and Ilira pulled it away, along with a cloudburst of rust that cascaded to the ground. The door opened rather easily, thanks to Brace's work on the hinges. True to his word, the gnome stepped into the gloom first, followed by Rujia. Myrin made to go third, but Ilira laid a gloved hand on her arm to still her.

"Be wary," Ilira said. "Devas have hard faces to read, and we do not know her."

"We hardly know each other," Myrin said. "And Brace knows her, so that's well. I trust his judgment."

Ilira gave her a dubious look, then shrugged. "As you will." She went inside.

Myrin lingered outside the entrance to the sewers, that feeling of scrutiny making her neck prickle. She looked out at the rooftops, but of course she would not see him.

"I hope you're safe tonight, Kalen." She clasped her elbow behind her back. "I—"

"Lady Darkdance?" Brace called.

Myrin nodded. "I miss you," she said to the night.

Then she went in.



As he ran along crenellations and leaped from rooftop to rooftop in the old central district near the market, Kalen chided himself for hesitating to call on Levia for aid immediately upon his arrival in Westgate. Not only did she have better information than he did—her contacts had led them to this night's destination—but he had to confess he enjoyed hunting with her.

Clad in gray woolens and carrying both Vindicator and Sithe's axe, he chased his former teacher over the treacherous

rooftops, trying to spot her as she ducked into shadows or around chimneys. As adept as Kalen had become at free-running over the years, Levia still outdid him at every turn. He had always suspected magic made the difference, and he would not have been surprised if she used an invisibility charm at times when she vanished only to reappear suddenly just behind him. “Keep alert,” she would say, and run on.

There had been numerous reports of a leather-clad vigilante stalking thieves at night, and every night in Westgate saw a thousand intrigues in various stages—every one a potential hit. Kalen might have been lost at the sheer scope of the options, but Levia had always possessed an amazing knack for choosing the right place to be at the right time. With some study of her detailed logs, a few interrogated guttersnipes, and a little coin spread around, she’d come up with an answer by the second day.

The Fire Knives had put out rumors of a second meeting with the Shou, and there was a high degree of likelihood the false Shadowbane would show himself, if only to carry on his work. This time, they were meeting on Bleth’s home terrain, where the Fire Knives would have the advantage. Construction scaffolds studded the nearby buildings. Crossbowmen stationed many of these projects, passing the time with pipeweed or dice. It was clearly a trap, but not for them. Thus, Kalen and Levia sneaked through without difficulty.

He was glad Levia had not insisted on bringing the shade along with them. Instead, she had told Hessar to keep up appearances at Castle Thalavar, covering for her so she could “go deep,” as she put it. This was her element—working at Kalen’s side—but even so he detected a slight hesitation in

her movements. Perhaps her age was catching up to her, or perhaps her heart truly wasn't in this. She had wanted to play a longer game—to wait for the false Shadowbane to come to them, rather than hunt him down—but Kalen had insisted. Levia had closed the discussion by remarking on Kalen's impatience, which apparently had not changed since their years of training together, and agreed to follow his lead nevertheless.

When Levia fell short on a leap to the escape ladder of a tallhouse, Kalen couldn't help mocking her a little. "With the scene you're making, he's probably already seen us coming. You're not *trying* to warn him off, are you?"

The priestess gave him an unhappy pout, but he could see laughter in her eyes. Levia was having a good time, and Kalen was as well. They were old friends playing a familiar game.

Kalen couldn't help but think about newer friends, though, thanks in part to his yearning spellscar. He hadn't seen Myrin in days. He hoped she was well and had the good sense to stay away from the Nathalan woman.

"Kalen?"

They'd paused on the rooftop of a tallhouse near the Bleth yards, where the meeting was supposedly taking place. They still had an hour yet, but already Fire Knives had gathered in the surrounding area, making an effort to seem disinterested, there by coincidence.

Levia turned to him where they crouched behind a sharp-slanted roof for cover. "What are you thinking about?"

"Lady Darkdance. I can't help thinking I made the wrong choice, and that she needs me."

"That's always been your problem, Kalen Dren," Levia said, looking cross. "You think everyone needs you all the

time.”

“Don’t *you* need me? To do this, that is.”

She edged a bit closer, a challenge in her eyes. “Is that all you’re going to ask me? You’ve been away three years, and now it’s just business between us?”

That seemed unusual to Kalen—both that Levia would be so forward in asking and that she would be so loud. *Was* she trying to get them caught?

Then he glimpsed, over her shoulder, a leather-clad man crouching in the shadows of the rooftop opposite their own. The man bore no weapon, but sure enough, Kalen could feel that same distant pull on Vindicator, growing stronger with proximity. And as easily as Kalen had detected him, so, too, did the false Shadowbane catch sight of Kalen’s hiding place. He ran.

Levia’s face dipped toward him, but Kalen pulled away.

“He’s made us,” he said, and immediately gave chase.



Men shouted and crossbow bolts flew through the night, narrowly missing the fleeing men. Levia sat there, startled that Kalen had gone so suddenly—and stunned after what she had almost done. Had she truly been about to kiss him?

And more importantly, how would he have responded if she had? After what had passed between them three years ago, surely trying to kiss him invited nothing but disaster. But she had been caught up in the moment, invigorated by the run across the rooftops. Had she grown so addled in these last years as to expect anything more of him?

Now she could only watch as he leaped across to the next rooftop, chasing Shadowbane.

“Time to be serious, Levia,” she told herself.

“Agreed,” a voice said. “You really should stop embarrassing yourself.”

Levia summoned a spell to her lips, but held her magic when she saw Hesar, who had appeared out of the shadows at her side. The Calishite wore a cold smile.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

The monk didn’t immediately answer, but rather looked after Kalen, who had gained the opposite roof and bounded across after the imposter Shadowbane. “Your lovely man certainly is dedicated,” he said. “But his attentions should be moved in a different direction, I think.”

“Kalen charts his own path. And I can’t keep lying to him, Hesar.” She tapped her foot impatiently. “Are you here for a purpose, or are you delaying me to no good end?”

The monk bristled a touch at that, but he said nothing. He drew a folded piece of parchment from his sleeve. “I’ve been following the Nathalan woman.”

“Can’t it wait?” Levia pointed after Kalen.

“You’ll want to see this,” Hesar said. “As will he, albeit for a different reason.”

“Different—?” Levia asked, but the monk had vanished, the way he often did. “I hate that man sometimes.” With no convenient pocket, she stuffed the note into her bodice.

Levia looked to where the two Shadowbanes had gone, and sure enough, Kalen had almost disappeared over a far rooftop. Hesitation cost battles, Gedrin had always told her, and Levia felt her heart pick up speed. She needed to catch Kalen and stop him before he unmasked the new Shadowbane. Also, the trapdoor leading onto the roof opened as she watched and Fire Knives climbed out to investigate. She ducked behind temporary cover and cursed. If she stayed

still, she would lose Kalen and Shadowbane, and if she moved, the Knives would see her.

Fortunately, she had a solution to both problems, in the form of a ring she wore with the stone facing into her palm. She righted it to activate its magic, and immediately her body began to shake. The world around her seemed to slow and drag, and to anyone else she would look like a blur of motion. When she started moving, they would hardly see her at all. As the Fire Knives appeared on the roof, their crossbows sluggishly rising toward her, she whirled and ran. The world moved slowly around her hastened state, making leaping to the opposite roof a simple matter. Crossbow bolts floated lazily beside her, and she eluded them without thought.

Even in her triumph, however, she felt her lungs begin to heave. With the toll it took on her body, she could not use the ring for long, but it would serve for the moment.

The clouds opened and dropped a warm summer torrent on her head as she moved. With the ring's magic cloaking her, she moved between the raindrops.

The men had not gone far. Their flight had become a confrontation on the sloping roof of a House Bleth warehouse. Kalen stood near the lower edge, Vindicator pointed up at the unarmed Shadowbane, who stood at the apex of the roof. Kalen was speaking, but Levia, in the grip of the speed magic, could hardly understand him: "Rhhhhh-hhhetttttttttt, weeee—" He sounded drunk, his distorted words dragging hollowly.

She turned the ring's stone back to the outside, and instantly the magic left her. She collapsed to one knee, coughing in the aftereffects.

"Rhett," Kalen was saying, "we don't have to fight. We

can—”

Levia recovered enough to speak. “Kalen, ware!”

“Levia.” Kalen turned, rain sliding off his cloak. “How—?”

In the distraction of her sudden appearance, the false Shadowbane charged. As he came on, he thrust out his hand toward Kalen, and Vindicator wrenched itself from Kalen’s grasp in a burst of gray flame. Rainwater sizzled as the sword—now in Shadowbane’s hand—slashed for Kalen’s throat.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NIGHT, 30 FLAMERULE

THE MOONLIGHT PIERCED THE GLOOM UP TO THREE PACES. At its limit, Brace busied himself with flint and steel to light a torch that had already grown wet in the putrid sewer. Myrin knew from his harried expression that he was having trouble, but was too proud to admit it. Myrin grinned at his oversight and cast a spell to solve the dilemma. A globe of flame appeared over her outstretched palm, bathing the room in golden light that painted their faces with unsettling shadows.

“Onward, then,” Ilira said.

They picked their way through a tunnel thick with fumes of decay. A channel running the length of the tunnel hosted a trough of murky liquid. Silently, Myrin thanked Ilira again for the feyweave gown, which repelled the grime. The sewer seemed to bother neither Rujia nor Ilira, or else the two women were too busy watching each other warily to notice. Brace tromped through, glancing periodically at his boots and muttering an apology to his cobbler.

When they paused at a junction of several tunnels, Myrin spoke up. “Where are we going, anyway? Amusing

as this is, I hope we're not exploring the sewer just for the sake of exploring."

"How much do you know of Westgate's history?" Ilira asked.

Myrin shrugged and Rujia gave a similar neutral gesture. Only Brace perked up in answer to her question. "I know a great deal about a great deal. Ask away."

"You've heard of the Faceless?"

"More than a century past, 'twas he that commanded a thieves' guild called the Night Masks." The gnome tapped his nose in thought. "He wore a mirrorlike mask stolen from the temple of some goddess of illusions . . ."

That sounded familiar to Myrin, somehow. She found herself remembering something she had absorbed from the doppelganger Umbra. The name of a dead goddess, one he had served and sought to avenge. "Leira," she murmured.

The others looked at her, Brace with surprise and Rujia with neutral disregard. Ilira's face was as hard to read as ever, but Myrin thought she detected a hint of unease there.

"Leira, that's right—a goddess who died in the Godswar," Brace said.

"And what of their lair?" Ilira asked.

"Cleared out in the Year of the Banner, 1368 Dalereckoning—by a band of adventurers led by one Alias of Westgate. If I recall correctly, it was hidden under—" His eyes widened. "In the sewers, near where we stand just now! It should lie in yon direction." He pointed down one of the tunnels.

"Quite right," Ilira said. "That isn't where we're going, however."

"It isn't?"

The elf busied herself, feeling along the walls with her

gloved fingers. Finally, she pressed a hidden catch, and stone creaked at their feet. The sewer water, which had collected in the middle of the room, whirled around and around before flowing down into an unseen opening. The water vanished, revealing a wide shaft with rusted rungs set into the stone.

“We’ve only a few heartbeats to climb down,” Ilira said. “No time to explain. Go.”

“Just a moment, lady—” Brace said, his voice wary. Rujia looked uncertain as well.

Myrin, on the other hand, trusted absolutely in Ilira, and she followed her command without hesitation. She bent low to climb into the dripping sewer shaft.

The shaft plunged into interminable darkness below. With a mental command, Myrin sent her flaming sphere floating down into the gloom, and it went down about twenty paces—the limit of the magic. She climbed down toward it, taking care to grip each rung firmly before she shifted her weight to the next. Above her, Rujia came next, followed by Ilira, then finally a less-than-pleased Brace.

“Why the haste?” Brace asked. “Is something to happen if we—?”

Stone growled, and the sewer opening above shut.

“That, for a first,” Ilira said. “Then—”

As Myrin watched, the top rung of the ladder lit with magical flame. Unlike her golden magelight, this magic was green and angry, and it quickly spread to the next rung, then the next.

A trap.

The four descended as fast as they could, chased down the rungs by the green flames. Myrin gasped and clutched at the slippery metal. Could they do this?

“Master your fear,” Ilira called. “Climb steadily—do not rush. Too fast and you’ll slip.”

She was right. The magic seemed to be descending only a little faster than a casual climb, so they didn’t have to rush. Kalen wouldn’t be afraid, and with that thought, Myrin could push down the rising fear. She focused on each rung, climbing carefully. The rungs became slippery as she descended, slick with sewer water and grime. It smelled awful, but she kept focused.

They made it five more paces down before it happened.

“Garl’s Godsdamned—ahh!” Brace slipped off a rung, scrambled, and fell free.

“Erevan Spit,” Ilira said, as the gnome fell into her and knocked her off the ladder.

Rujia and Myrin braced as the two fell toward them, but Ilira wrapped her arms around Brace and they vanished into the shadows with a rush of wind and dust just before they could strike Rujia. The deva looked blankly at Myrin, then at her hands on the ladder. Myrin looked away, over her shoulder, to where Ilira and Brace appeared farther down the shaft, still falling.

Then Rujia collided with Myrin, knocking her free of the ladder. She must have slipped, or else the near collision had sent the deva tumbling after all. In any case, the two women plummeted upside-down through the shaft, their arms and legs flailing. Myrin’s mind raced through the magics she knew, desperate for something she could do—

Even without her will, though, she felt protective magic seeping out to shroud her.

It was the ring she wore: the ring of feather falling Kalen had inherited from a friend in the Guard and given to Myrin, on that rainy night in Waterdeep. The ring’s magic

was automatically triggered when the wearer fell, slowing her descent to little more than a crawl.

Instinctively, Myrin countered the magic with a manifestation of will. After all, if the ring only worked for her, then would not Rujia plunge alone to her death?

The darkness around them turned to gold light. Myrin looked down over her head.

“Mother Mystra!” Myrin gasped as they plummeted toward her ball of fire. She dismissed the flaming sphere with a flicker of will just before they would have plunged into it.

Darkness filled the shaft, and Myrin knew that at any instant, they could strike the ground. She could let the ring save her, but what then of the deva? If Myrin held on to Rujia, the momentum might drive them both to their deaths. Should she not let go and save herself?

“No,” she breathed. She had to try to save them both.

Myrin focused on the ring, and she felt buoyant magic grip her body. Myrin grasped Rujia tight and winced at the pain as the falling woman almost ripped her arms from their sockets. She forcibly grasped the threads of magic with her will, demanding that it extend to Rujia and—to her astonishment—it did with a palpable snap. The magic slowed them, slowed—

They hit the floor with a splash of sewer water. Air rushed from Myrin’s lungs, and she lay stunned, unsure whether she yet lived. She remembered again that last night in Waterdeep, and thought this must have been what it was like for Kalen, when he and his foe had fallen off Castle Waterdeep. Then air returned, and she lay panting in the impenetrable darkness. Far above her, the green flames roared hungrily, then winked out.

“Ilira?” She shivered in that cold place. “Brace? Rujia?”

A silver-flaming torch flickered into life. Ilira held the light aloft, her gold eyes gleaming.

“An everburning torch,” Brace observed. “Should have thought of that.”

Rujia pulled another such torch from her pack, this one burning bright red.

“Don’t everyone spare my feelings all at once,” Brace said.

The minor magic of the torches hardly penetrated the oppressive, stuffy gloom. Myrin felt the dark like a hot fog that weighed heavy on her skin, and she felt slick with sweat.

“Are you well?” Ilira stood over Myrin.

“I think so.” With a pang, Myrin thought of how Kalen would have immediately kneeled at her side, inspecting her for breaks. On the other hand, she rather enjoyed being trusted to care for herself, rather than being treated like a fragile doll. “Just a bit dizzy. Are we ready to move?”

Ilira extended a gloved hand to help Myrin to her feet. That, Myrin accepted gladly.

Myrin saw Rujia past the elf’s shoulder. The deva watched her with an uneasy expression—perhaps that was fear on her exotic face or perhaps it was thanks.

Either way, Myrin made a decision: she would never save herself at the cost of a friend.

“Well,” Brace said. “I accept that there wasn’t time above to explain—what with the fire trap and all—but now that we’re here . . . ?” He bowed to Ilira.

“As you wish.” Ilira held her torch aloft to illumine as much of the room as possible, and with the other hand held up something Myrin and Brace had not yet seen: a black silk eye mask. Shadows leak from Ilira’s mask, and ancient

magic stirred in the darkness.

Dim light bloomed into being in the depths of the chamber, illuminating a great iron grate at their feet with nothing but darkness below. Four chains thick with a century's worth of rust spiraled up into the darkness from the four corners of the grate and connected above. The chains slithered through the grate at equidistant points and connected to cages that hung about six paces below the grate. A skeleton occupied one of the cages. Brace inhaled sharply at the sight.

"Welcome," Ilira said, "to the lair of the Night Masters."

As she spoke, she pointed with her torch toward the raised platform, indicating a row of four—Myrin swallowed a lump of sudden fear—coffins.

"The . . . the Night Masters!" Brace's voice shook. "The vampires who ruled the Night Masks, after the Faceless fell."

"Quite so. This was the dwelling place of Orbakh and his dukes—all of them vampires of great power and influence in their day. Fortunately, Gedrin Shadowbane drove them all out a century ago. Unless they've returned, of course, but that seems unlikely." Ilira indicated the coffins. "Those, incidentally, are fake—a deception to scare rank-and-file operatives or kill would-be hunters." One of the coffins was, indeed, destroyed, as though some explosion—a trap, perhaps—had ripped it apart. "There are much greater dangers that await us in this place."

Myrin's unease was passing, replaced by an interest in the unknown, as well as a vague familiarity. That was a bit disturbing, but she always felt better when a memory started to creep back, good or bad. "You sound as though you've been here before."

"Twice," Ilira said. "Neither time by choice."

“You spend your time in odd places,” Brace said. Then, when Ilira gave him a look, he added: “Which I rather fancy about you.”

The elf smiled. “The first time, I convinced one of the Night Masters to lead me here.”

“For an inevitable betrayal, no doubt,” Rujia murmured, startling Myrin. Ilira did not seem to have heard. Indeed, Myrin wouldn’t have believed the snide remark of the deva had she not heard it herself, plain as a crossbow firing. Rujia regarded her with a blank stare.

Brace hadn’t heard either, and he was looking at Ilira speculatively.

“Yes, friend gnome?” Ilira asked.

“Convinced, is it?” Brace said. “I’d have thought ‘seduced’ the more proper word.”

“Indeed.” Ilira smiled. “But Lady Vhammos was the one who did most of the seduction. I was just there for the ride.”

That made Brace’s eyes go as wide as saucers. Ilira cast Myrin a sly look, as though to say “look how easy that was.” The wizard smiled at the subtle intimacy of their private jest.

“There’s a false wall around here somewhere,” Ilira said. “I haven’t been here in almost a century, and my memory is hardly perfect. Look around, but take care not to step on the grate. It’s intentionally slippery, and that’s a long fall.”

Brace, who had been moving in that direction, abruptly stepped away and circumvented the wide grate instead. Rujia sought out the other corner of the room, while Myrin avoided her, a little disturbed at her subtle barb from earlier. Instead, she stuck close to Ilira, who felt along the wall behind the false coffins. “You said you were here before—with Gedrin Shadowbane?”

“Long ago, Gedrin led a contingent of his fellow Night Masks in driving their masters from the city. Vindicator’s light was particularly effective against the Night Court.”

“Gedrin was a Night Mask?”

“I’m surprised Saer Shadow didn’t tell you that.”

“He . . .” Myrin remembered a conversation with Kalen in which they’d discussed thieves’ guilds. The word “Mask” had floated in her mind, but he’d seemed not to recognize it and immediately directed her to the Fire Knives instead. But if he’d known about the Night Masks, why hadn’t he spoken of them? “He doesn’t tell me everything.”

Ilira made no reply to that. “Gedrin was a good man, as it passes. He turned the Night Masks—one of the worst, darkest, most putrid sores in Faerûn—into the shining Eye of Justice. It’s a shame that it didn’t stay that way, as little ever does. But it’s good to see his quest endures in the form of your . . .” She gave Myrin an uncertain look, as though selecting the right word.

“Friend.” Myrin didn’t feel like discussing Kalen just then, so she changed the subject. “You came here with one of the dukes—a noblewoman vampire?”

Ilira nodded. “We didn’t take the same route I showed you, of course, but a much safer one that I happen to know no longer exists,” she said. “Darklady Dahlia Vhammos, Duchess of Venom, didn’t want to damage her new plaything, after all.”

Myrin could imagine that, and turned away blushing before the elf could catch her.

Oblivious, Ilira kept searching the wall. “The second time I came here, I was leading Gedrin and his fellows down to kill the Night King. Most of the court escaped, including Dahlia. I wonder if she realized it was me.” She

sighed wistfully. “Probably.”

“Yow!” Brace’s cry interrupted them. The gnome was backing hastily away from what looked like an altar at one end of the huge round room. The altar had long ago been crushed by a massive black boulder from high above. “That must have hurt something fierce, eh Rujia?”

The deva averted her gaze, which to Myrin seemed to be like rolling her eyes.

Myrin could see no sign of any deity the altar had been dedicated to—likely, it had been fake, like the coffins. Whatever god the Night Masks had venerated must have been a dark one.

“Darklady,” Myrin said. “That’s a Sharran title, isn’t it?”

Ilira gave her a curious look. “How did you know that?”

Myrin shrugged. She’d read so many books over the last year, and while she usually had precise recall—she could point to which book, which sage, and even what year a piece of information came from—she couldn’t credit this. Had it been a memory she’d absorbed?

She heard a tapping sound and looked over her shoulder to see Rujia testing the wall for hollows with the pommel of her sword. The deva met the wizard’s gaze, and Myrin looked away.

“So . . .” Myrin grasped her elbow behind her back. “You lie with women, then.”

“Men and women both,” Ilira said. “Well, that was before my scar, when I could still lie with anyone without killing them. Dahlia, though, was a vampire, so my touch didn’t hurt her.” Ilira halted in her search and regarded Myrin with a speculative look. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Myrin realized she was grinding her toe into the filthy stone floor and stopped with a wince. “I was

curious.”

“Indeed?” Ilira stepped a bit closer to her, even as her shadow reached toward Myrin’s shadow as though to caress it. This unnerved and excited her both at once.

“There were those rumors about you and . . . and Lady Dawnbringer,” she said. “But—”

“You can ask me anything, Myrin. I promise I’ll answer. Unless, of course, I can’t.”

They stood so close Myrin realized she was shaking. She realized Ilira trembled, too, which made breathing hard. Ilira’s hand on the wall crept closer to Myrin’s own.

“Ah,” Ilira said. “Here it is.”

There was a click, a distant whir of gears, and the wall ground open. The secret door revealed a dark hallway filled with billowing mists. Myrin thanked the gods Ilira’s find had interrupted her before she said something she might regret. Whispers filtered from the misty hallway: words that she could not make out, let alone understand. She braced for an attack, but realized the voices were magical in nature, not necessarily belonging to physical foes.

Myrin also heard a sound like one stone falling on another, although from a great distance. The ground shivered a bit under her feet with each stone’s sound. It came again and again in an unexpected but steady rhythm, like a poorly functioning heart.

Ilira nodded to Rujia, who approached them. “I heard what she said earlier, about an ‘inevitable betrayal.’ You heard it as well, but said nothing. Do you agree with it, then?”

“What do you mean?” Myrin asked.

“That I’m a treacherous, deceitful seducer,” Ilira said. “I am, of course, but I would never do that to you. You have

to know that.”

“Oh.” Myrin wasn’t sure she didn’t want some of those things, although she could do without the treachery aspect.

“Myrin, I meant to betray the Night Masks, but there was a purpose to it, and it saved a great many lives.” Ilira put her gloved hands on Myrin’s shoulders. “Do I seem treacherous?”

“No. I mean, yes, but I . . .” Myrin met her eyes. “I trust you.”

Relief came over Ilira’s face, and she might have spoken were it not for the buzzing sound that filled their ears at that very moment. Myrin recognized the feel of waking magic, and looked to a small raised dais pulsing with green radiance. Brace stood before the platform, studying it in obvious fascination.

“Damn and burn,” Ilira said. “Trust the gnome to trigger the trap.”

There was a blast of reaving lightning, and Brace cried out in pain. His body contorted in the shock, and the crackling energy drew him into the circle. Myrin watched, startled, as the magic whisked him away. “Teleportation?”

A scowl turned Ilira’s lovely face into a harsh mask. “That leads into the Night Masks’ audience chamber,” she said. “Gedrin never made it there, so it could still have traps.”

“Why do we wait?” Myrin said. “We have to help him.”

“You saw the lightning. It’s a warding sigil Orbakh drew to thwart anyone using the circle without permission. Without his blessing—”

“That doesn’t matter.” Her recent vow never to choose safety while one of her companions suffered came back to Myrin. “Will it kill us outright? Is Brace dead?”

“No, but—”

“Then we go,” Myrin said. “Right now.”

Behind them, Rujia was watching them carefully, her sword in hand.

After a heartbeat’s hesitation, Ilira nodded. Her eyes turned jet black, heralding her shadowdancing powers. “Prepare yourself. This will hurt.”

And with that, she leaped through the shadows into the sizzling magic. Sure enough, the lightning struck and her body jerked taut. She vanished in the teleportation circle.

Myrin and Rujia shared a look, and the deva nodded. Myrin plunged into the magic.

The crackling lightning set every inch of her skin tingling. She expected pain, but it did not hurt. Instead, the magic caressed her like a lover’s fingers, and she shivered.

Then she was falling backward through darkness, and abruptly she landed somewhere else—somewhere filled with loud, resonant sounds that made the air shake around her. Something strong was hammering at something very solid. The whispers she’d heard became a chorus of gibbering, damned souls all around her.

She fell to one knee, disoriented but unhurt. Brace and Ilira both lay at her feet, the gnome seemingly senseless, while Ilira gasped and coughed. As Ilira curled in on herself in pain, a sliver of pale flesh appeared between her leather hauberk and belt. Upon her flesh was inked something in bright, vivid gold. Another tattoo?

“Mother Mystra, are you well?” Myrin asked.

“No,” Ilira said. “Be wary. Orbakh’s changed this room. It—”

That slam of stone on stone came again, deafening in its proximity. Myrin looked up and saw what must once have been an audience chamber with a great throne and

four smaller seats. One of these seats was replaced with a great stone coffin, the lid of which shivered from blow after blow. From *inside*.

“That—that’s one of them,” Ilira said wearily. “Phultan, Duke of Whispers, he . . . he never liked me.” Then she collapsed.

As Myrin watched, the coffin burst open, and the whispers became screams of agony.

PART FOUR:

FRENZY UNTO DEATH

The Tharchions of Thay once held dances that would end in death for those slaves who danced poorly.

After the rise of the necropolis, these rituals were not abandoned, as one might expect under the rule of Szass Tam. Instead, the necromancer king insisted they continue, with only some of the slaves being alive—and others undead.

Now, dancing poorly meant becoming a meal for those who danced well.

Catalan the Mad
Horrors of the Unapproachable East,
Published in the Year of the Fourth Circle (1474 DR)

FPO

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NIGHT, 30 FLAMERULE

GRAY FLAME FLASHED AS VINDICATOR CUT IN, BUT KALEN ducked and parried with the black haft of Sithe's axe. He drew the weapon in the same motion, shoved Levia away, and swiped at his opponent's legs. The imposter leaped straight up and kicked Kalen high in the chest with enough force to make him stagger back.

The summer rain had not had time to soak into the roof tiles, so it pooled atop the greasy wood, making balance nigh impossible. Kalen kept his feet firmly under him, his knees wavering. He flicked rain from his hood. "If that's you, Rhett, I'm very sorry about this. If you aren't Rhett, then I'm really not."

Wordless, the imposter rushed him, but Kalen lunged past, meaning to come around his flank. Whoever he was, this Shadowbane certainly had speed on his side and he used it to dance out of Kalen's trap. The rain hardly seemed to trouble him.

They ended up facing each other across half a dozen paces, on equal footing on the slanted roof. The rain pounded on Kalen's shoulders as he raised the axe over his head and set

it spinning, as Sithe had done. In reply, Shadowbane raised Vindicator in both hands.

“Kalen, wait!” Levia said from a few paces down the roof. “You don’t understand.”

But Kalen was past words—past hesitation. This man who wore his helm and wielded his sword—the one Gedrin had bequeathed him—could well be the man who had killed Rhett. He almost certainly wasn’t Rhett himself, and if he was, well . . . Kalen would give him the duel he had started. He vowed to the Threefold God that this foe would fall under his steel.

Answering his prayer, divine plate armor shimmered into being around him, just as Shadowbane rushed forward with an overhead slash.

“Impatient,” Kalen murmured.

He caught Vindicator with the spinning axe and brought the haft around with both hands, wrenching the blade viciously from Shadowbane’s hands. Following the same motion, he came around with a slash at chest level, but his leather-armored quarry leaped clear of his strike. Shadowbane cartwheeled back on one hand, the other hand wide for balance. Flames spread around his fingers and when he landed back on the roof, Vindicator was again in his hand. Rain seared into steam as it fell on the blade.

“Clever,” Kalen said.

Silently, Shadowbane beckoned him forward.

Kalen didn’t disappoint. The power of his god filled him, and he bounded across the rain-slick rooftop with a speed no mortal should know and slashed the jagged axe at Shadowbane. His alacrity took the imposter by surprise, and Kalen managed to catch him with a withering chop that drove him to one knee. Shingles shattered from the force

and skittered off into the night. Kalen brought around the axe for another strike but his spellscar chose that moment to numb his legs, and he faltered. The narrow opening was all Shadowbane needed—he danced back across the roof, seemingly unhindered by the acrobatics.

“Anytime you’d like to help,” Kalen muttered to Levia.

His teacher stood at the edge of the roof, seemingly uncertain. She looked from Kalen to the imposter and back, her fingers white on the grip of her mace.

He had only a heartbeat before Shadowbane bounded back toward a crooked turret that boasted a dragon-shaped weathervane, and then he vanished into its shadows. Kalen tried to see where he might have gone, but the cold certainty of an incoming strike filled him. He threw himself forward as a sword seared across his back. The divine armor stopped most of the cut, but he felt Vindicator’s flames pierce his flesh despite his numbing spellscar.

Kalen tumbled forward and fell to one knee. Blood dripped down his arm from where Vindicator had opened his shoulder. The gray plate looked rent, as though it were real armor rather than divine power. Shadowbane stood just behind where he had been, having emerged seemingly from his shadow. Was he a shadowdancer, like Ilira?

“Who *are* you?” Kalen demanded.

The imposter offered only that same inviting gesture in reply.

Slick with sweat in the summer rain, Kalen wished that Myrin had come along. With her magic, they could be winning this fight. He hoped she was having a better night than he.



Sweat froze on Myrin's neck and she could see her terrified breath steaming before her.

Until that moment, when the vampire burst forth in a chorus of shrieks, Myrin had held her calm. Now, she had the sudden urge to make enough water to soak her new gown.

The vampire—Ilira had called him Phultan, Duke of Whispers—was horrid. Bard's tales often painted such bloodsucking creatures as handsome and seductive creatures that promised lascivious pleasure for those who fed them, but not so Phultan. He might once have been fat—a jolly merchant criminal lord—but now his bulk hung off his bones like gray-white robes far too large for him. Greenish lesions riddled his desiccated skin, which leaked yellow-white pus rather than blood. There was no blood, and had not been in a long time—decades, or even a century.

Myrin realized she was staring. She should be summoning her magic, drawing out her orb, or at least trying to flee, but she could not move. She could do nothing but stare in abject fear, listening as the mystic chorus of whispers became screams.

Phultan spoke incoherent words ripped apart by hunger and madness. His eyes fixed upon Ilira, and his parchment-thin lips drew back around black gums and a jaw like a bear trap. His fangs seemed more like serrated daggers than teeth, and one was broken off. The black talons of one hand clicked against one another, while the other held a wand crafted of bone.

The vampire looked down at Ilira. "Little Fox—Venom's pet that brought the sun." A black, withered tongue scraped around his teeth. "I see you. I see—"

"See *me*, creature!"

A gleaming sword swept across and bit into the side of Phultan's head. The vampire staggered aside and Rujia stepped over Myrin. Somehow, the deva had passed harmlessly through the teleportation circle, just as Myrin had. Perhaps the magic had ebbed after striking Ilira and Brace so hard. Whatever the explanation, the deva gave Myrin a cold look, then followed Phultan to keep her sword between the vampire and her fallen allies.

Phultan made a sound, equal parts laughter and snarl. The wound in his head gaped open, but no blood ran forth and he did not seem in the least bit slowed. Rujia blasted the creature full in the face with a lance of astral flame, which the vampire shook off. The magic lingered around Phultan—a rune crafted of silvery light—but it seemed to amuse rather than trouble him.

“Oh, I'll deal with you, Many-Lives. I will.”

Phultan gave a choked gurgle of laughter. He bounded away, with an impossible dexterity for his grotesque body, and vanished in a swirl of invisibility magic. The vampire's laughter filled the chamber, punctuated by hungry snarls. The screaming magic died down into the same whispers that Myrin had heard before—voices that promised pain and doom.

Somehow, even though it presented an unseen and therefore greater threat, when Phultan disappeared, Myrin could shake off her terror. As Rujia stepped back and forth, casting her defense wide for the unseen enemy, Myrin patted Ilira's shoulder to rouse her. “Ilira! Wake!”

The elf moaned. Blood trickled from between her lips.

Myrin scrambled over to Brace, who breathed shallowly but steadily. She laid her bare hand on his arm, and blue runes swept up her skin. She looked into his mind and soul,

reached through him for his magic. When the gnome had spoken earlier of his father telling him to be a bard, it had been true: his thoughts took the form of loud songs and the words of an incorrigible braggart, connected by rainbow curls of magic. He fought with the force of his personality, rather than his arm, and Myrin found . . . his *voice*. This she drew into herself, stealing it with blue fire.

He could heal with words, and thus *she* could heal with words.

When Myrin broke contact with Brace, magic filled her mouth with a certain vocal majesty. These words, however, took a distinct flavor all Brace's own.

"Get up, you scum-guzzling, Bane-blessed bastard of a gnome!" she cried.

Magic flowed into Brace, and he coughed into wakefulness. His eyes focused on Myrin. "Why me?" He nodded to Ilira. "Why heal me, and not her?"

"You're better at healing than I." She rose. "Also, I have a vampire to slay."

"Right you are, lady." The gnome clambered toward Ilira.

Myrin turned to where Rujia kept up her defenses alone in the dark chamber, constantly turning to guard against the unseen vampire. The deva gave her a considering look, then beckoned her to come near. Silently, Myrin stepped toward her, and they stood back to back.

"So long since the Master locked me here." The vampire's voice echoed from every wall of the round chamber. "So long without it." The vampire squealed in hunger and lust. "Oh, give it to me. I promise I'll love you—just give it to me."

There was no question what he meant—especially not with the way Myrin's heart thundered in her throat. Blood.

Their blood.

Myrin shivered, but Rujia touched her shoulder. “No fear,” the deva said.

The words comforted her—and more important, they bolstered her confidence. She thought of Kalen and let the fear flow out of her. “Make of myself a darkness,” she murmured. “No fear, no pain—a darkness where there is only me.”

Phultan laughed out in the blackness—somewhere. Waiting. Myrin could hear—could *feel* him casting empowering spells on himself. He was toying with them, enjoying their fear.

No more of that, then. Myrin drew out her crystal orb and searched the memories she’d absorbed for a spell to remove Phultan’s advantage. They could not fight something they could not see . . . she remembered herself, her eyes glowing brightly as she searched the darkness. And as though seeing made it so, two tiny lines of runes traced down from the corners of her eyes down her cheeks. She spoke forgotten but familiar words, and suddenly the darkness brightened.

She saw everything differently. Her allies glowed with various magical treasures. Ilira’s armor, cloak, boots, and gloves were all enchanted, as well as the black silk mask she still gripped tight in one hand and her bracelet, both of which were mightier than the others. Brace had fewer such treasures, but his duplicating sword glowed, as did a ring on his hand. She could see all as it truly was, and the vampire’s invisibility would mean nothing to such vision.

“Where is he?” Myrin asked, scanning the room. “Where—?”

Then she saw Rujia, standing at her side, and was shocked

to silence. What her truesight saw . . . Her face . . .

“What is it?” Rujia—that is, the creature that called itself Rujia—held Rujia’s sword loosely, but magic burned around its free hand, ready to be used. Possibly on Myrin.

Phultan loomed out of the darkness and his claws swept toward Rujia’s head.

“Down!” Myrin threw a swath of hungry crimson flames as the deva ducked, and the arcane fire immolated Phultan’s hands. The vampire hissed and lunged away, but now Myrin could track him with her truesight. He veritably blazed with the various enchantments he’d laid on himself, all of them as translucent as the spell Rujia had laid over herself. Phultan rushed toward where Brace recited healing limericks to Ilira. He reached for the gnome, his mouth like a yawning chasm of blades. Myrin drew in breath for a warning.

Then Ilira’s shadow rose up from around its downed mistress and struck Phultan full in the chest. The vampire staggered, his loose folds of skin flapping around like a sodden cloak.

When she had seen the shadow before, Myrin had thought it had seemed like a bare outline of nightmare proportions, its limbs warped with barbs and spines. Through her true sight, though, it took the more humanoid form of a hairless giant, shoulders and arms studded with knobbed growths. It—*he*, Myrin realized with a start—stood protectively over his mistress.

“Have her, Exiled One, and welcome.” Phultan licked his jaws again with his black tongue. “I’ll have softer flesh—warmer blood.”

He lunged faster than a man should move, and within a heartbeat he was on them. At Myrin’s gasp, Rujia conjured

a lance of witchlight in her hand, but Phultan caught her arm and turned the magic on Myrin. At the same time, his wand flashed and a concussive blast sent the wizard sailing. Crushing pain filled her skull as she flew backward, and she fell, stunned. Rujia's magic shattered Myrin's truesight, and she could see little of anything.

Myrin couldn't say how much time passed—a heartbeat or an hour—but finally she gathered her wits. Rujia was screaming. Phultan stood two paces away, holding his hands aloft and gnashing his teeth in the air between them. It was only when blood spurted into the air from an unseen source that Myrin realized Rujia had turned invisible—for all the good it did. She couldn't see what the vampire was doing to her, but she could *hear* it.

It gave Myrin the moment she needed. She closed her hand around her crystal orb and sent a wave of force at the vampire, aiming as best she could so as not to strike the woman she couldn't see. Luck was with her, and the vampire staggered back toward his coffin. Myrin heard a thump and a moan and realized Phultan must have dropped the invisible Rujia.

Teeth gritted, Myrin leaped to her feet, charged forward, and raised her orb over her head. Fire surged around the orb, and she brought it down upon the reeling vampire with a cry of rage worthy of Kalen. Phultan shrieked, and Myrin poured all of the fire she could muster into his rotting body. Finally, the vampire collapsed next to his coffin.

Myrin kept blasting for a ten-count before she finally released the power. Drained, she stepped back from the greasy ruin of the coffin. Smoke filled the chamber, making Myrin cough.

"Rujia," the wizard said, scanning for the deva. "Are

you—?”

A fire-blackened hand closed around her ankle, and Myrin gasped for breath in the burning air. Phultan hissed and hauled her to the floor, where he clambered atop her. He thrust his seared face into hers, his mad eyes blazing. Pus drizzled down.

“I know you, I do,” he said. “The Master’s mare, and his alone, not to be shared. So pretty. So warm.” He caught Myrin’s face between his hands, and she felt his talons cut into the skin of her forehead. “Now he’ll share, Mare—now he’ll share.”

His tongue stabbed at her face like a blade.



Kalen barely knocked aside the thrusting Vindicator a hand’s breadth from his nose.

Gods, this Shadowbane was fast.

He was winning, too. Were it not for Kalen’s gray fire armor, he would have rolled dead off the roof long before. Shadowbane seemed tireless, and he fought in perfect balance. The wet rooftop hardly seemed to trouble him, whereas Kalen had to devote as much focus to staying upright as parrying. Each of Shadowbane’s strikes seemed harder than the last. Something drove him: something like pure, unadulterated hatred.

“Godsdamn it, Levia, *help me.*”

Why, by all the Watching Gods, was Levia standing there unmoving? Had Shadowbane frozen her with some spell? His entreaty seemed to snap her out of her daze, and finally, his teacher nodded firmly in his direction and drew out her mace. “Stop!” she shouted.

Shadowbane paused in his assault for a heartbeat to regard this new threat. Kalen didn't waste the moment. While Shadowbane's back was turned, Kalen prayed to the Threefold God and unleashed a matchless fury within himself.

He lashed out, seemingly slashing in all directions at once. The first chop of his axe hit Vindicator, then again, and then a third strike that sent the sword sailing wide. He brought his axe haft across Shadowbane's face, and brought the blade around to bury it in the man's chest. Or he would have, had Levia not caught the axe with her mace, stopping Kalen's deadly strike.

"What?" Kalen started. "Why—?"

Shadowbane lunged and struck him in the face with Vindicator's pommel. Blood spurted from Kalen's nose and he wavered. His balance fled, his feet slid out from under him, and Kalen fell back on the sloping roof. Tiles shot out from under him, skittering away as he slid down the slick incline. He groped for a hold, but his numb fingers refused to catch in the sodden roof. The axe clattered out of his reach and over the edge, and Kalen watched helplessly as it hit the cobblestones several stories below.

Strong hands caught his arm, and he saw through blood and rain that it was Levia who had grabbed him. She lay flat to keep hold of the tiles.

Shadowbane stood above them, Vindicator low at his side. Kalen couldn't see his eyes, but he knew the man was staring at him in challenge.

Finally, Shadowbane raised Vindicator in both hands and hurled it. The blade scythed down toward Kalen's unflinching face. It bloomed, and he could see his gray eyes reflected in its gleaming surface.



Magic shrieked in a triumphant chorus—Phultan’s magic, closing around Myrin. She saw his fangs coming toward her face, and knew death was upon her.

Myrin’s gown suddenly grew warm, and then blazed with light as the fey enchantments activated to protect her. The vampire recoiled, clutching at his seared eyes.

Then a rapier shot over her shoulder and stabbed the vampire through the roof of the mouth. Abruptly, Rujia stood beside Myrin, her face a torn mask of blood from the creature’s assault. Her eyes burned with absolute hatred, and that anger flowed down her arm and through her blade in raging witch fire.

An explosion burst between Phultan’s jaws, blowing his head in two in a way that was anything but neat. Shards of bone and burned-paper skin rained around them both, and the vampire staggered away, headless. His hands worked, fingers opening and closing ineffectually. The shrieks of his magic faded to whispers once more.

Rujia gave a victorious grunt, then coughed blood all over the floor and collapsed.

As Myrin watched, the vampire’s body melted and dissolved into a fine mist. Myrin sent an arrow of force into the cloud, but to no avail. It drifted away from them, seeping toward one of the walls. He’s escaping, Myrin thought.

“Stop him.” Ilira stood coughing near the slumbering teleportation circle. “Stop—”

Myrin did the only thing she could. She spoke a word of command and golden wind stirred around her, raising her blue hair to dance through the air. She waved, and the wind swirled around the cloud of mist, capturing Phultan.

She drew the mists into a ball the size of a man's head, and it roiled with what looked like the vampire's face. Spectral hands appeared in the mist and pushed outward at the imprisoning winds.

Myrin gritted her teeth, trying vainly to contain the creature. But the power wasn't strong enough—she wasn't strong enough. The vampire was going to break free.

"No," Myrin said, in a voice not entirely hers. "*No.*"

She felt azure fire awaken within her, and the flames spread from her hands and mouth into the warped air. Her heart raced and her lungs heaved in joy and terror.

This felt right to her. She would defend her friends, whatever the cost.

She would destroy the threat. Annihilate it utterly.

The mist trembled, and the whispers rose into wordless cries for aid. Myrin poured more into the flames—more of her scarred soul—and the winds became a tornado that buffeted the mist like a gauntlet of burning fists and ripping fingers. Her golden magic became angry blue. The whispers rattled for breath, choked in spellplague.

She had never been so certain about anything.

Then Myrin brought up her orb, which floated a thumb's breadth above her palm, and spoke a word of magic. A bolt of golden force seared through the air and shattered the balled-up mist into a thousand fragments.

And the vampire was no more.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NIGHT, 30 FLAMERULE

THE BLADE BURIED ITSELF IN THE ROOFTOP A WHISPER from Kalen's face. He'd just managed to dodge.

Levia breathed in sharply. Gods above, she thought. What was the boy *doing*?

Shadowbane gave them one last enraged look. Then he turned and ran.

Kalen looked to Levia. "Stop him."

"But—"

"I'm fine." Kalen's fingers scabbled at the wet tiles. "Don't let him escape."

Levia spoke a short healing spell over him, fending off his disapproving look. Kalen had never liked magical healing, but in this case he had the sense not to protest. As he coughed and fought back to his feet, Levia followed Shadowbane. She thought briefly of the ring, but she'd exhausted its magic for the day—and even so, a second use would no doubt do the same to her.

She ran across the roof of a tallhouse, its floors segmented for multiple families. She thought, momentarily, of the people gathered below. How many were awake at

this hour, plotting how many intrigues and deceptions? To Levia, the game had become second nature.

Instinct told her to halt, and so she did. Her quarry hid somewhere close by.

As she paused to search the rainy night around her, Shadowbane dropped down behind her. She turned, a chastening word on her lips, but he put an arm across her chest and forced her back against a chimney out of sight. His dagger hovered over her heart.

They stood together in the wet Westgate night, chests heaving for breath.

“Enough.” Levia looked down at the dagger. “Put that away.”

Shadowbane scrutinized her silently. He slid the dagger into its sheath at his belt.

“Don’t release me.” Levia spat to clear the rain from her mouth. The warm downpour continued unabated. “Kalen will be along any moment, but we need to talk first. Don’t we?”

Again, Shadowbane was silent.

“Listen,” Levia said. “When Kalen came to Westgate, he wasn’t intending to fight you for Vindicator. He just wants to know what happened, and I’m tired of lying to him. I only lied because I wasn’t sure he was ready.” She stared right into the helm. “So it happens tonight. Either you tell him the truth, or I do. He’ll accept this. He’ll accept you—*oww!*” Abruptly, Shadowbane leaned forward, driving his helm into her neck. “What the Hells are you—?”

Shadowbane’s hand rose, his dagger in his hand once more. Levia’s words trailed off and she stared, horrified. “What are you doing?” she said. “Don’t—”

Shadowbane paused a moment, then brought the

razor-sharp blade between them and slit the ties of her jerkin—one, two, three. Slowly, he put the blade away. Levia could only quake in mingled fear and desire as he spread her bodice and reached inside. His gloved fingers felt like bones against her skin, but she did not care—she enjoyed it even more because of the cold. A sigh shuddered between her lips and she stiffened under his touch.

She could not explain what was happening to her, but she did not want it to end. In that moment, in that armor, he became someone else—someone she had wanted for so long.

“Kalen,” she murmured, unsure if she was asking for rescue or release. “Kalen, *please—*”

Shadowbane reached for the visor of his helm.

She heard footfalls on the copper-lined roof behind her and Kalen’s familiar heavy breathing. Shadowbane heard it as well, and drew his hand away. He held the scrap of parchment Hessar had given her, which he pressed into Levia’s hand.

The parchment contained secrets and a single name: *Shadowfox*.

“Lead him to her,” Shadowbane said. “Or you won’t see either of us ever again.”

“Wait!” Levia lunged, but Shadowbane melted into the darkness just as Hessar had done not a quarter hour earlier. He was gone, leaving her alone and unsatisfied.

Levia leaned back against the wall, tingling and panting in the warm summer rain. Her senses came back, bringing both revulsion and a creeping thread of unfulfilled desire. Her breast heaved, and she realized Shadowbane had left her bodice cut open. She pushed the leather back together, but it wouldn’t stay closed. Mortified, she pulled her cloak

tight against the rain. By the time Kalen leaped down the rise behind her, his ugly black axe in one hand and Vindicator in the other, she had painted her face with studied indifference. She tried to ignore the heat she felt.

Kalen furrowed his brow. "What happened?"

Levia shook her head. "He was too fast for me."

"Did you fight him?" Kalen reached for her, but she winced. "Are you hurt?"

Much as Levia wanted him to prod her a bit, she refused his ministrations. It would not do for him to find her bodice cut open. "As I said—too fast."

"That wasn't Rhett. That was someone else—another chosen wielder of Vindicator. If he can pull the sword out of my hands . . ." He tightened his grasp on the haft of the black axe.

"I am sorry I lost him," she lied. Catching Shadowbane would have proved a disaster. "Perhaps he could have led us to this Rhett of yours." That was also not true in the slightest.

Levia had always known how to lie—and lie well—but a touch of frustration must have swept across her face, because Kalen looked suddenly suspicious. "What is it?"

Caught. Now she had to deflect him.

"It's nothing." She realized she was still holding the scrap of parchment and closed her fist around it. "Perhaps we are following the wrong path."

"Levia, speak," Kalen said. "What is that?"

She turned back to him. "Ilira Nathalan."

Kalen looked surprised. "What of her?"

Shadowbane had given her an ultimatum, and Levia meant to fulfill it.

"I've set Hessar to follow her. This is what he's learned."

Levia unfolded the parchment and scanned its contents. “She owns the Purple Lady Festhall and Silks at Dawn, and reportedly has interests in a number of civic endeavors. And she’s been seen in the company of several nobles in Westgate. Also, she was once a Netherese assassin called—”

“What do I care about *her*?” Kalen looked after Shadowbane’s trail. “If we go now, we can track him. He cannot have gone too far—”

“And if I gave you proof that she and the false Shadowbane are working together?”

That drew Kalen’s attention. “Go on,” he said.

“They attacked the Fire Knives and Nine Golden Swords the other night.” Levia read on. “Apparently, she’s quite the social queen. Ties with Bleth, Vhammos, Ssem, and . . . a blue-haired heiress who’s taken up the old Darkdance name?”

Kalen stiffened at those words. “Speak.”

“Lady Darkdance was seen just this night, along with her gnome retainer and a deva swordmaster called Rujia, following Lady Ilira into the sewers at the south end.”

Kalen seized the parchment from her hand. He read quickly, and his expression grew even darker. “Myrin,” he said. “She never listens.” His boots burned with blue-white flame and he leaped down from the rooftop, moving with a firm purpose.

Levia stood alone in the summer rain, her mind roiling. “Who’s Myrin?”



Shadowbane stood atop the long-defunct House of Spires and Shadows, perched like a hunting raptor among

the statues of ancient heroes decorated with the cracks of age and spoor of sea birds. The temple had once served Mask, the god of thieves, until that deity's inexplicable disappearance a century ago. How appropriate.

He watched as the two hurried off into the night, their attentions more suitably directed. Kalen Dren had always been easy to deflect, with a little manipulation. And Levia would, of course, follow him. Shadowbane had known about his teacher's feelings for Kalen Dren for some time and had planned this move against her for almost as long. In truth, Shadowbane hoped Kalen would not come back, but planned for his return anyway.

Having failed to slay the true Shadowbane himself, sending him against Ilira Nathalan seemed like an excellent way to murder two foes with a single blade.

The Master would be pleased.

Shadowbane sensed the shadows moving around him before his contact materialized, and his hand went for his dagger reflexively. Hessar watched him for a time, thinking himself undetected, and Shadowbane let him. He knew well that the shade liked looking at him—a dangerous distraction. Hessar was a liability as much as a blessing, but for now, Shadowbane needed him. More importantly, the *Master* needed him. For now.

“It is done?” he asked, his voice thick like gravel.

“It is.” Hessar stepped out of the shadows and stood easy, his eyes gleaming with a golden luster in the moonlight. He always seemed relaxed around Shadowbane. Amusing. “I have redirected them, as our master commands.”

“You are sure you did not overplay your hand?”

Hessar chuckled. “You question me, little boy?”

Hessar's words choked off and his gold eyes widened

as Shadowbane's hand closed around his throat. "Do not forget yourself, shade."

Hessar was not so easily cowed. The monk swept his arm wide to foil the grip, but when he stepped away, Shadowbane followed with equal speed. They grappled for a moment, as Shadowbane forced his way through Hessar's attempts to escape with unnerving strength. Then the monk's body wavered and flowed out of his grasp. Hessar disappeared into the darkness, only to find that the younger man flowed right with him in tune.

They danced through the shadows together—first along the temple roof, then across the street to the opposite building, down into the alley nearby, then away again across Westgate. They evoked more than one startled cry as the two figures appeared and disappeared with equal rapidity. As they went, their arms and hands worked, wrestling in one another's clutches. Hessar twisted and grappled with elegance, clearly a master of his craft. But shade or not, he was still a man, and Shadowbane was more. He had the strength of a vengeful god behind him.

In the center of Westgate market, a pair of merchants and their dozen or so bodyguards cried out and staggered away as the two men surged out of their forest of shadow and sprawled onto the dusty cobblestones. One merchant fell back, raising a cry of treachery, while the other turned and fled, calling for the watch. The bodyguards drew their swords and leveled their crossbows, but Shadowbane threw Hessar back into the shadows. They raced through the violent shadowdance and came out on the other side of the market tower where the Westgate watch was housed. There Hessar fell on his back, coughing, while Shadowbane perched over him, his right arm crushing Hessar's windpipe.

As they kneeled, locked together in a deadly embrace, Vindicator appeared in Shadowbane's left hand and pointed down at the monk's face.

Steel rang and cries went up all around them, but neither man looked away. They fought a silent battle. Hessar's teeth clicked and his shade-yellow eyes blazed like tiny stars. Shadowbane stared down without pity at the strangling man. Hessar's hands crept feebly up Shadowbane's arm, reaching for his helm. But, finally, Hessar fell back, yielding.

Shadowbane kept the monk pinned, but he lowered Vindicator—setting the blade on the ground. Choking arm in place, he ran his fingers across Hessar's face, making the shade's eyes widen even further in surprise at the intimate gesture. Those eyes held fear, but also a kind of acceptance—even joy at being so thoroughly defeated.

Shadowbane took his arm away from Hessar's throat. To his credit, Hessar did not sputter or gasp when air flooded back into his lungs. He coughed only once, then bowed.

"Enough," Shadowbane said. "We are the master's three blades, and it serves only to dull us if we fight among ourselves. Kalen Dren is mine, Nathalan yours, and the Darkdance girl belongs to that . . . other creature. Know your strike and make it well. Should you fail in your part, you shall pay the price—as shall our sister if she falters. Is that understood?"

"I shall not fail," Hessar said. "And neither will she. I promise that."

"We'll see."

He had not yet had the pleasure of facing the master's third, but he anticipated that he would—and soon. He was about to go, but he saw Hessar staring after him with

something like wistfulness. Strength, ruthlessness, and resolve won his respect, but there was something else.

“You’ve a question. Ask it.”

“Do you—nay. Think nothing of it.” Hessar cleared his throat. “Only tell me, why do you hate him so, when he is the one who taught you? Who made you what you are?”

Shadowbane did not answer immediately, but instead looked at Vindicator in his hand. The blade burned with the same gray flame that it bestowed upon all its wielders—warriors of faith who wielded it for one god or many. Gedrin Shadowbane. Kalen Dren. Vaelis. The Hawkwinter boy. Others.

“I will make of myself a darkness,” he mused. “A darkness where there is only me.”

Hessar narrowed his eyes. “I do not understand.”

“I will have vengeance upon he who abandoned me—and vengeance upon he who would take my name. And when I have cast my foe into his ruin—”

He dropped Vindicator clattering to the cobblestones, where it smoked and vanished.

“Then I will be the darkness, and there will be only me.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NIGHT, 30 FLAMERULE

MYRIN STOOD SHIVERING AS THE SWEAT OF BATTLE turned to ice on her skin. The room above had been cold, but this place was a tomb. She could see her breath steaming out in front of her. Her knees felt weak, and she wavered. The ground looked so comfortable. Perhaps just a rest . . .

Gloved hands caught her under her armpits. “Steady,” a voice said softly in her ear. “You’re breathing too fast. Calm.”

That made sense. She still felt the terror of the vampire’s attack, saw again the horrific folds of skin hanging from its limbs, its blackened lips receding back from daggerlike fangs.

Strong arms wrapped around the wizard, both to hold her up and to reassure her.

Myrin relaxed, letting her breathing slow. Just as gradually, the fear faded. “Thanks, Kalen,” she said, so accustomed to his support that she expected him to be there. “I—”

Then she leaned back, and realized it wasn’t Kalen holding her. Nor was it Ilira. Three paces away, the elf rose

woozily to her feet, aided by Brace. The darkness, cut only by the flickers of her torch, made her face a luminous patch of silver.

“Lady Darkdance?” Rujia asked.

Myrin’s truesight had faded, and she saw once again Rujia’s deva face. As a function of her magic, the deva seemed completely untouched after the vampire’s assault, but Myrin would not easily forget what she’d seen. Rujia looked unnerved, but was it because she suspected Myrin had seen through her illusion or because she had witnessed Myrin’s ruthless magic?

Myrin smiled. “I’m glad you’re safe.”

Rujia looked at her long and hard, then turned away.

Lying was much easier than Myrin had expected. What had she seen under the deva’s careful guise? What sort of monster lurked there, and to what end did she wear a different face?

She resolved to be more cautious of Rujia in the future.

“Ugh. Orbakh’s magic . . .” Ilira coughed blood onto her chin. Brace started to utter another healing insult, but she put a gloved finger to his lips. “See to the others.”

“I’m well,” Myrin said.

Rujia coughed and shook her head.

“In that case, say on,” Ilira leaned her ear to Brace’s lips. The gnome whispered something, and Ilira chuckled. “A promise easily made, but rather hard to keep.”

Brace blushed fiercely as the elf climbed unsteadily to her feet.

“This way, incidentally.” Ilira held aside a withered black curtain opposite the thrones and coffin. She raised her torch to indicate yawning darkness beyond.

“Just like that?” Brace asked. “We almost die, and we’re

meant to move along without a moment's pause?"

"No, she's right," Myrin said. "Let's get away."

Myrin wanted to leave the bleak chamber as soon as possible. The vampire attack had been bad enough, but the blue fire . . . *that* she did not want to remember.

The short passage opened into a much wider chamber. Slim columns heavy with spider webs rose around them, supporting a long hall that stretched off to what Myrin thought was the south. The teleportation had shattered her sense of direction. A thick black curtain cut off the other direction, rustling slightly in no breeze Myrin could feel.

Brace stepped toward the curtain, but Ilira cleared her throat to interrupt him. "This way," she said, gesturing into the wide hall with her torch.

The hall stretched away from them, supported by twin sets of six pillars from which hung tattered banners of an indeterminate color. The light didn't quite reach the high ceiling, which had to be at least a dagger-cast above them. A carpet stretched from where they stood into the darkness at the other end of the hall. Dust as thick as piled linens obscured much of the hall.

"Looks like no one has set foot in this place in a century," Brace said.

"Decades—but many of them," Ilira corrected. "Phultan said the Master locked him away here. If he went without feeding that long . . ." She shook her head.

"Will there be more like that?" Brace asked. "More vampires?"

"Gedrin accounted for most of the Night Court—killed or fled. We saw what became of Phultan. The Duke of Whispers, he never found. I do not think any vampires would linger here today . . . unless the Night King has returned."

“A frightening thought.” The gnome shivered. “This whole place is rather frightening, actually.”

Myrin wasn't afraid. To her, the Night Masks were a hole in her memory. This Night King intrigued her, however. He must have been a great wizard to craft a teleportation circle that endured over a century, to set wards such as the lightning trap that had hurt Brace and Ilira, and to keep a creature like Phultan locked away so long. She could learn much from such a master.

What Phultan had said—about how he knew her, and that she was the Master's “mare”—might be sheer lunacy, of course, if he'd been locked away for almost a century. But perhaps he had recognized her by her heritage the same way Ilira had. Perhaps one of her ancestors had been here, and that gave Myrin hope that she might find some clue to answer any one of a thousand questions. And perhaps Ilira knew it—why else would she have led them here?

So ultimately Myrin was not frightened, but rather *excited*, despite the danger.

“This is the worship hall, where Lady Vhammos led devotions to her goddess,” Ilira said. “The Night Masters' inner sanctum lies deeper in, but I hope we've no need to find it. In fact—”

“Where's Mistress Rujia?” Brace asked.

Myrin looked around, but indeed, the deva was nowhere to be seen. Ilira handed the torch to Brace even as she looked in the opposite direction. Myrin realized her gold eyes could pierce the darkness of the hall, without light to interfere. Then Ilira, too, disappeared into the gloom.

Brace turned with the torch to reveal a massive altar of basalt coated in a thick layer of dust at the end of the hall. It boasted a niche that might once have held a holy symbol,

but it had been long since desecrated. Two tall black candles, one broken in half, sat on the altar.

Rujia and Ilira stood in the pitch dark, staring at one another. The deva had a hand on her sword hilt, and Ilira had three fingers out of one glove.

“What’s going on?” Myrin asked. “Mistress Rujia? Lady Nath—?”

Her words drowned in a rising swell of blue fire. Her forehead felt tight and her cheeks felt hot with blood. She became acutely aware of the veins beating in her throat, and she could hear her pulse pounding in her head. Her spellscar awakened and her eyes fell upon a polished crystal sphere that sat atop the basalt altar. She recognized it without memory.

“Oh,” Myrin said.

As though activated by her proximity, azure flame lit inside the crystal.

“Is that why we came?” Myrin stepped forward without thinking. “Is that—?”

Ilira’s face appeared in the blue light, her expression uncertain. She made no move to stop Myrin when she moved toward the altar, her hand rising unconsciously toward the crystal.

Her fingers touched the deceptively smooth surface. It had hundreds of sharp edges that felt rough under her fingers. It felt warm, like something alive.

Blue runes spread up her arms and with them, memory.



Somewhere behind him, a man cried out for mercy, which the Night King found rather entertaining. He

focused on the game they were playing.

“Like that, my dear,” Orbakh said. “Just like that.”

Tears leaked down her face as the woman worried at the wet object that sat on the table between them. Her sticky nails wedged under the edge of one layer and peeled it slowly back.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” the Night King asked. “Impressive, that such powerful magic can reside in such a tiny thing.”

It was only an onion she was peeling, but it might as well have been a hunk of meat. Indeed, that was the effect of her magic on the prisoner behind him. As she worked at the onion, her flesh-reaving magic worked at his flesh. He moaned—it was important she hear the moans.

“I wonder, if I keep telling you to do it will you carry on?” He leaned in and sniffed her throat. “Or do you require the threat of your own pain to keep torturing that poor man?”

She looked up at Orbakh through bleary blue eyes. Her hand strayed across the table toward the shimmering crystal ball with the black flame inside. It was one of his favorite trinkets—powerful, too—and she was reaching for it seemingly unconsciously. Her fingers touched the orb, and the flames within turned bright blue.

“Fascinating,” he murmured again.

He caught her wrist, making her freeze in place. His nails bit into her skin, and blood bloomed. Her eyes shot back to Orbakh, who smiled.

“Now, now.” He relished the sensation of his fangs poking his lower lip. “A taste for you—a taste for me.”

Orbakh raised her wrist to his lips. His fangs tore her skin open, and she released a sigh of longing. He positioned her wrist over a fine goblet, crafted of bone and set with scores of tiny red stones like droplets of blood. The goblet

blazed with overwhelming magic, and when the first drip of the woman's blood struck its hollow surface, blue flames spread around the edge.

"Delicious," the Night King said.

He lifted the cup to his lips and drank.



Myrin realized she was staring at the basalt altar, watching as wind scraped away thick layers of dust from the stone. The broken candles rattled against the stone.

Something moved on the altar, disturbed in the dust and gleaming in the light of her magic: a single shard of what looked like porcelain. It matched the cup in her vision, into which Orbakh had poured her blood.

"Myrin," said an urgent voice. "Myrin!"

Blue hair whipped past her face, as though she stood in the midst of a hurricane. She could still see herself in her mind's eye—could still taste her own blood from Orbakh's vivid memory—but she was abruptly back in the worship hall, a chamber that was no longer dark but rather dancing with crackling blue fire like she'd seen inside the crystal in her vision.

What was happening?

Brace had fallen back against the stone wall, dodging stabbing daggers of azure fire. Rujia slashed her sword around herself, weaving a shield of sword magic to keep the flames at bay. Ilira had fallen to one knee, her teeth gritted against the blue firestorm.

"Myrin, look at me," she said. "Don't—"

A source of warmth in her hands drew Myrin's attention, and she saw she was holding the big crystal from the altar.

Just as in her vision, it glowed fiercely within, building to a steady blaze like that of a hearth fire. The twisting flames held her gaze, and she could not look away. She thought she could see faces deep inside. The fire sang to her scarred soul, which returned the call in a beautiful harmony.

“Myrin, don’t—” Ilira was saying.

Then the crystal shot through with veins of black lightning, and she knew horror.



He threw back his head and laughed at the woman’s pathetic mewls for mercy. Mercy seemed very much outside the bounds of possibility just at the moment.

“This has been an amusing game, once-apprentice,” Orbakh the Night King said. “But truly, I’d have expected more from one of the Blackcloak’s finest students.”

The young woman moaned and tried to rise, her blue hair lank and bloody against her face, but the darkness Orbakh had conjured ripped through her body and she collapsed. She clutched at herself, fighting against agony from within and without. Her gown fell in tatters around her, unable to withstand his scything magic.

“I should have drained you dry the moment you came to me, would-be Incantatrix,” Orbakh said. “But how could I, when you had so much to teach me? You should consider it an honor to teach one who has forgotten more of the Art than you could ever hope to learn.”

He raised one gloved hand and his magic wrenched her off the ground. She gave a choked cry as she dangled from nothing, her limbs taut as though pulled by unseen forces. A fall of black blood gushed from her nose and dripped

across her chin. Orbakh was not a slave to his urges, but just then, the little wench's blood looked so delicious he couldn't help licking his lips.

"Your suffering is almost ended, dear one—or, at least, your displeasure in it."

He waved his hand, beckoning her toward him, and the obedient magic brought her gasping in his direction. His power pulled her arms and legs wide, and she floated spread-eagled in front of him. His assault had torn some of her clothing away, and her bare skin gleamed with the black arcane runes that were the legacy of her checkered upbringing.

"I promise you, treacherous child." The Night King ran his fingers over her pert chin, loving the defiance on her face. "You will enjoy what befalls next."



Myrin wrenched out of the vision once more into a world blazing with blue fire and crackling with black lightning. She stood at the center of a storm of rending, life-stealing magic: necromancy enhanced with spellplague. Her friends lay all around her, coughing and gasping as twisting winds lashed them with soul-draining, flesh-warping flames.

Myrin looked down at the crystal ball between her hands, from which the flames lashed like flares of the sun. Indeed, it was the same crystal she'd seen in her vision, but the sparks of blue she remembered had become a surging bonfire. It was as though she held a star between her hands, which radiated a whirlwind of death. The power came not from the crystal, however, but from Myrin herself. It flowed through her chest like a river of scalding blood.

It was a trap. The Night King had known what would happen when she touched the crystal ball. The magic she could resist, and yet . . .

And yet, she did not *want* to resist. As horrible as the memories were, she wanted them so very badly. That had been her—Myrin Darkdance, blue-haired and covered in black tattoos—fighting the Night King himself. She had seen the fight through his eyes and heard him call her something—Incantatrix. If only she had more: more memories, more clues, more . . .

Her friends were dying. Ilira wept at the pain, blood running from her eyes and mouth. Brace lay unmoving. Rujia moaned and shivered.

Myrin could not choose her memories over them—especially not Ilira. She looked sadly down at the crystal in her hands, with the memories and power it promised.

It was something she simply could not have.

Slowly, her soul protesting every tiny adjustment of her muscles, she pulled one hand away from the crystal. Her skin stuck to it as though seared in place, but she gritted her teeth against the pain. She brought her tingling hand down to her belt pouch and, fingers shaking, unbuckled it. Lilten's orb pressed into her hand, radiating a soothing coolness. It had nothing like the power of the Night King's crystal, but she hoped it could tip the balance.

Myrin spoke words she didn't know—words that fell from her lips without conscious thought. She stared deeply into the orb, searching its cloudy blue interior for . . . there. She found a spark upon which she could focus.

Muscles straining, she brought the orb toward the crystal ball. Her arms were covered with azure tattoos now, and she could feel the markings creep up her shoulders and back.

After an agonizing effort, she touched the orb to the crystal with a tiny click. She did it again, then a third time with increasing rapidity until she hammered the orb against it over and over. Each time, it hurt her more and more. She struck again and again until finally a crack appeared. She hit it again, and cracks spider webbed across the surface of the crystal ball.

Soon all her strength was gone. Liltan's orb fell from her hand, saved from shattering only when it bounced off her foot and rolled across the stone floor. Myrin moaned. It seemed she was going to get her memories after all.

Then a shadow rose before her, and a pair of gold eyes gleamed into hers.

"Ilira," Myrin said.

The elf gave her a nod. Then she wrenched the crystal ball out of Myrin's hands. The power roared into her, making her arch in pain, her hands shaking. Blood flew.

"Ilira!" Myrin cried. "Give it back. I—"

Even as she collapsed, the elf hurled the ball aside, and it shattered against the wall.

The magic roared. The haze of fire and lightning took on the visage of a man half laughing, half screaming. Then it was gone.

Myrin sank to her knees, utterly spent, next to Ilira on the floor. The wizard reached toward the elf's face, but thought better of it. Instead, she laid her hand upon Ilira's breast and put her ear close to her lips. The elf took a shallow breath, and as Myrin watched, the gold eyes fluttered open. The women exchanged a silent look of relief.

"Well, lay me to sleep, evil angel," Brace murmured, rubbing his head. "A bit of warning, Lady Darkdance, when next you're going to do sommat the like?"

Rujia had risen, pulling herself up the black altar. The deva gave Myrin a cool nod.

The danger passed, Ilira pushed herself up and crawled over to the altar.

“What are you about, lady?” Brace asked.

“We’ve shared enough peril that you should call me Ilira,” the elf said. “And if it isn’t obvious, I’m looking for something.”

With the dust blown away in the storm of power, Myrin could see the fine polish of the basalt altar. Only one piece of a candle remained, and the withered remains of a book of some kind. Myrin looked for the shard of porcelain or bone or whatever it was she’d seen earlier, but there was no sign of it.

“This is what we came for,” Ilira said.

She examined the altar about halfway from the floor. Ilira brushed away the last of the dust and pressed her fingers into a depression in the stone, revealing a secret compartment.

“How did you know that was there?” Brace asked.

“Because I left it there.” Ilira reached into its dark depths and drew out—nothing. “Damn,” she said. “I suppose ninety years is a long time for something to stay hidden.”

As she spoke, Ilira moved her hand ever so slightly. The movement was so subtle, Myrin might have imagined it. But sure enough, the elf had slipped something into her belt pouch.

The elf gave Myrin an unreadable look. Did she know the wizard had seen her?

“Well, at least we can leave this awful place,” Brace said. “Please?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JUST BEFORE DAWN, MIDSUMMER

D ID YOU GET IT?" HESSAR ASKED. "THE ARTIFACT WE DISCUSSED?"

"Stay and belt up a moment." The Trickster stepped past him into the back room at the Bent Mermaid—their agreed-upon meeting place—and slumped gratefully into a pillowed chair. Two tankards of ale sat on the table, but she touched neither. She didn't trust the monk nearly that well.

By Beshaba, she was tired. The Trickster had hardly had a moment to catch her breath after the events in the lair of the Night Masters. The crystal trap had shaken her so badly that she was still trembling, even into the early hours of the morning. Her limbs fit poorly, bone grinding on bone with every tiny movement.

The monk's beady yellow eyes stared through her. "Are you well, my dear?"

The Trickster stiffened at those words. Betraying weakness to him would be a terrible idea, so she exercised her strong will to keep her face free of pain.

"It was simple enough." She slipped a wrapped parcel from her pocket. Even removed from the whole, she could

feel the magic of the object tingling in her fingers. How powerful it must have been at one time. “That girl makes a fine distraction.”

“That she does.” The monk extended his hand.

She hesitated, turning the prize between her fingers. It was a shard of dragonbone, slightly curved as though it had come from a goblet. Two little rubies gleamed in its outer surface, like drops of blood. “Why would our mutual master want this?”

“He simply means to avoid interference from the Fire Knives or the old Night King.”

“The Night King.” She shivered. “This was his, wasn’t it?” Hessar stared at her silently.

“Did you think I wouldn’t do my research? Orbakh bore three great artifacts in the world before: a rod of great power called the Maguscepter, a magic double-bladed dagger called the Flying Fangs, and this.” She held up the piece of bone. “A cup of blood called the Argraal.”

“The Regalia of the Night King.” Hessar made a rolling gesture with his hand as though to bid her continue.

“The scepter I could understand, but what use would you have for the Argraal? Surely you don’t mean to bring back the Night Masters of old Westgate. Or do you?”

“Do what is asked of you, and all will be well.” He laid his hand on her arm. “No horrors of the night to disturb your peace.”

“What need have I of fresh horrors”—she glanced at his hand, then up at his face—“when the memory of you serves well enough?”

“Remember that we are allies.” Hessar gave her a cool smile. “You rely upon me, and I upon you—for help, for healing when dealing with the Darkdance girl proves

perilous, and for more pleasurable companionship if you wish.” He inspected her slim form, looking pleased.

The Trickster felt nauseated. “I would need to be on death’s threshold and turned away by Kelemvor himself before I would even consider your bed, shade.” She gestured down to herself. “And would the god of the dead turn down a body like this? I think not.”

Hessar’s smile widened to show his gray teeth.

“I’m not afraid of you, shade. And until I am, I see no reason to give you this”—she put the shard in her pocket—“or anything else you so obviously want. I’ll give this treasure to my patron and no other. And”—she scowled—“and why the stupid smile?”

“Your patron.” He nodded over her shoulder. “He’s already here.”

The Trickster turned, only to have a white hand close around her throat and lift her into the air. Breath fled and she choked for words. She stared up into the creature’s black eyes. Not him. It couldn’t be!

“I’ll take that now.” The master took the shard of the Argraal from her pocket.

Her world was crumbling from lack of air, but her wits remained. She summoned magic and shifted out of his grasp to reappear in the far shadows of the room. She focused wild eyes on the man who had been choking the life from her. He looked like a handsome, dusky-skinned half-elf of middling height and a powerful build. His face gleamed in the moonlight like a blade. But she knew he was far more.

“Kire—Kirenkirsalai,” she said, wheezing.

Unconcerned, Kirenkirsalai turned the shard of the Argraal over in his hands, exploring its contours with his fingers. From his expression, he might have been admiring

a beloved treasure he knew from old but had not seen in many years. “I hear Maerlyn destroyed Phultan entirely,” he said. “She’s growing very powerful indeed. Our time grows short.”

“Our time?” the Trickster asked. “No, I’m out of this. This wasn’t the deal. I—”

“You say that”—Kire smiled, revealing long fangs—“as though you have a choice.”

The darkness rippled behind her and her neck prickled. She started to turn, but Kirenkirsalai danced out of the shadows too fast. His cold hand seized her shoulder and bared her throat. His cold tongue caressed her neck.

“You taste of my old friend,” Kire said. “Tell me, was it Liltan you thought you were serving, little lost one? Or did you know the truth all along, and simply refused to admit it?”

Something sharp cut into her, and blood oozed forth. His rough tongue lapped at the wound, caressing and scraping both at once. She shivered, terrified and horribly aroused. She felt warm all over, as though the brush with certain death lit her body with vibrant longing.

He held her a moment, tasting her skin, and she moaned.

“Enough.” Kire hurled the Trickster against the wall, where her head struck with a dull thud. The room swayed up and down, and she collapsed, dazed.

“You’ve had word from the Black Network?” Hessar asked. “Is Manshoon—?”

“Orbakh, you mean,” Kire said. “And no, the once-and-never-again Night King is done with Westgate and has summoned his agents elsewhere. He will take no action as yet. That may change in time, when he learns of our plans, but by then—” He held up the shard of the Argraal. “With

this, I can find the whole of the regalia, and then Orbakh's interference will not matter." He slipped the shard into his cloak. "What of Gedrin's heir?"

"I have redirected him, as you commanded. This Kalen Dren is strong of will but weak of mind. He will prove easy enough to mislead." The shade smiled. "Why face our enemies individually when we can send them to fight one another?"

"Indeed."

Hessar's yellow eyes turned to the Trickster. "What of her?"

She wanted nothing more than to melt into the wall and vanish, but none of her many magical talents were coming to her. Her mind felt far away, and she was just a creature of instinct—paralyzed by fear and the throbbing want, radiating from her neck. Gods—a *vampire*.

"We'll need her to get back in Maerlyn's good graces. She's too deep in this to be taken out now. Unless the young Darkdance has seen through her guise?"

The Trickster shook her head as best she could. "N-no."

"Shame." Kire grinned, exposing razor fangs. "She is too useful yet to drink."

"Lucky me," the Trickster murmured.

Hessar chuckled.

She might have summoned the will to move then, but a gloved hand fell on her shoulder. She looked up into a helmed face—a man who wore dark leathers and bore at his side a hand-and-a-half sword wreathed in gray flame. She could not see his face, but she knew those eyes.

"You," the Trickster said. "No—what are you—? Gods, I understand now. You're—"

One armored hand found her throat and choked off her

next words.

“The bitch is nothing—the pitiful spawn of an even more pitiful race.” Kirenkirsalai waved dismissively. “Release her, Shadowba—”

“Not that name.” He looked to Kirenkirsalai. “Not yet.”

The vampire lord at first looked startled to be interrupted, then was on him in an instant, reaching for his throat. Shadowbane caught his wrist and held his talons a thumb’s breadth from his helm. He was stronger than he looked. Even Hessar’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You dare?” Kirenkirsalai asked. “Talk back to your master *and* stand against him?”

Shadowbane glared at him and said nothing.

Slowly, the vampire’s furious expression softened into mirth. “I am pleased that I have trained a wielder with some spirit. And that my blood has strengthened you so. Now release her.”

At length, Shadowbane dropped the Trickster, who fell coughing to her knees.

“Our prisoner attempted to escape again,” Shadowbane said, which perked the Trickster’s ear. Even attempting to hock up a lung, she still had hold of her senses. *Prisoner?*

“He is not your concern,” Kirenkirsalai said. “I’ve a plan to use him against the true Shadowbane. Kalen Dren is our main task. Simply raising my own wielder of Vindicator is not enough if the old wielder yet fights.”

“I will remedy that,” Shadowbane offered.

“Oh, indeed, Kalen Dren will die, but not by your hand. You have not earned that. And he cannot die yet—he must be *defeated* first.” Kire appeared on one knee before the Trickster, one clawed finger raising her chin so their eyes met. “You’ll survive this night, little cat’s paw. Only

remember who you serve. You do remember, do you not?"

"Y-yes." The Trickster could barely breathe. "Kirenkirsalai."

He nodded, as though to express pride at a child's accomplishment. "Do what I sent you to do. Breathe a single syllable of this to any of them, particularly the girl—"

He nodded to Hessar, and the monk closed his hands around the sides of the Trickster's head and squeezed.

"Ngh!" Under the pressure, her head exploded in pain. The Trickster's body tightened and she babbled in agony. "Stop," she said. "Please—"

"Do well. And perhaps—" He grinned, fangs dripping blood. Her blood. "Perhaps you won't die shivering."

Then the three vanished into the shadows as though they had never been there.

"Father," she murmured. "Oh, Father—what have I done?"



The sun was rising over the Sea of Fallen Stars, banishing the chill of night. The lights inside Darkdance Manor had not dimmed since he'd returned in the early hours, immediately after the fight with the false Shadowbane, and he expected they'd go on burning into the morn.

"Kalen?" Levia asked, stirring him from his reverie.

He couldn't say exactly how long he'd been perched there on the roof of the Black Eye, watching Darkdance Manor. Nor did he know what he meant to accomplish here—Myrin had been very clear when she'd dismissed him days before. All he could say for certain was that this close to the manor house, he breathed a bit easier. His spellscar

hurt less, as though proximity to Myrin eased it. Something about her inner fire drew him and calmed him.

Levia had caught up some time ago, and Kalen had felt her watching him quietly, even as he watched the manor. He knew she was trying to understand, and he wished he could explain it. Finally, she stepped to his side. “No one’s lived in that house for as long as I can remember. Is this ‘Myrin’ an actual heir of the house? Because that would be ironic.”

“Hmm.” Kalen considered her cryptic observation. Irony? “Did you bring it?”

She reached into her haversack and drew out a sheaf of much-read, dog-eared papers. “Everything I could find about this Lady Nathalan.”

“Same old Levia.” Kalen took the collection of reports, log, and sketches. “Follow your instincts, but check your facts.”

She blushed a little. “Hessar deserves some of the credit,” she said. “He has a talent for rooting out skullduggery and rumor.”

“I’m sure he has many talents of which you avail yourself.”

Levia gave him a startled look, and Kalen knew why. The ever-serious youth he had been never would have made a remark like that. “Not with him, but there have been a few particularly cold nights, yes. I assume it has been the same with you?”

“Not recently.” He scanned the pages. “Are you sure about this? Some of the accusations here are particularly . . . virulent. I knew she was a killer, but—”

She nodded. “Lady Nathalan—or whatever her true name is—hides her tracks well,” she said. “No doubt she’s probably guilty of three times what my sources claim. Still,

it is enough for any thinking woman to grow suspicious, if not quit her company altogether.”

“Damn the gods, I hate being right.” Kalen nodded grimly. “What did you mean earlier, ‘that would be ironic?’”

“Skip to the last page,” she said.

Kalen did so, and turned to a sketch of a handsome half-elf man with shaded skin to indicate darkness. Something seemed familiar about him, but he could not immediately place it. Then he saw the name beneath the sketch portrait: Neveren Darkdance. Then he read the notes below that, and his expression turned dangerous.

“Why not go in right now?” Levia asked. “She’s your friend, isn’t she?”

Kalen considered. He wanted to respect her wishes and stay away, but he had to warn her somehow. Before, it had been merely suspicion. Now, he knew she was in immediate danger.

“I will speak with her first.”

“Do it soon.” Levia’s face was grim. “If Ilira Nathalan murdered *one* Darkdance, why not another?”

PART FIVE:

THE DESTROYER'S RAGE

My mother often spoke of a dance called the Destroyer's Rage, which speaks to the savagery that lies beneath the otherwise civilized state of the orcs of Many-Arrows.

A particular war chief took her and some of her soldiers captive, but instead of torturing or executing them, he stripped them naked and forced them to take part in a violent dance of orgiastic aspect. The dance culminated in bloodletting when the blades came out.

From this, my mother was fortunate to escape with her life.

Rhyn Venkyr
*Arya Venkyr, the Lion of Everlund:
A Memoir of My Mother,
Published in the Year of the Secret (1396 DR)*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

EVENING, MIDSUMMER

MYRIN LOOSENED HER CLOAK AS SHE WALKED DOWN THE southernmost curling lane of the Ssem Spur to the Purple Lady Festhall. The night was a hot one, and folk celebrated the festival day with verve. With every tavern full to bursting on Midsummer, revelers took to the streets.

She had the same feeling of scrutiny that had touched her the last time she'd walked Westgate's streets by night, and then, as now, it reassured rather than upset her. Kalen was there, watching. Even if recent events had driven a wedge between them, Myrin felt as though they would find each other again. They had before, after a year's absence.

She trusted herself and went about her business, confident that all would be well.

The first time she'd made her way to the festhall, three nights before, she'd had Brace and his exhaustive knowledge of the city to guide her path. And while the gnome's directions had seemed easy enough, there were three parts to the Ssem Spur and she'd spent half an hour wandering the North Spur before realizing she wanted the South. While she had a good head for details and the workings of

world-reaving magic, directions remained a mystery to her.

She yawned. The weariness from being up all night and day didn't help.

Lady Ilira had left her almost as soon as they returned to the mansion from the Lair of Night Masters. One moment, she'd been walking along at Myrin's side, but the next, she'd vanished. This left Myrin with many questions for the elf but no way to contact her.

Brace had asserted that Ilira must have more information to gather, and wouldn't everyone be better served, anyway, with some rest until she returned? Whereupon he had promptly flopped into a seat in the interior garden and gone right to sleep.

Rujia had more politely excused herself to attend to her swordplay school, leaving Myrin to her own devices. Like as not, that was for the best—considering what Myrin had seen in the sewers, she wasn't entirely sure she trusted Rujia. Or anyone, for that matter.

Even if Myrin could lie down, sleep wouldn't find her. As was always the case after she had absorbed new memories, Myrin couldn't rest, no matter how much her body wanted it. Thus she'd spent the rest of the night and all of Midsummer day combing through the family library for any and all references to the Night Masks and—specifically—the Night King. Sages disagreed on whether to call him Orlak II or Orbakh (as Ilira called him), but the consensus held that he was a vampire crime lord who'd ruled the Night Masks until the Eye of Justice had driven him out nearly ninety years ago, around the Year of the Wrathful Eye, 1391 Dalereckoning. The pertinent question was how Myrin had come to interact with him. Ilira had suggested Orbakh might have survived, but when had Myrin met him? And

where? The memory implied it had been Westgate, but how was that possible?

And how had Ilira known to take her to the Lair of the Night Masters at all?

These questions swirled in Myrin's head as she entered the Purple Lady, looking for answers. Perhaps she would find the elf where she had before: dancing sensuously like a queen among the drunken revelers. Gods, perhaps this time, Myrin might join her.

What she found in the festhall she truly did not expect.

She'd grown accustomed to the place quickly. The common room hummed with people and was filled with pipe smoke and babbling conversation. Attractive lads and lasses in daring silks drew in breathless onlookers, and much coin changed hands for a variety of entertainments.

What surprised her was the man sitting in the middle of the common room, the center of his own empty space. No one dared approach him, likely owing to the huge black axe that leaned against the table near his hand. He was the one man she would never have expected to find there.

"Kalen?" she whispered, with a mixture of anxiety and anticipation.

His shoulders hung low and his whole body slumped as though he'd dozed in the chair while he waited. He looked tired, as though he'd not slept in days. As she approached, Kalen straightened and his dull gray eyes blinked. "I've been waiting for you."

Heart beating fast, she took a seat across the table from him. "Why didn't you come to the manor?" she asked. "I was there all day."

"Last time, you made it clear I wasn't welcome."

"Ah." That cooled some of her ardor. Myrin sat back in

her chair and folded her arms. “So this is an apology?”

“No.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “And yes. I should not have said those things to you. They were . . . they were not the way I felt—feel.”

“Accepted.”

He reached out and touched her hand. She could feel his spellscar sparking against her own through their joined hands.

“What’s the matter, Kalen? You look worried.”

He bit his lip. “Should I be?”

“Not nearly as often as you *do* worry—and no, I’m perfectly well.” She thought of the battle in the Night Master’s Lair and amended: “Aside from some peril you likely wouldn’t believe.” In fact, if she described those events, he would believe her only too well, and then he would really have something to worry about. “I haven’t been idle, you know. I’ve learned—”

All these words meant nothing, when all she wanted to say was that she missed him and she wanted him to come back. She wanted that more than anything.

“I wanted to talk to you about Lady Nathalan,” Kalen said.

Myrin’s heart fell. “What about her?”

“She’s a dangerous woman, Myrin—a wanted murderess.”

“This again?” Myrin drew her hand away from his. “You *know* she was falsely accused. Gods, Kalen, you were there.”

“Not just in Waterdeep. Here in Westgate.” And so speaking, he dropped a sheaf of papers on the table between them.

“What’s this?” Myrin asked.

“Reports, from someone I trust.” At Myrin’s raised eyebrow, Kalen added: “My teacher Levia, in the Eye of Justice.”

“The same one Rhett was supposed to be meeting?” Myrin asked. “What did she have to say about Rhett? Or can she not find him, either?”

“Don’t change—”

“No, Kalen, I *will* change the subject,” she said. “Why waste your time spying on my friends when you could be out finding Rhett?” She saw pain on his face, which he tried to hide. “Gods. You *have* found something.” Kalen shook his head. “Tell me, godsdamn it!”

Kalen paused, refusing to meet her eye. “Rhett’s dead,” he said at last.

“Oh, indeed?” Myrin clasped her hands tightly in mock anxiety. “You’ve found his body? You’ve poured libations over his grave?”

“No, but—”

“Then you don’t *know*, and until you know, you have a duty to him.” Myrin glared. “I can only hope you wouldn’t take it so lightly if *I* were in deadly peril.”

She hadn’t meant to say that, but now that she had, she couldn’t take it back. Kalen didn’t seem to have taken it at anything other than face value, though, and he went red with anger.

“Lightly?” he asked. “If you knew what I have done these past days—”

“Then tell me,” Myrin said. “Tell me what you’ve been doing, and I’ll tell you the same. We can talk, like we once did.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “Well, perhaps there’ll be more than a little shouting involved, but we don’t have to fight.”

He opened his mouth to object or to agree—she could not say for certain—when a cheer went up in the common room. Ilira had appeared, dressed in one of her daring black

gowns—this one with feathers. She bowed to all with considerable grace. At her gesture, wine was poured and the bards of the evening struck up louder music than before. She met Myrin's gaze and gave her a promising glance, as though she had something important to share with her—and only her.

Brace was there, too, Myrin saw. Somehow, the sneaky gnome had slipped out of Darkdance Manor and not only located Ilira but had come here *with* her. It filled Myrin with an irksome sort of jealousy, although she could not say precisely why.

"I have to go," Myrin said as she rose. "I—"

Kalen caught her arm. "Leave her."

"What?"

"She's a danger to you and to everyone," Kalen said. "She will take what she wants, then hurt or kill you in the end, just as she does everyone else."

Ilira stopped to talk to a well-dressed merchant. By his gestures and his earnest expression, he was praising her in some way, and she laughed politely and touched his arm.

"She's helping me, Kalen," Myrin said. "And even if we find nothing, she's my friend."

"Myrin." His eyes burned in the dancing firelight. "She killed Neveren Darkdance."

"What?" Her thoughts flew apart. "How—how do you even know that name?"

Kalen flipped open the file to the back, showing a picture of a man who could have been her father. He was a half-elf with dusky skin, just as Ilira had described—a half-drow, possibly. Beneath the image it gave a name—Neveren Darkdance—and beneath that . . .

"Disappeared in 1358, the Year of Shadows," she read.

“Suspected foul play. Darkdance Manor damaged in duel. Missing: wife (Shalis), newborn daughter (unknown). Survivor: seneschal (Elevar), blinded and driven mad by event. Suspect: elf called the Fox-at-Twilight.”

There was a sketch, and it was definitely Ilira. The eyes were different—unlike her all-gold orbs, these had pupils and irises—but there could be no mistake.

“I don’t believe this,” Myrin said. “Where’s the proof? Where—?”

“Myrin—she did this. Has she told you a different story? Has she told you anything?”

“But—”

Myrin looked over her shoulder, to where Ilira was inspecting a guest’s attire with a critical eye as a group of noble lads and lasses looked on. She was a dressmaker, after all, and Myrin recognized the distinctive cut of the emerald and silver gown the noble lass wore as one of Ilira’s own making. The elf smiled, as though reassuring them it was no trouble at all. The way her golden eyes shifted, however, Myrin thought the smile was really for her.

“But she’s my friend.” Myrin’s head felt muddy. “There must be a mistake.”

“Myrin, please listen to me.” Kalen drew her gaze. “Am I not also your friend?”

“I—” *Friend*. The word felt like the thrust of a dagger to her stomach. “I don’t—”

Terror gripped her—nay, something worse: heartache.

Blue fire licked around the edges of Myrin’s world, and she saw runes appear around the hand on her wrist. Kalen, as owner of that hand, stiffened but could not pull away.

Ilira detached herself from the nobles, leaving them smiling. She saw Myrin’s distress, and her blithe expression

faltered.

“Myrin,” Kalen said. “I’m your friend. Don’t—”

“I don’t—” She clenched her hand tightly to keep from speaking, but the words slipped from her lips regardless. “I don’t want to be your *friend*, Kalen! I want—”

She realized everyone was looking at her, and for good reason. She stood in the midst of the common room, lit like a beacon of blue light. Runes covered her arm and reached up her shoulder. She touched her cheek, and it burned intensely hot with blue fire. Indeed, Myrin felt nothing else—not her fingers against her skin, nor the nails of her free hand in her palm. She had drawn blood without realizing it.

By accident, she had drunk in Kalen’s spellscar.

She nearly fell, abruptly barely able to feel her legs. She felt like a prisoner in her own thick limbs—a disconnected passenger watching the world wobble around her. With practice, she could learn to wield the reins of her body, but just then it was all she could do to stagger toward the door. She fumbled at her belt pouch for the crystal ball Liltan had given her.

“Myrin—” Kalen got up to stop her, but a coughing fit seized him and he sank back. She’d seen him cough like that before, but not since before Luskan. Without his spellscar to stave off sickness, he was so weak. She could kill him if she took too much.

Ilira pushed her way through the crowded common room, and her eyes darkened to black as she summoned her shadow powers. Myrin shook her head. She didn’t want Ilira to reveal herself for what she was—whatever she was. Not on her account.

Myrin’s orb came out, and she traced a rough circle with

her clumsy hand. It expanded rapidly into her shadow door, and she fell backward through darkness.



Kalen watched helplessly as Myrin's conflagration and sudden disappearance plunged the Purple Lady Festhall into chaos. Everywhere, patrons shrieked in terror. "Spell-plague!" they cried, and "Gods preserve us!" They trampled one another to escape.

Kalen wanted to do something about it, but he could not move for the pain.

His spellscar had all but vanished in the wake of Myrin's touch, filling him with roaring agony. Suddenly his legs and arms burned with soreness, and every wound he had taken in tendays raged back into his awareness. Years of punishment fell upon him all at once, leaving him a quivering mass of scars. He sat limply, nothing but bones coated in shredded flesh, barely stitched together with fraying sinews. His aching teeth ground on edge as the veins in his temples and throat thundered.

He tried to reach for Myrin as she conjured her shadow door, but crippling pain rushed through his head at the movement. His vision swam, and it was all he could do to keep breathing.

He saw Ilira standing over him, her gold eyes swirling with black. "I warned you, heir of Shadowbane." She drew off one of her velvet gloves. "But you—" Then she leaped to the side, avoiding a blast of white light that carved apart a column next to her head.

"Stand away and down arms!" Levia stepped from the crowd, her mace—emblazoned with the holy symbol of

Torm—raised over her head.

“The Eye of Justice sees much,” Ilira said. “I might have known.”

Kalen saw past Levia to where Brace stood behind a smoke-stained column, his sword clasped tight against his chest. The gnome wasn't shouting oaths and insults this time but meant to ambush Levia silently. Kalen tried to warn his teacher but could only cough.

Abruptly, Ilira looked toward the rear of the festhall, like a hound searching for a scent. Without a word, her eyes turned jet black and she vanished into the shadows of passersby and was gone. Brace also disappeared, and Kalen could breathe a little easier.

Levia appeared at Kalen's side. “Let me heal you.”

He wanted to object, but the pain wouldn't let him speak. He needed to make an exception and accept magical healing, if he was to help Myrin. A monster had trapped her, and he needed to save her.

Torm's soothing warmth flowed through him, and the pain waned. It still hurt like all nine of the Hells, but his limbs were his own once more. The blue fire burned dully, demanding he rise and head toward the rear of the building. He knew it was pulling him toward Myrin.

Was that what had drawn Ilira's attention? Did Myrin's spellscar call to her as well?

Kalen struggled to his feet. He managed three steps before he stumbled, but Levia caught him. “Kalen, we need to get you back to the Eye—”

“No.” He closed his free hand around an invisible handle, and gray flames announced the arrival of Vindicator in his grasp. “Let's go.”



Myrin plummeted into something damp and soft and was lost to the world for a time.

A single thought echoed through her bleary mind as she lay stunned in the cold and dank. Perhaps she spoke it aloud—she was not sure. “Godsdamn it Kalen, can’t you trust me?”

When her senses returned, Myrin found herself in a dampened stack of refuse out in the alley behind the fest-hall, where not a few days before she’d seen Ilira’s bodyguard bleeding to death. Indeed, there was still a dark stain on the cobblestones where he had died. In asking his mistress for a kiss, he’d chosen love over a peaceful death. And just at the moment, Myrin felt as though she’d done just the opposite.

She lay limp, her breast heaving with rapid breath, and stared up through blurry eyes. Rain fell on her face, although she couldn’t feel it through Kalen’s spellscar. When she raised a hand glowing with blue runes to wipe the rain away, it felt like prodding herself with a rock.

“How does he live like this?” Her voice slurred around a thick tongue.

She’d absorbed some of Kalen’s spellscar before, although never so much.

“You can do this,” she told herself. “Kalen can do it. Why not you?”

Myrin focused on her hand, which lay draped over her face as though it had fallen asleep there. If she didn’t move it, she would smother herself without realizing it. In her mind’s eye, she imagined sending warmth and life back up her arm, and in response, the hand awoke once more. Her skin burned, but at least she felt something. She raised her

hand in front of her face and marveled at the curl of her fingers—at every tiny pore and hair. Never in her life (not that she remembered, anyway) had she paid such close attention to her hand.

She woke the rest of her body in a similar fashion, and the effort grew easier with every limb. In the process, she realized that she could control Kalen's spellscar in a way he seemingly could not. The blue fire objected to her command, but she overpowered it at a thought. The scar hissed under her control like a captured serpent, stilled for the moment but deadly if ignored.

Could she do the same with any spellscar? She wondered.

The shadows moved before her, and abruptly Ilira was there. The elf fell to one knee and put trembling hands on Myrin's shoulders. "What happened? Are you—?"

Myrin pulled away. "Is it true?" she demanded. "Did you kill him? Neveren?"

Ilira's face betrayed no reaction. "I—"

The door to the Purple Lady burst open, heralding a harried Brace who bore a rapier in either hand. "They're coming this way," the gnome said. "We have to move!"

Myrin waited until Ilira's gaze shifted to Brace, then reached for her. Startled at the suddenness of the movement, Ilira could not dodge aside as Myrin laid a hand on her bare cheek. Blue runes erupted again down Myrin's arm, mingling with the runes already in place to make her arm a collage of azure and black ink. Smoke rose around her fingers, but she couldn't feel any pain—Kalen's spellscar saw to that.

"I'll see it," Myrin said. "I'll see . . ."



In Ilira's memory, Myrin found herself in a dark room that stank of blood and sweat. Dark swaths of blood festooned the walls like paint, and the tapestries hung ragged and tattered from the cracked rafters. Dust filled the air, punctuated by choked gags.

"Shalis." Ilira fell to her knees by the pool of blood and messy blankets. "Gods."

It was beyond bad. Shalis lay in a heap, breathing only shallowly. Blood oozed from a dozen piercing wounds, half congealed as it ran down her dark skin. Shalis seemed an old woman as she lay dying, pale and shivering, her skin like ice.

Ilira reached out to touch her face, and Myrin winced inwardly in expectation. But when Ilira laid her fingers upon the woman's brow, there was no burning and no death. Ilira had no spellscar in this memory, Myrin realized. How long ago had this been?

"I'm so sorry, 'Light," Shalis said. "After what happened with Neveren, I've hated you so long, and I—"

"It doesn't matter." Ilira took Shalis's hand between both of hers and pressed it to her cheek. "You were the mother I never had, and I will remember you that way."

That made Shalis smile wistfully.

Ilira's companions moved in the darkness: one a lithe elf, the other a hulking giant of a man. Myrin knew the elf from another memory she had absorbed a year before: Yldar was his name, and she knew Ilira loved him after a fashion. The giant man seemed made of stone more than flesh, and was striped with red mottling like the rock at a volcano. Growths like precious gems stood out on his skin. He took one knee, inspected Shalis's wounds, then shook his head.

"Are you sure, Gargan?" Ilira asked. "You have to be

sure.”

The giant shook his head once more. Darkness fell across his face, and Myrin realized she *had* seen him before. His was the shadow Ilira now wore as her own.

“Promise me,” Shalis said, drawing Myrin’s attention back to her. “Promise . . . that you’ll find her. That you’ll keep her safe.”

Ilira trembled. “Who?”

“My daughter. Nev . . . Neveren’s daughter.” She coughed, and the words disintegrated.

“Of course I’ll find her. You have my word.”

“She is lost to me. I think—” Shalis shook her head. “I think she blames me. For Neveren’s death.”

“I will find her,” Ilira said. “However long it takes. Only tell me her name.”

Shalis’s eyes softened, and it was clear life was fleeing her. She whispered a single word, letting it float on the air in that place of death.

“Maerlyn.”



“Maerlyn,” Myrin said in the alley. “But that’s not my name. I—”

She only absorbed memories of herself. Shalis had lived a century ago, and Myrin knew that memory had been from before Ilira was spellscarred. She saw again the memory of herself being born—of Shalis, no less. Could Shalis’s daughter—Neveren’s daughter—could that be *her*? She knew in her heart that it was.

She also knew, from that memory, that Ilira was not the danger of which Kalen had warned, but instead . . . “You’re

here to protect me,” Myrin said. “You promised—”

Then she realized, to her horror, that her hand was tingling with pain even through Kalen’s numbing spellscar. She looked, and through the blue flames, she saw her flesh unraveling against Ilira’s face. The elf’s spellscar was ripping Myrin’s hand and arm apart, raging at her with all the destructive fury of the spellplague.

Ilira seemed as shocked as Myrin herself, unable to move in the rush of memory. Earlier, in the marketplace, she’d only managed to take a flash. Now, there was more.

Myrin wanted it.

Brace stared at them both, seemingly paralyzed with terror and revulsion.

Finally, the elf’s gold eyes cleared and she could move. She shoved Myrin away, breaking the contact between hand and cheek, but caught her in her arms before she could fall. She supported the wizard’s slumping weight awkwardly.

“Brace!” Ilira snapped. “Brace, godsdamn it, stop staring and help me!”

The gnome shook himself and immediately crossed to them. He fumbled in an inner pocket of his weathercloak for a potion. His words fumbled around one another, but Myrin could hear the healing in them—healing she dearly needed.

“No fear, Maerlyn,” Ilira whispered. That name told Myrin that Ilira had seen the memory, too, and thought the same thing she did. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Myrin pulled her ruined arm away. “It doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t—”

Then agony struck her, she summoned breath for a scream, and the world faded.



Leaning on Levia, Kalen made it to the door, behind which he could faintly sense Myrin. He reached for the handle, but Levia stepped past him and peered out first.

“Gods,” she said. “Kalen, wait—”

He shoved past her and watched as Myrin practically burned her hand off against Ilira’s face, then collapsed into the elf’s arms. If breath had been hard to draw before, it refused to come now. He clenched Vindicator’s hilt.

“Stop her,” Kalen said. “We need—”

“There’s nothing we can do—*Kalen!*”

Kalen tried to push through Levia, but in his weakened state, he could hardly overpower her strong arms. Levia held him against the wall as he grasped feebly at her.

“We need to save her, agreed,” Levia said. “But you’re in no state to attack now, and I can’t defeat both the elf and the gnome at once. We don’t attack until we can win.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Kalen tried to wriggle free. “We have to—”

“And what good does it do Lady Darkdance if you die trying to save her?” Levia shoved him back. “We have to wait until you recover. Until—”

Blue flames spread across his hand on her arm, and she pulled away in surprise. Kalen felt his spellscar reassert itself, dulling the thousand shocks and pangs that had gripped him. Myrin must have used up the borrowed power, and the magic returned to curse him anew. This time, he welcomed it, as it meant he could move again.

“I’m going.” He hefted Sithe’s axe in one hand, Vindicator in the other. “Try to stop me.”

He pushed into the alley as Ilira gathered up Myrin in her

arms. As before, the two shared a look equal parts challenge and promise. A reckoning would come between them, and neither would back down. Kalen stepped forward, and Ilira vanished into the shadows.

“Gods damn all shadowdancers.” Kalen’s frustration ground the word to cracked glass.

He heard movement deeper in the alley and saw a familiar gnome lurking among the refuse. Rather than rush at him, he reached out with the power of Vindicator and seized Brace even as he tried to flee. The gnome staggered forward, surrounded in the sword’s magic, but before Kalen could catch him, Brace wavered and faded from view.

“Feywild magic—it’s made him invisible.” Levia spoke a word of power, and silvery radiance filled her eyes. With her blessed vision, she scanned the alley. “He’s escaped. I *hate* fey creatures. Do you think they’ve been in league this whole time—the elf and the gnome?”

“Perhaps.” Kalen lowered Vindicator, whose gray flames licked the cobblestones at their feet. “Either way, they’ve won this night.”

“Torm burn their eyes,” Levia said.

Kalen considered. The other Shadowbane was still at large in the city, but that consideration paled next to Myrin’s safety. Much as he wanted to rush off after her kidnappers that instant, Levia had been right before. They needed to be patient.

“You’re sure of your information,” Kalen said. “That we can act on it?”

“Absolutely sure,” Levia said. “That murderess must be brought to justice.”

“Agreed.” Kalen nodded. “Is Hessar good in a fight?”

“I’ve seen him take down a cadre of Shou warriors

without breaking a sweat,” Levia said. “As a monk, he’s skilled enough, but he knows magic, too. He holds his own.”

“And you’ve kept up your spellcasting these last years?”

Levia gave him a look as if the question was ridiculous.

“Three, then—not enough,” Kalen said. “Set Hessar to follow them, but don’t have him attack. You return to Castle Thalavar and prepare a strike plan to neutralize Lady Nathalan. Recruit men from the Eye—men you trust absolutely. Those men with the tattoos, perhaps.”

“You could command them yourself, you know.”

“Just go.” Kalen looked up into the night. He had another task to undertake, before they could strike. “Be prepared. We have a shadow to slay.”

Levia took her leave, and Kalen looked up at the darkening sky. He had one more task to undertake before the assault, and it was such a small thing. Why then did he feel like he was marching to his own grave?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MIDNIGHT, MIDSUMMER

AS THE MOON ROSE HIGH, KALEN STOOD ON THE ROOF-top of one of the buildings on the south bank of the River Thunn. A cold night wind whipped up off the Sea of Fallen Stars, ripping his clothing and biting his exposed flesh. The banners of the Shou district strained at their ties, and the waterfall thundered not far away.

He fell into communion with Vindicator, and the sword appeared in his upraised hand in a swell of gray flames. He held it aloft a moment, like a star in his hand, and turned in a circle to face all of Westgate. Then he set the sword reverently on the roof and sat cross-legged just outside its reach. He waited.

In the silence, he meditated on the stars above—Selûne’s tears—and on the struggles below. Kalen wanted to aid Myrin’s quest to recover her memories, but that was for another time. He needed to thwart Ilira’s seeming dominance of Myrin—break his friend from the elf’s thrall. Levia wanted him to intercede with the Eye of Justice. And, of course, there was Rhett to consider: where he might be found, whether he still lived or not.

All of these tasks, though, paled in comparison to what he would do this night.

Kalen heard the man approach from behind, although whoever he was, he could certainly move quietly. Kalen focused on his breathing, letting the night wind stir his hair.

Finally, gray flames spread silently around Vindicator, and it vanished from where it lay before Kalen. Summoned by another.

“Hail, Shadowbane,” Kalen said over his shoulder.

That gave the man pause.

Kalen had chosen this meeting place on purpose—the spot where he’d chased the false Shadowbane after their first meeting in the Timeless Blade. The way the man had lingered at the edge and looked back at him had suggested he would listen to Kalen if approached peaceably. Now the imposter stood on the roof half a dozen paces from him, in a defensive posture, waiting just as he had then. Kalen might just accomplish the task that drew him there that night.

Kalen appraised the imposter’s attire. The man was dressed much as Kalen himself had always dressed in Water-deep: thick black leathers studded with plates of steel, a dark gray cloak (less tattered than Kalen’s had become over the years), and a helm that hid his face. The differences were subtle: the way he carried himself, the way he moved. He lacked Kalen’s fluid grace, but Kalen knew not to underestimate his skill or speed.

He certainly *looked* like Shadowbane. Was he the one Kalen sought?

It occurred to him then that he didn’t know how long this other Shadowbane had been operating in Westgate, nor how long he had been wielding Vindicator. Before that

first day in Westgate, when he'd used the amulet to sneak Vindicator into the city, Kalen had kept the sword hidden in Myrin's deep-pockets belt pouch. It was entirely possible the imposter had summoned it from within, every day since Luskan. Possibly even before.

The imposter raised one hand, but Kalen cut him off. "Don't speak—just listen."

The imposter nodded ever so slightly, but he said nothing. Kalen had expected as much.

"I may die in what comes next, and there is much left undone. I need someone to carry on, to wield Vindicator in pursuit of the same goal." He looked up. "I need *you*, Shadowbane."

The man staggered back—surprised, perhaps. Kalen could not tell with his closed helm.

Kalen climbed unsteadily to his feet. This far from Myrin, his spellscar was temperamental. "I have tried to pass on my task, as it was passed to me," he said. "I had an apprentice once—Vaelis. I tried to train him, as my own teacher trained me. There was no friendship between us—I was his master, and I was hard on him. I never listened, and I never stood by him. Perhaps I trained him poorly, or perhaps . . ." He shook his head. "Regardless, he is dead, and his blood is on my hands."

The false Shadowbane stared at him, as silent as before. He held Vindicator in a two-handed high guard, such that Kalen would spit himself upon the steel if he charged. The false Shadowbane's hands trembled ever so slightly.

"I tried again with a man called Rhett—although I did not see the truth until it was too late." Kalen drew closer, standing just two paces from Vindicator's point. "The sword chose him, and Rhett sought at every turn to become

my apprentice, but I refused. He was—*is*, if he lives still—a good man. He . . .” Kalen closed his eyes. “He was my friend. I was hard on him, but I loved him even so.”

As though the words rang especially true, the false Shadowbane lowered Vindicator a touch, then shook himself and drew it back up into a defensive position.

“That is why I attacked you,” Kalen said. “I sent Rhett to Westgate, but I find you instead. I’ve accepted you are not he, although you used his name in the Timeless Blade. But whoever you might be and whatever you want—of me, of this city, of that sword—none of that concerns me. The sword is all that matters now.”

He nodded toward Vindicator, which hung in front of his face.

“All I know is that the sword has chosen you, as it once chose me—and that makes you as worthy a wielder as I. More, perhaps.” Kalen looked up at the man’s helm gleaming in the moonlight. “If the sword answers your call, then you are Shadowbane. You must rise to the challenge and carry on the quest that lies before us. Are you willing?”

The imposter’s arms trembled, although whether it was from the exertion of holding a high guard for so long or from the weight of the question, Kalen could not say.

Finally, Shadowbane lowered the sword and set its point against the rooftop. The wind howled around them. The false Shadowbane’s shoulders slumped a touch, as though he were struggling with a powerful emotion he could not quite express.

Kalen nodded. “We serve the same master—the Threefold God, who wielded that sword: Helm of the Everwatch, God of Guardians; Tyr the Evenhanded, God of Justice; and Torm the True, God of Valor.”

He lifted his hand, and his ring—the one Gedrin had given him so many years ago—gleamed in the moonlight. It bore the symbol of long-dead Helm: a gauntlet with an eye in the palm, which had always matched the hilt of Vindicator. In his hands, at least. As the other Shadowbane held the sword, Kalen saw the image on the hilt wavering, undecided.

“A woman I respected once told me that we were not saviors but rather destroyers,” he said. “She was wrong. I am Helm’s Sword, the defender of this world. What of you?”

Shadowbane shook his head, uncertain. He looked away toward the eastern horizon.

“You hold the sword, so I know one of them speaks in your heart. Which is it?”

Shadowbane was breathing heavily, his fingers tight on the sword. Gray flames swirled around the steel, leaking down to coat his gauntleted hand. They resolved themselves into a symbol below his knuckles: a set of scales, as one might use to weigh gold—or a heart.

Tyr. The long-dead God of Justice, the second of the three, who had taken the mantle from Helm. He’d worn it only a short while, then bequeathed it to Torm shortly before he left to face creatures of darkness in the heavens beyond the mortal world. How fitting.

“You are sworn to the scales, as I am to the helm. Do you accept this burden?”

Shadowbane nodded. The sigil flowed from his hand onto Vindicator’s hilt where it turned white, rather than gray.

“One thing more to this ritual—so that you remember it.”

Kalen launched a fist at the false Shadowbane’s head,

but the man knocked it aside with his left arm. He moved casually, as though he had known the blow was coming. Perhaps . . . but Kalen shook that suspicion away.

Again, the man nodded silently.

Kalen gazed west toward Darkdance Manor, which stood dark. Myrin and the others had not gone there, but he would find them. He would find them, and he would save her.

“I need the sword for one more task. I will summon it again when I have need of it, but after that, if I am dead, it is yours. If not . . .” Kalen focused, and gray flames rose from his skin, resolving into Helm’s armor around his limbs. “I will have no more need of Vindicator. You will carry it until you die, or until the task is done, and shadow and darkness are gone from Faerûn.”

And with that, Kalen turned to go.

“Shadow and darkness must be pursued,” a rough voice murmured behind him.

Those words caught Kalen’s ear. He’d heard them before of course, many times, but the way the imposter said them

. . .

“Shadow and darkness must be pursued,” the man said in a voice like gravel, “through every street, down every path, no matter how dark, until it is wiped from the world.”

He knew those words. Gedrin Shadowbane had spoken them, upon waking from his dream of the death of Helm a century ago. Kalen had first heard Gedrin speak them as he stood surrounded by foes in a light-seared warehouse in Luskan. He had spoken his heart’s vow in the moments before darkness swallowed him. He had never surrendered.

The words persisted as the vow taken by all initiates of the Eye of Justice.

Kalen stepped forward and put his hand on the man's shoulder. "I am proud of you, Shadowbane."

Then Kalen turned and walked away.



"What is this game?" his Shadowbane asked.

Lounging behind the desk, Lilten realized he'd been carried away by daydreams of a long ago, more peaceable time. Before that, he'd been pondering the next move on his lanceboard. The black reaver and white sorceress were cloistered close at one corner, also engaged by the white jester. At the other side stood the white knight, along with the white priestess and the black sorcerer, poised as though to launch an attack against them.

Lilten held two pieces in his hand—the black knight and the white bladesinger—considering where best to place them. Never the master of paying attention, though, he'd found himself considering the black reaver, and his mind had naturally wandered to warm memories: sweat-streaked and sweet.

Thus, when the boy stormed into his chamber and pointed Vindicator at his face, Lilten was momentarily dazed and sat blinking in the face of his vehemence.

"You lied to me. You told me he'd lost his mind—that he was coming to kill me. You—"

He cut Vindicator through the air in his frustration, the sharp steel and gray flames endangering the bookshelves. Abruptly, he realized what he was doing and caught the blade with his gauntleted hand. He stared at the hilt and trembled.

"Well, accept my apologies that I proved so convincing. I

take it you've been busy." Lilten looked to Vindicator's hilt. "Tyr. How droll."

"That's not the point." Shadowbane put Vindicator to Lilten's chest. "I became their prisoner, as you asked. I learned what they were about, as you asked. Then I escaped and went to Kalen, as you asked. And what happens? Not only do I not have to fight him, but he gives up the sword to me. Was this your plan all along?"

The old fire surged in Lilten, and he felt his limbs growing warm. "Threaten me at your own peril, boy," he said, moderating his voice. "I am not always so affable."

That had an effect on the youth, and he withdrew the sword. "Why did you lie to me? He and I—what I had with him was real. But this—" He shook his head. "Why did you lie to me?"

"Why does anyone do anything? For gain, of course." He placed the lady knight on the lanceboard, next to the lady sorceress. "You, my dear boy, have many strengths, but the power of your mind is not one of them. It makes you quite easy to manipulate."

"Master, I don't understand. Why would you do this? What gain can be had?"

He smiled. "No."

"No?" Shadowbane looked stricken. "As in, no, you won't tell me?"

"Indeed not," Lilten said. "Why would I even try, when your small mind cannot process the scope of that which I offer? It would simply be a waste of the time it takes to explain it."

"But—what?" Shadowbane shook his head.

"Most things I've learned over my long life have been lies, but I know this much: there are few things one will not

do for love.” He glanced at the lanceboard. “Few indeed.”

“You—I—” Shadowbane threw up his hands. “No more of this. I am sick unto death of the lies. I quit you—all of you. The Eye of Justice, Westgate, all of it.”

Lilten shrugged. “Sweet water and light laughter, then,” he said in Elvish.

Shadowbane offered only a perplexed stare. No doubt he spoke Elvish, owing to his heritage, but the words would have taken him by surprise. He did not, after all, see Lilten as an elf. His small mind proved easy prey to Lilten’s illusory magic, and so he saw exactly what he wanted to—or else what Lilten wanted.

“Among the People,” Lilten said, “it means piss right off.”

The young man stared at him a breath, then turned and strode to the door of his chamber.

“He will need you before the end,” Lilten said. “Or would you abandon him?”

Shadowbane paused at the door, just as though Lilten had driven a knife into the small of his back. He hesitated only a breath before he left and slammed the door behind him.

Lilten’s eye fell on the lanceboard again, specifically on the black reaver piece.

“Few things, indeed.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MORNING, SHIELDMEET

MYRIN AWOKE THE FOLLOWING DAY TO ITCHING PAIN ALL up her bandaged right hand and the Mother Mystra of all headaches. She groaned when she tried to move, then lay back on the pillow and gazed up at an unfamiliar timber ceiling. Sunlight streamed in the small, half-shuttered window beside the bed.

The sound drew the attention of Ilira, who was sitting beside Myrin, her knees drawn up to her chin. She wore the same sort of outfit she had donned to go to the Lair of the Night Masks, plus a veil over her face. She was taking no chances Myrin might touch her skin. Her gold eyes were unmistakable through the gauzy mask.

“You’re awake,” she said.

“I am,” Myrin said. “Have you been watching over me all night? Did you sleep?”

“Elves don’t sleep.” Despite this protest, Ilira sounded tired. Also, she cringed away when Myrin shifted closer.

“It’s all right. I don’t plan on touching you again.” Myrin held up her bandaged hand, which was soggy and smelled rancid. “Or possibly touching anything *ever*.”

She'd meant it for a jest, but Myrin could tell by the way Ilira turned away that she'd taken it as anything but. "Brace was able to keep you from succumbing. That voice of his . . . His magic takes an odd form, but he is as adept a healer as any bard."

Myrin remembered some of the gnome's colorful insults, and particularly the way she had taken his magic and used it herself. "He told me his father said he was a natural."

"He is." Ilira removed her veil, which made Myrin feel better. "He refused payment above whatever you pay him for his services. Although he accepted my offer of a favor."

"A favor, eh?"

"Indeed." Ilira smiled, which made the world seem a touch brighter.

The tiny chamber once more drew Myrin's attention. The room was sparsely furnished and utilitarian with little more than a cot, work desk, and standing wardrobe.

"Where are we? Why didn't you take me back to the manor?"

"The gate only opens for a wakeful Darkdance, and you were not awake," Ilira said. "We spent the night in a modest set of chambers I keep over Dawn's—a small salon I own not too far from the manor. You can see it from here, in fact—"

She leaned over the bed, taking great care not to touch Myrin, and pushed open the closed window shutter. Sunlight streamed in, and Myrin saw it was a beautiful Westgate day.

Myrin's eyes were less upon the scenic cityscape and more upon Ilira's lithe form. She could reach out and touch her with the tiniest motion, and possibly absorb more memories that way. The blue fire inside burned to touch

her again—that, and the lump in her throat.

“Er.” Distracted, Myrin clawed at something to say, remembered something she’d read, and ran with it. “You mean Silks at Dawn: Dresses and Fashions? You’re not . . . *the Dawn?*”

Myrin had heard of Westgate’s most fashionable stylist: one of the interminable invitations she’d received over the past days had been to a reception at Dawn’s shop. And although she’d found the concept of new dresses appealing, she’d not yet made the connection between Dawn and Ilira. Now that the elf had said it, Myrin thought the conclusion obvious.

Ilira shook her head. “Not the *original* Dawn, but we were friends. She did me a great kindness once, in teaching me to sew in her shop. For the first time in a long time, I occupied my hands with something other than blades. And for that, I honor her.”

“When was that? That she taught you to make dresses?”

“A century and a score of years ago, give or take. The last time I lived in Westgate.”

Myrin considered. “I’ve never seen you with a blade. You don’t seem the sort.”

Ilira’s expression turned sly. “You’d be surprised.”

More questions arose in Myrin: a dozen spawned about yestereve, but one in particular climbed to her lips. The elf seemed to sense the question coming, and her body tensed in preparation, bracing as though for the thrust of a knife. “Ilira. Am I—?”

The door opened, and Rujia stood over the threshold. Her presence was so surprising that Myrin trailed off. She bore in her arms a fresh towel and bandages. “You’re awake,” she said.

“Yes.” Myrin frowned. “Why is everyone saying that?”

“Fresh bandages,” Ilira said. “Good.”

The deva’s unflappable gaze fell upon the elf, and there arose an instant friction between the two women. They were communicating silently in a language Myrin could not understand. With what she had seen beneath Rujia’s mask, however . . . Myrin understood why Rujia, at least, did not seem comfortable around them. Perhaps Ilira sensed this as well. Why, then, had Rujia returned? Granted, she didn’t know what Myrin had seen, or know for sure that she had seen *anything*. Gods, it all seemed so complicated just at the moment, and Myrin’s head was beginning to ache.

Ilira hesitated, then pressed her gloved hand to Myrin’s shoulder. “Can you eat?”

“I—I think so. I’ll try.” Indeed, the wizard was famished.

“I’ll bring some morningfeast. We have much to discuss, and you’ll need your strength.” Ilira left, pointedly avoiding Rujia’s eyes.

Although Myrin dearly wanted answers—the memory she’d absorbed from Ilira loomed large in her mind—her questions could wait. For now, Rujia took up her attention.

“You’re still here,” Myrin said.

Rujia crossed to Myrin and sat beside the bed. She took the wizard’s hand with surprising gentleness and unwound the bandages. The wizard was momentarily concerned, but she saw the deva wore leather gloves, so there was no danger of her spellscar activating.

Rujia bent to the task of changing the bandages. “Look if you want.”

Myrin gazed in fascination at her hand, which was red and scarred but still looked reassuringly like a hand. Somehow, she had expected a burned, skeletal husk. Blood oozed,

but it was a clean feeling—purifying.

“Brace couldn’t have healed all of that,” Myrin said.

Rujia pursed her lips. “The elf did not tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“There was another healer. When Brace’s words proved insufficient, the elf took you in her arms and shadow-danced away. You were gone for a long while, but when you returned, your hand was bandaged and you slept comfortably.”

Myrin frowned. Where else would Ilira have taken her? And why keep it a secret?

“Whoever it was, though, he did well,” she said finally. “It itches but doesn’t hurt.”

It was true. Perhaps it was the lingering effects of Kalen’s spellscar, but Myrin felt merely a little tired. Her hand looked awful, but not as bad as she had thought it would, and it only tingled faintly.

“You should recover fully in a few tendays,” Rujia said. “Although no doubt *she* left her scar on you.”

The dialogue comprised more words than Myrin had ever heard the deva utter at once, and the venom that infused the reference to Ilira gave her pause. She said nothing, however, and only watched Rujia’s face as she gently wrapped her hand.

Myrin came to a decision then, regardless—or perhaps because of—what she had seen beneath Rujia’s guise. “Thank you,” she said when the deva was done.

The deva looked at her oddly, as though she had not expected this. “You have helped me on several occasions. I am repaying the favor.”

“You’re my friend.” Myrin laid her good hand on Rujia’s wrist. “That’s what friends do for one another.”

Rujia stared at her, troubled. Then, as though without meaning to do so, she said: "She stole something."

"What?"

Before Rujia spoke another word, the door opened and Brace bounded in. "You're awake!" he exclaimed.

"Indeed," Myrin said with a sigh.

Ilira, who had padded in behind the gnome, rolled her eyes.

Brace looked positively ecstatic, and he nearly spilled Myrin's morningfeast all over both her and Rujia. Fortunately, Myrin conjured a floating hand of magic, which caught the tray and delivered it safely to her lap. The food looked positively wonderful.

"It pleases me no end to see you awake, my lady," Brace said. "After your travails of yestereve, I permitted myself a momentary worry, but I know that you are possessed of great endurance and strength of will rivaling that of the greatest heroes of our time and all times past and, like as not, all times to come. Ever."

"Um, thanks?" Myrin smiled at his courtly babble, particularly the words over which he occasionally stumbled. It was difficult not to laugh, so she stuffed her mouth full of food whenever he spoke.

"And in that state, I would ask a boon of you, if you would be so inclined and able," he said. "Although I hesitate to voice it, as I'd not wish to impose—"

"What is it?"

Brace's eyes flicked toward Ilira. "Lady Nathalan consented to my request to escort her through Westgate for Shieldmeet today, but insisted that she would not leave your side," he said. "I believe that if you were to come along, then she would be able to resolve said paradox."

“Really.” Slyly, Myrin glanced at Ilira, who avoided her eyes. The elf looked as though she might be blushing, if such a thing was possible.

Considering how badly Myrin wanted to know about Kalen, about the vision, about *everything*, the gnome’s request seemed ridiculous. But on second thought, perhaps that was exactly what Myrin needed: a chance to let go of all her worries from the previous days. Also, if she was going to pry out any answers from Ilira, she needed to find a time when Brace wasn’t attached to her hip. She suspected that if she refused him this jaunt, he would want to stay with her and Ilira all day.

Also, she needed a rest. Life thus far in Westgate had proved nothing if not exhausting.

“When do we leave?” Myrin asked.



They spent the remainder of the day walking the streets of Westgate. A windy morning had cleared away the haze that swept in with the tide, setting the stage for a clear, beautiful day. As they wandered the thoroughfares, Myrin could count the clouds in the sky on one hand. The weather reminded her that life didn’t have to be a succession of magical cataclysms and pain.

Shieldmeet, it seemed, was a festival day held every four years the night after Midsummer. Having little memory of anything before about a year past, Myrin found her first such festival a welcome surprise. The folk of Westgate hung out banners—some old and worn, some new and shining—and everyone went around dressed in the attire of heroes. It was not like the masked ball back in Waterdeep

on Greengrass night—where attendees had dressed as particular figures of myth and legend—but rather a chance for the young people of the city to create their own crusaders and wizards that they might build their own legends. In the outfits they had worn into the lair of the Night Masters, the four of them fit in perfectly.

Strolling through the market, Myrin realized Brace had no intention of letting her have a moment alone with Ilira. The gnome proved as garrulous as the day they'd first met, with every word directed at Ilira, and he followed her without swerving. Even Myrin—hardly an expert on the permutations of male behavior—could not help but imagine a lovesick puppy. Ilira seemed indifferent to his attentions, but her assumed smile warmed until it became almost genuine.

Brace paused at a fruit stand to amuse them with a feat of apple juggling, at which Ilira and Myrin laughed while Rujia glowered from afar. When the gnome progressed to knives, however, Ilira interceded and took them deftly from his hands. Using the techniques of observation Ilira herself had taught her, Myrin saw the way Brace had engineered the mishap to lure Ilira into touching him. They laughed together, and the fey sound soothed Myrin's heart.

Rujia stood aloof, her arms crossed. The deva looked a bit like an angel that sat in judgment, although her glare at Ilira was very mortal and sullen.

"She didn't *have* to come along," Myrin said to Ilira as they admired jewelry laid out on a silk curtain. "She just wanted to come and demonstrate how much she dislikes you."

"I wouldn't be so certain," Ilira whispered in return. "You've been watching faces closely, as I suggested?"

“Aye,” Myrin said. “And she seems to loathe you quite a bit.”

“Indeed, but I think her interest this day falls upon you more than me. Note the way she stares, and how she averts her eyes when you look in her direction.”

Myrin did so, and sure enough, Rujia looked away.

“While you were asleep, she watched over you every moment I was not there,” Ilira said. “I suspect you’ve made more of an impression than you believe on our tight-lipped deva.”

That wasn’t it, Myrin knew—not entirely. Rujia had something to hide, something she suspected Myrin had seen. Should Myrin mention it to Ilira? Did she trust the elf enough?

Brace interrupted them by hopping up on the display table, much to the consternation of the vendor. The gnome completely ignored him and held an amber necklace up to Ilira’s throat. “Here is the perfect one, I believe,” he said. “It flattens your eyes, my lady.”

“Flatters, perhaps.” Ilira caught his hand before he could touch her bare skin and took the necklace away. “Thank you, good gnome.” She appraised it in the mirror.

Myrin thought for sure Ilira would reject the gift. Other than a sapphire bracelet, she’d never seen the elf wear color of any sort. But ultimately, she nodded and accepted the gnome’s offering.

“I tell you,” Brace said to Myrin. “Were I a taller man, or she a shorter woman—”

“You know you can’t touch her, right? She’d burn your hand right off.”

“Aye.” He smiled blithely. “But I’m starting to think it’d be well and truly worth it.”

The wizard had to smile at that. The gnome's eternal optimism was contagious.

"How's *your* arm, out of curiosity?" Brace asked.

"I'm likely to have a scar, but no matter." The gnome reached for the bandaged limb, but Myrin flinched back before he could touch her. "Still tender."

"It warms my heart to have expedited your recovery."

"Say," Myrin said. "You're able to afford that necklace for Ilira, right? Surely you're not strictly relying on the retainer's stipend I paid you."

"Absolutely," he said. "And on a completely unrelated note, could I have an advance?"



They ate a late highsunfeast at an ale garden called the Rosebud, the owner of which—a spritely woman named Dolarune—seemed to be good friends with Ilira, and offered them a free meal. Brace and Ilira jested together in Elvish the whole time, while Myrin and Rujia sat across from one another, not making eye contact. Myrin could see the deva stealing glances at her as the meal progressed, and she tried hard to focus on her leek and potato pie.

Afterward, they ended up at a place called Aurora's Emporium, a fashionable curio shop that sold exotic treasures from all sorts of lands unfamiliar to Myrin. Fanciful items like dusty headdresses crafted of coatl feathers from a land called Maztica and coral-carved jewelry from Myth Nantar joined more practical items like sturdy attire from Damara, hooked blades from Var the Drowned, or arrows and a curved Tuigan bow from the Hordelands far to the east. Two Shou boys were looking at this last item with

significant interest, and the shopkeeper had to keep shooing them away, lest they pluck up the bow for an improvised demonstration. Nearby, a man with dark skin chuckled and went back to looking at a display of Calishite smoking apparatuses.

“Unknowable Watching Gods Forefend!” cried the shopkeeper—an elegant, elderly woman in an indigo robe. “Folk across this broad world of ours use these things in everyday life. Have some respect for cultures not your own! Ah, Lady Nathalan!” The shopkeeper swept toward Ilira and her entourage. “What a glorious day. It’s been too long.”

“Aurora,” Ilira said. “Far too long indeed.”

They exchanged a kiss of greeting, although they did so without touching one another. Myrin thought this Aurora was well aware of Ilira’s spellscar.

“Aurora, let me present Lady Myrin Darkdance.”

“I am honored.” The old woman gave the wizard a cool, appraising glance. Her face was a maze of wrinkles, leading to bright, shining eyes like jewels in the heart of the labyrinth. Myrin thought she was searching her features in minute detail.

“Have we met, Lady Aurora?” Myrin asked, taking a risk. “You seem very familiar.”

“I think not, good lady. I would certainly remember one so lovely.” The merchant smiled graciously, then turned to Ilira. “Would you come with me, lady? I received some fabric from Cormanthyr, and naturally I thought of you—”

The elf followed her into the back. Brace sought to follow them, but they both cut him off with a look. He pretended to be interested in a set of satyr’s pipes on a display next to him.

“The gnome is a fool.” Rujia stood near Myrin, testing

the weight of swords of various shapes and sizes. The one she held just at the moment was shaped like a crescent—more like a sickle than a sword.

Myrin stepped closer to her. “Because he’s a moth and she’s a flame—literally?”

“He is a fool,” the deva said, “because *she* means to betray us.”

“But—Ilira?” Myrin furrowed her brow. “What do you mean?”

“Consider,” Rujia said. “She stopped you from learning from the crystal in the sewer.”

“She stopped it from killing us,” Myrin corrected. “And Ilira led us there in the first place. We wouldn’t even have found the crystal without her.”

“Because she wanted something in the lair,” Rujia said. “She stole something from the altar. Did you know that?”

Myrin remembered Rujia had said something to that effect, but she’d quite forgotten it in the bustle of Shieldmeet. “What did she take?”

Rujia shrugged. “Ask her,” she said. “I imagine she’ll lie to you.”

“That’s nonsense,” Myrin said.

“Is it?” Rujia asked. “She claimed to know your family, but has she given you clear answers to all your questions? Has she sat you down and revealed all?”

“No, but—” Myrin trailed off.

She and Ilira had spent days together, but the elf always seemed to disappear before they got a chance to talk, or else fate intervened and prevented the truth telling. Just that morn, Myrin had wanted to ask about her vision from the previous night, but Ilira had taken them out before she got a chance. Brace seemed to have suggested that outing, but

perhaps Ilira had manipulated him in that direction. Or had Myrin suggested it herself? It was all muddled up in her head.

The Calishite man by the hookahs gave Myrin a friendly smile, but she looked away.

Gods, maybe Kalen was right, and Ilira had indeed put some spell on her. She wanted to ask Ilira questions but kept failing to do so. If only she didn't feel so strange around her—awkward and yet comfortable at the same time, for all the sense that made.

Myrin was growing tired: her day out in Westgate, with all the Shieldmeet festivities, seemed to have worn her down. Her hand ached.

“Make no mistake.” Rujia stood very close to her now. “Her actions serve only one person: herself. You are simply her dupe.”

“But—” Myrin shook her head. “Gods, why do you hate her so much?”

Real emotion crossed Rujia's face for the first time since Myrin had known her, as though the question had broken through a shield she'd crafted for just that purpose.

“It's time for you to back off,” Myrin said. “I've had enough of this from Kalen. I don't need you doing it as well. She's hardly the only one with secrets.”

Rujia suddenly looked dangerously suspicious. “What secrets?”

Myrin instantly felt uneasy. In her exasperation, she'd let slip something she wasn't ready to say. She couldn't confront Rujia here, where so many innocents could be caught in a possible duel. Myrin swallowed her impulse to throw the truth in the deva's face.

“I wouldn't tell my secrets to someone who obviously

hated me, either,” Myrin said. “The enemy of my friend is *my* enemy. If you mean to hurt her, you’ll have to deal with me.”

Rujia tensed. “You don’t understand. I—”

“Ah, the beauty returns!” Brace said. “All is well in the world of mortals once more.”

Ilira and Aurora had reappeared at the rear of the shop, speaking quietly. Aurora smiled at the gnome’s ostentatious greeting, while Ilira looked serenely bemused.

Myrin felt Rujia’s hand on her hip, and she stiffened. The deva pressed herself against Myrin’s side, much as she had in the lair of the Night Masters.

“Easy.” The deva slipped something heavy into Myrin’s hand, then leaned close to whisper in her ear. “Open it when you’re alone. You’ll see she’s not your friend.”

Then she stepped away.

Cold fear curled around the base of Myrin’s spine in the wake of Rujia’s words. She’d brushed it off when Kalen had said something similar to her the previous night, but hearing Rujia say it as well, she started to see evidence. Ilira had indeed brushed off her questions. She’d vanished immediately after she’d absorbed the memories from the crystal ball. Myrin had seen her take something from the sewers, although she didn’t know what. And after the night before, when Myrin had absorbed a memory from Ilira that suggested a new, true name—Maerlyn—events had transpired so that Myrin couldn’t ask any questions. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

If Ilira could tell Myrin so much about her past, why hadn’t she? Surely there’d been time. Accident seemed like purpose. To what end was she stringing Myrin along?

Perhaps Rujia and Kalen were right, and Ilira was using

her as part of some nefarious scheme. But she felt such an immediate connection to Ilira, one that ran deeper than friendship.

What was she supposed to do?

Confused, the wizard felt around at the object Rujia had given her: a thin, rectangular parcel wrapped in fabric. Ilira was coming, and Myrin had a sudden fear that she would see. She slipped the object into her deep-pocket belt pouch.

“Are you well?” Ilira stepped close to her. “You seem troubled.”

“No,” Myrin said, shivering. With what Rujia had told her, suddenly Ilira’s attention to Myrin’s well-being seemed vaguely sinister. “Just a bit tired, that’s all.”

The elf smiled thinly. “Back to the manor, then.”



“So I tell Kalen, ‘it was very diplomatic,’ ” Myrin said that evening, as they passed through the gates of Darkdance Manor. “ ‘Not at all violent. Promise!’ ”

Brace laughed loudly while Rujia stared at her, perplexed. Ilira just gave one of her enigmatic smiles.

It was not as easy a moment as it seemed. Myrin’s anxiety had been growing since her near confrontation with Rujia, and Ilira had no doubt picked up on it. It was all so complicated: the shadowy elf who eluded her questions, the deva who wasn’t what she seemed, Myrin herself with suspicions she couldn’t voice. Brace was the only one of them who made sense, and he was obviously a few arrows short of a full quiver.

So preoccupied was Myrin that when she noticed the gate didn’t respond to her the way it normally did—in fact,

the magic seemed entirely absent—she completely ignored her misgivings. The gate’s magic was old and ill-used—perhaps it had simply faded. There were boot prints in the mud, but those she could explain away as well. Kalen practicing, no doubt.

When they entered the manor proper, the hall was dark, which didn’t surprise Myrin. Elevar was blind, after all, and had neglected to light the lamps for over a century. He’d not greeted them at the door as usual, but this, too, she brushed off. The manor was a big place for one dwarf, and Myrin made a mental note to hire additional servants at the first opportunity. Oh, and fix the magic on the gate. It was almost as though someone had dispelled it . . .

Myrin stopped short, however, when she saw what awaited them in the open-air garden in the center of the hall. Elevar hung limply on his knees before a woman who held him up by the collar. Her other hand held a flanged mace, which pulsed with magic. The woman had a plain face with angular, half-elf features, forgettable but for a heartless expression that chilled Myrin to the tips of her fingers. This woman was a cold killer and would tolerate no nonsense.

“Myrin Darkdance,” she said. “I am Levia Shadewalker of the Eye of Justice. We—”

“Out of my house!” A word of power fell from Myrin’s lips, and a bolt manifested in her hand as a dart of golden light with streaks of blue flame. She hurled the magic at the woman, but a shadowy shield appeared between them and absorbed it in a storm of decaying light.

A man appeared near her—the same dark-skinned Calishite she had glimpsed in Aurora’s shop. From the way he traced his hand through the air, Myrin knew he had cast the

shielding spell. He offered her a condescending smile.

“My associate, Hessar,” Levia continued. “And as I was saying, we’re not here for you, but rather for *her*.” She pointed her mace at Ilira. “Lady Ilira Nathalan, also called the Fox-at-Twilight, I hereby bind you in accordance with Westgate’s law for theft, assault, conspiracy, kidnapping, and the murders of many goodly folk, including Lorien Dawnbringer, Neveren Darkdance, and Shalis Ptolexis.”

Shock gripped Myrin, as every bit of anxiety about the few last days returned. Ilira had killed not only Neveren but *Shalis* as well? Myrin thought of the memory of yestereve—in which Shalis shared her last words with Ilira—but she had not seen what came to pass just before. Had Ilira been the one who left Shalis in that state? Her entire interpretation of the memory shook.

Ilira seemed unfazed by Levia’s accusations. “You had best leave, child, ’ere threats have to be made, or violence ensues. Stand down.”

“My apologies,” Levia said. “Did you think we came alone?”

At her gesture, half a dozen crossbows cocked, and Myrin saw men step from hiding all around them. They wore dark brigandine and tabards with the same symbol Levia wore: a gauntlet with scales and an eye in its palm. Brace put his hand to the hilt of his rapier. Rujia stared hard at Levia’s Calishite wizard, her sword hand at her belt.

“There is no need to involve yourself, Lady Darkdance,” Levia said. “Although if you help us subdue her, you will have earned the thanks of the Eye of Justice.”

Myrin looked to Ilira, who stood straightened to her full height, her fists at her sides. She wore a serene expression as always, but her shadow roiled furiously on the ground.

“I—” Myrin said. “I can’t do that.”

Then a last familiar voice shattered her focus, making her heart thunder in her throat.

“It’s well, Myrin.” Kalen stepped through the doors behind them, Sithe’s axe clutched in his hands. He’d not yet conjured his armor of faith, but gray flames stirred around him.

Ilira reacted to his presence with cold focus, seeming to forget the other knights. Brace looked increasingly nervous. Rujia was, oddly enough, smiling and shaking her head, as though she had expected all this somehow.

“What are you doing here?” Myrin asked Kalen, hardly able to speak.

“I came to talk sense into you if I can, or”—Kalen nodded to Ilira—“or fight her for you, if I must.”

“Fight her?” Myrin was baffled. “Why would you—what am I, some prize that you have to fight over?”

“Please,” Kalen said. “You know I’m right. Just listen to me—”

“Yes.” Myrin shut her eyes. “I know.” Slowly, she drew her orb out of her belt pouch. “I know exactly what to do.”

Then she opened her eyes and blasted Kalen back with a wave of thunder. He flew five paces through the air before he hit the floor.

The battle began.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TWILIGHT, SHIELDMEET

AS HE PICKED HIMSELF UP OFF THE FLOOR, KALEN CONSIDERED the responses he had expected to his appearance: shock, disbelief, or possibly even acceptance. In all truth, when he saw Myrin send a bolt of magic at Levia, he should have known the wizard would attack, but it still caught him by surprise. Not even in Luskan had he seen Myrin so angry.

Also, while he had felt the sting of her magic before, there was a big difference between accidental strikes and a purposeful hit. His bones still shook from the blow.

Crossbows clicked and bolts zipped toward the group. Myrin knocked one aside with her shield spell, which shifted by itself to deflect another. They skipped like stones off her magic. Brace batted a quarrel out of the air, while Rujia grunted as one sank into her leg. Ilira simply swayed aside, her gaze locked firmly on Kalen and his axe. A quarrel skipped across where Kalen had been standing, fired slightly wide of Myrin.

“Hold your fire, by Torm!” Levia cried. “You’ll hit—”

Kalen didn’t hear the rest, because at that moment Myrin declaimed words of power, brought her orb around, and

traced a curtain of fire between them and the Eye of Justice enforcers. Two more quarrels sizzled and popped like kernels of corn in the roaring crimson flames. The group was protected, at least for the moment—at least, from everyone but Kalen, who yet stood on their side. What was Myrin’s game?

Taking care to avoid attracting attention, Kalen got his feet under him and stood in a crouch. He closed his fingers around the haft of Sithe’s axe. Helm’s armor formed around him.

“Do we fight or retreat?” the deva asked Myrin.

“We fight,” Myrin said. “This is my home, and Elevar is my responsibility.”

Ilira nodded in approval.

Brace’s eyes lit up. “I hate to be the one to observe the ridiculously obvious, but retreat was never an option.”

“Ilira.” Kalen rose up like a vengeful specter, axe in hand. Smoke rose from his armor of faith. “Stand down. I don’t want to hurt you.”

They all turned to look at him, Brace nervous, Myrin aggrieved, Rujia implacable, and Ilira cold as frozen steel. “No fear,” the elf said. “You won’t.”

Myrin’s flames cast a dangerous gleam across Kalen’s axe and sent shadows dancing across Ilira’s silvery face. On the floor, Ilira’s shadow writhed, preparing for an attack.

Oh, but Kalen *would* attack. It was bad enough that this woman refused to face justice for her crimes—that she’d stolen away from the Watch of Waterdeep without so much as answering their questions. It was worse that she operated so brazenly in Westgate, laughing behind her anonymous gold eyes at concepts like law and order. But now . . . now she had turned Myrin—a soul of light and his best

friend—against him. What lies must Ilira have told her? What fell magic must she have brought to bear upon his dear friend's mind?

He would make it stop.

The weight of Kalen's enmity fell upon Ilira: this upstart creature that had eluded justice too long. That ended here, in this hall, tonight. And so he swore to each of the three gods he served that she would fall this night, or he would die in the attempt.

The elf glared back, her hands curled into fists. The fiery barrier shivered as though under attack and began to wane.

"They're dispelling the wall," Myrin said. "Be ready—"

Kalen saw Ilira's attention slip at Myrin's voice and he charged, his axe trailing flame.

"Lady!" Brace split his magic rapier into two identical swords and tossed one to Ilira even as Kalen leaped at her.

She caught the rapier just in time to deflect Kalen's overhead chop so that it screeched along the blade and slid wide. Riding his momentum, he leaped and kicked her in the center of the chest. Driven by his divine magic, she soared back toward the wall of fire, and he leaped after her without the slightest hesitation. The magic died away just as Kalen felt the heat of the flames, and the two skipped through. Kalen could feel the stunned silence from Levia and the others, but he had eyes only for his sworn foe.

Just before they landed, Ilira twisted around Kalen's leg, knocking him off balance. When they slammed into the floor, Kalen tumbled three paces before he staggered to his feet. Ilira landed on her backside as well but rolled to her feet, her rapier in her outstretched hand. They faced one another, in the dead center of the hall, their weapons ready.

Ten paces away, Levia stepped toward them, but Kalen

held up his hand to ward her off. Ilira was his foe alone.

“You will fall this night,” Kalen assured her. “I will put you down.”

Darkness pooled in Ilira’s gold eyes, turning them jet black. “You will try,” she said.



Myrin could not worry about Ilira. Instead, as soon as the wall fell, Myrin charged the nearest pair of crossbowmen, who were busy staring at Kalen’s incredible leap. In their dagger fighting lessons, Kalen had always told her to attack from surprise, and it paid off. Only one saw her, and only with enough time to widen his eyes and try to aim his weapon. She thrust her orb between the crossbowmen, and a wave of thunder knocked both men sprawling.

Pain seared into her back, partly absorbed by her gown’s magic, and she fell to one knee. Levia stalked toward her, her mace raised. “Last chance to stand down, Lady Darkdance.”

Myrin responded with another blast of thunder that sent Levia sailing away.

“Excellent.” Hessar appeared before her. “I feared you might surrender and spoil this.”

His fist—blazing with flames—swept up at Myrin’s chest, and she managed to absorb the brunt of it with her wizard’s shield. The force sent her a pace into the air, but even as she flew up, she brought the crystal orb between them to send flame sweeping toward Hessar. He caught the magic with a disc of blackness. She hung in the air as the magics strove against one another: her fires burned hot, but his shield was black nothingness, cold as the void. Her fire wavered.

Myrin gritted her teeth and saw in her mind the threads of the magic she had cast. She spoke the incantation again, slightly differently, and poured her heart and soul into the power. In response, the flames warped, becoming spell-plague blue. Finally, the spells extinguished each other. Myrin's fire burned itself out and Hessar's shadowy shield flickered away into the air.

Myrin floated back to the floor, panting. She grinned at him. "Well?"

"Impressive," the monk said.

Then Hessar whirled, brought around his foot, which was crackling with lightning, and slammed it into her chest. Pain lit in her as Myrin flew back through the air and skidded to the floor. She coughed blood, shook her head, and found herself staring at a pair of familiar crackling boots. Somehow, Hessar had stepped more than five paces in a heartbeat.

"Not impressive *enough*, however."

Hessar reached down, caught her by the collar, and smashed her head against the floor. The world became a ringing nightmare of blurry forms. His eyes flashed yellow, like those of a wolf—or like Ilira's eyes.

Again, it was Myrin's feyweave gown that saved her, as it had with Phultan in the sewers. It blazed with light, and the man screeched and fell back, clutching at his face.

Myrin rose dizzily, her perceptions shattered. She tried to focus, as Ilira had taught her, and only thus did she manage to see Levia rushing back toward her, her mace held high.

Not that she could do anything about it.



Ilira's first move was not to charge, as Kalen had expected. Instead, she sent her shadow racing across the floor toward him. It drew up into the room as it came on, a hulking creature with talons and wicked barbs of darkness. Kalen swept his axe around, coating the creature in gray flames, and it faltered before its talons could bite into him.

"You cannot flee," he said. "Helm demands—"

"Who's fleeing?" Ilira danced out of the shadow creature as though from a pool of water and kicked him in the face, cutting off his words.

He staggered and batted aside a thrust of her borrowed rapier, but she came back with another lunge that scraped off his conjured armor. Gods, the woman was fast.

He drew on a trick Sithe had taught him and slipped his mortal shell for just an instant. Ilira stabbed at him, but the steel cut nothing but gray flames as he passed, wraith-like, through the elf. Behind her now, he sent the deadly axe scything for Ilira's neck, but she compressed down into her legs and ducked. Kalen saw an opportunity and struck at her face with the butt of the axe, but she threw up her sword arm to block his attack. The stout handle struck her arm with a wet thunk, and she rolled away with the force of the strike. When she stood up, she grasped her arm with a wince and transferred the rapier to her left hand.

"Ambidextrous," she said.

Kalen wasn't listening. Divine fury surged in him at her attempt to flee. He called upon the Threefold God and shot across the intervening distance. Ilira barely dodged his downward cut and the axe sank into the floor. She deftly cut open his arm—which he couldn't feel—then somehow twisted Sithe's axe out of one hand, spoiling his leverage on the big weapon. She had skill, he had to give her that.

No matter.

Kalen clapped a hand on Ilira's left arm to restrain her. She turned, meaning to slip his grasp, but growing up a beggar boy in Luskan had taught Kalen long ago how to grapple with the most agile opponents. He ripped her sleeve, revealing a length of porcelain shoulder, and locked his arm around the lithe elf to pull her close against his gray armor. At his touch, gray fire spread from his fingers to her, burning Helm's sigil into her shoulder. She gasped in pain and tried to pull free. Instantly, he could feel her, as though the brand tied their souls together.

"There is no escape," he said, panting for breath. "You cannot flee justice this time."

Her black eyes shot to his face and her breast heaved against his chest. "Again," she whispered. "Who's fleeing?"

Ilira nodded over his shoulder. Kalen did not have to look; he felt it. Her shadow—forgotten in his pursuit—wrapped itself around him in an ice-cold embrace. Instantly, numbness filled his limbs, as when his spellscar manifested, and apathy filled his soul. He released Ilira, but when she tried to scramble away, the divine brand flared up, and she gasped and fell. Her eyes turned gold, as though his power had shocked her shadowdancing powers out of her.

Let go, a deep, masculine voice said in Kalen's mind. *Rest*
...

The desire to surrender swelled in Kalen, but he could not give in. Not when Myrin relied upon him—not when justice had yet to be done.

"No." Gray flames rose around Kalen, scalding the creature away.

Grasping her burning shoulder with one hand, Ilira thrust the rapier at him, seeking to take advantage of the

shadow's distraction. Kalen spun Sithe's axe and knocked her attack wide. She pumped her arm with blinding speed, as though conducting a choir, and she almost beat his defense. Without the powerful enchantments on Sithe's axe, she would have run him through.

"There is no escape and no victory," Kalen said through the spinning shield he had formed with the axe. "Drop your sword."

Ilira lunged at him again. Her blade cut open his calf before he knocked aside her sword. He could barely feel the injury, but it served to distract him. When he saw her eyes turn black—the shadow made manifest—he realized distraction had been her plan. She rolled around Kalen, but when he cut downward with the axe, she had vanished into his shadow.

At first, panic filled him and he gazed around wildly, at a loss for where she might have gone. But he felt the burning call of the mark he had left on her flesh, sounding like a signal horn from the center of the hall. There, Ilira had appeared in the shadows of the garden, to lurk near the marble platform. She screamed as the mark burned her.

Enough of this game of hunter and hunted. Kalen would beat her down with the strength of the Threefold God. At his prayer, he felt power infuse his limbs, and when he ran toward her, he moved faster than any man should have been able. By Helm's magic, she could not escape. He leaped onto the platform, the axe raised high.

"*Zhavaht*," she hissed.

With a shudder, the platform rose. Kalen staggered at the unexpected movement, and the axe sank into the marble between Ilira's legs. She looked at it a heartbeat, her shoulders heaving.

“Foolish,” she said, panting on the marble. “I can dance away, and leave you here.”

“Foolish,” he said with a smile. “To think the shadows will hide you.”

And with that, he summoned the full radiance of his faith. His armor burst off him and soared outward in a shining beacon of light, so bright it burned the shadow from her gold eyes. The blaze of light dispelled all the shadows on the floating chunk of marble, illuminating the two for all to see. It left Kalen unarmored, but took away Ilira’s shadows as well.

“Well, damn,” she said, hefting her rapier.

Kalen ripped his axe out of the platform, and they were fighting again.



Myrin saw doom bearing down upon her in the form of Levia Shadewalker, and no spells to save her came to mind. It had been days since she’d consulted her grimoire—not since the morning after the lair of Night Masters—and her mind felt muddy from Hesar’s magic-infused strikes. Had he worked a spell upon her to leave her befuddled? She couldn’t hear, either.

A blade appeared between them, however, and Rujia strode out of a portal of flickering light. It was, Myrin thought, a window to the Feywild or something of that nature. The deva met Levia’s charge with a lance of magic, making the priestess stagger. She groped around for Rujia, seemingly unable to see her standing not two paces distant. Myrin recalled the vampire redirecting that very magic toward her in the sewers, and now she knew how it worked:

it made Rujia—and only Rujia—invisible to the one struck.

The deva raised her sword to take advantage of Levia's confusion.

"Stop!" Myrin shouted, hearing herself only dully as though through water. Her ears were splitting. "No killing in my house!"

Rujia struck, but Levia had anticipated the blow and blocked. Even though she couldn't see the deva, she managed to keep her at bay.

Brace kneeled over Myrin, shouting something at her—a healing insult, perhaps. Warmth surged through her—Brace's words worked their magic even if she could not understand them—and she got to her feet with his help.

She saw that the gnome and the deva had made short work of the other Eye of Justice enforcers. Two men lay bleeding on the ground while a third slumped against the wall, seemingly senseless. A fourth man wandered aimlessly, babbling to himself in a disconnected tone. Myrin recognized an enfeebled mind, and wondered which of them had done that: Brace with his bardic magic or Rujia with her tricks?

Myrin sought out Kalen and Ilira, who had taken their fight to the rising platform. There they clashed like angels of light and darkness, and the duel offered no indication of which angel was winning. Finally, her hearing returned with a shock, and the world rushed back into ears.

"—all right?" Brace was asking. "My lady, are you—?"

"Fine," Myrin said, her voice strange and distant. "Help Rujia."

The deva was holding her own well enough against the priestess, although it was clear she fought only to delay her rather than to defeat her. Levia constantly swiped through

empty air, while Rujia kept directing the same blinding magic at her. Blood oozed from Levia's nose.

Likely, it would have gone well enough if Brace hadn't intervened.

"Stand away, you horse's-ass-faced wench!" the gnome shouted.

Levia stopped swinging at the dancing Rujia and instead focused on Brace and Myrin, whom she could see quite well. "What did you say to me?"

"I'd say you were as ugly as my horse's rear end, but as I've no such beast, I cannot," Brace said. "Also, to make such a claim would be to insult both my hypothetical horse's hind-quarters and the posteriors of worthy steeds everywhere."

Levia's eyes narrowed, and the room began to tremble. Rujia stared a warning at Brace.

"She looks angry, Brace," Myrin said. "*Very* angry."

The gnome continued unabated. "And honestly, do you never even *try* to do anything with that raven's nest you call hair?" he asked. "Cyric have *mercy*."

At that moment, a bright light shone overhead, dazzling them all. Myrin looked up and beheld Kalen and Ilira illuminated by gray flames. Myrin's heart leaped once more, and for a moment, she couldn't think. She wasn't sure which of them she wanted to win.

Then Levia loosed a cry of fury, and the ground around them rocked. A crack split along the stone from the priestess to Myrin, throwing both Rujia and Brace sprawling aside. The wizard murmured the words of her levitation spell, and hung in the air as the tremor ripped a chasm beneath her. Levia glared.

"Do you have any idea how much coin that will cost to fix?" Myrin asked. She inspected the ruined floor. "Well,

not that I do either, but still!”

Myrin started to cast another spell when shadow wrapped around her like a fist. She glanced over her shoulder, following the trail of magic, to where Hessar stood near the wall.

“Mother Mystra,” she said. “Wait—”

Then the shadow hand dashed Myrin against the floor, grinding her into the stones beside the crack Levia’s magic had left in her floor. She wriggled but could not move—could not escape or breathe. Pain gave way to panic and her whole body quivered against the floor. The pressure built and built and she wanted to cry out, but she had no breath. Then something tore inside her middle, and pain ripped through her anew. The hand relaxed, only to grind again. This time, there was no fear but only a dizzy sort of weakness.

Myrin looked up to see Levia standing over her, Hessar on the other side. “Do you yield?” the priestess asked, her mace raised. Hessar’s expression was disappointed.

In her dizzy madness, Myrin grinned through bloody teeth. She could not speak to cast magic, but she could feel the blue fire surging within her, begging for release. Her spellscar wanted to manifest—to destroy all those who would endanger it. And just then—seeing Rujia and Brace lying senseless on the floor a few paces away—she couldn’t see a reason to deny it.

A shield of flame surged around her. A vision flashed through her minds of the threads of magic that formed the spell—of the weave loosening. The flames turned blue, and the burned away the shadow like a thick mist. Hessar took an uneasy step back, his yellow eyes widening, and Myrin lashed at him with a surge of crimson flame. The monk tried to dodge, failed, and collapsed screaming to the floor.

Myrin grinned in fierce joy at seeing his pain. This was not like her, but she did not care—it felt so *right*.

She directed another golden bolt toward Levia, but realized the woman was not even looking at her. Instead, she stared up in shock at the platform upon which Kalen and Ilira fought.

Myrin looked, and gasped.



Glowing as fiercely as a gray star, Kalen brought the axe sweeping in, but Ilira ducked under it. They traded blows, moving each other back and forth across the rising platform. She proved damnably good at eluding his strikes, but he could tell she was tiring. Her attacks came slower, and she rarely struck through his defense, let alone cut him.

He'd shed his armor to produce the gray glow that surrounded them, but he felt no less protected by Helm's power. He was learning how to dodge Ilira's attacks—exactly where and when to move—and her rapier slid barely past his body. He knew how to move much as Sithe had done when first he'd seen her fight. The armor of faith worked both ways, he realized—either way, his faith was protecting him.

The platform rose from the hall out into the Westgate night. The Shieldmeet festivities lit the city with a thousand, thousand lights, and the effect was dazzling. As they drew up into the night sky, fires burst in the air around them—the product of hedge wizards and alchemists adding special magic to the celebration. Kalen's light was the most impressive display of all.

"I have the power of a god behind me," Kalen said as they fought. "What do you have?"

“A weapon.” Ilira eluded his next attack, caught his arm, and twisted the axe from his grasp. It fell, scything end over end, and cut into the floor far below. Deadly, but useless.

Ilira smiled at him and raised her rapier. “Regretting the decision to chase me yet?”

Kalen held out his arm as though to ward her off with an unseen blade. Gray flames tingled around his hand. Ilira pursed her lips, smiled, and lunged.

Vindicator appeared between them, a blade far longer than Ilira’s borrowed rapier. Her eyes widened at the suddenness of it and she managed to twist aside so that it plunged into her stomach, rather than her heart. She tried to gasp, but merely gagged in shock. The rapier fell from her limp hand and skittered off into the night.

They stood like that, locked together by the sword. Then Ilira staggered back and fell to her knees at the edge of the platform, clutching her stomach. Blood seeped between her fingers.

“Devious,” she said. “I . . . approve.”

“Bane bugger your opinion.” He put the point of Vindicator to her face. “Yield now, and I promise you will have justice.”

“Justice,” she said bitterly. “I’m innocent, in case you’re wondering.”

He shook his head. “Innocent folk don’t run.”

“Well.” She coughed. “I suppose you’ll just have to finish me then.” Her gold eyes blinked wetly at him and a smile crooked her lips. “Come, Saer Shadow. *Finish* me.”

He lowered the sword and stepped forward. “I bind you by the authority of the Eye—”

She caught his collar in one hand, his neck in the other, and pressed her searing lips to his.

Blue fire roiled inside him.



“Kalen!” Myrin cried, at the same time Levia uttered the name in similar terror.

They looked at one another.

“Upstart bitch!” Hessar rasped from the ground. A shadowy spear appeared over his hand, and he hurled it at Myrin.

Myrin deflected the bolt of magic with her orb—into which the spear dissipated harmlessly—but Levia smashed her mace into the back of her head. Without the shield, Myrin would certainly be on the ground, her skull caved in. Instead, she merely fell to one knee, dazed, as Levia staggered away, batting at blue flames that licked at her sleeve.

Blackness abruptly surrounded her, illumined in the orb’s strange blue light. Myrin watched in despair as shadow magic stripped away her fire shield. The spell didn’t hurt her, but she got the sense that it could have. The monk appeared before her, gazing down with that same supercilious smile, as though he were a master chiding a student with a glance.

“Do your worst,” Myrin said to him. “I’ve fought far greater foes than you.”

He smiled as if to say he doubted that.

Then, surprisingly, he nodded at her bandaged hand and winked at her. “You’d best use that now.” He vanished back into the conjured darkness.

What did that mean? Did he *know*?

No choice. Myrin grasped the edge of the bandage in her teeth and ripped it free.

The darkness faded, and a pair of hands grasped Myrin roughly by the collar. Levia.

“What is going on?” Levia looked up at the platform, unable to utter another word.

Myrin unwrapped her hand as quickly as possible behind her back.



Their kiss lingered.

Ilira pressed herself into Kalen, her body hungry for his, and he found his own appetite rising to match hers. Her tongue flicked along his lips, and he parted his teeth to allow her in. His glow dimmed as his focus shifted. They kissed and kissed.

And there was no fire.

Kalen had seen Ilira burn a man's face half away with a kiss. An innocent touch had been enough to burn his own fingers. And for one horrible breath, he thought she was doing the same thing to his face and he simply could not feel it.

But this time, there was nothing. Instead, it was simply a kiss: not tentative like Myrin's kiss or ravenous like Fayne's from a year ago. Those had been great kisses, but this . . .

Ilira kissed him in such a way as to make him love her.

Then the moment broke, and Ilira pulled away. “You . . .” She stared confusedly at his face, then touched her lips. “Gods of the Seldarine, you're not burned.”



Levia stared blankly up at the platform, her mouth wide

in an expression of horrified amazement. Myrin thought she could see tears welling in her eyes.

“Kalen taught me something,” Myrin said, the bandages falling away.

Levia looked back at her, eyebrows raised.

“One should always attack by surprise if at all possible,” Myrin said. “So . . . surprise?”

She grasped Levia’s wrist with her scarred hand, and blue flames rose from the touch. Ilira’s stolen spellscar tore apart Levia’s flesh, sending her screaming away from Myrin. She fell on her backside, cradling her burned arm.

Myrin looked up, her blue hair swirling in the winds of magic. “Kalen.”

Hessar was still there, rushing back toward her. Whatever amnesty had briefly hung between them was now gone, it seemed. His fists and feet blazed with dark energy.

Myrin stretched out her scarred hand, which glowed with silver-white light—Torm’s light, drawn from Levia. A searing ray shot out and struck the man full in the chest, and he shrieked and fell away. He reacted to the assault the way he had when her gown’s radiance touched him: it seemed to pain him deeply. He turned and fled.

She wanted to go help Kalen, but she couldn’t leave Rujia and Brace alone where Levia might capture them. She drew out her orb and called to mind the awful spell she’d used in Luskan, when she’d plunged an entire cavern into darkness through which her companions had still been able to see. Rujia and Brace could escape in that. Inky blackness surged from her, and the hall became absolutely dark once more. The power was run through with veins of blue fire.

Next, Myrin called upon her persistent levitation magic and surged into the air. She pierced the darkness but pulled

up short, her heart thundering. The platform was descending, and she saw why: no one stood upon it any more.

Locked together, Kalen and Ilira were falling right toward her.



Their hearts beat in unison as Kalen crouched over Ilira, and she pressed herself into his embrace. The silence drew out between them.

“Gods.” Ilira touched her lips with tentative fingers. “I’ve not kissed a man in a century—not without killing him.”

Kalen’s mind felt fuzzy. “You meant to kill me, did you?”

“I did.” Ilira glanced over the side of the platform, into a roiling mass of darkness. “Although perhaps this will do.”

She wrapped her arms around him, kicked in the side of one knee, and they both slipped from the platform, flailing as they fell through the night sky.

Kalen’s insides rushed upward. He wanted to vomit. “You’re mad!”

Ilira threw back her head and laughed, a melodious, wild sound that filled the night around them. Ilira sounded not terrified but exhilarated.

They hurtled past Myrin, who was flying toward them, then plunged toward the darkness.

“Do you want to die?” Kalen demanded of Ilira. “You’re killing both of—”

As soon as they hit Myrin’s conjured shadows, which swallowed Kalen’s light, Ilira’s eyes turned black as death. She danced into the shadows, taking him along.

For one disorienting heartbeat, the world blurred into a shadowy version of itself, and then he was slammed against

a solid wall. His bones rattled.

They started to fall again, and Kalen realized that Ilira had teleported them against the high wall of Darkdance Manor. Before he could do more than gasp for air, Ilira shadow-danced once more and slammed him again into the ceiling. Vindicator jarred loose from his nerveless fingers and vanished into the mass of darkness. Then she did it again, and again, and a fourth time, hammering him against one wall and leaping over to hit the opposite wall.

“Wait—” he said, and she slammed him into the floor. “Stop—”

They hit once more, and Kalen lay reeling on the floor with Ilira standing over him. She grasped his collar and pulled him up so that her black eyes blazed into his gray ones. She said nothing, only stared at him, her shoulders heaving. As he watched, her eyes slowly returned to gold, and emotion flooded her face: something deep and long ago buried, only now awakened.

“I—” Ilira tried to speak but could only cough, sending blood leaking down her chin. He must have cut her deeply indeed.

Finally, the darkness dissipated, and as it did, Levia appeared behind Ilira, her mace held high. But her shadow fell across them, cast by the glowing light of Vindicator two paces away. The elf’s ears pricked slightly, not unlike those of a cat. Even as Levia struck her head, Ilira threw herself down on top of Kalen and danced into her shadow. The world spun crazily again.

They appeared by one of the gargoyles atop Darkdance Manor, tumbling out of a shadow cast by an exploding firework. They hit the sloped roof together and bounced apart. Ilira tumbled without control, seemingly senseless from

Levia's strike. Kalen reached for her, but she slipped out of his grasp and he skittered and rolled down the shingled roof toward the edge. He managed to roll over onto his stomach and dig his fingers into the shingles to no avail. Indeed, he left a trail of blood where the shingles tore his skin.

"Not tonight, Helm," he prayed.

Gray flames spread around his hand and Vindicator appeared in his grasp. He raised the blade into the air and stabbed it down. The shingles and the wood beneath parted easily enough, and the blade cut a path down the roof with an ugly groan. Ilira rolled past him. Unless he did something, she was going to fall to her death when they reached the edge.

Perhaps it was the thought of Myrin and how it would hurt her.

Perhaps it was his vow to protect the innocent and bring justice to the darkness.

Or perhaps it was the kiss.

Regardless, Kalen reached out and grasped Ilira's bare arm. Instantly, smoke rose from his bare skin on hers, and he knew that whatever had suppressed her spellscar before had worn off. He gritted his teeth and prepared for the heat that built against his own protective scar. For what seemed forever, they fell together, blue fire dancing from her skin to his, Vindicator blazing as it tore open Myrin's roof.

Then they reached the edge. Vindicator thunked against a crossbeam, halting Kalen with an abruptness that made his arm creak. The impact jarred his hand loose of Ilira's arm, but he snatched out and caught her gloved forearm. He heard more than felt his arm strain past the breaking point, but his spellscar let him hold her.

How long they hung that way—Kalen just over the edge,

Ilira limp in his grasp—he could not say. It might have been breaths or hours.

Then hands closed around Kalen's wrist and he looked up into Myrin's terrified face. She helped him push Ilira onto the roof, then pull himself up. He and Myrin sat panting in the warm Westgate evening.

"Kalen. Are you well? I—" Myrin trailed off, eyes wide.

Without even realizing it, he'd summoned Vindicator out of the roof and back into his hand. The blade seemed as pure and sharp as ever, for all its haphazard trip through her roof.

"I have to take her," Kalen said, pointing the sword at Ilira. "You know that."

Myrin shook her head. "She's no threat to me—I swear by Mystra and all the gods."

"Mystra is long dead," Kalen said.

"So is Helm, but he still means something to you."

Kalen coughed. "I have to take her."

Myrin's eyes burned. "Are you really Kalen, or are you just Shadowbane?"

He stared at her. "I—"

"And I'm your shadow," Ilira said.

The elf—who must have awakened during their moment together—swept Kalen's lower foot out from under him. He tried to catch himself, but with his numbing spellscar he had no balance. He slipped off the roof out over the Westgate night.



Myrin felt a crushing weight on her chest, as though her heart had stopped and would never start again.

“What—what have you done?”

Ilira started to respond, but at that moment another voice cried out in rage and fear. Levia came running down the roof toward them, away from the obediently floating platform.

“Myrin, it’s well.” Ilira coughed into her hand. “You have to take us—”

She faltered and fell into Myrin’s arms. The wizard furrowed her brow, stupefied as to what was happening. When she brought up her hand, it glinted with wet blood in the moonlight.

Red-black blood trickled between Ilira’s lips and over her chin, and her flesh smoked where Kalen had marked it with Helm’s sigil. Her eyes seemed vacant and opaque, their gold luster faded to a muddy yellow. The color reminded Myrin of Hessar, when he had looked at her through the shadows. She brushed the comparison aside and held Ilira tight in her arms.

From higher up on the roof, Levia declaimed words of power, and the air before her shaped itself into a hundred scything blades, which came roaring down toward Myrin.

Myrin didn’t know what to think, but she understood what had to be done. She opened her shadow door and pulled herself and Ilira through it just as the blades fell upon them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

NIGHT, SHIELDMEET

NO, GODSDAMMIT!” LEVIA CRIED AS THE TWO WOMEN vanished, dodging her storm of blades. “No!”

What if she had used the ring? Could she have got to them in time? But no, the platform had been so slow. Perhaps if she had brought a potion of flight . . . Gods!

Levia slipped on the treacherous shingles and nearly slid off the roof herself. She was panicking, and panic made one stupid. She shimmied down and glanced over the edge, wincing.

Kalen hung about a pace down, clinging to a gargoyle. “Help?”

Levia blinked down in disbelief. Then such relief swept through her that she laughed.

“I’m glad you’re amused,” Kalen said. “*Help.*”

She caught his arm and pulled. Muscles straining, she helped him up, and he collapsed half atop her on the roof. They lay together in the moonlight, half supporting one another.

“Levia?” Kalen asked. “Are you all right?”

“Am *I* all right?” His fingers brushed her face, and she

realized her cheeks were wet with tears, despite her relief. “I think so. I—Kalen, your hand!”

His left hand was red and blistered as though he’d plunged it into fire. Magical fire, perhaps, or—or Ilira’s spellscar. The one that hadn’t burned him when Ilira kissed him.

Immediately, all of Levia’s warm relief fled, replaced by cold, murderous focus. Other folk might grow hot and foolish when angered, but Gedrin had long ago taught Levia the self-defeating nature of rage. Instead, she imagined her hands around Ilira’s throat—those gold eyes huge and protruding out of her damnably beautiful face. Her mind went over the steps to make that fantasy a reality.

“We’ll find them,” she said, her voice cold.

Ilira may have received Kalen’s oath of justice this night, but she had earned Levia’s eternal enmity. Levia swore her own vow to her god that Ilira would suffer when they met again.

It would be a mercy if Kalen’s strike had killed her already.



Some ways away, the revelry in the common room of the Purple Lady festhall waned as the night progressed, and many of the patrons retired for more personal amusements elsewhere. There were still two-score folk lounging around the place, smiling blissfully and flirting over their drinks. The previous night’s battle had rattled them, but they had let the excitement go.

Abruptly, a cold wind flowed through the common room, stirring clothes and loose hair. Plates rattled and quivering tankards sent mead and ale foaming onto the tables. Folk looked for the source of the icy breeze: a door of

shadow that opened among the tables. Through that door, they saw a desolate landscape of ruined buildings—a bleary, nightmare reflection of Westgate.

Myrin and Ilira stumbled from the door. The nearly unconscious elf clutched her middle with a blood-drenched handful of cloak. The wizard's hands were slaked with blood, though the mess seemed not to touch her gown through the enchantments woven upon it.

Myrin guided Ilira to collapse on a nearby table. The Helm sigil burned into her shoulder sizzled, and she cried out anew. Black blood ran like spittle from her mouth.

“Don't just stare,” Myrin cried. “Help us!”

The patrons of the Purple Lady did no such thing, being frozen in awe and terror.

“Allow me to rephrase.” Myrin raised her orb and sent a bolt of magic lancing into a pillar right next to one of the slack-jawed patrons. It reduced a purple tapestry to tatters. “Someone help me, or I aim better.”

“My lady!” The door slammed open, and Brace rushed into the tavern. The gnome looked harried, but little the worse for wear. His eyes widened when he saw Ilira bleeding out on the table and Myrin holding her bloody cloak pressed to her midsection. “Gods!”

“Praise Mystra,” Myrin said. “You can heal her.”

Brace shook his head. “Her wounds are beyond my magic.”

“A healer, then,” Myrin said. “Find a priest!”

The gnome exercised his harsh words to drive back curious onlookers, and a curse sent one of them rushing for the nearest temple. As a group they did nothing, but when offered direct instructions, they jumped to obey. One of them—an elderly man with a medallion of Ilmater, god of

healing—came forward, but Ilira slapped away his seeking hands.

“Priest . . .” she murmured. “Burn . . .”

The gnome’s face went pale as that of a corpse, and Myrin understood why. A healer would have to touch Ilira, and her ravenous spellscar burned with renewed fury in her skin.

“I’ll take your scar again,” Myrin said. “Then a healer can—”

“Not again.” Ilira’s gloved hand trailed down Myrin’s rune-covered arm. “Don’t make my . . . last act . . . killing you.” Her body heaved and she vomited blood onto the table.

Myrin and Brace exchanged a look. Ilira was dying, and there was nothing they could do.



In his borrowed office, Liltén’s hand lingered over the black reaver. He had not seen the piece in check before, and yet the white knight had swept into the space and slain it.

“Fascinating,” Liltén said aloud.

His guest remained unseen, despite Liltén’s sharp senses and unique heritage.

“My compliments,” Liltén said. “I had not expected such a gambit so early.”

The shadows stirred, and a pair of ruby red eyes appeared in the gloom. After a moment, Liltén’s opponent was sitting in the chair across the desk from him. “Surprise wins battles.”

“I see you’ve decided to play the game after all, my old friend.”

“Hardly. I simply kill those who stand in my way.” Kirenkirsalai reached out and very firmly tipped the reaver over. “Your woman is dead, or soon will be. You have lost.”

“It is a mark of your impatient youthfulness that you think you have won before a piece is taken—or even all the pieces declared.”

He reached out to right the reaver piece, but Kire clapped his hand over his. They struggled, matching strength—Kire’s unholy, Liltens ancient.

“I see no way your fox can survive this, unless”—Kire’s eyes widened—“No. She won’t do it. She can’t. Taking the elf’s scar will kill her.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Liltens held the reaver firmly. “How does that make you feel?”

Finally, Kire let go of the piece and stood, anger on his dark face. “Would you sacrifice the prize of our game to save your little pet? Are you that mad?”

“Just as you underestimate me, so have you underestimated that woman for the last century and a half. I see no reason to assume you’d change your ways.” Liltens indicated the rest of the board. “I wonder if all the pieces you think are yours are indeed yours.”

Kire stared past him, at a glass case in the corner of the chamber. He’d been in this chamber before, but the way he gazed at the case, he’d never noticed it before. The hand Liltens had thought hovered over his rapier hilt was, in truth, touching an object in his pocket.

“Fascinating,” Liltens murmured. “Do you see something appealing?”

Kire scowled at him. “How’s your daughter?” Then he vanished into the dark.

For a long time, Liltens stared into the empty seat. His

hand lingered on the reaver.

“Erevan,” he prayed. “Hear your lapsed servant. Be with her.”



Ilira cried out, her voice burbling with blood and bile. She kicked and scabbled and would have torn at her wound had two of the larger patrons not restrained her. Myrin made sure they did not touch her skin. Others watched from a distance, terrified of the wizard and her angry gnome companion.

Blood spattered Myrin’s blue gown and slid down like water on glass. The magic kept her perfectly clean, but it could do nothing for Ilira. Myrin conjured a magic hand to hold pressure on the wound, while her own hands were busy.

“Godsdamn it, isn’t there anything we can do?” Myrin’s voice cracked.

“Despair serves no one, Lady Darkdance,” a man said. “Fortunately, I can help her.”

Hessar stepped out from behind a pillar. Instantly, Myrin raised one bloody hand to throw a bolt of golden force at the monk. His shadow magic deflected it to blast a crater in the wall.

“Wait,” Ilira croaked. “He’s . . . a friend.”

“A friend?” Brace—who had reclaimed his rapier from Ilira—drew both swords into his hands. Hesar looked bemused. “This is one of those Eye of Justice lunatics—”

“Not the Eye . . .” Ilira coughed blood. “Shade . . . he’s . . .” A coughing fit wrenched her up off the table. “He’s a Netherese spy.”

“Netherese!” Brace gaped. “But that’s—that’s so much worse!”

“Stay back.” Myrin raised her orb. “I warn you this once.”

“And I warn *you*.” Hesar looked calm. “Take your mage’s hand from that wound at her peril. She is bleeding to death while you stand in indecision.”

Ilira struggled against the hands holding her. She curled into a pained ball, making her leather jerkin ride up and revealing the luster of gold: a tattoo of a starburst with many points.

“Very well.” Myrin raised her scarred right hand to Hesar’s face.

“Is this necessary?” the monk asked.

“You’ll give me the spell from your mind,” Myrin said. “Unless you’re here to kill her.”

“If you take the spell, will you not have to touch her?” He gestured to her untouched left hand. “And wouldn’t a second scar be a perfect mate to the first?”

Myrin hesitated.

“Trust me to aid her or no, but decide quickly,” he said. “Else you’ll have to hope you can steal knowledge of how to raise the dead.”

Could Myrin trust Hesar? She remembered the way the monk had restrained himself from striking her during the battle. Hesar had stood over her in the darkness and winked at her. He’d known about Ilira’s spellscar—he’d even told her to use it against Levia. Perhaps . . .

Ilira moaned. Bloody veins shot through her gold eyes and she convulsed, gasping for air.

“Very well,” Myrin said. “Heal her. But if you harm her—”

“Rest assured, lady—I serve my own interests in this,

and those do not entail her death just yet.” Hessar stepped to her side and pulled up his sleeves to bare gray-tinted arms. “Put your hand on my skin—I’ll need your strength. Yours, too, gnome.”

Brace sneered at him. “Never, shade—” He stopped when Myrin shot him a pleading look. Grudgingly, he put his hand on Hessar’s arm.

The shade put his hand over Ilira’s face. He uttered dark and powerful words in an ancient dialect that Myrin found she understood, although she could not say how. He was chanting a healing ritual, one designed to take life from their bodies and put it into Ilira. Myrin felt cold as his magic drained some of her life through her hand. Brace, too, paled slightly. If Myrin was right, though, Hessar would have to touch Ilira to complete the spell.

“She’ll burn your hand off. She—”

She drew in a sharp breath when Hessar laid his bare fingers on Ilira’s forehead, but there was no burning. He simply touched her, and healing radiance fell into her body.

“You can touch her,” Myrin said. “What does that mean?”

“It means that I know more about her than you do.” As Myrin watched, the rent in Ilira’s belly closed. The elf stopped shaking and her breathing eased. “Satisfied?”

Myrin nodded. Before she let go of his arm, however, blue runes lit on her arm and something cold seeped into her. Hessar shivered, but if he sensed her theft, he gave no sign.

“What of that?” Myrin gestured to the brand of Helm on her shoulder.

Hessar shrugged. “Only he who put that mark on her can take it off once more. Until then, it will allow Kalen

Dren to find her wherever she goes, and harm her when she tries to flee him. My magic suppresses the harmful effect, but the beacon will still be there.”

“Shar’s Slaving Spit.” Brace glowered. “Hiding is moot if the Eye can track her.”

“Not so long as she wears this.” Hessar indicated Ilira’s star-sapphire bracelet, the only bit of color she wore. “This magic conceals her from any scrying attempt. Although—” He smiled. “No doubt they are tracking both of you instead. I would go, and quickly.”

The monk drew away and vanished into the shadows.

Brace hopped up on the bench and felt at Ilira’s leather-wrapped chest. “She’s breathing normally—I think she’ll be well. Although we should move, ’ere your lad finds us again.”

“In a moment.” Myrin slumped down on the bench. In the mess of everything, she’d forgotten something important, and her heart raced. “Brace, what happened to Rujia? Elevar?”

“The dwarf is well. He immediately set to cleaning up the mess.” The gnome shrugged. “As for Rujia, we got separated. They might have taken her.”

Somehow, Myrin doubted that. It was a relief to hear Elevar was well, at least.

Then she remembered something about Rujia and felt at her deep-pocketed belt pouch. She drew out the fabric-wrapped package the deva had given her only a few hours before, although it felt like years ago. She unwrapped it and found a book, one whose binding seemed vaguely familiar. It reminded her of other books she had seen in the manor. In fact, she realized, this was the very book that was missing out of her family histories.

Her fingers shook as she unwound the leather strip. The first dates in the tome were from two hundred years ago. She skimmed through to the end. The last entries were written in a delicate feminine hand and discussed the last male heir of the family—Neveren Darkdance—and his wife, Shalis. And their daughter . . .

Maerlyn Darkdance.

Myrin read on, her eyes widening.

PART SIX:

VEILS OVER FIRE

The pasha of Calimport keeps a harem of beauteous genasi, whose veiled dance of allure has been known to drive a hundred men to distraction at a time. It is not, however, until they lower their veils and reveal faces of flame that the true dance begins.

Shalis Ptolexis, Celebrant of Sharess
Wanderings in Love's Name,
Published in the Year of the Bow (1354 DR)

FPO

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DUSK, 1 ELEASIS

AS DARKNESS FELL THE FOLLOWING EVENING, THE knights of the Eye gathered and the Vigilant Seers finally emerged from their skulking business of the day to hear the business of the night.

As Levia stood in the grand council hall of the Eye of Justice, standing before a council of fools and thugs, it was all she could do to still her tongue. But if Lord Gedrin Shadowbane's adopted daughter had learned one thing from all the lessons he had bestowed, it was patience. She had a goal in mind—to kill Ilira Nathalan—and the ramblings of senile old men wouldn't stand in her way.

"Did you think you could hide this?" Haran's voice had picked up a reedy quaver in the last ten years. "Did you think you could brazenly attack a noble citizen of Westgate—using the Eye's own resources, no less—and we would not hear of it? Or that we would take no action?"

Yes, Levia thought, but she said nothing aloud.

The Vigilant Seers were impotent fools, too interested in their petty squabbles and hypocritical dealings with the scum of Westgate to do anything of value. And a stuffy idiot

impressed to death with his own position like Haran was only one, albeit excellent example.

“How far you have fallen from your esteemed father’s lofty aims,” Haran said. “We should all be ashamed of your actions. You—you’re like a wayward child. Why—?”

Saer Harangue continued with his voluminous rebuke, really pushing himself to the limits of his abilities. He questioned her competence, her loyalty, her judgment, her motives, and then her competence again. Haran had blasted her with so many of these oratories over the decades that they just droned on in her ears to no effect.

Levia looked around at the rest of the faded council of Vigilant Seers, remembering a day ten years prior when she had done much the same thing. Gorverim—a Mulan sorcerer of some far country—seemed to pay only scant attention to Haran. Instead, he quietly conferred with his bodyguard Shae-Lan, a tattooed Rashemi woman as big as any orc warrior. On his other side sat that damned Rsalya, who had succeeded her master Sephalus—Levia hated her as much as ever. The fourth member of the council—a sniveling fool called Vaulren of House Vhammos—was not even present. No doubt he was laid up with too much drink from a Shieldmeet revel.

Uthias Darkwell sat in the center seat on the council, listening raptly to every word. Levia was technically one of his Watchers, although she rarely took orders from him. No one else wanted her, due to her history and her lone-wolf attitude. She’d traded little beyond barely civil dismissals with any of the Vigilant Seers since Gedrin’s passing.

Haran had apparently finished his diatribe. “Have you nothing to say for yourself?”

Levia shrugged. “What I did, I did for a purpose, as I

have ever acted. If you disagree with that purpose, censure me. But let me get back to work.”

Murmurs rippled through the chamber among the assembled knights. They were accustomed to anger, but this coldness from Levia seemed to have taken them by surprise.

“The council is agreed, then,” Uthias said. “For her unprovoked and unsanctioned attack on Lady Myrin Darkdance, Sister Levia is censured—”

“What of Shadowbane?” Gorverim spoke softly, as ever. “There have been reports over the past tenday of a man wearing black leathers and wielding Vindicator.”

“Reports, that we had of our *own* Watchers, not of you,” Rsalya said. “Were you hiding these stories from our sight, I wonder?”

“Indeed.” Haran hesitated enough that Levia thought he hadn’t heard such reports himself, but Saer Harangue was ever an opportunist. “What say you to that?”

Levia looked to Uthias, who gave her a slight nod. “Rumors are rumors. I deal in facts.”

Rsalya would not let it rest. “And you did not think these rumors worthy of attention?”

Levia hated that question. It put her in the position of choosing her words carefully, lest she lie to the council. “I do not see how my methods pertain to the question at hand.”

“You dissemble as well as ever,” Haran said. “Do you deny the return of Shadowbane? That he is your ally, just as he was your student?”

“By the Threefold God—” Levia amended her words at Haran’s sharp look. “By Torm I say to you, I do not see how my methods pertain—”

“Outrage!” Haran slammed his fist on the pulpit behind which he stood. “Who has hired you away from us, Levia,

that you lie so brazenly? The Fire Knives? The Shou? Are you—?”

“Peace.” Uthias’s cool voice rippled along the walls of the round audience chamber. “Sister Shadewalker would not have allowed tales of our master’s blade to escape her notice. I’m sure she had plenty of reasons not to mention such rumors.”

“And I want to know those reasons,” Haran insisted.

“*Enough*, Haran. Levia Shadewalker has always been an effective operative, and a loyal one. She is our ally, even if you cannot see it.” Levia opened her mouth, but Uthias spoke again, unexpectedly. “Thank you, Sister Levia, for your steadfast devotion to our cause. Although we do not always concur with your methods, you have been a wonderful operative of the Eye of Justice, and for that, you have my personal gratitude.”

His support—let alone actual praise—caught her by surprise. “Thank you, Lord Seer.”

The others of the council looked equally as startled. They had never known Uthias Darkwell—urbane, brilliant, but hard as iron—to show such kindness.

The silence lasted a ten-count before a red-faced Haran broke it. “She is a traitor! She is keeping secrets from us and refuses to answer our questions!”

Rsalya looked startled by his outburst and even a little nervous. Gorverim watched it all with detachment. At his side, Shae-Lan tightened her grasp on her gold-inlaid double axe.

Uthias waved to him. “Peace, my brother Seer—”

“No peace when traitors stand among us!” Haran signaled his two watchers—men twice as wide as Levia and thrice as strong. “Watchers, take her into custody—by

force, if she resists!”

Levia dropped a hand to where her mace would hang, but of course they'd taken her weapons outside the council chamber. She could cast battle spells, but would it be enough?

Then the doors opened with a grind of metal on stone, drawing the attention of all.

“Enough,” said Kalen Dren.



Bandaged and splinted from the battle in Darkdance Manor, Kalen limped before the assembled Eye of Justice, unmasked and unarmed, his gray eyes fixed upon Uthias Darkwell.

The council of Vigilant Seers rose, their faces paling with shock. “He—you cannot,” said Haran, finally at a loss for words. “You cannot be—”

Kalen shouldn't have come. Every bit of him called out for rest, for healing after the beating Ilira had given him, but he'd waited long enough. He'd heard enough of their bickering and double-talk. It was time to lay all his coin on the table and deal all the cards.

“Many of you know me, but for those who do not, I am Kalen Dren, he who is called Shadowbane. I have returned to settle accounts—to finish the task Gedrin began so many years ago and restore the Eye of Justice to its former glory.”

He raised his hands, and gray flames swirled into the form of Vindicator. The assembled Eye of Justice gasped as one, and whispers shot through the room like lightning.

Kalen fixed his gaze on Uthias, for whom his announcement could only be a challenge. But the master of the

Vigilant Seers had a sly smile on his lips. “You are welcome in this hall, heir of Gedrin. Only tell us—what is your intention? Have you come to challenge us?”

“I care nothing for the leadership of the Eye,” Kalen said. “That was never my desire or ambition. I am an instrument of the Threefold God’s justice, and will remain as such.”

Referring to the Eye’s divine patron by that name—the old way—provoked a few uncertain expressions, but no verbal objections. Levia had told Kalen that, in these latter days, much of the order considered naming the Threefold God outdated, foolish dogma, if not outright heresy. No one dared denounce him now, however.

Uthias nodded. “Well are you returned, then, Brother Kalen,” he said. “If you would leave us awhile—you and Sister Levia. The council must deliberate.”

“Of course.”

Kalen took Levia’s hand and led her out. At the door, however, Kalen turned back. He surveyed the council chamber, then said something that made Levia gasp.

“I am not the only Shadowbane chosen by this sword,” Kalen said. “There is another, and—Threefold God willing—there will be more. I intend, starting today, to find more worthy wielders to carry Vindicator against the darkness.”

This evoked gasps, even among the Vigilant Seers. Only Uthias remained unshaken, displaying his usual stoic aplomb.

The doors ground shut behind them, leaving them in the outer chamber. The energy in the air of Castle Thalavar felt as it had ten years prior, when he had first come to Westgate, but Levia’s face was troubled. Kalen smiled shakily, hoping to diffuse what was sure to be an upbraiding.

Instead, she sighed. “Well? You’ve done it. Do you see what I have said?”

“You told me true,” Kalen said. “The Eye has fallen to thieves and schemers, and it is my responsibility to purify it. Today was simply the first step.”

“You did not have to show yourself like that,” Levia said. “I’m happy you did, but why?”

“I could no longer stand by and do nothing.” Kalen smiled wanly. “Also, you looked like you needed the help.”

Kalen turned to go and winced. His body didn’t move as he instructed, and he would have fallen had Levia not interceded and caught him in her strong arms.

“Heh,” he muttered. “You always did support me when I went too far.”

“When do you *not* go too far?”

She murmured a healing spell and for a first, he felt no compulsion to object. Instead, he rested his head on her shoulder, like a boy with his older, stronger sister. He thought at first she trembled, but like as not, that was his spellscar deceiving his senses.

Kalen released Vindicator to clatter down onto the stone floor of the castle. Levia reached for it, but it dissolved in gray flame before she could.

“I’ve given it back to the other Shadowbane,” he explained. “I told him I would have no more need of it, and I won’t.”

Something flickered across Levia’s face, but she suppressed it. Same old unreadable Levia. “What of your promise, to find others able to wield the sword?”

“I do not need the sword for that.” Kalen raised his hand, around which crackled gray flame. “The Threefold God lives in me, and I in him. The sword is simply a tool.”

The council chambers opened and the knights of the Eye and the Vigilant Seers filed out, all of them at least glancing at Levia and especially at Kalen before they moved on. Most wore faces as unreadable as rough stone, although some seemed clearly hopeful or angry. Haran—with his entourage of supporters—stared with open dislike at Levia and Kalen.

Uthias exited last and crossed to them. “Be welcome yet wary in these halls, Kalen Dren. I support your return, but my opinion isn’t necessarily the general one.”

“I understand, Lord Seer,” Kalen said. “I’ll make myself hard to find.”

“There’s a lad.” He turned to Levia. “Attend me a moment, Sister?”

“Of course.”

Kalen stepped away, back toward the corridors that would lead to Levia’s chambers. He’d rested there since the battle in Darkdance Manor, hidden away from prying eyes and ears, but he suspected that would change after his scene in the council chambers. Even now, he could feel the careful scrutiny of the Knights of the Eye, some of them sharpening their knives.

“Go ahead and try,” he murmured with a daring smile.



As Kalen strode away, showing only a slight impairment from his many wounds, Levia’s heart swelled with pride and something not unlike affection. He had come before the council just as sternly and abruptly as he had ten years before, when first he’d come to Westgate, and seeing him challenge the Vigilant Seers had been a wonder to behold.

Kalen's return a tenday before had stirred old feelings she'd thought buried in the wake of his departure, and just at the moment, she did not bother fighting them. After all, he'd nearly killed Lady Ilira, and in so doing shattered whatever he'd had with that slip of a girl Myrin Darkdance. The battle had shown that he held no affection for either the innocent Myrin or the mysterious Ilira. And that meant perhaps—just *perhaps*—Levia might . . .

But no matter: there would be time to speak when their duties were done. And perhaps, when a certain secret no longer lingered between them.

Uthias's eyes were unsettlingly intense, as though he could hear her thoughts. "A question for you, Sister," he said. "Regarding a certain mutual friend."

"Do you mean Kalen, my lord?" Levia asked.

"The other one, actually," he said. "*Our* Shadowbane."

As though invisible feathers tickled her neck, Levia shivered. She looked around the outer chamber, which still hosted half a dozen Eye of Justice enforcers. None of them appeared to have noticed the Vigilant Seer's words, but who was to say for certain. How did he know about her secret apprentice?

"I'm sure I don't understand, Lord Seer."

"Sister." Uthias stepped closer to her, making Levia retreat a step. He drew in close, however, and put his hands on her arms. "Kalen confessed to his knowledge of the new Shadowbane. Was this your doing?"

Levia shook her head. So Uthias *didn't* know—merely suspected. "He asked for my help to track his old apprentice. And we found him—or at least someone. Another Shadowbane."

"I see." Uthias made no attempt to whisper, but no one

seemed to note his words. “I only wish you had come to me earlier.”

“I thought I could handle it. Kalen and I fought him on Midsummer’s Eve.”

“Midsummer’s Eve.” Uthias’s eyes narrowed slightly. “The night before Midsummer. You are sure of the date?”

“Yes, Master.” Levia had a firm head for dates and times. “Master? What is it?”

Uthias wore a rueful smile, and Levia swore he chuckled softly—something she had never heard the Lord Seer of the Eye of Justice do. “Ah, such a complex game we play.”

“Game? What game—?”

Then Uthias leaned in and kissed her. It startled Levia so badly that all thought ground to a halt in her head. His hand found her breast and squeezed, sending a shudder of delight through her. Eyes wide, she gazed around the outer chamber, but no one seemed to see.

They parted. “Apologies,” Uthias said. “My heart belongs to another. Farewell for the nonce, Sister Levia. Go in the Eye’s Sight.”

Then he was gone, sweeping down one of the dark corridors of Castle Thalavar.

Levia stood stunned, not comprehending what had just come to pass between them. She had rarely even known the Master to express joy or frustration, much less—

And then it struck her: the sheer magnitude of Uthias’s kiss. Her knees felt weak and her lips tingled as though with sparks. The scent of flowers and ash filled her nose, and her eyes moistened as if in empathy. And beneath it all, she felt a terrible longing to have him return and kiss her once more . . . or a dozen times more.

Gods, what was *happening* to her?

Levia pushed these thoughts and feelings aside long enough to see the world once more. Her fellow knights of the Eye finally seemed to notice her, although they looked confused about why she was breathing rapidly and clutching at her midsection. She thought to head for her chambers, but Kalen would be there and she couldn't face him like this. Instead, she headed for the chapel of Torm in the heart of the temple, where she could pray this damnable desire out of herself. Yes, that she would do.

She felt confused and unbalanced and, most of all, profoundly unhappy. She hoped that Lady Ilira—if she even yet lived—was bitterly cursing her life as well.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DUSK, 1 ELEASIS

HA!” ILIRA LAUGHED ALOUD AT A JEST BRACE HAD JUST made. “And then?”

The gnome beamed with triumph. “And then the troll, he says, ‘Oh, don’t worry—it’ll grow back. Promise!’ ”

His audience erupted in laughter, Ilira louder than most. Brace, pleased at the reception his story garnered, bought a round for the room. The bards interrupted their music long enough to toast their short patron, then renewed with a merry dancing tune. All made merry.

All but Myrin. Looking at the shadow that flickered along her skin, she just felt cold.

Cold and dark Hessar might be, but his healing seemed to have taken well enough. Ilira had spent much of the day unconscious, but the twilight had invigorated her and she awoke at sunset with a roaring appetite. Hence their current revelry in the cramped, sweaty interior of the Blue Banner, a rowdy tavern and inn in the Shou-dominated Tidetown. Founded by a Cormyrean expatriate, the establishment had proved popular enough that the owner was constantly expanding with new construction: another floor for renting

rooms to patrons, an outdoor balcony, and the like. Neither the Fire Knives nor the Eye of Justice had a presence in this district, which was Nine Golden Swords territory. Levia would not dare come after them here.

All seemed well and safe, but Myrin didn't feel particularly at ease. The thugs of the Eye of Justice had attacked her in her own manor, which was bad enough. And Kalen had not only supported them but actively fought at their side. He'd almost sacrificed himself in his attempt to kill Ilira, in the name of saving Myrin from herself. Could he have gone mad?

Or could he be right?

Since the battle, she'd found she could think with surprising clarity, unhindered by the complicated emotions tied to Kalen and now Ilira. She'd thought Kalen's objection to the elf an extension of his protectiveness, but now that she examined the facts with cold dispassion, she started to see his point. They had glimpsed Ilira that first day in Westgate, when she had conveniently appeared to intercept a cadre of Justice Knights. Myrin didn't believe that had been a coincidence, nor was her meeting with Ilira in the market "accidental." By the time Ilira had approached her at the manor house, the elf had roused Myrin's curiosity. From there, it had been a simple matter to manipulate Myrin into her friendship, offering hints to her forgotten past but nothing definitive. To what end? What was Ilira after?

Perhaps Kalen was right after all, and she ultimately meant to hurt Myrin—kill her, even.

A shadow flickered across Myrin's scarred hand in her lap. She looked up, but no one was near her. She shifted her hands around, and as she watched, uncast shadows danced across her skin, like darkness imbedded in her flesh. As

though suddenly aware of her scrutiny, the shadows vanished. What had she done to herself?

Myrin sensed someone watching her and looked up. Rujia stood a few paces distant, leaning against a pillar. The deva had vanished after the battle at the manor, but Myrin was far from surprised to see her here. As the oblivious Ilira and Brace started dancing to the jig that the bards played and folk applauded in time, the deva beckoned silently.

Myrin joined Rujia in the back of the tavern, beneath the shadows of the staircase, where illicit lovers hid their liaisons from curious eavesdroppers. Being this close to Rujia made Myrin faintly uneasy, but it was not out of fear.

“No one can know that I’m here,” she said. “Not Brace, not—that woman. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Myrin said. “Does this have to do with that book you gave me? The one you so obviously stole from my manor?”

Rujia narrowed her eyes, on the defensive immediately. “You see, don’t you, why you can’t trust Ilira? She tricks, lies, and murders, and those who love her aren’t safe.”

“What business is it of yours?” Myrin asked. “What am I to you that you care so much for my well-being?”

Rujia moved closer, and laid her hands on Myrin’s shoulders. “If anything happened to you, I—” Her face came closer.

Myrin was almost taken in. Indeed, she would have accepted Rujia’s kiss and whatever else the deva might have offered, had she not realized something very important. “Stop.”

Rujia hesitated. “What’s wrong?”

“I just remembered,” she said. “The lying, the stealing, the illusion, the seduction—it’s all very familiar.” She drew

out her orb and pressed it to Rujia's chest. "Step back."

The deva retreated a step, staring at her uneasily. "I knew it. I knew you saw my face in the sewers. I was so careful. I spent nearly a year developing 'Rujia.' "

"Can you hate her so much?" Myrin asked. "I know she has hurt you—I saw it happen—but can you not leave it in the past?" She took Rujia's hand. "Can you not let it go?"

"I—" Rujia turned away.

"I won't tell her, you know," Myrin said. "I won't tell her the truth about you."

Rujia looked surprised. "Why not?"

"Because we're friends." Myrin took Rujia's hand. "But in return, you have to try to let it go. See her for who she is, not who she used to be. Can you try?"

They shared a moment in the shadows of the stair, gazing into one another's eyes.

At length, Rujia looked away. "I'm sorry," she said. "Fair warning—if you stay with her, sooner or later, it will bring you to grief."

Myrin sighed. "You're threatening me now?"

"No, but—I don't want to see you hurt."

"Why the sudden care?"

"It wasn't all a lie, you know—the seduction. Nor did I shield you from the vampire for no reason—because believe me, that isn't something I would do."

Myrin looked at her, puzzled. "What are you saying?"

"You saved my life twice, yet I've done nothing to earn it. You know who I am, yet still you try to persuade me to be better than I am." Her illusion wavered. "I have lived many years, but I've . . . I've never known someone like you."

"A wizard?" Myrin asked.

"A friend."

Reality split and swallowed Rujia into another, brighter world. Myrin thought she would never see her friend again. Sorrow roiled in her, and the shadow she'd absorbed from Hessar did nothing to blunt the feeling. On the contrary, Shar's blessing seemed to delight in sadness.

Myrin stood for a long time in the shadow of the stairs, her mind turning in circles around all the intrigues flanking her. Finally, she looked up at Ilira where she danced and laughed with Brace. For all the secrets and potentially murderous motives that she supposedly harbored, the elf seemed quite at ease. She seemed, for the first time Myrin had known her, legitimately happy.

Myrin decided that the time had come for a confrontation.

"A toast," Myrin said, but no one listened. She stepped from the shadows and cast a tiny cantrip to make her voice spread to the rafters. "I've a toast!"

The folk of the common room raised their glasses with a cry of approval. Brace looked at her in wonder, while Ilira's face grew cool and unreadable once more. This, if nothing else, convinced Myrin of her current course. The barkeep poured her a glass of wine, but before one of the barmaids could bring it, Myrin drew it to herself with conjured force.

"Well." Myrin raised her glass. "I may have lost my ancestral manor—at least for the moment. And I am now apparently a known criminal—"

This drew a chorus of "huzzahs!" from the assembled folk. She suspected more than a few spent their time doing piracy or thievery rather than honest work. Ilira, however, did not cheer but watched Myrin carefully.

"And even so, I've no regrets," Myrin continued. "For I have gained stout-hearted friends in the place of my name—friends who would never hurt me or keep secrets from me.

And I really don't mind that arrangement. So hail!"

"Hail!" Again they cheered and raised their glasses. Ilira's mirth had gone away entirely.

"I would change none of my actions." Myrin fixed the elf with her gaze. "Not one."

This time, they all drank. Myrin downed the entire glass of strong wine, doing her best to keep watching Ilira as she did so.

Finally, the elf looked away. "Excuse me," she murmured.

"But my lady—" Brace said.

She placed her gloved hand over his mouth, and he kissed her knuckles. It was the closest they would come, Myrin thought, considering her spellscar. Ilira's eyes became black and the shadows coiled around her. As everyone was looking at Myrin, not Ilira, she took the moment to vanish into Brace's shadow. Ilira always made a point to use her shadowdancing only when unobserved, Myrin noted. Was she ashamed of it, or were her motives more sinister?

At the very edge of her perception, Myrin saw a shadowy image of Ilira flit, birdlike, from the common room up the stairs toward the balcony. She imagined no one else could see this, as she had absorbed something of Hessar's sight from their brief touch. She shaped her shadow door and stepped backward, falling briefly, until she stood on the weathered deck.

The dizzy haze of teleportation cleared, and she found herself overlooking the Sea of Fallen Stars, the waves lapping gently below. The summer rains had vanished with Midsummer, leaving the city gripped in balmy warmth by day and a soothing afterglow by dusk. Folk could sit at the tables outside at all hours, but no one was there now . . . no one except the two of them.

The glint of a star sapphire drew her attention to where Ilira leaned on the rail, her hands clasped tightly around the wood. If not for the pendant Ilira wore wrapped around her wrist, Myrin might not have seen her there against the night. She gazed out at the overcast sky, which hid the almost-full moon behind gray haze. Seabirds cried out to one another, and they heard the muted laughter of another festhall, juxtaposed with the clash of steel from some distant street.

“You know what I want,” Myrin said. “Although I’m worried that if I ask, we’ll be interrupted by vampires or more crazed knights or mayhap a dragon this time.”

If Ilira had heard, she gave no sign.

The trappings of mirth fell away and Myrin looked at her with a hard expression. “Did you kill them?” she asked. “My mother and father, I mean.”

Ilira raised her chin but said nothing.

“Is that why you haven’t told me who I am?” Myrin balled up her fists, around which blue fire began to crackle. “Because if I knew you had murdered my family, I would hate you?”

Ilira still said nothing, her face turned away.

“Silence, is it?” Myrin fumbled the family history out of her belt pouch and slapped it down on the rail by Ilira’s hand. “Tell me the meaning of this, then.”

Myrin opened the book to the last filled pages and pointed to the sketched images contained there. She pointed to the portrait of a handsome half-elf man, and read aloud: “Nev-eren, Lord Darkdance: 1290 to 1358.” Then she indicated a beautiful human woman with chocolate skin. “Shalis Ptolexis Darkdance, 1318 to 1379.”

Ilira stiffened, and her fingers tightened on the rail.

“And this.” Myrin turned the page. Few words adorned this last page: only a birthdate—1358—and a name: Mae-rlyn Darkdance. But the portrait . . . The portrait was of Myrin, only a little younger than she was now, from her blue hair to the awkward smile she wore all too often.

“You have answers,” Myrin said. “And I want them. Now.”

“Answers.” Ilira looked to Myrin for the first time, and the wizard saw with shock that her eyes were jet black. “And you will answer me, then? About stealing my scar?”

Myrin backed away a step, clutching the tome to her chest, and Ilira turned on her like a roused wolf. The moon came out from behind the clouds, casting Ilira’s shadow, which writhed madly on the deck at her feet. It reached its claws toward Myrin’s own shadow, and Myrin flinched despite herself.

“First you nearly kill yourself doing exactly what I *begged* you not to do,” Ilira said, stripping the glove from one hand. “Then not only do you steal my burning touch, but you don’t tell me about it until it’s too late.” She held up her bare hand. “And I thought *I* could be cruel.”

“I swear by Mother Mystra—”

“Mystra’s dead and isn’t listening!” Ilira took a step toward her, her eyes blazing with angry blackness. “This is between you and me.”

Ilira’s shadow had given up its assault on Myrin’s more timid shadow and turned back on its mistress, seemingly trying to hold her back. The shadow had always given insight into Ilira’s emotions, and if it was fighting back, that meant she was conflicted. Seeing this emboldened her.

“What reason have you given me to trust you?” Myrin demanded. “You’ve led me into one trap after another, all

for your own gain.”

Ilira drew back. “It’s not for my own gain. I’ve been seeking the truth, just like you.” Her shadow roiled, then curled around her to embrace her. “It’s—gods. You said it in your toast.”

“What do you mean?”

“Friendship.” Ilira shook her head. “It’s never been a real thing to me. A ‘friend’ is merely searching for an angle: how to use me, how to bend me to her will or break me. Everyone I’ve ever loved has turned into my enemy, at one point or another.”

“That sounds like your scar,” Myrin said, then winced. “I’m sorry! Wait—”

Ilira glared at her, and her eyes became jet black once more. She glanced over her shoulder, at a far rooftop across Tidetown. Shadows gathered and whisked her dancing away. She reappeared on the rooftop, gave Myrin a long look, then shadowdanced away again.

She still hadn’t got the answers she wanted, but just then, Myrin felt sad for an entirely different reason. “I meant—” she leaned on the rail and sighed. “That sounds lonely.”



As the night deepened, he found her clinging to the spire atop the highest tower in Westgate, the wind whipping her unbound hair around her face. Her black eyes were fixed upon the distant horizon, as if longing for the sun to sear away the darkness that was her element. Blood beat in her throat and temple, and she clutched her free hand to her chest. She looked delicate and vulnerable and very angry.

Into the approaching midnight, Ilira sang an elven

melody of such haunting beauty and deep abiding sorrow that he could not resist lingering to listen. The words hardly sounded angry to an untrained ear, but the fey races had ever been masters of hiding their true feelings behind softness. Finally, the song faded away, and she stared silently into the darkness.

It was at this point he knew she could feel him, and there was no point in hiding.

“You should have been a bard, not a thief.” Hessar emerged from the shadow of the spire at her side. “But is there not a man’s part to that song as well? A lost lover to soothe your pain?”

Ilira said nothing, only looked out over the city.

“You sing of being broken and alone,” Hessar said. “These things are sweet to the lady.” He looked her up and down. “I do not often desire women, but I do delight in true despair.”

“If you would speak,” Ilira said softly, “then speak.”

“As you command.” Hessar ran his bare fingers up her arm, which she bore with stoicism. “This is an amusing sort of rabble you’ve gathered around yourself, but then, you always did draw fools to distract you. Fools who could never touch you—not the *real* you.”

His hand fell upon her neck, and she shivered but did not pull away.

“It wasn’t quite true, what you told them,” he said. “You can touch *certain* folk, can’t you? In fact, you couldn’t use your fire on the children of Netheril even if you wanted to.”

Ilira pulled away roughly and regarded him with dangerous black eyes.

“Now, now. Is that any way to treat a very old friend?”

Perhaps his use of the word was a mistake, or perhaps it

was exactly what he needed to say. Regardless, Ilira glared at him with violence in her eyes.

“Remember your vows, my lady. Just because your bonds have loosened over a century does not mean you are forgotten.” Hessar caressed her face with his grey fingertips. His yellow eyes gleamed, reflected in her black gaze. “Or would you prefer your newfound ‘friends’ learn of your true loyalties, Shadowf—”

She pulled him into a deep kiss.



At midnight, the Trickster found the damned monk lounging on a rumpled bed in a seedy dive in Tidetown. He was naked, which was not a total loss, but there desire ended and distaste began. His fatuous smile made him particularly repulsive.

“Truly? *Her?* Ugh. Just when I thought you couldn’t make yourself *less* appealing.”

“Ah, my little Trickster—jealous?” He indicated the bed beside him with a languorous wave. “It’s still quite warm if you care to join me.”

“Somehow I doubt that, shade—that your bed would ever be warm.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised.” His yellow eyes grew luminous. “And how has your seduction gone, or did you pick the wrong form for the Darkdance girl? I’ll never understand why you picked *that*. It’s just so . . . so blank.” He looked her over. “I don’t understand the white and purple. And that name—Rujia? So uninteresting.”

“You have a small mind, monk, but this does not surprise me,” the Trickster said. “Seduction is hardly a matter

of sweat and desire, but giving the mark what he or she wants.”

“That’s a surprisingly mature attitude, from what I’ve heard of you.”

“We all grow up, don’t we?”

“So you’re saying what Myrin wants is an ageless, serene, perfect creature of mystery?” Hessar stretched across the bed he had shared not a song’s length before. “Ah yes, but I’ve answered my own question. I’ve just described the Shadowfox, have I not? Your worst enemy.”

The Trickster glared. “It doesn’t matter. Myrin sees through my disguise. She knows me for who—if not what—I am.”

“Shame,” Hessar said. “The master will not like this development. And yet you come to me.” He rose, making no effort to draw the blankets around himself. “You knew I would find out on my own, so you came here to purchase my allegiance and silence, no? With that . . . *thing?*” He appraised her body with distaste.

“Don’t misunderstand.” The Trickster averted her eyes as the monk touched her chin with his fingers. “Myrin will keep my secret. I am not compromised. I can go back.”

“Oh? Why would she not go immediately to her shadowy mistress and tell all?”

“She won’t.” The Trickster could not give him a better answer.

“Imagine that. You have genuine feelings for the Dark-dance lass, don’t you?”

“Shut up,” she said.

“Perhaps you’d rather switch targets? The Shadowfox has lost none of her tricks, for a century of rare usage. I’m sure you could craft a disguise she’d find . . . appealing.”

Revulsion filled the Trickster and she wrenched herself away from the monk. “Don’t,” she said. “Don’t *ever*. If you knew what that woman has done to me—what she *took* from me—”

The monk spread his hands. “A jest, merely. Don’t bleed your feminine sentimentally all over the room.” He turned away and donned a robe hanging from a peg on the wall. “Your misfortune is fortunately timed, and soon it will not matter if you can serve as a snake in Lady Darkdance’s bed-clothes. The game is nearly ended.”

“Our . . . *patron* is moving? At last?”

“Indeed. You are almost free of this—if you behave yourself.”

The Trickster gritted her teeth. She hated and feared Kirenkirsalai, but she truly dreaded the day when her father discovered her misstep. The sooner she could escape the vampire, the better. “I know that.”

“Do you?” Hesar fixed her with his yellow eyes. “I want to ensure that your head—not your heart—is in this. You’ll have your revenge, but on *his* terms, not yours. Acceptable?”

“Yes.”

The Trickster nodded, although she felt far less resolved than she put on. She could not forget what Myrin had said to her. The woman had called her a friend, and now she was about to betray her trust. When in her life had trust ever mattered?

“There will be blood,” she said. “Enough for both of us.”



In the early hours of the morning, Myrin awoke from her troubled sleep to find her rented room at the Blue Banner

grown wintry cold. She thought at first that she must have left the window open, but she saw the dark shape of Ilira framed in the moonlight. She sat on the windowsill, her knees pulled up to her chin.

“You came back,” Myrin said. “I . . . I thought that might be our farewell.”

Ilira drew herself down from the window and perched on the edge of the bed. After a heartbeat, she drew out a cloth-wrapped item from an inner pocket and offered it to Myrin. The wizard looked at her questioningly, but Ilira merely nodded.

Myrin unwrapped the parcel, revealing a silver ring that picked up the glint of moonlight. The image upon it was scratched out, but when she touched the ring with her bare flesh, a sigil appeared of a bird crafted of black flames. The phoenix sigil tickled at her mind until she realized where she had seen it—engraved in the cover of the Darkdance family histories, the most recent of which lay open on her bedside table.

This was her family’s signet ring—the mark of Darkdance.

“I thought as much,” Ilira murmured.

“What does this mean?” Myrin asked.

“It means I am sorry,” Ilira said. “My words earlier were untrue and ill-advised.”

“Accepted.” Myrin laid the ring on the blankets, but the sigil did not disappear. Instead, it started to waver, as though it would fade over time.

“Sorry, also”—Ilira gave her a sidelong glance—“for kissing your man.”

That clutched at Myrin’s attention. “What? Kalen’s not—” She trailed off when Ilira gave her a dubious look, and heat flared in her cheeks. “Aye, mayhap he is. Although

he . . . I don't know what's going through his head. He thinks you're a danger to me."

Ilira's eyes gleamed brightly. "Do you think I am?"

"No." Myrin shook her head. "But I need to know. Are these my parents? Is this me?"

She showed Ilira the book again, still open to that page. Tears dotted the parchment where she had cried herself to sleep reading it again and again, searching for clues in the few words. Those same tears welled anew in her eyes.

"Just tell me it's true, or that it's a lie—a sick jest at my expense," she said. "Please. You must know. You *must* know who I am."

Ilira gazed at her a breath, then nodded. Slowly, she traced her finger through the book's shadow, scooping up a blob of the inky darkness. Then she put her finger to the book and traced a new word beneath the portrait: "Myrin."

It was not the word itself that made Myrin go weak but rather that the delicate script matched the other entries perfectly.

"It—it was you?" Myrin asked. "You penned this? All of this?" She marveled at the care that had gone into the portraits. "You didn't kill them."

"I've killed many people, but I would never hurt them," Ilira said. "Your parents were like family to me. I am sorry I could not save them. It is a pain I have borne for a century."

"My *parents*," Myrin said. "So it's true."

Ilira nodded, her eyes bright. "You are Neveren and Shalis's daughter, without a doubt. You have Nev's wits and courage and Shalis's beauty and strength."

Myrin's eyes welled with tears.

"I am sorry to have kept the truth from you so long. I just—I wanted to be sure, before I told you. Now I am."

Ilira took Myrin's hand. "And you are not a simulacrum, a wraith, or anything like that. You are exactly the woman you seem to be: Maerlyn Darkdance."

Myrin had a sudden memory of a year ago, when she had first met Cellica, Kalen's adopted sister. The halfling had asked her name and she, barely remembering, had started "Mare, mere—" to which Cellica had said, "Myrin?" She had nodded.

"The ring proves it," Ilira said. "Neveren had that ring specially enchanted, so that only an heir of his blood could awaken the sigil. It was precious to him, so I hid it where no thief would steal it—among the treasures of thieves. Among the Night Masks."

"My father was a Night Mask?"

"As was I, but that is a tale for another day."

"But—" Myrin said. "But how is that possible? That was over a century ago. How—?"

"How could you have seen a hundred winters and not look a day over twenty?" Ilira shrugged. "Magic can do many things—your spellscar, a portal, something altogether different."

"My spellscar?" Myrin asked. "According to your records, I would have been seven and twenty when the Spellplague fell. Am I frozen at that age?"

"Perhaps. A dear friend of mine was trapped in the body of a beautiful young woman who never aged, but was condemned never to sing again. And she had the most beautiful voice." Ilira shook her head. "Your spellscar is powerful, but I do not think it is so mighty."

"It doesn't seem so," Myrin said. "My spellscar is only for stealing magic—"

"As you took mine?" Ilira asked, her words a touch bitter.

Myrin looked down at her hands. “I am sorry. By the time I realized it had happened, it was too late.”

“I do not begrudge you—indeed, I thank you.”

“Because of Kalen?” Myrin sniffled and wiped her nose. “He does kiss well, doesn’t he?”

“Quite well, but that isn’t what I meant,” she said. “Even if you did it accidentally, you were still trying to aid me, and that is a gesture of love.”

Myrin was overwhelmed and speechless. Tears filled her eyes and she pushed herself into Ilira’s embrace. She had so many questions, but sleep was closing in on her—the exhaustion of the last few days finally taking its toll.

“I will tell you more when there is time, but for now, you must rest.” Ilira pulled away and pressed her gloved hand to Myrin’s cheek. “You’ll be seeing Saer Shadow again sooner than you think, and you’ll need your strength.”

“What do you mean?” Myrin wiped at her eyes. “Do you fear another attack?”

“Tomorrow, we go on the offensive.” She smiled slyly. “Tomorrow, we steal him back.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LONGSUN, 2 ELEASIS

MYRIN STOOD GRASPING HER ELBOW BEHIND HER BACK A block away from Castle Thalavar. She caught herself and chided herself for the nervous gesture. This was no time to be tentative.

This late in the day—before dusk, as the sun dipped toward twilight—long shadows ran down Silverpiece Way, giving Ilira plenty of places to shadowdance without being seen. Myrin could faintly detect her, the same way she had the previous night. Fascinating.

Myrin turned as Ilira danced back into the alley. “Well?”

The elf looked surprised. She must have expected she would take Myrin by surprise. “As I thought, there’s little enough activity during the day. The Night Masks were a nocturnal order, and it’s good to see traditions continue, even over a century.”

“The Eye of Justice, born of the Night Masks,” Myrin said. “It seems impossible.”

“I knew Gedrin and what he crafted, but little of that remains in the order today,” Ilira said. “There are rumors that some of them hold close to the old ways indeed.”

“What do you mean?” Myrin’s eyes widened. “Vampires?”

“So the rumors say. Not in the daylight hours, though.” Ilira turned away and drummed her fingers on her lips in thought. “I’ve been considering how best to get us in. I can move unseen on my own, but you are less stealthy. There is a servant’s entrance in the back, a trapdoor on the roof, and there’s always the sewers . . .”

Myrin drew out her orb. “What about the front door?”

She murmured an invisibility spell and faded from view.

Ilira looked at first surprised, then smiled slyly. “Try to keep up, then.”



Kalen awoke late in the day, awareness blooming before feeling, as ever.

He’d had to sleep a great deal recently to give his body time to recover, always under Levia’s scrutiny. Under her aegis, he felt secure enough to sleep a night through for the first time in three years. It was ironic, as his performance before the Vigilant Seers yestereve had no doubt earned him dozens of enemies with knives, but his teacher still made him feel safe.

This time, however, he awoke to a rhythmic hum in his head, almost like a chant he could not quite hear. It was the song of the mark he’d placed on Lady Ilira. She was here, in the castle.

She’d blocked the connection before, but now he could feel the mark calling to him. To Kalen, this signaled a trap, of course, but she had come to his house, where she would be disadvantaged. Perhaps she meant only to talk. Either way, he would go prepared.

Levia had fallen asleep at the table, her head nestled on her papers. Perhaps this was for the best. His mentor absolutely hated the elf, and having her there would complicate the issue. No doubt she would want to arrest or attack Ilira rather than . . . what? Kalen wasn't sure what he would say or do, but he needed to see the elf—and not at the end of his blade.

He kept thinking about that soul-rending kiss, but he pushed the memory away.

He waited, teeth grinding, as sensation crept back into his disused body, then he rose quietly and did a quick self-assessment. His arm seemed fine after Levia's healing magic had set and repaired the break. His other superficial wounds had faded to scars.

Kalen dressed quietly, but even so, Levia stirred. "Time for you to sleep, I think," he said, laying a hand on her shoulder. "I've had your bed long enough."

"Not long enough," she murmured with a smile. "Always welcome . . . to it."

"I know."

He guided her into the bed he had vacated, where she fell back into slumber. Had she been any less than mostly asleep, her suspicious nature might have awakened her fully.

When he was sure she had gone to sleep, Kalen padded to the door. Sithe's axe leaned against the wall, and he took that. He didn't mean to fight, but going unprepared was foolish.

Out in the corridor, he followed the song of Helm's mark. In the common hall where an early evenfeast was being served, he passed two Lord Haran loyalists, but gave them no more than an indifferent glance. He felt their eyes following him and heard them whispering, but Kalen paid

little attention. If they meant to attack him, then so be it—he had his axe.

He followed the sensation down the lord's corridor, toward the chambers of Lord Uthias Darkwell. Once, when House Thalavar had thrived in old Westgate, these rooms had been the domain of Lady Thistle Thalavar and her household, including her young son . . . Gedrin, who would dream of a god's death as a boy and go on to challenge the Night King as a man.

Kalen paused a moment, drawn back to the childhood of a man he had known for only a matter of breaths and yet held in higher esteem than any other. Gedrin Shadowbane had inspired his entire life with those few short words they had shared, that gloomy night on the streets of Luskan nearly twenty years ago. Kalen had a hard time imagining the rough old man as a carefree boy, running and playing in these very chambers. He himself had never done that, and he wondered what the Shadowbane who came after him would be like. The night Kalen had bequeathed Vindicator, he'd taken something of a measure of his would-be heir, and something he'd seen had impressed him. Was this how Gedrin had felt, seeing him as a boy?

He heard a click as the latch closed on the door to Uthias's office. He moved in that direction and paused at the door. Why would Ilira be here, in a conference with Uthias?

Sounding an alarm might have been prudent, but he decided against it. He wanted to do this alone. Kalen eased the door open, then stepped through. He was glad he had brought the axe.

Uthias's office was much changed from that night three years ago. Once, neat stacks of parchments had sat on the desk next to balancing scales and an inkpot—everything in

its proper place. Now, papers piled high on every scrap of furniture and a dozen platters with scraps of food perched precariously on the desk. The place was a mess, and completely unlike the meticulous Lord Seer of the Eye of Justice.

And sitting among the devastation—resting back on her hands, one leg drawn up on the desk while the other dangled—was Ilira Nathalan, dressed all in black leather. She wore no weapon, but she didn't seem the least bit surprised or uneasy to see him.

Kalen closed the door behind him. "Well?"

She blinked. "Yes?"

"You're the guest," he said. "I thought you'd want to speak first."

"Very well. You look excellent, Saer Shadow."

"And you're not dead."

"You noticed." She stretched like a lounging cat.

He peered around the room but could see no one else—no sign of a murdered Uthias, for instance. Good. He might or might not be able to defeat Ilira alone, but he might be able to delay her until the Lord Seer returned from his business of this night. A persistent magic radiance chased most of the shadows from Uthias's office. He kept it that way purposefully, saying the light bathed the righteous. To Kalen, it meant fewer escape routes for his enemy.

"Are you here to a purpose?" he asked. "Or do you freely pillage others' private chambers at whim?"

"It was like this when I arrived, actually. Your Lord Seer is something of a rat, and this is his nest. I can only imagine how he keeps his bedchamber." Ilira pushed herself off the desk and sauntered toward him. She held her hands out, palms up, to show him she had no weapon. He raised the axe anyway to ward her off.

“Stay back,” he said. “I remember those hands—and that kiss of yours.”

Dutifully, Ilira stopped outside the reach of his axe. “You kiss very well.”

“You noticed.”

She glanced sidelong, but Kalen could see no one there. Perhaps Brace lurked, hidden by fey magic, waiting for him to drop his guard.

“What of Lady Darkdance?” he said. “Have you used her up and disposed of her yet?”

“You should trust that woman to make her own choices.”

The words resonated in Kalen’s bones. Of course he trusted Myrin. They had fought and bled together so much over the past few tendays that he well knew her value and ability. That wasn’t what this was about. Ilira endangered her. She was working some angle that would get Myrin hurt in the end—or worse. He just wanted Myrin safe.

As though she could read his thoughts and knew when to interrupt them, Ilira spoke: “Is there anything I might say to convince you of my noble intentions?”

It finally dawned on Kalen, then, that this went deeper. Even if he had concrete proof that Ilira meant only good for Myrin, he would still oppose her. Because—

“No,” he said. “There is nothing *you* can say.”

If, however, Myrin honestly told him that the elf was what she wanted—and not him . . .

“Will you kill me, then?” Ilira stepped forward into the reach of Kalen’s axe. “You could have killed me on that rooftop, but you did not. Will you end it now, to protect her? Myrin?”

That was all he wanted—to protect Myrin. From herself, if necessary.

“I do not wish to,” Kalen said. “But if that is what it takes, then so be it. She is my friend, and I will not let you stand between us.”

Ilira stood right before him now, their faces close indeed. She looked into his eyes for a breath or two, then glanced over her shoulder. “Satisfied?”

Kalen was confused, but then Myrin shimmered into view behind Ilira’s shoulder. Kalen realized what he’d not seen before on Ilira’s wrist: her star-sapphire pendant decorated Myrin’s neck instead. That was how she had blocked Kalen’s mark, and that was why Kalen could be in the same room as Myrin and not feel her soothing presence. The amulet prevented it.

“Oh, Kalen.” Myrin’s lips quivered. “I never wanted to be your friend, but I was content to do so, if that was my only choice. Now . . . now I don’t even want to be that.”

“Wait,” he said. “Listen—”

“Sorry, but it’s too late.” Myrin looked away. “You cannot respect my choices, no matter how hard you try. Whatever there might have been between us, it’s too late.”

“Myrin—” He stepped forward, but Ilira blocked his path. Angry heat filled his belly, though he knew the elf was right. Not that he would forgive her. “Is this truly what you want?”

Myrin turned back to him, seemingly having reached a decision. “We can part amiably, at least.” She put out her hand.

He considered this for a long time. “Myrin, I—”

She shook her head. “Farewell.”

His spellscar did nothing to numb the pain of that word.

He took her hand, and arcane runes glowed on her skin. The room grew hazy. His legs felt as if they were slipping

through the floor. He thought he might faint. “Myrin?”
Then he slipped into darkness.
One of my own making, he thought at the last.



As Kalen collapsed onto the Calishite rug, Myrin half caught him and buckled under his dead weight. “Help me, would you?” she said. “He’s heavy.”

“Myrin!” Ilira said, shock slipping her usual serenity.

“Don’t give me that look,” she said. “Your plan was just to hit him over the head.”

They deposited the sleeping Kalen among the pillows. Ilira stared at Myrin.

“What?” Myrin asked.

“What you said to him—are you *sure* he isn’t your man?”

“There’s a great deal between Kalen and me, but we don’t have the time to deal with it all now. He knows that.” Myrin shrugged. “Or, at least, he’ll figure it out when he’s slept on it.”

“Very well, then.” Ilira sighed. “Although now we have a hulk of unconscious manflesh that weighs as much as the two of us combined to carry out of here.”

Myrin drew a flat circle with her orb, sculpting a disk of golden force in the air. It hovered next to Kalen, then waited as she shoved him over onto it. The disk sagged a bit but remained floating, and Kalen continued to snore.

“Wizards,” Ilira said.

“Thieves!” Myrin smiled. “You do seem to know your way around this place. Broken into Castle Thalavar before?”

“Once recently,” she said. “To see what I could steal to offer the Fire Knives for their non-interference. I found

Vindicator. Not that I stole it just then, mind, but I recognized it from Gedrin's hand a long time ago, and knew it was what I needed."

"You—" Myrin frowned. Vindicator hadn't been in the castle until recently. How could Ilira have seen it? "You're sure it was the same sword?"

"Hand-and-a-half sword, burns with gray fire? Hard to mistake that."

Myrin was puzzled. "When was this?"

"A tenday past, or so," she said. "Two days before I ran into you in the market, actually."

"Two days before?" That was even more troubling. That day in the market had been their first in Westgate, so they must have still been on the road from Luskan two days before. How could Ilira have seen Vindicator in Castle Thalavar before they even arrived, much less went to the castle? Until that last day on the road, when Kalen insisted on using his amulet, the sword had been stored safe in her deep-pocketed belt pouch. Hadn't it? And where was it now? Kalen should have been carrying it. Unless—

Footsteps in the outer hallway drew their attention, and the two women looked to one another. Ilira could hide, certainly, but Myrin had no second invisibility spell, nor another sleep spell. Myrin pressed herself back against the wall and drew out her orb.

Ilira made no move to hide. Instead, she winced and furrowed her brow.

"What is it?" Myrin asked.

"I have an ache," Ilira said, touching her head. "A very familiar one."

The door opened to admit two individuals: Levia and a middle-aged man. He had a fine build as of a lifelong

warrior, and his hair had gone mostly to gray. But despite his age, his eyes were surprisingly lively. He was the High Seer Uthias Darkwell, based on Ilira's description.

Levia was rubbing sleep from her eyes, as though she had just woken up. "He went this way, and—" Her words cut off as she saw them waiting.

Myrin expected Ilira to spring upon them, but instead she stood staring at Uthias. "You."

What was she doing? She had betrayed any hope of an ambush.

Uthias looked up at her with nothing like surprise on his face. For all Myrin could tell, he'd expected them. Levia, on the other hand, cried out in alarm and reached for her mace.

"Kalen!" Levia pointed to where the man floated, unconscious, then pointed at Ilira. "What have you done, you gold-eyed whore?"

Ilira bristled.

"Stand down, Sister Levia." Uthias laid a hand on her shoulder. "I assure you, these beauteous ladies mean me no harm. They are my guests."

"What?" Myrin and Levia said at once. Myrin drew her orb as Levia unbuckled her mace, and they glared at one another.

"You may go." Uthias stepped in front of Levia, and his hand dropped to the starburst hilt of a rapier at his belt. "Or do you think me incapable?"

"But Lord—"

"I said you may go, so—" His voice took on a tone of magical command. "*Go.*"

Levia staggered away from him, and her expression took on a dreamy confusion. She was struggling against his

magic. “But Kalen—” She reached vaguely toward him.

“All will be well.” Uthias’s words took on a singsong quality. “I suggest you return to your chambers and rest. Forget all about this.”

The magic caught her entirely this time, sublimating her will to his. Levia dropped her mace on the floor, turned, and strode from the room.

Uthias sighed. “I should have specified that she take the mace with her. Alas.”

Myrin took the opportunity to look over at Ilira, who was regarding Uthias with one of those unreadable expressions she often wore. “What is this? Do you know Uthias?”

“Not Uthias, no.” Ilira shook her head. “But I know *him*.”

“What?” The wizard squinted hard at Uthias, and found that scrutiny of his features gave her a faint headache. He seemed at once Uthias and also another, very different man. He had two different images in the same shape. It reminded her of a man she had met in Luskan, who had worn illusions to hide his true face.

Myrin had the same instinct she knew Kalen would have had: that this was a trap.

She raised her orb, a slaying spell on her lips, but Uthias extended his hand and the orb wrenched itself from Myrin’s fingers and flew to him. He caught it, and lightning shot from the orb to strike his arms and body. Magic fell around him, boiled away by the lightning, and the image of Uthias shattered, replaced by the man himself. He was an elf with gold skin and eyes, impossibly handsome and ageless. The only blemishes upon his otherwise perfect face were two tiny creases in his cheek, as if from a long-ago wound. He wore fashionable attire in the loud colors of a dandy, from

his boots to his gloves to his fantastic hat.

And Myrin knew him. They'd met in Luskan, when the elf had led Kalen and Myrin into the sewers to confront a demon. And he'd delivered a bloody bag of sword shards. "Lilten?"

"I see my little bauble has served you well." The elf lobbed the orb into the air and caught it like an apple. "Apologies that I took it back for a moment, but your power has grown since last we met, and I didn't fancy tasting it again."

He tossed the orb back to Myrin, and she caught it with both hands against her chest. She looked at him, utterly confused. "Why are you here?"

"I know why he's here," Ilira said. "Haven't you given up yet, Uncle Nemesis?"

"Your servant, my lady." The elf gave them a dazzling smile and bowed.

"He's your uncle?" Myrin asked.

"Nay, nay. 'Tis a nickname, and not a kind one, considering," Lilten said. "All I have done and all I will ever do, I do for *you*, my love."

"Somehow," Ilira said. "I doubt that."

"I don't understand," Myrin said. "You were waiting . . . for her?"

"Among other things," he said. "Borrowing the office of the Lord Seer has permitted me a certain freedom to watch events unfold. But now you have come, and that means our game will draw to a close soon. Hence, I've shown you my true face. My love, would you present me?"

"Bastard." Ilira gritted her teeth and turned to Myrin. "I'd like you to meet Lilianviaten Dlardrageth the Changecloak, last prince of the Daemonfey, High Priest of Beshaba, Masked Lord of Waterdeep . . . and my husband."



Even though she was fully dressed and had clearly been going somewhere she couldn't remember, Levia felt exhausted and wanted nothing so much as her own bed in her own chambers. She wandered there in a daze, the halls of Castle Thalavar blurring around her. Dimly, she remembered something about Kalen, Lady Darkdance, and that gold-eyed elf, but it seemed like a dream—distant and poorly formed in her mind.

She came fully awake only when she entered her chamber and found Hessar waiting for her. "Levia, you—" He trailed off, and his eyes flashed yellow. "Shadowfox did this."

"What?" Levia focused on Hessar's yellow eyes. She had just seen another set of those same eyes . . . another shade . . . Ilira. "The elf is here. I have to warn—"

"You'll do no such thing." Hessar was faster. He lunged across and forced her back against the wall. "I am much stronger. Struggling will only harm you."

"What are you doing?" Levia fought against his viselike grasp anyway. "Release me!"

Hessar ignored Levia's protests. "Why would she be here? Unless—she cannot mean to ally herself with the Lost Prince, can she? This changes all."

The Lost Prince? What was he talking about? Levia remembered going to Lord Uthias's chamber, and—"Lord Uthias!" She was starting to remember. "I should have known you for a traitor, shade. If you're here to kill me, you'd best do it quickly, 'ere I get free—"

"Foolish woman," he said. "I'm not here to hurt you. In fact, we're on the same side."

"Which side?" she asked.

“Shadowbane’s, of course.” His lips quirked. “Now, what to do with you . . . ?”

Levia sublimated her fear, letting cool reason take over. Hessar had taken her by surprise, and she could not muster an effective defense. She did not even have her mace, for all the good it would have done her. She was going to die unless she gave him a reason to spare her. She sucked in a sharp breath. Then, slowly, she relaxed, showing no sign of aggression.

The shade seemed pleasantly surprised. “There’s a good wench.”

Levia suppressed her aggravation at the term. “You are in command, Hessar. Do with me as you wish. But I can help you—you know I can.”

The monk considered. “I see the time to keep you in shadow is at an end. I shall say this to begin: you have been a good mistress, Levia Shadewalker, but you are not my master.”

She had figured that out herself. “And neither is Uthias. Do you serve Netheril? Shar?”

“Neither, but the truth is not for you to know yet,” Hessar replied. “All you need to know is that I have been tasked with watching Kalen Dren, while my other half has his lady companion firmly in hand. Lady Darkdance requires a deft touch to which I am . . . unsuited.”

Levia realized she had been an unwitting pawn in the hands of a greater player, and that infuriated her. Outwardly, however, she kept calm.

“I suppose I am to aid you,” she said, “and that I have no choice.”

“Just so—not if you want your man to live. My master is not a forgiving one.”

Levia shivered. Kalen was in an unknown danger, and until she knew the truth of it, she had no choice but to yield. “What must I do?”

Hessar considered. “If you are under his compulsion, then you must have seen something you should not have seen, and that means Lady Nathalan is here. Rouse yourself, and then we will go to your Lord Uthias’s chambers.” He smiled. “With the whole of the Eye, of course.”

He released her and vanished out of the chamber to run down the corridor.

Levia followed slowly, her mind racing. What did she really know about Hesar? She’d thought him a shade on the run, a defector from the empire of Netheril, and an excellent operator. Had he been playing her all the time they had known each other?

Levia saw only part of the puzzle, and knew only a little of Hesar’s game. The shade had made it clear he was not her ally, but he had also overplayed his hand. There was a conspiracy, and Hesar was part of it. Who were his true masters, and what did they want?

If she wanted to figure this out, she would have to play along.

“To arms!” she cried through the hall. “Our master is attacked!”



Myrin was stunned. “Husband?”

“It was many years ago,” Liltan said. “I’m amazed my lady even recalls.”

“Oh, you’re not an easy one to forget,” Ilira said. “Liltan the Changecloak—once high priest of Erevan Ilesere, until

he betrayed the Fey Trickster and threw in his lot with Beshaba, Maid of Misfortune. Traitor, heretic, murderer—”

“I am hardly the only one who has betrayed the Fey Trickster.” Liltan laid his hand on the small of her back, where Myrin had seen a hint of a tattoo. “One might say that my betrayal is the lesser offense.”

Ilira jerked away as though he had shocked her. “I ought to kill you right now.”

“I see you’ve lost none of your affection for me, despite our century-long estrangement.”

“Not long enough.” Ilira crossed her arms.

“Unseasonably cold in Westgate this day, don’t you think? I hope you’ve brought more clothes than that.” Liltan brushed past her. “Why, Lady Darkdance, you look so lovely today.”

Like the finest courtier, he took her hand and bowed low to kiss it. His lips stopped short of touching her skin, and she could feel heat tingle between them. His gold eyes were vibrant.

Myrin wondered what would have happened had he touched her bare skin.

Then he nodded to Kalen, who lay unmoving on the couch. “And I see you’re attending to the business that lies betwixt yourself and young Master Dren in ruthless fashion,” he said. “My compliments on your technique.”

“He’s only sleeping,” Myrin said.

“Well. No one is perfect, I suppose.” He smiled at Myrin, making her knees feel weak.

“Isn’t she a few centuries too young for you, fey’ri?” Ilira asked.

“Oh, you wound me, to think of me in such inferior terms.” Liltan smiled, and Myrin could see the faint points

of his teeth. “My dear wife, you grow sharp in your middle age. You know I would take none other into my heart than you, were I to live ten thousand more years.”

“That vow is something we do not have in common, Uncle Nemesis.” Ilira gestured to the lanceboard on his desk. “I shouldn’t be surprised this is all a game to you, but I would have hoped you’d have changed.”

“Would someone please explain what’s going on?” Myrin gestured to Kalen, who stirred. “Quickly, before my spell wears off?”

“What is there to be said? He’s a liar and a schemer. He’s been watching us for gods-know how long, playing some game of his. Enough, I say.” Ilira rejoined Myrin. “Let’s go.”

“Fleeing so soon, my love?” Liltan grinned. “And would you leave me so unsatisfied?”

Ilira stood firm. “In a heartbeat.”

“Always so hot,” he said. “Ah, how I have missed it.”

Myrin heard a clamor of boots out in the corridor, and her stomach lurched. She’d known their entrance could only go unnoticed for so long. She spoke words of magic, and the bar fell across the door just before a great force from the corridor slammed into it. Men grunted and pushed against Myrin’s magical seal. “We should go,” she said. “Ilira?”

The elves stood locked in a duel of wills, fighting a battle in the depths of their impenetrable gold eyes. Liltan’s burned with an inner fire, while black shadows flickered across Ilira’s. History and the force of animosity hung between them like a raging firestorm.

Over the past few days, Myrin had learned to look to Ilira’s shadow to know her friend’s heart. Now it cowered on the floor, seeking to put as much distance between itself and Liltan as possible. Myrin knew they were doomed. “Ilira,

just leave him be.”

“I can’t.” Ilira stripped off one of her gloves. “He’s been watching us this whole while. I can’t just turn my back on an enemy.”

“Drawing your weapon, I see,” Liltan said. “Might I suggest another?”

With a single sweeping flourish, he drew his rapier and flung it at her. Myrin cried out in alarm as the bone-white blade cut through the air, end over end, and stabbed into the wall by Ilira’s head. If she hadn’t flinched aside, it would have spitted her face.

“What is this?” Ilira asked.

“I thought I would return what you rightfully stole, all those years ago.” Liltan indicated the sword, which flickered alternately with sparks and flame that licked along the sharpened edges. “I’ve no more use for it, but you may need it to survive what’s coming.”

“Spare us your prophecies and your gifts.” Ilira touched the rapier stuck in the wall. “I do not want this sword. Take it back.”

Liltan laid his hand on hers on the sword hilt. “So this means you’re giving up?”

Ilira didn’t back down, but neither did she shake off his hand. “I am not the woman you seduced and betrayed all those years ago. I put that life behind me.”

“Oh, love.” He ran his gloved fingers down her cheek. “Quite the opposite, I fear.”

She reached up toward his face, mirroring his touch, and her fingers perfectly matched the two marks on his cheek. Had they come from her fingernails?

Myrin felt as much as heard a heavy blow fall on the door, which bent inward, and she sensed countering magic

being woven out in the corridor. Hessar had arrived.

Myrin traced her shadow door in the air and sent Kalen's floating bier through. "Ilira!"

Ilira flinched away from Lilten, his spell over her finally broken. The elf wrenched the rapier out of the wall and leaped toward Myrin. Ilira never looked back, but Myrin glanced back to see Lilten regarding her with an almost friendly smile. He saluted her.

They teleported away.



No sooner had Myrin's portal faded than the office door flew off its hinges. Lilten was dimly aware of Levia rushing through first, and half a dozen knights of the Eye following her. They shielded their eyes against the crackling magic of Myrin's doorway.

"Lord Uthias?" Levia asked.

Lilten realized he'd been so distracted by Ilira's and Myrin's visit that he'd forgotten to raise his illusions once more. The simple glamour that made everyone see what they most wanted still lingered around him, to be raised at a flicker of will, but it would hardly suffice. They expected to see Uthias Darkwell, so Uthias Darkwell it would be.

He spoke a word of magic, disguising his form with a bit of Art he'd mastered long ago, then learned again after the Spellplague rewrote the laws of magic. That had been a terrible inconvenience, true, but what he was doing with Maerlyn Darkdance never would have been possible had the Spellplague not come to pass.

"All things to a purpose," he murmured. "When you mold them so."

He smiled and greeted his fellows of the Eye. In particular, he noted Hessar, who was glancing around the room surreptitiously. Seeking a hidden adversary, perhaps? No doubt he wanted it to appear that way. Or was he looking for something else?

To his sensitive eyes, familiar shadows flitted about the monk—touches of Ilira's shadow—and Liltén recognized something with cold certainty. Hessar had been a naughty shade, indeed. Something Liltén would have to revenge.

Liltén sensed that all his scheming was coming to an end, which was not a surprise. His wife always did disrupt the best-laid plans.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TWILIGHT, 2 ELEASIS

FOR THE SECOND TIME IN AS MANY HOURS, KALEN AWOKE, but because of Myrin's magic, this time it was his body—not his mind—that stirred first. The world was pain, as every limb awoke with its own grumbles and complaints before he could do anything about it.

When his thoughts finally came to him, he found his limbs quivering against their bonds. He tried to touch his face, but his hand couldn't stretch more than a thumb's breadth from the bed board. He really didn't remember falling asleep tied to a bed. He and Myrin had been speaking, and then she had touched him and . . . nothing more.

He'd been under a sleep spell before and recognized its effects. Damn.

They were in a rented room in Tidetown—that, Kalen knew by the sounds of seabirds and the smell of new timber stained with fresh pitch. Built since the Sea of Fallen Stars had drained substantially lower, this part of Westgate was quite a bit younger than the rest of the city. Also, he did not know it as well, since new buildings went up every tenday or so.

“Good—you’re awake,” Brace said from near his bedside.

Kalen focused on the gnome perched on a chair near the window, where he’d been scribing words on a scrap of parchment. “Where is she?”

“The ladies left us gentlesirs—probably off to get roaring drunk.” Brace paused in his scribbling. “If you don’t mind, I’m trying to find a rhyme for ‘shadow.’ Thoughts?”

“What?” Kalen’s voice sounded dry as a desert.

“It’s a poem I’m writing for Lady Nathalan,” he said. “‘Shadow’ is a difficult word.”

“No,” Kalen said. “Get roaring drunk? What happened?”

The gnome shrugged. “They appeared out of one of those doors Lady Darkdance carves with magic, tied you up, and asked me to watch over you while they adjourned for some ‘lass talk’—whatever that means. It looked and sounded serious, so I said I’d ‘guard the bullheaded prisoner and dream.’ Hence, writing.” Brace tapped his parchment. “I’ve never tried writing a song of my own, and it’s surprisingly difficult. The best I can do for shadow is ‘credo,’ which isn’t quite right and sends the wrong message, anyway. Perhaps ‘drow’ like ‘snow’?”

Kalen’s head hurt. “I thought it was ‘drow’ . . . like ‘cow.’”

“Maybe you’re right. Hmm. But ‘drow’ has nothing to do with anything. I’d have to think of a word that . . . Ah!” His eyes lit up. “‘Plough!’ That’s it.”

“That doesn’t rhyme with any of it,” Kalen said.

“It’s a soft rhyme. It’ll make sense in context. Yes yes.” Brace wrote feverishly.

Kalen tested his bonds, which strained but held firm.

“Strong, aren’t they?” Brace smiled wryly. “Feywild underlinens—stronger than rope, softer than silk. Methinks

our lovely Lady Ilira's tied up a man or two in her day." He sighed, and a vacant look of fantasy seized his face. "She's just wonderful."

Kalen exercised his will and gray flames coursed around his hand. He released the power, however. What good would summoning the sword do him now? The fading flames illuminated a hulking shadow lurking on the wall across from the bed. Ilira had left her shadow to guard over him as well. Even if he could escape, he'd have to defeat not only Brace but the shadow.

Kalen slumped back against the pillows on the bed, defeated.

"Myrin," he murmured. "I hope you're right about this."



"Let me get one thing straight," Myrin said over bowls of wine. "Between us, I mean."

Ilira's gold eyes gleamed. "By all means."

Myrin thought if she held back any longer, she might explode. "I'm sick to death of the lies and manipulations," she said. "Right here, right now, I want no more. Do you hear me?"

Ilira nodded slowly. "I hear and understand."

"You'll answer all my questions?" Myrin asked. "As completely as you can?"

"I will."

"That's a relief." Myrin opened her mouth, but nothing would come out. Now that she finally had the chance to ask, the words failed her. There was just too much.

"We have time." Ilira sipped her wine.

After securing Kalen at the Blue Banner, they'd exchanged

a significant look, and Ilira had suggested they go elsewhere. So they sat outside the Lurking Wyrms in the Shou District, drinking mulled rice wine and eating meatless dumplings. The night was unseasonably cold, but the Wyrms lit braziers among the tables to keep guests warm. Clouds above threatened rain, and for this purpose the Shou wait staff set out parasols for guests who insisted on eating outdoors.

Questions flitted around each other in Myrin's mind, but one rose to the forefront. It was only the most recent mystery. "So. What's this about your *husband*?"

"Ah, Lilten." Ilira's eyes glinted like burnished gold in the candlelight. She looked bemused. "Is this what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Among many things, but a good place to start. I'm curious why you call him 'uncle.' "

"The word in Elvish means 'far relative'—not one's immediate family, and not entirely trustworthy. I called him so before we were handfasted, and it became a jest between us afterward." Ilira sighed. "It was a long time ago, and I was very young. Foolish."

Myrin waited, then cleared her throat. "That's it? That's all you're going to say? After all I said about lies and manipulations?"

"I've thought little of him in a century."

"Is he a threat?"

Ilira shrugged. "If he becomes so, he is mine to deal with."

"Fair enough." Myrin switched tracks. Rooting out this mystery had freed her to ask the questions she really wanted to voice. "Tell me more about myself, then. When Shalis—my mother—sent you after me, you seemed not to know who I was, either."

“I knew only that you went missing,” Ilira said. “Over the years, I discovered you had apprenticed to various wizards all over Faerûn, studying all sorts of magic. In your letters, you said you were training to be an ‘incantatrix.’ ”

Myrin recognized the word Orbakh had used in the memory she’d absorbed from the crystal in the lair of Night Masters. Also, because of what Ilira had just said, Myrin was beginning to suspect exactly why she had been interacting with the vampire in the first place: she’d been his apprentice. She must have been doing the same thing Ilira had done with Darklady Vhammos—luring Orbakh into believing her an ally, only to betray him. Apparently, not only had she been a powerful wizard, but she’d been brilliant as well. And manipulative.

Something Ilira had said floated back into focus. “You said I wrote letters? What sort of letters? Do they survive?”

“I wish I’d saved them, but alas, that was a hundred years ago,” Ilira said. “No doubt you’d have given your mother heartstop if you hadn’t written to let her know where you were, that you were safe, and the like. Then, one day in 1379, the letters stopped. Shalis begged my companions and I to search for you—I owed her a favor, after all.”

“Companions?” Myrin asked.

“I had two companions then. Gargan Vathkelke”—she traced the letters inked on her chest—“a goliath, and the best friend I have ever had. He is with me still, in some small way.”

Myrin’s eyes widened. “He’s your shadow, right? Just as he was in the flesh?”

She nodded. “My other companion was Yldar Nathalan. And no.” Ilira held up her hand to stay Myrin’s speculative look. “Before you give words to those thoughts, I am more

sister to him than lover. There are . . . reasons.” She looked at her gloved hand, then put it in her lap. “I call myself ‘Nathalan’ today out of respect.”

Myrin understood that quite well, actually. Names had power. “You say ‘am,’ not ‘was.’ Does he live still?”

“I know not, but hope ever abides.” Ilira sighed.

“You said you had two companions then—did you gather more?”

“Just one,” Ilira said. “Gedrin Shadowbane.”

“The founder of the Eye of Justice?”

She nodded. “Some years later, after the business with the Night Masters, Gedrin joined with us. He had sworn to find you, and gods-be-burned if he would fail in his quest. Apparently, he decided that he could not find you alone, and that we would need his aid. He would not allow us to refuse his companionship—even when I *begged* him.”

“Well that’s not nice.” It made Myrin laugh anyway, particularly when she thought of Kalen insisting on repaying a debt with service.

“Nay, he was a good man, and he’d sworn an oath—though he never told me to whom. I daresay he never gave up the search. Bastard probably kept looking for you until his last day.” She laughed wryly. “*Gods*, but he was a pain in our collective backside. Always nettling us about ‘don’t take this coin that doesn’t belong to you’ or ‘don’t torture yon mage for information’ and the like. Have you ever traveled with a paladin before? Oh, but of course you have.”

“Kalen’s not a pain, he’s just—” Myrin trailed off as hot tears welled in her eyes.

Instantly, Ilira reached out as though to touch Myrin’s hand and comfort her, but she withdrew. She’d lost her glove in Castle Thalavar, and Myrin could see the old fear

of touching take over. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m not upset—I’m angry.” Myrin bit her lip. “Kalen made his choice, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. I’m mad as all Nine Hells at him.”

Ilira nodded in approval. “Good for you.”

“But I still—” Myrin grasped her elbow behind her back. “I mean—”

“Yes.” Ilira looked away. “Yes, I really do. Understand, that is.”

They were silent a moment. Another round of rice wine came, and Ilira thanked the server in the flowery Shou language. Myrin listened to children laughing as they ran, carefree, through the streets of the east end.

“Are you still angry at me?” Myrin asked.

Ilira looked confused. “Why would I be?”

“Because I took away your touch without telling you,” Myrin said. “I—at first I didn’t think it had worked, and by the time I realized I’d taken it . . . How could I just bring it up?”

“What of ‘bless you, Ilira, now you have a whole day of touching folk after a century without. Don’t spend it all in one festhall.’ How about that?”

Myrin hung her head. “I’m sorry.”

Ilira smiled. “Truth be told, I’ve no idea what I would have done. I meant what I said to Lilten: the woman I was before the blue fire . . . she seems so far away, I hardly know her anymore.” She fingered the starburst hilt of the rapier leaning against her chair. “I left that life behind me a long time ago.”

“And yet you took the sword,” Myrin said.

“I did,” she said. “Betrayal, it’s called. It was a gift from your father—after a fashion.”

“My father.” Myrin felt decidedly uncomfortable, although she couldn’t say exactly why. “How did you know him? Where did you meet?”

Ilira made no reply.

“You’ll tell me all about me, but when I ask a simple question about you, you grow silent.” A shadow flickered across Myrin’s skin, and she focused upon it, using the trick Ilira had taught her. “You don’t talk about yourself much, do you?”

“Why would I?” Ilira sipped her wine.

“Why *wouldn’t* you?” Myrin sighed. “If I knew myself—my past, my family, my anything—I would talk about it all the time! But you, you have *centuries*—”

Ilira gave her a sour look. “Only *two* centuries, thank you.”

“*Two* centuries to talk about, and yet you don’t. It doesn’t make sense.” Myrin grasped Ilira’s wrist on the table. “What are you so afraid of remembering?”

Ilira sucked in a sharp breath, surprised as much by the question as by the hand on her bare wrist. Myrin’s skin was touching hers and there was no fire.

“Oh.” Myrin hadn’t meant to touch her—hadn’t even been sure she could—but there it was, and Ilira’s spellscar had not come between them.

She started to pull away, but Ilira caught her wrist and held her hand in place. “How is this possible?” the elf demanded. “Have you taken my scar again?”

Myrin shook her head. “It’s from Hessar,” she said. “When he was healing you, I . . . I thought perhaps I could take away whatever it was about him that let him touch you. I didn’t take all of it—just enough.”

“Hessar could touch me because of the shadow in our

souls. He is blessed of the power of Shar, and the ritual that made me what I am also protects the heirs of Netheril." She looked at Myrin's hand, across which shadows passed. "Do you have the least idea what you've done?"

"No?"

"You've bound darkness to yourself, corrupted your inner light into something horrible. Something like me. Did"—her grim expression wavered—"did you do this for me?"

"I—yes?"

Not breaking their gaze, Ilira grasped Myrin's hand and brought it to her face. She laid the wizard's fingers against her cheek and, when there was no burning, finally closed her eyes and sighed. Her whole body relaxed, as though she had laid down a century's burden.

"I thought"—Myrin's tongue felt thick in her mouth—"I thought this way I could touch you again and take your scar for a time. Let you touch whomever you wanted. Perhaps Brace—"

"No. You can't do that."

"I only had that curse for a day—I couldn't imagine having it for a century. You—"

"No." Ilira opened her eyes, awash in tears. Myrin had never seen such emotion on her face, and it silenced all her thoughts. "As much as I would want to be free, I cannot wish the same curse I bear upon anyone—not even you. *Especially* not you."

"Especially not me?" Myrin managed. "What do you mean?"

"You've been so kind to me, and I've given you no reason, other than my own dark memories about your parents. And now you even offer to relieve me of a burden that will hurt you to the core? No."

She took Myrin's cheeks between her hands, cradling her face.

"You have a good heart, Myrin Darkdance," Ilira said. "And I swear to you now that I will never willingly harm you, nor suffer you to come to any harm."

"But—but it won't hurt me," Myrin said. "And you'll have a day when you can touch anyone you want!"

"This," Ilira said. "This, right now, is enough."

She leaned across the table and pressed her face against Myrin's forehead. Tears fell on Myrin's cheeks.

"You feel so warm," Ilira whispered. "I have touched the cold flesh of shades in the last century, but never a warm-blooded, living creature, man or woman—not without bringing death. The shadow cools you somewhat, but you feel . . ." She shivered. "You feel so *good*."

Myrin trembled. "Thanks?"

Ilira's face dipped and their lips came close. Their eyes met and they exchanged an understanding few ever know. Myrin licked her lips, making ready.

Abruptly, Ilira's lips moved in words. "Can you see anything else? Any memories?"

"Oh." Of course. In that moment, Myrin had forgotten about the memories. "Nothing. I can only see those memories that relate directly to me. And if you have none, then that means—"

"I never met you," Ilira said. "I was there at your birth, and Shalis spoke of you that once, but in all those years of searching, I never even saw your face. I am so sorry."

"Don't be," Myrin said. "You met my parents—loved them, even. Can you . . . can you tell me about them?" She cursed herself for the sudden and impulsive question, particularly if it meant driving Ilira even the tiniest bit away. "I

mean, if you want.”

“I’d love to.” Ilira smiled wryly. “How much time do you have?”

“All night, I suppose,” Myrin said. “I mean, if you’re sure—you’re sure you don’t want someone else. Brace, for instance, or . . .”

Ilira closed her hands tightly around Myrin’s own.

“Oh, Brace is going to be so disappointed,” Myrin murmured.

“Let him,” Ilira said. “There are plenty of things two people might do that don’t involve touching.” She leaned closer and added in a whisper: “And a few that require it.”

Myrin’s eyes slid closed.



“Watching Lost Gods *damn* it!”

The outburst drew Kalen’s attention from working on his bonds. The gnome sighed and set aside the parchment he’d been working on.

“What troubles?” Kalen relaxed to allow blood back into his hands, which had turned an unsettling shade of purple. He’d come close to freeing himself, but it would do him no good if he could work free, only for his hands to prove unable to clutch a weapon.

“Alas, I’m a terrible poet,” Brace said. “I should crumple this up and toss it aside as in some melodrama, but alas, a working footman such as myself has but a limited coin supply, and the canvas of my art doesn’t come cheap. I just hope I have enough remaining to finish before I have to take this to the scribner’s for cleaning. I tell you”—he waved his quill at the shadow on the wall—“your mistress

is proving harder than I thought to properly honor with flowery words.”

Ilira’s shadow made no reply, but kept its gaze on Kalen tied to the bed. There was a rustle outside the window, as of leaves disturbed by the wind.

“A question, friend gnome,” Kalen said.

Brace turned in his chair and regarded him. “I’ll pause, certainly.”

“You seem to admire yon Lady Shadow very much,” he said. “Does it bother you—she an elf, you a gnome, and neither of you able to touch?”

The gnome smiled absently. “Methinks you know little of love, Saer Shadow, if you limit it to such tawdry concerns as race or stature. Even magical curses can be overcome—”

The shutters of the window exploded inward, followed by a man who kicked Brace off the chair and out into the room. Shadowbane perched on the desk like a panther. As Kalen watched, black flames spread to shroud him in a full suit of plate armor.

His own armor of faith—black as death.

The shadow on the wall exploded into motion, rushing toward Shadowbane, but Kalen saw gray flames surge as Vindicator materialized in the man’s grasp, and its flame turned black.

“Wait—” Kalen struggled against his bonds. He could not free himself in time.

The shadow lunged, and Shadowbane sent a blast of searing black radiance straight into it, shattering the beast into a thousand motes of darkness that rained around the room.

The gnome, blood leaking from a cut high on his forehead, managed to crawl a pace, and his form started to waver into invisibility.

“Not this time, gnome,” Shadowbane said, his voice like that of a man hideously burned.

He plunged Vindicator through Brace and into the carpet. The gnome cried out and struggled against the blade pinning him to the floor. Blood surged down the blade.

“Stop,” Kalen said. “Let him go.”

“As you wish.” Shadowbane twisted Vindicator viciously. Brace shrieked and collapsed.

Until now, Shadowbane had kept silent by habit, and now Kalen knew why. As much as the man tried to hide his voice in an affected rasp, he sounded terribly familiar. And what Kalen heard turned his bowels to water. “You,” he said. “But that cannot be. Not you.”

“Not the boy you knew, and not Shadowbane, either. I am Vengeance.” He raised Vindicator, point downward. “And you are nothing.”



Ilira recoiled from Myrin with a gasp. She clutched the edge of the table for balance.

“What is it?” Myrin felt her heart suddenly racing. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, it’s—” Ilira clutched at her chest, where Myrin could see her line of black runic tattoos burning and evaporating like smoke. “Gargan, he—they’ve destroyed him. My shadow.” Her tear-filled gold eyes turned black with rage. “We’re under attack.”

Myrin grasped Ilira’s hand tight. “I’m going with you.”

The elf nodded, then her eyes went wide. “Away!” She shoved Myrin back from the table. The wizard was at first shocked, but then she saw fire bloom in Ilira’s metallic eyes: a

blade wrapped in eldritch flames was hurtling toward them. The blade struck the table, blasting it—and their half-eaten meal—into blackened cinders and a cloud of smoke.

The force threw Myrin sprawling into another table and deafened her. She saw the world as a bleary dream. Rain fell on her face as she lay blinking, but she forced herself up. Suddenly, the night rushed back in, filling her damaged ears with choked screams of terror.

Ears ringing, Myrin glimpsed their attacker through the smoke and rain, standing tall at the edge of the Lurking Wyrms' patio. "Rujia?" she asked. "What—?"

As patrons panicked and fled around her, the deva strode toward the elf and the wizard, majestic of stature but deprived of the serene façade she had once worn. Her white-and-purple face was a storm of rage, anguish, and—above all—undying hatred.

"No more running," she said. The blackened ruin of her sword rose from the cinders and reformed in her hand, shining and pure. "My vengeance will wait no longer, Ilira Nathalan!"

As Rujia spoke, an aura of threshing, spectral blades appeared around her.

"Go." Ilira touched Myrin on the shoulder, making her skin tingle at the heat. The shadow she'd stolen from Hessar was burning away. "I will face her."

"But—?" Myrin could hardly think as Rujia stalked toward them.

"Go." Ilira gave her a gentle smile. "I trust you. Trust *me*."

Myrin's heart beat faster.

She summoned the spell of flight and soared back toward the Blue Banner.



The Trickster watched Myrin go with equal parts trepidation and satisfaction—Kirenkirsalai would be displeased, but Myrin just might find a way to defeat the vampire. The wizard was a resourceful woman. Also, the Trickster felt a hint of relief that she would not have to face Myrin, and—unexpectedly—a tiny surge of hope that Myrin would survive the night. Even though they could never be friends after this, the Trickster still cared about her.

The Trickster had made her choice, and she would face its consequences.

“I’m sorry, Myrin,” she murmured as she faced Ilira. “I just can’t leave it in the past.”

The two women gazed upon one another over the emptied battlefield. Ilira had come dressed the part in something similar to the adventuring outfit she had worn when she had broken the Trickster’s heart. She even wore a sword now, as she had not in some years.

“A blade—good,” the Trickster said. “This would not satisfy me if there was no duel.”

How she had prepared for this moment! It was time to use the skills and magic she had honed in the year since her last attempt at vengeance on the woman she hated more than anything else in the world. She tightened her grasp on her sword, through which she’d painstakingly learned to channel her magic. She no longer had any need for a wand.

Drops of water fell on her face and she glanced up. The clouds had finally decided to burst. Perfect—not only for the tone it lent this deadly business but also because a storm would block the moon and there would be fewer shadows for the Nathalan woman to use.

“You have the advantage of me, lady,” Ilira said. “You know much of me, but, except that I have done you wrong, I know naught of you.”

“You should!” The Trickster suppressed the angry tears that threatened to choke her. “You took *everything* from me—you and that slave of yours, Yldar! The two of you murdered my mother before my eyes, and you didn’t have the decency to die for it.”

Ilira looked at her with an oblivious expression.

As the Trickster spoke, she wove a subtle spell that would bind Ilira to her. It was meant for protection, this aegis, but she had perverted its purpose to her own ends. Her magic would remain upon Ilira even if she tried to flee. As she cast the spell, she felt another tracing spell upon the elf, but she found they would not conflict.

The clouds chose that moment to open fully. The torrential deluge plastered Ilira’s hair to her head and soaked her garb. The Trickster felt her own leathers clinging to her false body.

“I will never, *never* forgive you for what you’ve done,” the Trickster said. “I have spent decades striving to bring you nothing but sorrow, but it is not enough. Nor will it ever be enough—not until you lie dead at my feet with your blood on my hands.”

“Oh, child.” Ilira’s face grew sad, but no doubt that was artifice. She would feel true pain soon enough. “Who have I wronged so grievously?”

With a flicker of will, the Trickster shed her guise. She was no longer Rujia, the woman she had spent a year building for just this moment. She shrank and slimmed in stature until she matched the lithe elf shape of her nemesis. Her skin lost its odd pattern of colors and became pale with

hints of silver to match her pupil-less, silver eyes. A forked tail sprouted from her tailbone and a pair of graceful antlers curled from the tangled shock of her red-pink hair.

“I am Ellyne, named for sorrow,” she said. “But you will call me the name I have chosen for myself—the name of your doom.”

The Trickster sneered through her fey’ri fangs.

“And that name is Fayne.”



Vindicator plunged down, but even as it fell, gray flames swirled around the blade and it vanished just before the point could pierce Kalen’s chest.

Overbalanced, Shadowbane—Vengeance—staggered and caught himself on the bed, his face a hand’s breadth from Kalen’s own.

This was Kalen’s moment: he twisted his left hand against the bedpost to break his thumb with an audible crack. Then he slipped his hand from the bond and dealt his reeling attacker a vicious left hook to the jaw. The armor deflected the blow, but Vengeance still fell back. Immediately, Kalen reached across to untie his other hand . . . but what he saw made him stop short, hardly able to breathe.

Standing in the doorway, clad in dark leathers with a helm to hide his face, Vindicator burning in his hands, was *another* Shadowbane.

“If you are Vengeance, then I am Mercy.” The second Shadowbane raised the blade high, revealing the rune of Tyr burning in white on the back of his hand. “Now stand away, and maybe I’ll show you some.”

PART SEVEN: BROKEN MIRRORS

This deceptive dance hails from the treacherous land of Sembia. At least three lords clad in identical garments dance in a circle around a single lady, faster and faster until none is sure which is which: not the attendants, not the lady, nor even the lords themselves.

Shalis Ptolexis, Celebrant of Sharess
*Wanderings in Love's Name,
Published in the Year of the Bow (1354 DR)*

FPO

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NIGHT, 2 ELEASIS

FAYNE MADE THE FIRST MOVE, LEAPING BETWEEN MOMENTS to slash at Ilira from behind. Her magic permeated the veil of reality between this world and the Feywild, and she used it to move impossibly far with a single step.

Ilira swayed back, drew her rapier, and parried Fayne's overhead chop in the same motion. The fey'ri had little enough strength to put behind the blow, but her magic lent the strike enough power to knock Ilira to one knee.

"This is the great Fox-at-Twilight? Slayer of demons and breaker of hearts? Pathetic!"

Ilira's blade flashed in the moonlight, and Fayne suddenly recognized its distinctive blade: white hizaghuur, vanishingly rare, mined in the deepest reaches where most dwarves feared to tread. Moreover, she knew this sword was called Betrayal and was her father's sword. Fear filled her—had the awful woman got to him as well?

"How much will you take from me!" she cried.

Ilira thrust at her belly, but one of Fayne's warding spectral swords swatted the point aside. It was an ancient elven magic, one Fayne had toiled long months to learn,

and although she hardly possessed the skill of the *armathors* of old, it would suffice to kill one out-of-practice blade-dancer. After waiting nearly all her life for this moment of vengeance, it disappointed her a bit to see Ilira so clearly overmatched.

But only a bit.

Ilira had no shadow to telegraph her movements, but then of course she wouldn't. With luck, losing her shadow would weaken her. Fayne hadn't known that would happen, but she was not one to turn aside Beshaba's blessing.

Ilira reached into an alley, shaped shadows into a noose, and hurled it toward Fayne's neck, but the shadows were fading as the downpour intensified. A simple word of fire magic let Fayne burn the shadow lasso away. Even as Fayne stepped through her own small inferno and raised her sword, Ilira vanished into the shadows her conflagration had created.

Light destroyed one shadow, but in so doing, it created more. In this way, would darkness ever be wiped from the world, as Kalen sought to do? Foolish sentiment.

Fayne had expected this, and so she listened to the hum of her aegis. It beckoned down the street toward the river, and she let its magic pull her through the bleary Feywild to the cobblestones right behind Ilira as she crouched. Fayne's sword raked across the elf's left thigh, and bright blood bloomed in the misty night air. She deflected Fayne's follow-up attack and staggered away, limping slightly.

"You followed me. How—?" Ilira looked down at her star-sapphire bracelet as though at a treacherous friend.

"I know all about the Shroud, whore," Fayne said. "I know how to counter it."

"Very well." Ilira shifted her rapier to her left hand and

reversed her stance to favor her injured leg. She turned her full focus to the fight. “*Bir kerym.*”

Fayne smiled. “And may your swordplay fall to dust as well.”



Myrin stepped out of her shadow door into an isolated corner of the common room of the Blue Banner. She staggered and almost fell in the dizzying aftereffects of magical travel and promptly tripped over something yielding on the floor. It was a man, she realized—no doubt a patron sleeping off a few too many ales.

She was about to apologize for disturbing him when she saw the way his neck bent at an unnatural angle and that his chest was drenched in an ocean of blood. Then she saw his vacant, staring eyes fixed upon her. It was not a man, but a corpse.

Myrin loosed a small, horrified cry and would have fallen had not strong hands caught her under the shoulders.

“Hail and well met, Lady Darkdance.” Hesar’s eyes flashed yellow. “All’s well, lady—for *us*, anyway. Not as much for you.”

She looked past him to a common room littered with mangled bodies: patrons killed in a similar way to the man she’d tripped over. Men, women, and even a few children lay strewn around like broken dolls. Blood coated the walls, dripping from corpses slung over the stairs and balcony. After the horror of the dead man in the corner, she felt numb when she looked at the awful scene. She thought, morbidly, that the Blue Banner had been dyed red.

Also, the terror faded away because something about the

scene looked familiar to her. Impossibly, a memory surfaced of another chamber—filled with blood. Blood on her hands

...

“Shadowbane’s bloodlust is impressive,” Hessar said. “You’d think he was one of them.”

“He—” Myrin paled. “You don’t mean Kalen. He couldn’t have done this.”

“Oh, no, ’twas the younger, stronger Shadowbane.” Hessar traced his fingers down her cheek. “Although have no doubt that when the Eye arrives, dutiful Kalen will get all the blame. Levia should be here any moment. We should make the most of our time alone.”

Myrin recoiled. “Away from me, you monster!”

He caught her wrist as she raised the orb toward him, and she could not move against his overwhelming strength. She called upon her magic, but there was no reply—what countering spells had he woven in anticipation of their battle? In spellwork, they might have been equals, but physically, he was far superior. And he had surprise on his side.

“Pity,” he said. “You’d have been far warmer in my bed than the Shadowfox.”

“Shadowfox—?” Myrin asked.

“You know her as Ilira Nathalan,” Hessar said. “But I trust you’ll die even more easily.”

Myrin’s heart raced and she couldn’t seem to catch her breath. She couldn’t move. Myrin felt as she had a year ago, when Rath the dwarf had kidnapped her: helpless.

“Kalen!” she cried.

“Oh,” Hessar said. “I doubt he’ll come save you this time.”

Then he put his hands on either side of her head and began to squeeze.



Kalen understood much in that moment, staring at the two Shadowbanes.

He knew, for instance, why on one occasion (when he'd bequeathed Vindicator), his double had offered him no violence, while the other (the trap he'd laid with Levia) had proved a battle to the death. Those had been different Shadowbanes, although they dressed alike. He understood *why* there were two other Shadowbanes as well—at least one other wanted another wielder of Vindicator for his or her own purposes.

But he could not have predicted what would happen next.

He stared at the two Shadowbanes—Vengeance girded in armor of black flames, Mercy in mortal leather—and focused on untying himself. It was extremely difficult to unravel the knot with one hand, particularly with a broken thumb.

"You've made a terrible mistake, boy," said Vengeance. "This has to be done."

Mercy shook his head and held Vindicator toward his adversary. "Stand against me, and you stand against us all."

He might have said more, but in that moment, Brace—blood filling his eyes and trailing from his lips—rose and hurled himself upon Vengeance.

"Coward!" the gnome cried. "Son of a Cyric-loving whore! Detestable curd of maggot-ridden goat shit! You—" His curses only grew fouler.

Taken by surprise, Vengeance strove to fend off the enraged gnome and his twin rapiers. Kalen could feel him calling out for Vindicator with his will, but Mercy clung to

the sword, leaving the man in black weaponless.

Kalen focused on the newcomer. He recognized by Tyr's burning sigil that this Shadowbane—Mercy—was the one to whom he had bequeathed Vindicator. He remembered the words they had shared, the vow that Mercy had repeated to him. Kalen thought he knew the man's stance and poise. Also, he knew his heart.

"Rhett," Kalen said. He was almost free. "Rhett, if that's you—help me."

Mercy regarded him, expression hidden behind his helm. He hesitated.

"Kalen!" came a cry from below—Myrin's cry.

Mercy looked around, and instantly gray flames surrounded Vindicator as his focus lapsed. Kalen reached out for the blade, but too late—it vanished from Mercy's hands. Brace's insults fell away into gurgling death. The gnome stood spitted on Vindicator, which burned black in Vengeance's hands.

"Apologies," Vengeance said. "Was this a friend of yours?"

Then he wrenched the blade free in a torrent of blood. Brace, torn almost in half, collapsed to the floor, dead.



Ilira slashed her rapier quick as a threshing wind, and it was all Fayne could do to parry with steel and magic. Ilira danced around her just as quickly as she wielded her blade, striking from dozens of unexpected angles. Fayne blocked with her own sword only a quarter of the time, and she relied on her shielding aura of blades to deflect the rest. Gods, the woman was fast, but Fayne had the weight of justice on her side. She would not lose.

Fayne thought, madly, that this must be how Kalen felt when he fought. Kalen—

Her sword blazed and struck Ilira's wounded belly with a blast of eldritch power, just where Kalen had stabbed her. With luck, it would still be tender. Sure enough, with a gasp of pain, Ilira staggered, but before Fayne could land a finishing blow, the elf shadowdanced away. Determined to allow her no escape, Fayne pursued through her aegis.

"You murdered the only person who ever mattered to me!" Fayne cried. "I *will* kill you!"

They fought their way over walls and around buildings, to the side of the River Thunn and north along the bank. They passed the River Bridge, where the river fell away into the Sea of Fallen Stars. Fayne tried to maneuver Ilira toward a shattering fall to the rocks below, but the elf was careful to keep moving and avoid being trapped.

Their battle led into a graveyard filled with statuary, which the growing rain cut into a bleary world of dark and light. Ilira vanished into the shadow of a leaning statue perched on the edge of the cliff, meant perhaps to be an old king of Westgate. Fayne listened for the call of her aegis to teleport after her. The magic did not call from afar, however—did not activate at all. Had Ilira escaped, somehow? No!

Then a rapier screeched through Fayne's shielding magic and slashed across her back. Her warding deflected it somewhat, but it still cut open the leather over her shoulder blade. Blood splashed in the hazy moonlight. She whipped around, but Ilira leaped back into Fayne's own shadow, from whence she had come. Fayne cast around for her, cursing in Abyssal.

"Hail." The elf perched casually atop the statue. "Your

heart may be in this, but your arm hardly is,” she said. “You use the arts of an *armathor*, but you’re no warrior. You’re throwing all your magic at me, hoping to overwhelm me. Who *are* you, lass?”

It was true. Fayne was almost out of tricks, and while she’d wounded Ilira, she hadn’t defeated her. She could not let this chance slip past her. She had to win. She *had* to!

Rage filled Fayne, and she raised her sword, blazing with fire and impossible force. She slashed it around and cut the statue in two. Ilira leaped away from the crumbling top half as it fell over the cliff. As Ilira alighted behind her, Fayne spun and lashed out with a fist coursing with the same spell. Ilira parried awkwardly, which kept Fayne’s punch from going through her chest. As it was, the elf flew backward with the force, bounced off a tombstone, skipped into the air, then crashed back through a stone wall surrounding the Timeless Blade. Ilira collapsed into the fencing yard. There she lay, bleeding and coughing.

Ilira started to rise, but Fayne pointed her blade like a wand and cast a spell she had only cast once, and only upon Ilira herself. “Your worst fear to unmake you!” she cried, the Abyssal syllables ringing like a profane chorus around them. Shadowy magic stirred. The elf drew up straight as though struck, then grasped the sides of her head. Soundless, she crumpled.

“No,” Ilira panted. “I don’t need you. I don’t—”

“How fitting!” Fayne declared. “The same way I first struck you is the way I kill you!”

She leaped through the Feywild and materialized over Ilira, her rapier raised. Writhing in the rain-drenched mud and her own blood, the elf stared up at Fayne with pleading gold eyes. “Please,” she said. “Just leave me. I don’t need

you . . .”

She tried to raise Betrayal, but Fayne stepped on the rapier.

“Cythara—mother,” she said, raising her sword. “Now you are avenged.”



Kalen saw Vengeance murder Brace, and blood filled his vision. He wrenched himself free of his bonds and rose, surrounded by gray flames. He grasped Sithe’s black axe.

“You are angry.” Vengeance raised the bloody Vindicator. “Excellent.”

Kalen lunged at him with a cry, propelled by the Threefold God’s power. The axe chopped down and shrieked against Vengeance’s raised defense. Vindicator cut across Kalen’s middle, but he dodged back enough that it clanged off his flame armor.

As Vengeance slashed, Vindicator danced aside with the same impossible speed he’d exhibited on the rooftop, but Kalen slammed bodily into him.

“Not this time,” Kalen said. “This time, you fall. I swear it.”

“I’m sure.”

In Vengeance’s hands, the sword’s hilt had shifted into a symbol that was not Torm’s gauntlet, Tyr’s scales, nor Helm’s eye. Rather, it was a black hand grasping a coin between two fingers. Upon the coin was a man with two faces wracked with pain and terror.

“The mark of Hoar, God of Vengeance,” Kalen said as they fought. “You pervert the Threefold God’s justice with your heresy.”

“Heresy?” Vengeance laughed. “Ah, Kalen, but you do not know the Threefold God at all, do you? He has chosen a champion for each of his faces—you, Helm the Guardian—he, Tyr the Just. And another—”

He stabbed at Kalen, but the whirling axe knocked the blade wide. Shadowbane grasped the axe and pulled Kalen close. Their helms burned against each other.

“Only *I* serve the greatest of the three: Assuran the Lord of Three Thunders—Hoar the Doombringer, Lord of Vengeance.” He knocked Kalen back with a slam of Vindicator’s hilt. “He is the true heir of the Threefold God, and I am his Chosen. You are *nothing*.”

This was the final insult. As a boy, Kalen had seen firsthand and done terrible evil in Luskan, and had chosen the slim thread of hope Gedrin offered in Vindicator. As a youth, he’d watched shadow corrupt the Eye of Justice, and chosen his own crusade out of the city. As a man, he’d fought countless villains in Waterdeep and Downshadow, then left to follow his heart and his quest. He had driven all others away, sacrificed so much to heed his god’s call: Levia, Rhett, Myrin—her most of all. All these things he could put aside for the sake of his purpose.

He was the bringer of justice, the guardian of the world, and the wielder of Helm’s fire.

And now, to have his order shattered, his love lost, his faith undermined, and his very identity taken was more than Kalen Dren could bear.

“No,” Kalen said, rage filling him.

Vengeance laughed, and Kalen slammed the butt of Sithe’s axe into his face. The man staggered back against the wall, but his laughter continued.

“What are you, old man,” he asked, “to think you can

defeat the Hand of Vengeance?”

“I’m the godsdamned Shadowbane,” Kalen said. “And *you* are dead.”

He gave into his rising anger, opening himself to the fervor of the Threefold God.



Blery lights flickered across Myrin’s vision and she rasped for breath as slowly—ever so slowly—Hessar crushed her skull. Myrin struggled, but she could not escape. Her spells-car could not absorb anything through his gloved hands. Her magic added up to nothing in whatever dispelling field he had conjured around them.

Without her magic, she was just a frightened girl being murdered.

She’d cried out to Kalen, but she knew he wasn’t coming. She knew that in her heart. Whatever lay between them had been cast aside, and she had been the one to do it. Perhaps if she’d told him how she felt, rather than toying with him all this time . . . But no. Kalen had his quest, and Myrin had hers. She’d said as much to Ilira.

No one was coming to save her.

She reached for her dagger—the one Kalen had taught her to wield what seemed like forever ago—but although she managed to draw it, it fell from her nerveless fingers.

The pressure built and built, compressing all thought to guttural directives. Instinct took over and she struggled like an animal—to no avail. Her hands twitched ineffectually at her sides. She needed air, but only sputtered when she tried to breathe. Drool leaked down her chin, and she could feel something in her eyes straining to pop. Gods, she needed

air.

Air.

Blue fire sparked in Myrin, heedless of the monk's anti-magic. She visualized the threads of magic that would summon the winds—the delicate weave, forming such a beautiful tapestry of Art. She seized the threads and ripped them apart.

Runes gleamed into being on her body, and she summoned forth the corruption inside. It lacked the luster of true magic. It was raw and unrestrained and it was exactly what she needed.

The tables rattled as winds rose around them. Hessar shuddered, and the pressure eased just slightly. “What are you doing?” he demanded. “What—?”

Myrin seized Hessar in a whirlwind of blue fire and hurled him spinning away from her. The magic slammed him upside down against the wall and dragged him up toward the ceiling. He hung there suspended, gasping for the air that the magic had wrenched out of his lungs.

Myrin channeled her spellscar, seizing raw power untempered by human Art. She wove the threads of blue fire together to serve her will. It was the magic she had used in the Lair of the Night Masters, but even then, she had not called upon it of her own volition. Now she did. She was the mistress of dark magic that bent to her will.

“No more,” she said, in a voice not entirely her own. Although she couldn't say quite why, she walked toward him on feet that did not touch the floor, her hands wreathed in blue fire.

The monk struggled to speak but could not. His grayish skin turned purple as blood rushed into his head and air rushed out of his lungs.

“I know why you do these awful things—hurt people in the service of darkness,” she said. “But now you can rest. I promise.”

She laid her hands on either side of his upside-down face and kissed Hessar on the lips.



Fayne’s burning sword stabbed down into nothing, and the bleeding Ilira—sculpted out of shadow—dissolved around it. Betrayal remained, resting on the ground untouched.

Fayne blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“Couldn’t fake the sword,” a voice said behind her. “Illusions are so limited.”

Fayne hadn’t detected her coming. Even though the moon was behind her, Ilira cast no shadow to give her away. Fayne turned, but slim hands seized her horns and brought her face down into a leather-wrapped knee. The world exploded in whirling stars. As she reeled, Ilira seized her hand and punched her wrist, making the sword fall from suddenly nerveless fingers.

“You didn’t think my magic extended only to my own shadow, did you?” Ilira asked. “I can sculpt any shadow into an illusion. A minor talent, but effective at least this once.”

Fayne tried to cry out in frustration, but Ilira chopped the butt of her hand into the fey’ri’s throat, cutting off her words. Fayne fell to her knees, and her hand found something cold on the ground: the hilt of Betrayal.

“I remember you now,” Ilira said. “You were just a child, and you used that same spell on me. Eighty years is so long to live for vengeance—and too long to find redemption.”

Desperately, Fayne closed her fingers around the handle of Betrayal, but Ilira caught her wrist. They struggled over the blade.

“You’ve delayed me long enough. I’ve already lost one dear friend tonight, and there could be others.” Slowly, she brought her free hand—this one bare—toward Fayne’s throat. “I am very sorry, but you’ve given me no choice.”

“Wait—” Fayne winced as Ilira touched the taut muscles of her neck.

But there was no burning—no blue fire to sear Fayne’s flesh and leave her permanently disfigured. She looked into Ilira’s eyes. The elf looked as surprised as she felt.

“She did it again.” Ilira’s eyes turned jet black. “That stupid girl.”

She took Betrayal out of Fayne’s hand and strode away from her, toward the nearest bank of shadow by the ruined wall. She was leaving.

“No,” Fayne said, gasping for breath. “No, I won’t let you—”

She reached out with her *armathor*’s magic and drew her sword back into her hand from five paces. “Ilira!” she cried, raising the blade high.

Fading into the shadows, the elf looked back just as Fayne threw. The sword cut through the shadows where Ilira’s head had been half a heartbeat before. There was a sound, like rending flesh, and then the blade flew on unhindered, trailing blood, and sank into the ruined wall.

Fayne threw her head back and cried her wrath to the sky.



Everything slowed, as it had that last night in Luskan, and Kalen moved gracefully in a world of silence. Without Vindicator, he was still himself—not the hand of a long-dead god—but it would be more than enough to do what must be done.

The Hand of Vengeance slashed at him, but Kalen knocked his arm wide with a casual thrust of the axe's haft and tore the weapon's jagged edge along his chest. Black flames boiled away and he saw blood trailing in the wake of his strike. He swayed away from the next attack, whirled the axe around his body, and cut across the same breach he'd left in Vengeance's armor.

Vindicator rose in a desperate attack—but Kalen stepped back and almost sadly brought the axe scything up to hack off Vengeance's arm at the elbow. Then he bore the imposter back against the wall, haft against his throat to crush the life from him.

The arm and Vindicator slapped against the wall and slid to the floor. Hoar's sigil blurred and faded from the hilt.



Blue runes covered Myrin's face and Hessar's power flowed into her. He shivered, at once terrified and ecstatic.

The darkness in his skin bled out into a muted tan even as hers seemed to darken. His yellow eyes lost their unnatural pigment and turned an unremarkable brown.

Then the kiss ended, and although Myrin's magic still held him against the wall, breath rushed back into Hessar's lungs. "What—what have you done to me?" he asked in a tiny voice.

Myrin smiled. "I've freed you."

Sounds of battle from the floor above drew Myrin's attention: clashing blades, cries of fury, and something unsettlingly like laughter. She dropped Hessar limply to the floor and looked up. Her eyes flashed yellow. "Kalen."

The monk's antimagic faded along with his consciousness, and the Art filled her once more. She felt buoyant, her spell of flight still infusing her limbs. She raised her orb overhead and flew toward the ceiling. Just before she arrived, she blasted the floorboards apart with a wave of thunder and rose through the hole.

What she saw stole her breath away.

TWENTY-SEVEN

NIGHT, 2 ELEASIS

THEY STOOD TOGETHER AGAINST THE WALL, LOCKED IN A deadly embrace: Vengeance bleeding to death, Kalen strangling the breath from him with Sithé's axe.

Then Vengeance coughed, and blood sizzled through the black flames of his helm to spatter Kalen's gray fire armor. Kalen wrenched free to let him slump to the floor.

"This is your vengeance." The black Shadowbane lay, coughing and rasping. "The Threefold God's . . . true face." He coughed up blood. "Thank you . . . for showing me."

He nodded toward Mercy, who stood in the doorway and had just watched all this time. The helm hid the man's face, but Kalen could feel the weight of his gaze.

"Take your vengeance, champion of Helm," Vengeance said. "Is it not your duty to punish me as I have punished so many? You have no choice."

He was right. There was no choice. Kalen raised the axe high.

Strong hands grasped the axe's haft and twisted it out of Kalen's grasp. With his broken hand, he could not resist. The Shadowbane without flames—Mercy—held the axe away.

"You cannot do this," Mercy said. "This is not justice."

"Tyr cares for justice, Helm only for duty," Kalen said. "And this duty is mine."

CHAPTER

and fled, taking the axe with him.

Kalen turned back to Vengeance, who lay panting and barely conscious on the ground, waiting. “What now?” the man asked. “Will you strangle me, perhaps?”

“Hardly.”

Kalen invoked the Threefold God, and gray flames swirled around Vindicator on the floor. Vengeance did the same, struggling to hold it. They wrestled over the blade, will against will. Sweat appeared on Kalen’s brow and dripped down his face. The black flames of Vengeance’s armor dimmed as he poured his will into summoning Vindicator.

Then the black Shadowbane launched an attack that had nothing to do with a blade or a spell. He dispelled his black armor, revealing his face for Kalen to see.

It was not a striking face. It bore no great wounds or scars that gave him pause. It was simply the face of a common lad from the streets of any city of the Western Heartlands. He had dirty blond hair and wine-colored eyes, and he wore a smile on his blood-smearred lips.

And Kalen knew him. He’d recognized the voice, but managed to convince himself of his error. Now, there was no doubt.

“Yes, Master Shadowbane,” said Vaelis—his old apprentice, the one he had killed in a dusty temple in Downshadow. “You have taught me so well.”

An explosion tore Kalen’s attention away and made him stagger. He tripped over Brace’s corpse and fell to the floor. Vaelis loosed his hold on Vindicator, and the sword

appeared in Kalen's hand. Then Vaelis seized his dismembered arm, gave Kalen a last nod, and vanished back into the shadows.

"Kalen?" Myrin floated up from the common room, blazing with blue runes. Her skin seemed to have acquired a gray tinge and her eyes flickered with yellow. "Watching Gods . . ."

Kalen realized what she was seeing: he stood in the middle of a blood-spattered room, with the mutilated corpse of their companion at his feet, holding aloft Vindicator—the very weapon that had killed Brace. "Myrin," he said. "I didn't do this."

Myrin's expression grew icy. "I don't know that," she said. "I didn't *see* it."



Cold seized her—doubt as well as the darkness that she had just stolen from Hessar—and Myrin spoke without thinking to hurt Kalen. She said the words he had said of Ilira, and the way he reacted—the agony that filled his face—told her that Brace's blood did not stain his hands.

She knew in her heart he was innocent. But in her mind, she wasn't so sure.

Then the shadows moved, and Ilira appeared. She flinched back, struck in the face by something they could not see. She fell to the floor at Myrin's side, and the wizard caught her in her arms. There was no burning, of course—not with the shadow she had stolen from Hessar. That had been Myrin's purpose, after all.

"Ilira!" Myrin cried. "Are you—?"

The elf turned in her arms, and Myrin saw that she bore

a long cut along her left cheek. It didn't look deep, however, and that let Myrin breathe.

Ilira's eyes started to turn gold. Then she saw Kalen standing among the bloody mess that had been Brace, with his bloodstained sword and her eyes turned black. She sagged to the floor.

Kalen gave Myrin a look, which she returned with sorrow and horror. Her heart went out to him, but even so, she withdrew a step. "I am sorry," she said. "But you need to go. Now."

"I understand." Kalen nodded, then went out the window.

Myrin shook the elf in her arms. "Ilira? Ilira!"



As his heart sent rolling thunder through his head, Kalen plunged out into the night. A cold rain had begun to fall some time earlier, and the clouds now covered Selûne entirely. His lungs heaved, his body protested loudly, and he could hardly see in the rain and darkness, but he couldn't stop running. Something drove him, but was it Helm's duty, Hoar's vengeance, or . . . ?

He saw movement in the darkness ahead of him, up on the roof of a warehouse across the way: a man with a black axe in his hands.

"Wait!" Kalen ran across the wet roof. The distance was far, but with his boots, he knew he could make it.

He was so fixated on his goal that he slipped and fumbled the jump. He slammed into the opposite edge, and he could hear his body cry out at the impact. He felt none of the pain, of course, but his arms and legs felt sluggish as

he dragged himself onto the roof. His left hand refused to function, and he had to remind himself that his thumb was broken. When he gained the roof, his spellscar grew powerful in the wake of Helm's fervor, and he could hardly move.

As he stared up into the night sky, a dark figure entered his field of vision. Mercy held Sithe's black axe in his trembling hands. "Is this the man you've become, Kalen Dren? A murderer? A monster?"

"I have no choice."

"That's just it, Kalen." Mercy bent over him. "What you and Levia and Uthias—if that really *is* Uthias—don't understand. You *always* have a choice."

"Evil must be pursued," Kalen said. "Down every path, no matter how dark . . ."

"What of your own evil?" Mercy drew back up and raised Sithe's axe, like a headsman. "I saw what you did to that man—corrupt murderer that he was, did he deserve that? Was that justice? Shall I purge Faerûn of your own corruption right now?"

"If you feel you must."

The rune of Tyr's scales glowed brightly in white flame on Mercy's gauntlet. He considered Kalen for a breath, then walked away.

"Wait." Kalen forced his exhausted limbs to move. Blood roared in his head and chest, his body groaned, but he pushed himself to a sitting position, then up to one knee. "Rhett."

The man stopped five paces away. "What is it, Kalen? A lesson? The kind you refused to give me?" He looked over his shoulder. "If I'd known then what you are . . ."

"I never made any secret of what I am," Kalen said. "I do what is needful. What the Threefold God demands."

“He demands something else of me,” Mercy said. “I hear him in my heart, demanding justice for the horror you have done this night. And even after I have seen your darkness, I—”

He whirled and stripped off his helm, revealing his crimson hair and tear-streaked cheeks.

“Even so, I cannot. You are still my friend, my teacher, my—” Rhetgast Hawkwinter roared in frustration. “What do I do, when my god demands one thing and my heart another?”

Kalen thought of Myrin. “I have erred in that choice so many times.”

They stood on the lonely rooftop, with the rain scything down around them, for a dozen steaming breaths. Rhett held Sithe’s axe while Kalen held Vindicator. It was not unlike the Gedrin’s dream from so long ago—Tyr against Helm, justice against duty. Then a clang of steel on stone split the silence as a weapon fell between them—the black axe.

“No.” Rhett tossed Sithe’s axe to the rooftop. “Tyr demands we fight, but I refuse. You break my heart, Kalen Dren, but I will not spill your blood—not this night. But—” He met Kalen’s eyes. “Justice will be done for your crimes. We will forever be enemies.”

“Rhett, please,” Kalen said. “You don’t understand what he did. What he meant—”

“It doesn’t matter. What I saw tonight was not justice. It was . . . unworthy of a man.” He shivered. “If you truly believe such cruelty is needful, then strike me down. I swear upon the graves of the gods we serve, I’ll not fight you.” He spread his arms wide. “Kill me.”

“No. Do not do this.”

“It is your duty,” Rhett said. “Unless you kill me, I will end your quest. Sooner or later, I will defeat you. And on that day, you will fail. Unless you kill me. Why not do it here and now?”

Kalen found himself starting to raise Vindicator. His numb body wasn't listening to his commands, but to those of the Threefold God. Had Vaelis spoken true? Was the heir of Gedrin's legacy not Torm the True but Hoar the Vengeful?

Had Kalen erred, without even knowing it?

Visions of his endless mistakes flashed through his mind. He saw himself training Vaelis in Waterdeep, then he killed the boy in a terrible miscarriage of fate. He saw himself pushing Rhett away, then he nearly lost his mind with grief when he saw the bloody shards of Vindicator returned to him. He saw himself arguing with Myrin, then watched as she blasted his numb body away with her magic. So many failures.

And why was Vindicator not burning him? Surely he could not be worthy of it any longer. Had Vaelis spoken true? Had the Threefold God turned evil through and through? In his determination to fight evil with any means, had he embraced the very thing he sought to destroy?

Could a man stare so long into darkness without it staring back?

In his defeat, the last thing Kalen wanted was to hold the sword. He did not want that burden any longer, not if it meant killing his friend.

“No,” he said. “I will not.”

Through force of will, he opened his fingers, and Vindicator fell clattering to the stones.

Then, as though all his strength had gone out of him, Kalen slumped to his knees, and down onto the rooftop.

His spellscar overwhelmed him fully now, freezing his limbs into icy slabs. Had the day finally come? He could not speak, but he hoped his eyes conveyed his sorrow.

Rhett raised his hand, and gray flames swirled up and down Vindicator's blade. Just as well—Kalen never wanted to touch that sword again. The flames spread from the sword to Rhett's arm and across his body, cloaking him in fire, like Kalen's armor of faith. Once they sculpted plates across his muscular frame, the flames turned white, rather than gray. He truly was Mercy—Shadowbane the White, even as Vaelis was Shadowbane the Black.

And Kalen? What was he? Just a sick, weak, dying man.

"Farewell, Master," Rhett said as he walked away. "You refused to teach me, but even so, I learned much from you."

"Rhett—" He tried to say, but his spellscar stole the words in numbness.

Just before the world left him, he thought he saw a feminine figure watching from the edge of the building. She floated among the driving raindrops, illumined in blue fire. He tried to reach toward her, but his body wouldn't move.

Slowly, Myrin shook her head, and turned away.

Darkness.

A darkness, he thought sadly, where there is only me.

Warm light tickled the horizon as Hessar stumbled back down the alley that would lead to his Master's lair, staring at his pale hands. He opened the sewer grate with the command word to unlock the warding, but paused to look east before climbing down.

Unlike every other dawn for nearly a century, the light did not hurt his eyes—rather, he longed to see the sun rise, as though it would comfort him the way the darkness once had.

What was wrong with him?

So distracted was he that he forgot, at the bottom of the sewer shaft, to speak the command word that would still the temple's defenses. A set of rusty swords rose from the murk of the sewer and scythed for his face, but he threw up an arcane shield to ward them off until he could speak the passphrase: "Praise to the Reaver, who bathes in the blood of his enemies and sleeps to the lamentations of their lovers."

The enchanted swords fell instantly, their magic suppressed for the nonce.

He'd chosen well, Kirenkirsalai, in the ancient House of Steel. The temple to Garagos the Reaver hadn't seen frequent use in more than a century, but its defenses held strong and as far as Hessar knew, no enterprising treasure seeker had discovered it. Or perhaps Kirenkirsalai had slain all such intruders. Also, its location was significant, as it lay almost exactly beneath Darkdance Manor, the residence of Kirenkirsalai's obsession.

EPILOGUE

What the shadowfire sought in Maerlyn Darkdance, Hessar had never understood—until that night. He was amazed by his hands, which showed no sign of freezing darkness. What had she done to him? Had she taken *all* his shadow?

He strode through the sewers and passed through the secret entrance into the worship hall of Kirenkirsalai's lair, where he immediately stopped. The sharp scent of blood assailed his nostrils. Had the master fed just recently? He was ever such a messy eater.

Then he heard the labored panting and saw Vaelis—the Master's personal Shadowbane—propped up against the altar to the Reaver. His blood-filled eyes glared out at the monk as he panted and shivered. The boy looked awful—pale as a corpse, having lost so much blood through his severed arm that he should be dead now. Vaelis appeared to have cauterized the wound with his black flames, or perhaps it was sheer hatred that kept his heart pumping. For the life of him, Hessar could not say why the boy yet lived.

The life of him . . .

That was how Hessar felt: infused with life, rather than shadow. Myrin Darkdance may have been his enemy, but she had done him a great service in stripping the shadow from his soul.

He was free, with nothing but potential before him.

Was this how the Shadowfox felt? To think herself free? He'd misjudged her, perhaps.

Vaelis gagged, drawing Hessar's attention, and the monk sighed. "No master to heal you, my lovely boy? Now that

the sun is rising, I fear he'll be gone until nightfall as well. Pity. Such a waste of so perfect a body." He knelt and kissed Vaelis lightly. "You taste of fear and death."

Vaelis glared at him, unable to speak.

"What terrible misfortune befalls you." Hessar straightened up. "But alas, I've no healing to offer—not now that I am a creature of the light. I am quit of you both."

He turned to go, then hesitated. Something pulled him back. He felt, in the pit of his stomach, a swell of compassion for Vaelis that had nothing to do with desire. He marveled at his pale hands once more. What had that woman *done*?

Ultimately, though, even cleansed of his inner darkness, Hessar was the man he had always been: selfish and without pity. He bowed to Vaelis one last time. "Farewell, and may your next life treat you bet—"

He never finished the word, for at that moment a pair of dark-skinned hands closed around his neck and cracked it in a particular way. Hessar knew that particular move—had done it on more than one victim. He fell immediately, his entire body paralyzed.

"I wish I could claim to be surprised you turned on me, once-shade," Kirenkirsalai said. "But your people were never reliably loyal to anything but their own interests. Much like mine."

Hessar tried to protest, but his voice would not work. He could only gag.

"You have betrayed me three times," Kirenkirsalai said. "One, in your stupidity, you told Levia Shadewalker of us. You thought to lord yourself over her, and in so doing sacrificed the only value you had—your secrecy."

Hessar wheezed. Perhaps given time, he could recover,

but he had to survive that long.

“Two, you coerced Ilira into your bed.” Kirenkirsalai looked disgusted. “I may be a monster, but I will not tolerate such a travesty.”

He tried desperately to speak—to defend himself—but all he could manage was drool.

“Three.” Kirenkirsalai seized Hessar’s head. “You attacked my child. *Mine*.”

Fear gripped Hessar. In all his time in service to Shar, he had never seen such rage or hatred as filled the vampire’s eyes. He knew then that he was done.

Kirenkirsalai dropped him to lie paralyzed on the bloody floor. He could dimly see around him several other shadowy figures—tall, pale creatures that must once have drawn breath. They regarded him with all the passion a broken earthworm might elicit. Kirenkirsalai had not been idle, it seemed, and he had plenty of other loyal servants to do his bidding.

The vampire stepped past and bent over the trembling Vaelis.

“Such weak flesh, but such powerful spirit.” He ran one talon down Vaelis’s cheek. “Your use has not run out, my child. If I preserve you, will you slay Kalen Dren for me?”

Vaelis’s lips shook, and blood flew from his mouth as he tried to breathe. “Y-yes,” he managed. “Yes—”

“The time has come, then, to complete your gift. This is a blessing.”

Kire bit savagely into Vaelis’s throat. The boy gasped, his whole body went taut, then he collapsed. Flesh tore, and the boy’s head lolled.

Face coated with lifeblood, Kire turned back to Hessar. “I suppose you’re wondering why I did not kill you.”

Hessar trembled but could not move. His hands twitched with life of their own.

“When he wakes”—Kire smiled through the gore—“my new son will need a meal.”



Ensnared in his office in the Eye of Justice—the office he was borrowing from Uthias Darkwell—Lilten drummed his fingers on the edge of the desk and stared at the *coronniir* board laid out before him. Several of the pieces were destroyed, while others lay entwined. Entirely too many obsidian figurines stood on the board: the black lord knight, particularly, and of course the black king. It seemed the vampire had the same plan he had conceived long ago: to create a new Shadowbane to wield Vindicator.

“You always have feared that sword, old friend,” Lilten said. “It will prove your undoing one of these centuries—the sword or your cowardice.”

He reached across and removed the black sorcerer, marking Hesar’s disappearance from the game. Myrin had done quite well with that one. But there were still many pieces waiting, most of them black. Had he let Ilira distract his attention such that his foes had closed in around him? In his eternal arrogance, Lilten was certain this could not have gone so badly . . . unless some of his pieces did not truly belong to him.

He sensed the arrival of his daughter before he could see her. The child had always been clumsy with the Art, even if she believed otherwise. It was not entirely a surprise that she was here—she would be more surprised to see *him*—but rather something of a disappointment.

He wove a counterspell. “So your erstwhile mother’s vengeance waits for another night.”

Fayne shimmered into being in the middle of the room, stunned. Her shocked expression told him what had happened. Cloaked in illusion magic, she’d ventured up to Lord Darkwell’s chambers to steal something (and he had a good idea what). She’d expected to go undetected by the dozing lord in the chair, and she certainly had not expected him to dispel her invisibility. She wore a disguise, of course, although exactly which face she’d chosen took him somewhat by surprise: Levia Shadewalker.

She stood up straight in a passable imitation of the repressed priestess. Truly, Lilten would have been impressed by her pluck had he not been in such a foul mood. “Lord Darkwell,” she said. “I was worried. You had not—”

Lilten had a theory, and he tested it. He assumed a predatory expression. “Hail, servant *mine*,” he said, in a pitch-perfect imitation of Kirenkirsalai, his old friend and enemy. “Come to take what I already possess, is it?”

Fayne visibly calmed. “Master,” she said. “I didn’t know you were here. How did you penetrate the Eye of Justice? Don’t they have wards against—?” Then her eyes widened. “Gods. *Father?*”

“I am disappointed, child.” Lilten sighed. “You’ve as much as told me you were working for my adversary, and I hardly had to deceive you. *Very* disappointed.”

He rose from his seat and casually threw the desk aside with a flick of his left arm.

Startled, Fayne raised her sword by instinct to ward him off, but Lilten called upon the curse of Beshaba and in response Fayne slashed open her own throat with the blade. She fell to her knees, her hands pressed over the spurting

wound.

“My, what terrible luck.” Lilten strolled toward her, his momentary anger vanished. “Swords are such dreadfully dangerous things. So sharp.”

He ran one finger through the air right by her cheek, and his invisible claw split her skin open, leaving a trail of blood. She was not the only one who concealed a dark heritage.

“Father . . .” Fayne took one hand away from her throat to paw at him. “Please . . .”

Lilten brushed off her pawing hand and she sank into a spreading pool of blood.

He let her choke a few breaths, then sighed. “At least take off that awful face when you speak to me,” he said. “Levia Shadewalker is so ugly, even for a half-elf.”

“But—” Fayne said.

“I would do it quickly, ’ere you run out of blood and breath.”

With whatever will she could muster, Fayne dispelled her disguise. She became herself, although it did nothing to fix the gaping wound in her throat. “Heal . . . me . . .”

“I hesitate to do so, child,” Lilten said. “After all, you’ve betrayed me.”

“No choice,” she managed. “Threatened me . . . Vampire—”

“Oh, no—you misunderstand.” Lilten kneeled down, putting his face in hers. “I understand entirely why you would work for Kirenkirsalai. Indeed, why do you think I brought you to Westgate? I knew he would seek to turn you or manipulate you, and so he has done. You are my cat’s paw in his ranks—my own little spy. No, that isn’t why I’m angry.”

He grasped her wrist, and it was clear his superior

strength could wrench her hand in a heartbeat and she would die on his floor. Her terrified eyes shot to his.

“Did I not forbid you to attack Ilira Nathalan?” Lilten said. “Did I not?”

“But—” Fayne’s words broke. “I don’t . . . What is she to you?”

“Far more than your mother, that is for certain.”

The veins standing out in her forehead, her eyes stormy, Fayne looked so upset that she almost pulled her hand away and died just for spite. Lilten held her hand in place, however—he wasn’t finished with her.

“What now?” Fayne had grown pale. She gasped and choked on her words. Blood leaked from her mouth. “You’ll kill me . . . because I betrayed you? Father?”

At length, Lilten shook his head. “Such punishments are the mark of a small mind.”

He spoke a melodious phrase in ancient Elvish, and the wound in her throat closed. Fayne coughed and gagged on the floor, but at least she would not die.

“Always remember, you are my daughter, and I love you.” He ran his hand over her red-pink hair. “But do that again, and I will not save you from yourself. Understood?”

She nodded weakly. “Thank—thank you.”

He smiled. “I didn’t revive you out of pity,” he said, “but because I need you.”

She narrowed her eyes. “For—for what?”

“To do what I always do when I’m losing the game,” Lilten said. “Change the rules.”



Eyes puffy with tears and hair plastered slick to her head

with rain, Myrin had been searching for Ilira for hours. Her flight spell had expired around midnight, and she'd contented herself wandering the streets. She couldn't go back to the Blue Banner—not with the Eye of Justice soldiers searching it—and she had tried the Purple Lady Festhall, Silks at Dawn, and even Aurora's Emporium, all to no avail.

No one accosted her during her search. No one dared cross the wild-eyed, blue-haired wizard woman glowing with runes.

Surely Ilira would find her later, but Myrin had to search, if only so she didn't have to think about what happened on that rooftop. What Kalen and Rhett had said . . . She shivered.

The rain ended shortly before dawn, and Myrin finally returned to Darkdance Manor, sure that Ilira would not have gone back there but unable to give up. She hadn't yet had a chance to repair the wards on the gates, so they were still open. Just inside she noticed drops of bright blood on the stones in the courtyard garden.

With her heart beating in her throat, Myrin hurried inside only to find a gore-smeared Ilira meditating in the garden in the center of the chamber. The magic of the place kept the rain from falling through the open ceiling, but Ilira's hair and clothes were plastered to her wiry body with sticky blood. The elf sat with her legs crossed on the marble platform, and in her lap was Brace's torn and crumpled corpse.

"Thank you, Elevar," she said as she accepted a crystal goblet of wine.

Myrin hadn't even noticed her dwarf seneschal, next to the spectacle of Ilira. Ever dutiful, the blind mute bowed to Ilira, then to the newly arrived Myrin, then went on his

way.

“What—?” Myrin asked. “What are you doing?”

Ilira traced her bare hand down Brace’s cheek—there was no burning, of course, as he was very dead. “I knew him only a little, but he was kind to me,” she said, “Many men are, of course, although when they find out what I am, their kindness inevitably wavers. Not him. If anything, learning of my curse only increased his affection. He should not be forgotten.”

She brushed at the tears on Brace’s cheeks—her own tears, Myrin realized. Then she closed her eyes, leaned down, and embraced the gnome tightly.

Ilira sang dark words in her beautiful elf voice—the closing refrains of a ritual Myrin was only seeing at the very end. As she watched, Brace’s body blurred and grew indistinct. He turned to what looked like black liquid and ran down through her embrace until he pooled on the marble beneath her. He became a shadow cast by the moon. Ilira’s shadow.

Myrin saw Brace’s name appear down Ilira’s left arm. This time, the tattoo took the form of flowing Espruar letters, the Elvish script, rather than the rougher syllables of Dwarvish Dethek she had worn on her breastbone. Even in death, the gnome clung to her joyfully.

“There,” Ilira said, eyes still shut. “I feel much better. Almost ready, in fact.”

“Ready for what?” Myrin asked, trembling.

Ilira’s eyes opened wide and black. “To kill Kalen Dren.”



The rain lessened and finally stopped just before dawn.

Sunlight burned the distant horizon, chasing the clouds away.

It was then that Levia finally found Kalen on the rooftop where he had fallen. He lay partially submerged in muddy rainwater, the vicious black axe discarded a few paces away. His right hand reached toward the edge of the roof, the fingers curling helplessly into the air. His eyes stared blankly up at the lightening sky.

Levia had seen many corpses in her day, but none struck her as this did. The world slowed, and she could feel every beat of her heart like a hammer's blow upon her chest. Something inside her was breaking, and she fell to her knees over Kalen.

She pounded on his chest although he did not flinch, cried his name although he showed no sign of having heard. She could not tell if he was dead, or locked so deep in his spellscar that he could see and hear but not respond. And she was not sure which would be worse.

She prayed to Torm—to the Threefold God—to any god who would give her the power to heal him, and poured her magic into his limp body. Over and over again she cast healing spells, begging him to wake, then begging without words. She kissed him over and over. She slapped him across the face. She screamed her outrage to the heavens.

Finally, she collapsed onto him, covered her face, and wept.

She could not say how long she stayed with him, crying as she had not let herself cry in the three years since their parting. She wept until there were no tears left, then wept anew.

The sun was rising. Westgate was waking.

Levia felt broken, leather wrapped fingers on her cheek.

She sniffed.

“I was wrong,” Kalen said. “I have always been wrong.”

Then tears welled in his eyes, and Levia cradled his head against her breast as he wept.

