Praise for The Doom of Kings …

“Bassingthwaite skillfully balances the high adventure common to the DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS novels with some tender and believable character moments. The grief over a lost sword-brother is given equal weight to intense battles, as is Ashi’s frustration at the regimentation of her life amongst the Dragonmarked House of Deneith. My favourite touch however, was that rarity of rarities, a non-human culture that felt true without borrowing slavishly from an existing or ancient people of our own world. I’m very excited that there will be two more novels with which the author can showcase his goblin peoples … The Doom of Kings is also an excellent starting point for a fantasy reader unfamiliar with EBERRON and the other worlds of DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS.”

— Chadwick Ginther, writing for McNallyRobinson.com

Geth reached inside himself and shifted. The familiar feeling of invincibility burned through his veins. The pain in his rope-burned hand and his aching shoulder seemed to grow distant, than to vanish altogether. His skin felt like hide, his hair like thick, coarse bristles.

And he pushed himself further, pouring everything he had into the shifting. Hide, hair, flesh, bone—he was as hard and dense as the heaviest oak. Wild power flooded him and thought vanished. This was how a charging bear or a rampaging boar felt. Geth drew in his legs, pressed himself against the wall, and kicked out with all his strength, roaring as he unleashed the coiled power.

He let go of the rope just before it snapped taut. The plaza rushed up at him. so did the guards.
LEGACY OF DHAKAAN
BY DON BASSINGTHWAITE

The Doom of Kings

Word of Traitors

The Tyranny of Ghosts
June 2010
Rraat shë aanaa.

“The story continues.”

—Traditional opening to hobgoblin legends
THE EVENTS
OF THE DOOM
OF KINGS

Once a savage hunter, now the bearer of a powerful dragonmark, Ashi d’Deneith found herself isolated in the city of Karrlakton and at odds with her mentor, Vounn d’Deneith. Vounn had been tasked with transforming Ashi into an elegant, educated asset of House Deneith, a process which generated considerable resentment between the two women. Storming out of Sentinel Tower after a particularly bad argument, Ashi discovered and fought with a thief attempting to steal an artifact from a Deneith memorial. The thief, however, turned out to be a friend, Ekhaas, a hobgoblin duur’kala, or “dirgesinger.”

Ekhaas was in Karrlakton as part of a delegation to Deneith from Darguun, the goblin nation that was a major source of mercenaries for the house. The leader of the delegation, Tariic—nephew of Lhesh Haruuc Shaarat’kor, high warlord and founder of Darguun—carried an invitation for Vounn, Deneith’s premiere diplomat, to come to Haruuc’s court as a special envoy. Haruuc, a cunning but aging ruler, had seen the need for a closer bond between Darguun and Deneith.

Vounn agreed to allow Ashi to accompany them to Darguun. Their journey took them through the city of Flamekeep, where they discovered that Ekhaas and Tariic had not been entirely truthful. The mission to Karrlakton, while genuine, had served to disguise their real purpose: making contact with the shifter Geth, another friend of Ashi and Ekhaas. Accompanied by Chetiin, an elder of the goblin assassin clan, the shaarat’khes, Geth joined them. Tariic explained that Haruuc wished the shifter brought into Darguun covertly. The canny lhesh knew that although closer ties between Deneith and Darguun might aid his nation, his eventual successor would need something more. Geth, as the bearer of Wrath, the legendary hobgoblin Sword of Heroes forged thousands of years before when the goblin Empire of Dhakaan ruled the land, was the key to lasting stability in Darguun.

Reaching the goblin nation, Geth, Ashi, Ekhaas and the others—joined now by Midian Mit Davandi, a gnome scholar of the famed Library of Korranberg and an expert on the history of Dhakaan—found themselves caught in simmering unrest as warlords chafed at Haruuc’s commands of peace between Darguun and surrounding nations. One clan, the Gan’duur, moved to open rebellion. In the company of a select group of Haruuc’s allies that included the aged warlord Munta the Gray and Ekhaas’s superior, Senen Dhakaan, ambassador of the traditionalist Kech Volaar clan, Geth, Ashi, and Vounn finally learned the truth behind Haruuc’s need for Geth.

The lhesh understood that whomever he eventually named as his heir would need a strong symbol of power to bring the fractious Darguul clans into line. Haruuc had been in negotiations with the Kech Volaar, for many generations keepers of the lore of fallen Dhakaan, to bring the isolated clan into alliance with Darguun. From their stories, he had learned of an artifact passed down from emperor to emperor during the Dhakaani Age. This artifact, the Rod of Kings, had been forged from the same vein of the purple byeshk as the Sword of Heroes and a third artifact, the Shield of Nobles. The shield had been shattered and the rod and sword lost at different times before the fall of Dhakaan, but Geth’s recovery of the sword offered hope that the rod could be found as well. The rod would provide a potent symbol that could unite Darguun, and Haruuc had asked Geth to undertake the quest to recover it.

Geth accepted. Undergoing a ritual of duur’kala magic to wake the power dormant in the sword, he experienced memories of the great hobgoblin heroes who had wielded it during the time of the empire and found that through the sword he could sense the direction in which the rod lay. He set out from Haruuc’s capital of Rhukaan Draal to find it, accompanied by Ekhaas, Ashi, Chetiin, Midian, and Dagii of Mur Talaan, a young warlord in the service of Haruuc. The sword guided them to a hidden valley in the Seawall Mountains.
Bypassing the camp of a savage tribe of Marguul bugbears, they descended into the valley where they
discovered an untouched forest and a mysterious stone staircase of pre-Dhakaani design.

Before they could investigate, however, they were attacked by trolls and forced to flee—a flight that resulted
in the capture of Ashi, Dagii, and Ekhaas by the bugbear tribe. Invoking the names of Haruuc and House
Deneith brought no respect from Makka, the leader of the bugbears, and the trio was held under threat of being
either sacrificed or sold as slaves. Geth, Chetiin, and Midian had managed to escape, however, and with the
help of Chetiin’s cunning wolf-like mount, Marrow, they rescued the others, burning the bugbears’ camp in the
process and leaving the tribe in disarray. Now armed with fire to ward off the trolls, they returned to the valley
and descended the stairs to find an ancient shrine.

Within the shrine, a crevice led down to a strange cave where the withered corpse of a richly-dressed
hobgoblin sat on a throne, clutching the rune-carved byeshk rod that they sought. As Geth tried to take the Rod
of Kings, however, the apparent corpse moved and spoke, revealing that he was Dabrak Riis, the very emperor
who had vanished with the rod thousands of years before. The cave was a forgotten place of power, the Uura
Odaarii, or “Womb of Eternity,” where time did not pass and to which Dabrak Riis had retreated from the
world with no idea of Dhakaan’s fall.

Attempts to persuade the lost emperor to give them the rod only made Dabrak angry, and revealed a power
of the Rod of Kings unmentioned in any Kech Volaar legend: commands issued by Dabrak could not be
resisted. The Sword of Heroes protected Geth from the power of the rod, but Dabrak had also mastered the
strange power of the Uura Odaarii and used it to defeat the shifter. Geth’s heroic resistance gave Ashi the
inspiration she needed to invoke her dragonmark, rendering her impervious to any form of mental domination
or attack. Dabrak couldn’t affect her with the powers of either the rod or the cavern, but in the timeless place,
she couldn’t harm him physically.

She found the answer to her dilemma in the skills that Vounn had driven into her, and struck a bargain with
Dabrak for the rod and the release of the others. When Dabrak went back on his word, however, it took a clever
trick to make him hurl the rod at Geth in a fit of anger. The heroes fled the cavern with the rod in Geth’s grasp.
Dabrak pursued them but burned to ashes when he attempted to pass beyond the shrine.

Geth and the others found that none of them felt comfortable handing the rod over to Haruuc once they knew
the terrible power it contained. Not giving it to the lhesh, however, could spell the end of Darguun. They
decided on a compromise proposed by Chetiin. Dabrak Riis had said that it had taken generations for the
Dhakaani emperors to unravel the full potential of the rod. As the rod now seemed to have fallen into an
inactive state, they would give it to Haruuc to act as the symbol he needed, but keep its power a secret, acting
only if Haruuc or his successor should discover the rod’s true nature.

In Rhukaan Draal, meanwhile, Vounn also faced danger, kidnapped by a changeling disguised as one of her
guards. Although she was rescued, the kidnapping could have embarrassed and weakened Haruuc at a time
when increased raids by the rebellious Gan’duur had cut off food supplies and left the city starving. Vounn and
a loyal guard, Aruget, also discovered that Tariic, expecting to be named as heir by Haruuc, was gathering his
own power by making secret alliances with a number of warlords, including the devious Daavn of Marhaan.

The heroes’ return, and the rod they carried, was greeted with celebration. As Tariic took the rod from Geth
and presented it to Haruuc in the throne room of Haruuc’s fortress, Khaar Mbar’ost, the heroes waited uneasily
in case its power should manifest. But the rod did nothing except lend Haruuc a more majestic presence.
Relieved, the heroes accepted Haruuc’s gratitude. The lhesh offered a special reward to Geth, an invitation to
become his shava or sacred “sword brother.” Early in his life, Haruuc had taken three warriors as shava, though
two of them—Dagii’s father and Tariic’s father—had since died. Geth agreed and joined Vanii, Haruuc’s
surviving shava, at his side.

Dagii, meanwhile, was given the glory of leading an attack against the Gan’duur and their wily warlord,
Kerala. Backed by an army assembled from loyal clans and accompanied by Vanii for guidance, Dagii defeated
the Gan’duur and captured Keraal. Vanii, however, was slain in the attack—a tragedy that brought out an
unexpected brutality in Haruuc, who ordered the captive Gan’duur warriors left to die slowly along the road to
Rhukaan Draal. When Dagii—who had disagreed with Haruuc’s dishonorable execution of the Gan’duur and
secretly given each of them a swift death—presented Keraal to him, the former warlord of the Gan’duur found
the strength to taunt Haruuc, accusing him of cowering on the doorstep of humans.

Angered, Haruuc responded that he cowered before no one, that Darguun cowered before no nation, and the
people of Darguun would reclaim the heritage of Dhakaan. On their return to Khaar Mbar’ost, Geth, Munta,
Tariic, and Chetiin all confronted the lhesh about what amounted to a threat of war. Haruuc forced Tariic and
Munta to yield to his authority, but Chetiin would not yield and spoke harshly of the danger of acting rashly—
for which advice Haruuc exiled him. Chetiin departed but warned that Haruuc would destroy everything he had built unless he was stopped.

When he and Geth were alone, Haruuc offered his shava the chance to leave his service if he would perform the final act of standing with Haruuc to honor Vanii. Geth agreed, but he was dismayed to discover that Haruuc had found and erected an ancient Dhakaani grieving tree, a magical stone construction upon the thorny branches of which its victims suffered an agonizing death. This was the punishment Haruuc had for Keraal. In shock, Geth confronted Haruuc. Haruuc admitted that he did not like what he was doing, but nonetheless did what a king must.

Geth realized that just as the Sword of Heroes sometimes showed him visions of how a hero should act, the Rod of Kings showed Haruuc visions of how a king—an emperor—should act. What was for Geth a gift, however, was a curse for Haruuc. The visions, memories carried by the rod of an ancient time when Dhakaan’s power was unlimited, were driving the lhesh to become a tyrant. He begged Geth for help to save his nation once more.

Geth guessed that Ashi’s dragonmark might be able to shield Haruuc. Leaving Haruuc to face the honoring of Vanii and the punishment of Keraal alone, Geth ran in search of Ashi. He found her in her quarters, preparing to leave Darguun under Vounn’s orders. She accompanied Geth at his urging. As they made their way back to the throne room, Geth’s explanation of the situation was overheard by Aruget. Assuring Geth that he could keep a secret, the guard guided them to a side entrance to the throne room.

They arrived to hear the assembly of warlords calling on Haruuc to lead them in war—and to see Haruuc almost give in to them and to the curse of the rod, before cannily suggesting the elves of Valenar as a target. Geth understood that by starting a small war with the elves, ancient enemies of Dhakaan and, like Darguun, mistrusted by other nations of Khorvaire, Haruuc was preventing a larger war that would surely have destroyed his nation. Once Ashi used the power of her dragonmark to shield him from the rod’s curse, even that small war might still be averted.

As Haruuc raised his arms in triumph, however, a crossbow bolt from a balcony struck him. Geth and Dagii ran to his aid, but the bolt was poisoned and the assassin was already descending from the balcony. It was Chetiin. Avoiding Geth and Dagii’s attempts to defend the wounded lhesh, the traitor killed Haruuc with a dagger thrust through his eye, then made his escape.

As the throne room erupted into chaos, Geth saw two things. First, that Chetiin had believed Haruuc had discovered the rod’s power of command when in fact all the power Haruuc had ever needed had been his own charisma. And second, that the rod remained a danger and that whoever sought to succeed Haruuc would surely fall to its curse as well. Acting to buy what time he could and knowing he was protected by the magic of his sword, Geth seized the rod and proclaimed that, until an heir could be determined, it was his sacred duty as Haruuc’s shava to hold the throne of Darguun.
CHAPTER
ONE

19 Sypheros, 999 YK (mid-autumn)

Noise battered Geth loud enough that he could feel it in his belly. It swelled out from pipes fashioned from brass stems and inflated bags of leopard skin; from the rhythm of big drums beaten with short, thick rods; from the voices of hundreds—thousands—of goblins, hobgoblins, and bugbears as they crammed the streets of Rhukaan Draal and shouted a final farewell to Lhesh Haruuc Shaarat’kor.

The corpse of the assassinated lhesh sat in a throne carried on the shoulders of six strong bugbears. Haruuc had been dressed in a suit of heavy armor decorated with the claws and fangs of great cats, his hands curled around the hilt of the famous red sword that had carved out Darguun’s destiny. Protective magic had held off decay for the ten day period of mourning. When Geth had knelt before the throne in the last ritual submission demanded by goblin tradition, it had seemed to him that the lhesh might have been resting except for the ruin of the eye socket through which Chetiin’s dagger had plunged. Goblin tradition put the fatal wound on display for all to see, though Geth knew that the greatest wound was invisible. The dagger, straight and ugly with a blue-black crystal winking from its blade like the eye of a great cat, was called Witness. When it killed, it consumed its victim’s soul. Powerful magics could return life to the dead, but Chetiin had made certain that Haruuc was beyond even their power.

For ten days, no fires had burned in Rhukaan Draal. For ten days, the streets had been empty between dawn and dusk, and even between dusk and dawn, they had been quiet. The infamous Bloody Market was virtually deserted, most of its stalls shuttered. For ten days, no one had entered or left the city without permission from the fortress of Khaar Mbar’ost—no easy command to enforce, but the guards who patrolled Rhukaan Draal’s ragged fringes and stood watch at the barricades that sealed its entrances were not above using fists and clubs to keep order. Wagons carrying food for a city still recovering from the raids of the rebellious Gan’duur clan were permitted to enter, but they did not leave.

Ten days without fire, ten days of silence, ten days of isolation. By goblin tradition, a warlord was mourned within his clanhold for five days, but Haruuc Shaarat’kor had been more than just a warlord.

The morning of the eleventh day had come. Soon the people would be released to the spectacle of games commemorating the dead lhesh. But first, Haruuc’s tomb waited for him. The mingled sound of pipes, drums, and goblin voices was discordant and terrifying, halfway between a lament and a call to battle, a primal roar to accompany a king to his grave.

Or, Geth thought as he marched behind the moving throne, to sound the doom of a shifter who was in over his head.

His hands, already clenched around the Rod of Kings, tightened even more. The rune-carved byeshk shaft seemed colder and heavier than it had any right to be. He glanced at it and thought for the hundredth time in the last ten days, This is your fault.

If the rod made any response, he couldn’t hear it. At his side, Wrath, the Sword of Heroes fashioned by the same ancient hands from the same vein of byeshk as the rod, murmured its own subtle song of inspiration. Not so long ago, he’d only been vaguely aware of the sword’s influence as it urged him toward the deeds of a hero. Now, knowing where the rod had led Haruuc, the sword’s very weight was an uncomfortable reminder of its influence. Would it someday guide him to his doom as the rod had guided Haruuc to his?

A crooked smile pulled on Geth’s lips, baring sharp teeth. Maybe it already had. For ten days, a shifter mercenary had been the ruler—in name if not in practice—of a goblin kingdom. Why? Because it was the heroic thing to do?

On Geth’s right, Tariic, who had been Haruuc’s nephew, leaned close and spoke over the noise of the crowd. “You look uneasy.”

Geth forced the smile away, but he couldn’t completely hide how he felt. “I feel uneasy,” he growled back. “I could help you,” Tariic said. “With the ceremony. You don’t have to do it all yourself.” His eyes darted to the rod and his ears flicked. “It would be within my right—”

There was sudden movement at the edge of Geth’s vision, and he turned his head to see another hobgoblin, his broad shoulders made even broader by two thick leopard pelts worn as a mantle, his cheeks marked with ritual scars like clawmarks, pushing out of the packed mass of warlords who followed close behind the throne. Other warlords looked at him, but his eyes were on Tariic, and he had the look of a zealous magistrate watching for the slightest
violation of the law. Geth shifted his grip on the rod and dropped one hand to Wrath’s hilt. He might mistrust the sword’s guidance, but while it was in his grasp it allowed him to understand the harsh sounds of the Goblin language as if he’d been born to it. The warlord’s words became clear in his ears.

“Have care if you seek to advance your status, Tariic. Haruuc is not yet in his tomb!”

He spoke louder than he needed to. Even against the noise of the crowd, his voice carried to the warlords nearby. Geth knew him: Aguus, warlord of the Traakuum clan, and like Tariic, one of those in contention to take Haruuc’s place as lhesh. The other claimants were close, too. Garaad of Vaniish Kai, lean as a spear and just as deadly by reputation, walked with his supporters on the left. Iizan of Ghaal Sehn, wealthy and willful, looking more like a merchant than a warrior, watched from the right.

Haruuc had been deeply concerned with selecting the perfect heir, with finding a successor who would build on the foundations that he had built. Unfortunately, death had found Haruuc before he had named that heir. It could have been worse, Geth knew. If there had been a clear heir, he wouldn’t have had the chance to take control of the rod. It had killed Haruuc as surely as Chetiin. But sooner or later there would be an heir, and he’d have no choice but to hand over the rod—and the dangerous secrets within it.

Tariic looked over his shoulder as he walked. He met Aguus’s challenge with a practiced calm. “I speak to a friend, Aguus.”

“So long as he holds the throne, he is no friend of yours,” Aguus snapped. “The assembly of warlords swore to respect the terms of mourning. We do not seek to advance ourselves until Haruuc is laid to rest. You already force the terms by marching in a place of pride.”

Tariic’s ears pressed back against his skull. “Haruuc was warlord of the Rhukaan Taash clan before he was lhesh. The traditions of the Rhukaan Taash are clear. By those traditions, I am Haruuc’s heir as warlord. A place of pride is my right.”

“Haruuc’s status as lhesh takes precedence over his status as warlord. You try to influence the assembly by putting yourself on display before the allotted time.”

“And what do you do by challenging him, Aguus? Why do you challenge Tariic’s place when no one else does?”

The words came from the young warlord who walked on Geth’s left. Dagii of Mur Talaan’s gray eyes flashed, and his ears shivered as he glared back at Aguus. Geth had asked him to walk at his side as an advisor—a good choice. In the battle-scarred ancestral armor, the three long horns of a massive tribex mounted on its shoulders and back, of the warlords of Mur Talaan, Dagii made a commanding figure. Warlords who might have mistrusted the shifter who had seized the Rod of Kings could respect the hobgoblin who had defeated the Gan’duur for Haruuc.

Aguus’s glare shifted from Tariic to Dagii, but other warlords were rumbling their agreement with the chief of Mur Talaan. Aguus dropped his gaze. “Haruuc must be honored,” he said. “He leaves us a great legacy.”

“He is honored,” said Dagii. “No more challenges. Let the people see that the lords of Darguun are united in their respect for Haruuc.” With a fluid motion, he drew his sword and thrust it into the air. “Haruuc!” he shouted. “Haruuc!”

The other marching warlords followed his example, drawing their weapons and holding them aloft. Tariic, Geth noticed, was the fastest to put his sword in the air. For a moment, it seemed as if the watching crowd paused in their own shouting—then the air shook with a roar that was louder than ever. Light flashed from polished blades as the gesture was imitated in a ripple along the procession of the powerful and important—warlords and chiefs, ambassadors and envoys from hobgoblin clans that stood apart from the lhesh’s authority, from the nations beyond Darguun, and from the great dragonmarked houses—that followed behind the throne.

Haruuc’s dead ears heard nothing, but the bugbears carrying his throne stood taller and the day seemed a little brighter.

Geth’s hand squeezed the rod until his fingers ached. He glanced at Dagii and found the young warlord looking back at him. He nodded grimly and Dagii nodded back. Geth drew breath between his teeth and turned his eyes forward again. Somewhere back in the procession, Ekhaas and Ashi would be feeling the same thing he did.

If they failed in what lay before them, Haruuc’s only legacy would be chaos and the collapse of the nation he had founded. Darguun would die. And so might they.

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Ten days earlier—9 Sypheros

Smoke rose in a column over Rhukaan Draal, illuminated by flames below and moonlight above. From the
window at which Ekhaas stood, high in Khaar Mbar’ost, she could see only the one fire, but others were probably burning. Word of Haruuc’s assassination had spread into the city. The night would be violent.

Word had almost certainly spread beyond Rhukaan Draal. Beyond Darguun, as well. Across the city, ambassadors and envoys would be employing any means at their disposal to rush news of the lhesh’s death to their lords. House Sivis’s network of speaking stones would be alive with whispers. House Orien’s legion of couriers would be flashing across vast distances. In every nation of Khorvaire, in palaces and seats of power, sovereigns and dragonmarked patriarchs would be called from tables, desks, and beds to hear of events in Darguun.

She had just helped to do the same, weaving her duur’kala magic together with that of Senen Dhakaan, ambassador of the Kech Volaar to Haruuc’s court, to send a message to Volaar Draal. Now the wind brought the ghost of a song back to her ears—a reply, but not one that was meant for her.

Ekhaas turned to look at Senen Dhakaan. The chamber in which they stood was hers, simply decorated in a way that imitated a stark style popular during a middle period of the Dhakaani Empire. Senen’s ears stood high and quivering as she listened to a song that had been sung far away in the mountain caverns of their clan. The song faded and she nodded.

“The visit has been cancelled,” she said. “Tuura Dhakaan and Kurac Thaar will remain in Volaar Draal.”

“And the alliance with Darguun?” Ekhaas asked. Like the other Dhakaani Clans that revered the old ways of the ancient Empire of Dhakaan, the Kech Volaar had stood apart when Haruuc founded his new nation. The Dhakaani Clans lived within Darguun but were not a part of it. Haruuc had recently persuaded the leaders of the Kech Volaar, Tuura Dhakaan and her warlord consort Kurac Thaar, that Darguun and the Kech Volaar had more to gain in working together. By joining Darguun, the Kech Volaar would have a voice in the assembly of warlords and the means to spread the stories of Dhakaan that they had collected for thousands of years—and Haruuc would have access to the clan’s hoarded secrets.

Tuura and Kurac had been planning a journey from Volaar Draal to Rhukaan Draal to formalize the alliance. But like so much that Haruuc had accomplished during his reign, the nascent alliance had been built on the force of his personality. With his death …

Senen shook her head. “They will wait to see who comes to the throne.” She turned a slow stare on Ekhaas. “They aren’t certain what to make of Geth’s actions.”

Ekhaas’s clenched teeth ground a little tighter before she answered. “He is Haruuc’s shava. It was his duty to take charge of Haruuc’s affairs until an heir is determined. He follows tradition.”

Senen pursed her lips and her ears flicked. “Which Tuura Dhakaan respects. She also recognizes that by taking up Guulen, the Rod of Kings, he staves off a more serious battle between the prospective heirs. But he is a shifter, not one of the dar. Why is he doing these things?”

Dar—the ancient term for the goblin races. Ekhaas had heard the word—and the Goblin words for the three races—more frequently in recent days than she ever had before, as if Haruuc had woken a new pride in the triple races before his death and the people were throwing off names pressed on them by human domination. Bugbears were once again guul’dar, the strong people; goblins were golin’dar, the quick people; hobgoblins, ghaal’dar. The mighty people. But in uncertain times, maybe it was good to have such things to cling to.

“Geth is shava to Haruuc,” Ekhaas said. “He bears the Sword of Heroes.” She shrugged. “He has a respect for tradition.”

“How do you know?”

“He is my friend.”

“You also counted Chetiin as one of your friends.” Senen’s eyes narrowed. “What do you know, Ekhaas?”

A knock on the door of the chamber and a call from the corridor beyond saved her from a lie. “Senen Dhakaan! Are you there? I’m looking for Ekhaas.”

It was Dagii. Senen’s ears twitched and her hard eyes took on a knowing, triumphant gleam. She turned away from Ekhaas to open the door. “Saa’atcha, lord of the Mur Talaan.”

Dagii didn’t enter the room. He stood in the doorway, his gray eyes moving from her to Senen and back again as if he could sense the brewing tension between them. Those pale eyes, combined with shadow-gray hair and a naturally somber face, made him look older than he really was. In fact, he was no older than Ekhaas herself, and young for a warlord. “Geth sent me,” he said. “He wants to talk to you.”

Worse words couldn’t have been spoken. Senen’s ears rose sharply. Ekhaas walked past her without saying anything. Once the door was closed and Dagii was ushering her along the corridor, she said, “Senen suspects something.”

Dagii gave her a grim smile. “This is a time for suspicion.”
The halls of Khaar Mbar’ost were quiet. In the moments after Haruuc’s death, they had been chaotic, but Ekhaas guessed that as the shock of the assassination had ebbed, people had stumbled back to their rooms or out into the city, seeking reflection or mindless violence, as they preferred. She glanced at Dagii. The aged metal of his ancestral armor carried shiny, fresh scrapes and dents. In attempting to drive off Chetiin, he had come within reach of the grieving tree Haruuc had erected in his throne room. The lhesh’s final words had stilled the tree and forced it to release Dagii. His face bore the beginnings of bruises and the limp in his walk—the result of a broken ankle healed in a rush by her magic during the quest for the Rod of Kings—was even more pronounced than usual.

“Did the tree hurt you?” she asked.

“No. It wasn’t able to get past my armor. Falling out of it hurt more.” His face tightened. “Keraal is worse off.”

Ekhaas’s ears rose. In the madness of Haruuc’s death, she had forgotten the rebel lord. The command that had released Dagii had also released Keraal. “He’s alive?”

“For now.”

There was noise ahead, noise that grew louder as they approached the antechamber outside of the throne room. It seemed that not everyone had retreated to grieve. A final turn in the passage revealed the antechamber—and Geth, along with two old hobgoblins, under siege by a small mob of shouting warlords. The two old hobgoblins looked to be in their element.

One, a thin woman, met the shouts of the warlords with calm, firm answers. “It is tradition! Would you do it differently in your clan hold? The period of mourning is dedicated to the dead—there will be no discussion of succession until Haruuc is in his tomb. Ten days of mourning Haruuc’s death, five days of games to celebrate his life, and then an heir will be selected. Until then the shava holds Haruuc’s power.”

The other, a vastly old, rotund, yet vigorous man who wore the ceremonial armor of a warlord himself, replied to shouts as if he were on the battlefield. “The assembly will meet, Garaad! Tomorrow. Maabet, decide for yourself, Iizan! Honor him as you choose.”

The thin woman was Razu, who had been Haruuc’s mistress of rituals. The fat old warlord was Munta the Gray, Haruuc’s closest ally for more than thirty years. Between them, shielded by them, stood Geth. The shifter gripped the Rod of Kings with one hand and the hilt of Wrath, the Sword of Heroes, with the other. Wrath was still sheathed but Geth looked ready to draw it. Ekhaas knew that animal instincts ran strong in Geth’s veins. His large eyes were wide and fever-bright, and his thick, coarse hair was almost standing on end. He looked like a wild thing backed into a corner.

His expression brightened slightly when he saw Ekhaas and Dagii. He nodded toward a door across the antechamber, then turned to face the warlords. “Enough!” he said, his voice a snarl that cut through the clamor. He spoke the human language but many of the warlords in the antechamber had fought in the mercenary armies of House Deneith during the Last War and understood the tongue. They fell silent. Geth glared at them all. “Leave. You heard Razu. I’m not going to talk about the succession.”

“Maybe not about the succession.” Ekhaas recognized the warlord who spoke—Aguus of Traakuum. “But what about the war?”

“The war?” asked Geth.

Aguus grunted. “It is as Haruuc said. We should turn our blades against the Valenar. If we must wait ten days or more before we make a decision, the Valenar will have an advantage over us.”

“There is no war. How can there be a war when the man who spoke of it was cut down moments later?” Geth swept his gaze across the silent warlords. “Think about that during the period of mourning.”

Aguus wasn’t finished. “Haruuc would have wanted it!”

Geth froze for a moment, then growled, “You’re wrong.” He turned away from them, gesturing with the rod. “Leave now. A shava needs to mourn, too.”

He pushed away from them without waiting for a response. Munta followed for a few moments, exchanging words with him, then turned back to block any of the more aggressive warlords from following. Geth came to join Ekhaas and Dagii at the door.

“How are you?” Ekhaas asked him.

“How do you think I am?” He opened the door and led them through into a short corridor.

Along the corridor was another door and a hobgoblin warrior wearing the red corded armband that signified service to Khaar Mbar’ost standing outside it. Aruget, one of the loyal warriors assigned by Haruuc to act as a personal guard to Vounn and Ashi d’Deneith. No one would interrupt them as long as he stood guard.

The chamber beyond was the same luxurious waiting room for dignitaries where they—she, Dagii, Geth, Ashi, the gnome scholar Midian Mit Davandi, and Chetiin—had been deposited on their return to Khaar Mbar’ost bearing
the Rod of Kings. Ashi was waiting for them, pacing the room like a cat. Her dark gold hair had been drawn back, revealing the intricate lines of the powerful dragonmark, a rare Siberys Mark, that patterned her neck—and her shoulders, back, arms, her entire body save the palms of her hands and a narrow strip between her cheeks and her brow. Two small gold rings that pierced her lower lip were the only sign that less than a year ago, Ashi had been a savage hunter of the Shadow Marches before discovering her heritage in House Deneith, and before the manifestation of the mark that allowed her to shield minds and block powerful divinations.

At the opening of the door, she looked up, her mouth framing a greeting. Geth didn’t give any of them time to speak. With a snarl of frustration, the shifter twisted his torso and hurled the Rod of Kings into a large, ornately framed mirror that hung above a sideboard.

The glass exploded out in a shower of sharp fragments. The rod bounced off the thin wooden backing, hit the sideboard hard enough to gouge it, and fell to the floor with the heavy clang of solid metal. Ashi’s words turned into a yell of surprise and the door slammed open as Aruget charged in.

Geth turned on him. “Out!”

The guard stepped back and closed the door without a word. Ekhaas went over and looked down at the rod. The rune-carved shaft was unmarked. She would have picked it up, but Geth stopped her.

“Don’t touch it,” he said. “Don’t anybody touch it.” Feet crunching on the broken mirror, he retrieved the rod, handling it as if it were a snake. Geth grimaced and dropped back into one of the room’s chairs. His voice was a growl. “Chetiin said something to me after he killed Haruuc, just before he escaped. He said, ‘We swore we would do what we had to.’”

“He thought Haruuc had discovered the power of the rod,” said Ekhaas. Memory of the rod’s hold over her mind brought her ears low. There had been as much hope of resisting it as of holding back a flood with a leaking bucket.

“He should have talked to the rest of us.” Dagii’s face was grim.

“I wish he had,” said Geth. “Because if that’s what he was thinking, he was wrong.” He turned the rod in his hands, and for a moment Ekhaas thought he might throw it again, but then he stood and drew Wrath. Forged from the same twilight-purple byeshk as the rod, the sword was massive and heavy, sharp on one edge and deeply notched on the other, a dar design that hadn’t changed much in thousands of years. “Wrath … talks to me. In a way. Sometimes it gives me a nudge, pushing me to act the way a hero would. Occasionally it puts heroic words in my mouth. It’s not just the Sword of Heroes. It’s a sword that makes heroes.”

In the other hand, he hefted the Rod of Kings. “The rod is the same. Just before Keraal’s punishment, Haruuc and I had an argument. All the time that we were carrying the rod back to Rhukaan Draal, I was the only one to touch it. Wrath doesn’t just protect me from the rod’s power of command—it shields me from all of the rod’s power. When Haruuc took up the rod, he didn’t have that protection. A hero inspires. A king rules.” He bared his teeth. “From the moment he first held the rod, it fed him the memories of the Dhakaani emperors.”

Dagii’s ears rose. “Maabet. The rod has been pushing Haruuc to act like a king?”

“Not a king. An emperor.” Geth lowered both sword and rod. “Haruuc said the rod responds to the touch of anyone with the will to rule. I think he was strong enough to hold its influence off for a time, but when Vanii was killed in battle against the Gan’duur, it was too much.”

“He gave in,” said Ashi. “What he did to Keraal and the Gan’duur, his talk of war …”

“The rod,” Geth agreed.

“But not his talk of war with Valenar,” Ekhaas said. She remembered the look of desperate cunning on Haruuc’s face when he’d spoken of the elves as ancient enemies of the hobgoblin empire. “Two upstart nations carved out of territory seized during the Last War. The rod might have been driving him to war, but he was trying to choose a target that wouldn’t bring all of Khorvaire down on Darguun.”

“And if Chetiin hadn’t taken matters into his own hands it might have worked,” Geth said. “I could have gotten Ashi to him. We might have been able to block the rod’s influence.” He sheathed Wrath. “Haruuc and Chetiin had an argument. Chetiin tried to point out to Haruuc that he was heading for conflict. Haruuc ordered him out of Khaar Mbar’ost. The last thing Chetiin said to Haruuc was that he would destroy everything he had built unless he was stopped. Maybe he thought he was acting to preserve Darguun. He’s only made it worse, though.” He held out the rod. “Whoever succeeds Haruuc is going to claim this—and it will claim them. Haruuc had the strength of will to resist it. I don’t think anyone who comes after him is going to have that.”


Ekhaas’s ears rose. “We can’t,” she said. “Haruuc’s plan to use the rod as a symbol of power was good. Too good. If it disappears now, there’s never going to be a clear line of succession. It may be possible for the assembly of warlords to agree on a new lhesh, but the rod links him to Haruuc and Darguun.”
“We could warn the new lhesh,” suggested Dagii.

“Warn him how? ‘Be careful. The rod will try to make you an emperor.’” Geth said. “Is that going to scare a new lhesh or make him curious?”

“There’s still the danger of the rod’s real power, too,” Ekhaas said. “Haruuc did everything that he did with the force of his own personality. The rod may have enhanced his presence, but he didn’t need its help. If he hadn’t resisted it, would the rod have revealed itself to him eventually?” She looked around the room at the others. “We’re holding a sword by the blade.”

“So what do we do then?” asked Ashi.

“I don’t know,” said Geth. “But we’ve got ten days of mourning and five of games to think of something.” He pointed the rod at Dagii, then grimaced and lowered it, gesturing instead with his free hand. “Dagii, I’m going to give you charge of keeping order in Rhukaan Draal. Use it to get a message out to Midian and tell him to return to the city. He’s clever. I want his help.”

“Mazo,” Dagii said.

Ekhaas nodded, too—Rhukaan Draal was technically the territory of the Mur Talaan clan, but Dagii’s father Feniic had been one of Haruuc’s original shava and had ceded it to the lhesh as neutral territory for Darguun’s capital city. Putting Dagii in charge of it during the period of mourning would meet with the approval of Darguun’s warlords. Bringing Midian back to the city was a good idea as well. The gnome scholar had left Rhukaan Draal days before to explore Dhakaani ruins in the south, a reward from Haruuc for his role in recovering the Rod of Kings. She wondered if news of the assassination had even reached Midian yet.

“What about Ashi and me?” she asked.

“Listen,” said Geth. “You’re in a position to hear what’s being said among the warlords—especially the possible heirs like Tariic and Aguus. Ashi, you listen to what’s happening among the ambassadors and envoys. They’ll be coming to me, but I want to know what they’re really thinking.”

There was still one worry lurking in Ekhaas’s mind, though. “What about Chetiin? He’s out there somewhere.” Geth hesitated, then bared his teeth. “If he’s smart, he won’t show his face again.”
Storm at dawn, I think I’m going to go deaf!” said Sindra d’Lyrandar above the roar of the crowd as a fresh wave of noise honoring Haruuc rose to meet the morning sun.

“You’ve said that already!” Pater d’Orien shouted back at her.

“That’s because I mean it. Imagine how bad it must be at the front of the procession. Where’s the dignity? How much longer is this going to go on?”

Ashi clenched her teeth and tried to ignore the running litany of complaints from the viceroys of Houses Orien and Lyrandar. The crowd that packed the windows and rooftops of Rhukaan Draal was bad enough—she could almost feel the weight of hundreds of gazes on her—but the viceroys’ comments just made it worse. All around her, the envoys who represented the affairs of the dragonmarked houses in Darguun marched in their appointed place in Haruuc’s funeral procession, yet only Pater and Sindra felt the need to make their opinions known. It was almost as if they were in competition, something Ashi could believe far too easily. There was no love lost between the two viceroys. Their houses had a long-established rivalry, with Orien controlling overland transport across Khorvaire while Lyrandar’s sailing vessels dominated the sea and their wondrous airships the skies, but Pater and Sindra took it personally. Haruuc’s funeral wasn’t the place for it, though. If they wanted to talk about dignity …

At Ashi’s side, Vounn said calmly, “Ashi, we’re here to show our respect for Haruuc, not start a fight.” The gray-haired lady seneschal of House Deneith—special envoy of the House to the court of Haruuc Shaarat’kor, and Ashi’s mentor in the ways of civilization—nodded pointedly downward.

Ashi realized her hand had gone to the hilt of her sword.

Her first thought, as it always was when she looked at the weapon was, no, not my sword, only the sword I wear. Her sword, the honor blade that had belonged to her grandfather, Kagan, and that had been the first clue she was more than just a hunter of the savage Bonetree clan, had been lost in the wilderness of the Seawall Mountains in the race to recover the Rod of Kings. It had been a terrible bargain. She wished that the rod had stayed lost. She would have Kagan’s sword and Haruuc would be alive.

But she understood what Vounn was trying to tell her. She couldn’t let herself get caught up in Pater and Sindra’s argument. She might not have been walking near the front of the procession as Ekhaas, or Dagii, or Geth were, but she still represented House Deneith. She let her hand fall back to her side.

Vounn leaned closer so that only Ashi could hear her words. “The mourning period has been difficult—for all of us.”

She caught Ashi’s eye as she said it.

“I appreciate that, Vounn,” said Ashi.

Vounn drew back, eyes still on her. Ashi waited a moment before she glanced away, then didn’t look at her mentor again. She knew Vounn had guessed she was holding something back, just as Senen Dhakaan knew Ekhaas wasn’t telling everything. The difference, Ashi thought, was that she wished she could tell Vounn what she knew. When Vounn had first become her mentor in House Deneith, they had been in conflict: a barbarian bearing a rare and powerful dragonmark and the diplomat tasked with turning her into a lady. Talent, knowledge, and poise counted as much or more than an individual’s mark for respect within the house—the mark Vounn bore was small, capable of creating a shield against physical blows for a time, yet she had the ear of Deneith’s patriarch himself—but Ashi’s deeds in recovering the Rod of Kings had opened a new path of respect between the two women. Ashi had taken some of Vounn’s lessons to heart and Vounn had begun to trust her more, treating her as the capable woman she was, not merely as an asset of House Deneith. If Ashi could have returned that trust by telling her the truth about the rod she would have. She didn’t dare. The rod’s secret had to be kept.

They were going to need help soon, though. There had been no word yet from Midian or even from the messenger Dagii had sent to find him. She, Geth, and the others still hadn’t figured out a solution for the problem posed by the rod—as the days left ahead of them shrank, theft or destruction looked like the only options. If they wanted to save Darguun, they might have to risk destroying it.

At least she’d had nothing to report to Geth of unrest or rumors among the envoys of the dragonmarked houses or the ambassadors of the nations of Khorvaire. She’d listened to them as Geth had asked, but most were either angered
at being trapped in Rhukaan Draal for the mourning period or uncertain what to make of the shifter who had seized Haruuc’s power. Only the nations of Breland and Zilargo shared a direct border with Darguun. The Brelish ambassador hinted that they were watching events closely. The Zil ambassador, a gnome like most Zils, put on a show of being timid and flighty, but Ashi could tell she was as sharp as a knife. Against Geth’s prediction, almost none of the ambassadors or the envoys were interested in making deals with someone they considered just a figurehead. They preferred to wait until the proper heir was determined.

Perhaps the only other good thing that could be said of the mourning period was that there had been no sign of Chetin. If the goblin was still in the city, he wasn’t making himself known. Nor were any members of the shaar’khash, the Silent Blades, or their cousins, the taarka’khash, the Silent Wolves. The Silent Clans might just as well have vanished from Rhukaan Draal. It was probably a good thing, too. Public anger had turned against the secretive goblins. City guards charged with enforcing the terms of mourning under Dagii’s authority had kept things quiet so far, but those terms ended with Haruuc’s entombment. Envoys and ambassadors had been quietly visiting House Deneith to arrange the hire of additional mercenaries to supplement their security in the coming days.

It occurred to Ashi suddenly that Vounn had made sure she was in attendance during those discreet visits. She’d thought it was just further training in the business of the House, but what if it hadn’t been? Much of the information—nothing damning or private, only rumors and descriptions of mood—that she’d passed along to Geth had come from those meetings. Ashi looked back to the lady seneschal and found her still watching her. Vounn’s eyebrow rose again and she smiled briefly before turning away.

If she hadn’t been in the midst of the procession, Ashi would have stopped cold with surprise. As it was, she stumbled. Maybe Vounn didn’t know everything that was happening, but her mentor was helping her anyway!

“Ashi?” Pater d’Orien caught her arm. “Is something wrong?”

“No. Thank you.” She smiled at the heavy-set viceroy of House Orien. In spite of his rivalry with Sindra d’Lyrandar, Ashi liked Pater. He had the manners and appearance of a caravan master in a fancy coat but behind his blunt exterior was a keen and cunning mind. “Excuse me, please—I need to catch up to Vounn.”

“She won’t be going far,” Pater said, nodding ahead. “This is the end of the—”

A swelling of pipes and drums drowned out his words. Ashi looked around and realized that they had reached the edge of Rhukaan Draal. The city dwindled away into a scattering of huts and shacks, though the road continued. The crowd was as thick as ever, but suddenly it was silent. When the crash of the pipes and drums ended, Ashi realized that she could hear another kind of thunder: the noise of the first cataract of the mighty Ghaal River, the steep stretch of whitewater west of Rhukaan Draal that prevented ships from progressing upstream beyond the city.

Ahead, the crowd ended, held back by a low wall of stone topped by a black iron fence, while the procession marched on through an imposing heavy arch as big as a good-sized house and built of the same red stone that had been quarried for Khaar Mbar’ost. Ashi heard Sindra snort. She was a half-elf and her fine-featured nose turned up in disdain. “A Karrnathi victory arch. Not very original.”

“Get closer,” Pater told her. “I think you’ll find it’s more original than you think.”

Ashi knew victory arches—House Deneith was based in the ancient Karrnathi city of Karrlakton, where monuments were nearly as common as hovels—and as they approached the arch in the wall, she could see what Pater meant. Karrnathi arches were typically decorated simply with fluted columns and a band of relief sculpture around the top, crowned perhaps with a memorial statue. This arch was different. Reliefs crawled across the red stone walls: hobgoblins and bugbears and goblins in battle and on the hunt. It was difficult to distinguish what they were fighting or hunting, but the scenes of struggle were clear. Nor could the arch properly be called a “victory arch,” because at least as many of the goblins depicted in the fantastic carvings were dead or dying as were triumphant. The higher up the walls the reliefs went, the more dead dar there seemed to be, until just beneath the crown of the arch, where rows of curved spikes jutted out like sinister horns, the carved bodies were piled in heaps. Ashi stole a glance at Sindra. The Lyrandar viceroy looked vaguely unsettled.

The carvings continued in the shadows of the arch as well, though here the dead stood in a parade of figures pierced with swords and crushed with hammers, bristling with arrows and ravaged by monsters, burned, tortured, decapitated, and dismembered. Ashi stared at a bugbear who appeared to be marching onward as if in ignorance of the massive ballista bolt that pierced his belly, and felt recognition. “Baargaar Seven Axes,” she said. “These are the heroes of dar history.”

“Aye,” said Pater. “And now they have one more.” He pointed up.

About halfway through the vault of the arch, the parade of figures gave way to smooth stone and on the edge of the empty space was a figure freshly carved—a hobgoblin wearing a spiked crown, one eye socket empty, a sword in his right hand and a rune-carved rod in his left.
“Haruuc,” said Ashi. She couldn’t help noticing that the stonecarver had taken some liberties. Under Haruuc’s feet lay the broken body of a goblin dressed in the clothes of the shaarat’khes and holding two daggers, one wickedly curved, the other straight and plain. Chetiin. Ashi wondered if the others were having the same difficulty as she was in reconciling the quiet, wise goblin who had traveled with them to recover the rod with the treacherous assassin who had cut down Haruuc. That Chetiin was a killer—yes, even an assassin—there was no doubt, but which of them wasn’t? Ashi had been a hunter and briefly the huntmaster of the Bonetree, the most feared and savage clan in the Shadow Marches. Chetiin was an elder in an ancient clan of assassins and skilled in ways Ashi could only hope to imitate. When he moved, he was a whisper. When he fought, he was the blade of a dagger. When he spoke, his strained voice carried the lessons of a lifetime. He carried their loyalty and the loyalty of Haruuc and the loyalty of the Silent Clans. Yet he had turned against and slain in cold blood the greatest leader the dar had known in generations, someone who had trusted him and called him a friend. If Chetiin were standing in front of her right now, Ashi didn’t know if she would talk to him or try to put her sword through him.

Beyond the arch, the only sounds were the movement of bodies and the crash of the cataract. The road formed the only level surface across rocky and irregular ground and even it ended within a dozen paces of the arch. The funeral procession walked through tall grass, dry with the end of autumn, heading toward a ridge of weathered rock—the same ridge that formed the cataract in the river. Haruuc’s tomb waited within the shelter of a fold of the ridge, a low structure with a peaked roof that sank back into the rock and a larger underground chamber. It had been built of the local gray stone and seemed stark in its simplicity. The door gaped open, ready to receive its occupant. Ashi felt her flesh crawl. The arch, the vanishing road, the ridge, and the eternal crash of the cataract created a vista to haunt the soul of anyone who approached. Haruuc’s was the only tomb here, yet Ashi felt as though she walked through a graveyard that already held the royal dead of centuries.

The stark hierarchy of the funeral procession broke down in the field of grass. Goblins crowded forward as Haruuc’s body, still borne aloft on its throne, was carried up a set of steep stairs carved into the rock. Humans, half-elves, and other races stayed back, clustering together with unspoken wariness. Ashi caught up to Vounn. Pater and Sindra joined them, rivalry set aside for the moment.

Three hobgoblins waited beside the open door of the tomb. Priests, Ashi thought. Goblins by tradition offered their prayers and sacrifices to the gods of the Dark Six, hoping to appease the harsh deities. Haruuc, however, had embraced the worship of the Sovereign Host, the gentler faith followed by the majority of the nations of Khorvaire. Over the years of his reign, acceptance of the Host had filtered down from warlords and courtiers eager to emulate their lhesh to average warriors, merchants, and farmers. The Darguuls, however, had put their own mark on the worship of the Host. Ashi guessed that the three priests spoke for Dol Dorn, Dol Arrah, and Balinor, the gods of strength, honor, and the hunt that Haruuc had venerated above the other Sovereigns. All three wore snowy robes, but their faces had been smeared with dirt of different colors, and beneath their robes they wore armor—plate for Dol Arrah, chain for Dol Dorn, a hunter’s leathers for Balinor.

As soon as the gathered warlords had grown still, the priest of Dol Dorn stepped forward. His face was darkened with gray soil that could have been scooped from among the rocks of the ridge. He called out in Goblin, but Ashi had been studying with Ekhaas and the harsh sounds of the language were familiar to her now. “Who comes to the gates of death?”

Geth stepped forward from the crowd to mount the steps up to the tomb. “Geth, who bears the sword Aram, who carries the honor of Kuun, who killed the dragon Dah’mir, comes.” His accent was thick, but he spoke the Goblin words carefully.

The priest of Dol Arrah moved forward. His face was yellow with the dust of Rhukaan Draal. “You will not pass, Geth who bears Aram. Death has not claimed you.”

“I follow one whom death has claimed. I seek passage for him.”

Balinor’s priest came forward as well. His face was stained with ochre, red as the blood spilled during the hunt. “For whom do you seek passage? Who will enter the gates of death?”

“I seek passage for Haruuc of Rhukaan Taash, who was son of Tiraan, who was Haruuc Shaarat’kor, Lhesh of Darguun. He will enter the gates of death.”

“By what right do you seek passage for him?” The priest’s voice was deliberately disdainful.

Geth met his eyes in ritual defiance. “I was shava to him.”

Balinor’s priest paused before responding solemnly, “You have the right.”

Dol Arrah’s priest put out his hand. “Bring forward the treasures that will pass with Haruuc through the gates of death!”

There was movement behind Ashi, and she stepped aside as those who had walked through Rhukaan Draal at the
end of the funeral procession came forward. Bearers representing all three races of the dar passed among ambassadors, envoys, and warlords, the sun’s light gleaming on what they carried in their arms. Caskets full of gold and jewelry. Chests packed with bright weapons and armor. Fine goods from across Khorvaire, from exotic Xen’drik, and from distant Sarlona as well. If Ashi hadn’t known better, she would have thought that Khaar Mbar’ost had been stripped to fill Haruuc’s tomb, but this was only a fraction of the treasures that Haruuc had amassed and some of what would follow Haruuc were offerings from other clans—even from dragonmarked houses. She saw the crest of Deneith on a polished shield and the sign of Orien on a small but exquisite sculpture of a horse cast in silver. There was also a bearer who walked apart from the others with nothing more than a small open chest in his hands. A single dagger rested inside the chest, the deadly weapon, left behind by Chetiin, that had struck the fatal blow. By dar custom, it would rest with its victim.

One by one, the bearers climbed the ridge, bowed once before the priests and twice before Haruuc’s corpse, then vanished briefly into the tomb before reappearing without their burdens. It took a long time, but when all of the bearers had returned to the field below, the priest of Dol Dorn spoke again.

“Traditions tell that the People were born in caverns and lived there before we emerged to fight beneath the sun and the sky. When we pass through the gates of death, we return to caverns, the womb and the grave. Life continues. Tradition continues.”

He gestured for the bugbears holding Haruuc’s throne to kneel. When they had, he reached up and pulled free Haruuc’s sword, then turned to Geth. “The People have mourned Haruuc’s passing. Free them to continue their lives.”

Geth nodded. Tucking the Rod of Kings between his arm and his body, he knelt before the priest and the sword. The other two priests came forward. Balinor’s priest now carried a broad tray. Dol Arrah’s stood close with an unlit torch.

From the tray, Geth took a copper bowl lined with thick shreds of fiber and a flint, laying the Rod of Kings in their place. He set the bowl on the ground. The priest of Dol Dorn grounded Haruuc’s sword in it. Carefully angled so that all could see what he did, Geth leaned forward and struck the flint on the blade of the sword. Sparks jumped from the sword into the tinder. Smoke curled up in a fine wisp, growing thick as Geth bent close to blow gently onto the bowl. When he sat back, the torch was ready for him. He took it and touched it to the burning tinder. Flames leaped into life. Geth lifted the torch and stood to face the warlords.

“From this will fire return to Rhukaan Draal,” he said. “From this will life continue.”

He took back the rod. The priest of Dol Dorn returned the sword to Haruuc’s grasp, then looked out over the crowd.

“This was Haruuc!” the priest shouted, his ears high and quivering. “Haruuc who founded Darguun and Rhukaan Draal, whose boldness made a new homeland for the People. He will never be forgotten! He will live in stories and legends as long as mighty, quick, and strong people draw breath. He will inspire us as long as the Ghaal and Torlaac Rivers flow from mountain to sea. Let all who would be great follow in the path that his red sword has carved!”

The roar that rose from the gathered warlords was as loud as anything Ashi had heard in the city. Weapons were drawn and flashed against the sky. Ashi felt the fervor of the moment sweep her up—she drew the sword at her side and raised it high as well. “Haruuc!” she shouted along with the Darguuls. “Haruuc!”

The priest of Dol Arrah nodded and the bugbears lifted the throne again. Turning underneath it, they reversed their positions so that they could walk forward. With his warlords shouting his name, Haruuc was borne into his tomb facing outward and the shadows of the grave closed over his face like dark water.

The three priests followed him in. Geth moved to stand before the doorway and the shouts of the warlords died away. In the silence, the noise of the cataract seemed louder than ever.

After a moment, Pater spoke softly. “The first time I met Haruuc, I expected him to talk about taxes or tolls. Instead he asked me if the trade roads were in good enough condition to allow easy trade between Darguun and Breland.”

The humble memory startled Ashi, but then she realized that throughout the crowd, warlords and ambassadors were whispering, sharing quiet reminiscences.

“He asked me about distant ports,” said Sindra. “He knew what was happening across Khorvaire.”

The Zil ambassador, Esmyssa Entar ir’Korran, stood nearby. “He always spoke to me as if I was as tall as he was.”

“We discussed philosophy,” said Vounn.

Ashi tried to find her own most significant memory of Haruuc. It took her a moment—his presence, even before he held the rod, had been inspiring and it was hard to pick out just one memory. She finally found the one she
sought. Something that probably would have seemed small to anyone else but made a great difference to her. “He saw me as more than my dragonmark.”

Vounn raised a slim eyebrow at the statement, but said nothing.

The throne-bearers were the first to return to the surface, followed by the three priests. The priest of Balinor stepped around to the side of the tomb and, straining hard, pushed. The massive door swung shut. Stone as thick as a dagger’s length moved ponderously but, once set in motion, smoothly. The dark doorway became a narrow gap, then a sliver. Then the great door closed with a solid boom—and a hollow crack as the pivots that had allowed it to swing broke as they had been designed to do. The tomb of Haruuc Shaarat’kor was sealed. From the front of the door, an effigy of Haruuc glared down, a fierce warrior and a mighty king at the height of his power, the guardian of his own grave.

Standing under that gaze, Geth raised the torch and the rod high above his head. “The time for mourning is done. We remember Haruuc’s death—but now we celebrate his life. Now the games begin!”

The cheer that rose from the warlords was not as powerful as that which had honored Haruuc, but it was joyful and enthusiastic. Ashi was certain that she even heard an echo of it from the common people who waited beyond the arch.

Geth began the descent of the ridge, new fire for the city held out before him, and warlords shifted in an attempt to be among the first to accompany him back into Rhukaan Draal. Ashi tried to catch his eye, to give him a simple gesture of encouragement and show him he had done well, but it was no good. There were too many people vying for his attention. She started to turn back to Vounn—

—and felt the back of her neck prickle with the sensation of being watched. An old hunter’s instinct. She glanced around. This wasn’t like it had been while the funeral procession moved through Rhukaan Draal. No crowd watched her here.

No crowd except the one beyond the arch. Ashi spun sharply.

And the feeling was gone. The crowd was already breaking up and streaming back into the city, eager for the start. If someone had been watching her, they’d needed only to turn away to lose themselves in the crowd. Ashi found her hand was back on the hilt of her sword. She trusted her instincts. Someone had been watching her. Who?

Her hand tightened on the sword. Chetiin?

“Ashi?”

The sound of her own name made her whirl. Her sword was halfway out of its sheath before she realized it was Ekhaas. The duur’kala’s ears rose at the sight of her blade. “Is something wrong?”

Ashi felt blood rush to her face and she shoved the blade back. “No.”

Ekhaas’s ears didn’t drop but she nodded. “Would you like to watch the start of the games together?”

The thought of a fight after the long period of mourning was good—it certainly seemed like a fitting tribute to Haruuc. Ashi looked back to the tomb, then nodded. “I’ll tell Vounn.”

She glanced at the arch and the moving crowd beyond one last time. Someone had been watching her. That didn’t mean it was Chetiin. With such a large crowd, it could have been anyone.
CHAPTER
THREE

When the bugbears of the White Stone tribe, savaged in the dark woods by a huge wolf that could only have been part demon, returned to their camp to find every hut ablaze, their children alive only by the dark gods’ whim, and the prisoners who had started it all escaped, their only choice was to flee. The wolf-demon had settled for the moment to feast on the bodies of fallen warriors. Their camp was on fire. The trolls that lived in the cursed valley below, that had for years kept to themselves in return for carcasses thrown down from the bugbear camp, were raging. Overnight, their haven in the Seawall Mountains had become too dangerous to hold.

So they fled, slipping away down the western approach to their high vale with the flames of their burning camp leaping high into the sky behind them. Then they started looking for someone to blame.

Makka, who had been the chib, the leader, found himself on the other side of their anger.

“Makka kept the lowlanders that the trolls were chasing!” said Guun, who had been his closest friend. “He should have sent them back, but he kept them! He was greedy for the treasure they sought in the valley!”

“When the lowlanders’ friends challenged us from the woods, Makka led us out,” said Utaa, whose skill in a fight was a close second to Makka’s. “The human woman had a dragonmark—her magic must have summoned the wolf. Now our camp is gone, seven warriors are dead, and we have nothing!”

In the tradition of the Marguul tribes of the Seawall Mountains, Makka could have defended his honor in combat against Guun and Utaa, but the wolf had torn into his right arm. It would heal, but until it did all he had were threats.

“Guun and Utaa are cowards! They are foxes circling an injured lion. I am Makka! I am your chib! I am—”

The first stone struck him between the shoulders. Roaring, Makka whirled to lash out with his trident at the one who dared attack him from behind, but the blow was weak. More stones, mud, and branches pelted him, splattering the bear hide vest that he wore. The White Stone tribe howled its rage, Tuneer and Wiraar, the mothers of his children, among them. Guun hefted his big mace, Utaa his sword. The two warriors came forward through the rain of debris.

Marguul tradition valued honor, but not so much as it valued staying alive. Followed by the jeers of his tribe, Makka fled for the second time that night.

For three days he hid, thoughts of vengeance festering in his mind just as his wounded arm festered. On the fourth day, he went to a brook upstream from the White Stone’s new camp and washed the pus from his arm, praying to the Dark Six that the sluggish water would carry the infection to his former tribe. Then he packed the burning wound with moss and spiderwebs and made his way back to the burned-out camp. Down the mountainside, he found tracks. The footprints of humans and hobgoblins, the hoofprints of horses, the pawprints of wolves, all leading out of the mountains and back to the lowlands.

The ones responsible for his shame were the three prisoners, two hobgoblins and a human that he had rescued from the trolls—and whatever allies had appeared to help them to escape and lay waste to the White Stone camp. He had learned something about the three prisoners while they were his captives. The hobgoblin warrior had named himself Dagii of Mur Talaan and claimed the hobgoblin woman as a follower, though Makka doubted the claim. The human woman carried the dragonmark of Deneith across her face and arms, and the bright sword that now hung at Makka’s side like an oversize dagger had been hers until he had taken it.

His shame had been begun by the three. On a mountain side during a thunderstorm, Makka swore by the passion of the Fury, dark goddess of rage, that his vengeance would start with them.

Where would he find them? They had tried to bargain for their safety by invoking the name of the lowland king, Haruuc. Whether they had his favor or not was questionable, but if they’d known to try invoking his name, there was only one place to begin his search.

Makka turned his footsteps toward Rhukaan Draal.

19 Sypheros

He arrived just before dawn on a fine cool day to find the entrances to Haruuc’s city clogged with lowlanders, all dressed as if for a festival. Makka waded into the throng, shouldering past hobgoblins, goblins, and bugbears alike.
There were only dar present, he noticed. That was strange. Usually humans forced their way into everything.

As he got closer to the front of the crowd, he saw what was holding it back: guards wearing armbands fashioned of red cords stood at makeshift barricades. He grabbed the nearest goblin and spun the little creature around, forcing him to look up into his face. “What’s happening here, taat?”

The goblin stared at him with wide eyes. “The end of mourning,” he said, his voice cracking. “Haruuc goes to his tomb today.”

Makka grunted and looked back to the guards. The goblin, he noticed, took the opportunity to shrink back into the crowd. Makka didn’t try to stop him.

He’d heard about Haruuc’s death during his journey. A goblin in the southland had squeaked out the news, not that it had meant much to Makka. The end of a warrior—may the Keeper treasure his soul—but also a fitting end for a lowland sopp who had turned dog for the humans. Makka had his vengeance to think about. Other goblins and hobgoblins along the way had confirmed the passage of the three he sought. Yes, two hobgoblins and a human with a dragonmark across her face had traveled that way. Yes, they had been going toward Rhukaan Draal. Yes, they had traveled with others: a shifter, a gnome, and a goblin who rode on a great black wolf. Makka had added three more deaths to his oath of vengeance.

Names had come later—those who had passed were heroes, acclaimed by Haruuc. Dagii of Mur Talaan, Ekhaas of Kech Volaar, Chetiin of the shaarat’khes, Ashi of Deneith, Midian the gnome, Geth the shifter and shava to Haruuc. Later still, the news that Chetiin was Haruuc’s assassin and Geth now held the throne of Darguun. That had made Makka smile. His targets were chib. Killing them would bring him much honor.

And the Fury, it seemed, approved of his vengeance, because he found four of his targets with an ease that could only be an omen.

They were out in the open, marching in Haruuc’s funeral procession, unsuspecting of the death that had come for them. Dagii of Mur Talaan and a shifter that could only be Geth walked directly behind Haruuc—the lowland king made a wrinkled, pathetic corpse. Ekhaas of Kech Volaar was further back, and Ashi of Deneith walked with humans and other races near the rear of the procession. The riches borne at the very end of the parade of mourners gave Makka pause. So much wealth! He ground his teeth, closing out greed inspired by the Keeper, and turned back to his targets in the procession. They were the reason he had come.

They were well-protected. He would have to wait, but he had waited for prey many times. Makka chose his target. The human woman would be first. He would slay her with her own sword and leave the weapon in her steaming guts, letting the others know who was hunting them.

He shadowed the procession through the stinking crowds of Rhukaan Draal. When the city ended, he pushed forward until he was right against the wall beyond which the procession had passed. Heaving himself up against the iron fence atop the wall, Makka could see the marchers, but not Ashi in particular. That didn’t bother him. He’d pick up her trail again.

He had a good view of the tomb along the ridge and of the three hobgoblins standing alongside it. Only when the ceremony had started did he realize they were priests. The tips of his ears curled and a growl rumbled out of his belly. He’d heard that Haruuc had abandoned the Dark Six and the old ways of the dar to follow the Sovereign Host, but to bury a warlord or a chief without the sanction of the Keeper, god of death? As Haruuc’s throne-bearers descended into the tomb, Makka thought maybe the priests would at least make a sacrifice of them, but all of the bugbears returned to the surface and the tomb was sealed without blood being shed. Makka’s hand went to the muu’kron, the talisman of six knotted cords on his belt, and his fingers closed around the fang that was the token of the Keeper.

Along the wall, he could see a few others doing the same thing, though furtively. Makka felt a surge of disgust—Haruuc hadn’t turned all lowlanders to the worship of gentle gods, but he’d forced those who’d kept to the old traditions to hide their beliefs. He caught the token of the Fury, a bit of wood carved like a snake and polished smooth by his touch, in his fingers and prayed for a swift resolution to his vengeance so that he could return to the freedom of the mountains.

His prayer was answered. As the blasphemous ceremony ended and the crowd below the tomb broke up, he caught sight of Ashi again. He smiled.

The human woman stiffened, as if catching his scent, and turned.

Makka dropped away from the wall, slipping into the sea of people turning away from the tomb to rush on to the games. He didn’t want Ashi to know he was here. Not yet.

From behind a moving screen of dar, he watched Ekhaas of Kech Volaar distract Ashi. The two women spoke together, then to an old human woman, then they moved back to the road that led away from the tomb and joined the
crowd streaming into the city. Alone.

Makka hadn’t considered taking two of his victims at once, but when the Six gave a sign, only a fool ignored it.

Ashi waited until they were away from the tomb, away from the remains of the procession and safely anonymous among the crowds of Rhukaan Draal before she spoke. “I had an idea last night. A way to deal with the rod.”

Ekhaas looked at her, ears flicking gently. “How?” she asked.

“As long as I’m in Rhukaan Draal, I can use my power to protect whoever holds the rod from its influence. We tell the new lhesh that it’s dangerous, so he knows he needs my help, but we don’t tell him about the power of command. The protection of my dragonmark lasts for about a day—I could renew it every morning.”

“You’d be trapping yourself in Rhukaan Draal,” said Ekhaas.

“I’m willing to do that,” Ashi said.

Ekhaas’s ears stood up straight. “Why? Ashi, this isn’t your fight. You could leave Darguun any time and forget all about us.”

“Darguun provides mercenaries to House Deneith, but it doesn’t want anything from us except gold. Vounn came to Darguun to find a way to change that balance. If the lhesh needs me to protect him from the rod, that changes the balance.”

The duur’kala stared at her as if she were crazy. Ashi’s confidence in her argument crumbled under that gaze. “It sounded good in my head,” she said.

“Leaving aside the insanity of binding yourself into service,” said Ekhaas, “what if something happened to you? What if you missed renewing the protection? What about when you get old and die—the rod isn’t going to go away.” She grimaced. “It would also mean telling the lords of Deneith about the rod. How do you think they’d react to that news?”

“Not well.” Ashi clenched her jaw tight. “We’re going into battle armed with a spoon and shoe leather, aren’t we?”

“We’ve got five more days. We’ll think of something.”

“My head hurts from thinking about it.” She hesitated, then added, “We should ask Vounn for help. She already suspects something.”

“No.” Ekhaas’s answer was immediate. “Ashi, too many people already know about this. The fewer people who know the rod’s secret, the better—and the less Vounn knows, the better for her.” She glanced sideways at Ashi. “If something happens and this all goes wrong, Vounn will be able to say honestly that she didn’t know anything. Tell her and you could even risk the honor of Deneith.”

“The same for Senen Dhakaan and the Kech Volaar?” Ashi asked her.

Ekhaas’s ears folded back and she made a sour expression, an answer that spoke as loud as words. If she had actually intended to reply, however, her words were lost in the commotion that broke out around them.

The street they followed narrowed at a point where a building pushed out into the street like an overly bold merchant. If the crowd on the street had been moving in two directions, the spot would have been almost impassable, but with everyone heading in the direction of the games, movement was merely slow—at least until someone on the rooftop began throwing stones and debris down onto the milling crowd below. Yelping and cursing, those on the street tried to push through, pull back, or just take cover. The crawl of movement turned to a wall of chaos and more people were still pushing into them from behind.

“Khaavolaar,” muttered Ekhaas. “This way.”

An alley opened off to one side, narrower than the street, but the space at its opposite end seemed wide and open, presumably with another exit. Some people were already turning down it and they showed no sign of returning. Ashi and Ekhaas followed them.

Behind them, the shower of stones shifted as whoever was on the rooftop moved to cut off the escape route. Only a few quickwitted goblins made it into the alley on their heels before the crowd pulled back.

“Children looking for sport,” Ekhaas said. “We should be lucky it was only stones—”

There was an ominous grinding from overhead. Ashi glanced up just in time to see the rough bricks of a chimney tilt and topple into the alley. The bricks fell several paces behind them, but the goblins who had followed them into the alley weren’t so lucky. A couple were down, clutching heads covered in dust, bits of mortar, and blood. Those who had escaped the falling bricks were shaking their fists and shrieking in fury at their unseen tormentors.

A creeping sensation ran along Ashi’s spine. Stones had stopped falling at the mouth of the alley as if those on the rooftop had tired of their game, but with the collapse of the chimney, no one else was venturing down the alley.
“I don’t like this,” she said. She looked at Ekhaas and the hobgoblin nodded. The fallen chimney and injured goblins blocked the way back along the alley. Ekhaas jerked her head and they continued on, moving more quickly, one eye on the bright gap of sky above.

The alley opened into a yard of packed earth. Aside from some chickens clucking with dim curiosity and three hobgoblin children, too young to have possibly climbed up to the roofs, staring from a patch of mud in one corner, the yard was empty. Those who had entered the alley before Ashi and Ekhaas were gone, down a second alley that gaped at the other end of the yard. Ashi’s neck prickled again. They were in the open. She whirled, running backward so she could look up at the rooftops.

And just in time. A mighty roar split the air as the bulky silhouette of a bugbear came swinging out of the sunlight, the trident clenched in one massive fist stabbing down at her.

Ashi flung herself aside. Their attacker drew his legs under himself and landed in a crouch, soaking up the hard impact and pushing off again to lunge at Ashi. She rolled, and the trident stabbed packed earth. He kept after her, thrusting again and again as she scrambled away. Chickens flapped and leaped around the clear space. The hobgoblin children were pressed up into a corner, screaming.

The bugbear spun the trident in his grip and swiped at her with the butt of the shaft. It caught her across the face and blood sprayed from her mouth as she went sprawling sideways. She twisted, catching herself, and stared up at him, anger at the unprovoked attack flooding through her—then giving way to shock.

She knew the bugbear. She recognized the bear hide vest, the trident, his face, his sneer.

Makka.

She didn’t have a chance to say anything though. “Ashi!” shouted Ekhaas. “Move!”

The warning might have been intended for her, but Makka understood it too. Even as Ashi sprang away, he spun to face Ekhaas.

The duur’kala stood at a distance, sword drawn but held low. Ashi saw Makka blink with confusion. Then Ekhaas drew a breath—and sang.

Dust jumped from the ground in a thin yellow cloud as waves of battering sound burst around Makka. Ashi caught the very edge of the magical attack and it was as if all of the noise that the crowd had made in cheering Haruuc’s funeral procession were focused on her.

Makka reeled under the assault of the song, then roared defiance and charged Ekhaas on unsteady legs.

Ashi ripped her sword from its scabbard and leaped to meet him, knocking aside the trident before he could reach Ekhaas. Makka jumped away from the follow-through and dropped into a crouch, weapon at the ready.

Ashi crouched across from him, every hard breath sending a little spray of blood from a broken lip. “You!” she panted.

Ekhaas recognized him, too. “Makka,” she said. She moved in cautiously, trying to flank him. Makka moved the trident between them, pointing the weapon first at one, then the other, as he shifted backward to stay clear. Chickens and children had both settled into frightened silence along the walls. Ashi watched his feet. Ekhaas watched his face. “What are you doing here?” the duur’kala asked in Goblin.

Makka didn’t answer. Instead, he surged forward with a howl. Ekhaas brought her sword up, but he batted it aside with a swing of the trident’s shaft, the same swing that caught Ekhaas across her shoulder on the down stroke. She staggered and went to her knees.

Ashi hissed and darted around her, launching a flurry of blows to drive Makka back before he could strike a second time. He tried to hold her at the length of his trident, but she twisted like a weasel, slipped inside his reach, and slashed at him. His heavy bear hide vest turned the blow. He kicked and managed to catch her. Ashi stumbled back, sucking breath through her teeth—and saw him draw a sword from a sheath at his belt.

The sword he had taken from her. Kagan d’Deneith’s bright honor blade.

Her eyes went wide and Makka grinned, exposing sharp teeth. “This sword will kill you,” he snarled in Goblin. “This is my vengeance!”

Maybe he mistook what he saw in her face for fear, but if he thought the threat or the sight of the stolen sword could frighten her, he was wrong.

A tremble ran through her. The world seemed to sharpen as blood roared in her ears. Her lips twisted to expose teeth stained red with her own blood. Goblin words tore themselves out of her, starting as a snarl and ending as a scream. “Give. That. Back!”

Ashi had moved like a weasel before. She moved like a tiger now, attacking with a ferocity that put Makka on the defensive. The bugbear stood a full head taller than her. He weighed probably twice as much as she did. She still
forced him back. Her attacks fell with such speed and force that it was all he could do to block them, first with the bright Deneith sword, then with the shaft of the trident. Desperation started to show on his face—vengeance seemed forgotten and all of his attention was focused on Ashi as she pushed him step by step across the space between the buildings.

She chopped down with her sword. Makka raised his trident to block it—and the stout wooden shaft, already deeply gouged, snapped. Deflected, the sword nicked his arm. They staggered apart, but rage surged in Ashi and she lunged. This time her blade cut across his side. She felt it grate along Makka’s ribs, then catch flesh and plunge deep. He howled and dropped the broken trident to lash out blindly with a fist.

The blow was lucky. It caught her on the shoulder and threw her to one side, breaking her attack.

But Ekhaas was there. In the instant that Ashi fell, she heard the duur’kala’s song swell. The music was different this time though, not hard and battering, but strangely thick. Ashi saw Makka struggle, his movements slow and dragging as if he were underwater. For a moment, it seemed as if his muscles would lock, betraying him—

“No!” he roared—and smashed his arm into his wounded side.

Ashi saw pain cross his face and his limbs moved freely again, magic’s grip broken by the sudden agony. Ekhaas scowled and let her song fade, but raised her sword. Ashi rolled to her feet and faced Makka, ready to carry on the fight. The bugbear’s small eyes narrowed and his ears curled. Ashi slid close, blade ready.

Makka spun around and took two long strides to the corner where the hobgoblin children huddled and cried. He grabbed the first one his fingers found and dragged it up in front of him, the Deneith sword held across its squirming body. At the touch of the steel, the child went still and silent.

Ashi stopped. From the corner of her eye, she saw Ekhaas freeze, too.

Makka didn’t say anything. Moving slowly and leaving a bloody trail behind him, he slid sideway across the wall. The alley leading out of the yard was close. Ashi started to shadow him, but he pulled the bright blade tighter and the child whimpered.

She stopped. He would kill the child. She knew it in her gut.

Makka stepped into the alley, walking backward until he was out of sight. A moment later, the hobgoblin child came running out of the alley, face taut with terror.

Ashi was waiting for that. She leaped to the alley mouth, but the shadowed passage was empty. A swirling crowd filled the street at its far end.

The only signs of Makka were the drops of blood that ended where the crowd began, treading feet wiping away the trail as surely as flowing water. Ashi bit off a curse.
Tradition dictated the opening battle of Haruuc’s games—two junior warriors of the warlord’s clan fighting each other to honor the departed chief. Now one of the junior warriors of the Rhukaan Taash lay with his life’s blood soaking into the sand of the arena floor, while the other faced the raised box where Geth sat and thumped a trembling fist against his chest in the hobgoblin salute. Geth stood, raising the Rod of Kings, and slowly the cheers that filled the three tiers of the arena subsided.

“Faalo of Rhukaan Taash, you honor Haruuc Shaarat’kor,” Geth called into the quiet. “Name your reward.” The Goblin words weren’t as elaborate as tradition demanded, but they were what he could manage. It had taken all of his concentration just to get the responses of Haruuc’s funeral right.

The young hobgoblin lowered his head for a moment, then looked up, his ears standing tall. Wrath translated his answer: “I want to lead a squad in battle against the Valenar!”

The crowd erupted again, but Geth felt his belly flip. “Boar and Bear!” he growled quietly in the human tongue.

Seated beside him as the new warlord of the Rhukaan Taash, Tariic leaned a little closer. “Geth—”

Geth glanced down at him. “There’s not going to be a war!”

Tariic’s jaw tightened. “I was going to say give him a rank and be done,” he said. “Make no promises about elves if you don’t want to. If there’s no war, he’ll lead border patrols.”

It was good advice. Geth felt heat flood his face. “What rank?”

Tariic’s ears flicked as he thought, then said, “Lhikor.”

Geth raised his voice against the noise of the crowd, speaking Goblin once more. “In the name of Haruuc, Faalo of Rhukaan Taash, you will be lhikor!”

The crowd answered with a wall of sound. A smile spread against Faalo’s face and the young warrior thumped his chest once more, then turned to face the crowd, raising his arms in victory. A pair of honor guards appeared to escort him through one of the arena’s two gates. From the other, a troop of goblins appeared, throwing down fresh sand and dragging off the body of the warrior who had not been so fortunate. From a raised platform, an announcer using a speaking trumpet called out descriptions of the spectacles that would follow through the first day of the games. Geth dropped back into his seat and didn’t listen.

“I would have thought you’d enjoy this,” said Tariic, sitting down as well.

“If I was sitting out there”—Geth gestured around the arena—“instead of up here, I probably would.”

Tariic laughed. “Geth, you realize that if the king of Breland had chosen to attend Haruuc’s funeral, he would be here beside you right now? You’ve put yourself on a level with monarchs and you’d rather be sitting with the people.” He stopped laughing when he realized Geth wasn’t smiling. “This isn’t where you thought you’d find yourself, is it?”

“No.” There was no point in lying about that.

“You did an honorable thing. It confused me at first, but then I realized that if you hadn’t claimed the duty of a shava, Darguun might have fallen into civil war. And after the chaos of the Gan’duur raids, with just one clan in rebellion, I don’t know if we could have survived. You’ve given us a chance to calm down.” Tariic considered him with a serious expression. “You think quickly.”

“Not quickly enough.” The words slipped out and Geth tried not to wince. “This isn’t my place,” he said. “I’m a fighter, not a talker.”

“That’s to be expected. You wield the Sword of Heroes, not the Rod of Kings.” On Tariic’s other side, another hobgoblin leaned forward so he could look at Geth. “But seizing control was the act of a hero. You’ll be remembered after you leave us.”

The first time Geth had encountered Daavn of Marhaan, the warlord had been trying to persuade Haruuc to allow his clan to raid into Breland. Haruuc had embarrassed him before his allies with a clever ruse, but since then, Daavn had found new favor with Tariic. Even before Haruuc’s death, the two had become close, as Tariic, confident his uncle would eventually name him as heir, looked for supporters. Vounn d’Deneith had suspicions that Daavn was even more ambitious than Tariic—and more ruthless. She believed Daavn might have been behind an attempt to kidnap her from Khaar Mbar’ost—an attempt that had been widely blamed on Keraal of the Gan’duur and that
would have shamed Haruuc had it succeeded. They had no proof to confront Daavn with, however, and so Vounn’s suspicions remained just that.

Whenever Daavn spoke, though, his words left Geth with a sense that he was up to something. The shifter had fallen into a habit of turning them over in his mind, trying to find the hidden danger. “I … hadn’t thought about leaving yet,” he said cautiously.

“You hadn’t?” Daavn asked. “Then you’re a true friend to Darguun. A lesser man would have left at the first opportunity. But when your duty as a shava ends, what reason will there be for you to stay?”

“Don’t pressure him, Daavn,” said Tariic. His ears twitched as he smiled again. “As you say, Geth is a hero. He’ll always have a place of honor in Khaar Mbar’ost.” He rose. “But you have other duties to see to, don’t you, Geth?”

He did, but he raised his eyebrows and looked at Tariic. “How did you know—?”

“I asked Razu. These games honor my uncle. I want to know what’s happening. Lead on. I’ll come with you.” He gestured for Geth to go ahead of him.

“You’re not going to stay for the games?” asked Geth. “I thought you’d want to be seen.”

Tariic bent his head. “My presence isn’t strictly necessary. Daavn will be here.”

The gates of the arena opened and two bugbears advanced across the sands in the second bout of the games. “Pesh of Ghaal Cave and Riil of Thunder Gap fight open-handed,” called the announcer. “To the victor of this match, Tariic of Rhukaan Taash promises a chalice of gold from his own table! Hail to Tariic, nephew of Haruuc Shaarat’kor!”

The crowd bellowed its approval as Daavn produced a shining goblet. Tariic turned and waved. The bugbears looked up at him, then at each other—then roared and came together like twin juggernauts.

Khaar Mbar’ost was less than thirty years old. Built by the humans of House Cannith under commission from Haruuc, it was a blend of human and dar styles. It was also the tallest building in Rhukaan Draal. A mighty fist of a structure, it rose against the sky in a demonstration, to both Darguun and other nations, of the strength of the lhesh.

It also still felt almost new when compared to any other fortress Geth had been in. Most were many decades—or even many centuries—old, their stones worn and stained. The stones of Khaar Mbar’ost, however, still had the sharp corners put on them by masons’ chisels. Their surfaces were dry and clean. In places where the odor of living hadn’t permeated the air, Geth sometimes thought he could still smell the dusty, fresh-cut stone.

Even the dungeons sunk into the rock beneath the fortress still had a crisp new feel to them, though they smelled nearly as bad as Geth had expected. It felt strange to step into an almost pristine corridor lit by everbright lanterns while grubby faces peered through the barred windows cut into the cell doors on either side, the interiors of the cells lost in stinking darkness.

The noise that the prisoners made was startling as well, echoing in the closed space until it seemed as loud as the crowd in the arena. Prisoners yelped and cursed as they fought to get a look out at those who had descended to their world: Geth, Munta the Gray, Tariic, and a large number of guards. Geth had left the Rod of Kings in his chamber, locked safely away and with guards posted outside the door. It felt good to be rid of it for a time. He looked back at the prisoners and tried to guess how many were packed into each cell. “It’s crowded,” he said in halting Goblin.

The dungeon keeper, a big hobgoblin with numerous scars and only one ear, looked at him blankly. Geth had to repeat himself twice more, speaking carefully, until he was understood and the scarred hobgoblin grumbled a response that Wrath’s magic translated perfectly and instantly.

“We’ve been keeping them for a while instead of enacting punishment. Bringing them in from across the city.” He strode up to one of the cells. The prisoners inside backed away as the keeper ran through a catalogue of crimes. “The usual thieves and murderers stupid enough to get caught. Cheats. Profiteers who tried to get rich when the Gan’duur raids starved the city. Rioters. Taat caught violating the terms of mourning—”

“Mercy!” came a shout from one of the cells. There was a commotion and a human face pressed up against the bars of the window. The man looked like he had been beaten. He spoke better Goblin than Geth. “I needed light! It was only a lamp!”

A guard’s club hit the bars and the human jumped back. “The terms of mourning applied to everyone!” roared the keeper. “You disrespected Haruuc. Now you have another chance to honor him!” He looked to Geth, who clenched his teeth and gave a nod to Munta.

The old warlord stepped forward as if what he were about to do came as naturally as rallying troops. “Condemned! Be glad! In the tradition of the People and in memory of Haruuc Shaarat’kor, you are given the chance to win your freedom. The games wait for you.” He paused, letting his words settle into the prisoners. “Win in the arena and your crimes are forgiven!”
The dungeon filled with a new cacophony that almost made Geth cringe back. Many of the voices raised in the cells proclaimed an eagerness to see the arena. Only a few, mostly non-goblins it seemed to Geth, begged for an alternative. Munta came back to him. “Just as I told you,” he said with confidence. “Offer a **dar** the chance to die before a crowd and he’ll take it.”

Geth nodded numbly. At last count, over five hundred combatants had signed up of their own free will to fight in the games, but the arena was hungry. Letting prisoners fight for their freedom was an ancient tradition. He’d tried telling himself that most of them would have died for their crimes anyway—Darguun’s few laws carried harsh punishments—but there was still something that seemed deeply wrong about forcing them to fight for the amusement of the crowds. And yet, as Munta said, many of the prisoners were eager to take the chance.

“Who first?” asked the keeper.

There were six big cells, as if the builders of Khaar Mbar’ost had foreseen the need of the games. Geth pointed at the cell whose occupants seemed most enthusiastic for the fight.

The keeper and the guards descended on the cell like vultures on carrion. A few prisoners tried to rush the door when it was opened, but the guards’ clubs beat them down and they were first to be locked into a long chain of shackles. Guards began pulling other prisoners out one by one, adding them to the line, while those in the other cells whooped and yelled.

As the gang was assembled, Tariic stood ready, giving each prisoner a swift inspection. He had a goblin with him as an assistant, and the little creature crept forward to swipe green paint onto the leg of those Tariic indicated. The first prisoner, a mangy bugbear still dazed from the guards’ clubs, tried to kick him away. The goblin squealed and jumped back. Tariic planted himself in front of the bugbear, hand on sword, and glared up at him.

“Take the mark and you get a weapon in the arena. No mark, no weapon. Understand?”

The bugbear’s lips curled back from his teeth.

Tariic shrugged. “No weapon.” He pointed at the next prisoner in line, a hobgoblin. “You get his weapon. All you have to do is dedicate the fight to me—Tariic of Rhukaan Taash—if you win.”

The hobgoblin stuck out his leg eagerly. Other prisoners did the same, though Tariic had the hobgoblin mark only the strongest-looking of them. The bugbear at the front of the chain began to look like he regretted his decision.

“Clever,” murmured Munta. “The audience in the arena will remember this, and any of these scum who survive will tell the story. The other potential heirs are going to copy this.”

“They won’t be able to,” Geth said. “Tariic paid a heavy bribe to the keeper for the privilege.”

There were fifteen prisoners shackled together now. Most seemed ready for, or at least resigned to, the arena. A few struggled and pleaded with the guards as they were pulled from the cell. The human who had called out for mercy. An elf woman dressed in rags that had once been quite fine. A hobgoblin who cradled one arm to his chest and looked feverish and ill. A dwarf who glared at the guards surrounding him, thick fists opening and closing in barely restrained anger. Tariic made sure he got a stripe of paint.

“They don’t want to go,” said Geth.

Munta’s ears flicked. “They don’t have a choice. Don’t interfere, Geth.”

The shifter ground his teeth together and held his silence—until a guard emerged from the cell leading the last of the prisoners. Geth’s breath burst out of him. “Grandmother Wolf, no. That’s enough.”

The final prisoner was an elderly goblin woman, so hunched and wizened that she stood no taller than Geth’s thigh. He wasn’t sure that she would have been able to walk easily on her own without the guard’s support. She looked up at his outburst and he saw that her eyes were milky. Geth fought back a growl and turned to Munta.

“She’s not going. She doesn’t stand a chance. What’s she even doing in here?”

Munta looked to the keeper, repeating Geth’s words in Goblin. The keeper grunted. “She led a famine march during the Gan’duur raids. Her followers damaged the Bloody Market.”

“A famine march is a rite of the Dark Six,” Munta said. “Marchers make sacrifices to the Devourer in an attempt to ward off further suffering.”

“I saw the march, Geth,” said Tariic. “I remember Haruuc’s anger at it. He ordered her thrown into the dungeons.”

“**He** didn’t order her to fight in the arena, did he?” He faced Tariic. “How will the audience react to that? An old woman in the arena?”

Tariic’s ears went back, but after a moment he nodded. Geth glanced at Munta. The old warlord frowned but nodded as well. Geth went over and knelt before the goblin woman. “Old mother,” he said in Goblin, “what is your name?”

“Pradoor.” Her voice was sharp and shrill. She reached out a gnarled hand and put it on his face, feeling his
features. Her big ears twitched and her mouth curled in recognition. “So, shifter—am I going to the arena to honor one who turned his back on the gods of the Six?”

The confidence in her sharp voice almost took him aback, but he shook his head. “No. You’re going free.” He looked up at the guard who held her. “Give her food and take her out of Khaar Mbar’ost.”

His words opened a floodgate. Abruptly all of the prisoners who had been struggling to stay out of the arena—as well as those who now saw the possibility of release—were calling out to him.

“Me, shifter! Release me!”
“I don’t stand a chance!”
“Look at me!”
“Have mercy!”

Some of the harsher goblin prisoners just laughed. A few of the cries for help ended in sharps gasps of pain and more urgent, realistic cries as those in the cell were dragged down and shown just how little of a chance they stood. The keeper and some of the guards started banging on the cell doors. Geth clenched his jaw and made sure Pradoor and the guard escorting her got out of the dungeon and started the climb up the stairs leading to the fortress above. He didn’t look at Munta, Tariic, or the keeper, and he did his best to ignore the slowly dying pleas for aid.

Then one shout cut through the din. “Hey—brother! Here!”

The voice had a distinctive gravelly roughness, the accent of Geth’s own home in the Eldeen Reaches. He turned around in time to see a shifter clinging to the bars of one door, struggling to get his attention while holding off the jeering prisoners who shared his cell. Wide animal eyes met Geth’s own. “Let me go, brother,” the other shifter pleaded. “Or at least make sure I get a sharp weapon for the arena!”

“Quiet, you!” said the keeper, slamming a fist onto the fingers that gripped the bars.

The shifter held on, though. Geth charged across the dungeon hall and grabbed the keeper’s arm as he raised it again. “You didn’t say there was a shifter here!” he said.

“No! He’s wrong!” protested the prisoner. “I’m a shifter like you, brother!”

A hand inside the cell stopped trying to pull the shifter away and instead slammed his head forward against the bars. The shifter jerked and sagged. A big hobgoblin pushed him aside and peered out. “I’ve been in this cell for seven days. Until just now, there was no shifter here.” The hobgoblin dragged the shifter upright. “He’s a ga’a’ma.”

_Gaa’ma_—a wax baby, the Goblin term for changeling. Geth let his hand drop from the keeper’s arm and the scarred hobgoblin snorted. “I told you. His name’s Ko. He’s the changeling who tried to kidnap the envoy of House Deneith by murdering one of her guards and taking his place.”

Geth stared at him, surprise quickening the beat of his heart. The changeling who had tried to kidnap Vounn. If anyone could provide the evidence that would link Daavn of Marhaan to the plot and show Tariic just what kind of serpent he was dealing with, it might be this Ko.

“Take him out,” said Geth. “Put him in the empty cell. He’s not going to the arena.”

The storm that command produced made his sparing of Pradoor seem like the smallest act of charity. Howls of outrage sprang from the other prisoners—and from the guards, who this time did nothing to silence their charges. Munta and Tariic both came forward to press Geth. The big hobgoblin prisoner who still held Ko bellowed in anger.

“You’re sparing this cowardly piece of filth?”

He punctuated his words by driving Ko against the door of the cell with bone-shaking force, forcing gasps out of his captive. The thick hair on Geth’s arms and on the back of his neck rose. The hand that gripped Wrath’s hilt tightened and he wrenched the sword free of its sheath. “Silence!” he roared in Goblin, thrusting the weapon high.

When she had first seen the sword, before she had guessed at its true nature as the Sword of Heroes, Ekhaas had proclaimed it a _lhesh shaarat_, a blade so fine that any descendant of Dhakaan instinctively recognized it as a weapon of kings and warlords. Just the act of drawing a _lhesh shaarat_ proclaimed the wielder’s might.

Wrath didn’t have the power of the Rod of Kings to force obedience, but it could command respect. Silence fell over the dungeon. The big hobgoblin released his hold on Ko, who slid down out of sight. Geth gestured to the keeper with Wrath. “Get him out of there.”

The keeper moved to obey him.

“What are you doing, Geth?” Munta asked softly. “You can’t keep all the prisoners from the arena.”

“He might know something about Vounn’s kidnapping.”

“He’s been questioned,” said Tariic. “A hobgoblin in a mask and using a false name hired him. We know that was
Keraal. The changeling has outlived his usefulness.”

Geth wanted to ask how Tariic could be certain the masked hobgoblin had really been Keraal, but he didn’t. Instead, he said, “He tried to hurt a friend.”

“Then send him to the arena,” Munta said. “You’re causing unrest!”

The keeper had the cell door open. Waving his club to keep those inside back, he kicked and dragged Ko clear. Geth stood over the battered prisoner and looked down at him. Ko’s eyelids flickered, then his face seemed to blur and run. A shifter’s dark hair turned pale, animal eyes became blank and white. His features grew soft and strangely ill-defined, his skin turned a dusky gray, and his body became a little taller and a little leaner. The scrapes and bruises on his face didn’t disappear, though. “Thank you,” he said, his voice thick.

“Don’t thank me yet,” said Geth. He turned to the keeper. “Watch him. I’ll be back to talk with him when I can.”

The scarred hobgoblin grumbled something under his breath but grabbed Ko by the front of his shirt and shoved him into the recently emptied cell. The other prisoners jeered and grumbled again. The keeper slammed the door on Ko, then pointed at the chain of prisoners destined for the arena that day. “Take them away!” he ordered the guards. His eyes swept the other cells. “You shut your mouths. You’ll all have your turns.”

The prisoners just laughed and shook the cell doors. The keeper’s remaining ear went back flat. “No food tonight, then! Maybe you’ll fight better on empty bellies!”

“Nicely done,” Tariic whispered in Geth’s ear. “You’re right. You aren’t much of a talker.”

Geth didn’t answer that, sliding Wrath back into its sheath instead. “Are we done?”

“I wish we were,” said Munta. “There’s one more prisoner we need to see.” He gave Geth a hard look. “Don’t pardon him.”

Keraal had a small cell to himself. The defeated rebel sat on a heap of straw, arms restrained by a length of chain running through rings set into the wall, and stared at them with dead eyes as they entered. He still wore only the loincloth in which he had been led into Haruuc’s throneroom. His red-brown skin was covered in tiny, freshly healed scars—the marks of the grieving tree. Geth waited for him to say something, but Keraal didn’t speak. After a long moment, the former warlord of the Gan’duur clan lowered his head, and his face disappeared behind thick, dark hair.

“The problem is what to do with him,” said Munta in the human tongue. “He should already be dead, killed on the grieving tree, but Haruuc’s final words spared him.”

“Haruuc’s final words saved Dagii,” Geth said. “They just happened to set Keraal free at the same time.” He looked down at Keraal. The hobgoblin was entirely broken. Keraal had fought against a lhesh he thought had gone too far in seeking the acceptance of human nations—and been crushed when Haruuc actually became the ruthless warlord Keraal had sought. Geth hardened his heart. “We can’t return him to the grieving tree,” he said. “Haruuc was the only one who knew the words that controlled it. Without them, it’s only so much stone.”

He thought he saw Keraal’s ears, protruding through his lank hair, tremble in relief at the news, a movement so slight it could have been his imagination. Secretly Geth was glad the words had been lost as well. The tree might be a Dhakaani artifact, but it was a device for torture and slow death.

Munta also shook his head at mention of the tree. “Even if we knew the words we couldn’t use them for the same reason this gaa’taat is still alive,” the old hobgoblin said heavily. “By tradition, when a warlord spares an enemy, no one under his command may seek his death. Haruuc may not have intended to spare Keraal, but he did. Yet tradition also holds that all prisoners in a warlord’s stronghold face their judgment in the arena.”

The glance he gave Geth was harsh, and the shifter felt heat spread across his face. “Why not send him to the arena, then?” he asked.

“A prisoner who wins in the arena walks free,” said Tariic. “As much as the people would love to see Keraal forced to fight, do you want him to have his freedom?”

“Put me in the arena and let me die there.”

Tariic actually jumped at Keraal’s sudden words. The chained hobgoblin raised his head and looked at them all. His voice was as flat and dead as his eyes. He spoke in the human language. “What reason is there for me to live? The warriors of my clan rot in trees along the road to Rhukaan Draal. The women and children have been sold into slavery. I am alive by chance. The Gan’duur are destroyed. My clan paid the price for my arrogance. I failed them. Chiit gath’muut. Chiit gath’atcha. Chiit gath’piir.”

I am without duty. I am without honor. I have nothing.

Geth looked at Munta and Tariic. Munta nodded. “It is decided.”
Tariic’s ears bent. “The people won’t like it if he doesn’t fight back.”

A growl escaped Keraal. “Do I care what the people think? Give me a sword and I will fall on it in front of them. Will they find amusement in that?”

“If you give yourself a coward’s death, then you will truly be without muut or atcha.”

A shadow fell across the light that entered the cell from the hall outside. Geth looked over his shoulder to find Dagii standing in the doorway, his face hard and his gray eyes narrow. “The Gan’duur fought hard—I know this because I fought them. They followed you willingly. Let yourself die cheaply and what pride remains in the name of the Gan’duur will die with you.” His ears rose tall. “My victory over you will have no meaning.”

Keraal stared up at him for a moment, then stood with a rattling of chains. “The honor of the Gan’duur will last beyond my death. The Gan’duur starved Rhukaan Draal and eluded all the troops that Haruuc Shaarat’kor sent against us.”

“All except the last,” Dagii said grimly, “and that’s how I want my victory remembered: a triumph over a strong enemy. But I promise you that if Keraal of Gan’duur dies without fighting in the arena, then all that Darguun remembers of the Gan’duur will be a warlord who passed from life as a coward. It would be better for your legacy if you had died in agony on the grieving tree.”

The dead look had left Keraal’s eyes. They were bright and angry, and his chest heaved with each breath. Tariic let out a furious hiss. “Dagii!” he said. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“He reminds me that I owe muut to my clan even if I no longer have a clan, even if I no longer have atcha.”

Keraal straightened and turned to face Munta. “I will fight in the arena.”

Munta nodded again, slowly and with a look of approval on his face.

Tariic’s features twisted with frustration, however. “And if he wins, he walks free? What kind of punishment is that for my uncle’s enemy?”

Geth felt a strange pressure creep into his mind, a vague memory that wasn’t his own, and shivered. He recognized the sensation: it was Wrath. This was what Haruuc had experienced and what had almost driven him mad. The Sword of Heroes had been created to protect and inspire, though, not to command. Geth pushed it away—and it retreated, but not without leaving an idea behind.

“He won’t fight just any fight,” Geth said. “He’ll fight a battle each day. If he wins all of them, he wins his freedom.”

Tariic spun around to give him an ugly look, but Keraal stood tall and nodded. “I accept these conditions,” he said.

“Me!?” said Tariic. He looked to Munta. “What about honoring Haruuc?”

“Keraal didn’t kill Haruuc,” Munta said. “Chetiin did. Keraal can fight. He must be allowed to fight.”

“No weapons, then!” snapped Tariic. “He fights with nothing more than he has now.”

Dagii looked Tariic over and nodded. “I agree.” Tariic seemed relieved—relief that turned into renewed fury as Dagii added, “Let him fight with the chains he wears.”

“I won’t allow this!” Tariic said. “It can’t be allowed to happen.”

“You’re not lhesh, Tariic.” said Munta. “The decision is Geth’s. He is Haruuc’s shava.”

The old warlord looked to him. So did Tariic. And Dagii. And Keraal. Geth drew a breath and let it out.

“Keraal fights. Five battles wielding the chains he wears.”

Keraal bent his head in acceptance. Tariic’s eyes flashed. He turned and strode out of the cell, pushing past Dagii. Munta frowned after him, then looked to the others. “I’ll summon the keeper and make the arrangements. We’ll need to have a fight added to the games today.”

Munta left, leaving Keraal with Geth and Dagii. The chained hobgoblin glanced between them, then bent his head again to Geth. “Ta muut,” he said. You do your duty—the simplest way of saying “Thank you” in Goblin.

Then he turned to Dagii. “Paatcha!” An offering of honor.

Dagii made no response—none was needed. He stepped out of the cell as the dungeon keeper, grumbling about warlords changing their minds, and a pair of guards arrived. Geth glanced once more at Keraal as he stood still for the keeper to unlock his chains, then went after Dagii. “Honor between enemies?” he asked the young warlord.

“A good enemy is better than a bad friend,” Dagii said.

“You didn’t come down here to shame Keraal into fighting, though.”

A smile flickered across Dagii’s face, then was gone. “No. That was just luck. I came looking for you.” He leaned close for a moment. “Midian has returned to Rhukaan Draal.”

Geth’s gut twisted. “Get messages to Ashi and Ekhaas and let them know. We’ll meet tonight.”
They met in the small room high in Khaar Mbar’ost where they had once met with Haruuc and where he had revealed his plan to seek out the Rod of Kings. Once again, Aruget stood guard outside the door. After Haruuc’s assassination, Ekhaas had wondered if the warrior could be trusted, but he already knew some of the truth behind the rod and had kept his silence. He could be trusted.

Ekhaas saw Aruget’s ears rise slightly as she and Ashi approached. Duur’kala magic had erased the aches and cuts of their battle against Makka, but there were still bruises. In addition, Ashi walked like an angry cat, full of rage and ready to lash out. Aruget said nothing, though; just opened the door for them.

Geth and Dagii, on the other hand, weren’t so restrained. “Rat!” Geth said, leaping up out of a chair by the room’s only window. “Were you in a fight?”

“A fight that ended too early,” said Ashi. She snapped her teeth on the words.

“Makka is in Rhukaan Draal,” Ekhaas explained.

Dagii’s ears lay back. “The bugbear Marguul chief from the mountains? What’s he doing here?”

“I’d say looking for revenge. He looked like he’d been traveling and he seemed to be alone.” She described their fight with the bugbear—and his escape.

Geth growled. “That’s all we need,” he said. “An enraged bugbear trying to kill you.”

“Trying to kill us,” Dagii corrected him. “He had Ashi, Ekhaas, and me captive. I doubt if he’d end an attempt at vengeance with just Ashi and Ekhaas. He may even be looking for you—it wouldn’t take much to link us together.”

“How would he have found us?” Geth asked.

“He knows my name. He might have started with that.”

Dagii shrugged. “There was no reason to hide it.”

“He may not be coming after anyone anymore,” said Ekhaas. “Ashi left him with a bad wound. If he doesn’t get to a healer, it could kill him.”

“Let’s hope,” Geth said.

“Let’s not.” Ashi’s hands opened and closed as she moved around the room. “He’s still got my sword—Kagan’s honor blade.”

“We’ll find it,” Ekhaas assured her. “One way or another, we’ll—”

A knock on the door interrupted her. The door opened and Midian Mit Davandi slipped through. Geth gave a genuine smile, probably the first one Ekhaas had seen from him in ten days. “Midian.”

The gnome’s sun-browned face was flushed and his pale hair damp with sweat as if he’d been running. “Sorry,” he said. “I had to call on the Zil ambassador. She’s trying to keep track of all the Zils currently in Darguun in case there’s trouble.”

Ekhaas had never been to Zilargo, but she’d heard it was a strange place, ruled by a blend of gossip, co-operation, and subtle coercion. Then again, an entire race that was no bigger than goblins, without larger hobgoblin and bugbear cousins to rely on for physical might, probably would develop different ways of dealing with the world. Certainly it showed in their history—the gnomes of Zilargo had never fought a war, preferring to hide behind policies of conciliation and neutrality. It seemed to work. The nation still existed in a pocket between humans and dar when by all rights it should have been overrun long ago.

Midian caught her looking at him and his blue eyes flashed. “I have something for you, Ekhaas. I found it in the ruins I was investigating at Bloodrun.” He produced a small object and tossed it to her. It was a Dhakaani coin, black with age and badly corroded. A hole had been punched through one edge. Once it would have been threaded on a cord, the face of the emperor on the coin looking outward, to make a kind of simple amulet. They were common artifacts in all eras of the empire. She looked for the dynasty name on the coin, frowned, and glanced at Midian.

“Koolt Dynasty. Early empire. The ruins at Bloodrun are late empire.”

“Wrong, duur’kala,” Midian crowed with delight. “Dig down and you find that the late empire ruins are built on
top of early empire ruins. Did the Kech Volaar know that? I don’t think so!”

Ekhaas glowered at him. Tariic had hired Midian to join the quest for the Rod of Kings without Haruuc’s knowledge. The gnome had proved to be clever and resourceful, but it had taken time for Ekhaas to admit respect for him. He was a researcher for the Library of Korranberg, a scholar, and a historian—and as such a bitter rival to the duur’kala of the Kech Volaar. Her clan kept the glorious history of the Empire of Dhakaan alive through tales and the careful collection of artifacts. Scholars like Midian turned vibrant history into dusty reports and stole Dhakaani artifacts from their rightful keepers. In fact, when Senen Dhakaan had first learned Midian was in Darguun, she’d demanded his death as a grave robber and thief. Haruuc had overruled her, and when he was handing out rewards for the recovery of the rod, had granted Midian official permission to investigate some of Darguun’s many ruins. Ekhaas had eventually come to like the gnome. Most of the time.

She flicked the coin back to him and his fingers snapped it out of the air. He tucked it away and turned to Geth and Dagii, his expression sober. “Your message was slow reaching me—the messenger showed up at the ruins suffering from dust fever. I tried to treat him, but we didn’t have what he needed. I stayed with him until he died, then came to Rhukaan Draal.” His face darkened. “It wasn’t easy to hear about Chetiin. If Haruuc had discovered the rod’s power, though, I suppose he did the right thing.”

“No,” Geth said, “he didn’t. He only made the situation worse.” Midian looked at him with startled curiosity and Geth let his breath out in a hiss. “There were things we couldn’t trust to the messenger. The power of command isn’t the rod’s only secret—”

As Geth laid the whole truth about the Rod of Kings before Midian, the gnome’s face grew first pale, then hard. Ekhaas pushed a chair at him. It had been designed for a larger creature and for Midian it was like jumping up to sit on a table, but he did it anyway, never taking his eyes from Geth. There was a strange intensity about him, Ekhaas thought. The light-hearted researcher who had gloated over an ancient coin was gone, replaced by someone who grasped immediately just what kind of trouble they—and Darguun—faced. When Geth had finished, Midian sat in silence for a long moment.

“Chetiin needs to answer for this,” he said finally.

“He will,” said Dagii. “If we find him, he will.”

“And you wouldn’t trust any of the potential heirs with the rod?”

“No,” Ekhaas answered. She counted the names off on her fingers. “Aguus, Garaad, Iizan—definitely not. Tariic …” She hesitated.

“Not even Tariic,” said Geth. “I’d rather see him on the throne than any of the other three and maybe he would have been Haruuc’s choice, too. But if Haruuc couldn’t stand up under what the rod was urging him to do, how can Tariic?”

The gnome wrinkled his nose. “I agree. And the only plans you’ve come up with are stealing the rod or destroying it?”

Ashi looked up as if about to repeat her suggestion of using her dragonmark to block the rod’s power, but Ekhaas shook her head sharply and said, “Or both. Something stolen can be recovered. I don’t think we want anyone to get their hands on the rod. But stealing the rod presents its own problems. Darguun needs it as a symbol of stability.”

Midian’s lips twitched. “By Aureon’s blue quill, it’s a good thing none of you were born a gnome. You would have had to be locked up for your own safety.” He sat back in the chair and spread his hands. “Replace the rod with a fake.”

Ekhaas stared at him. They all stared at him. Midian looked back at them then rolled his eyes. “You can’t all be that high-minded, can you? Replace the true rod with a false rod. Darguun has its symbol, the lhesh is safe, and we can take the true rod somewhere and destroy it without anyone ever suspecting.”

“But it’s the Rod of Kings,” said Geth. “How do you create a fake? Someone will notice.”

“Nobles across Khorvair walk around with paste gems all the time, and no one can tell. Half of the nobles probably don’t even know they’re wearing fakes.” Midian sat forward again. “How many people besides the five of us and Haruuc have ever examined the rod closely?”

“Chetiin,” Ashi said.

Midian waved the name away. “He’s not likely to get close to the rod again, is he? Anyone else?”

“Senen Dhakaan wanted to look at it, but Haruuc wouldn’t let her,” said Ekhaas. “Maybe he already realized there was a danger in handling the rod.”

Geth pressed his lips together in thought. “Most of the warlords have seen it, but never up close. Razu has been
close to me and to Haruuc, though."

“Do you think she would suspect anything?”

“Probably not.”

“Wait.” Dagii looked uncertain. He rose from the chair he had been sitting in and paced around the small room. “The rod is made out of byeshk. That’s not exactly a common metal.”

Midian gestured toward the window. “We’re in Rhukaan Draal. You can buy anything at the Bloody Market.”

Dagii frowned. “Maybe so. But the rod is more than just a piece of metal. Even without its power of command, you could feel something when Haruuc held it. He had a greater presence. He seemed more majestic.”

“Any artificer worth his fee could create the same effect—and work the byeshk, too.” The gnome shifted. “The only problem might be finding an artificer we can take into our confidence. If you’re willing to try this.”

Once again, they looked at each other. What Midian had suggested was, Ekhaas thought, dangerously simple. It wasn’t without risks, but it was the only plan they’d come up with that met all of their needs.

“I’m willing,” she said.

“So am I,” said Ashi.

Dagii nodded his agreement.

Geth opened his hands. “We’ll do it. So we need to find an artificer we can trust and who can create a replica of the rod in five days before the end of the games.”

“Four days,” Ekhaas said. “We’ve lost a day now. I’ll take care of that—of all of us, I can move around Rhukaan Draal without attracting attention.”

“Move fast.” Geth leaned his head back against the wall behind his chair. “Grandfather Rat’s naked tail. This could actually work.” He looked at Midian. “You’re brilliant.”

The gnome’s smile flashed. “Say that again. I don’t get tired of hearing it.”

The wound in Makka’s side was an agony. He’d tried to staunch the bleeding, but every movement tore the wound open again. Blood matted the thick hair of his body and left a spattering of big drops on the ground wherever he stopped.

When the wolf had savaged his arm on the mountainside, he’d been in familiar territory and—for a short time at least—among friends. There had been someone with sure hands to bandage the wound. There had been herbs to treat it. Rhukaan Draal was strange and alien. There were no allies. Makka had tried to find a healer, but everyone he’d demanded aid from had fled.

When he staggered and fell against the wall of a building, he knew the wound was too deep. This was the end of him—the end of his search for vengeance. The jackals of this accursed city would circle him, and when he was dead they would strip the flesh from his bones. He felt along the wall until the building became an ally. He slipped into the cool shadows, found shelter behind an abandoned cart, and lay down to wait.

Memories and dreams came to him. Hunting deer at dusk in the mountains. Feasting on liver cut fresh from the steaming carcass. Gorging on hot, dripping meat roasted over a fire. Creeping up behind Ashi of Deneith and plunging her bright sword through her belly, laughing as she turned in astonishment to face her killer, as he wrenched the sword sideways to tear through her flesh. Catching Ekhaas the duur’kala and cutting the tongue from her mouth, then using her mewling cries to lure Dagii of Mur Talaan. Stringing him up like a deer and butchering his still living flesh, blood falling with a drip-drip-drip—


Makka opened his eyes. Full darkness had fallen, though not yet the darkness of death. The constant noise of Rhukaan Draal was a din in the distance.

An elderly goblin woman made her way along the alley, tapping before her with a stick. After feeling in front of her with the stick, she would slide forward a few steps and repeat the procedure. Her old eyes were milky white.

The stick found the cart and she came around it.

“Go away,” growled Makka. She moved to the other wall of the alley but kept coming. “I said, go away!”

Her answer was a thin chuckle. Makka snarled and lashed out at her. He still had strength in his arm, if not in his body. The attempted blow pulled him off balance and he sprawled to the side. His weight fell against the cart, sending it rolling forward a short distance with the protesting squeal of a rusted axle. Makka fell against the ground and lay there choking on a new burst of pain. His arm stretched out across the alley—the old golin’dar was just out of reach.

Her tapping stick encountered his hand, then rapped down hard across his hairy knuckles. “You have fallen,” the
old woman said in a shrill voice. “One of the hunters lies wounded. The order of the world is reversed.”

“If you’re going to try and rob me, get on with it,” said Makka. “There’s still enough strength in these hands to drag you into the Keeper’s domain with me!”

Her chuckle turned into a cackling laugh. Makka roared and thrust himself forward, sliding on a slick of his own blood, ignoring the pain in his side. “By the Fury, you’ll meet the Keeper before I will—and by the Mockery, you’ll suffer more too!”

His push wasn’t quite enough. Somehow she was still just beyond his reach, though her cackle was dropping now. Her big ears cupped as if she was listening to something more than his threats and curses, and her wrinkled face creased in a thin smile.

“Oh, you would be a terror at your full strength!” Her stick rapped his knuckles again. He grabbed for her and missed again. Her smile grew tight. “You honor the old ways,” she said. “You wear the muu’kron.”

It was a statement, not a question. An eerie feeling penetrated Makka’s anger. How had the goblin known? She couldn’t have seen the six knotted cords on his belt. Had she guessed? There was too much confidence in her voice. His hands dropped and he pulled back a little bit.

“I wear the muu’kron,” he said.


“When thunder rolls and my belly is empty,” said Makka.

“The Shadow?”

He shivered. “I have little dealing with dark magic.”

“But you honor him?”

“I fear his power.”

The goblin tapped her stick against the ground. “That is as much as honoring him. And the Traveler?”

Makka’s hair rose as stories of the trickster god came creeping out of his childhood. Stories that told of how the Traveler had remained on Eberron after the age of creation, wandering the world to spread chaos and test the faithful, never appearing in the same guise twice. Stories rejected by the adult mind of a hunter that had no room for chance, but broke down on the edge of death. Makka looked at the old goblin woman with new eyes and a growing wariness.

His silence must have given away his thoughts. The golin’dar laughed. “You think I could be the Traveler? Your wounds must be bad! And yet surely the Traveler led me to you.”

Makka found his voice again. “Or the Mockery, to increase my torment.”

She laughed again, a sound like some night-hunting bird, and moved closer to settle down on her haunches. She was close enough to seize now, but Makka didn’t move. It wasn’t just because of the growing darkness that drained the strength from him. There was something odd in this fearless woman.

“I am Pradoor,” she said.

“Makka.” He didn’t add the name of his tribe, partly because he no longer had a tribe, partly because a strange sensation had fallen over him. He stood on a cliff. With one step, such things as tribes would no longer matter.

“You are called, Makka,” said Pradoor. “The change beloved of the Traveler is coming. Haruuc fled to the gods of the Sovereign Host in the belief that it would make Darguun strong, but only the strength of the old ways can make Darguun great. There will be a new lhesh, and he will respect the Six. The people still believe. The order of the world will be set right.”

Her blind eyes faced him. “You want revenge. The Dark Six—the Fury—will place it in your path. Serve me, and your strength will be greater than anything you had before. Refuse and die.”

The words were blunt. It wasn’t a threat, only the truth. “When the Six give a sign, only a fool ignores it,” Makka said. “I choose vengeance.”

“When the Six call, you have no choice.” Pradoor stretched out a gnarled hand—she was somehow even closer than he had thought—and stroked his head the way his mother had when he’d been a pup. “You are their instrument. The Keeper will not take you this night.”

Waves of fatigue and weakness washed over Makka. For a moment, he thought that Pradoor was wrong, that the Keeper had claimed him, then fatigue and weakness were both gone. He trembled, as if just recovering from a long and terrible fever, but the fire of the wound in his side had cooled. He stood up and pulled apart the gap that Ashi’s sword had made in his bear hide vest. The skin beneath was crusted in dried blood, but the wound had closed, leaving a tender pink scar behind.
“Stare later,” said Pradoor. She poked her stick into his leg. “Up.”

Makka lifted her up to his left shoulder where she settled herself comfortably, one hand curled around the back of his neck. The old goblin weighed almost nothing. She tapped his head and pointed to the mouth of the alley. “The people wait for us. A king waits for us.” Her fingers stroked his head again. “Your revenge waits for you.”

Makka bared his teeth. “Praise the Six,” he said, and walked out to face the jackals of Rhukaan Draal.
CHAPTER
SIX
20 Sypheros

The most rumored match of the second day of the games had already begun as Ekhaas stepped into the sun of the warlords’ box. Below, Keraal circled the ring, back to the wall, taking the measure of his opponent—an ettin captured somewhere in the northern hills of Darguun and forced into the arena. Ekhaas shaded her eyes against the afternoon’s brightness and studied the creature just as Keraal did. The ettin stood nearly twice as tall as the hobgoblin. Its limbs were thick and its features angry, with fleshy lips and ragged ears on each of the two heads that sprouted from its massive shoulders.

Both pairs of the ettin’s tiny black eyes were fixed on Keraal, watching intently as the warlord of the Marhaan spun the chain that was his appointed weapon in a slow circle before him. The ettin had been provided with arms of a sort as well: a club fashioned from a length of heavy building timber and a shield made out of a door.

The spectators in the stands were cheering, most of them for the ettin, a vocal few for Keraal. Ekhaas saw one of the ettin’s heads murmur something to the other, then the creature let loose a bloodcurdling dual-pitched cry and charged. The club swept down and Keraal slid aside, but it was a feint. The ettin pushed its makeshift shield into the path of Keraal’s spinning chain. A few chunks of wood flew free, then the chain crashed into a tangle. Keraal tried to leap away, but he was slow. The club dealt him a glancing blow. He staggered and turned the stagger into a desperate lunge under the ettin’s arm. He kicked hard into its calf, then sprinted away as it hopped in pain, yelping with two voices. On the other side of the arena, Keraal shook out his chain and began to spin it again.

A few more voices were cheering for Keraal.

Geth sat alone at the front of the box. Ekhaas slipped in beside him. “None of the heirs are putting themselves on display?” she asked.

“They are. Just not here.” Geth pointed to either end of the box, then out into the stands. “They claimed their own territory.”

Ekhaas followed his gesture. At one end of the raised box, Tariic stood cheering with Daavn at his side. A good number of other warlords clustered around him. Aguus of Traakuum and the warlords who supported him had claimed the other end of the box. Garaad of Vanish Kai had taken a populist approach, sitting in the stands surrounded by warriors of lower ranks—many of them looking vaguely wistful as they stared across the arena at the section of benches taken over by Iizan of Ghaal Sehn and his supporters where wine was flowing freely and boxes of sweet shaat’aar were being handed around.

“He’ll empty the vaults of the Ghaal Sehn,” Ekhaas said.

“They’re all spending money,” Geth told her. “Iizan’s just being more showy about it.”

Ekhaas spotted Midian among the Ghaal Sehn, trying to get Iizan’s attention and apparently not having much luck. “What’s he doing?”

“Trying to get all the heirs to let him continue digging at Bloodrun, I think. So far he’s only got Tariic to agree. I don’t think any of the others care much for gnomes—or history.”

Ekhaas’s ears lay back.

In the arena, the ettin charged again. This time, Keraal flicked his arm and the chain broke out of its spin to fly low at the ettin. At the last moment, the hobgoblin twisted into the chain, wrapping it around his waist. The flying end of the chain, weighted with shackles, changed direction sharply and jumped up to slam into the shoulder of the ettin’s sword arm. The creature’s shield dipped and it pulled its charge up short—though not short enough. Keraal jerked on the chain and the shackles cracked across one of the ettin’s faces, tearing its lips and cheek. A roar went up from the crowd at the sight of first blood.

“Who chooses his opponents?” asked Ekhaas.

The ettin swatted Keraal with its shield as he tried to get past and a cheer went up from Tariic and his supporters. “Who do you think?” said Geth. “He’s let it out that there’s a fat reward to whoever defeats—and kills—the rebel who defied Haruuc.”

Another successful blow by Keraal brought another, louder roar for the rebel. Ekhaas’s ears flicked upright again. “That could bite him,” she said. “The longer Keraal stays alive, the more the crowd will treat him like a hero.”

“Haruuc told me once that Darguuls want blood and it doesn’t matter who sheds it. I think the crowd will be just
as happy if he dies.” Geth grimaced. “I haven’t figured out what I’m going to do if he lives.”

“There’s nothing to figure out. He goes free. We’re bound by tradition.” She looked sideways at him. “I’ve found our artificer,” she said quietly.

The shifter sat up. Ekhaas put a hand on his arm and pulled him back down in his seat. “Don’t make a fuss!” She glanced around. No one seemed to have noticed Geth’s excitement. “He’ll see us tonight. You, me, and Dagii.”

“Just the three of us?”

Ekhaas nodded. “I think he suspects something, so he wants to be discreet, which is what we want, too. I’m his contact, you’re the only one who can handle the rod, and Dagii will provide us with extra protection. Bringing Ashi and Midian would attract too much attention in the streets at night.”

“How did you get him to agree to it?”

She drew breath through her teeth. “He hasn’t entirely. Not yet. He knows that he’s going to be copying a Dhakaani artifact. That’s all. I even asked in the Bloody Market about the availability of byeshk. We’ll get it to him when he needs it.” Ekhaas sat back. “He’s fascinated by the lost knowledge of the daashor, the Dhakaani artificer tradition. That’s what hooked him. Bring Wrath with you tonight. If he hesitates when he finds out what we really want, I think the opportunity to examine two artifacts created by the legendary Taruuzh will help him make up his mind.”

“I’d bring Wrath anyway.” Geth touched the sword’s hilt. “I’m not going anywhere without it right now.”

“Dagii and I will come for you when the first moon rises,” Ekhaas said. “Wrap the rod in something to disguise it—and try to disguise yourself. Too many people recognize you now.” She rose.

An loud whistling sound from the arena drew her attention back to the sands. Keraal had doubled up his chain and was swinging it hard and fast overhead. The ettin, uncertain what the hobgoblin was up to, backed away slowly. Maybe too slowly—Keraal dropped suddenly to one knee and loosened his grip. The chain slid through his fingers with a long rattle and swept around in an expanding arc. The end of it wrapped around the ettin’s ankle, the shackles catching in the chain and tangling.

Instantly, Keraal was back on his feet and racing around the ettin even as the two-headed creature tried to shake the chain loose. Keraal caught its other leg inside the loop of chain, and hauled back with all of his strength. Muscles strained under his scarred skin.

The ettin’s legs were pulled together, then wrenched out from under it. Arms flailing, it crashed faces first to the ground. Keraal dropped the chain and charged, jumping up onto its broad shoulders and leaping high.

He came down with both feet together on the back of the creature’s right head. Even with the shouts of the crowd ringing in the arena, Ekhaas thought she heard a distinct crack as the head’s face was smashed into the sand. The left head bellowed in shared agony. The ettin heaved, trying to turn itself over.

Keraal dragged the club out of its slack right fist, wrapped both of his hands around the heavy timber, and lifted it. The ettin saw the raised club and tried to get its shield up, but its left arm was supporting most of its weight. It dropped as if it could roll away, but Keraal swung first. The club came down square on the left head. Bone crunch. The ettin managed a feeble roar. Keraal, silent, swung the club again.

The skull shattered and collapsed. Blood and brain spattered the hobgoblin. The ettin’s right head jerked and screamed. Keraal turned to it and swung the heavy club a third time.

The crowed roared in delight. Keraal flung down the club and turned to look up at Geth. Shifter and hobgoblin faced each other in silence, neither moving for a moment, then Keraal turned to Tariic and thumped his chest with his fist in a mocking salute. Tariic’s ears pressed back flat against his skull.

The arena resounded to the cheers and applause of the crowd.

Geth knew Dagii and Ekhaas had arrived when he heard song in the hall outside his door. It was a beautiful, soft song, strange and broken as all dar songs were to someone who hadn’t grown up with them, but still soothing. It reminded Geth of warm nights looking up at the stars and Eberron’s twelve moons and the hazy glow of the Ring of Siberys that dominated the southern sky.

He jerked back to alertness as the door of his chamber opened and Ekhaas entered. The duur’kala was wearing plain, drab clothes and a loose scarf that hid half her face but left room for her large and mobile ears. “Geth? Are you ready? The guards won’t sleep for—” Her eyes landed on him and she stopped. “What’s that?”

Geth pulled the enveloping cloak that he wore more tightly about himself. The hood hid his face better than Ekhaas’s scarf hid hers—in fact, he could barely see to either side. “You said to disguise myself because too many people recognize me.”
“So we wouldn’t attract attention. Now you look like someone trying to disguise himself. Get that off and we’ll try something else.”

Growling, he shook the cloak off—then growled again as Ekhaas squeezed her eyes shut and bent her ears down.

“What?”

“We’re not going to be able to cover that.” She rapped the great gauntlet that covered his right arm.

A sleeve of magewrought black steel plates, studded with flat spikes on the forearm and short hooks on the back of the hand, the gauntlet was all the armor he needed. It was light. It was strong. Paired with a sword in his left hand, it made a second weapon that had surprised many opponents over the years. What it wasn’t was inconspicuous.

“I was wearing the cloak to cover it and Wrath!” He slapped the sword at his side.

“Hurry!” Dagii’s voice came low from the hall.

Ekhaas’s ears bent even further. “There isn’t time to take it off. Just hold still.” She concentrated on his face for a moment, her amber eyes intense, then raised a hand and sang a brief rippling passage of song. Geth had experienced Ekhaas’s duur’kala magic many times before, and each time it felt as though he had been dipped in some wild spring that bubbled with the primal music of the world’s creation. This time the music still had that primal energy, but it was strangely muted, almost as if it were only an echo. Ekhaas lowered her hand and nodded. “It will do.”

“What will do?”

“I’ll tell you when we’re out. Where’s the rod?”

“Here.” Geth had the Rod of Kings wrapped up in the soft oiled leather that normally protected his gauntlet. He reached for the anonymous bundle and was startled to see an unfamiliar hand pick it up—a hobgoblin’s orange-red hand on the end of a slender arm wearing a black wool sleeve. He glanced at Ekhaas.

“Illusion,” she said. “Just take the rod. We need to leave.”

He didn’t ask anything more, but grabbed the wrapped rod and followed Ekhaas out the door, closing it behind him. The guards that stood on either side of the door—an honor for the shava of Haruuc more than anything else—were leaning back against the walls, both of them lightly dozing under the subtle effect of Ekhaas’s magic. They wouldn’t know he had slipped out of his chamber.

Dagii was waiting just along the hall. For the first time Geth could recall, the young warlord wore no armor, though he did carry a sword. His shadow-gray hair had been shaken loose and brushed forward over his face. Dagii barely looked like himself. His ears rose at the sight of them, but he said nothing and fell into step alongside them.

As soon as they were away from the hall outside his chamber, Geth looked down at himself. He wore—or seemed to wear—a robe of black wool and a wide girdle of red leather tooled in the angular patterns favored by hobgoblin design.

He also appeared to have breasts.

“A woman?” he said under his breath. “You made me a woman?”

“My older sister, actually,” Ekhaas whispered. “I was in a hurry. I had to choose someone I knew well but that no one in Khaar Mbar’ost was likely to recognize. The illusion won’t last long—that’s why I prefer non-magical disguise. Try not to talk. The magic doesn’t change your voice.”

“You don’t know any hobgoblin men?”

Dagii’s voice was thick with restrained laughter. “If it’s any consolation, Ekhaas is clearly the beauty in the family.” He nodded to the duur’kala. Ekhaas’s ears flicked and she returned the nod gracefully, a smile playing around her lips.

Geth ground his teeth together.

If it was embarrassing, the illusion was effective. They tried to move through the least busy parts of Khaar Mbar’ost, but even at night the fortress was an active place. Still, no one within the walls gave them the slightest glance except for one hobgoblin warrior whose gaze lingered on Geth. They couldn’t sneak around the guards at the gates, but there Dagii simply looked one of the guards in the eye. The guard, startled by his unexpected appearance, snapped up straight. If anyone cared to question him, the hobgoblin might report that the warlord of Mur Talaan had left Khaar Mbar’ost, but Geth doubted if he would remember the two women who passed by with him.

Beyond Khaar Mbar’ost, the daytime revelry of the games spilled over into the night. Bonfires burned in the middle of some of the wider streets, and the people of Rhukaan Draal gathered around them to sing and dance and drink. The guards that had patrolled the city during the period of mourning were all but gone. Those few Geth spotted as they passed through the shadows were celebrating as heartily as the rest of the crowd. Here and there, vast casks of ale stood open and whole roast hogs were laid out courtesy of those with aspirations to the throne. Geth recognized the chiefs of a few lesser clans calling out the virtues of Aguus or Iizan or Garaad. The warlords had
called on their allies to help support the costs of their campaigns of popularity.

“I don’t see anyone touting for Tariic,” he said.

“He’s being clever,” said Dagii. “Here all the food and drink blur together. He’s concentrating his attention on the arena and on winning over the unallied warlords.”

“He may win over some with a previous allegiance, too, if the others push their client-clans too far,” Ekhaas added.

The street where the artificer lived was far from the busy parts of the city. Here no light but moonlight illuminated the crooked streets. In spite of the silence and the darkness—or maybe because of them—Geth felt a distinct unease.

When Ekhaas’s illusion finally dissipated in a flickering of ghostlight, he was more than glad to be rid of it. The sight of Wrath and his great gauntlet might hint at his identity to anyone watching from the shadows, but they would also be a greater deterrent to attack than a gown and a girdle.

The buildings in the area were, for the most part, dark and in poor repair, leaning on each other like a bunch of drunkards. Ekhaas guided them to a low stone building that was doing most of the work of propping up its neighbors. It had the look of human construction rather than dark, and Geth guessed that it predated Haruuc’s creation of Darguun and the establishment of Rhukaan Draal. With a wide double door and only a few small, high windows, he suspected it had originally been a barn or a dairy or some other outlying farm building. Light shone around the door and the shutters. Ekhaas gestured for him and Dagii to hang back along the stone wall, then she went forward and knocked in a short rhythm on the double door.

A moment later, light stabbed her face as a peephole opened up. Geth heard a murmuring voice. Ekhaas gave an answer. The peephole closed again, then bolts rattled and one half of the door opened wide. Ekhaas waved for them to join her and stepped inside. Holding the bundle containing the Rod of Kings close, one hand on Wrath, Geth went after her.

Barn, he decided as he stepped through the door, the stone building had definitely once been a barn. The central room of it was lined with the remains of stalls and the cobble floor showed channels where filth had once been sluiced away. Any animal odor was gone, however, replaced by a strange smell like hot copper. The stalls had been lined with shelves which were in turn filled with books and papers and strange implements. Everbright lanterns hung from the rafters, illuminating the space with an unwavering magical light.

Ekhaas was in conversation with their host—a horn-browed tiefling. As Dagii closed the door behind himself, both turned to face them. “This,” said Ekhaas, “is Tenquis.”

The tiefling was tall and lean, his skin of his face smooth and dark brown. Geth would have said that he was probably a little bit older than either Ekhaas or Dagii, possibly even around his own age. It was difficult to tell because his eyes were solid golden orbs without white, iris, or pupil. Descendants of ancient mages who had bargained with devils, tieflings showed the taint of their ancestors’ bid for power. Tenquis’s strange eyes were echoed in gold flecks on the polished heavy black horns that curled back from his forehead above dark, wavy hair. Horny spikes edged his chin in imitation of a sharp goatee. He wore a kind of long vest embroidered in an intricate labyrinthine pattern over a much-laundered shirt and brown leather trousers; in the back, vest and trousers were cut to make room for a thick fleshy tail, brown like his skin.

And as Tenquis stared at Geth staring at him, the tail rose and lashed the air. “I know you,” he said. His teeth, sharp as a shifter’s, flashed white with each word. His voice had a husky rasp. He glared at Ekhaas. “A Dhakaani artifact? I know what you want! By the sorcerer-kings, get out before you ruin me!”

“Tenquis, wait,” said Ekhaas, raising her hands. “Everything I told you this afternoon is true. Listen to us before you answer. You don’t know what we want—”

“Can I guess.” He pointed a finger at Geth. His nails were the same color as his horns, black flecked with gold. “You want a copy made of a Dhakaani artifact. What artifact does Haruuc’s shava hold? The rod of the Dhakaani emperors. I’m no idiot. I am not bloody copying the symbol of the lhesh’s rule! Get out!”

“Tenquis, wait,” said Ekhaas, raising her hands. “Everything I told you this afternoon is true. Listen to us before you answer. You don’t know what we want—”

“Cursed?” The word dripped with disbelief.

“Believe what you want,” said Dagii grimly. “It’s the truth.”

Tenquis looked at the young warlord, then at Ekhaas, then at Geth. “And how do you know this?”
Ekhaas opened her mouth, but Geth spoke first. “Haruuc told me,” the shifter answered, meeting the golden-eyed gaze. “The rod drove Haruuc to hang the warriors of the Marhaan on along the road to Rhukaan Draal. It drove him to sell their women and children into slavery. It drove him to torture Keraal on a Dhakaani grieving tree. It almost drove him to lead Darguun to war.”

“I know a lot of Darguuls who were happy with all of that.”

“Haruuc wasn’t. He knew that what the rod wanted would destroy Darguun.” Geth hesitated, then plunged on with the truth—or at least part of it. “It was created to guide the emperors of Dhakaan, but this isn’t the world the Dhakaani knew. Whoever holds the rod sees the memories of the emperors.”

“The memories of emperors?” Tenquis’s eyes opened a little wider.

Beyond Tenquis, Geth saw Ekhaas’s ears stand tall and remembered what she had said in the arena, that the artificer was fascinated by the lost knowledge of the ancient Dhakaani daashor. He fumbled with the ties that held the bundle closed. The leather fell open to reveal the Rod of Kings. Geth lifted it free.

Tenquis stared at it, his lips open just a little bit, his tongue running across the tips of his teeth. He reached out with one hand. Geth pulled the rod back. “Don’t touch it! That’s how it passes on the memories.”

Tenquis drew back, but just a little bit. “How can you hold it then?” he asked.

Geth dropped the leather and drew Wrath with his other hand. Behind Tenquis, Ekhaas smiled. “The histories preserved by the Kech Volaar,” she said in the tones of a trained storyteller, “tell of three artifacts created by Taruzh daashor from the vein of byeshk he named Khaar Vanon, the Blood of Night. The first was Aram, or Wrath, the Sword of Heroes that was lost by Rakari Kuun in Jhegesh Dol when he killed the daelkyr lord of that place. The second was Muut, or Duty, the Shield of Nobles that was shattered as Dhakaan slid toward the Desperate Times. The third was Guulen, or Strength, the Rod of Kings. Three great artifacts, each the equal of the others in power.”

“Wrath protects me,” Geth said simply. “I’m the only one who can safely touch the rod.”

Tenquis’s gaze moved from the rod to the sword and back again. He swallowed. “Taruuzh made these.”

“You’ll be the first artificer to have the chance to study them,” said Ekhaas. “You won’t get this opportunity again.”

Tenquis looked longingly at the rod once more, then his lips pressed together into a thin line and he turned to Ekhaas. “What exactly do you need from me?”

Geth took a long breath of relief. Dagii relaxed a little, too. Ekhaas’s face remained impassive, however. “An exact copy of the rod, enchanted to enhance the presence of the one who holds it—”

Tenquis snorted. “Easy enough.”

“And ready in three days.”

The snort turned into a twitch. “Three days? That’s not possible. This isn’t like forging a horseshoe. Six, maybe. Byeshk is hard to work with and I’d need to find some first—”

“We can have the byeshk here in the morning,” said Ekhaas.

“I’ll need more than byeshk. Other materials. They won’t be cheap.”

Dagii stepped past Geth and tossed a fat, clinking pouch to Tenquis. “That should cover the price of anything else you need.”

Geth wondered where he had come up with the money. The Mur Talaan clan was highly respected, but it wasn’t wealthy. Tenquis rolled the pouch between his fingers, looking both startled and pleased. “I’ll need to study the rod,” he said. “Make sketches, take measurements.”

“You have tonight,” Ekhaas said. “No touching it. Geth can hold it for you.”

The tiefling flicked his fingers dismissively. “Gloves,” he said. “Has anyone tried holding the rod while wearing gloves?”

Geth looked at Ekhaas and Dagii, and felt a flush of embarrassment warm his face. They’d been too worried about the danger of the rod to consider it, but the priest at Haruuc’s funeral had held the rod on a tray and felt nothing.

Tenquis raised an eyebrow at their silence. “I didn’t think so. I’ll want to study the sword, too.”

“Another time,” said Ekhaas. “Can you do better than six days?”

Tenquis pursed his lips and glanced at Geth and the rod. “I may be able to make it in five.” He held up a finger. “I have conditions. Nobody outside of this room can know about my involvement. Not any allies, not your mothers. I’m not losing my head for you.”

“That’s fair,” said Ekhaas.

Tenquis held up a second finger. “There will be a … fee.”
Dagii’s ears pressed back. “The pouch has more than you’ll need for materials. The rest is yours.”


“I’ll tell you everything I know,” Ekhaas promised. “After the rod is copied. Five days, no more. If the Rod of Kings passes into the hands of an heir, we’ve run out of time. Do we have an agreement?”

Tenquis smiled. “We have an agreement.” He held out his hand. Ekhaas drew a knife. The tiefling’s smile faltered for a moment, then returned. “By your people’s custom, then.” He pulled an ornate dagger from his belt and touched the blade to Ekhaas’s, sealing the deal in dar fashion. Then he dropped the dagger onto a nearby table and pointed at Geth. “Bring the rod, here. If I only have tonight to examine it, I need to get started.”

Tenquis worked quickly, clearing a large table and directing Geth to set the rod on it. Multiple everbright lanterns with arrangements of mirrors and lenses directed bright light onto the rod, lighting it up as if the sun were shining into the converted barn. The artificer produced paper, pens, and ink, a measuring stick, calipers, and more lenses. He began with a careful examination of the byeshk shaft—with Geth turning it as he instructed—then took calipers and began transferring the dimensions of the rod onto paper. As quickly as he worked, though, the copying took time. Ekhaas found a chair among the shelves and books, stretched out, and dozed off. Dagii simply lay down on a carpet that covered a section of the stone floor.

Geth didn’t have that luxury. He could move about, stretch, occasionally sit down, but it was never long before Tenquis called on him to turn the rod—the tiefling had tried handling the rod with thick gloves, but while they protected him, they were also clumsy. Geth’s hands were more dexterous. At Tenquis’s request, he laid Wrath alongside the rod, so the artificer could compare the runes scribed on the two artifacts. Half the night seemed to pass and Geth watched him fill page after page with careful sketches of the rod in the most minute detail. Tenquis was a talented artist—the drawings he made were vivid and fine. His dark hands, calloused and nicked in ways that set them apart from a fighter’s hands, moved with swift certainty from pen to calipers and back again, adjusting a lens on a lantern, grabbing for a fresh piece of paper, or flipping back to consult a previous sketch.

After a time, he realized that Tenquis was glancing up at him as well. He twitched his gaze away. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Tenquis set his pen down and stretched his hands. The joints popped. He leaned back on the stool he occupied and looked at him. “The rod and the sword aren’t the only artifacts you carry.”

Geth touched the collar of black stones, each one roughly polished and marked with a symbol, that he wore around his neck. “You mean this.”

“Yes. Those are orc runes.” He rose and leaned across the table, reaching out to lift one of the stones and rub his thumb across it. His fingers were warm and dry. “Druidic tradition. Very old. Powerful too.”

“The collar is a Gatekeeper artifact,” said Geth. “It protects my mind from the forces of Xoriat, the plane of madness. It belonged to a … close friend.”

“Who died?”

It was difficult to read the tiefling’s featureless eyes, but up close Geth could see the tiny creases in the skin around them, the slight movement of the brow below the heavy horns. He half-expected to see himself reflected in the golden orbs, but they gave back no reflection at all. “He was killed,” he said.

“And the person who killed him?” Tenquis let the stone fall back against Geth’s neck and stood straight.

“Dead.”

Tenquis smiled, showing sharp teeth again. “My grandmother has a saying: the way through the maze is clear for the wise and the lucky, but the rest of us have to fight.” He sat down and stared at the rod for a moment before looking up at Geth again. “The symbols on the rod and the sword—you don’t understand them, do you?”

“They’re not Goblin.”

“No. They’re not any kind of language you could read, really.” He picked up the pen and tapped it against the rod. “They bind magic, shaping it. The methods used by the Dhakaani daashor are different from what modern artificers use, but there are similarities if you know what to look for.” The pen touched one carved rune, then another. “These are strong runes. Taruuzh bound incredible power into the rod.” Tenquis lifted his eyes. “There’s more to the rod’s power than just the memories of emperors and enhancing the presence of the holder, isn’t there?”

The hair on Geth’s arms and neck rose. He didn’t say anything. For a moment, neither did Tenquis. Then the tiefling nodded slowly and set the pen down. “I might be able to figure it out myself, but I’m not sure I want to,” he said. He paused before asking, “When I’ve made the copy, what are you planning to do with the true rod?”

“Who says we’re planning to do anything with it?” said Geth.
“The voice of experience. When people want something copied, they usually have plans for the original. They
want to sell it if it belongs to them or they want to steal it if it doesn’t.”

Geth’s throat felt dry. “We’re going to destroy it,” he said.

Tenquis’s lips curled. “Really?” he said.

Quick as a thought, he reached down and caught up a heavy smith’s hammer. Before Geth could stop him, he had
raised the hammer and brought it down on Wrath’s blade with a crash that jolted both Ekhaas and Dagii from their
sleep.

“Grandfather Rat!” shouted Geth. “What do you think you’re—”

He stopped, staring at Wrath. By rights the blade, heavy as it was, should have been smashed or at least bent, but
there wasn’t a mark on the purple metal. Tenquis dropped the hammer. “It’s not so easy to destroy powerful artifacts
like these,” he said. “You might want to come up with another plan.”

“Maabet!” cursed Dagii. “What was that about?” He had his sword out, ready for a fight.

Geth looked at Tenquis for a moment longer, then turned to Dagii. “Tenquis was showing me how tough Wrath
and the rod are.”

“You couldn’t have been quieter about it?” Ekhaas looked at the sea of papers and sketches that covered the table.
“Are you finished?”

“I think so.” Tenquis began to gather up his drawings. “Be sure the byeshk gets here. I’ll send word if there are
problems. Otherwise you’ll hear from me when the false rod is completed.”

As soon as Geth returned Wrath to its sheath and wrapped the rod back into the bundle of leather, they took their
leave. Tenquis gave Geth one last golden-eyed glance, then his door closed behind them. The night was almost over,
the first hints of dawn glowing in the east, though the streets were still dark enough to have left a human blind.
Rhukaan Draal was, briefly, at its most silent. Ekhaas didn’t bother trying to renew the illusion that had cloaked
Geth—instead she brushed his shaggy hair forward to hide his face. Dagii shed the jacket he wore and draped it over
Geth’s shoulder to conceal both his great gauntlet and the bundled rod. A rough disguise, but it would do. The
weariness of a night without sleep weighed on Geth. There was something he knew he had to say, though.

“Tenquis figured out that there’s something more to the rod.”

Ekhaas let out a soft curse. “Can we trust him?” asked Dagii.

“I think so,” said Geth. “He also guessed we were planning to do something with the true rod. I told him we were
going to destroy it. That banging was him showing me that’s going to be harder than we thought.”

“I was afraid it might be,” said Ekhaas grimly. “In legends, great artifacts are either ridiculously fragile or
impossibly durable. The cursed ones are never fragile. We’ll think of something—”

The skittering of a stone in the shadows interrupted her. Instantly, all three of them were on the alert, hands on
their swords. “Rat?” breathed Dagii.

“No,” Geth said. There was another sound, this time from the shadows on their other side. They moved back to
back. Almost immediately, a third stone rattled on the street, louder than the others. They all looked toward it.

“Whoever is out there,” said Ekhaas, “is either incredibly clumsy or wants us to know we’re not alone.”

“The latter,” said a voice that was thick and strained like a scar. A small shadow detached itself from high on a
wall and dropped softly to the street, then moved forward so they could clearly see an old goblin with thin cobweb
hair, the parchment-like skin of his face stained dark to match the black clothing of the shaarat’khesh.

“We need to talk,” said Chetiin.
CHAPTER
SEVEN
21 Sypherōs

The fatigue Geth had felt dropped away, burning into rage. “You!” he snarled. He shrugged off Dagii’s jacket and thrust the bundle containing the rod at Ekhaas. Wrath ran as he drew the twilight blade, then he charged at the goblin.

Chetiin had picked a good spot for a fight, a small open square, little more than a broadening of the street with the shutters on the surrounding buildings closed tight. Four running strides closed the distance between Geth and the goblin. Chetiin sank back into a crouch, hands raised in loose fists. Geth swung Wrath on the last step. The heavy sword arced down—and Chetiin slid out of the way.

Geth spun, letting the momentum of the blow carry him around, and turned Wrath in another blow that forced Chetiin to dodge with a little less grace. Dagii joined him, moving in on Chetiin’s other side with his sword at the ready. Chetiin slipped back into his crouch and rocked gently from one side to the other, his hands weaving along with his body and making it difficult to tell where he was going to go next.

“Geth,” he said, his strained voice low, “listen to me—”

The shifter answered with a fast backhanded swipe of his gauntlet. Magewrought steel swept the air. Chetiin stepped aside—and vanished. Geth and Dagii whirled, searching for him.

He reappeared behind Dagii. Geth caught the flash of a fist as Chetiin punched into the warlord’s leg at mid-thigh before darting back. It was a hard blow, delivered with precision. Dagii grunted and nearly went down, his leg numbed, but Ekhaas appeared to support him. Eyes flashing with anger, she drew breath to sing.

Chetiin’s hand dipped into a pouch at his waist and emerged to fling ash into her face. Fine gray particles floated in an expanding cloud. Ekhaas’s eyes went wide and her song turned into a fit of choking. Chetiin leaped away from her and Dagii and turned to face Geth again, dropping into a crouch once more. His wide eyes were hard, his big ears cupped, his teeth bared—and through them he spat, “Geth, I didn’t kill Haruuc!”

The protest was so feeble, so ridiculous, that the only answer Geth could manage was a growl that rolled out of his belly. Dropping into a matching crouch, he reached deep inside himself, drew on his fury … and shifted.

The lycanthrope ancestors of the shifter race had the power to become animals, but as their bloodlines had tangled together, that ability had been diluted. Shifters couldn’t take animal form, but they could assume the animal traits of their ancestors. Some shifters could manifest sharp claws or put on a burst of feral speed. Geth’s gift was sheer toughness.

The shifting spread through him like a heat in his blood. His skin thickened into leathery hide. His hair turned even more coarse and heavy. A sense of invulnerability washed over him. The growl turned into a shout and he surged forward, spinning Wrath in deadly arcs, holding his gauntlet ready to block any blow Chetiin attempted or to bash him should he try to skip aside again.

But the shaarat’khesh elder fell back before the attack. Light and quick, he swayed back and forth, looking for a way around, but Geth kept him contained. He pressed hard, forcing Chetiin backward until the goblin was caught in a corner of the square. His face tightened. Geth lunged.

And Chetiin turned to push off one wall onto the next and back to the first, each leap taking him higher. Wrath struck stone, grating out a shower of orange sparks. Geth twisted around to follow Chetiin as the goblin made a final leap from the wall and soared over his head.

He landed like a cat. Geth charged again, whirling as he swung. When Chetiin tried to dodge, he was ready for him. His gauntlet caught him with a punch that sent him tumbling. Chetiin rolled to his feet with blood trickling from his mouth. He leaped away as Geth came in again, drawing a dagger from one of the sheaths on his forearms and circling well away from the shifter.

“Why would I kill Haruuc?” Chetiin asked. “He was my friend.”

“You said he needed to be stopped. You thought he’d discovered the power of the rod.” Geth flung the words Chetiin had spoken over Haruuc’s body back at him. “You did what you had to do.”

“I didn’t.”

Geth saw his eyes flick toward Dagii, standing on his own again, and Ekhaas, able to breathe once more. In a moment, they would have the advantage. He slid forward. Chetiin’s eyes snapped to him and he slid back.
“You’re an assassin,” Geth growled. “An assassin from a clan of assassins!”

Chetiin’s ears pulled back. “Then why would I kill Haruuc in full view of every warlord in Darguun? Why would I leave Witness, a treasure of the shaarat’khes, behind? Why would I put my clan in danger?”

He threw the questions like knives and they found their target. Geth hesitated. Why would Chetiin have let himself be seen? He could have struck from the shadows in some quiet corridor. He could have slipped into Haruuc’s own chambers. He could have arranged a quiet death for the lhesh so that it didn’t look like an assassination at all—

And in the instant that he hesitated, Chetiin struck. He threw himself forward in a swift tumble. His leg swept around and, small as the goblin was, kicked the shifter’s legs out from under him. Geth slammed down onto his back. Chetiin jumped on his chest, one heel kicking the wind out of him as he landed. The point of his dagger pricked the skin beneath Geth’s chin.

“I wasn’t the one who killed Haruuc,” Chetiin said.

He held the dagger under Geth’s chin a moment longer, then vaulted off to land well away from him, Ekhaas, and Dagii. Geth thrust himself up, wheezing as he sucked in air.

“Geth,” said Ekhaas, “I think we should listen to him.”

“Why?” Geth croaked.

“Because we’re alive. He could have killed any of us from the shadows before we even knew he was there, but he didn’t. He could have killed you just now, but he didn’t.”

Geth looked at her and at Dagii, then at Chetiin. “I saw you. You killed Haruuc right in front of me.”


“No.”

“Geth—” Dagii said. The hobgoblin sheathed his sword. So did Ekhaas. Geth grimaced and put Wrath away as well. Chetiin made his dagger disappear into the sheath on his forearm with a smooth gesture. Geth glaring at him with narrowed eyes. A part of him wanted to trust the goblin elder. He’d been a wise and capable friend. The rest of him still stung from Haruuc’s death and Chetiin’s betrayal of their friendship.

“Why should we believe you?” he demanded.

“For the reasons I said. If I wanted to kill Haruuc, I wouldn’t have done it the way that it happened. It was far too public. If you believe nothing else I say, believe that.” He spread his hands. “You know I believed in Haruuc’s vision of a stable Darguun as much as anyone else. Such an obvious killing, especially when Haruuc had not named an heir, would have served no purpose.”

“Except to separate him from the rod if he’d discovered its true power,” said Geth.

Chetiin scowled and jerked his head at the windows around the square. “This isn’t the place to discuss secrets,” he said. “Come with me. There’s a place we can talk.” His face softened. “Trust me. On Haruuc’s memory and my word, I’m telling you the truth.”

Geth glanced at Ekhaas and Dagii. Ekhaas’s ears flicked and she nodded curtly. He looked back to Chetiin. “No tricks,” he said.

The goblin nodded. “After the last two weeks I don’t think I have any tricks left.”

The place he led them to was a fragment of brick wall standing in the middle of large swath of burned-out ruins. The nearest surviving buildings were some distance away.

“One of the fires that burned on the night of Haruuc’s death destroyed this area,” said Chetiin. “It will be reclaimed, but between the mourning period and the games, no one has had time. We won’t be overheard.” He squatted down in the shelter of the wall and looked up at them. “I’ve been watching you for the last few days, waiting for a chance to speak with you alone,” he said. “I saw you leave Khaar Mbar’ost tonight and I followed you to the tiefling’s house. His shutters fit badly. I know your plans. Who thought of creating a false rod?”

Ekhaas answered. “Midian. When he returned.”

Chetiin nodded. “I heard what you told Tenquis about the rod’s influence on Haruuc. Maabet, I should have seen it. Nothing he did in the last days of his life was like him.”

“You said as much when you argued with him just before his death,” said Geth. “You said, ‘You’re not the Haruuc I’ve known for so many years.’”

“If we knew truth when we spoke it, we’d all be seers.” Chetiin’s mouth tightened. “I didn’t guess that the rod had a hold on him. If anything I would have guessed that he had begun to grasp the rod’s power.”
“That’s what we thought you believed,” Geth said. “You also told Haruuc that he would destroy what he’d built unless he was stopped.”

“And you thought that I had followed through and stopped him.” Chetiin fell silent for a moment before adding, “I would have considered it. We swore to keep the rod’s powers secret by any means necessary.” He glanced at each of them in turn. “But we all swore to that. I wouldn’t have acted on my own. I would have come to you.”

“Then what happened?” asked Dagii.

Chetiin made a face and his ears folded down. “I was careless. When I left Haruuc after our argument—after he ordered me out of Khaar Mbar’ost—I was angry. I ignored the first law of the shaarat’khesh: watch and listen. Someone put a crossbow bolt in my back. Poisoned.”

Breath hissed between Geth’s teeth. “Just like Haruuc. Did you see who did it?”

“No.” Chetiin shook his head. “The bolt was bad. The poison was worse. It worked fast, burning in me. It made me weak and blind. Strandpine sap, I think. A big dose, maybe as much as they used on Haruuc.”

“And you’re smaller than he was. How come you’re not dead?”

“An assassin who works with poisons for many years develops a resistance to them,” the goblin said. “As it was, I was as good as dead. That probably saved me. I think if I had been any more alive, my attacker would have been certain to finish the job.”

“Lucky,” Ekhaas said.

“It wasn’t my only piece of luck. I drifted in and out of consciousness after that while the poison ran its course. When I finally woke up, I realized that I’d been stuffed up onto a ledge in one of the chimneys of Khaar Mbar’ost. If not for the ban on fires during the period of mourning, smoke in the chimney would have suffocated me.” He spread his hands. “The bolt had been pulled out of me, maybe to make it easier to hide my body. That spared me further exposure to the poison. My daggers had been taken, of course. When I managed to climb down, I discovered the ledge I’d been hidden on was above the fireplace in my own chamber.”

“Your chamber was searched,” said Dagii. “I was there.”

“Whoever attacked me did a good job. The ledge was invisible from below. Smoke and heat would have preserved my body. What little smell there might be would have been whisked up the chimney. I might never have been found.”

He said it with a chilling bluntness, as if talking about his own murder was the most natural thing in the world. Geth held back a shudder. “And we would have kept on thinking you’d gone into hiding. Why didn’t you come to us?”

“I overheard that Haruuc was dead and that I had done the deed. I didn’t know who had attacked me, but it was clear that anyone who found me wasn’t going to let me live long enough to explain. I could barely move, much less defend myself. It was two days after Haruuc’s death. I bandaged my wound, disguised myself, got out of Khaar Mbar’ost, and made my way to a shaarat’khesh house. It was deserted—those of my clan had fled the city or moved to more secure shelter—but it was enough for me. I spent eight days recovering there until the end of the mourning period.” His expression darkened. “With the beginning of the games, I was able to move around Rhukaan Draal in disguise. I learned everything that had happened—and I started to watch for my chance to talk to you. You gave it to me tonight.” He spread his hands. “Sit ya toomiish—those are events as they happened to me. I didn’t kill Haruuc, but someone wants it to look like I did.”

“If you didn’t,” asked Geth, “who did? And why?”

“You believe me then?”

“I—” Geth hesitated. He wanted to believe the goblin. What Chetiin had told them made at least as much sense to him as the idea that Chetiin could have turned on Haruuc. And yet the time he had spent since Haruuc’s death cursing Chetiin’s name wouldn’t leave him so easily. Both versions of events were incredible.

Dagii spoke into the silence. “I believe you,” he said firmly. “You have too much muut, too much atcha to have acted against Haruuc on your own. I know that you would have come to us first.”

Geth glanced at Ekhaas. The duur’kala’s ears were cocked. Slowly, she nodded. “I think you’re telling the truth,” she said to Chetiin. She smiled. “Khaavolaar, I hated thinking of you as a traitor!”

Geth’s gut felt a little hollow, as if he was a traitor now. He forced a smile to his face, though. “I believe you, too. It’s good to have you back.”

Chetiin didn’t smile. His dark-stained face remained pensive. “I’m not back,” he said. “Too many people think I was the one who put Witness into Haruuc’s eye.” He shook his head. “I’ve thought about it ever since I escaped, but I don’t know the answer to your question, Geth. I don’t know who actually killed Haruuc.”
“A changeling in your shape?” suggested Dagii.

“A changeling can’t imitate a goblin,” said Chetiin. “We’re too small. A changeling child might be able to, but no child could have done what I am told I did.” The muscles of his jaw tightened. “I can only come up with one plausible explanation. It was another of the shaarat’khesh.”

“One of your own clan?” Geth asked. “They would do that?”

“Not all of them. Shaarat’khesh can refuse a request, but there are those who would have considered it a challenge.”

“And they would have tried to kill you to do it?”

“I have my rivals,” Chetiin said grimly, “though so far as I knew, none of them were in Rhukaan Draal at the time. But yes, they would have.”

Dagii looked doubtful. “Why use your identity to kill Haruuc? The honor of his death would fall on you.”

Chetiin gave him a thin smile. “You fight open battles, Dagii. Among the Silent Clans, the assassin would be twice-honored: once for killing Haruuc, once for concealing his true identity.” The smile faded from his face. “But I’ve been in touch with shaarat’khesh I trust who remain in hiding in Rhukaan Draal. None of our clan has claimed Haruuc’s death. Maybe no one will—because of the trouble that it brought down on us, the clan is angry. I had to talk fast to get even old friends to believe my story. In any case, if Haruuc truly was killed by one of the shaarat’khesh, the blame doesn’t fall on the assassin, but on the one who hired him.”

“Then we need to think about why Haruuc was killed,” said Ekhaas. “What did anyone have to gain from Haruuc’s death?”

“They could stop him from becoming a tyrant,” Geth said. “They could prevent a war—they would have had their plans in place before he tried to turn the warlords away from Breland toward Valenar.”

Dagii shook his head. “Those are the reasons we’ve been chasing since Haruuc’s death. Except that, as Tenquis pointed out, most Darguuls liked the way Haruuc was acting under the rod’s influence. They would still welcome a war with Valenar. Or with anyone else, never mind the consequences.” His ears flicked. “Could a non-Darguul have hired one of the shaarat’khesh?”

“It would be difficult,” said Chetiin, “but not impossible. If one of my clan wanted the honor badly enough—”

“We’ve forgotten something.”

They all turned to look at Ekhaas. Her ears were flat against her skull and her eyes were narrow. She pointed at Geth. “You said that after he killed Haruuc, the assassin looked at you and said ‘We swore we would do what we had to.’ That’s what made us all think Chetiin believed Haruuc had discovered the power of the rod.”

“And we were wrong,” Geth said, but Chetiin’s eyes opened wide and he drew a long hard breath. Dagii’s lips peeled back from his teeth. A moment later, Geth understood what Ekhaas had seen as well.

Only the six of them who had recovered the rod and understood its terrible secret knew about the oath they had made. The idea left him cold. He looked out across the burned ruins to the eastern sky. Khaar Mbar’ost stood as a silhouette between them and the coming dawn. “One of us hired the assassin? Who would have done that? Who could have done that?”

Dagii spoke through clenched teeth. “Midian.”

Geth whirled to question this blunt accusation, but Ekhaas was already talking, building up evidence. “He was the only one of us who wasn’t there. You, Geth, and you, Dagii were with Haruuc on the dais. Ashi was just off of the dais in the side room. I was with Senen Dhakaan on the floor of the throne room. Chetiin was lying wounded. But Midian was conveniently out of Rhukaan Draal. He could have hired the assassin, told him what to say to make his disguise as Chetiin even more convincing, and left for the ruins at Bloodrun.” She began to pace back and forth among the ashes as she thought. “You knew that Haruuc hadn’t really discovered the power of the rod, Geth. You told me and you told Ashi. If one of us had hired the assassin, we had time to stop the assassination.”

“I didn’t hire an assassin!” Geth growled.

“I’m not saying you did. Or that Ashi did.” She looked to Dagii. “Or you.”

“I didn’t know about the danger of the rod until after Haruuc was dead,” Dagii said stiffly.

“No, but I know you.” Ekhaas’s ears rose and flicked. “When you returned with Keraal as your prisoner, you were as dirty as a farmhand and your hands were blistered because you had insisted on binding the Gan’duur warriors into the grieving trees along the road yourself. You took responsibility for their deaths. Someone with such *muut* wouldn’t hire an assassin to kill his lhesh.”

Geth thought he saw something pass between them, a meeting of amber and gray eyes, then Dagii lowered his head in acknowledgement and Ekhaas turned back to him and Chetiin.
“None of that proves Midian is the one behind it, only that he wasn’t there,” she said. “Haruuc had enemies—any
one of them could have hired an assassin. But the false Chetiin knew the words of our pledge. Midian has to be our
suspect.”

Only if Chetiin is telling the truth, whispered a voice inside Geth. He swallowed it, sending it down into the cold
feeling that swirled in his gut. He remembered how pale Midian had been when they had told him about the danger
of the rod. If Geth had just realized he’d made a horrible mistake, surely he would have reacted in the same way. “It
still leaves us with the question of why he would do it,” he said, “and why he wouldn’t have come to the rest of us
before hiring an assassin.”

“For any and all of the reasons we guessed Chetiin might have done it,” said Ekhaas. “We’ve got Midian. Do we
confront him?”

“No,” Chetiin said quietly. The goblin elder rose from his crouch. “Solve the problem of the rod first. When
Haruuc’s heir is lkesh with the false rod in his hand and the true rod has been dealt with, then we confront Midian.”

“You think he’d betray us.”

“I’m not certain what to think, but I know that accusing him of orchestrating the murder of Haruuc will not go
well right now. We can’t involve other people without revealing the secret of the rod. We need to deal with one
problem before we move onto the next. You’re close to getting the true rod away. Will rushing to confront Midian
change anything?”

Ekhaas flicked her ears. “No. I don’t think we should tell him any more than he needs to know though. We’ve
already promised Tenquis we wouldn’t reveal his identity. We should keep our meeting with you a secret, too.”

“It’s better if no one knows you’ve seen me,” said Chetiin. “Not even Ashi—the more people who know, the
more people who could give me away. There’s someone out there who believes I’m dead. We should let them
continue to believe it. If it’s Midian, Ashi’s trust will hide our suspicion. I’ll listen for rumors of the shaarat’khesh
who performed the assassination. We may be able to learn something more.” He nodded to the east. “Dawn is
almost here. You should return to Khaar Mbar’ost.”

“What if we need to talk to you again?” asked Dagii. “How do we contact you?”

“Hang something from your window in Khaar Mbar’ost. I’ll come to you.” He smiled. “I’m pleased that we were
able to speak. It’s good to know I can trust you.”

Suspicion seethed in Geth’s belly. He struggled to keep it from his face as Chetiin vaulted up onto a charred beam
that slanted down into the ruins from a broken roofline. They lost sight of him among the shadows for a moment—a
moment that stretched out longer and longer until they all realized he had gone.

Their own return through Rhukaan Draal was quiet. There were a few more people moving on the streets now,
though they were still able to pass without attracting notice. The chill sense of suspicion was still with Geth as they
paused a short distance from Rhukaan Draal. “I’ll catch the attention of the guards at the gates,” said Dagii. “You
two go in. There will be other people arriving at Khaar Mbar’ost now. Once we’re inside, there’s no way to avoid
being seen at this time of day, but there also won’t be anything unusual in us moving around.”

“How do I get past the guards outside my chamber?”

“Just walk in,” Ekhaas said with a smile. “It’s your chamber. They’ll think you’re already inside and they’ll be
too surprised and embarrassed to say later that you weren’t.”

Geth made a face. “That sounds too easy.”

It was. They turned a corner and came into sight of the gates of Khaar Mbar’ost. Instead of only a few people
passing into a fortress still stirring in the early morning, the gates were a rush of messengers, warriors, and warlords.

“Rat,” said Geth.

“Khaavolaar,” said Ekhaas.

“Something has happened,” said Dagii grimly.

“What do we do?” Geth looked at the two hobgoblins, who looked at each other. Ekhaas’s ears bent forward.

“Keep going,” she said. “We may be able to slip through in the chaos. We’ll find out what’s going on once we’re
inside.”

The guards at the gate, however, were alert. Even as they approached, trying to move causally in the wake of a
warlord’s entourage, one of the guards straightened and shouted, “He’s here! Send the message—he’s here!”

Instantly, Geth was the center of attention as guards came pouring out into the courtyard of the fortress. For a
moment, he feared that they were there to arrest him, but then he realized that they were forming up as an honor
guard. He shoved the bundle containing the Rod of Kings at Ekhaas. They couldn’t be found with it. “Get that away!
Get it back to my chamber.”

She nodded and melted away into the moving crowd. Dagii stayed by Geth’s side. A moment later, Munta and Tariic appeared. “Maabet!” cursed Munta. “Where have you been? We’ve been looking for you.”

“I wanted to see the celebrations that took place at night after the games ended,” Geth said. “I wanted to go without anyone knowing who I was.”

Munta blinked. “Rhukaan Draal? At night? With only Dagii for protection?”

“He’s not entirely helpless, Munta,” Dagii said. “What’s going on?”

“You picked a bad night to go out.” Tariic’s voice was dark. “A messenger falcon arrived in Khaar Mbar’ost during the third watch. It was carrying word from the village of Zarrthec. Villages and clanholds to the east have been attacked by raiders.”

Dagii’s ears rose sharply. “Someone sympathetic to the Gan’duur?”

Tariic shook his head. “Valenar.” He fixed his gaze on Geth. “The war that you said wouldn’t happen is here.”
CHAPTER
EIGHT
21 Sypheros

The throne room had been pressed into use for the first time since Haruuc’s death. Leaning forward from the viewing gallery above, Ashi could still see the stain of the lhesh’s blood on the dais. A dar tradition, like leaving the death wound visible. As long as the stain remained, people would remember that a great leader had died on that spot.

The white bulk of the Dhakaani grieving tree still stood to the side of the dais as well, blocking one of the tall windows behind the throne. The tree made a sinister presence, but the carved stone limbs were harmless now. The words that commanded them had died with Haruuc. No one had tried to dismantle and remove the tree, though. Maybe Haruuc had been the only one who knew that secret, too.

Noise filled the rest of the throne room and the gallery. The assembly of warlords gathered in the throne room beneath walls lined with tall statues of fierce hobgoblin warriors and banners carrying clan crests. Exiled to the gallery were all those who had no place among the warlords and clan chiefs: ambassadors and envoys from the other nations of Khorvaire, the dragonmarked houses, and those clans like the Kech Volaar that dwelled in Darguun but had not sworn allegiance to Haruuc. Today the gallery was more crowded than the throne room. Everyone was in attendance. Word of the messenger falcon’s arrival during the night, and of the news it carried, had spread quickly.

Geth sat at the head of everything on Haruuc’s blocky throne, the Rod of Kings in his hand. Ashi might have expected Dagii or Munta to stand with him, but they were on the floor among the other warlords. Instead, the four contending heirs stood around Geth—Tariic and Garaad to his right, Aguus and Iizan to his left. The heirs took turns glaring at each other and nodding to supporters among the assembly. Geth just looked uncomfortable and exhausted. Ashi felt for him. All of his insistences that there would be no war had collapsed under him. She wondered if he had really believed what he was saying.

“I’ve heard that when the falcon arrived last night, they couldn’t find Geth and when they finally did, he was returning from the city with Dagii at dawn.” Esmyssa Entar ir’Korran, the ambassador of Zilargo, raised herself up a little to speak in Ashi’s ear. Normally the gnome sat on a cushion that lifted her up on chairs made for larger beings. There was no room for a servant to get through the crowd with a cushion today. In fact, only Esmyssa’s small size had enabled her to squeeze through and claim the seat. Pale blue eyes flashed. “I wonder where he was.”

The comment was so probing she might as well have asked the question outright. “I don’t know,” said Ashi. It was no lie for a change, though she could guess at where Geth had been. As she had Vounn had made their way to their seats, Ashi had caught a glimpse of Ekhaas standing with Senen Dhakaan. The duur’kala looked just as tired as Geth. Ashi wondered if that meant they had found an artificer to create a false rod.

That at least would be welcome news. A war was bad, but the danger of the Rod of Kings was potentially even greater.

The blunt rebuff brought a flicker of disappointment to Esmyssa’s eyes, but it didn’t silence her. She looked back to the dais. “This business of a shava and four heirs is messy. The sooner the Darguuls have a lhesh again, the better. It’s so much easier to deal with one stable leader. With four possible lheshes, it’s hard to know where you stand—”

“Isn’t Zilargo ruled by three leaders?” Ashi asked, trying to head off the inevitable question of who she thought might stand closest to the throne.

“The Triumvirate speaks with a single voice backed by the wisdom of three minds working in concert,” Esmyssa said proudly. “Haruuc’s heirs struggle against each other. And the assembly of warlords …” She made a dismissive, if quiet, noise. “Without a strong, thoughtful lhesh to lead them, Darguul’s clans are a danger as much to themselves as the rest of Khorvaire. If this was Zilargo, we wouldn’t be facing the possibility of a war.”

The Zil ambassador was right about Darguun’s clans, of course, but her self-righteous arrogance was like a dull blade dragged across Ashi’s skin. “And what would Zilargo do if Valenar elves were raiding its borders?”

“Negotiate,” said Esmyssa. “Emissaries of the Triumvirate would be sent to talk to them and find a solution before conflict arises. Words are the armies of Zilargo.”

Ashi’s teeth ground together. “Razh toch tao gi,” she said in the language she had spoken growing up among the barbarian clans of the Shadow Marches. “A sword has no ears.”

Esmyssa’s smile tightened as well. “Pithy,” she said, and turned away to speak to the Brelish ambassador. Ashi turned as well, righteous anger warm in her belly. Vounn was seated on her other side with Pater d’Orien beyond her
and the two dragonmarked envoys were having a much more practical discussion.

“—content of the message directly from Tariic,” Vounn was saying. “It only mentioned two clanholds by name: Tii’ator and Ketkeet. Both small and not too far from Zarrthec. The messages the falcons can carry are short by necessity.”

Pater grunted and scratched under the collar that stretched tight around his thick neck. “I know something of that part of the country,” he said. “Orien wagons make a market circuit there. Settlements east of Zarrthec are sparse. The land can be good and a fair amount of it was cleared by Cyre before the founding of Darguun, but go too far east and you get uncomfortably close to the Mourland.”

Vounn pressed her lips together. Ashi thought she could guess what her mentor was thinking. What had remained of the human nation of Cyre after Darguun and Valenar had seized their pieces of it had been consumed in the massive catastrophe that had come to be known as the Mourning. The terrible event had happened only five years before, but already mention of it evoked a legendary dread in most people. All that was left of Cyre was a cursed wasteland inhabited by dangerous monsters and surrounded by borders of dead-gray mist. The Mourland was a blight on central Khorvaire, and by unfortunate coincidence Darguun shared the longest border of any nation with it, from the long inlet of Kraken Bay that became the mouth of the Ghaal River all the way to the spur of mountains marking the northern boundary with Breland. It also formed a deadly barrier hundred of miles wide between Valenar and Darguun. If Valenar elves were raiding in Darguun, they had either managed to cross the Mourland—not entirely impossible for a people with a reputation for almost supernatural horsemanship—or they had slipped unnoticed up the inlet of Kraken Bay to the mouth of the Ghaal.

The same thing must have occurred to Pater. “There’s a town—Rheklor—that stands on a peninsula with Kraken Bay on both sides. Haruuc placed a garrison there. They watch all ships traveling inland from the ocean. They would have seen anything unusual.”

“Perhaps.” Vounn glanced at Ashi, then dropped her voice so that only the three of them could hear. “Have either of you seen Sindra this morning?”

Ashi raised her head and looked around the gallery. From where she was sitting, there was no sign of the viceroy of House Lyrandar, but Sindra could easily have been lost in the crowd. “No,” she said, “but—”

Pater’s face had turned red. “There are no Lyrandar ships at the Rhukaan Draal docks right now!” he said. “I noticed that yesterday.”

Vounn raised an eyebrow. Pater turned a deeper shade of red.

“Lyrandar wouldn’t aid Valenar against Darguun, would they?” Ashi asked. “They’ll have to come back to Rhukaan Draal to do business.”

“I think Sindra would try to claim her absence was just a coincidence,” said Vounn. “But it strikes me as a very fortunate coincidence when she might otherwise have to answer some awkward questions. Lyrandar ships travel up the Ghaal all the time without attracting attention. Ships for the Lhazaar Principalities are common, too—but the Lhazaars haven’t built ties with Valenar the way that House Lyrandar has.”

“Khyberit gentis,” muttered Ashi. “Do we tell—?”

“No,” Vounn said with a quick shake of her head. “We can’t be seen to inform on another house. The Darguuls will figure it out on their own—if they haven’t already. They can investigate if they want to.” She pursed her lips. “But if Lyrandar is already involved in the conflict, then we should be too.”

The color in Pater’s face broke and Ashi realized he hadn’t been holding in anger but a huge, greedy grin. “By Kol Korran’s golden bath,” he said, his cheeks jiggling with the effort of keeping a straight face. “I’ve missed war!”

Ashi stared at them both, but before she could say anything, there was movement down below. A lean old hobgoblin spoke to Geth, then moved to a tall pole on the floor below the dais. Two young hobgoblin warriors stood beside the pole and at a nod from the older hobgoblin, they attached a black banner to ropes hanging from the pole’s top and raised it. The warlords and clan chiefs fell silent and turned their attention to the dais. A second banner was raised, this one bearing the sword and crown symbol that had been Haruuc’s crest. Geth stood.

“A message has been received by messenger falcon,” he said in his heavily accented Goblin. “This is that message.” He produced a piece of paper too large and stiff to have been carried by one of the hobgoblin-trained falcons. Someone must have translated the original Goblin runes for him and coached him in reading it. “To Khaar Mbar’ost,” he read. “A runner from Ketkeet clanhold has arrived in Zarrthec. Valenar raiders have struck at Tii’ator, are advancing on Ketkeet, and are believed to have struck at more locations. Survivors of Tii’ator are adventuring on Ketkeet, and are believed to have struck at more locations. Survivors of Tii’ator seeking refuge at Ketkeet report seeing smoke in the direction of other clan- and farmholds. Other runners and falcons sent by Tii’ator and Ketkeet have not arrived. I believe they have been brought down by Valenar. Zarrthec stands to defend itself.”

Geth looked up. “It is signed by the chib of Zarrthec and dated the evening of 20 Sypheros. Yesterday.”
Words of anger and frustration swelled from the warlords, but the old hobgoblin by the pole rapped a staff against the floor. “Respect the order of assembly! The shava of Haruuc continues.”

When silence had returned, Geth looked back at his paper. “Two other falcons have since arrived. One comes from Baar Kai clanhold, along the border of the Mournland south of the ruins of Lyrenton. The message it carried reads only, ‘Baar Kai falls. Elves burn our fields and kill all who stand against them.’” He hesitated, then said, “The third message was written in Elven.”

The room erupted in outrage. Ashi saw those ambassadors and envoys with elf blood—the half-elf viceroy of House Medani, the entertainer who served as the spokesperson for House Thurani in Rhukaan Draal, an aide to the Aundairian ambassador—sitting in the gallery flinch at the anger below. The old hobgoblin slammed his staff down and called for order repeatedly. Geth shouted for calm in Haruuc’s name. There was no response until Tariic’s voice rang over the chaos. “Darguuls! We give victory to our enemy if there is not order!”

And the warlords listened to him. Many took their seats again, dragging more boisterous neighbors with them. “He sounds like his uncle,” murmured Pater.

“The warlords who responded are all in his camp,” said Ashi. “Daavn was one of the first to sit.”

Vounn glanced at her and nodded at the observation. They weren’t the only ones to notice. Garaad, Aguus, and Iizan glared at Tariic, but the new lord of the Rhukaan Taash had already nodded to Geth. The shifter drew a breath and read from his paper.

“The Valaes Tairn”—Ashi recognized the Valenar elves’ name for themselves—“manswer the challenge of Lhesh Haruuc Shaarat’kor. If the blades of Darguun would fall on Valenar, Darguuls must face the warband of Kaelan Vaerian! Kaelan Vaerian will defeat all who come against her!”

Someone below laughed loudly. “A warband? A single warband? They must be junior warriors out to make honor for themselves! They can’t be much of a threat.”

“Be quiet, you fool!” Tariic’s voice cracked like the thunder of a nearby lightning strike. He stood forward again, glaring down among the assembled warlords. “This isn’t just one warband. The territory of the Baar Kai is too far from Ketkeet or Tii’ator. There are at least four or five warbands working together, probably more. We know they’re a threat because they’ve destroyed at least three clanholds—and there has been no further word from Zarrthec.” He turned, snatched the paper out of Geth’s hand, and shook it in the air. “This is no missive from a true war leader. This is a boast sent out to the enemy by an inexperienced warrior drunk on a fleeting victory. If a junior warrior under my command did such a thing, I’d have him whipped.”

The old hobgoblin’s staff tapped the floor. “Tariic of Rhukaan Taash, respect the order of assembly.”

Tariic nodded. “Arbiter, there is more I have to say, but I will wait for recognition.” He turned to look at Geth. Before the shifter could open his mouth, though, Aguus had pushed forward.

“Tariic has already spoken. I will speak now!”

Garaad and Iizan weren’t far behind with their own protests and demands. Geth turned a bewildered gaze to the arbiter, then to Munta and Dagii. Munta pointed at one of the heirs. Ashi couldn’t be sure which one. Neither could Geth, it seemed, because Munta grimaced when he called out “Tariic of Rhukaan Taash will speak.”

The banner of the lheshe came down from the pole and a banner bearing the crest of the razor crown rose in its place. Tariic nodded to Geth. The other heirs backed down—reluctantly, Ashi thought. Geth returned to the throne as Tariic moved forward. He stood straight and proud as he addressed the assembly.

“Chiefs, warlords, elder warlords—warriors, heed me. Lhesh Haruuc was struck down at the height of his glory. We all know the last words he spoke. ‘Ancient blood demands an ancient enemy. As it was in the age of Dhakaan, the People shall go into battle against elves. Let our blades fall on Valenar.’ Haruuc’s murder robbed us of a great leader, one who deserves all of the honor that we give to him.” His voice dropped and he lowered his eyes. “But perhaps in honoring him with mourning and games, we have denied him the greatest honor of all. We have failed to follow his final words.”

He paused for a moment and the hall was silent between his words. “‘Ancient blood demands an ancient enemy.’ We have let our recent history cover our glorious past. Haruuc signed the Treaty of Thronehold that brought an end to the Last War and recognition as a sovereign nation to Darguun—and yes, to Valenar. Yet fear of this document, fear of war, has held us back. Some have even claimed there could be no war.”

Ashi saw Geth sit up, anger crossing his face. Tariic ignored him and continued.

“Our hesitation has cost us. Valenar has struck the first blow. They have seen what Haruuc surely saw: that the Treaty of Thronehold is a document drawn up by chaat’oor, defilers, strangers to the shores of Khorvaire.”

His voice rose again, filling the throne room. “As it was in the age of Dhakaan”—our People ruled this continent before humans even dreamed of its existence. And in those days, only one enemy met us as an equal on the field of
battle: the Tairnadal, honored ancestors of the Valaes Tairn. Those who wrote the Treaty of Thronehold are lovers of peace. They see war as unnatural. A temporary condition. There is a reason we do not number elves among the chaat’oor. Like us, they know that war is eternal, that struggle, not peace, is the true way of the world. Since the age of the Empire of Dhakaan, they have been an honored enemy.”

“Our attack reminds us of who we are, of who we were meant to be. Now is the time to throw off illusions of peace. Now is the time to meet their attack. Now is the time to remember and honor Haruuc. The arch-traitor Chetiin silenced his voice, but he could not silence his spirit for it is the spirit of the People.” Tariic drew his sword and thrust it into the air. “Let our blades fall on Valenar!”

There was not even a moment’s silence before a roar of approval rose from the warlords. Light reflecting from drawn blades flashed around the throne room and the thumping of fists on chests in the dar salute was like the sound of drums. The arbiter didn’t try to restore order, but simply stood and offered applause in the form of an open hand slapped against his chest. Aguus, Garaad, and Iizan looked sour, but they roared and cheered along with the other warlords—Ashi knew there was nothing else they could do now. Anything they said would sound like hollow imitation.

Even those dar in the gallery were applauding. Ashi saw Senen beating a hand against her chest, eyes wide and ears high in admiration. At her side, Ekhaas applauded as well, though when her eyes met Ashi’s there was worry in them.

Among the ambassadors and envoys—the chaat’oor—in the gallery, there was only mechanical applause, if that. Even Pater who had moments before greeted the prospect of war with greed looked stunned. “Lords of the Host, I’ve never seen Tariic like this before. He always talked about how Haruuc brought Darguun into the world but that he would bring the world into Darguun.”

“He wants the throne,” said Vounn. “Haruuc told me once that Tariic valued atcha over muut. He’s willing to play any game of politics to reach it.”

“Including starting a war?” asked Ashi.

Vounn sat back in her chair. “He didn’t start it, Ashi. He’s only using it—just as all of us will.”

Ashi looked back down into the throne room. Geth had stood up, an expression that mixed fury and confusion on his face. His hand was tight on the Rod of Kings and Ashi suspected that if it had been possible for him to use its power, he might have done so at that moment. Tariic spoke a few quiet words to him, but the shifter just jerked away. The warlords were growing quiet again, and the arbiter rapped his staff on the floor. Tariic turned away from Geth to give the old hobgoblin a nod. The banner of the Rhukaan Taash descended on the pole of order.

But another shout rose from the crowd. Ashi recognized Daavn of Marhaan’s voice. “Who will lead us?”

The descending banner paused. Tariic turned back to the warlords.

This time Garaad was the first heir to protest. “No!” The lean warlord still had his sword drawn. The blade rose to point at Tariic. “You will not take this honor! There are two days of games left. Haruuc’s successor will only be chosen then. You are not lhesh yet!”

The words sounded hollow and desperate even to Ashi, but Tariic only bent his head to Garaad. “It is as you say,” he said. “I wouldn’t dare to act as lhesh while we still honor Haruuc. But we can’t sit on our swords while Valenar raiders sweep Darguun. We must act now, don’t you agree?”

He looked at each of the other contending heirs in return and once again Ashi knew that there was nothing they could say. Garaad’s ears went back flat against his skull. “Yes,” he said, lowering his sword. “But it will not be you leading the battle.”

“Not any of us. We’ve been too busy fighting each other. But there is one who has recently fought on behalf of Darguun.” Tariic looked down among the assembled warlords. “Dagii of Mur Talaan, named lhevk’ruh by Haruuc, will you recall the army that defeated the Gan’duur?”

The warlords around Dagii seemed to draw back a little bit, leaving him to stare back at Tariic like a sentry caught off guard. Then his face hardened and he stood straight. “Mazo,” he said.

Tariic looked back at the other heirs and at Geth. “Dagii’s troops will be a vanguard, moving swiftly to meet the threat presented by the Valenar. His loyalty to Darguun cannot be questioned. Does this satisfy you all?”

Ashi could see the heirs’ ears flick as they thought through the merits of the suggestion. One by one, they nodded. Tariic glanced at Geth. “And you, shavo of Haruuc? You hold the throne in trust. Do you grant your approval?”

Geth’s expression was hard as he looked down at Dagii. The young warlord gave him back a slight nod. Geth looked up at Tariic and bared his teeth. “How can I refuse?”

Tariic met his bared teeth with a fierce smile, but didn’t bother to answer the question. There was, Ashi knew, no need to. Instead, he gestured for Iizan, Aguus, and Garaad to stand forward with him. “It is decided!” he said. “The
reign of a new lesh will begin with glory and war on Valenar as Haruuc wanted. The assembly of warlords is ended!"

The gathered warlords cheered again, some closing on Dagii to congratulate him, but most saluting the four heirs gathered on the dais. Ashi wondered if she was the only one to notice the old arbiter look to Geth for confirmation of Taric’s words and to see the shifter nod like a weary fighter defeated in battle.

Ashi turned away and founded herself facing Esmyssa Entar ir’Korran once more. The Zil ambassador’s face pinched up into a smile. “Better to have Darguun and Valenar at each other’s throats than ours, at least,” she said. “If they want to break the Treaty of Thronehold, I don’t imagine the other nations of Khorvaire will rush to aid either of them.”

Ashi couldn’t hold back a snort. “And that’s what Haruuc really wanted.”

Esmyssa looked puzzled.

Ashi shook her head. “Never mind,” she said and stood up. “Please excuse me.”

She managed to spot Ekhaas before the hobgoblin left the gallery. Ekhaas and Senen Dhakaan were standing in a corner, arguing with quiet words. By the time Ashi reached the spot, the two duur’kala had separated and Ekhaas was on her own, glaring at Senen’s retreating back.

Ashi caught her arm. “What do we do now?”

Ekhaas’s amber eyes flickered to her, then went back to Senen. “Carry on as planned, I think,” she said, her voice hard.

“You think?” Ashi tried to keep her own voice both level and quiet. “Ekhaas, we’re losing Dagii. He’s going to be …” She stopped, following Ekhaas’s gaze after Senen. “What’s wrong?”

“Senen wants me to go with Dagii,” said Ekhaas. Her ears were back against her head. “She wants a representative of the Kech Volaar along. She wants a duur’kala to witness the great clash of hobgoblins and elves.”

Ashi’s hand fell away from Ekhaas’s arm. “No. She can’t.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

“Unfortunately, she can,” said Midian.

Ashi twisted around to find the gnome leaning against a chair.

Midian thrust out his jaw, tipped back his head, and said in an arrogant tone, “You serve the Kech Volaar and the memory of Dhakaan, daughter of the dirge. You will do as I say!”

It was a flawless imitation of Senen Dhakaan. “How long have you been listening?” Ekhaas asked.

“Long enough. Ashi’s right. This is bad timing.” He raised an eyebrow “But you look as tired as Geth and Dagii this morning and I don’t think they were just out seeing the city last night. Did you find—?”

Ekhaas flicked a finger to silence him, glanced around, then jerked her head toward the stairs leading down from the antechamber outside the throne room was hardly less crowded when they reached it, but the envoys, ambassadors, and their various assistants who frequented the galleries were always listening for bits of information. The warlords who had flooded into the antechamber were thinking of nothing but war. Ekhaas found a momentarily quiet corner, beckoned them into it, and whispered, “We found an artificer who can make what we need—in five days.”

“Three days after the end of the games.”

“Two if we count today.”

“Even if you do, Taric won’t want to wait that long for his coronation.” The gnome folded his arms around himself. “He’ll want to take the throne immediately.”

“You think it will be him?” Ashi asked.

“Do humans hit their heads in gnome houses? Even if it’s not, it doesn’t matter. We need to find a way to delay the coronation.” Midian tapped his fingers against the wall. “I’ll talk to Razu. Maybe I can put a knot in her plans or persuade her that the ceremony needs to be more elaborate.”

“Anything to buy time.” Ekhaas’s ears stood tall suddenly and her already soft voice dropped even more. “Ashi, Vounn is here.”

Ashi looked over her shoulder. Vounn stood a discreet distance away with Aruget and another hobgoblin guard, Krakual, just behind her. As Ashi met her gaze, she raised one eyebrow. “I’m returning to our chambers,” she said. “Would you like to come with me?”

Her tone said clearly that it was neither a question nor an invitation. Only a month ago, Ashi would have rebelled against the command, but the new understanding that had grown between her and Vounn was stronger than that. She looked briefly at Ekhaas. “I’ll find you tonight,” she said, then went to fall in beside Vounn.
Her mentor said nothing as they swept out of the antechamber and nothing as they climbed the stairs up through Khaar Mbar’ost. Not until they had reached the chambers Haruuc himself had assigned to them and were inside with Arugget and Krakul standing outside the heavy door did she speak—and when she did, it was without turning to look at Ashi.

“I think,” she said, “it’s time you told me what’s going on.”

Ashi glanced sharply at the gray-haired lady seneschal. Vounn ignored her, instead walking to look out of a window that presented a wide view of the city below. “I know there’s more going on than you’re telling me,” she said. “You know that I know. I am your mentor and your superior in the house. If there’s something happening that could put either of us or the operations of Deneith in danger, I should know about it.”

Ashi tried to think of what to say. Perhaps mistaking her silence for reluctance, Vounn continued. “Just before Haruuc’s assassination, Geth summoned you away with no words other than, ‘Haruuc needs your dragonmark.’ Whatever he needed it for, I presume you were too late. I have not asked for an explanation.”

She finally looked at Ashi. “The night Haruuc died, I was prepared to send you out of Darguun with the next Orien caravan. Circumstances prevented it. War has arrived—between Darguun and Valenar perhaps, but still war. When I report what happened here today to the head of the house, I expect that he will demand that you, as the bearer of the Siberys Mark of Sentinel be moved out of Darguun for your own safety. Give me a reason to keep you here.”

“I … I can’t.” Ashi clenched her teeth and lowered her voice. There was no lie she could think of that would cover everything, not with the looming possibility of being sent away from Rhukaan Draal just when the others needed her most. “Vounn, something is going on, but I can’t tell you what. I’ve made an oath. All I can say is that it doesn’t present a danger to you or Deneith. You have to believe that. It may even save—”

Vounn held up a finger, silencing her. “If it’s so important you’ve taken an oath to keep it secret, don’t say anything more.” The older woman studied her. “Whatever is going on doesn’t present a danger to me or Deneith. What about you? Does it present a danger to you?”

“Yes,” Ashi said bluntly. “But it’s a danger I’m willing to face.” She raised her chin. “It’s a danger I have to face.”

Vounn’s eyebrow twitched. “Will it advance House Deneith when it becomes known?”

Ashi felt an ache like a punch in the gut. “If it’s successful, it can never become known. No one will ever know about it.” She drew a breath and stepped closer. “Vounn, you know what I’m capable of. I can look after myself. I’ve proved that.”

“I know,” Vounn said. “That’s why I’m not sending you back. Baron Breven d’Deneith can rant all he likes. You’re in my charge.” She reached out and took Ashi’s hands. “But promise me that if you ever need my help, then you will come to me. I can keep secrets, you know.”

Relief put a smile on Ashi’s face. “I know.”

“Good.” Vounn held her hands a moment longer. “I want you to do one thing though. Whenever you can, take Arugget with you. Two swords are better than one, and I know that he can keep a secret, too.”

“I will, Vounn.” Ashi fought to keep her smile from getting wider. She didn’t think her mentor would appreciate knowing that her guard already knew more than she did.
Moving through Rhukaan Draal with Pradoor on his shoulders gave Makka a feeling like nothing he had felt before. On the one hand, he felt very small and very humbled. The wizened goblin had saved his life. Now he was her beast of burden, guided by her taps, and sometimes her punches, on the side of his head. He strode along streets not knowing when Pradoor would catch some clue—a familiar odor or sound, he still wasn’t sure how the blind woman found her way—that would prompt her to pull on his ear and command him, “Turn!” At times it was almost as if he had a god or some divine spirit on his shoulders directing the order of his existence, a sensation intensified by Pradoor’s spontaneous recitation of stories and lore of the Dark Six.

On the other hand, he felt as large as if he had blundered into the middle of a duur’kala’s tale. At times, he didn’t carry a divine spirit—he was a divine spirit. Everywhere that Pradoor directed him, people stepped aside. That, Makka was used to, but what he wasn’t used to was the respect with which they looked at the pair of them. People nodded to them and lowered their eyes. Dar who wore the muu’kron touched it as they passed. They knew Pradoor by name and while they might not have known Makka, they included him in their greetings not with a casual saa but a formal saa’atcha.

But it wasn’t just goblins and hobgoblins and bugbears who moved out of their way. In the rush of his first day in Rhukaan Draal, Makka hadn’t understood how many different races inhabited the city. Nor had he appreciated the range of those who made prayers to the Six. A stout dwarf merchant dressed in fine silk bent his head to Pradoor. A shifter with feral eyes and matted hair simpered and whined like a dog. A rangy gnoll, as tall as Makka and with a head like a hyena, bowed low and forced the coffle of slaves she led to their knees as well. Even a fey eladrin, wrapped in a silvery cloak that the illt of the streets did not seem to touch, lowered pearly eyes as they passed.

And there were offerings! From the moment that he and Pradoor had left the alley where he had come close to death, people had thrust gifts upon them. Sometimes they requested blessings—

“A new sword, Pradoor!”
“My children, Pradoor!”
“I fight in the games tomorrow, Pradoor!”
—but often they were given up with only a word of praise for one or all of the Six. Meat, bread, wine, beer, a fine knife, coins of copper and silver, so many offerings that Pradoor directed Makka to take a sack from a shop. The merchant bowed and scraped as if the theft was an honor.

Much of what they were given was handed out again to beggars, but Makka’s belly was full and the sack was never empty. The knife found a place at his belt. When Pradoor was tired, it seemed like all they had to do was turn a corner and they were met with an offer of a place to rest.

“Pradoor,” Makka said as his third day in Rhukaan Draal drew toward dusk, “are there other priests of the Six in Rhukaan Draal?”

Pradoor laughed her shrill cackle. “Ah, it speaks! I wondered if the Keeper had kept hold of your voice when I snatched you back from him.” She tugged on one of Makka’s ears. “Yes, there are other priests. Haruuc spread the faith of the Sovereign Host, but the old faith of the people never went away. Priests of the Six are like mice in Rhukaan Draal—and most hide like mice too! They scurry about in shrines and temples, afraid of Haruuc’s pet cats. They’ll grow bold sometimes, but only Pradoor has the faith to walk the streets!”

“You don’t walk, I carry you,” said Makka.

Pradoor pulled his ear hard enough to make him wince. “You serve as I serve!” she said. “I keep the old ways alive. The faithful may seek out shrines from time to time, but they see me and they remember the hold of the Six on their lives. When the city starved, I led the famine march. When the Night of Long Shadows falls, I tell the stories that make the faithful roar and nonbelievers tremble. I feel the mood of the streets and the people.” Her voice sank into a harsh croak. “The age turns. Rhukaan Draal is the axle and I am the pin.”

“Do you mean the war with the elves?” Makka asked.

Rumors had spread through the streets all day, growing wilder and wilder with each telling. Raiders had destroyed clanholds. Fires had consumed eastern Darguun, the smoke blotting out the sun at dawn. Valenar cavalry had crossed the Mournland and were riding on Rhukaan Draal. Darguun would follow Dhakaan into the dust of ages. All
of the elves of Eberron had risen to war, determined to exterminate the dar—unless dar marched to destroy them first, which they undoubtedly would because Haruuc himself had returned from the dead to reclaim the Rod of Kings and lead Darguun to victory!

Makka believed less than a quarter of what he heard. Something was happening, there was no doubting it, but it could have been anything from a pitched battle to a mere skirmish. Still, he had seen hobgoblins and bugbears with the look of seasoned warriors checking armor, sharpening weapons, and glaring murder at any elves they saw. War it was, then.

Pradoor’s ears twitched. “The war is a part of it as I am a part of it and you are a part of it,” she said. “The Six give straw to some, clay or steel to others. What we are given makes no difference—we are judged by what we make of it.”

Sudden certainty uncoiled in Makka’s mind. “I am given steel,” he said.

“Yes,” said Pradoor. “You are a warrior called to serve.”

Makka twisted his head so that he could see Pradoor out of the corner of his eye. “What were you?” he asked.

“What are you given?”

Pradoor laughed again, her cackle rising above the noise of the street. “No one who has served me has ever dared to ask that question!”

“Are you going to answer it?”

Blind eyes turned to a red sky and the setting sun. “I was a midwife,” said Pradoor. “I am given souls.” Then she pulled back her hand and smacked the back of his head. “Now turn here!” she commanded. “And hurry. We are expected.”

Makka turned and strode along another narrow crooked street. A hobgoblin working the edge of a well-used sword with a whetstone glanced up and gave him a nod. Makka returned it.

Full dark had fallen and the streets had come to life when the tight-packed buildings fell away. A crowd stood in the space beyond. Makka instinctively held back to assess what lay ahead. Pradoor smacked his skull. “Keep going.”

He stepped out from the shadow of the buildings and into an unpaved square over which arched the first trees he’d seen since he entered Rhukaan Draal. They were twisted, spindly things, much like the guul’dar who lived in the city, with smooth trunks he could have circled with his hands and thin canopies that barely iltered the moonlight. Torches—real burning torches and not harsh magical imitations—had been hammered into the ground around them and wedged into their lower branches. Figures roamed the square in small groups, talking quietly and casting shadows against the smoky flames. There was something at the heart of the square among the trees, something that looked like a dark jumble, though he could make out no more against the torchlight and the shifting shadows.

“What is this place?” he asked Pradoor.

“Somewhere older than Rhukaan Draal, a place that was here before the city and that the city surrounded but could not fully consume. People come here when they are uncertain or when they’re afraid. I always find them here.” She tapped his head again, gently this time, and he continued on toward the dark jumble among the trees.

He had taken only a few paces before some of those in the square noticed him—or rather, noticed Pradoor. A pair of hobgoblins talking with their heads together looked up. Their ears rose, then they bent their heads and murmured, “Pradoor.”

Their voices drew the attention of others, who bent their heads and spoke Pradoor’s name in turn. The respect that the wizened goblin woman had received on the streets of Rhukaan Draal had left Makka amazed. The respect she received as they passed through the square came close to adoration. The bending heads were like grass in a windy field; the chorus of her name was like the whispering of a breeze. “Pradoor.” “Pradoor.” “Pradoor.”

They moved under the branches of the trees, and for a moment they were alone. The dark jumble resolved itself into a pile of weathered, lichen-covered rocks. A gaping hole among them plunged into the ground, and Makka thought he could hear the rush of water. The rocks were an ancient well, he realized, and the water below some hidden branch of the Ghaal River—and yet there was something more here, as if a vast and unseen presence had focused its attention on this spot.

He knew the feeling. The cursed valley that had lain below the camp of the White Stone tribe, the valley that Dagii of Mur Talaan, Ekhaas of Kech Volaar, and the rest of their party had disturbed, had felt like this. No bugbear of the tribe had ever gone further than the edge of the ancient trees that covered the valley floor, but all of them had gone at least that far, if only so they understood why the valley should be left alone and the trolls that lived there kept sated.
But Pradoor seemed to have no fear of the strange presence. Her fingers on his head urged him forward until he stood beside the rocks and above the hole. “Turn,” she said in his ear, and he did.

Those who wandered the square had moved in among the trees, crowding in on all sides. Torchligh illuminated faces even more diverse in race and rank—though Makka could see no elves among them—than those that had greeted Pradoor on the streets, as if the cover of night had drawn to the Six those who by day professed only a faith in the Sovereign Host.

They were silent, then Pradoor spoke. “What troubles you?”

Those gathered stayed quiet, glancing nervously at each other, until a bugbear found the nerve to speak. “War comes,” he said.

A goblin called, “The Valenar are riding against us!”

And suddenly all those who stood among the trees seemed to find their voices at once. Makka heard all of the wild rumors he had heard during the day and more beside. He heard fear for safety in Rhukaan Draal and fear for the safety of sons and husbands called to fight. He heard the Six smile on Darguun. You who will fight—do you fear that the Fury will not give you strength to smite your enemies?”

This time a chorus came back. “No.”

“Do you fear that the Mockery will not give you the skill to make your enemies suffer?”

“No!” Louder and stronger than before.

“Do you fear that the Shadow will not give power to the spell-casters who march at your side?”

“No!”

Pradoor raised her shrill voice to match the volume of the crowd. “You who will remain—do you fear that the Devourer will not protect the supplies stored against attack?”

“No!”

“Do you fear that the Traveler will lead your enemy past those who defend you?”

“No!”

Her voice rose so loud that it seemed impossible it should come out of her small, trembling body. “Do any of you fear that the Keeper will break his pact with those who have faith, that if you fall your souls will wither like forgotten fruit?”

“No!”

“Then why do you fear war?”

Makka felt his heart stir to Pradoor’s words as the hearts of her audience did. For all of his life he had feared and venerated the gods of the Six. They were the primal forces of the worlds—hunger and passion and pain and death and power and change. But as Pradoor spoke, he found fear and veneration coming together with the sense of service that had hung over him since the goblin woman had healed his wounds. What did a true servant of the Six have to fear from war—or from anything in life?

Pradoor let her words hang among the trees for a moment before she continued. “You who are of the People understand muut and atcha, duty and honor—you who are not should learn. There is muut in serving a warlord. There is muut in faith. But duty is like the two halves of a mill stone. There is muut in serving a warlord, but for a warlord there is muut in protecting those who serve him. So it is with the Six, who protect those who serve them and keep their faith!”

She spoke the words with a power and confidence far larger than her frail old body. The words lifted Makka up—lifted him beyond those others who stood before the old goblin woman. He could see the wonder in their expressions, but he knew in his gut that none of them could feel the way he did. Some were crying. Some had dropped to their knees. His spirit struggled within him as if it was ready to burst free.

“The Six protect those who serve them and keep their faith,” repeated Pradoor, her tone softening slightly. “Don’t fear war. If you must fear something, fear defeat, because it will mean you have failed the Six—and Darguun. This is a time to celebrate. You have the chance to prove yourselves.” Her voice rose again. “Are you strong?”

“Yes!” answered the crowd in one unified voice.

“Are you fierce?”

“Yes!”
“Are you faithful?” “Yes!”

Pradoor raised her hand in blessing. “Then return to your homes and prepare for what the Six bring you, but leave your fear behind. It will only drag you down. Now go from this place in awe of the Six who rule our lives!”

The crowd broke apart, its unified voice splintering into babble. Most of those who had gathered melted away into the shadows and torchlight, renewed confidence showing in the way they held themselves and in the tone of their voices. A few came forward to kneel before Pradoor and Makka. Pradoor tapped him on the top of his head, and he lowered her to the ground. It was strange to see hobgoblins and other bugbears humbling themselves before the blind old woman, but it almost seemed that, in that moment, she was bigger than they were. Drawing a worn 

mu'kron from her belt, she pressed it against the foreheads of those who knelt and murmured a blessing to each of them.

With each blessing, Makka felt his own belly grow tighter. His head seemed to throb. When the last kneeling figure had risen and left the shelter of the trees, he spoke, his voice cracking in his throat. “Pradoor—”

She stopped him with a raised hand. “There are others who want to speak.” She turned her blind eyes out to the shadows among the trees. “You. Come forward now.”

Two hobgoblins detached themselves from the shadows. One walked barefaced. The other had a scarf wound around his neck, and he tucked his face down into it. In a crowd he might not have drawn attention, but alone he seemed familiar. As he drew closer, Makka recognized him. He had walked beside the shifter Geth in Haruuc’s funeral procession, and Makka suspected that made him important. He tried to push back his own urgent desire to speak with Pradoor and studied the intruders more closely. The one who had walked beside Geth carried himself with confidence in spite of his attempt at disguise. His eyes were bright and a shade of dark brown so intense they were almost red. He looked back at Makka, raising his face from the concealment of his scarf to study him and Pradoor just as he was studied. A sense of wariness seeped into Makka.

The unknown hobgoblin, however, had the look of a schemer. His eyes went to Pradoor and stayed there. He tried to walk tall, but his shoulders hunched as he drew close. “Pradoor,” he said, “I am Liirt—”

Pradoor interrupted him with absolute confidence. “No, you’re not. Speak the truth to me or do not speak to me at all.”

The schemer looked at his companion, who nodded. The schemer looked back to Pradoor and his hunched shoulder became a little bow—useless, Makka thought, before someone who was blind. “You are as perceptive as you are eloquent, Pradoor. I am Daavn of Marhaan. My companion is Tariic of Rhukaan Taash.”

Pradoor smiled at the second name. “Saa’atcha, lhesh of Darguun.”

The second hobgoblin smiled slightly in return, an honest reflex and not some vain attempt to ingratiate himself. “Saa’atcha, Pradoor, but I am not lhesh. Yet.”

“You know you will be though—or at least you believe you could be.” Pradoor raised her face in the direction of Tariic’s voice. “You remember me now, don’t you?”

Tariic answered without hesitation. “The dungeons of Khaar Mbar’ost. You were spared from the games.”

She cackled. “Your agreement with the decision was grudging at the time. I know it. You don’t begrudge me my freedom now, though.”

“No,” said Tariic bluntly. Pradoor turned to Daavn.

“Why do you come to me tonight?” asked Pradoor. “Surely those who would rule Darguun have no fear of war.”

“We don’t,” Daavn told her, “but I knew there would be those who did—that’s why I brought Tariic to see you. Your words are inspiring.”

Pradoor snorted and Daavn’s ears flicked. Makka saw his eyes dart to Pradoor as if he thought she might be mocking him. The hobgoblin continued with more care and less flattery. “The assembly of warlords will give their support to Haruuc’s heir in two days’ time. The voice of the people can sway their decision. For three days, our rivals have been attempting to buy the people with food and drink—”

“As Tariic buys them with contests in the arena,” Pradoor interrupted.

Daavn squirmed but carried on. “The announcement of war with Valenar gives us a new opportunity. The assembly supports the war but we need a way to reach the people. If they embrace the war, they will embrace the man who called for it. I knew of your popularity in the streets. I knew that if people had fears, they would come to you.”

“And you came to watch me perform.” Pradoor’s voice was dry. “You want me to lead the people to you so that they forget the comforts of food and drink and see only the glory of war.”

“You already do it,” said Daavn. “Your talk of 

muut between the people and the lhesh, between the faithful and
the Six—"

Pradoor’s ears cupped and her eyes narrowed. “I do not talk of muut, Daavn of Marhaan,” she said.

Daavn almost seemed to wither at her words and Makka came close to smiling. Tariic, however, scowled at his companion and waved him back. He stepped forward in his place—and knelt before Pradoor.

“Guide the people,” he said, “and when I am lhesh, the old ways will be restored to Darguun. You will speak from the dais of Khaar Mbar’ost and warlords will be your audience. You call me lhesh and say that I believe it will be so. I believe that it will not happen without the favor of the Six.”

“Oh.” A smile spread across Pradoor’s face. “Flattery is sweet, but the truth is sweeter, and reward sweeter still. When you are crowned, where will I stand?”

“At my left hand, as those who speak for the Six have always stood at the left hand of warlords.”

“And the priests that Haruuc raised?”

Tariic bent his head. “When the lhesh praises the Dark Six, I think they’ll find that the worship of the Sovereign Host has not found such deep roots in Darguun as they think.”

Pradoor’s hand rose, feeling for Tariic’s face, and she pressed her muu’kron to his forehead. “The might of the Six be yours, Tariic of Rhukaan Taash. I will give you the people.”

“Ta muut, Pradoor.” Tariic caught her hand, holding the muu’kron close for a moment longer. When he released Pradoor, he rose, nodded to Makka, then gestured for Daavn. The scheming warlord of Marhaan followed him away among the trees without a word or a nod to either Pradoor or Makka.
Aruget stood outside the map room of Khaar Mbar’ost. “Ashi’s here?” Ekhaas asked.

The guard nodded. “Geth and Dagii, too.” He hesitated, then added, “Is it true you ride east with Dagii’s army?”

Ekhaas flicked her ears. “You know?”

“By command of Haruuc and Lady Vounn, I remain close to Lady Ashi. But I keep my secrets.” His ears rose high. “Swift travel and great glory, Ekhaas duur’kala.”

Ekhaas bent her head to him, knocked once on the door, then went in.

Midday light flooded through a window and illuminated a room hung with maps, with cabinets containing more maps lining the walls. In the middle of the room stood a large table. Dagii, Geth, and Ashi looked up from it. Under the sunlight, Dagii’s face was creased and weary, though his eyes brightened at the sight of her.

“Saa, Ekhaas,” he said. “Come look.”

She joined them at the table. A large map had been laid out on it, a fine map depicting the whole of Darguun in good detail. The Seawall Mountains on the west had been drawn in slate blue, Kraken Bay off the southeastern coast and the Thunder Sea off the southern in brighter shades. The great rivers Ghaal and Torlaac divided the land into thirds with shining threads of silver. Roads were red, lightly drawn for lesser roads, heavily for the fine trade roads maintained by House Orien. The names and locations of town and villages showed in crisp black, except for Rhukaan Draal, which had been marked with gold. The border of the Mournland, running more than half of Darguun’s length and pressing against its entire northeastern side was colored in stormy, featureless gray.

All of the text was written in Goblin. This was no human map, drawn over and recolored to suit a conquered territory. It was a fresh new map, made by dar to show a nation of dar. Her heart stirred at the sight of it.

Markers had been placed on the map, short sticks and round counters of polished wood, tracing a route across the Ghaal River then east and slightly south to the black dot that was Zarrthec. Ekhaas looked up at Dagii. The warlord of Mur Talaan twitched his ears.

“The advance regiments of the army have already started marching east,” said Dagii. “We’re using a staggered deployment to reach the area hit by the Valenar raids quickly.” He reached out with a thin wooden wand and traced a line from Zarrthec to the wide scattered dots, close to the gray blotch of the Mournland, that were the eastern clanholds.

“Senen will be angry I’m not riding with the first troops,” Ekhaas said. Dagii’s ears twitched again and stiffened.

“If Senen wants to record the heroic tale of soldiers marching to camp, she’s welcome to ride in their dust herself.” He drew back the wand and tapped Zarrthec. “You and I will leave tomorrow after the games finish—I need to stay for the naming of Haruuc’s heir. We will be able to catch up to the advance regiments before they pass Zarrthec. Your story can begin there.”

Geth bared his teeth and gave a little growl. “Grandfather Rat. It’s bad enough that Tariic pushed you into leading this army. You don’t have to sound like you’re enjoying it.”

“Tariic turned the situation to his advantage, but I would have taken command in any case. Darguun must be defended. The Valenar raids must be answered.” Dagii stood back from the table. He smiled. “We’ll be in more danger than you will be here.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Geth looked at Ekhaas. “What about the false rod? How are we going to get it if you and Dagii are gone? T—” He cut himself off before he said the artificer’s name and his eyes darted to Ashi.

The human woman wrinkled her nose. “I know. You promised not to reveal the artificer’s involvement. Whoever he is, you’re not going to be able to go on the day of the coronation and get it from him, and he’s not likely going to deliver it to Khaar Mbar’ost.”

Ekhaas had already weighed the problem. “He’ll just have to deal with one more person knowing his secret,” she said. “Ashi, you’re going to have to get it from him. His name is Tenquis. I’ll take you to him today to show you how to get to his workshop and to tell him about the change in plans.”

“What about Midian?” Ashi asked. “Should we tell him?”

Beyond Ashi, Dagii tensed and Geth twitched and Ekhaas knew they were thinking of what Chetiin had hinted at.
The same thoughts had occurred to her, but she had an answer ready. “No,” she told Ashi smoothly. “We did make a promise to Tenquis. We’ll bend it out of necessity, but we won’t break it. One more person needs to know but not two.”

Ashi grimaced, but nodded. “I suppose. It feels strange to be keeping secrets from Midian, though—especially when we’re being broken up. We’ve already lost Chetiin.”

“We’re always going to have secrets,” Dagii added. “Whatever we do with the Rod of Kings, we’ll have to keep a secret.”

“That’s not the same as keeping secrets from each other.”

The irony of Ashi’s words put a slightly sick feeling into Ekhaas’s gut—they were already keeping the secret of their suspicion of Midian from her—but then Ashi pressed her lips together for a moment and added, “There’s something I’ve been holding back. Vounn and Pater didn’t want me to say anything, but Sindra d’Lyrandar wasn’t in the gallery yesterday, and there are no Lyrandar ships at the docks—the Valenar may have used House Lyrandar to get their raiders into Darguun.”

Ekhaas raised her ears at the news but Dagii only nodded. “Some of the warlords already guessed that.”

Ashi’s face turned red.

Dagii shook his head. “No, thank you for telling me, Ashi. I appreciate it.” His ears flattened. “Lyrandar knows we’ll need to welcome them into Darguun again eventually. This war is only business for them—as it is for all the dragonmarked houses. Vounn and Pater have come to me. Orien wagons will follow our army and form our supply lines. House Deneith has contracted a regiment of our own mercenaries back to us.”

“Bastards!” said Geth. “I served House Deneith as a mercenary during the Last War. They’ll do anything for a profit. Sorry, Ashi.”

Ashi shook her head. “No, I know Vounn and Deneith. You’re right. Darguun has always provided Deneith with mercenaries, but they’ve never needed anything but gold in return. Vounn came to Darguun to try and reverse that.”

“She’s found her opportunity,” said Dagii. “The mercenaries were waiting at the Deneith enclave at the Standing Stone for a chance to work outside Darguun. Deneith was able to offer them to us more quickly than we could raise another regiment of our own. Vounn has even offered us mercenaries from other nations if we want them.”

The idea pinched Ekhaas like a dissonant note. “Will you take them?” she asked.

Dagii’s smile was thin. “Right now I couldn’t if I wanted to. Tariic has made sure this will be a war of dar against elves. Even people in the streets are saying the war is muut, our duty.”

Geth looked at the young warlord of Mur Talaan. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s a war.” Dagii’s smile vanished entirely. “Dar or mercenaries, it has to be fought, and it has to be won. That is my muut to Darguun.”

The arrival of Munta and other warlords marked the end of their privacy and they separated, leaving Dagii to plan strategy while Ekhaas and Ashi went out to pay a visit to Tenquis.

Geth headed back to his own chamber vaguely envious of Dagii’s role in what was to come—not of the warlord’s command of Darguun’s armies but of his excursion onto the battlefield. Sneaking, conspiring, and playing at politics weren’t for him. The assembly of warlords the day before had been an embarrassment, but there had been no way to escape. He had his muut, Dagii might have said. One heroic act had bound him more closely than being thrown into a dungeon.

At his side, Wrath seemed to stir with reassurances that he had done the right thing. “Easy for you to say,” he muttered back at it.

But it would all be over soon. As soon as the false rod was in the new lhesh’s hand—and, for all of his ambition and posturing, Geth hoped it would be Tariic—he would be free to leave Darguun and spirit the true Rod of Kings away with him. What they would do with it after that was another matter—one he didn’t want to consider just yet.

First he had to put in another appearance at the games. He hadn’t lied to Tariic when he’d said he would have enjoyed the contests in the arena more if he’d been sitting in the stands rather than the warlords’ box, but he wasn’t sure even that would be enough anymore. Watching other people fight only made him want to draw Wrath and leap into the fray himself. Fighting was fast and real. No lies, no waiting. Your enemies were right there in front of you and all it took to deal with them was a sharp sword.

The closest thing he’d come to a good fight in weeks was against Chetiin.

The thought of the goblin pulled a groan out of him that produced a look of concern from a passing hobgoblin guard. Geth waved her away. In the chaos of the news of the Valenar raiders and the assembly of warlords, it had
been easy to put Chetiin out of his mind, but he couldn’t ignore the problem forever. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about the goblin. Part of him was hurt and suspicious and clung to the idea that Chetiin had been the one to murder Haruuuc, like a child clinging to an old fear.

But another part wanted to believe his story of being attacked and left for dead, his identity usurped for the assassination. The proof Chetiin had offered might have been nebulous, but it made sense—there was no reason for him to have made such a public killing.

At the same time, though, if he believed Chetiin, it meant there was a different traitor among them, that Midian had conspired in Haruuuc’s death. And that was just as hard to take. He needed some proof, something to tell him which of his friends he could trust.

It came to him that he knew exactly where to look for that proof. He turned at the next corridor and moved off into a different part of Khaar Mbar’ost.

He found what he was looking for without too much effort. The door was the same as many on private chambers throughout Khaar Mbar’ost, with two handles—one high for hobgoblins and creatures their size and one low for goblins—and a lock set midway between them. This door, however, had been marked with Haruuuc’s sword and crown crest above a short phrase written in Goblin. Geth could have grasped Wrath and ordered the sword to translate the angular runes for him, but he didn’t need magic to have a good idea of what the phrase said. There was something about Keep Out that looked the same in any language.

For a change, though, it didn’t apply to him. He probably could have found someone willing to open the door for Haruuuc’s shava but it was easier to keep his visit a secret. Geth checked up and down the corridor, then drew his knife, slipped it between the door and the frame, and slid the blade up until he encountered the bolt. For a long period of his life, he’d lived on the run and he’d learned a number of tricks to survive. One of them was how open a locked door. With a swift motion, he kicked the knife up and gave it a twist to one side.

The blade broke. Geth was left staring at the hilt end of the knife while the tip clattered to the ground on the other side of the door. “Rat,” he muttered. Checking the corridor again, he stepped back and slammed his foot against the door just above the lock. With a sharp crack of wood, the door flew open. Geth waited for a moment to see if the noise brought anyone to investigate, then stepped inside, closed the door, retrieved the broken knife blade, and studied the room that had been Chetiin’s.

He had trouble imagining that those who had searched it after Haruuuc’s death could have needed very long. Chetiin must have lived simply. A slashed pack, a few articles of discarded black clothing, a broken vial—these were all of the personal items left in the room. Maybe the searchers had taken anything else but Geth thought it was equally likely there had been little more to take.

The furniture in the room did show the unmistakable signs of a search, however. The bed had been pulled apart, a chest overturned, the stuffed seats of a pair of narrow chairs slit like throats. Geth walked around the wreckage and over to the fireplace.

If Chetiin’s story was true, there would be a ledge in the chimney—and presumably some sign of the goblin’s escape from death.

Ashi was a far better tracker than he was, but Geth knew he wasn’t completely useless. He scanned the floor as he went, searching the thin carpet that covered it for signs of ash that might have been scattered when Chetiin emerged from the fireplace. He found nothing. His gut twisted more than he would have expected. No sign—no escape. Chetiin had been lying.

“No,” he whispered to himself. It didn’t mean that he had been lying. Chetiin was as wily as anyone Geth had ever met. He would have taken care to leave no trail behind.

Geth squatted in front of the fireplace and stared at the cold ashes of the last fire to burn there. The charred remains of logs had been tumbled about, the poker that had been used to stir them still protruding from the ashy heap. Someone searching the room might have stirred the dead fire, but it seemed to Geth that the fire had been stirred too well. Ash lay in a soft gray blanket, as evenly turned as the soil in a kitchen garden.

He rose and squeezed into the fireplace, trying not to step right in the ash. Fortunately, flat stones a double handspan wide ran along the sides and back of the firebox, making a space to set pots or kettles or big feet. Geth had to crouch a bit to avoid the sloping upper surface that fed into the chimney, but by straddling the firebox and twisting his neck, he could peer up into the dark shaft.

The shadows were so thick and blended so closely with the soot-covered walls that even shifter eyes had trouble seeing through them. He waited, letting his vision adjust. After a long moment, he saw a stray wisp of gray, like a cloud scudding across a moonless sky. Smoke from a neighboring fireplace. With that wisp as reference, other vague details made sense—the flat planes of shadow that were the walls of the chimney, the smoky darkness that
was the rising central flue. There was something not quite right about the junction of shadow and smoke, though.

Geth twisted his head around the other way. There was another plane in the dark.

He grimaced and shifted one foot right into the middle of the ireplace, digging down into the ash until there was solid stone beneath his sole, then stretched an arm up into the chimney.

His questing fingers caught the lip of a ledge. The stone was warm and dry, heated by air rising from unseen irises. Geth moved his hand back and forth. He couldn’t reach far enough to feel how deep the ledge was, but it was wide. Wide enough to accommodate the body of a goblin.

The twist in his belly unraveled. "Wolf and Tiger," he murmured. A ledge in the chimney, just as Chetiin had said.

Then the twist came back. Chetiin had been telling the truth, but that meant Midian Mit Davandi had brought about Haruuc’s death.

Geth brought his arm down and stepped out of the ireplace. A bit of discarded clothing made a rag to brush the ash from his foot and wipe the soot from his hands. He stirred the remains of the ire again, then stuffed the sooty rag among the remains of the bed. With the door broken in, there was no hiding that someone had been in the room, but he could at least disguise what he had done here. He backed out of the room and closed the door behind him, brushing away splinters of wood and securing the ruined latch as best he could. Gut aching with a mixture of relief and anger, he headed back through the corridors of Khaar Mbar’ost to his chamber.

He was nearly there when he turned a corner and found himself facing Midian.

"Geth!" The gnome’s face curved into a smile. “I was looking for you. When you weren’t in your chamber, I thought I might have to go in at the arena.”

Geth forced himself to smile back. Not too much of a smile. Not too little. He couldn’t give away what he knew. “I haven’t been yet today. I was looking in on Dagii. I’m just on my way back to my chamber now.”

“I’ll walk with you.” Midian turned and fell into step at his side. “I spoke to Razu.”

“What about?”

Midian lowered his voice as a hobgoblin came along the corridor toward them. “I told her I’d try to find a way to get Razu to delay the coronation of the lhesh so that your artificer would have the time he needs to finish … what’s he working on. Razu wasn’t aware of the importance that the Dhakaani emperors placed in having an auspicious conjunction of moon phases on the day of their ascension to the throne.”

“Did they really care that much about the phases of the moons?”

Midian looked hurt. “I’m not known as a noted researcher of Dhakaani history for nothing, Geth. Fortunately for Razu and the new lhesh there will be just such a conjunction just two days after the end of the games.”

“Really?”

The gnome’s lips twitched. “Let’s just say it’s not a position I’d try to put forward in a research paper for the Library of Korranberg. But there’s only ever been one coronation of a lhesh, and Razu is desperate for ideas to build the ceremony around. You’ve noticed how dar love tradition?” His blue eyes twinkled. “You can tell me I’m brilliant again.”

They had almost reached the door of his chamber. Geth knew he should end the conversation and get away from the gnome, but Midian’s smugness was like vinegar in his mouth. “What if Razu asks Senen Dhakaan about this?” he said sharply. “Senen will know you’ve made it up.”

“There’s an odd thing.” Midian’s voice turned serious. “Razu did ask Senen—and Senen said I was right. I may be brilliant, but I’m not that brilliant. Senen hates me. She’d contradict hard evidence just to spite me. I wonder if she knows we’re up to something.”

The answer gave Geth a moment of real surprise, and he glanced down at Midian. “Maybe she does.”

“It would be better if she didn’t. Aren’t we trying to make sure the secret of the rod stays a secret?”

Maybe it was his imagination, the shock of having Chetiin’s story confirmed, but Geth thought he heard a chilling ruthlessness in Midian’s words. He tried to hide the shiver that raised the hair in his neck. “You’re being suspicious,” he said.

“That’s what keeps gnomes alive.” Midian stopped beside the guards who stood outside Geth’s door. “Your chamber. I’ll see you at the arena?” His face brightened considerably. “Keraal has developed a popular following. He defeated three Kech Shaarat bladedancers yesterday. There’s a rumor that he’s ighting four Marguul berserkers today.”

“I’ll be there.” Geth stepped up to his door—the guards put fists to chests in a salute—then glanced back at Midian for a moment as the gnome bounced away down the corridor. Maybe it wasn’t so difficult to see him
orchestrating Haruuc’s death. He wondered how long they’d be able to keep Chetiin’s survival a secret.

Geth pushed open his door, stepped into his chamber, and closed the door behind him, then looked around the room. Hang something out of your window if you need to talk to me, Chetiin had said. Geth’s eye landed on a bright green blanket across his bed. Dragging it off, he took it over to the open window and wedged one end firmly around the hinge of a shutter. The other he tossed out of the window. The wind caught it and blew it out like a woolen banner.

It was all he could do for now. Hopefully Chetiin would see the signal and come to him. Geth turned away to prepare for his appearance at the games—and stopped as he caught sight of himself in a mirror that hung on his wall.

One cheek was streaked with black. The whole time he’d been talking to Midian he’d had soot on his face. He cursed and looked more closely. The patch of soot was small and narrow, left behind by the careless touch of a finger maybe. Geth turned his face back and forth, then tilted his head back, trying to guess how much a short person like Midian could really have seen. The soot was close to the thick hair of the sideburns that traced his jaw and easy to mistake for a shadow. Maybe the gnome hadn’t even noticed it. And what if he had? It was only a smear of soot. It could have come from anywhere.

You’re worrying over nothing, Geth told himself. He drew a deep breath, blew it out again, and scrubbed the soot away with the heel of his palm.
CHAPTER
ELEVEN
22 Sypheros

Twilight came, and with it an end to the flow of supplicants to the grove around the ancient well. Pradoor had chosen to remain beneath the twisted branches for the day, letting the faithful come to her rather than wandering the streets to meet them. Normally Makka would have chafed at a day forced to sit and do nothing, but he found the time slipping past like a fast stream. Like the unseen water that rushed in the depths of the well.

The dark presence that lingered in the grove didn’t vanish with daylight, but seemed to grow stronger the longer Makka sat above the rock-rimmed hole.

When the last of the faithful had left the grove and the setting sun outlined the wizened branches with red light, Pradoor let out her breath in a long hiss of triumph. “Rhukaan Draal is the axle and I am the pin. The order of the world will be set right. The old ways will be given their proper place once more.” She turned to face Makka. “You have been silent.”

“I have been thinking,” he said.

“Have you?” Pradoor asked. Her thin lips twitched.

The old goblin’s speech the night before had lit a fire in Makka’s belly. He dropped to his knees in front of her.

“The Six call. Show me how I may serve them.”

“You already serve.”

“Show me how to serve them better. Show me how to serve as you serve.”

Pradoor smiled, showing her teeth. “The Six marked you as theirs before they guided me to you, Makka. You cannot serve as I serve—I am given souls, you are given steel. But I can show you how to serve in your own way.”

She pointed. “Turn.”

Makka shifted around and found himself staring into the ancient well among the jumbled rocks. “What do I do?”

“Look,” Pradoor said. She reached up and pushed his head forward. “Look and learn to see. The age turns, and you have your own part to play in the order of the world.”

Makka leaned out over the hole and peered down into the echoing darkness. At first it seemed there was nothing to see, but then shapes moved, and the sound of rushing water became the thunder of blood in his veins. Makka’s eyes widened and he saw.

He saw Ashi of Deneith dying on her own sword.

He saw the shifter, Geth, crushed and in agony.

He saw Dagii of Mur Talaan impaled on an elf spear.

He saw Ekhaas of Kech Volaar with her throat torn out.

He saw the White Stone tribe wasting away from a plague that afflicted their camp and no other, but that pursued them no matter where they fled.

He saw every person he had ever sworn vengeance against brought low. He saw every person who had wronged him in even the slightest way met with a swift and terrible justice.

He saw himself, filled with anger and power and strength, mercy wiped away by rage, bringing divine wrath down upon the world.

“Who do you serve?” asked Pradoor’s voice.

“I serve the Six,” Makka said.

“How do you serve?”

“With steel.” More. Understanding rose up inside him. “With steel and faith, and a will to bring the old ways back to the dar!”

“Who is your patron?”

He knew the answer. It throbbed with the beating of his heart and raced through him with all of life’s ecstasy. He saw it before his eyes. The calm that had guided him through the day vanished in a wave of frenzy. He drew the knife that had been an offering to the Six from his belt and pushed the tip against his chest, carving what he saw into his flesh. “The Fury,” he roared. “I belong to the Fury and her power belongs to me!”
The call intruded on Geth’s sleeping mind, and it seemed to him that he had been hearing it for quite some time. It came again. “Geth.”

He curled more tightly under his blankets.

“Geth!” The speaker, his voice strained and thick, sounded irritated. Something flicked Geth’s nose.

Awareness, if not alertness, burst over him like a war wizard’s spell over a battlefield. He moved by instinct. A figure stood close to him and he punched at it in the same movement that brought him out of bed. The figure simply tumbled away, landing in a crouch on the sill of the open window. Geth dropped into a defensive stance, hands and arms raised, shocked mind calculating how he could reach Wrath before his attacker came at him again—

Recognition intruded on the rush of battle. The figure on the window sill was Chetiin. The goblin watched him with careful intensity in his black eyes. The sky behind him was gray with dawn. Geth shook his head and lowered his hands. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“That’s why I tried to wake you from a distance first,” said Chetiin. He reached down to the back of a chair below the window and tossed Geth’s pants to him. “Cover yourself.”

Geth struggled into the pants, swaying as the dizziness of sudden waking crashed down on him. “I thought you might have come sooner.”

“Sneaking into Khaar Mbar’ost isn’t easy.” The shaarat’khesh elder looked at him. “You summoned me. You need to talk?”

Over the afternoon and evening of the day before, Geth had worked out what he would say to Chetiin. How he would describe the misgivings and shameful suspicions he’d had as smoothly as Ekhaas might have. Sleep, however, had stolen the words from him. “I …” he bumbled, then clenched his teeth and said simply, “I doubted you. I’m sorry. I’ve seen the ledge—”

Chetiin shook his head. “Don’t speak of it,” he said. “Just tell me that wasn’t the only reason I climbed up here.”

“You climbed?” Geth went over to the window and peered past him. His window was easily seven or eight floors up. Khaar Mbar’ost was far shorter than even a minor tower in the city of Sharn, but it was still tall enough. There was nothing under his window except a drop to the stones of the plaza around the fortress. He looked at Chetiin with new respect.

The goblin just shrugged casually. “It was the easiest way to reach you. Now talk. Is it something about the war?”

“What you learning anything more about who attacked you?”

“No.” Chetiin’s ears twitched. “And that troubles me. If no one has stepped forward to claim the assassination by now, they may never come forward. They may not be able to. Whoever hired them may have betrayed them.”

“Midian.”

“If he could betray Haruuc, he could betray a hired assassin.”

“We are talking about someone who tried to kill you, Chetiin.”

“Who breaks muut with one member of the Silent Clans breaks muut with all of us, Geth.” The muscles of his jaw tightened. “And if the true assassin is dead, I can’t clear my name. I convinced you, but I doubt I could convince others. Volaar kapaa’taat kesha do haan—the word of traitors is written on air.”

“We could vouch for you,” Geth said.

Chetiin shook his head. “And reveal the secret of the rod? I don’t think so. My honor may become a sacrifice.”

It was as good an opening as he was going to get. Geth took a breath and pushed out the idea that had prompted him to hang the blanket from his window. “If you’re not having any luck tracking down the assassin, maybe there’s something else you can do,” he said. “I’d like you to go to war with Dagii and Ekhaas.”

He didn’t think he’d ever seen Chetiin look surprised. The expression survived only moments on the goblin’s wrinkled face, though, then it was gone. “Why?” he asked.

“I want to be certain they make it back. I don’t think I’ll be able to deal with the Rod of Kings on my own.”

Chetiin looked past him. Geth turned and followed his gaze to the small chest that rested on—or rather was bolted
to the top of—a heavy table. The chest was bound in iron and had three magewrought locks, the keys to which hung around Geth’s neck. There were other defenses, too, invisible to his eyes, but Ekhaas assured him they were there. In truth, though, Geth didn’t see the chest as protecting the rod from others so much as protecting others from the rod.

“You’ve done well so far,” said Chetiin.

“And the switch with the false rod should be easy,” Geth continued for him. “No, it’s after that I’m worried about. I won’t be Haruuc’s shava any more. I want Ekhaas and Dagii—and you—here to help me and Ashi.” He echoed what Ashi had said. “Our group is being broken up. We need to stay together.”

Chetiin looked at him for a long moment. “Ekhaas and Dagii are capable. They can take care of themselves,” he said. “If I go, only you and Ashi will be here. I don’t think Midian can be trusted.”

“Neither do I. He still doesn’t know we’ve figured him out, but if we have to deal with him after the false rod is in the hands of the new lhesh, he may guess. That’s why I need you to make sure Dagii and Ekhaas make it back. War isn’t predictable. I want someone watching over them.”

Chetiin’s ears twitched. “You trust me.”

“I do now.”

Chetiin actually smiled. “That pleases me. I’ll go.” His smile jerked a little higher on one side. “It isn’t often that one of the shaarat’khesh is asked to protect lives rather than take them.”

“I’m not used to sending other people out to fight in my place,” said Geth with a grunt. “I’m surprised Wrath hasn’t pushed me to go myself.”

“Fighting isn’t always the hero’s part,” Chetiin said. He twisted around and swung his legs out the window, then nodded toward the glowing horizon. “The last day of Haruuc’s games. The beginning of the end. Good luck, Geth.”

“Rat and Tiger dance for you, Chetiin.” Geth leaned out and watched the goblin start his climb down the wall of Khaar Mbar’ost like some big shadowy spider.

The end began as Haruuc’s funeral had begun—with a procession.

At first there was little to see from where Ekhaas sat in the stands of the arena, but she could hear the waves of cheering that accompanied the progress of the procession through Rhukaan Draal. It was like listening to the approach of a violent storm. The excited murmur of those lucky enough to have found a place in the arena itself—and there wasn’t a spare place to be had, even among the sections reserved for dignitaries—was wind in storm-tossed trees. The blurred susurrus grew louder and louder until the storm was upon them. One pair of the arena’s great gates opened and lightning might have struck. The roar of the crowd was thunder.

Where Haruuc’s corpse had led the funeral procession, Geth led the way onto the blood-damp sand of the arena floor. Somehow, Ekhaas thought, the shifter managed to look even more grim than the dead lhesh had. Ashi, sitting at her side, took her hand and squeezed it. The very human gesture was embarrassing, but Ekhaas didn’t pull away. It felt good to share her anxiety.

The four claimants to Haruuc’s throne followed Geth, smiling like victorious soldiers and waving to their supporters. Among the deafening echoes that filled the arena, it was impossible to tell who received the loudest cheers. Iizan looked just as confident as Tariic, and Garaad looked just as confident as Aguus. All four were dressed in splendid armor that flashed in the sunlight. All four walked as if they strode the polished stones of a throne room rather than an arena that had seen five days of combat and bloodshed. Not that any of them had any choice now, even if they doubted their true chances. To abandon their claim would be a stain on their honor.

The warlords and clan chiefs of Darguun came last. They entered as a group, more solemn than the contending heirs, though not so grim as Geth, and took their places for the final ritual of Haruuc’s mourning.

Geth moved to stand against one wall of the arena, the rival claimants against the others. The warlords—Dagii among them, the three tribex horns mounted to shoulders of the ancestral armor of Mur Talaan rising over his head—spread themselves out on either side, leaving a broad pathway between them.

Drums took up a deep rolling heartbeat that sounded even above the noise of the crowd. Slowly, sound in the arena died away until only the drums remained. Then they, too, fell silent and Razu stepped onto the raised platform that had recently been occupied by the announcer of the games. Her staff rapped the platform three times.

“Did you know that Razu moved the date of the coronation by two days on the advice of your friend Midian Mit Davandi?”

“I didn’t,” Ekhaas lied.

“Tariic isn’t happy.”

“I don’t imagine he is.”
Razu spoke, her voice ringing. “By tradition, when a warlord of the Ghaal’dar Clans dies without declaring an heir, any senior warrior of his clan who believes he can hold the position may seek it. Rivals must pass the judgment of the other senior warriors and meet the approval of the members of the clan. If they cannot, they are not strong enough, and only the strong may take a place as warlord.” The beat of a single drum began again, a counterpoint to the old hobgoblin’s words. “Lhesh Haruuc Shaarat’kor died without declaring an heir. We look to tradition to guide us!”

She thrust out her staff. “Iizan of Ghaal Sehn. Aguus of Traakuum. Garaad of Vanish Kai. Tariic of Rhukaan Taash. You believe you have the strength to take the throne of Darguun as lhesh. With the warlords of Darguun to judge you and before the people of Darguun”—her staff swung around to encompass the crowd in the arena—“step forward and claim it!”

The sound of all the unseen drums surged together into a powerful, throbbing beat that Ekhaas felt in her belly. The crowd remained very nearly silent, however. Ekhaas could see the four claimants studying Geth and each other.

Iizan moved, taking a slow step forward. His eyes swung around the assembled warlords.

One … two … three of them met his gaze. The rest looked down or up or simply away, anywhere but into his face. Among the stands, there were only scattered shouts. Iizan trembled and took another, tentative step, still searching the faces of the warlords for support, but even those who had met his gaze before looked away. The shouts from the stands gave way to mocking hoots. Iizan stopped where he stood, his face pale, his ears sagging.

Garaad, Tariic, and Aguus didn’t wait to take turns. As Iizan stood in shame, they stepped out almost at the same time. The noise in the stands exploded and once again it was impossible to tell who had the greatest support from the people. It was simpler, though, to tell who had support among the warlords. Aguus and Garaad advanced across the sand step by step, finding and then losing the gazes of the lords of Darguun. Garaad made it several paces beyond Iizan before the last of his supporters looked away. Aguus stopped a short way beyond that.

Tariic’s stride was casual, almost arrogant. He didn’t pause to search for support, he paused to accept it. As Garaad and then Aguus stopped, it became abundantly clear whom the people of Darguun—or at least those of Rhukaan Draal—favored as well. One loud voice broke free to rise above the others. “Tariic and victory over the Valenar!”

Tariic lifted his head and pointed out into the crowd in the general direction of the shout. The noise in the arena seemed to double. Tariic strode across the sand, stopped in front of Geth, bowed his head, then stepped to the shifter’s side and raised his hand.

Warlords and people alike roared their approval of the next lhesh of Darguun.

He’s done it, thought Ekhaas. Ashi squeezed her hand. Ekhaas squeezed back.

* * * * *

Razu didn’t appear again to make any kind of formal announcement of Tariic’s succession to the throne. There really wasn’t any need. Aguus, Garaad, and Iizan came forward and knelt before him in acknowledgement of his triumph—a true pledge of allegiance would come after his coronation. The rhythm of the drums shifted into something almost festive, and the warlords, Tariic, and Geth retreated from the arena to the cheers of the crowd. A few moments later, Tariic and Geth appeared together at the rail of the warlords’ box. Tariic waved once more to the crowd, allowed them to cheer a little longer, then nodded to the announcer, who had reclaimed his platform. The drums fell silent, and so did much of the crowd. The event, aside from the selection of the lhesh, that had driven their anticipation through much of the day had arrived.

The announcer raised his speaking trumpet to his mouth. “By tradition, the final match of the games honors both the old warlord and the new with the finest fighters available. Today we honor Lhesh Haruuc”—a cheer from the crowd—“and Lhesh Tariic”—a second cheer—“with the final battle of the only man to fight matches on all five days of the games!”

A rumble grew in the audience. The announcer gestured with a flourish to one of the gates of the arena. “I give you Keraal!”

As the gates swung open to reveal a chain-draped figure and an enthusiastic roar leaped from the audience, Ekhaas couldn’t help wondering if the people in the stands remembered that this was the man who had led a rebellion against Haruuc. Who had tried to starve Rhukaan Draal by burning crops and storehouses. She leaned forward to get a better look at him.

Scars covered much of the one-time warlord’s skin, but Keraal had far fewer visible injuries than she would have expected. Someone must have been giving him magical healing in preparation for his next match. He looked worn and weary, though, anticipation for the battle only a faint flicker in his eyes. His ears were down. He didn’t respond at all to the crowd’s cheering or to the closing of the gates behind him.
“He looks like a knife that’s been sharpened too many times,” Ashi said in her ear. “I don’t think Tariic likes that he’s still alive.”

Ekhaas looked up at the warlords’ box. Tariic barely seemed to be watching the arena, but she caught him in a glance, and in that glance was anger fit to kill. She remembered what Geth said about Tariic choosing Keraal’s opponents. “He’s got one more chance to kill him,” she said.

“He’s fought a tiger, an ettin, bladedancers and berserkers,” said Ashi. “What else can Tariic throw at him?”

The answer came from the announcer’s speaking trumpet. “Keraal fights the Five Homas, hunters of the Talenta Plains!”

“The Talenta Plains?” Ashi asked. “Halflings?”

The gates opposite Keraal shuddered and jerked as something on the other side bumped them in its eagerness for combat. Ekhaas felt her throat clench, partly in amazement, partly in involuntary anticipation of inevitable bloodshed. “No,” she said, her voice feeling thick. “Not just halflings, I think.”

The gates shuddered again, then were forced wide as Keraal’s opponents emerged. Those gathered in the arena fell into a stunned silence—then shouted even louder than they had for Keraal. “Rond betch!” gasped Ashi.

“Khaavolaar!” said Ekhaas.

Halflings, yes. The same size as goblins, though with finer limbs and human-like features. And five of them, dressed in leathers painted in bright pigments, embellished with colored stones, and stitched in elaborate patterns. Their hair, coated with some kind of pale clay, rose in wild ridges and matted clumps above the bone masks that concealed their faces. Their weapons were glaives—wide, sharp blades pointed like a spear, edged like an axe, and set on long, curved poles.

They were mounted on the great lizards of the Talenta Plains, all of the creatures decorated like their riders so that it was difficult to tell where the shimmering colors of scales ended and vibrant paint began. Four of the halfling hunters rode lizards as tall as a hobgoblin that strode upright on their hind legs, powerful heads balanced by a thick tail. The beasts’ forelegs were small and grasping, their jaws terrifying, but their hind legs were the danger. They were massively muscular and the great toe of each foot carried a heavy claw as sharp as a sickle. The lizards prowled out into the arena, heads darting and nostrils flaring.

The fifth lizard came out more slowly. It was big, nearly twice the height of a hobgoblin in the length of its body alone, and easily twice that again from the small hook-beaked head on its lowslung neck to the tip of its long, powerful tail. A double row of bony plates rose from its back, but the beast had weapons as well as armor: the massive tail ended in a cluster of four long bony spikes. Its rider, nestled between the plates over its shoulders, used a small hook on the butt of his glaive’s shaft to prod the giant lizard just behind its skull. The creature raised its head as far as its neck would allow and let out a rumbling honk. The other four lizards answered with whistling shrieks imitated by their riders.

“What are they?” Ashi asked in awe.

“Clawfoots and a daggertail,” said Ekhaas. “Halflings may not put a lot of imagination into naming things, but they go straight for the important details.”

“They look hungry!”

“They likely are—the clawfoots at least. The daggertail eats plants.”

“Khyberit ghentis.” Ashi shook her head. “Keraal can’t fight all of them, can he?”

Down on the arena floor, the lone warrior seemed to be thinking the same thing. Ears flat back against his head, he watched the halflings and their mounts just as they watched him. The announcer gave the audience a moment longer to drink in the sight of the magnificent lizards, then shouted through his speaking trumpet, “For the honor of Lhesh Haruuc Sharaat’kor and the glory of Lhesh Tariic—begin!”

Keraal let his chain slip down his arms, then whirled it up into a shield of spinning, flashing metal. The clawfoot riders urged their mounts forward with kicks and piercing whistles. They spread out to the sides of the arena as the daggertail lumbered to take a position closer to the center. Its rider prodded at it with his long goad, turning it around so the powerful spiked tail could be brought into play. It looked nervous to Ekhaas. All of the lizards did, in fact. One clawfoot rider even seemed to be struggling with his beast. Keraal shifted a few paces to the left, then back again as if gauging the reactions of his opponents.

Then he moved, sprinting at the nearest clawfoot on his right. The rider whooped and the clawfoot surged into a long leap, thick leg muscles bunching and releasing to send it high. The crowd in the arena gasped in unison and even Keraal looked startled. The lizard’s terrible claws slashed down, but Keraal dived to the ground, throwing himself away in a spray of bloody sand. The clawfoot missed him, instead landing in a heavy crouch. Another clawfoot leaped, forcing Keraal to scramble across the sand on all fours with his chain dragging behind him. The
halfling on the daggertail laughed wildly and his mount’s tail slapped the ground—nowhere near Keraal but enough to intimidate even Ekhaas. They were toying with him, she realized, keeping him off-balance and weak. The other pair of clawfoots stalked closer. The first halfling whooped again and his clawfoot leaped—

Keraal flung himself aside once more, but this time as he rolled, he whipped out one end of his chain so that it wrapped around the clawfoot’s leg. In the same moment that the lizard landed, Keraal came up to his knees and jerked back hard on the chain. Pulled off balance, the lizard bleated like a sheep and smashed forward. Its rider swayed in the saddle, momentarily stunned—long enough for Keraal to free his chain with a flick of his wrist, turn, and send the chain arcing at another rider. Halfling and lizard both ducked instinctively, but neither was Keraal’s target. His chain tangled around the shaft of the halfling’s glaive and Keraal yanked it out of his hand. Another fast tumble across the sand and Keraal rose with the weapon in his grasp.

The crowd howled in approval. With a flip and a twist, Keraal wrapped the chain around his torso and gripped the glaive—sized for a halfling but still useable by a hobgoblin—with both hands. Three of the four clawfoot riders were circling him now. It was impossible for Ekhaas to see their expressions behind the bone masks, but they no longer seemed interested in toying with Keraal. The hobgoblin had landed the first blow—the downed clawfoot seemed reluctant to get up in spite of the cajoling and curses of its rider.

Then the three circling clawfoots broke and moved back. Those in the stands saw what was coming and their reaction may well have saved Keraal, who turned and lurched to one side as the daggertail’s spikes came swinging at him. He didn’t quite manage to get out of the way. The point of one spike gashed his chest.

But it also caught in the chain wrapped around him and instead of being thrown back to where the clawfoots waited, he was dragged along with the tail. As the tail curved back, he flew free, rolling across the sand and ending up near the daggertail’s head. The lizard’s rider stared at him for an instant, then started to goad his mount into a turn, heavy forelegs smashing into the ground, hooked beak snapping, small eyes wild.

“Plant-eaters?” said Ashi.

“Just the daggertail,” said Ekhaas. She pointed. “Look there!”

The rider of the fallen clawfoot had his mount up again. The creature’s pointed tongue licked at a muzzle covered in sand and the clawfoot might even have pressed itself back to the arena floor if the halfling hadn’t vaulted into the saddle and hauled back on the reins that guided it. The lizard shrieked in protest.

“What’s it doing?” Ashi asked, then her eyes widened as she realized what Ekhaas already had. “The blood out of the sand!”

“Five days’ worth of blood from the games,” said Ekhaas. To a hungry predator, the smell in the arena must have been intoxicating. No wonder the clawfoots seemed hard to control—and no wonder the daggertail seemed skittish and wild. To a plant-eater, the arena would stink only of death and danger.

Keraal must have realized it too. As the daggertail’s head and forelegs came closer, he pushed himself to his feet and ran—not away from the lizard but at it. The halfling hunter saw him and shifted his grip on his glaive, abandoning efforts to goad his mount in order to defend himself. Sticking between the daggertail’s double row of plates, he darted back along its spine, trying to keep pace with Keraal.

The hobgoblin was quicker, though. With a shout, he leaped high and thrust the head of his stolen glaive into the daggertail’s side with all of his weight and strength behind it.

The great lizard let out a terrible honking screech and reared up on its hind legs. The halfling on its back, trying to stab down between the plates at Keraal, had to drop his weapon and hang onto one of the plates with both hands. Keraal clung to the shaft of his glaive as his weight dragged the sharp blade inexorably through the creature’s flesh. Blood spurted out, spraying him. The daggertail crashed back to all four legs. Its head twisted around to try and bite at the source of its agony and its spiked tail thrashed wildly, but Keraal had chosen well: neither neck nor tail were flexible enough to reach him where he clung. He kept digging with the glaive, forcing the wound deeper and wider.

The slapping tail kept the clawfoot riders back, too. The halfling on the daggertail whistled and waved, gesturing for one of them to throw him a glaive, but the other riders were busy trying to control their hungry clawfoots as they caught the scent of fresh blood—and a moment later, the daggertail decided to act on its own. Turning suddenly, it made a lumbering run for the nearest wall of the arena. Spectators sitting in the lower rows fled for higher elevation, even though the spiked tail couldn’t have done more than splinter the wall below them. The clawfoot riders scattered. Keraal seemed to reach into the wound before he flung himself away from the beast, leaving the glaive behind.

The daggertail’s rider wasn’t fast enough. Yelling at the beast as if he could calm it by voice alone, he hung onto one of the plates along its back right up until the moaning daggertail slammed its side against the wall and began to
rub like a cow against a tree. The impact jarred the halfling loose. He screamed as he lost his grip and went sliding down between the great lizard and the wall.

The audience winced and groaned with one voice.

Keraal had his chain free again. He let it swing loose in one hand as he stalked closer to the nearest clawfoot, a blue-streaked monster somewhat larger than the others. The halflings were wary now. The others circled as the hobgoblin warrior’s target backed his mount away—but Keraal’s eyes were on the lizard, not the halfling. He stretched out his free hand, in it a big chunk of bloody flesh torn from the body of the daggertail.

The blue-streaked clawfoot cocked its head like some enormous bird.

Its rider saw the chunk of flesh and stiffened, then bent over his mount’s neck, maybe trying to whisper to it, to control it. No luck. Keraal took two quick paces forward then flung the meat to one side of the beast.

The clawfoot whirled and lunged, snapping for the food. So did the next nearest clawfoot as both riders fought to control their mounts. In the moment of chaos, Keraal darted close. His chain snapped up and curled around the throat of the unfortunate halfling whose clawfoot had betrayed him. Keraal stepped back, heaving the struggling rider out of his saddle. The halfling hit the sand of the arena and an instant later, Keraal was on him, one arm around his neck, the opposite hand gripping his skull. The hobgoblin’s shoulders tensed and the halfling’s head twisted around on his shoulders, the snap of his breaking neck completely lost in the roar of the crowd.

The now-riderless clawfoot turned to stare at Keraal, who froze with the body of the halfling hunter still in his hands. The clawfoot lowered its head, taking a slow stride forward, and even from where she sat, Ekhaas could see a kind of feral intelligence and loyalty on its reptilian face. It knew its rider, knew he was dead, and knew that Keraal had killed him. Behind it, the remaining three riders spread out. Keraal let the corpse slip from his grasp and backed up slowly, swinging his chain.

It might have been his final act if the daggertail hadn’t at that moment staggered away from the arena wall, honking in pain and distress. It left a long smear of blood on the wall behind it, along with the broken body of its rider and the shattered shaft of the glaive—the head of which, Ekhaas guessed, must have broken off inside the wound, now even larger and uglier than before.

All four clawfoots turned to look at it. All of the surviving riders tried to rein in their mounts and control them just as the dead rider had tried to control his, but with no greater success. The distraction that Keraal had set up by wounding the daggertail was too strong. The halflings had left their clawfoots hungry before the battle. The sight and smell of the injured daggertail—natural prey for such predators—was too powerful.

The clawfoot that Keraal had initially brought down was the first to break. Twitching its head against the pull of the reins, it stalked out to confront the daggertail. The wounded lizard’s eyes fixed on it. The fearsome tail swung back and forth, but the clawfoot stayed well back. The other clawfoots moved in, forcing the daggertail to try and watch all of them. Ekhaas saw one of the lizards turn its head and fix its rider with an ugly stare. The halfling stiffened and whistled to the other halflings before he leaped to the ground to let his mount hunt. The other two hunters followed his example and the clawfoots, all riderless now, circled the daggertail.

The blue-streaked clawfoot looked once more at Keraal and threw back its head to let out a bone-chilling shriek. The daggertail swung toward the sound—and the other clawfoots pounced on it. The big spiked tail caught one in mid-air, bashing it to the ground with deep wounds in its flank, but the others were on it, trying to find a grip in its flesh with their claws and their teeth. The blue-streaked clawfoot shrieked again and leaped join in.

Keraal picked up a lost glaive, snapped the shaft over his knees to create a weapon that he could wield in one hand, and went after the three surviving halflings.

For a warrior who had defeated a tiger, a two-headed ettin, three Kech Shaarat bladedancers, and four Marguul berserkers armed only with the chains that had once bound him, they were no challenge. The clawfoots fought their own battle and the deaths of the hunters of the Talenta Plains were accompanied first by the screams of the daggertail and then by the sounds of the feasting clawfoots.

And by the roar of the cheering crowd, a roar that died away only when Keraal stood below the warlords’ box and let the head of the last halfling fall to the sand.

Tariic rose slowly and glared down. His face was dark and tight with anger, but somehow it didn’t reach his voice. “Keraal, who was warlord of the Gan’duur,” he called out—and if there was no anger in his voice, there was at least malice. “Who defied Lhesh Haruuc Shaarat’kor. Who led his clan to defeat and watched it die. Who is now Keraal of nothing.” He paused, his ears trembling, before continuing. “You have fought in the arena and you have triumphed. By the tradition of the People, you have won your freedom.”

He gestured and one of the gates of the arena, the one farthest from the still feasting clawfoots, opened just a crack. Ekhaas was fairly certain that whoever stood on the other side was keeping a very close watch on the great
beasts. Keraal, however, ignored both lizards and gate. He just looked up at Haruuc’s successor as Tariic pointed and said, “Go.”

“No,” said Keraal.

Except for the tearing and gulping of flesh, the silence in the arena was complete. “No?” asked Tariic, a hint of fury finally creeping into his voice.

“No,” Keraal repeated. He stood tall. “Where is Dagii of Mur Talaan?”

Partway along the box, just behind a wide-eyed Geth, Dagii rose and came forward. “I’m here.”

Keraal looked up at him. “You ride to war against the Valenar?”

“No.” Dagii glanced at Tariic, then back at the fallen warlord. “I leave Rhukaan Draal before twilight. I wait only for the blessing of the lhesh.”

Down on the blood-soaked sand, Keraal bowed his head, “You taught me the meaning of muut, Dagii of Mur Talaan. You defeated me in battle, but gave me respect. When my warriors were to be hung in trees, you bound them there yourself. When I would have died in shame, you forced me to fight and live.” He raised his chains in one hand and the broken glaive in the other. “If you will have me, I pledge myself to your service, to follow you and obey your commands. On blood and graves, I swear it.”

For a moment, Dagii just stared at him, then he drew his sword and held it high. “Keraal, I accept your service!”

The applause began with the thumping of a single fist against a single chest—and Ekhaas was surprised to see that it came from Senen Dhakaan. She was alone for only a moment, though. Up in the warlords’ box, Munta the Gray began to applaud. Then Garaad of Vanish Kai. And Aguus of Traakuum. And Geth. And abruptly the applause was taken up all around the arena, no shouts, no cheers, only the beating of fists on chests so loud that even the clawfoots took notice and looked up from their grisly meal. Dagii lowered his sword and gave Keraal a curt nod. The warrior let his weapons fall and walked out of the arena with his ears held high.

Dagii turned to face Tariic, lifting his sword again, and the applause slowly died. “Lhesh,” said Dagii, “I go to meet the enemies of Darguun at your command.”

Some of the rage at Keraal’s defiance faded from Tariic’s face. He drew his sword as well and touched the blade to Dagii’s. “Swift travel and great glory, Dagii of Mur Talaan. Show the Valaes Tairn that Darguun fears no invader!”

They let their swords fall, the blades sliding against each other with the slow ring of metal on metal, then Dagii bent his head and turned away without looking back. Tariic turned to face the arena and thrust his sword into the air. “The games are over! Lhesh Haruuc is remembered with honor and Darguun is strong!”

The cheer that rose in the arena was the loudest one yet, so loud it seemed to shake the stands. Tariic simply stood and soaked it all in. The clawfoots hunched and stared around in fear.

Ekhaas turned at looked at Ashi. “That’s my sign too,” she said over the noise. “Dagii will be waiting for me. Great glory, Ashi.”

The human woman’s mouth tightened for a moment, then she spread her arms and threw them around her. Ekhaas stiffened, shame at the public embrace spreading through her, then she relaxed and returned it—very briefly. “Warriors in victory are permitted such displays,” she said in Ashi’s ear.

“I feel like we’ve won a victory,” Ashi answered. “Two days to the coronation. Come back as soon as you can.”

She released her and Ekhaas turned to Senen. The ambassador nodded to her. “Swift travel and great glory, Ekhaas du ur’kala. Craft your tale carefully—I have a feeling it will be one for the ages.”

Ekhaas returned her nod and, like Dagii, walked to the exit from the stands without looking back.
The next visitor Geth had to his chamber didn’t arrive with the same stealth as Chetiin. There was a knock at the door and Ashi entered. Midian slipped in after her and Geth caught a glimpse of Aruget speaking with the guards before the gnome closed the door again. Both wore tense expressions. Geth was certain Ashi’s was genuine; he wasn’t so sure about Midian’s.

“I ran into Midian in the entrance courtyard,” said Ashi.

“Ran into, nothing. I was looking for you,” Midian said with the kind of desperate cheerfulness people used to cover up stress. “This is the day, isn’t it? I would have waited in the hall outside Geth’s door if his guards didn’t look at me funny every time I walk by.” He turned to Geth. “Sage’s quill, you’re dressed up like kings and queens are coming to call. No, wait—they are. Or at least one is.”

“Shut it, Midian,” Geth told the gnome. He knew how he looked. The mirror in his chamber told him that. During his time fighting in the Last War, he’d gotten into the habit of preparing early on the days that he would see battle. Sometimes very early. His comrades had mocked him for it until they’d realized that the earlier Geth rose, the worse his temper before the battle was likely to be. Tariic’s coronation was a kind of battle and Geth had risen very early. His thick hair was washed and brushed and tied back. His clothes—fine trousers and a crimson shirt, a close-fitting vest of black leather stitched with polished bronze plates in the hobgoblin style—were all new, chosen by Razu and tailored to fit him. The great gauntlet on his right arm was as polished and bright as the black steel could ever be. Wrath hung at his side. He’d been ready since before dawn, and the coronation wouldn’t take place until the sun had passed noon.

Unlike human courts, *ghaal’dar* tradition not only permitted but required that arms and armor be worn in the presence of rulers as a sign of service and respect. Wrath and the gauntlet were a comforting weight, even if they weren’t the weapons he would need today. He looked to Ashi.

He didn’t need to say anything. She held out an innocent-seeming bundle wrapped in coarse sackcloth and tied with rough cords. Geth took it and laid it on the table beside the chest that held the Rod of Kings. The cords were intricately knotted. Geth simply cut them. More sackcloth had been wadded up around an inner wrapping of fine linen that reminded him disturbingly of a shroud. He folded it back.

Purple byeshk forged into a shaft as long as his forearm, as thick as his wrist, and traced with strange symbols winked up at him. The rod that lay among linen and sackcloth might have been the true rod instead of the false. A slip of paper had been wrapped around it. He pulled it free and read the crisp, flowing script upon it. *Balance owing: Kech Volaar tales of the daashor, Geth to bring the sword for my examination. You hold an exceptional piece of work. I should charge you more. Don’t tell anyone else my name!*

Geth smiled at an image of Tenquis writing the brief note. Midian tried to peer at the message. “What’s that?”

“Nothing.” Geth folded the paper and tucked it inside his vest, then glanced at Ashi. “Did you have any trouble getting it from him?” he asked, taking care not to mention Tenquis by name.

Ashi was just as cautious. She shook her head. “He wasn’t expecting Aruget, though. He made him wait outside.” She looked down at the false rod. “It looks perfect, doesn’t it?”

Midian whistled, his blue eyes wide. “You wouldn’t want to get those mixed up.”

Geth nodded and drew the keys to the chest up from inside his shirt. The three locks made heavy clicks as they opened. The true Rod of Kings lay like a slug among folds of black silk. Geth picked it out and held it next to the false rod. Tenquis’s work really was exceptional. The two rods were identical.

Midian whistled, his blue eyes wide. “You wouldn’t want to get those mixed up.”

“Our man thought of that,” Ashi said. “There’s an extra mark carved on the end of the false rod so it’s possible to tell them apart.”

Geth pushed the linen and sackcloth down so he could inspect the end of the rod. A faint spiral marked the byeshk, unmatched on the true rod. “What about the magic?” he asked.

Ashi grinned, reached down, and picked up the false rod. Something about her changed almost instantly. Geth couldn’t have said exactly what it was. She seemed taller somehow. The blue-green colors of her dragonmark seemed brighter, the dark gold of her hair richer. Something
stirred in him—he felt like he was in the presence of greatness. The effect was subtle but strong. Her words, when she spoke, were as stirring as one of Ekhaas’s stories.

“Concentrate,” she said, “and you can fight it. It’s not as powerful as you think.”

Geth blinked and pushed back. The illusion of glory and greatness slipped away and Ashi was herself again. He whistled. “Grandfather Rat! Even Haruuc would have been satisfied with that.”

“You could never feel the effect of the rod when Haruuc held it, but it was almost exactly like that.” Ashi handed the false rod to Geth. It felt no different in his hand than the true rod, a heavy bar of cold metal, but Ashi and Midian’s eyes turned to him like a needle to lodestone. Midian’s smile faded, however. “That’s bad,” he said. “The true rod doesn’t have that effect when you hold it. People might be suspicious.”

“Rat.” He was surprised Tenquis hadn’t thought of that.

Or maybe he had. Geth replaced the true rod in the chest and moved the false rod to his gauntleted hand. Ashi’s eyes refocused. Midian shook his head. Geth nodded in satisfaction at Tenquis’s work and a lightness he hadn’t felt since before Haruuc’s death settled over him. Their plan was going to work! “Just like the true rod,” he said. “You need to touch it with bare skin.”

“Brilliant,” said Midian. “Now, what about the true rod?”

Geth reached out and closed the lid of the chest. The triple locks snapped closed. “It will be safe here for now,” he said. “We’ll find another place for it after the coronation. And after that—”

“Ekhaas and Dagii’s return?” Midian asked. He made a pinched face. “We’re putting an awful lot of faith in their survival.”

“I’d rather assume their survival than count on their deaths,” Ashi said hotly. “If they don’t come back, we’ll deal with the rod on our own—until then, I’m happy knowing that the danger is past.” Her lips twitched and curled. “Rond betch, we did it. Tariic will take the throne with the symbol of rulership that Haruuc wanted his successor to have. Is there a better tribute than that?”

“Maybe not going to war with Valenar?” asked Midian. But he sighed and his face unwound into a smile as innocent as if he hadn’t plotted Haruuc’s death. “Lords of the Host, I guess it could be worse, couldn’t it? Haruuc wanted Darguuls to be united and they are. Maybe Dagii will spank the elves hard enough that they’ll ride home with pillows on their saddles.”

Geth forced a smile onto his face. Maybe they still had to deal with the gnome’s treachery and maybe Ekhaas and Dagii were still at risk—even if they did have Chetiin to back them up—but Midian and Ashi were right about one thing. Darguun was safe from the danger that had brought down Haruuc. He closed his armored fist around the false rod and felt a little pulse from Wrath.

Even if no one else would ever know the truth of what they had accomplished, the Sword of Heroes approved.

The plain little room that opened onto one side of the dais in the throne room had memories attached to it—not good ones. Here Geth had witnessed the argument that had broken the friendship between Haruuc and Chetiin. From here and out onto the dais, Geth had followed Haruuc in the wake of that argument and discovered the terrible influence that rod held over its wielder. Into this room, he had led Ashi in a desperate effort to reach Haruuc and use her dragonmark to break the rod’s hold on him, only to watch as he was struck down.

It was still too easy to think of the assassin as Chetiin. Another of the shaarat’khesh, Geth reminded himself, services paid for by Midian.

He also tried to remind himself that the small room would soon also have a more triumphant memory attached to it. From here, Tariic’s reign as lhes of Darguun would begin—although it was hard to be optimistic when the air in the room was stifling from the bodies crowded into it. Tariic, wearing bright armor of brass-chased steel, the chestplates worked into the pattern of a skull, the helmet riveted with rows of sharp blades. Razu, staff in hand, fussing as she awaited the arrival of the priests of Dol Arrah, Dol Dorn, and Balinor. A hobgoblin servant, likewise awaiting the appearance of the priests, held the spiked crown of Darguun on a velvet cushion. Daavn of Marhaan, grasping Tariic’s sword. Aguus of Traakuum, carrying a heavy cape of tiger skin edged in the soft white fur of a tiger’s belly. Munta the Gray, balancing a tray holding a pitcher of water and a silver basin.

And Geth, holding the false Rod of Kings. The shifter who had claimed—for nearly three weeks—the throne of a goblin nation and in doing so had saved it. His mouth curved into a grin.

“You look pleased with yourself,” said Munta. “Ready to give up the rod?”

“More than you know.”

Munta laughed. “I’ll tell you something Haruuc told me,” the old hobgoblin said. “Sometimes he wanted to leave
the throne behind and go back to being the warlord of Rhukaan Taash or even just a warrior of the clan. He couldn’t, though. The throne held him tight.”

“He told me something like that once, too.”

Munta’s ears flicked and he smiled. “You’re luckier than most warriors who leave the battlefield to take a throne, Geth. You’ve tasted power but you have the chance to walk away—and without anybody trying to kill you!” He laughed again.

Geth laughed with him. Heads around the room turned to look at the pair of them. The stares didn’t bother Geth. He felt a flush of confidence. Beyond one of the room’s two doors, the throne room was full of all the warlords of Darguun and all the ambassadors and envoys in Rhukaan Draal. He could hear them. Soon the responsibility for Darguun would be in Tariic’s hands. All he had to do was keep the true rod hidden for a little longer. For a moment, he even dared to dream about what he’d do after they’d found a way to deal with the true rod. He had friends in Fairhaven in Aundair and in Zarash’ak in the Shadow Marches that he could trust to keep a secret. The stories he’d be able to tell them …

Across the room, Daavn said something to Tariic. The new lhesh laughed at it, but Daavn’s eyes darted toward Munta. The old warlord didn’t seem to notice, but there was something in Daavn’s gaze that Geth didn’t like. Something cunning. Something scheming.

The confidence he felt coalesced into a need to act. He’d held off telling Tariic about Vounn d’Deneith’s suspicions of Daavn for lack of any hard evidence. He’d never gotten the chance to bring Daavn and Ko the changeling face-to-face to see if there was any recognition between the two of them. Maybe there was one last thing he could do before he passed power on to Tariic.

He left Munta and crossed the room to the two warlords. “Tariic,” he said, ignoring Daavn, “I need to talk to you for a moment. Alone.”

He tipped his head to the door that opened into a corridor beyond the little room.

Under his helmet, Tariic smiled. “Of course.” He nodded to Daavn—who shot Geth an angry glare—and led the way out the door. Once they were in the corridor, he sighed extravagantly. “Maabet, if you think it’s hot in there, you should try wearing this.” He rapped his helmet. “What did you need to talk about?”

He seemed more relaxed than Geth had seen him since Haruuc’s death, but then Geth felt more relaxed, too. It almost seemed wrong to spoil that. He did it anyway. “It’s Daavn,” he said. “I think he’s been getting close to you so that he comes into power when you take the throne. Some of us think it may actually have been him, not Keraal, behind the attempt to kidnap Vounn. We don’t have anything more than guesses right now, but the changeling in the dungeon who made the attempt might be able to—”

“Wait.” Tariic held up his hand and Geth stopped with the explanation still on his tongue. Tariic smiled. “I know.”

Geth almost choked. “You … knew?”

“I’m not stupid, Geth. I grew up in Haruuc’s court. I’ve known politics all my life.” He lowered his hand. “I didn’t know about the kidnapping, but I’ll ask him about it after the coronation.”

“But why let him get close?” Geth asked. “He’s using you.”

“No. I’m using him.” Tariic’s ears, poking out through holes in the helmet, twitched. “A king—a lhesh—needs someone he can trust. My uncle had Munta, then his three shava, and then you. I’d never take Daavn as shava, but as the saying goes in Sharn, you can always trust a greedy man to watch out for himself. It’s handy to have someone like Daavn around.”

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“Oh.” Geth’s confidence fell as limp as an empty wineskin. Tariic knocked his knuckles against the steel of his great gauntlet. “Don’t worry, Geth. I keep an eye on him. I know what he’s doing and I won’t let him get beyond my control. I appreciate that you tried to warn me.” He nodded at the rod. “I appreciate that you took care of that for me, too.”

Geth forced a smile. “It might not have been you that the warlords chose as lhesh.”

Tariic’s ears stiffened and his eyes turned hard. “No,” he said. “It was always going to be me. I was always going to be lhesh.”

The hair on Geth’s arms and on the back of his neck rose. He didn’t have a chance to say anything, though. Tariic’s eyes shifted to look past him and the new lhesh said, “Finally. You’re here.”

“You guards wouldn’t let us in,” answered a thin, shrill voice that struck Geth as strangely familiar. “That won’t be a problem again.” Tariic opened the door into the little room and called, “Razu, join us.”

Geth turned around—and stared in shock at the bugbear who filled the corridor and the old, blind goblin woman
who sat on his shoulder. The hair on his arms and neck rose even higher. Pradoor still wore the same ragged dress
she had when he’d set her free from the dungeons of Khaar Mbar’ost, but now she was wrapped in a fine, dark green
mantle as well. Makka wore the bear hide vest Geth remembered from the Marguul camp in the mountains.
Apparently he’d survived the mortal wound Ashi had dealt him after all. The thick hair of his chest had recently
been gashed in a savage design: a serpent with the outstretched wings of a bat.

Makka looked at him and his black eyes narrowed. His hand moved to the sword—Ashi’s bright Deneith honor
blade!—that hung from his belt but Pradoor slapped the back of his head and his hand dropped.

Geth heard the tap of Razu’s staff on the floor, then he heard the mistress of rituals gasp.

“Razu,” said Tariic, “there’s been a change of plan. The priests of the Sovereign Host won’t be participating in the
coronation. This is Pradoor. She’ll be taking their place. If everything else is ready, we can proceed.”

Ashi shifted her weight from foot to foot in an almost imperceptible movement. Vounn had tried to teach her the
technique as an indispensable skill of courtly manners, a way to make standing through long speeches and parties
bearable. At the time, Ashi had been amused—it was the same trick she had learned as a hunter, a way to keep legs
and feet from aching as she waited for prey. Now, after months as a part of House Deneith, she knew better. Hunting
and attending court weren’t so very different after all.

The throne room of Khaar Mbar’ost was filled and everyone was standing. The carved wood benches that
provided seating for the assembly of warlords had been moved out. Dust had been shaken from the clan banners
that covered the walls. Braziers had been heaped with incense that gave off the resinous smell of cedar. The tall windows
behind the blocky throne showed a blue sky and a city at peace, though Ashi knew that the streets around and the
plaza before Khaar Mbar’ost were actually packed with a lively crowd. The common people of Rhukaan Draal
didn’t attend the coronation except in the form of a delegation of nine individuals plucked from the street and
deposited in a corner of the throne room to gawk at the power gathered around them.

Even the grieving tree that still stood on one side of the dais looked strangely beautiful: white and gleaming, a
piece of strange sculpture rather than an ancient device of torture.

Buzzing excitement drifted through the crowd, but Ashi doubted if anyone could be quite as excited as she was—
after all, no one else knew what had been at stake leading up to this moment. Not even the dire whispers that passed
between those she stood with could darken her spirits.

“I’ve had a letter from friends in House Lyrandar,” said Pater d’Orien. “They confirm there are factions within
Lyrandar that see a greater profit in committing their services to Valenar than in selling to both sides.”

“Sindra among them?” Vounn asked. Her lips barely moved.

Pater snorted. “What do you think?”

Esmyssa Entar ir’Korran raised an eyebrow. “Orien and Deneith were quick to sell their services to Darguun,” she
pointed out. Ashi wondered why the ambassador of Zilargo had bothered to stand with them. When the ceremony
started, the little gnome wouldn’t be able to see anything—Midian had paused to greet them earlier, then passed on
to get closer to the dais. The conversation must have been worth more to Esmyssa than the view.

Pater just snorted again. “Selling cartage to Valenar elves is like selling stone to dwarves. Their warbands carry
everything they need. Our routes in Valenar are limited to runs between a few established fortresses.”

“Deneith’s relationship with Valenar is nearly as important as our relationship with Darguun,” said Vounn. “An
offer was made, of course. Neutrality saw Deneith through the Last War. More, I don’t know. Details of forces
contracted to opposing sides in a conflict are kept secret.”

“And if you were to speculate, Lady Vounn?” asked Esmyssa.

Vounn pressed her lips together for a moment before she said, “If I were to speculate, I would say that the Valaes
Tairn declined our offer. This war is as much a point of honor for them as it is for the Darguuls. We were only able
to contract to Darguun because the mercenaries were their own people. The war is a test of ancient blood against
ancient blood.” She bent her head to the fifth member of their group.

Senen Dhakaan dipped her head in return, but added, “My blood, but not yet my people. The Kech Volaar will
watch the war, though. An alliance with Darguun may still be a possibility.”

Esmyssa’s eyes flashed with delight. “I’ve heard,” she said, “that the Kech Shaarat clan have embraced the war
and have already approached Tariic about sending warriors to ight.”

Senen’s ears lay back. “The Kech Shaarat would fight pigs in a wallow and call it a rout. I wouldn’t put much
value to their boasting—”

The wail of Darguul war-pipes burst over the throne room, followed a moment later by the throbbing of drums.
Conversations ended instantly and all heads turned to the dais. As the martial music rose to a pitch, a door opened and a procession emerged, one by one, to take up positions behind the throne. Razu came first—and Ashi’s curiosity stirred. The old mistress of rituals looked shaken.

Munta, a pitcher and basin on a tray in his hands, followed her. His face was dark and troubled. Ashi glanced at Vounn. Her mentor was frowning.

“What is it?” asked Esmyssa. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Ashi told her.

Aguus came next, then Daavn. The warlord of Marhaan seemed smug. Then—

The breath caught in Ashi’s throat. Her hand went to the sword at her side, gripping the hilt and ready to draw. **Makka** stood on the dais with the spiked crown of Darguun in his hands. Her reaction, however, was lost in the chaos that gripped the throne room. Many people—warlords and ambassadors alike—gasped. A piper’s instrument struck a screechingly bad note.

A very few warlords, after a moment of shock, shouted out, “Praise the Six!”

“Quill and staff, what’s happening?” Esmyssa finally gave up and squirmed forward through the audience as only a gnome or goblin could.

Ashi ignored her, spinning to face Vounn. “That’s Makka!” she said.

“That’s the goblin who led the famine march!” Vounn stared at the old goblin woman, her eyes milky white, Makka carried on his shoulder. “What is this?”

Pater’s round face was tense. “Host shield us,” he said. He pointed at the goblin woman, then at Makka. “Dark green is the color of the Devourer. The winged wyrm is a symbol of the Fury. Tariic has gone back to the Dark Six.”

Makka reached the throne and shifted the crown into one hand so he could lower the goblin woman to the ground with the other, then handed the crown to her. It was larger than her whole head. The effect should have been comical, but Ashi didn’t feel like laughing.

Geth appeared, the false rod raised in front of him. His gaze swept the audience and found her. His eyes were hard. All Ashi could do was nod to him, then he had taken a position beside Makka. He glanced at the bugbear. Makka looked back at him and bared his teeth.

If it had been her up there, Ashi didn’t think she would have been able to stop herself from running Makka through. She was surprised Geth didn’t. Instead, he just stiffened and glared back.

He was going through with the coronation, she realized. Makka’s presence, Tariic’s unexpected embrace of the Dark Six—neither mattered. They had to get the false rod into Tariic’s hands and Geth would make sure it happened.

“Ekhaas told me about Makka,” Senen said. “Geth bears an insult.”

“He has a duty, Senen Dhakaan,” Ashi told her tersely.

The music swelled again. Tariic entered, the armor he wore flashing in the light of the hall. The cheers and applause that greeted him were half-hearted at best, the crowd uncertain what to make of the appearance of Makka and the goblin woman. Tariic didn’t break his stride, but his ears went back. Across the dais, Daavn jerked his head at someone in the crowd and instantly a renewed cheer rose up. Tariic stopped in front of the throne, faced the crowd, and raised his hands.

The pipes and drums stopped. The cheers died out. For a moment, there was silence, then Razu cried out in Goblin, “Behold Tariic of Rhukaan Taash, brave warrior and mighty warlord!”

She rapped her staff twice against the floor. Tariic pulled off his gauntlets, then reached up and removed his helmet. Beneath it, his red-brown skin was shiny with sweat, His hair was lank and damp. Munta came forward, holding out the tray he carried. Tariic raised the pitcher on it and poured a long stream of water into the basin. Returning the pitcher to the tray, he plunged his hands into the basin and splashed water onto his face and through his hair. Munta lifted a square of thick white cloth from the tray and offered it to him. Tariic dried himself and returned the cloth. Munta stepped back to his place.

“He is purified in the mighty waters!” said Razu. Her staff rapped the floor again, and this time Aguus stepped up to lay a magnificent long cloak of tiger skin across Tariic’s shoulders, fastening it with thick gold chains to rings on his armor. “He is clothed in the strength of beasts!” Her staff rapped the floor a third time and Daavn came before Tariic with a self-confident smile on his face. He went down one knee and held Tariic’s sword up to him. The new lhesh took it and favored Daavn with a smile and a nod as he sheathed the weapon. Daavn returned to his place, like a dog who had been thrown a scrap from his master’s table.

“He is armed,” said Razu, “with his own skill and cunning! He is become more than Tariic of Rhukaan Taash.”
She half-turned to Tariic, encompassing him with a sweep of her staff while still facing the crowd below. “High warlord, how will you be known?”

Tariic raised his head high. “Kurar’taarn,” he said and a murmur of approval swept through the throne room. It took Ashi a moment to understand the phrase in human terms.

The death of elves.

“He embraces the event that deines his reign,” said Senen.

“He’s slapping the Valenar in the face,” said Vounn.

Razu’s staff hit the floor again. The murmur of the crowd slipped away—and became an eerie quiet as Makka guided the blind goblin woman forward before retreating. The goblin stood alone on the dais, facing Tariic, with the crown of Darguun held out before her.

At Ashi’s side, Senen let out a soft hiss. Ashi looked at her. “What is it?”

“The ritual humbling,” said Senen. “By tradition, warlords of the Ghaal’dar Clans are confirmed in their position by priests of the Dark Six, but first they must kneel before the priest to show their respect for the Six. She won’t raise the crown to put it on his head. He’ll have to lower himself.”

“But she’s a goblin. Tariic will have to practically lie on the floor!”

“It is the tradition,” Senen said with a certain satisfaction.

On the dais, Tariic stepped before the goblin woman and said in a ringing tone, “Pradoor, I honor the Six and crave their blessing. You will stand at my side and I will listen to your guidance.” He paused and a wry smile crept across his face. “But the emperors of Dhakaan did not crawl before priests, and neither will I.”

He reached down and plucked the crown from her hands. Turning to face the assembled warlords and ambassadors, he placed it on his head. “I name myself Lhesh Tariic Kurar’taarn!”

Once again, confusion swept through the throne room.

“Tradition, you say?” Pater asked Senen.

The ambassador of the Kech Volaar actually looked both surprised and strangely pleased. “He embraces a tradition older than the Ghaal’dar Clans,” she said with amazement in her voice. “Until the empire began to decline into the Desperate Times, the Dhakaani emperors acknowledged no power greater than their own. I didn’t think it was something widely known or respected outside of the Dhakaani clans.”

Ashi watched Makka’s face twist with rage, and the face of the goblin woman, Pradoor, go from confusion to anger … to amusement. Her voice rose, thin and shrill but more powerful than Ashi would have expected. “May your reign last as long as your strength and cunning, lhesh, and the Six show you their favor all your days!”

There was something in the blessing that brought a chill to Ashi’s skin, but the Darguuls seemed to pay it no mind. Tentatively at first, then in a great rush, applause and cheering put an end to the silence. Pradoor turned and groped her way back to Makka and her place behind the throne while Tariic turned and stretched his hands out over the crowd in a blessing of his own.

Razu rapped her staff against the floor, but the sound was almost inaudible and she was forced to gesture for Geth to come forward. Ashi’s heart seemed to slow. This was the moment they had waited days for. Giving Makka and Pradoor a wide berth, Geth approached Tariic with the false rod, grasped in his gauntleted hand, held out before him. Tariic turned to face him, triumph and eagerness written on his face. Shifter and hobgoblin nodded to each other, and Geth knelt down and extended the rod. Tariic drew a slow breath, preparing himself for the final ritual of his coronation, then he reached down and closed his fingers around the byeshk shaft.

He froze. His face tightened. He leaned close to Geth and whispered something to him. The shifter stiffened.

Ashi’s heart might have stopped altogether. She felt Vounn’s hand on her arm and heard the lady seneschal ask, “Ashi?”

Words felt thick on her tongue. “Something’s wrong,” she said.

Geth could see the frustration in Razu’s eyes. The old hobgoblin lived for ritual and the coronation, her shining moment, had been spoiled, first by Makka and Pradoor’s unexpected appearance, then by Tariic’s startling crowning of himself. When the crowd drowned out the sound of her staff, he half-expected her to delay the ceremony until the cheers faded.

Don’t, he willed the mistress of rituals. Just keep going. Finish it!

When she turned and gestured for him to go ahead, he almost gasped with relief. If he hadn’t been holding the false rod in his armored hand, it probably would have slid right out of his sweating palm.

Makka’s glares had been redirected to Tariic, but Geth still stepped wide around him and Pradoor, then fixed his
eyes on the new lhesh and crossed the dais. His mouth was as dry as his palms were wet. Tariic, eyes bright and ears high, bent his head to him. Geth nodded in return and lowered himself to his knees.

The dais under him was marked with a dark stain. He knelt, he realized, on the spot where Haruuc had died. The circle of succession was complete. Power passed from Haruuc to his shava to a new ruler. He looked up into Tariic’s face again and held out the rod. Tariic’s chest swelled as he breathed in. He reached down and grasped the rod—

—and his eyes widened, then narrowed. He bent closer and the whisper that came out between his sharp teeth was hot in Geth’s ear.

“This,” snarled Tariic, “is not the Rod of Kings!”
Geth twisted his head to stare at Tariic, but the hobgoblin was already straightening and sliding the false rod out of his slack grasp. The moment it was in Tariic’s grip alone, Geth felt the magic Tenquis had crafted into it take hold, enhancing the new lhesh’s presence. The cheers of the crowd died into exclamations of amazement. Tariic seized his free hand and drew him up to stand at his side, raising their joined hands high as if they were two warriors united in victory.

Razu’s staff slammed twice against the floor and her voice rose in ringing, triumphant tones. “Behold, Darguun! Behold Tariic Kurar’taarn, second lhesh of Darguun!”

This time there wasn’t a moment’s hesitation in the wild cheers that erupted. Arms beat against chests in a flurry of applause. Tariic lifted the rod and waved it. His other hand tightened on Geth’s in a crushing grip.

Shock numbed Geth. Tariic knew the rod was false. He’d recognized the truth as soon as he had touched it. How? The false rod was a perfect duplicate except for the spiral Tenquis had added and that end of the rod had been concealed in Geth’s hand. Tariic couldn’t have seen, much less felt, it. It was almost as if he’d known there was more to the true rod, known that he should have felt the glory of the emperors of Dhakaan in his mind as Haruuc had.

But that wasn’t possible. Haruuc couldn’t have told him about it. None of those who knew the rod’s secret would have told him. Tariic couldn’t have known unless he touched the rod before and he had never—

A memory rose in Geth’s mind of the day that they had brought the Rod of Kings back to Rhukaan Draal and stood in triumph before the dais in the throne room, basking in Haruuc’s gratitude.

The day that Tariic had taken the rod from him and climbed the dais to kneel and present it to Haruuc.

Mere moments of contact. Small enough to forget in the wash of events but long enough. Haruuc had told Geth that the rod had been in his head since the moment he held it, and that once the rod’s power had gripped him, it fed him its memories of Dhakaan’s glories whether it was in his grasp or not.

The Rod of Kings answered to those with the will to rule, the old lhesh had said. And Tariic had the will to rule. He’d always had the will. It was always going to be me, Tariic had said. I was always going to be lhesh.

They’d tried to save Haruuc’s successor from the curse of the rod, but it had already been too late.

But it might not be too late to save Darguun. The true rod was still safe in his chambers. For now.

Geth’s gut tightened, determination slipping past shock and pushing aside the glamour of the false rod. The thin armor under Tariic’s upraised arm made a tempting target. A hard punch there would certainly force the lhesh to ease his grip. If he could escape and retrieve the rod, he could run. Tariic would rule, but he wouldn’t have the true rod.

He curled his free hand, his gauntleted hand, into a fist.

Tariic caught the movement and squeezed tighter. “Attack me,” he said into Geth’s ear, “and I’ll denounce you as a traitor. I may not have the Rod of Kings but I have the warlords on my side now. You’ll die before you can leave this hall. Continue with the ceremony.”

A few stairs led down from the dais to the floor of the throne room and a wide aisle clear to the hall’s great doors. Tariic, pulling him along at his side, descended them. The music of pipes and drums began again. Geth knew what would happen next—or at least what was expected to happen next: Tariic would pass through the crowd of warlords in triumph, then proceed out of Khaar Mbar’ost to greet the people who had gathered before the fortress. The final act of the coronation spectacle. Once it was complete, there would be nothing, no interruption, that could stop Tariic from taking the rod by force.

He had to get away from the new lhesh before then.

He raised his gauntleted arm and waved to the crowd in imitation of Tariic. The hobgoblin glanced at him and growled, “What are you doing?”

“The same thing you are,” Geth said through a false smile. He tried to find Ashi, but it was harder to see through the mass of waving arms from the floor than it had been from the dais.

“Where is the rod?”
“Somewhere safe.”

“You knew, didn’t you?” Tariic kept waving. “So did Chetiin. He did us all a favor by killing my uncle.”

Geth couldn’t find a reply to that but Tariic didn’t give him a chance to answer.

“Haruuc couldn’t master the rod—I felt it trying to reach him and I felt him holding it back. That was his mistake. Embrace the glories of Dhakaan and you become the master of the rod. I’m not going to make the mistake Haruuc did. Give me the true rod, Geth, and I’ll tame it. I’ll unlock its secrets.”

A chill ran through Geth. “That’s what I’m afraid of, Tariic.”

The doors of the throne room were getting closer. An honor guard waited on the other side, ready to escort Tariic—or obey his commands to whisk a treacherous shifter out of sight. Geth glanced back over his shoulder. The others who had participated in the coronation ritual had followed them down from the dais. Munta and Razu, the two he might have counted on for some kind of aid, were last and too far away. Aguus was paying more attention to the crowd than to the others in the procession. Pradoor and Makka—out of the question.

But Daavn darted ahead of the goblin and the bugbear. He walked just behind Tariic and Geth, strutting and waving as if he had taken the crown himself. Geth looked ahead once more, then, as they reached the doors, called back to the warlord of the Marhaan. “Daavn, go before us and announce the lhesh’s approach!”

Those lining the aisle heard. Makka and Pradoor heard. Daavn’s face tightened in suspicion. Tariic turned to look at his ambitious friend—and Geth twisted around, reaching between himself and the new lhesh to grab a fistful of fur and drag the trailing edge of the long tiger skin cloak forward.

It was a ridiculous, desperate trick, but it worked. The heavy cloak tangled between Tariic’s legs. Caught off guard and off balance, he stumbled. His raised arm came down, his grip eased momentarily, and Geth wrenched his hand free. Leaping ahead of the hobgoblin, he turned back and said loudly, “No? I’ll do it myself!”

He whirled again, ducking between the startled guards. The antechamber to the throne room flashed past him, then a corridor, then he was bounding up stairs two at a time, racing for his chamber like a fox before hounds.

The moment that Tariic slid the false rod out of Geth’s grasp, Ashi narrowed her eyes, focused her concentration, and drew on the power of her dragonmark. Warmth flashed through the colorful lines that patterned her body and a sharp clarity wrapped around her. The mark had protected her from the influence of the tainted dragon Dah’mir, the alien madness of one of the terrible daelkyr, and the commanding power of the true Rod of Kings—the magic Tenquis had woven into the false rod didn’t have a chance. She could even have fought it off on her own, but she needed all of her wits about her.

Suspicion made a hard lump in her belly. Something was very wrong. Geth’s eyes had a startled, hunted look to them as Tariic pulled him up to the edge of the dais. And when Razu proclaimed Tariic as the new lhesh, the shifter should have looked triumphant—but he didn’t. Protected by the power of her mark, Ashi knew she was probably the only one to notice that for all of Tariic’s apparent goodwill and pleasure, he gripped Geth’s hand with the strength of someone holding a prisoner.

She turned and grasped Vounn’s shoulder, drawing on her dragonmark once more, but this time channeling its protection into her mentor. Heat like a fever flashed on her skin, then Vounn blinked and looked at her, the influence of the false rod banished. “Ashi, what—?”

“Don’t trust Tariic,” Ashi said. “Whatever happens, don’t trust him.” She released Vounn and turned away.

The lhesh had come down from the dais and was passing through the cheering crowd with Geth at his side. The shifter’s gaze was sharper now. His free arm rose and he started to wave along with Tariic. What was he doing? Ashi cursed under her breath and tried to push forward. The crowd resisted. She cursed again and wished that she were the size of a gnome—Midian could have slid through easily. Hopefully he had seen things as she had.

Makka passed along the aisle with Pradoor on his shoulder and she crouched down to avoid being seen. Through a gap among arms and elbows, Ashi watched her grandfather’s sword swing at the bugbear’s side. Her hands clenched and she forced her eyes away. So close to the stolen weapon and yet she couldn’t risk stealing it back. Not here. Not now.

When she looked up again, Tariic and Geth had reached the throne room doors. She was losing them! She shoved the nearest hobgoblin hard and his gaze finally shifted from Tariic. “Watch yourself, taat!” he snapped at her.

“Yes, sorry,” she said, pushing past him to the next obstacle in her way. “My fault. Excuse me—”

A commotion interrupted her and she looked up just in time to see Tariic batting aside his cloak. She heard Geth’s voice over the noise of the pipes, drums, and crowd. “No? I’ll do it myself.”

Past Tariic, she caught a glimpse of the shifter, free of the lhesh’s grasp, breaking past the guards that stood
outside the throne room. Tariic did not look pleased. He summoned Daavn to his side with a sharp gesture and spoke to him in tones that did not carry. Daavn nodded and slipped ahead of Tariic, pointing to four guards who fell behind him. Tariic turned back to the crowd in the throne room and waved the rod, raising another cheer, then resumed his progress as if nothing was wrong.

Ashi paused, uncertain of what to do. Try and find Geth or catch up to Tariic and watch him? Either option would be slow—

The hobgoblin she had shoved gave her a push. “Don’t just stand there!”

She glared at him, lips peeling back from her teeth in a snarl—then looked past him and realized that the whole crowd was moving, following Tariic out of the throne room. She could ride the current out.

Or she could swim against the stream. Snarl turning to a fierce smile, Ashi thrust herself against the moving crowd, forcing hobgoblins aside. The progress of the crowd toward the throne room doors was a slow shuffle, but in just a few moments she had reached the thin edge of the mass and vaulted onto the dais. With no one to block her way, she dashed across the dais to the door and the small room on its other side, and then into the corridor beyond.

Where had Geth gone? He wasn’t one to run from a fight, which, Ashi guessed, meant that he was running to something—his chamber and the rod. There would be no following him through the crowded antechamber outside the throne room, but there was always more than one way through Khaar Mbar’ost.

She started running.

Flight after flight of stairs passed under Geth’s feet. He had darted past three floors of the fortress before the sounds of pursuit echoed after him. He recognized Daavn’s voice calling more guards to the chase. He smiled without humor. A shifter was still faster than a hobgoblin. Thankfully, he met no one coming down the stairs—anyone who was of importance in Khaar Mbar’ost had been at the coronation and anyone who wasn’t would either be at work preparing for the feast to follow or in the streets celebrating. Another floor passed and another. His breath rasped in his lungs but he drove on. Another floor, then only one more to go. His chamber and the rod were close. Did he have time to grab a pack? Maybe. He dragged the keys to the locked chest up from beneath his shirt—

—and came to a halt so abrupt he almost fell over. A hobgoblin guard wearing the red corded armband of Khaar Mbar’ost sprawled across the stairs. Blood ran in the thin streams down the stone steps.

Geth sucked air between his teeth and moved closer, quick but cautious. The guard was dead, no doubt about it. The blood poured from a slit throat and, strangely, slashed legs. He’d been hamstrung, his legs rendered useless. He would have been kneeling or fallen when his throat was slashed.

There were no smears or handprints or any other signs to indicate that anyone else had already seen the corpse. He was the first. Stepping around the dripping blood, Geth touched his fingers to the body. It was still almost as warm as life. Death had come recently. The hair on his arms and the back of his neck rose. Who would have done this? And why?

There was a yelp and a crash as one of his pursuers missed a step. Geth’s head snapped around and a growl forced its way out of him. Every moment he spent standing still was a moment in which pursuit grew closer. He glanced once more at the nameless guard, and bounded past.

He moved more slowly, and where the central corridor of his floor opened off of the stairs, he stopped and peered around the corner before moving on. Whoever had killed the guard might have gone anywhere in Khaar Mbar’ost, up the stairs or down. But so close to his floor? That couldn’t be a coincidence.

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The door to his chamber stood ajar. The guards who had stood outside his door since Haruuc’s death were gone—with the Rod of Kings passing to Tariic’s possession, at least in theory, there had been no reason for them to remain. If they had still been on duty, Geth suspected he would have found them on the floor with their throats cut.

From the stairwell, sounds of pursuit became sounds of surprise and anger. His pursuers had found the dead body. With their cries as his cover, Geth moved, leaping in front of the door and kicking it wide.

Chetiin froze in the middle of the room. There was a thick tube of stiff leather slung across his back. The chest that contained—the Rod of Kings lay open, all locks and magical protections defeated, a pair of blacksmith’s tongs and a bloody dagger with a wicked curved blade abandoned beside it.

And Geth froze as well, caught in the doorway as the black-clad goblin’s treachery crashed down on him.

No, he tried to remind himself, it had been another of the shaarat’khesh who’d killed Haruuc. If another goblin had taken Chetiin’s place before, why not again?
His mind told him that. His heart fell back on the betrayal he’d felt after Haruuc’s assassination. Then Chetiin spoke and Geth knew his heart was right.

“Give my regards to Tenquis.”

Only four other people knew that name. Three of them Geth would have trusted with his life. The fourth was Chetiin.

“No,” Geth choked.

The proof of innocence that Chetiin had offered in his story of a second assassin and an attempt on his own life, of blame laid on Midian, shattered like glass on stone. A lie. It had all been an enormous lie, right down to his promise to watch over Ekhaas and Dagii. The shaarat’khesh elder had waited for the one moment that all eyes had been elsewhere to make his final move on the true rod.

Chetiin gave him a smile that seemed almost pitying—then he moved. In one jump, he went from the floor to a chair, and in another from the chair to the windowsill. A thin rope had been secured to a shutter in the same place Geth had secured the blanket he had used to signal the goblin. Chetiin grabbed it and whipped it around his body in a smooth motion. Then, with a last look to Geth, he pushed himself back into space.

“No, you bastard!” screamed Geth. He ran to the window. Chetiin was already halfway down the wall, gliding in long arcs of descent slowed by brief brushes with the wall. A few people in the plaza below looked up and pointed, their attention drawn by Geth’s scream, but most were moving to the fringes of the vast crowd at the front of the fortress. Tariic must have emerged, displaying the false rod even as Chetiin made off with the true.

_Rage burst inside Geth. He grabbed for Wrath. One blow would sever the rope and send Chetiin plummeting—_

_“Stop!”_

Wrath half-drawn, Geth whirled around. Daavn and three hobgoblin guards stood across the room with more guards crowding the corridor outside. All of them had their swords out.

Ashi emerged from a flight of narrow stairs onto the floor where Geth had his chamber to the sound of angry cries and running footsteps. She drew her sword and hurried along a side corridor, moving with the practiced silence of a hunter of the Shadow Marches. She had almost reached the main corridor when a scream pushed her back against the wall.

“No, you bastard!”

Geth’s voice. Her breath caught in her throat. She slid along the wall, then peered around the corner into the main hall just in time to see Daavn and three guards push into Geth’s chamber while five more guards crowded around the door.

“Stop!” ordered Daavn from inside the room.

Ashi pulled back and tightened her grip on her sword. Nine to one if Geth was forced to fight Daavn and the guards alone. The odds would be far better if he had some help.

She drew breath and tensed, ready to spring around the corner and charge.

Arms grabbed her, one around her neck with a hand covering her mouth, the other catching the crook of her sword arm and forcing it back. A soft voice rasped in her ear. “Don’t do something stupid.”

She moved on instinct, punching back with her elbow, flinging back her head, and biting down hard on the hand over her mouth. Her assailant avoided her elbow and her head bash with surprising grace and endured her bite with remarkable discipline, even though she tasted blood. “It’s Aruget!” the voice said, pinched with pain. “Aruget!”

The guard forced her around so she could glimpse his face. Ashi blinked, opened her mouth—the hobgoblin guard snatched away a bleeding hand—and snapped, “They’re attacking Geth! Let me go!”

“No, you—”

A loud gasp and a curse of “Maabet!” from Geth’s chamber interrupted him. Ashi’s heard rapid footsteps and another curse, then Daavn’s voice speaking in Goblin. “No, alive! Tariic wants him alive!”

Ashi growled and strained toward the corner in an attempt to see around it again. Aruget’s hold on her loosened. She pulled forward—and something hit her hard across the back of the head. Dark blotches swam before her eyes, then the world turned upside down as Aruget heaved her over his shoulder and trotted with her back to the narrow stairs.

Daavn and the guards spread out around the chamber, more of them squeezing in. Geth sank down into a crouch, Wrath still only half-drawn. Daavn had the advantage of numbers and he had—
Nothing. Not even the Rod of Kings now.
Daavn’s eyes narrowed as he circled closer. “Come quietly, Geth. Tariic just wants to talk to you.”
“Boar’s snout, he does,” Geth said.

Eight guards and the warlord of the Marhaan. Daavn held his sword with a veteran’s ease. Geth had a nasty feeling that even Wrath and his great gauntlet weren’t going to be enough to get him past them. In the close quarters of the chamber, they’d pile on him and the fight would be over. He also had a feeling that any “talk” with Tariic wasn’t something he’d likely survive. He could try and fight his way out—or he could attempt the same route Chetiin had.

Geth slammed Wrath down in his scabbard, spun, and swung himself up to straddle the window sill. Down below, the treacherous goblin had vanished. Geth grabbed the rope, wrapped it once around his gauntleted forearm, then gripped it hard with both hands. One of the guards gasped and Daavn jumped forward, but the warlord was too late. Geth swung both legs over the sill, braced himself for a moment then pushed out and let himself drop.
The thin cord sang with tension as it raced around his gauntlet and the shutter creaked, but both held. His unprotected left hand burned, skin rubbed away by the rope, but when he swung back toward the wall of Khaar Mbar’ost, he’d dropped almost a full floor.

“No, alive!” came Daavn’s voice from above. “Tariic wants him alive!”

Geth looked up to see the flash of light on polished blade as a sword was drawn away from the rope. A chill passed through him—he’d planned the same fate for Chetiin. He started lowering himself as fast as he could, hand under hand under hand. The movement bumped him back and forth against the hard wall of Khaar Mbar’ost. The thin rope swung and lashed below him with every motion. He hooked it with his foot, twisting it around his leg in an effort to keep it steady. The ground approached at a snail’s crawl, those few people who had not deserted the plaza below after Chetiin’s descent staring up at him.

Then the rope jerked with such force that it almost pulled his arm out of his socket. He shouted as pain lanced through his shoulder and chest. His burned hand jumped free of the rope. The grip of his good hand failed. He dropped and the rope screeched as it slid around the metal of his gauntlet—and stopped short with another jerk as the rope twisted around his leg and closed tight on his flesh. For a long, long moment, Geth dangled above the plaza. He shivered uncontrollably, watching the stones of the plaza twenty paces below spin in his vision.

The rope jerked again. With a yelp, he closed his metal-clad fingers on it in a hold tighter than the Keeper’s. His other hand joined it, pain forgotten in fear. He held very still.

And yet the wall in front of his nose was still moving past him—in the wrong direction. Geth craned his head back. Hands were on the rope where it emerged from the window of his chamber. Daavn and the guards were hauling him back up! An arm’s length of wall slid past in fits and stops, then he felt the pull grow steadier and stronger. Another guard had joined in.

With eight guards heaving at the rope, it would be like drawing up a fish hooked on a line.
Heart trembling, he kicked at the twist that had saved him, loosening it so that he could descend again. He forced his right hand to open, shake the loop from around the metal of his gauntlet—and stopped short with another jerk as the rope twisted around his leg and closed tight on his flesh. For a long, long moment, Geth dangled above the plaza. He shivered uncontrollably, watching the stones of the plaza twenty paces below spin in his vision.

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Geth scanned the walls for windows, but for all that Khaar Mbar’ost might have been a palace at the heart of a busy city, it was still a fortress. Only the upper floors had windows worthy of the name. The lower floors were largely featureless except for narrow slits for light and defense. They offered no hope at all of escape. If he waited for the guards to pull him up higher, maybe he could swing to an upper window and make his way back into—

Shouts from below caught his attention and he looked down again. Two guards had appeared, attracted by the commotion. No. Three guards. One was running off, probably to find support. One of the others was dragging at the crossbow slung across his back. Geth’s heart jumped.

“No!” Daavn shouted from above. “The lhesh wants him alive. Hold your bolt! Hold your bolt!”

Even Geth heard only half the warlord’s words clearly. To the hobgoblins on the ground, he would have been all but unintelligible. The guard with the crossbow planted the nose of the weapon on the ground, held it with a foot, and hauled up on the cord, trying to draw it into position.

“Bear and Boar,” breathed Geth. He was out of time. He couldn’t go up, he couldn’t go to the side, and certainly couldn’t stay where he was. He looked down at the knotted tail of the rope and loosened his grip.

He dropped just as the guard below raised his crossbow to his shoulder and let the bolt fly. The missile spanged
off the stone where his back had been just an instant before. Geth squeezed his hands tight again and jerked to a
stop. There were loud grunts and curses from above as the sudden force yanked the guards pulling on the rope off
balance. Geth sucked in a rasping breath. The tail of the rope pressed against his belly.

Only about fifteen paces below, the guard with the crossbow was rearming his weapon. The other guard stood
beside him, hand on the hilt of his sword, waiting for his own chance.

Geth reached inside himself and shifted. The familiar feeling of invincibility burned through his veins. The pain in
his ropeburned hand and his aching shoulder seemed to grow distant, then to vanish altogether. His skin felt like
hide, his hair like thick, coarse bristles.

And he pushed himself further, pouring everything he had into the shifting. Hide, hair, flesh, bone—he was as
hard and dense as the heaviest oak. Wild power flooded him and thought vanished. This was how a charging bear or
a rampaging boar felt. Geth drew in his legs, pressed himself against the wall, and kicked out with all his strength,
roaring as he unleashed the coiled power.

He let go of the rope just before it snapped taut. The plaza rushed up at him. So did the guards. He had the briefest
glimpse of two terrified faces and of a crossbow snapped up toward him.

Black pain stole his sight, but there was no blocking out the sounds that came with the moment of impact. The
clash of metal on metal. The hollow thump of flesh on stone. Moist crunches and wet tearings. A cry that ended in
bubbling gurgles.

Light returned like thunder, and with it came the urge to vomit. Geth held down his gorge. He felt numb, almost
separated from his body. He lay on his side, stone under his cheek. He sat up slowly—or tried to. His left arm
buckled when he tried to put weight on it. He looked at it and saw an unnatural bend between wrist and elbow. He
rolled over instead, felt a burst of pain in his side, ignored it, and pushed himself up with a right arm that wouldn’t
bend properly but at least wasn’t broken.

Khaar Mbar’ost towered over him, an angry giant. By Geth’s legs lay the guards. Both looked as if the fortress-
giant had raised a hand and swatted them like flies. Both were sprawled with the joints of their limbs at odd angles.
One lay still and silent, his skull broken against the stones of the plaza, while the other twitched and gurgled, his rib
cage crushed.

A few dar stood around, not too close, staring at them and at him. Geth looked up to the rope, still swaying
against the wall, and the distant window of his chamber. The red-brown faces of hobgoblins gaped at him for a
moment, then pulled back and vanished.

Daavn and his guards were coming. Geth stood, slowly and carefully, the worst of the pain kept at bay by the
shifting, though he no longer felt invincible. Left arm broken. Right arm bent—his gauntlet was dented and locked.
Pain in his side—broken ribs. Something ground against his left hip—the final bolt from the crossbow, deeply
embedded. Wrath still hung at his side, through one of the leather loops fastening scabbard to belt had been torn
free. He suspected that later he’d find an imprint of the sword’s length stamped into the flesh of his leg. His right
knee pulsed with every step. One side of his face felt strangely soft, and his head was buzzing. He could feel a loose
tooth wobbling in his mouth.

The staring dar jumped away as he turned, putting his back to Khaar Mbar’ost. The fortress Haruuc had built was
no haven for him anymore. The maze of Rhukaan Draal lay before him. Limping and weaving, he fled for it.
Ramshackle buildings swallowed him up, a mob concealing him from the gaze of the giant behind him.

When the grinding of the crossbow bolt in his hip threatened to stop his flight, he found a niche and thrust himself
into it. Clenching his teeth tight, he wrenched the crossbow bolt out of his leg and pressed his left hand against the
wound as best he could. Bright sparks danced in his vision. Greater pain was coming, though. Geth braced himself
and pushed back the shifting.

Comforting numbness vanished, laying bare his injuries. A scream tore out of him and left him gasping. His entire
body ached and nausea hit him in waves. The end of the shifting brought a gift, though. Sharp pains pinched him
here and there as the very worst of his injuries healed themselves—which wasn’t saying much. Arm, ribs, and face
still hurt, but his knee throbbed a little less and when he lifted his hand, the deep hole in his hip had become a paper-
thin, paper-smooth scar.

The wound Chetiin’s betrayal had dealt to him didn’t seem likely to ever close.

He wanted to sit. He wanted to sleep. He didn’t dare. Daavn would be hunting him. Geth stumbled out of his
hiding place and on through half-familiar streets, trying to stay in the shadows. He turned the scraps of his attention
to going unnoticed and let his feet guide him away from Khaar Mbar’ost. Once, he thought he heard the commotion
of searching soldiers and dived into a stinking alley, then hastened along its crooked length to emerge onto another
street. He pressed on, the sense that hunters were close behind raising the hair on his neck and arms, until the city
became a string of streets and alleys.

Icy cold seemed to creep into him. Some part of his mind recognized the shock that descended on a body after great injury. Even if he found some hiding place where Daavn wouldn’t find him, his own body might kill him. He needed help. He needed refuge—but his only allies still in Rhukaan Draal were behind him in Khaar Mbar’ost. Ashi. Midian, redeemed now. Vounn. Senen. Munta.

He didn’t think he’d ever felt more alone, a fugitive in a city where he had been a reluctant king. He tried to laugh but it hurt. He stumbled and spat blood as he rose. All of his friends, practically everyone he knew in Rhukaan Draal were in Tariic’s power.

No. Maybe all his friends, but not everyone he knew. Geth looked around himself at buildings that leaned on each other like drunks and realized where his staggering footsteps had taken him. He turned around and found the low stone building that had once been a barn, though for some reason, it and the rest of the world insisted on spinning around him. He reeled up to it and banged his gauntlet against the double doors.

There was no response.

It took the last of his strength but he hammered his fist on the wood a second time. His legs gave out from under him and he slid down to lean against the stone wall. It was enough, though. The door opened and Geth managed a smile as he looked up into Tenquis’s startled gold-eyed, black-skinned face.

“You wanted to have another look at the sword?” Geth said.

Then the tiefling, his door, the street and all of Rhukaan Draal blurred together and he squeezed his eyes closed to shut them out.
Away from the city, the number of stars visible in the sky multiplied ten-fold. By turning her back on the few campfires that had been lit, Ekhaas could see far up into the depths of the night. Only a few of the moons had risen and most of those were thin crescents, bringing even greater life to the stars and, drawn like a veil across the southern sky, the bright band of the Ring of Siberys. She drew a deep breath of cool night air, so much fresher than that of Rhukaan Draal—except for the lingering stink of cold, wet ashes.

The burned shell of Tii’ator clanhold clawed the sky above the camp. Around the hill on which clanhold and camp stood, burned fields scarred the gently rolling landscape. In the eastern distance, the dead gray mists of the Mournland rolled under the starlight.

Ekhaas tried to fix the scene in her memory, a beginning to the story she would take back to Senen Dhakaan and to the Kech Volaar. Burned clanhold and shifting mists, pale starlight and bright campfires. Forty warriors drawn from Dagii’s army to accompany their commander forward to a scouting position.

No sign of the Valenar raiders save for ruined clanhold, fields turned to ash, and bodies—dar and animal—left to rot. When they’d reached the hill around noon, Dagii had ordered two pits dug below Tii’ator, one for people and one for beasts. The unfortunate soldiers conscripted to the duty were only just now heaping soil back on the mass graves.

Ekhaas put her back to the stars and the distant mists and looked over the well-ordered lines of the camp. After the games, a swift boat had borne her and Dagii—and Keraal—down the Ghaal River from Rhukaan Draal to a point closer to the village of Zarrthec. With some hard riding, they’d caught up to the bulk of the army. The Valenar hadn’t tested Zarrthec yet, but raiders had been seen from the walls, watching and studying before riding away. The town was filled with refugees from clan- and farmholds like Tii’ator; the tales they carried told of swift strikes, slaughter, and miraculous survival.

“Not miraculous,” Dagii had muttered to her. “The Valenar are letting enough live to spread fear and become a burden on Zarrthec.”

“I know,” Ekhaas had told him in return. “The strategy appears in stories of war preserved by the Kech Volaar.”

He’d given her a slightly mocking smile. “Ban—and now you’ll get to be a part of those stories yourself.”

At Dagii’s command, the body of the army had established its camp about half a day’s ride east of Zarrthec—the better part of two days’ march back from Tii’ator. Small squads of scouts, mostly goblins and bugbear ambushers, had left the forward camp at dusk, fading into the long shadows. Some had gone north toward Baar Kai and Lyrenton. Others had gone south. Most would be back by dawn. Elves saw as well by night as dar, but elf bows would be less deadly in the shifting shadows. Darkness was a fickle ally in this conflict.

Back in Rhukaan Draal, the coronation should have taken place. Tariic would be sitting in the throne, Ekhaas thought, or more likely presiding over a great feast, all with the false rod in hand. She wondered what Geth and Ashi were doing: joining in the well-deserved revelry or standing nervous guard over the true rod?

A figure detached itself from the firelight and came to her. She recognized Dagii easily from his stance and the limp in his walk. He’d set aside his ancestral armor for plain scalemail—there was little point in letting the Valenar know that the commander of the enemy forces had left the safety of the army. Dagii’s lhev’k’mor, the warlord who served him as a second-in-command, had suggested he remain at the main camp, but Dagii wouldn’t be persuaded. He insisted on seeing for himself what damage the elves had wrought on Darguun.

Ekhaas suspected his motives weren’t so noble as he claimed. He wore detachment as he wore his armor, but she knew his blood stirred at the call of battle just as much as any hobgoblin’s.

For a moment, another figure followed him from the fires, but Dagii waved him back. Ekhaas waited until the lord of the Mur Talaan was closer, then said, “Keraal and now you’ll get to be a part of those stories yourself.”

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emperor, he still displayed his slave brand openly. The expression ‘I would rather be the sum of what I endure than of what I deny’ is attributed to him. Keraal has been your enemy and your prisoner. Now he’s trying to be your ally. Give him time to find his own pride again.”

“I am,” said Dagii, “but I don’t need him at my side constantly.” He glanced at her. “Walk with me a little ways. There is … something you should know.”

She kept her face and ears still, but her heart and belly trembled a little bit at his words. An instant later, she felt like twice a foolish girl as Dagii’s strong face turned dark with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a stammer. “That came out poorly. I meant that there’s something I need to tell you, but not in front of Keraal—” He winced and his ears went back. “Just come with me.” He walked past her, around the hill and down its slope.

Ekhaas followed, embarrassment turning to secret amusement at the thought that Dagii was as flustered as she was. They passed a sentry and Dagii’s was so curt, the warrior ended up saluting her instead. There was something odd about the cuff of leather he wore on the hand that remained still at his side. It seemed thick and strangely knobby. It took her a moment to realize that the thick leather was sewn with soot-blackened bells. She caught up to Dagii and fell into step behind him as they strode through tall grass. “Your sentry is wearing bells,” she said.

“All of them are,” he said. “It’s my idea. A knife or an arrow might kill silently, but even if a sentry falls, he’ll make noise.”

“Clever.”

His ears flicked. “I still have the reliquary of Duural Rhuvet. I sleep with it near my bed. I like to think it inspires me.”

Her tremble and her embarrassment returned. The reliquary—a sealed casket a handspan long and wide made of age-darkened iron bound with gold—had languished for generations as an anonymous trophy in a House Deneith memorial until Ekhaas had rescued it. In fact, it contained the brain and tongue of the last great strategist of the Empire of Dhakaan. Ekhaas had recovered it with the intention of placing it in the vaults of Volaar Draal, but on the day Dagii had ridden out of Rhukaan Draal to attack the rebellious Gan’duur, she’d pressed it on him. She hadn’t told Senen. Ashi was the only other person who knew of the gift.

“I am pleased,” she said. “But no legend of Dhakaan tells of sentries equipped with bells.”

Dagii smiled slightly. “The Dhakaani didn’t think of everything, Ekhaas.”

A thick stand of trees rose ahead, remnants of an ancient wood long cleared but surrounded by a fringe of new growth sprung up since Cyre had abandoned this land to Darguun. Dagii led her into it, following a narrow game trail until the wood gave way to an open space cleared by the death of an old tree. He paused, gesturing for silence. For a long moment, they waited.

Finally, a shadow stirred alongside the great fallen tree—and a huge black wolf rose to its feet. Her feet, Ekhaas corrected herself, and not a wolf, but a worg. She knew the beast. “Marrow?” she said. The worg’s tail swished once. Ekhaas looked at Dagii. “Then—?”

“Yes,” came Chetiin’s scarred voice.

Ekhaas turned to find the shaarat’khesh elder crouched beside the game trail as if he’d been there the whole time. And maybe he had.

He stood and smiled at her, teeth flashing in a face stained dark. “Saa, Ekhaas.”

“He revealed himself to me in Zarrthec,” said Dagii. They all sat or crouched in the shadow of the fallen tree, their voices low. “He told me not to tell you until we were here.”

“You should have told me anyway,” Ekhaas said indignantly—and saw something like a smile pull on Marrow’s muzzle and creep into her coldly cunning eyes. She glanced away. The worg understood what they said, even if she couldn’t speak their language.

Chetiin reached up and scratched behind his mount’s ears. “There was no reason to tell you,” he said. “You would have tried to seek me out.”

“I wouldn’t have!” she protested. He just continued to look at her as he scratched Marrow. After a moment, Ekhaas flicked her ears. “Maybe I would have.”

Chetiin’s dark eyes seemed to flash. “When you march with an army, you have little need of additional protection.”

“Protection?” Ekhaas asked. She saw Dagii wince slightly and Chetiin’s ears twitch. She looked from one of them to the other. “What are you talking about?”
“Geth asked me to watch over you during the war,” Chetiin said. “He wants to be sure you make it back to Rhukaan Draal to help dispose of the Rod of Kings.”

“I hope you told him we don’t need watching over!”

Marrow raised her big head at her angry tone and woofed softly as if in warning.

“Ekhaas,” said Dagii. There was command in his voice, the sort of tone she’d heard him use with his soldiers. She closed her mouth. He nodded to Chetiin. “In war, there is a place for any aid that is offered.”

Chetiin returned the nod. Marrow snorted and lowered her head back onto crossed paws. Ekhaas glowered. “When we get back to Rhukaan Draal, I’m going to take Geth up Khaar Mbar’ost and throw him off it.”

“He was worried for you,” said Chetiin. “We spoke the night before the final day of the games. I think he was feeling powerless—a strange thing to say about someone who sat on the throne of a king, but still true. He needs allies. We should make sure we all return to him.” He left off scratching Marrow and reached into a pouch at his waist. “Marrow and I didn’t stray far from your marching route, but we had an interesting encounter today. You know you’ve been watched?”

He held out two severed elf ears, fleshy and lobed like human ears but tapering to long tips. Marrow whined and thumped the ground with her tail. He shook his head at her, holding out the ears to Ekhaas and Dagii.

“Know it?” asked Dagii. “I expected it.”

Ekhaas glanced from the ears—both left ears, so cut from two elves—to him. “You expected it?”

“It would be difficult to move a company of soldiers through territory controlled by the enemy without being noticed.” He sat back. “I’ve never fought the Valenar before. I’ve only heard stories. If we’re going to beat them, I want to see them fight firsthand. I want to see their tactics.”

“I could tell you a dozen stories about battle with the Valaes Tairn,” Ekhaas said.

“Stories,” said Dagii. “I need to fight them myself.”

“You approve of this?” she asked Chetiin. The old goblin frowned.

“I didn’t know about it until now. It’s not the _shaarat’khesh_ way.” His frown became thoughtful. “It makes some sense—if the Valenar don’t decide to overwhelm you in numbers. Their idea of honor is not _atcha_ or _muut_. To them, a victory is a victory, no matter how it’s achieved. The only things they hold sacred are their ancestors and their horses. You can’t count on a fair fight.”

“Then it will be a test of strategy and will. If we can’t beat them here, how will we beat them if they come against the main army?”

Chetiin’s expression tightened. “Geth was right to send me to protect you. You’re mad.” He flicked the elf ears to Marrow, who snapped them out of the air and began to chew at the tough cartilage.

A chill passed through Ekhaas. “If their force is evenly matched to ours, both sides could suffer heavy losses.”

“Then it will be a test of strategy and will. If we can’t beat them here, how will we beat them if they come against the main army?”

“The main army is bigger,” Ekhaas said.

Dagii smiled—and put his hand on her knee. The touch was hesitant but it wasn’t fleeting or accidental. It lingered and Ekhaas could feel it even through the stout steel-studded leather she wore. It took her breath away. Dagii’s face had turned a little dark, but he kept his voice steady. “We’ll beat them, Ekhaas. I promise you.” When he moved his hand, he slipped it away as if reluctant to break the moment of contact.

Ekhaas tried to find words. Chetiin had looked away, politely ignoring the awkward, intimate moment.

“What about the scouts?” Ekhaas managed to say.

Dagii’s smile faded. “They have orders to go back to the main army if they return and we’re not here,” he said. “Not all of them are truly scouting either—a few have stayed and concealed themselves to watch Tii’ator. They’ll carry word back to the army if we’re defeated.”

Ekhaas’s ears flicked. “I begin to doubt your promise of victory. If we’re defeated, will the scouts be able to evade the Valenar?”

“I sent out the best available. Only _taarka’khesh_ of the Silent Clans would have been better,” he said.

Chetiin looked back at that and even Marrow perked up in the midst of her chewing. Ekhaas recalled what Chetiin had once told her, that the worg’s pack had an ancient alliance with the legendary scouts of the _taarka’khesh_ and that she traveled with him as a favor.
Dagii nodded at them both. “I tried to make contact with the taarka’khesh,” he said. “I had no response in either Rhukaan Draal or Zarrthec.”

“The Silent Wolves stay away from Rhukaan Draal at the best of times,” said Chetiin. “They’ve abandoned the city altogether in the wake of Haruuc’s assassination. It isn’t safe for any of the Silent Clans. In Zarrthec, they avoided you because your ties to Haruuc and to Tariic stain you. You’ll have to convince the taarka’khesh of your good will before they’ll work for you.”

“I thought that might be the case,” Dagii said. “I have faith in those I’ve chosen, though. How we proceed will depend on what information they bring back.” He scraped a patch of dirt clear and leaned forward to draw in it with a stick. “The border of the Mournland, the Ghala River, Zarrthec, Ti’ator, Ketkeet, Lyrenton, the Orien trade road”—the stick made two crooked lines, one straight line, and four dots in the black soil—“these mark the limits of Valenar raids so far as we know. A worst-case scenario is that the raiding warbands are operating independently, forcing us to chase them down separately.”

“The Gan’duur did the same thing in their rebellion against Haruuc,” said Ekhaas. “Could Keraal give you insight into that tactic?”

“I asked him. The Gan’duur sought to starve Rhukaan Draal. It’s not clear what the Valenar are trying to accomplish by burning fields and clanholds in an isolated area.” Dagii tapped his crude map. “Ideally, the scouts will find some kind of central staging area and uncover some clue of the elves’ plans.”

“An attack on Zarrthec.” Chetiin touched one of the points on the map.

Dagii nodded. “Maybe, but it seems wrong to me. It’s too obvious.” He made a new mark on the ground, extending the Orien trade road and poking a hole into the middle of it. “The Gathering Stone,” he said. “House Deneith’s primary enclave in Darguun. All of our trade in mercenaries with Deneith flows through there. It would be a difficult target, but a strike against it would be incredibly disruptive.”

“You think they would attack a Deneith holding?” asked Ekhaas. “They contract mercenaries to Deneith, too.”

“Attacking the Gathering Stone would hurt us far more than it would hurt them. I’m expecting anything of the Valaes Tairn. Chetiin is right. To them, a victory is a vic—”

Marrow’s head rose suddenly, her nostrils flaring. She gave a low growl that could almost have been a word and climbed to her feet. Chetiin stiffened and turned around. “Elves!” he said.

Dagii twisted around. Ekhaas’s head snapped up.

She was just in time to see a flash of color among the trees and to catch the blur of motion as arrows flew from singing bowstrings. Chetiin twisted and seemed to vanish into the shadows. With a solid thunk, an arrow sprouted from the trunk of the fallen tree. Dagii grunted and turned his twist into a dive in front of Marrow. A second arrow rang on the plates of his armor, bunched up across his shoulders. A third sank into Marrow’s hindquarters, bringing out a yelp of pain, but at least the one meant for her chest had been deflected by Dagii’s actions.

At almost the same moment, bells jangled loudly up the slope of the hill and closer to the camp. There were other bells as well and voices raised in alarm.

“ToF! ToF! Idad!”

Someone cried out orders but all of Ekhaas’s attention was on the small clearing and the wood around it. Three arrows. At least three elves, trying to take down their unarmored enemies first. She had to make sure they didn’t get another opportunity. Surging to her feet, Ekhaas focused her will, drew song up from inside of her, and flung it at the trees where color had flashed.

Sound burst outward in a wave of dissonance. Leaves stiffened and fluttered as if struck by a strong wind, some of them tearng free to dance on the air. For an instant, she caught a glimpse of two elves still clutching short bows as hands covered ears, dark red leggings and short, close-fitting robes worn over light armor fluttering as the leaves fluttered.

Only two. Where was the third?

A figure leaped out of the trees to her left. Somewhat shorter than a hobgoblin but far more slender, the elf moved with a grace that made Ekhaas feel heavy and slow. Violet eyes blazed beneath a cloth-swaddled, cap-like helm and above a concealing veil. It was difficult to tell if the elf was male or female beneath the veil and the wrapped robes, but there was a delicacy to the brow above the fierce eyes that made Ekhaas guess female.

She held a curved scimitar, broad, but elegant as a hawk’s wing, already raised.

Ekhaas dragged at her own sword, trying to free the blade and knowing she was already too late.

Then Chetiin leaped out of the shadows, launching himself at the elf’s shoulders and head. He tackled her from the left, where she could not easily bring her scimitar around, and swung across to her back. The dagger he carried flashed—and screeched across a metal gorget hidden beneath the veil. The elf ducked and whirled like a dancer. Chetiin’s legs swung free. He jerked his dagger up. Flesh and fabric tore, then Chetiin leaped clear to land in a cat’s
The elf straightened. Her veil hung askew and blood ran from a wound that sliced across jaw and cheek to a pointed ear. She swung her curved sword at Chetiin and missed but continued around in a scything strike at Ekhaas.

But the shaarat’khesh’s attack had given Ekhaas the moment she needed to draw her own sword. The elven blade met the deep-toothed edge of the heavy hobgoblin blade with a crash that jolted Ekhaas’s arm. She wouldn’t last long in a fight against this warrior! Twisting her sword, she locked the two weapons for an instant and kicked out under them desperately. Her boot sank into the elf’s stomach. The elf staggered back. Chetiin leaped again, this time catching the elf around her neck from behind and using his weight to drag her off balance and backward.

Ekhaas stepped back, turned her sword, and swung the weapon in a flat arc. She felt the sharp edge of the blade shear through mail, into the flesh underneath, and back out through mail again. The elf wailed—the first sound she had made—then fell back, letting her scimitar drop and groping feebly for the terrible wound in her torso before sliding to the ground, eyes wide in death. Ekhaas spun to face the remaining elves.

The powerful burst of song had shaken them, but they were pressing in now, bows abandoned for scimitars in the close fight. Lacking the shield he usually carried in combat, Dagii had drawn his sword and waited for their attack. Marrow snarled and circled to their side, limping on three legs, but still moving like a deadly shadow. One of the elves turned to face her.

Dagii roared and charged, sweeping his sword out and driving the two elves apart. Marrow darted in at one, teeth snapping, to force him back. Chetiin jumped atop the fallen tree and ran along its mossy trunk, joining Marrow. Ekhaas moved to fight at Dagii’s side. The warlord’s sword was swinging and hacking in deadly blows, but the elf managed to parry each one, his curved sword a blur of bright metal. He’d learned from the dead elf’s mistake and was careful not to put his blade in a position where Dagii could bind it. Dagii, however, gave him no room to return his blows. They turned around and around each other, locked in a deadly dance.

As Ekhaas joined in, however, the elf’s eyes darted at her, then his free hand dipped into his close-fitting robes and emerged holding a rough ceramic flask no bigger than her fist. Ekhaas’s ears rose sharply and Chetiin’s words came back to her. 

To them, a victory is a victory, no matter how it is achieved.

She whipped up with her sword, aiming for the elf’s wrist.

Dagii did the same, striking down.

The elf, perhaps thinking to seize this opening, thrust his blade forward.

Dagii’s blow struck first, slashing through the elf’s forearm—and driving down the hand that held the flask. A fraction of a heartbeat later, Ekhaas’s blow caught the severed limb and spun it up. Dagii twisted in close and the elf’s thrust skimmed past his back, shock only just registering on the elf’s face. Dagii shoved him hard with his elbow and sent him reeling back half a dozen paces.

The ceramic flask fell free of the spinning hand. Hardly thinking, Ekhaas snatched at it in midair and flung it after the dazed elf.

It hit his armored chest and shattered. Green smoke burst out, writhing up around his shoulders and head. The elf wheezed, shuddered once, and collapsed. The green smoke dissipated, leaving only thin threads of gray drifting from smoldering hair, robes, and veil.

A snarl and a broken wail brought Ekhaas’s attention back to the last of the elves. Marrow had her jaws around the elf’s sword arm and was shaking her shaggy head. Sword already lost, the elf jerked back and forth—then, with a wet tearing, the arm pulled free of its socket. Armor held the limb in place, but the elf’s face went white and his body limp. Marrow shook her head once more and flung him away.

Chetiin was on him instantly, drawing his knife expertly across an exposed throat.

The sounds of combat from the camp were growing. Dagii turned for the game trail they had followed into the wood, pushing his way through tree branches and undergrowth. For the first time, Ekhaas saw the arrow—meant for Marrow—that protruded from high on his shoulder, lodged in armor and flesh. “Dagii!” she called after him.

“You’re wounded. Let me heal you.”

He glanced back at her, then reached over his shoulder and snapped the shaft of the arrow between his fingers, breaking it off short. He threw the fletched wood to the ground. “Heal Marrow,” he said. “Follow when you’re able. Chetiin, stay with Ekhaas. Watch for more ambushers.” Then he turned again and plunged on through the trees.

Ekhaas looked at Chetiin, but the goblin elder only jerked his head at Marrow. Her ears laid back flat, Ekhaas turned to the panting worg, pressed her hand against the beast’s wounded flank and sang as she tugged on the arrow embedded there.
There’s no sign of the rod,” said Daavn. “And no sign of Geth. Maabet, Tariic, he shouldn’t have been able to walk away from the fall he took, but he did. The guards I have searching haven’t found him. No one has seen him. The streets were practically empty this afternoon—anyone who was out had gathered to see you after your coronation.” He pursed his lips and added, “If we could be more specific in our description, it might help. ‘A wounded shifter wearing a black steel gauntlet’ might jog more memories than just ‘a wounded shifter.’”

“No,” Tariic said.

The lhesh stared out of the window into the night. Unlike Tariic, Makka found more to look at inside the chamber than out. The final transition of power in Khaar Mbar’ost seemed to find a reflection here. What had been Haruuc’s royal quarters were now Tariic’s. Old trophies of war had been shuffled out and luxuries brought in. Makka couldn’t have guessed where the rich goods came from other than somewhere beyond Darguun’s borders. Thick carpets in strange patterns. Furniture carved with delicate vines and flowers. Small chests of hammered metal inlaid with bright stones. Sweet-scented candles of uncommonly smooth wax in stands of fine ironwork. All had been haphazardly placed or tumbled about the room, abandoned when Tariic had ordered the servants out.

A grin of pleasure spread across Makka’s face. He belonged to the Fury. He knew the currents of vengeance. When Tariic had told Pradoor about Geth’s treacherous theft of the Rod of Kings, asking if she knew any prayers or divinations to locate lost objects, he’d recognized the hands of the Six. Pradoor knew no such prayers.

As if sensing the smile, Tariic turned and met his eyes. His ears went back. “Pradoor, I permit your servant’s presence. I won’t suffer his insolence.”

“He isn’t my servant, Tariic,” said the old goblin. Pradoor perched on top of a spindly little table, her fingers idly tracing the deep carvings of the dark wood. “He serves the Six. Surely his insolence is no greater than yours.”

Tariic bared his teeth, speaking between them. “Have care, Pradoor!”

“Or what?” Pradoor turned white eyes in the direction of Tariic’s voice. “Perhaps you don’t believe you need to humble yourself before the Six, but you need me. My words brought you the people. My words can take them away.” She smiled and her blind gaze softened. “But there is nothing in that for me, lhesh,” she added. “Continue to show favor to the Six as you promised and I will be your most loyal councilor.”

Tariic’s eyes narrowed, but his ears and face relaxed a little. “You use me, Pradoor.”

“As you use me, lhesh,” said Pradoor, inclining her head. “Consider this my best advice: why do you seek the Rod of Kings with such vigor when you possess what you need? The rod you hold has power even I can feel. All accept it as if it were the true rod. Rule with it and find Geth in your own time.”

“The rod was a triumphant gift from my uncle to the nation. It is my duty to recover the true rod. It would be a shame upon him if I didn’t.” A harsher tone crept into his voice. “And as long as I don’t possess the true rod, there is the risk that the false rod will be revealed. I must have the Rod of Kings in my hands as quickly as possible.”

If Makka hadn’t been looking directly at Tariic—and if Tariic hadn’t been looking at Pradoor as he spoke, his reactions attuned more to her blindness than to anything else—he would have missed the momentary tightening of the lhesh’s face and the darting of his eyes to the false rod where it rested alongside the spiked crown of Darguun on a velvet covered sideboard.

The grin on Makka’s face slipped away. Tariic’s glance had the look of greed, of a hunter who had made a good kill, but still wanted more. Makka felt a twinge of unease.

Tariic seemed to regard the fading of his smile as nothing more than proper concern. The hobgoblin’s ears rose and he nodded to Makka. “Yes,” he said, “there’s nothing amusing in that, is there?” He gathered the tiger skin cloak that was still fastened around his shoulders and sat down in a nearby chair. “Until the rod has been retrieved, this matter is a secret. No one outside of this room is to know that Geth is being hunted. Daavn, find another explanation for the death of the guard he murdered on the stairs. The guards who were with you when he jumped—where are they?”

“Out in the streets. Searching for him.”

“Deal with them.”

There was a hard finality in his words. “Mazo,” said Daavn. “But people will start to wonder what’s become of
Geth.”

Tariic sat back. “I have a solution ready,” he said, ears twitching. “One that Geth himself made possible and inspired.” He raised his voice. “You can come in now.”

A door opened and Geth stepped into the room.

Makka held back his rage, just as he had when he had faced the shifter before the coronation. To be so close to one of those he had sworn to kill and yet be forced to cooperate with him …

Yet something was different. Geth looked nervous, but not startled or ready to attack as he had before. He looked at them all in turn before his eyes finally settled on Tariic and he gave a little bow. Pradoor slapped Makka’s thigh.

“What’s this?” she demanded. “Who’s there?”

“Geth,” Makka growled. “But not Geth.”

Tariic frowned. “Perceptive.” He looked at Geth. “Well?”

“I only met him once,” Geth muttered. “I don’t have much to go on. It would be best if I stayed away from people who know him well. You think this is easy?”

“It’s easier than dying in a corner of my dungeon,” Tariic said. “Show them.”

Geth wrinkled his nose—then his face flowed and changed, becoming dusky-skinned and softly formed with wide eyes milkier than Pradoor’s. Makka’s lips pulled back from his teeth. “Wax baby,” he spat and Pradoor cackled.

The changeling looked more uncomfortable now than he had as Geth. He didn’t look any more uncomfortable, however, than Daavn. The hobgoblin’s ears flicked furiously, almost pulling back flat. He stepped in close to Tariic and tried to whisper in his ear. Makka caught some of his words. “You can’t trust a changeling, Tariic. They’re treacherous—”

Tariic pushed him back. “Daavn,” he said coldly, “this is Ko. Have you ever met before?”

Daavn drew a breath, then spread his hands. “If we have, I didn’t know it. You know what they say about changelings: they all look the same or else completely different—”

The lhesh cut him off. “Ko, have you ever met Daavn of Marhaan before?”

“Not as such,” Ko said without hesitation. “But I met a masked hobgoblin named Wuud once who sounded a lot like him. He hired me to do a job. That job landed me in your dungeon.”

Daavn’s ears flattened. “I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“I do,” said Tariic. “You tried to undermine my uncle by having Vounn d’Deneith kidnapped, Daavn. Somehow Vounn guessed it. She told Geth. Geth tried to warn me about you.”

The warlord of the Marhaan was still and silent for a long moment. Finally, he bowed his head. “I schemed against Haruuc, lhesh. But remember that I also guided you to power.”

“You guided me as a boatman without oars or rudder guides his boat down the Ghaal—I brought you with me.”

Even without crown or rod, it seemed to Makka that Tariic radiated command. “The relationship between us is changed, Daavn. Remember that.” He turned his head. “Have you learned from this, Pradoor?”

Pradoor sat for the space of five heartbeats, as if listening to some distant voice only she heard, then ducked her head as well. “I have, lhesh.”

“I am pleased.” He gestured to Ko. Makka watched, his skin creeping, as the changeling’s features once again shifted into those of Geth. Tariic spread his arms on the arms of the chair, sitting as if it were the blocky throne of Darguul. “Now,” he said, “the real Geth could possibly be hiding anywhere in Rhukaan Draal. Our chances of finding him are slim. However, I’m certain that there must be someone who knows where he is.”

He rose and strode to the false rod, plucking it from its velvet resting place and turning it in his hands. “There could be several reasons Geth might want the rod. Perhaps to sell to another nation. Perhaps to sell to another nation. Perhaps as some remembrance of Haruuc. In any case, the scheme isn’t something he could have created on his own.” His smile exposed his teeth. “He’s brave and stubborn, a good fighter, but not a schemer. He must have had help.”

“Ashi d’Deneith,” Daavn said.

“Ekhaas of Kech Volaar. Dagii of Mur Talaan. Munta the Gray. Any of those close to him.” Tariic seated himself again, holding the rod at an angle against one outstretched knee. “However, Ekhaas and Dagii are beyond our reach—for now. Munta, if he is involved, is nothing. An old man with fading power. Ashi … Ashi is of interest.” He flicked his ears. “And protected by House Deneith.”

“You’ve declared that the gods are not above you, Tariic,” said Pradoor. “Why should the dragonmarked houses be?”

Tariic smiled and contemplated the false rod again. “They’ll fall in time,” he said, “but not yet. We need another way to reach Ashi.”
“Or we forget her,” Daavn suggested. “What about Midian Mit Davandi? He’s only here because you hired him. You’re his only protector.”

Blood seemed to thunder in Makka’s skull, driven by the recitation of the hated names—and an abrupt understanding of what Pradoor meant when she talked about the turning of ages. Fate seemed to focus on him at that moment, as if it was the will of the Fury that he should be here, in this room, at this moment. He stepped forward, feeling like he walked through water. “I can reach Ashi,” he said. “I can reach any of them. I hunt them already—the Fury knows my oath.”

Ko and Daavn flinched back. Pradoor smiled, her ears twitching. Tariic’s eyes narrowed. “Why do you hunt them?” he asked. “Who are you?”

“They destroyed my tribe’s camp and turned my tribe against me. I have taken an oath of vengeance. The Fury guides me. She blesses this hunt.” He crossed his arms over the bat-winged serpent on his chest. “I am Makka.”

The lhesh’s ears pricked up. “Makka?” His eyes went to the sword at Makka’s side and the bugbear knew he recognized it now. A thoughtful expression passed over Tariic’s face, then he smiled. “I have heard of you, Makka, though the stories I’ve heard are from another point of view.”

Daavn moved closer to him. “Tariic, you can’t let him—”

Tariic waved him to silence, gaze still on Makka. “Priests of the Fury aren’t known for their subtlety,” he said.

“I’m no priest,” said Makka, showing his teeth. “I am the Fury’s warrior. When I fight, I fight. When I stalk, I stalk. I can reach Ashi of Deneith for you—and her house will know nothing of it.”
The healing song took only moments to work through Marrow’s flesh, but they were moments in which Ekhaas could hear commands, screams, and curses from beyond the trees. The instant the deep puncture closed, leaving a hairless patch the size of her thumb among Marrow’s dense fur, Ekhaas rose and crept cautiously up the game trail that led out of the grove. Chetiin and Marrow came after her—or at least she thought they did. Goblin and worg vanished in the shadows. Ekhaas had a sense that they were still close, but she couldn’t see or hear them.

At the edge of the trees, she paused, sword ready, and looked out.

The tall grass of the hillside had been trampled by a fight. The sentry who had been so confused by Dagii’s curt nod lay dead a little way up the slope. Blood from a slashed throat soaked the ground, but his bell-covered wrist remained outstretched.

Lithe forms in red garb and veils flowed over the hill like cats racing across a field. At the edge of the camp, hobgoblins and bugbears formed up into a perimeter two ranks deep. Shields and spear points flashed in the firelight. Ekhaas recognized the voices of Keraal and the two lhurusk who commanded the soldiers shouting orders—contradictory orders, she thought. The surprise of their attack spoiled by Dagii’s strategy of bells, the Valaes Tairn prowled just beyond spear’s reach, looking for an opening.

“The ranks are too thin,” said Chetiin. “They’ll crumble.” His scarred voice seemed to come from right beside her, but she had to look twice to find him and Marrow.

“At least the elves aren’t riding.”

His ears twitched. “Not all of the Valaes Tairn fight from horseback. It doesn’t make them any less deadly.”

Ekhaas scanned the hillside for Dagii and found him hugging the wall of the ruined clanhold. A hobgoblin on his own—the elves would turn on him as soon as they spotted him. He needed a distraction to give him the chance he needed to join his soldiers.

He looked down the hill and saw her. As if he guessed her thoughts, his ears went back and he shook his head. She raised her ears in response and bared her teeth. Then she focused her attention on a point of the hillside below the camp and behind the prowling elves. A breath drew up her song.

The magic passed her lips as a whisper, but burst out behind the elves with the roar of a tiger.

The attackers whirled. Whatever misgivings Dagii might have had about her causing a diversion, he took advantage of the moment’s confusion. He charged, howling a battle cry. His sword slashed one elf across the back of the leg, taking him down, then cut deep into the belly of another who spun to meet him. Realizing they been tricked, more elves turned to him. The ranks of Darguul soldiers strained as warriors took an unthinking step, ready to defend their commander.

“Hold position!” Dagii roared. “Archers, give cover!”

From high up in the ruins of Tii’ator clanhold, arrows spat down on the ground between Dagii and the elves. One took an elf warrior, pinning veil to throat. Another struck a shoulder, but most only forced the elves to check their advance. A few arrows hissed up from the base of the hill—the Valaes Tairn had archers in concealment as well—but they fell short. The ranks of hobgoblins opened like a parting curtain and Dagii plunged through. He disappeared, but his voice rose. “Archers, loose!”

Arrows fell again, this time carefully aimed. The elf who had taken an arrow in his shoulder took a second in his chest. Other elves danced back, some struck, others simply avoiding the deadly rain. They were on all sides of the camp though, and the archers in the ruins were forced to divide their efforts. Ekhaas saw one of the hobgoblins silhouetted for a moment against the starry sky; the heavy bow he carried seemed too thick to bend, yet bend it he did, and another elf died.

“Form up—double fortress!”

The thin lines of the Darguul perimeter dissolved and reformed into two solid rectangles of soldiers parallel to each other with camp and campfires between them. Ekhaas caught another glimpse of Dagii. He’d claimed a helmet and a shield. Three other hobgoblins clustered around him for a moment: Keraal with his chain and the two lhurusk. Keraal and one of the lhurusk were nodding, but the other one seemed inclined to argue. His hand thrust toward the second formation of soldiers.
Dagii’s fist, still wrapped around the hilt of his sword, punched out and cracked him in the jaw. The struck hobgoblin staggered, then ducked his head and joined the distant column. Dagii sent the other lhurusk with him, then he and Keraal melted into the first formation.

“Archers, hold!”

The arrows stopped. For a moment, the night was still, the Valenar waiting for the Darguuls to move, the Darguuls waiting for the Valenar.

Then a scimitar flashed up, whirling around the head of its wielder as she let out a high, musical war cry—and abruptly the night was filled with war cries. The elves ran at the defenders, not as disciplined dar might, but singly, each elf fighting alone. They darted and cut and dodged, their red garb like dancing flames in the night.

“Hold position!” Dagii commanded. “Hold!”

The wave of elves broke and receded for a moment, and Ekhaas saw that for all its apparent ferocity, that attack had been a show. She couldn’t see the faces of the veiled elves, but their posture was stiff and their weapons trembling. They were disappointed, she guessed. The mock attack had been intended to break the enemy formation and draw them out. The Darguuls had resisted.

An elf voice screamed. The wave crashed forward again.

This time, the scimitars flashed out in earnest. “Forward ranks, attack! Archers, loose!” roared Dagii.

Spears thrust at the elves. A few found flesh, but the elves were clearly used to this tactic and many slid or ducked to come up inside the reach of the first rank—only to encounter spears jabbed forward by the second rank underneath the arms of their comrades. At the same time, the first rank of Darguuls dropped their now useless spears and drew swords. Arrows rained down on those elves who hung back or tried to pull away, making retreat almost as dangerous as staying close.

And yet a band of elves had leaped into the gap between the two rectangles of dar, leaping bedrolls and campfires. They didn’t, however, attack the defenders, and Ekhaas knew immediately what they were up to. They were going for the gaping charred doors of Tii’ator. They would try to take the ruined clanhold and seize the high ground from the hobgoblin archers.

She started to rise, to shout a warning, but Chetiin grabbed her hand and pulled her back down. “Dagii knows!” he rasped—just as the warlord of the Mur Talaan shouted out, “Rear ranks, close!”

The rear ranks of each rectangle spun around and slammed together like the jaws of a vise. The running elves found themselves trapped. Scimitars turned against heavy dar swords as they tried to fight their way clear.

Chetiin drew breath through his teeth. “The elves will call for their archers soon. Marrow, with me.” He turned black eyes on Ekhaas. “Stay hidden! The elves will be looking for a spellcaster now. Hopefully they’ll think you’re fighting among the ranks in the camp.”

He turned and disappeared without another sound into the shadows. Marrow padded along with him, cold vengeance in her eyes. Ekhaas looked after them for an instant, then up at the struggling elves and dar, and made her decision. She wasn’t going to stay out of the fight like a coward.

She rose to her knees, watching the battle and at the same time listening to the darkness. After a long moment, she heard a muffled thump, like a falling body, from the direction Chetiin had gone. At least one of the unseen elf archers was no longer a danger. She crept forward in the long grass, then stood, singing as she moved. Magic danced along her skin. She felt it as a tingling, a kind of scraping as if her flesh were being gently drawn apart; then, like a soap bubble, the feeling burst. The song flicked away from her and took on another form.

Three more Ekhaases rose out of the grass alongside her. Thin echoes of song tied them to her—what she did, they imitated. She strode up the slope of the hill, closer to the battle. Elves who had managed to escape the close fighting and retreat for the moment cried out as they saw her. Or rather, as they saw them.

The warriors acted just as she’d hoped they would, in the heat of battle seeing four figures, lightly-armed scouts perhaps, instead of just one surrounded by magical illusions. Three of the elves broke off and came gliding toward her, eager for an easy kill to dishearten their opponents. Ekhaas smiled and eased sideways a little so the Valaes Tairn were across the hill from her rather than uphill with Darguuls at their back—

One of the elves brought up a bright throwing knife, hurling it with a snap of his arm.

She threw herself aside, a move that was both too slow and completely unnecessary. The knife flashed in the air and plunged through one of her illusory duplicates. Ekhaas felt as much as she saw her double wink out of existence.

Even if the knife hadn’t struck it, she’d given herself away. Not even the most coordinated troops would dive for cover with the same movement. She spoke a little Elven, more than enough to understand one of the elf warriors as he pieced together what had just happened. “Spellcaster!” he shouted. “She’s a spellcaster!”

No time now to draw them closer to her. Ekhaas cursed, rolled back to her feet—the elves were charging,
bounding across the hill—and sang again. Not an illusion this time. Not a diversion. Not a stunning burst of sound. The song that rippled from her lips was dark and deep, a haunting song that played across hearts like footsteps in an empty room or the distant cry of carrion birds. The strides of the elves faltered. Above their veils, their eyes grew wide. One began to tremble, his scimitar falling from his hand.

They turned and fled, gripped in the terror inspired by her song. They weren’t the only ones—two more, caught by the edge of the magic, fled with them. Another two, perhaps sensing a shift in the tide of battle, went too.

Seven of the Valaes Tairn taken out of the fight. Perhaps not dead, but as good as until they stopped running. Her side of the hill was nearly empty of living elves. Only a handful were still on their feet. The fighting had shifted to the other side of the hill, beyond the remains of the Darguul camp, and even that sounded like it was growing less frantic.

The same commanding elf warrior whose whirling scimitar had signaled the Valenar attack seemed to realize the same thing. She thrust away from the hobgoblin she had been fighting, raised her scimitar again, and this time Ekhaas heard distinctly the orders she cried. “Arrows! Feather me these dogs!”

But no arrows fell out of the darkness except those loosed from the ruined clanhold. The elf’s veil had been dragged aside in the fighting and Ekhaas saw her fine-featured face twist in rage. Her scimitar fell as the hobgoblin she’d thrust away came at her again and he went down with his shoulder half cut from his body. Ekhaas ran forward, but the elf was turning away, hand reaching into a pouch to produce a ceramic flask very much like the one the elf in the trees had carried.

With a swift motion, she hurled it into a campfire burning at the back of a knot of hobgoblins. The fire erupted into a column of gold-white flame that blasted all those nearby, defenders and attackers alike, off their feet. The Darguul defenders took the worst of it though: their backs smoldered and two hobgoblins lay where they fell, unmoving.

The elf commander turned again, a second flask in her hand, and took aim at another fire. “Stop her!” Ekhaas shouted.

A chain hissed out of the battle and wrapped around the elf’s raised forearm. The whipping metal spun up her wrist and hand, hitting the flask—and shattering it. Shards and golden dust rained down over half of the elf’s face. Her eyes opened wide and she shrieked in agony. Red welts streaked her skin wherever the dust touched. She dropped her scimitar and groped at her face, but Keraal still held the end of his chain. With a tremendous heave, he yanked the elf off her feet to squirm on the ground. His free hand grabbed the fallen scimitar and drove it into her back.

Shrieks and squirms ended. Once again silence fell on the night as Valaes Tairn and Darguuls stared. Then the dar were shouting in victory and the last of the elves were fighting to escape. Hobgoblins moved to pursue the red-garbed forms that darted into the night but Dagii’s stern voice called them back. “Let them go! The battle is ours!”

A cheer rose. A trio of bugbears grabbed Keraal where he stood, panting for breath, over the body of the elf commander, and hoisted him onto their shoulders. Keraal stared around in surprise and his eye fell on Ekhaas. He grabbed one of the bugbears and tried to point at her, but Ekhaas just shook her head and stepped back.

Dismissing her remaining illusory duplicates with a whisper of song, she went to find Dagii.

She found him walking among the victims and the survivors of the attack. He saw her and nodded, but stopped first beside a young warrior crouched over the body of a fallen elf, flipping through the folds and pockets of her clothing. The warrior glanced up, saw who it was, and sprang to his feet, thumping his chest in a salute. Dagii looked him up and down. “Who are you?”

“Faalo of Rhukaan Taash, thevk’ruh.”

“You killed this elf?”

Faalo straightened. “Yes. My first kill in real combat.”

“A good clean blow.” Dagii examined the wounds on the body. “Well done.” He clasped Faalo on the shoulder, a moment of contact between two comrades in victory. Faalo seemed to stand even straighter, his ears high and proud. Dagii released him and came to Ekhaas.

“I saw what you did,” he said.

“Driving off seven elves or giving you a chance to join your soldiers?” she asked him.

“I was thinking of the elves.” His gray eyes narrowed. “The diversion was not so well done. I could have made it back on my own. You put yourself at risk.”
“At more of a risk than facing seven elves?” Amber eyes met gray.

“Chetiin shouldn’t have let you do that either.”

“Chetiin went to deal with the elf archers.” She dropped her eyes and looked him over. His armor had new dents and scratches. The links of mail protecting one side of his torso were broken and his stance favored that side, though no blood seeped through the padding beneath the armor. A thin bloody scratch traced the line of his jaw just beneath his helmet. She stepped around him, examined the stump of the arrow that still stuck out from the back of his shoulder, and snorted. “I’ll give you healing now.”

“There are warriors who need it more than me.”

“You are their leader. They look to you for command. You need to be healthy.” She pushed him over to one of the remaining campfires. “Take off your armor so I can get the arrowhead out.”

His face flushed. “Not in front of the troops!”

“Why? I’m a duur’kala. I’m offering you healing.”

The muscles of Dagii’s jaw tightened and his mouth pressed into a thin line. He reached up—a little awkwardly because of his side and his shoulder—and pulled off his helmet. The shadow-gray hair that had come early to him fell lank and sweaty. Ekhaas helped him remove his mail coat and the padding beneath. Ekhaas started to peel away the light linen shirt he wore beside his orange-red skin but Dagii caught her hand. “Leave it on,” he said with a little embarrassment in his voice.

“It will be ruined.”

“I have others.”

She nodded. Dagii sat down on an abandoned pack and she went around behind him. Slowly by his armor, the arrow hadn’t penetrated deep, but it had dragged bits of padding and linen with it into the wound. Ekhaas tore the hole in the shirt a little wider, then took a firm hold of the broken shaft and pulled. Crusted blood broke and fresh blood seeped out. Dagii grunted softly, but she could feel the tension in the broad muscles beneath her fingers. A leather flask had also been abandoned by the fire. She opened it, sniffed and tasted the contents, then sluiced water over the wound until it was clean. Then she pressed one hand over the hole and sang a healing song.

Dagii drew a short breath as the magic worked on him. Ekhaas could feel a little of the song as well, vibrant and energizing. She shifted the song, sending it deep into his flesh, and reached around him with her other hand to touch the place where an elf scimitar had broken his armor. He flinched slightly at the second touch, then relaxed into it. Maybe she allowed herself to sing slightly longer than was absolutely necessary.

The clearing of a throat made both her and Dagii jump a little bit. Keraal and the two lhurusk stood a discreet distance away, carefully looking anywhere but directly at them. Ekhaas ended her song and stepped back. Dagii rose and the three waiting hobgoblins came forward as if they had only just seen the two of them standing there. All three were smiling, even the lhurusk that Dagii had struck. “A triumph, Dagii!” he said.

“You fought well, Uukam—and you, Biiri.” He nodded to both lhurusk, then to Keraal. “And you, Keraal. Ta muut.”

Keraal didn’t bend his head. “Ekhaas duur’kala turned the tide,” he said. “Her song started them running. But a triumph?” His ears lowered and he shook his head. “I wouldn’t call it that.”

Biiri and Uukam looked ready to protest but Dagii raised a hand to them. “I agree with Keraal. How many warriors did we lose?”

“About half,” said Biiri. “Twenty or so. It could have been worse.”

“Yes,” said Dagii, “but it could have been better. I count ten dead elves.”

“Five more fled at the end,” said Keraal. “Ekhaas forced seven away.”

“Four archers lie dead in the dark. Plus three who tried to ambush us.” Chetiin came strolling past Ekhaas.

The reaction from Keraal, Uukam, and Biiri was immediate. They grabbed for their weapons and dropped into defensive crouches, their ears back and their teeth bared. “Shaarat’khesh!” snarled Uukam.

“Easy!” Dagii said. “He’s a friend. He’s—”

“I’m Maanin,” said Chetiin smoothly. “I’m with Dagii to redeem the honor of the Silent Clans.” He crossed his arms and waited. Slowly the three warriors lowered their weapons, though Keraal was the last to do so. His ears twitched and he looked to Dagii and Ekhaas, then nodded.

“Maanin,” he said. He looked back to Dagii. “One of the Silent Blades instead of one of the Silent Wolves?”

“Do you want to argue with four more elves dead?” Ekhaas asked him.

Keraal’s eyes narrowed but he bent his neck in the slightest of nods.

“Maanin’s place here is not the issue,” Dagii said. “Ten elves dead here, four and three dead below the hill,
twelve fled in fear or defeat.” He put his hands on his hips and looked around at all of them. “Twenty-nine Valaes Tairn sent against forty Darguuls. If not for Ekhaas’s song, I think that more than half our number would be dead right now. Don’t claim a victory here—claim a lesson learned.”

The others had no response.
Dagii nodded. “Uukam, Biiri, give the warriors a short time to celebrate, then order them back to discipline. The camp needs to be restored and sentries set again. It’s possible the elves may try their luck again. Keraal, pick out those who fought worst in the battle—they’re to collect the dead and bury them in the morning.”

Keraal’s ears flicked. “Those who fought worst are already among the dead,” he said with the ghost of a smile.

Dagii returned the smile, then jerked his head dismissing all three. When they had gone, he looked down at Chetiin. “Maanin?”

The goblin seated himself on the pack by the fire. “You don’t want to be seen with Haruuc’s assassin, do you? Trying to defend my innocence to all your warriors would only raise more questions. Better that I be someone else for a while.”

“You could have stayed in hiding,” said Ekhaas. “Keraal knows something isn’t right.”

“Hiding isn’t always an advantage. Tell Keraal the truth later. When there are fewer things to concern him—and you.” Chetiin glanced up at them. “I followed the fleeing elves a short way. I doubt that they’ll return tonight, but the odd thing is that they had no horses.”

Ekhaas narrowed her eyes. “You told me that not all Valaes Tairn fight from horseback.”

“They don’t,” said Dagii, “but all of them use horses for transportation. If they didn’t ride, their camp must be close.” His smile became grim. “We can scout them out.”

“Marrow can track them by scent,” Chetiin said.

Dagii nodded. “Let me find some light armor. Something that won’t give us away.” He looked at Ekhaas. “You’ll come?”

“Try to stop me.”

“You should find some light armor and a less rattling weapon for Keraal and bring him too,” said Chetiin.

Dagii’s ears rose at the suggestion. So did Ekhaas’s.

“He’s already suspicious of you,” she said.

“Suspicions are like gardens—left untended, they grow wild.” The goblin’s thin lips pressed together for a moment. “But in this case, I like the idea of an extra sword at my side. The Valaes Tairn are cunning.”

“I’ll find Keraal,” said Dagii.

Keraal, outfitted in leather with a sword at his side, reacted to Marrow with surprise at first, then gave her a deep, respectful nod. The worg growled something to Chetiin, who smiled.

“What did she say?” asked Keraal.

“She appreciates your gesture of submission but says that only pups present the back of the neck.”

Keraal’s ears flicked and he addressed himself to Marrow, “I doubt I would survive your tenderness, mother.”

Marrow’s tail waved rapidly, her ears flipped forward, and her mouth opened so that her tongue hung out. She looked, Ekhaas decided, amused.

“Humor, Keraal?” asked Dagii.

The other warrior’s mouth set in a firm line. “It happens sometimes,” he said.

Marrow led them into the night. The campfires faded behind them, obscured by trees and the rolling landscape until only the sharp finger of the ruined clanhold was visible against the sky. Biiri and Uukam had orders to break camp and return to the main army if Dagii didn’t return by mid-morning. They had tried to persuade him not to go, but Dagii had insisted with the same argument he had given Ekhaas: he needed to see the Valaes Tairn forces for himself.

For a while, the trail of the fleeing elves was so easy to see that Ekhaas could have followed it herself. She supposed that the elf warriors she had frightened with her song had made it, driven by their fear without a thought for stealth. Here and there, blood made a smear on the ground or on a leaf, evidence that at least one of the elves had been wounded in the battle. As the obvious trail of broken branches and crushed grass faded, Marrow moved to the fore. She cast about, sniffing, then stopped, whuffed sharply, and growled at two trees.

Chetiin found a long branch on the ground and approached the trees cautiously, tapping ahead with the branch. It caught something. Chetiin peered at the trees though Ekhaas could see nothing. Taking a few steps back, the goblin
flung the branch.

There was a snap and a short hiss. The branch jerked and fell apart in three pieces, the leafiest piece somehow remaining suspended and bobbing gently in the air. “Come look,” Chetiin said. “It’s safe now.”

Ekhaas ventured forward. Three thin dark wires curled up close to one of the tree trunks. The leafy branch was caught in the embrace of one. A broken tripwire showed how the trap had been triggered. “They were stretched between the trees,” said Chetiin. “A goblin walking into that trap would have been seriously injured.”

“Will there be more traps?” asked Keraal.

“There might be,” Chetiin admitted. “But I think it’s more likely this was set as a warning, to deter pursuers or at least make them wary and slow them down. We should be fine.”

“Should be?” Keraal said.

Chetiin shrugged.

“Keep alert,” ordered Dagii. “Marrow, show us the way.”

The elves must not have anticipated the presence of a scent-tracker—the worg was able to follow their trail with ease, even when there was absolutely no visible sign of their passage. Once or twice, false trails appeared, seemingly accidental traces indicating that the elves had turned this way or that, but Marrow led them right past. Just as Chetiin had suggested, there were no more traps. Accounting for variations forced by the landscape, it seemed to Ekhaas that they were heading consistently to the east.

The realization brought a chill to her flesh. She leaned close to Dagii. “We’re heading for the Mournland.”

“I know.” His voice was taut. “They must make their camp close to the border. No one would be likely to wander this close.”

The guess was proved wrong as they came around the shoulder of a hill. Across a broad, very shallow valley the dead-gray mists of the Mournland’s border rose into the sky. Ekhaas had been close to the mists before, close enough to hear the screams and roars of the unseen monsters that made the cursed land beyond their home. Tonight, in this place, the mists were quiet, hanging like a drifting, billowing curtain. The valley, marked by the small, dry riverbed, lay empty but for a few withered trees under the moonlight. There was no elf camp.

They all stopped and stared. Ekhaas looked away to the north and the south. “Maybe they turned aside here,” she said.

Marrow’s hackles rose and she growled. “They didn’t,” Chetiin translated.

“Who would want to make camp in the Mournland?” asked Keraal with a grimace.

“Someone who wanted to hide from prying eyes or magics,” said Dagii. “Someone desperate or frightened enough might flee there to throw off pursuit.”

“Do you think the Valaes Tairn were that frightened of us?”

“No,” Dagii said. “All the more reason to believe they’ve camped there.” He slipped off down the gentle slope into the valley, moving from stunted tree to stunted tree.

“He is mad, isn’t he?” muttered Chetiin, but he moved down after the young warlord.

One by one, they followed Dagii in to the valley. Only Marrow didn’t stick to the dubious cover of the trees, instead flowing like a sleek black shadow along the faint rise and fall of the valley floor. Nose to the ground, she trotted all the way to the very edge of the mists before returning to join them in the shadow of the crumbling riverbed. She snarled and whimpered, and Chetiin said, “That’s the way they went, but the mists smell”—he paused, searching for the right word to translate the worg’s language—“wrong. Unnatural.”

Ekhaas searched her memory for anything she’d heard of the Mournland. “They say that laws of life and death are suspended there—that wounds don’t heal and dead flesh doesn’t decay. Water, plants, and animal life are tainted.”

“It’s true,” said Chetiin, his scarred voice unexpectedly soft. “I’ve been there. Don’t count on your healing songs, Ekhaas. Don’t count on anything—nothing is as it seems. We’ll need to be careful. If the Valenar raiders have made camp inside the border, they’ll be extra vigilant because of the Mournland’s dangers.” His face tightened. “The mists may be a problem. They’re disorienting.”

“Won’t Marrow be able to track through them?” asked Dagii.

Chetiin gave him a curt nod, “Yes, but they confuse more than just your sense of direction. If you feel anything … odd, if you feel like you just want to lie down and sleep, fight it.”

“We’re going in and out,” Dagii said. “We won’t stay long and we won’t fight unless we have to. We see what we need to of the Valenar camp and then we leave.” He looked around at each of them, then nodded to Marrow. The worg loped up the bank, Dagii close behind.

There was no need for a warning to stay together. Ekhaas knew that they all understood it implicitly. The wall of
mist drew closer and closer as they climbed the valley’s far slope—then all at once, they were inside it, as if the Mournland had reached out to claim them.

Moons and stars were completely cut off. By rights, she shouldn’t have been able to see any better than a human in the dark, but somehow she could. A dim radiance seemed to permeate the mists, as if they caught the moonlight, rendered it thick and opaque, and smeared it through the air. She could see no more than two paces in front of her. Chetiin was a shadow and Dagii, walking beyond him, a ghost. Ekhaas felt no shame in reaching ahead to put one hand on Chetiin’s shoulder and reaching back so that Keraal could grasp the other.

The mists were slightly cool, but not cold. If she stopped moving and the heat of her body warmed the air around her, she probably wouldn’t feel anything at all. Sounds were at once magnified and muffled as if she held a great glass vessel around her head. Her footfalls on the ground—which was dry in spite of the mists—were as quiet as if she walked on green grass, yet her breathing was loud in her ears. She swallowed and heard it like a big stone dropped from a height into a still pond.

It was impossible to tell if they were moving. The mists were constant, the rise of the land—or maybe its fall—so gradual that it could have been level. She understood what Chetiin had meant when he said the mists could be disorienting. It would be easy to wander in circles. Easy too to simply stop and stand still …

“Ekhaas.” Keraal’s voice. A push from behind her. Startled, she stumbled. Her hand left Chetiin’s shoulder. Instantly, the goblin’s small hand seized hers in a hard, rough grip.

“Keep walking,” he said.

“I thought I was walking.”

“It’s the mists.” He sounded tired.

There was a muffled sob from ahead. “Dagii?” Ekhaas called.

“It’s nothing.” His voice was thick.

“Nothing?” Keraal now. Ekhaas looked over her shoulder. His face was drawn and wracked with guilt. “My clan is dead. I led them to their destruction. You know my grief, Dagii. Tell me yours.”

“No, I can’t. I … can’t.” Dagii struggled. “I—”

“Fight it,” Chetiin murmured like a distant echo. “You must fight it.”

Ekhaas ground her teeth together and dragged up a song from inside her. There was magic in it, but not the focused magic of a spell. Rather it was a simple magic, just as it was a simple song, the kind of tune heard in every dar drinking hall—or the drinking halls of any other race for that matter. Into it she poured all of the bawdy joy that she could, singing it as loud as she dared.

“Ahhh, when I was a baby, my mother gave me suck.
She changed my clothes and wiped my nose and tied my hair for luck.
But now that I’m a warrior, I hold other things more dear.
I love my sword, I love my song, but most I love my beer!”

She heard Keraal snort in amusement. She squeezed his hand and Chetiin’s. “Sing!” she said, and launched into the chorus.

“Beer! I love my beer! Beer I love! I love my beer! Be-eer-eer-beer!”

Slowly and dirge-like at first, the men joined in, but their song gained strength until even Dagii sang “Be-eer-eer-beer” with an offkey lustiness. By the time she launched into the second verse, their joined hands were swinging back and forth in time to the song.

“When I was a child, my father gave me sticks.
He told me they were spears and blades and taught me many tricks.
But now that I’m a warrior, I keep my weapons near.
I have my sword, I have my shield, I also have my beer!
Beer! I have my beer—”

In no story that Ekhaas had ever told or even heard had the heroes crept up on their enemy while simultaneously singing a drinking song. In fact, she was fairly confident that no duur’kala had ever heard of such a thing. There was no dignity to it. There was precious little stealth. If there had been elves lurking in the mist—though she couldn’t imagine that they would linger here—they probably would have dismissed the whole spectacle as an illusion too odd to be believed.

And yet it was ridiculously fun. By the time Marrow came to a halt and huffed at them in warning, they were all laughing softly, the terrors of the mist banished. Up ahead, the mists were thinning and honest moonlight filtering through. Marrow sat down on her haunches and growled at them. Keraal, wiping tears out of his eyes, choked, “Yes,
mother! As you say, mother!

Chetiin chuckled. Marrow actually looked bewildered.

Dagii drew a deep breath, steadying himself. “Move to the side,” he said, gesturing. “If the elves come this way frequently, they may have sentries posted.”

They followed him, each of them struggling to suppress the lingering humor of the song that had seen them through the mists. Ekhaas gulped lungfuls of air, pride warming her belly. Dagii caught her eye and gave her a thin smile that was as rewarding as gold.

As they emerged from the mists, she could feel the wrongness of the Mournland that Marrow, through Chetiin, had tried to describe. The air felt too thin, the moonlight too harsh. The stars didn’t twinkle but instead seemed hard as ice. There was a smell in the air that reminded her of a lightning strike or certain powders burned in an alchemist’s furnace. Even the land had changed—somehow they stood just below the rocky brow of a steep slope, though she was certain that they hadn’t climbed anything more than a gentle grade. Looking back along the brow, she could see a gap, probably the start of a way down the other side and likely the way that the elves had gone.

The boulders lining the brow of the slope made climbing easy, but Chetiin still reached the top before any of them. Staying low to avoid presenting a betraying silhouette, he stuck his head up over the edge, froze for an instant, then ducked back down, his eyes very wide. With one hand, he waved them all forward. With the other, he gestured for absolute silence.

Dagii reached the edge next. Ekhaas watched his ears stand before falling back flat against his head. Then she was at the edge, too, and peering between two boulders down into another wide valley—

—at a camp that stretched from one side of the valley to the other. Tents made a small town. Horses picketed together at the center of the camp made a herd that could have raised a noise like thunder if they’d been running. Next to the picketed horses stood a pavilion flying a long swallow-tailed banner with a pattern of stars. There was activity at the pavilion. The survivors of the attack on Tii’ator were likely reporting their defeat. Ekhaas tried to guess at how many elves moved beneath the harsh moonlight and how many more might be asleep in those tents. Far more than the four or five warbands Tariic had anticipated in his rousing speech in Khaar Mbar’ost.

Dagii touched Ekhaas’s hand and motioned for her to go back. All of them slipped carefully to the ground and joined Marrow back at the edge of the mists.

“Maabet!” cursed Keraal. “That’s a full Valaes Tairn warclan. They’re hiding an entire warclan in the Mournland! How did they get them all through the mist?”

“I don’t know,” Dagii said tightly, “but they must have some trick. How many do you think there are?”

“Three hundred,” said Keraal at the same moment as Ekhaas and Chetiin said, “Four hundred.”

Dagii nodded. “We’ll assume the worst. Four hundred Valaes Tairn warriors. Based on our experience tonight, enough to crush our troops without lathering their horses.”

“What do we do?” asked Ekhaas.

“We laugh our way back through the mists,” Dagii told her in tones that brooked no laughter whatsoever. “We return to Tii’ator, dispatch all of our messenger falcons in the hope that at least one makes it to Khaar Mbar’ost, then we run back to the main army, make a stand outside Zarrthec, and hope we can slow them down.”

Keraal grunted agreement. Chetiin nodded. Ekhaas looked at all three of them. “Slow them down? If they get through us, they won’t have far to go to reach Zarrthec.”

Dagii bared his teeth. “They’re not interested in Zarrthec, Ekhaas. They didn’t bring that many warriors to attack a village, and if they wanted to harry the countryside they would be doing it already instead of hiding here. A force of that strength is meant for a big target. They’re planning an attack on Rhukaan Draal.”
Safe,” said Aruget and led Ashi and Vounn across a small square. Krakuul watched their rear. Ashi could have told Aruget the square was clear of assassins, assailants, thugs, thieves, or any other danger. Darkness was falling, but there was still enough light for her to see the streets of Rhukaan Draal. The houses that lined the streets here were built of stone with high, windowless outer walls that could have seen off a casual attack. It was as wealthy and peaceful an area as the city could boast—a pleasant place for a dinner party, a terrible place for an ambush. She scowled at Aruget’s back.

Vounn poked her in the ribs. Ashi forced her face to return to neutrality and wondered what Krakuul thought of Aruget’s new caution. She hoped he was as frustrated as she was. The lump at the back of her skull, two days old now but still tender, throbbed as if to torment her.

Down the street, guards stood before a door marked with the crest of House Cannith. A warforged, metal body swathed in a gown stiff with intricate embroidery, appeared from inside the doorway. “Lady Seneschal Vounn, Lady Ashi, welcome to Cannith enclave.”

In marked contrast to a mask-like face and green glass eyes, the warforged’s voice was lively, warm, and surprisingly delicate. Even more than the gown, the voice and a certain way of moving made Ashi think instinctively of the warforged as a woman in spite of her muscular frame and bald head. The effect was disconcerting, and she had to force herself to nod when the warforged offered a graceful curtsy.

Vounn didn’t even blink. “Thank you, Stitch,” she said. “We’re late. Has dinner begun?”

The warforged ushered them into a narrow, high-ceilinged entry hall. “Lady Dannel has waited for you, lady. I’ll show you to the library. If your guards care to go to the kitchen, they’ll find refreshment.” She indicated an unobtrusive door just inside the main entrance.

Aruget looked at Vounn, scowling, but when she gestured he and Krakuul vanished through the door.

The lines of the house were clean and fine, the walls and floors faced with polished stone, yet there was a strange echo about the place as if it was more than half empty. Ashi tried to sneak a look around as Stitch led them through the entry hall.

The warforged caught her curious glances. “The enclave in Rhukaan Draal was built at the same time that House Cannith was constructing Khaar Mbar’ost and other projects for Lhesh Haruuc Shaarat’kor,” Stitch said. “At the time, there were many more members of the house in Rhukaan Draal than there are now. But we cling to our pride, don’t we?”

“Oh … yes,” said Ashi, but Stitch had already turned away to open a fine wooden door ornamented with nothing more than its natural grain.

“Lady Seneschal Vounn d’Deneith and Lady Ashi d’Deneith,” she announced.

In a library with walls lined with velvet drapes and dark bookshelves, nearly a dozen people looked back at them. Ashi saw Pater d’Orien and Esmyssa Entar ir’Korran. She recognized most of the others: the ambassadors of Breland, Karrnath, and Aundair, the envoys of Houses Vadalis and Medani. Dannel d’Cannith, envoy of her house, strode up to Vounn, welcoming her with a smile.

Just the wealthy and powerful of Darguun’s visiting dignitaries gathered for dinner—as if there was absolutely nothing wrong.

Two days before, with the sounds of the city celebrating Tariic’s coronation drifting in the window, Ashi had sat with a cold cloth pressed to her head in the chambers she shared with Vounn and listened to the hobgoblin and the lady seneschal argue.

“You hit her?”

“She would have tried to attack Daavn and his guards, Lady Vounn.”

“So you hit her?”

“Lhesh Tariic sent Daavn after Geth. If Ashi had attacked him, she would have been interfering with the lhesh’s orders.” Aruget gave Vounn a level look. “Would Deneith have been able to protect her?”
That won the argument for him. Vounn gave him cold thanks for his discretion, sent him away to find out what had happened to Geth—and turned her attention to Ashi.

“You protected me with your dragonmark. You told me not to trust Tariic. Geth has clearly done something to anger him. You’re clearly involved.” The lady seneschal’s expression, normally as calm and controlled as still water, was like a storm. “No more evasions, Ashi. What’s going on?”

There was no way around it. Ashi had given too much away already and even when she tried to hold back, it all came rushing out. She confessed everything, from the pact that she and the others had made to keep the rod’s power a secret to Haruuc’s discovery of the curse, to Geth’s decision to seize the rod after the assassination and Midian’s idea to present the new lhesh with a false rod, to the fear that had pierced her at Tariic’s reaction during the coronation. The only thing she managed to keep secret was Tenquis’s name.

Red spots of color appeared high on Vounn’s cheeks. She sat down stiffly and didn’t move or speak for a long, long time. When she did finally speak, it was to say, “You’re leaving Darguun.”

Ashi’s head snapped up. “I won’t! Geth needs me now more than ever!”

“You would rather be arrested for conspiracy?”

“It’s not a conspiracy—”

“It is,” Vounn said harshly. “You may have had the best of intentions, but what you have done is conspire against the throne—and in every nation of Khorvaire, that’s a crime. If you were a Darguul, it would be treason. Is there evidence? You’re Geth’s friend, so suspicion will fall on you, but is there hard evidence?”

Her gut felt numb. “Geth’s word, but Geth would never betray me or any of us.”

“If Tariic is serious about rooting you out, he may not give Geth a choice.” Vounn closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and put her hands on Ashi’s shoulders. Her voice was tense but not so angry. “If you had attacked Daavn, Tariic would have had a reason to arrest you—you should thank the Host that Aruget stopped you. He had the right of it. Unless he has evidence that you’ve done something wrong, Tariic would be putting himself against Deneith if he tried to take you captive.”

“And if he has a reason to arrest me?” Ashi asked.

“Then I’ll have to give you to him.” Vounn looked into her eyes as she said it. “He won’t want to anger us, but we don’t want to anger him. Deneith values our contracts too highly. You’ve dug yourself a grave, Ashi. We need to get you out of Darguun before you’re forced into it.”

“Abandon my friends or you’ll abandon me?” Ashi gave her a bitter smile. “What if I don’t give Tariic any reason to arrest me? What if Geth doesn’t betray me?” The smile twisted a bit. “What if he escaped Daavn? I’ll have left my friends in danger for nothing.”

“You want to take a chance on that?”

“It’s what you’re doing.” She lifted her chin stubbornly. “My friends took a chance on me once, Vounn. They gave me the strength to leave the Bonetree Clan.”

“Some people would say you repaid that debt by giving yourself up to House Deneith when you had to.”

“Are you one of them?”

Vounn’s lips pressed into a thin white line and she looked away—but anything she might have said was interrupted by a knock on the door and Aruget’s entrance. The hobgoblin must have sensed the tension in the room. His ears flicked. “Should I come back?”

“No,” said Vounn. “Report. What have you found out?”

“I’ve seen Geth,” Aruget said. Ashi’s heart gave a lurch. “He walks with Tariic in the hall of honor in advance of the coronation feast.”

“How did he look? Was he a captive?” Ashi asked.

Aruget shook his head. “He didn’t walk like a captive. He looked uninjured, though he had changed his clothes since the coronation. There was a crowd around Tariic—I didn’t want to get too close.”

“Was Makkathe bugbear from the coronation—there?”

“No.” Aruget hesitated, then added, “I went past Geth’s chamber but there were guards outside his door and I didn’t try to go in.”

“It would have been suspicious if you had,” Vounn said, nodding. “What about Daavn? Did you see him at all?”

“No.”

Ashi stood up. Between her argument with Vounn and Aruget’s news, her blood seemed to boil. Her head felt light. Geth hadn’t been captured—or had he? If it had been anyone else, she might have been afraid that Tariic had used the Rod of Kings to command that they stay by his side, but thanks to his bond with the Sword of Heroes, Geth
was immune to the rod’s influence. There had to be some reason he’d stayed with Tariic, though. “I need to talk to Geth. We need to know what happened.”

“Sit down, Ashi.” Vounn’s eyebrows drew together as she thought. “Is it possible that there’s another explanation for what happened at the ceremony? Geth doesn’t like spectacles—and he did seem friendly with Tariic as they left the throne room.”

“At which point he bolted for his room like a rabbit.” Ashi shook her head, teeth clenched. “It’s not my imagination. Something is wrong, Vounn. If I can talk to Geth—”

“You can’t,” Vounn said with a note of finality. “You are going to stay in these chambers while we figure out the status of things.” Ashi started to protest, but her mentor silenced her with a raised finger. “I will grant you that the situation doesn’t seem as dire as I thought. Maybe Geth is on good terms with Tariic and there’s nothing to worry about.”

Ashi saw Aruget’s ears twitch and rise at the hint of trouble.

Vounn ignored him. Lips drawn down at the corners, she said, “You can stay in Darguun for now—at least until we know whether you’re in danger or not. But there are two conditions.” She held up a finger again, then added a second one. “First, don’t give Tariic any reason to take an interest in you. Stay in our chambers and keep your head down—I’ll pass word that you’re not feeling well—while Aruget and I make a few discreet inquiries. Second, we make arrangements to get you out of Darguun, and when I tell you to leave, you leave.”

She lowered her hand. “Your friends took a chance on you. You’re taking a chance on your friends, and now so am I. Does that satisfy you?”

It would have been impossible to be completely happy at that moment. Ashi still had too much anger and fear inside her and Vounn’s face was set in spite of her offer of compromise. It was also, Ashi knew, the best aid she could hope for.

She nodded.

The long table in the Cannith dining room had been set with delicate porcelain plates ringed with silver and remarkable goblets of cut glass. The big candelabras that marched down the center of the table were likewise cut glass. The flickering candlelight—no cold, steady magical light here—danced through them. Esmyssa Entar ir’Korran, seated in a special tall chair, leaned between two of the dazzling pillars. “We haven’t seen you in Tariic’s court since the coronation,” the Zil ambassador said.

“I’ve been ill,” said Ashi.

Esmyssa gave an understanding nod. “I’m so glad that you were able to come tonight, though,” she said. “You weren’t in Rhukaan Draal long enough to join one of our dinners before Haruuc sent you off. Then of course, the business with the Gan’duur and mourning afterward. I’m sure you’ll find the evening interesting.”

“I hope so,” Ashi said with a politeness that she didn’t really feel. “Vounn insisted that I make the effort to attend.” She shifted aside slightly as a servant’s arm reached past to place a shallow bowl of soup in front of her. It was creamy, fragrant, and golden. Seated on Ashi’s left, between her and Vounn, Pater d’Orien breathed deep.

“Oh,” he sighed. “Aundairian. Beautiful. Proper food from the Five Nations—not that I have anything against dar cuisine, but sometimes you want to sit down with friends over a meal that reminds you of home. I’m sure you understand what I mean, Senen Dhakaan.”

On the other side of the table, Senen’s ears bent slightly. “More than you know, Lord Pater,” she said. She picked up a spoon and stirred the soup dubiously. “It seems rich.”

“Senen started to scoop up a little of the soup, then glanced at Dannel d’Cannith, chatting casually with Vounn while the rest of the table was served. The ambassador of the Kech Volaar set her spoon down again and sat back stiffly. Ashi understood her discomfort in the situation—it reminded her strongly of her own first experience with the etiquette of formal dining in the style of the Five Nations. To tell the truth, she preferred dar feasts and the fashion of eating as food was presented. But seeing Senen here at all was a surprise. It had taken quite some time for the strongly traditionalist hobgoblin to find common ground to even talk with Vounn. To find her eating with non-Darguuls was a sign that she was opening up a little bit more.

If having Senen there was a surprise, though, it was nothing compared to the other gnome who had stood at Esmyssa’s back when they’d entered the library. Midian now sat at the far end of the table, chattering about Dhakaani history to the half-elf viceroy of House Medani. As they’d passed from the library into the dining room, Ashi had managed to exchange a few words with Midian—a very few words. "What are you doing here?"
“I suspected you’d be coming, so I talked Esmyssa into bringing me as a guest.”

“Have you seen Geth since—?”

He’d interrupted her, dropping his voice. “We’ll talk later.”

The last guest was served. Dannel d’Cannith picked up her spoon, and everyone at the table began eating. The soup was indeed rich. Pater slurped it up with a look of pleasure on his round, rough face. Ashi watched Senen work through her bowl with the dogged determination of someone set to a chore.

Conversation flowed around Ashi, light and casual. Esmyssa attempted to engage Senen with questions about the ancient history preserved by the Kech Volaar and the other Dhakaani clans. On Ashi’s right, the envoy of House Vadalis, a lean man named Kavrin, struck up a question about the wildlife of the Shadow Marches. Ashi described the beasts and monsters she had seen as a hunter of the wild swamps, a pleasant distraction as the soup bowls were removed and replaced with fish poached in Brelsh stock. Fish gave way to pork roasted and sauced in the Karrnathi style. Ashi kept her eyes and ears alert. Around the meat course, Vounn had said—that was when it would happen.

And, just as she picked up her fork, it did. Seated beside Dannel and across from Vounn, the ambassador of Breland, leaned a little forward and asked Pater, “How goes the process of supplying Darguun’s army?”

Pater sipped a little wine—Ashi saw abruptly that the servants who had stood behind the table, ready to refill empty glasses, had departed and that only the warforged Stitch remained—and said, “It goes well. Orien has lent an aide to Dagii’s quartermaster and he sends me reports. There was some expectation that the Valenar might attack the supply wagons, but there haven’t been any attacks yet.” He raised his glass. “Pray Kol Korran keeps it so!”

Like the first punch thrown in a brawl, the question changed the tone of conversation around the table. Abruptly Ashi found herself in a bubble. All around her, everyone was talking about the war and Tariic, but perhaps believing that a junior envoy would have nothing to add, no one talked to her. She didn’t dissuade them. Not being talked to gave her a better chance to listen. Esmyssa turned to the Aundairian ambassador on her other side to ask his opinion of the impact of the war on Khorvaire at large; the Aundairian was tight-lipped and grim. Kavrin d’Vadalis discussed the Valenar cavalry capabilities with the Karrnathi ambassador on his right. Senen and Midian both became sought-after partners in the discussion as they related stories and histories of past conflicts between ddr and elves, sometimes glaring at each other and arguing when what they told clashed. Dannel, Laren, Vounn, and Pater quietly spoke of Tariic’s new power and what he might do with it. In the two days since his coronation, he had divided his time between public appearances and the assembly of warlords, stirring pride in the Darguuls and whipping up sentiments against the Valenar—and all elves by extension.

A game was in play around the table, with each ambassador and envoy offering up a little bit of what they knew in return for new knowledge form the others. Here and there, hints revealed plans. Vadalis hoped to convince Tariic to purchase their strong and tough magebred mounts for his army. Breland would increase patrols along their side of the Seawall Mountains in case Darguul warlords were stirred up too much, while Karrnath, having more direct experience with the Valenar, wondered if the distracted elves might pull away from their northern territories. Zilargo had hopes that the war would be brief and Tariic would settle into the role of peaceful, predictable ruler. Everyone talked about House Lyrandar and Sindra d’Lyrandar’s conspicuous absence from Rhukaan Draal.

“We gather with our own,” Vounn had told Ashi as they’d prepared for the dinner. “We know what we’re doing, we know what we trade. We each bring a thread and from them weave a tapestry none of us could have woven alone. Everyone leaves on even footing.”

And Vounn, Ashi saw quickly, was one of the most able players of the game. She spoke only a little, but listened with intensity, and Ashi felt sure that if a tapestry was being woven tonight, Vounn sat at the loom and threw the shuttle.

Senen, surprisingly, was another able player. She might not have been familiar with the table manners of the Five Nations, but she was surely a veteran of intrigues among the Dhakaani clans. Her ears flicked rapidly back and forth, as if she was listening to several conversations at once. Ashi realized that with a lhesh now on the throne, the Kech Volaar and Darguun might draw closer to an alliance again. Ekhaas had confided in her that Senen suspected that she was involved in something. Ashi wondered if the ambassador could have suspicions of Tariic as well.

Plates were cleared and glasses emptied. A lull fell into the conversation, as if the diplomats had sated their need for information along with their hunger. Ashi saw Dannel give a glance and a nod to Stitch. The warforged stepped out of the room. Dannel smiled at those seated around the table. “Let us adjourn to the library. We have sweet wine and cheese to finish.”

She rose and her guests rose with her, Vounn, however, caught Pater’s hand and held him back as the others left the room. Ashi, waiting for the signal, stayed as well. “Pater,” said Vounn, “I need a favor.”
The eyebrows on Pater’s round face rose slightly. “There are worse things than having House Deneith in your debt.” His voice was pleasant but his gaze was suspicious. “What do you need?”

“I think Baron Breven will recall Ashi to Sentinel Tower in Karrlakton soon. I’ve put him off before, but I don’t think I can delay again. Ashi will have to leave Darguun.”

The lie was simple and completely believable because it was mostly true. When Pater glanced at her, Ashi didn’t need to feign her frustration.

Vounn continued her appeal smoothly. “Unfortunately, with conditions as they are in the country, the route could be dangerous. We’ve had no word from Dagii’s army or from Zarrthecc. It’s possible raiders could be scouting the trade road.”

“I haven’t heard anything from our caravans,” Pater grunted.

“You don’t rule out an attack on your supply wagon,” Vounn reminded him. “If I move a force of mercenaries guarding one person up the trade road, I expect the Valenar might find that too tempting a target to resist.” She gestured to Ashi. “Can you take her? I mean, are you capable of taking her should the need arise?”

Pater screwed up his face and cast an eye over Ashi. She felt as if she was being sized up as cargo—which, strictly speaking, she was. House Orien bore the Mark of Passage. Pater’s dragonmark, though not the most powerful of Orien’s marks, allowed him to step instantly across vast distances. Vounn had told her it was an ability that the viceroy seldom used and then only to carry urgent letters and parcels, but that it was theoretically possible for him to transport a passenger on his long-distance jaunts.

She found herself holding her stomach in, as if that would make her look like a lighter load.


“Of course,” said Vounn. “I regard it as a favor that you’re willing to do it at all.” She clasped his hands and smiled. “Thank you.”

Pater’s face didn’t relax. “One step follows another, Vounn. You wouldn’t ask me like this if it was a simple transport.”

“And you wouldn’t agree if it was just a simple transport. I know you, Pater.” Her smile took on an edge. “Not all dangers wait along the road. No one will suspect your involvement. I intend to organize a mercenary escort and send Ashi out of Rhukaan Draal with them—you meet her outside the city, on the other side of the bridge over the Ghaal River, and take her from there. Attention will remain on the escort, which will disband a reasonable distance from the city with no sign of Ashi—or you. Will you do it?”

Pater glanced from her to Ashi. “Aye,” he said. “I will. Give me a day’s notice when you need me.”

“Thank you, Viceroy Pater,” Ashi said. She stepped forward and bowed slightly. “I appreciate this.”

They strolled out of the dining room. Ashi followed in their wake along the short passage that connected library and dining room.

She didn’t even see Midian until he grabbed her wrist and tugged her back into the shadow of a large decorative urn.

“You’re leaving?” he demanded.

“You heard that?”

“I hear a lot more than people think I do.” His eyes glittered. “I know about Tenquis.”

He’d learned the name. “How—?”

He scowled. “Finding an artificer was my idea. You don’t think I could ask the same questions as Ekhaas? Now it’s your turn. You’re leaving?”

Ashi looked around. The urn concealed Midian completely, but what hid a gnome didn’t hide her. “Not here,” she said. “Somewhere private.”

Servants had entered the dining room to clear away the dinner plates. Midian, still holding tight to Ashi’s hand, led her the other way along the passage, away from the library and up a flight of stairs. A door opened onto an airy gallery with ornate filigree screen panels forming a long wall open to the night. They were up high, well above the street. The gallery was unlit and dim to her eyes, though Midian moved with confidence.
“Don’t touch the screens,” he warned her. “They’re Cannith gearwork, trapped to keep out thieves.”

“How did you know this was here?”

“I had a look around before dinner.” He let go of her hand and turned to face her. “Let’s try this again. You’re leaving?”

“Not if I can help it,” Ashi told him stubbornly. She described her attempt to reach Geth after Tariic’s coronation—and her subsequent conversation with Vounn. When she had finished, Midian let out a hiss of frustration.

“I wondered why you hadn’t left your chambers for the last two days. Your guard Aruget told me you were ill whenever I came around.”

“What did you make of what happened at the coronation?”

“I couldn’t see anything. A fat lump of a bugbear pushed in front of me. Not that I was all that eager to be seen once Makka strolled onto the dais.” Ashi could make out Midian’s face—he was chewing nervously on a thumbnail.

“Sage’s quill. Tariic may know about the false rod.” He glanced at her, his blue eyes flashing in the moonlight. “So if you leave, what happens to me, Ekhaas, and Dagii?”

Ashi shook her head. “I’m not leaving yet. Vounn just wanted to make arrangements. She spoke with Tariic yesterday on business for Deneith, and she says that he doesn’t act like he suspects anything. Or at least he doesn’t suspect us. She hasn’t spoken with Geth yet, though. Aruget hasn’t gotten close to him either.”

“Neither have I. I wanted to talk to him, but I couldn’t find him. I have seen him with Tariic a lot though.” He hesitated for a moment, then added. “What if Tariic has the true rod? What if he’s found some way to dominate Geth?”

“He can’t. Wrath protects Geth.”

“Here’s the thing, though—whenever I’ve seen Geth, he’s not wearing Wrath.”

“I don’t think that matters,” Ashi said. “When we recovered the rod, he was disarmed, but the rod still couldn’t affect him.”

“Then why won’t he talk to us, and why isn’t he wearing Wrath? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” Uncertainty and fear stirred in Ashi’s gut—along with grim determination. “But we’re going to find out. We need to talk to Geth. Come see me tomorrow. We’ll decide what to do.”

Midian nodded, then said, “We should get into the library. Vounn has probably missed you by now, and she’ll know something is up when we come in together.”

“That doesn’t bother me,” Ashi said. “She’s had me out tonight. She can’t confine me to our chambers now. Maybe we are in danger, but we need to get answers while we can.” She clenched her jaw. “And Geth is the only one who has them.”

“...”

“And Geth is the only one who has them.”

Stretched out on top of the thick outer wall, Makka hugged a clenched fist to his chest and bared his teeth. When I fight, I fight. When I stalk, I stalk. The first time he had confronted Ashi and Ekhaas, he’d made the mistake of fighting without properly stalking his prey. He’d been too hasty. He’d forgotten the lessons of the hunt. The Fury seemed to appreciate revenge well-savored, though. Patience and stalking—even with the pathetic caution of Deneith’s hobgoblin guards—had paid off.

His decision to scale the walls of the building Ashi visited had paid off, too. As had his accidental touch of the great screen an armslength above his head. Whirring metal springing to life had gouged the skin of his fingers and palms, but the instinct of freezing in the shadows rather than running had both saved him from discovery by guards and put him in exactly the place he needed to be.

Not just Ashi of Deneith but the gnome Midian too.

The door in the screened chamber closed. Makka offered a silent prayer of thanks to the Fury, rose to his feet, and moved with silent steps back to the deep shadows where he had climbed up.

Careful stalking was one of the lessons of the hunt. Choosing proper bait for the trap was another.
He’d had this dream before.

Adolan sat across the fire from him. The druid’s face was calm under his red-brown beard. His eyes were the same color as the fresh oak leaves tied to the heavy shaft of his spear, with pupils as black and shining as the collar of stones around his neck. “Are you just passing through?” he asked.

Geth could smell the stink from his own body. It had been a long time since he’d bathed. The rank odor blended with smoke from the fire, the sizzling juices of the chicken that charred on the rough spit above it, and the cool damp scent of the deep forests of the Eldeen Reaches. There was another smell, too, like hot copper. It seemed out of place, but Geth ignored it.

“Maybe,” he answered the druid. “Maybe not.”

Adolan’s eyes bored through him. “You should move on.”

Geth looked at him. That wasn’t right. He repeated the words he’d said to Adolan the night that the druid had confronted a wandering, chicken-stealing shifter. “Yes. Just passing through.”

“Good. Be on your way.” Adolan rose, supporting himself on his spear.

“What?” Geth dropped the chicken he’d been holding and jumped to his feet. “No!”

“Why not?” The face across the fire looked genuinely surprised. “You want to stay here?”

“I’m supposed to,” Geth said. “That’s what happens, Ado. You convince me to stay in Bull Hollow.”

“Not this time. This time you have to keep going.” Adolan turned away.

The pain of the rejection was a giant fist wrapped around Geth’s chest. He felt a piercing ache in his side, like broken ribs. The hot copper smell grew stronger. He grabbed for his sword, drawing Wrath—and a part of him knew that was wrong, too. He’d still carried a plain Deneith service blade when he’d encountered Adolan. That wrongness didn’t stop him from pointing the twilight blade and shouting “Stop!”

“Or what?” The figure that turned was small and dressed in black. It spoke with a strained, scarred voice. Chetiin. In his hand, he held the Rod of Kings. “I’m your friend, Geth. What are you going to do?”

Chetiin turned around again and leaped through the window that grown in the middle of the forest. “No!” Geth screamed. He sprinted after the goblin.


Adolan, watching. And maybe a little sad.

Geth tried to stop, to turn back, but it was too late. He plunged through the window, and the stones of the plaza below Khaar Mbar’ost rushed up to meet him—

He jerked and snapped upright, a roar tearing itself from his throat. From somewhere close, there was a yelp, the crash of shattering glass, and a stream of curses. Body trembling, Geth stared around. He sat in a high bed, threadbare sheets twisted around him. A low, raftered ceiling was close overhead. To either side of the bed rose stone walls that stopped well short of the ceiling and the opposite wall. The hot copper smell of his dream filled the air.

A moment later, Tenquis peered around the corner of one of the short walls. The tiefling’s expression, at first cautious, hardened and he stepped around to stand at the foot of the bed, glaring at Geth with his golden eyes. “Horns of Ohr Kaluu, can you do anything quietly?”

Geth squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then opened them again and the strange bedchamber made sense. The last moments of his flight from Khaar Mbar’ost came back to him. He was in Tenquis’s home, the one-time barn. The short walls closing in the bed were the sides of stalls. Cows had once slept where the bed stood. Geth lay back, wringing a sickening ache out of his side that echoed the agony of his dream. He raised his head enough to look down at himself. His chest was wrapped in bandages. More bandages swaddled his left arm, and there was something thick and crusty smeared across his face over his cheekbones. He reached up with his right hand and
whatever was on his face crumbled into a lumpy powder that left his fingertips dark and glittery. The flesh underneath was tender.

“A healing compound,” Tenquis said. The anger faded from his face, replaced by a certain self-satisfaction. “Faster than a body on its own, slower than true magic. A good artificer needs to know something about anatomy, as well as alchemy and artifacts. You had several broken ribs, a broken arm, a broken cheekbone, and were badly bruised all over. Your left hip had a deep wound that was just barely healed—magic or some shifter gift, I assume. The bruising is gone. Your hip is completely healed. The broken bones are likely mended, although you’ll want to be careful of them. They’ll be like green wood for a few days yet.”

Geth bent his bandaged arm experimentally. More dark, glittering powder ran out between the fabric strips. “I … Twice tak, Tenquis.”

The tiefling wrinkled his nose. “You did pass out on my doorstep. It would have attracted attention if I’d left you to die in the street—and once you were inside, I had to do something or I would have had to get rid of the body.”

It was hard to tell if he was joking. Geth waited for him to laugh or smile, but he didn’t. Finally Geth broke the silence. “There’s been trouble.”

“I suspected it.” Tenquis’s voice was flat. His fleshy tail snaked slowly back and forth through the air. “I really was tempted to leave you in the street, but since I’d guess this has something to do with the false rod, whatever happened to you puts me in danger, too.” He cocked his head and his gold-flecked black horns flashed in the light of the lanterns that lit the barn. “Lhesh Tariic discovered the deception.”

“Good guess,” said Geth.

“I wish it wasn’t. Given that you came on the night of his coronation, it seemed obvious, though.”

“Wait.” The tiefling’s words settled into his head like leaves drifting to the ground. “On the night of Tariic’s coronation? How long have I been here?”

“Three nights.”

“Three?” He sat up again, threw his legs over the side of the bed, and stood—almost. Tenquis darted in and grabbed him before his legs folded completely.

“Give yourself a moment,” he advised.

Geth nodded numbly. He wore only his smallclothes. Tenquis dragged a sheet off the bed and draped it around him, then helped him out into his workshop in the main room of the barn.


“Easy.” Tenquis guided him to a table and pulled out a straight-backed chair so he could sit. Geth grabbed the back of the chair and hung on. Tenquis shrugged and let go. He left him holding onto the chair, fetched a broom, and began to clean up a mess of broken glass and thin, smoking liquid.

Across the workshop, Geth’s clothes lay on another table together with Wrath and his great gauntlet. Geth shook out his legs, took a deep breath, and walked—wobbling only slightly—to the other table. Tenquis paused in his sweeping to watch him. “In a hurry?”

“I’ve been in a bed for three days. I need to get out. I need to find out what’s been happening.” Geth held onto the edge of the other table and let his breath catch up with him.

“As far as I can tell,” Tenquis said, “not much.”

Geth stared at him. “What do you mean ‘as far as you can tell?’ And what do you mean ‘not much?’”

Tenquis ignored him, tipping a bucket on its side, sweeping the glass and smoking liquid into it, then shaking sand from a second bucket over the remaining liquid. When he’d finally finished, he looked up at Geth and flashed sharp white teeth in a sly grin.

“Did you think I was sitting by your bedside? I may make good guesses, but there’s only so much I can glean from someone who’s unconscious. And I’m not the kind of person who waits for trouble to come creeping up on him. While you were sleeping, I went out to see what kind of danger I was in.”

He set the broom aside and moved around the workshop, gathering things—a basin, a brush, hot water from a small iron stove—as he spoke.

“That first night, there were guards from Khaar Mbar’ost looking for a shifter in parts of the city, though not around here and not for long. By dawn, there was no more search. Tariic’s been putting himself on display to the people for the last two days. He’s getting them ready for war with the Valenar—not that dar need much encouragement. I want to see one of his speeches so I could get a look at him, and I noticed two interesting things. The first was that whatever he might know about it, he was still using the false rod. I recognize my own magic.” He
stopped in front of Geth, basin held in his arms. “The second thing is you shouldn’t be here because for all appearances, you were there, standing with Tariic.”

Geth’s lips peeled back from his teeth. “How—?”

“A changeling? An illusion disguising someone else?” Tenquis shrugged again. “How it’s been done doesn’t matter so much as that it’s been done at all. Someone, whether it’s Tariic or someone else, is trying to cover up the fact that you’re missing. And given that neither you nor Tariic has the true Rod of Kings right now, I’m going to guess that someone else has it. Am I right?”

Geth blinked, then nodded slowly.

“Boiled down, yes.” He looked at Tenquis for a long moment and the tiefling looked back. Questions raced through Geth’s head. What had happened to Ashi and Midian? Where was Chetiin now? Had Dagii and Ekhaas engaged the Valenar? What was Tariic up to?

The one that made it to his tongue, though, was, “Why are you doing this? You didn’t want anyone to know your name. You didn’t want to be involved.”

“I told you—whatever happened to you puts me in danger too. If Tariic knows about the false rod, he could find a way to track it back to me. I think we’ve just been lucky that he hasn’t.”

“No,” said Geth, shaking his head. He felt ashamed at the suspicions that gnawed at him. Tenquis had hidden and healed him. Why shouldn’t he trust him? But he’d trusted Chetiin, too. “I mean why are you still here and not halfway out of Darguun? Why go out looking for answers?”

“Like I said, I’m not one for letting trouble creep up on me.”

“Trouble’s not going to creep up on you if you’re in Breland or Aundair.”

“If I were Tariic and I was looking for the true Rod of Kings, a little thing like distance wouldn’t stop me. But your point is taken.” Tenquis grimaced and set the basin, brush, and water down on the table. “I thought about running—for about the time it takes water to boil. The thing is, I don’t run easy. Most tieflings have the fury of ancient devils in their blood. I’ve got the other side of our heritage too: the curiosity of the sorcerer-kings who made deals with those devils.”

His tail lashed from side to side. “You know I’m interested in the lost lore of the Dhakaani daashor. Darguun is the place to be to look for that lore. Ekhaas still owes me the stories preserved by the Kech Volaar. You still owe me time with your sword and I have a feeling that if I stay with you, I’ll find out even more. Why would I give that up by running?” Tenquis crossed his arms. “When I was young, my grandmother said to me, ‘Quiso, curiosity has consequences—if you’re going to ask questions, you need to be ready for the answers, or they’ll take you down hard.’ I’m all for self-preservation, but outright fear is something else, and I haven’t seen anything yet that makes me think I should be afraid of helping you.”

Geth looked at him again, suspicion turning into a strange camaraderie for the feisty artificer. “Are you sure about this?” he asked. “You really don’t know what you’re getting into.”

“If I were Tariic and I was looking for the true Rod of Kings, a little thing like distance wouldn’t stop me. But your point is taken.” Tenquis grimaced and set the basin, brush, and water down on the table. “I thought about running—for about the time it takes water to boil. The thing is, I don’t run easy. Most tieflings have the fury of ancient devils in their blood. I’ve got the other side of our heritage too: the curiosity of the sorcerer-kings who made deals with those devils.”

He was. “Ravenous. Like I haven’t eaten for three days.”

“I’ll cook something and you can tell me all about what I’m really getting into.” Tenquis stepped behind Geth and the shifter felt him unfastening the bandages around his chest. “Let’s start with how you ended up looking like you found the bad side of an angry ogre.”

“I jumped out of Khaar Mbar’ost.”

The hands on his bandages paused. “You’re joking.”

Geth thought of the stones of the plaza rushing at him. His belly clenched and rose at the memory. “I wish I was,” he said.

The tiefling was not a good cook. The stove on which he made their food seemed to be the same one on which he heated various experiments. The spices and herbs he used came out of jars plucked from among others that Geth felt certain contained alchemical ingredients. The bowl he eventually put in front of Geth contained balls of starchy noon bobbing in an over-spiced broth alongside uncertain meats, mushy vegetables, and bits of black loosened from
the bottom of the pot. More noon balls, slightly stale, were served as bread, with hard cheese, slightly moldy, on the side.

But with one bite, Geth’s hunger seemed to explode and he ate everything. As he spun out the story of the Rod of Kings, however, Tenquis’s appetite appeared to shrivel. Finally, he pushed his bowl away. “So the true rod wants to make its wielder an emperor bent on conquest and can give him the power to make it happen. Tariic knows about the true rod and is aligned with Makka, who wants to kill all of you. Chetiin has betrayed you twice and currently has possession of the rod. Two of your allies are off to fight the Valenar and the other two are likely under Tariic’s watchful eye.” The artificer slumped on his stool. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“Killed a dragon once.”

Tenquis’s gold eyes opened very wide.

Geth shrugged. “I thought you might find that reassuring.”

“It disturbs me that you were in a position where you had to fight a dragon.”

“No dragons this time. At least not so far.” Geth lifted his bowl and swallowed the last of the broth. “I want to find out what’s happened to Ashi and Midian. I need to know if Tariic has harmed them.”

“I have a better idea,” said Tenquis. He leaned forward. “Track down the true rod first.”

Geth growled as he set the bowl down. “How are we supposed to do that? Chetiin could have taken it anywhere, and he’s hard enough to keep track of when you’re looking right at him.”

“The same way you found it before, of course. Use Wrath.”

Geth blinked and looked at the tiefling. Tenquis spread his hands. “It stands to reason, doesn’t it? You say the duur’kala opened a connection between them so you could locate the rod in the wilderness of Darguun. Is there any reason the connection shouldn’t still exist?”

“I … hadn’t thought of it.” Geth shook his head. “I haven’t tried it since we brought the Rod of Kings back to Haruuc. I just thought the magic would end when we found it.”

Tenquis snorted. “The sword is still the sword. The rod is still the rod. Try it.”

Geth rose, went to the table where Wrath lay, and drew the sword from its sheath. It felt good to hold the twilight-purple blade in his hand again. The grip, the weight and feel of the sword—even the sense of it at the edge of his awareness—had become familiar to him. Geth moved to the open center of Tenquis’s workshop, held out the sword, and opened himself to it.

He felt the pull immediately, a draw toward the sibling artifact that had been crafted from the same vein of byeshk and by the same as hands as Wrath. The same pull he had felt when they’d first sought the rod. Turning slowly, he found the direction in which the pull was strongest. “That way,” he said. “I can’t tell how far it is, but the rod is that way!” He grinned. “Grandmother Wolf, that’s perfect!”

“Chetiin probably assumed the same thing you did,” said Tenquis. He got up from the table. “I assume you’re ready for a little scouting?”

“Almost.” Geth sheathed Wrath again, then picked up his great gauntlet and slid his arm into it. Tenquis had repaired the dented metal and the joints of the armored sleeve moved freely once more. Geth tightened the straps that held it in place, flexed his arm, and bared his teeth. “Now I’m ready.”
They walked out of Tenquis’s workshop into a day that was cool and bright, though gray clouds were piling up in the east. Geth could smell rain on the wind, faint behind the odor of the kitchen and workshop scraps that Tenquis had used to disguise him. Egg and carefully drawn soot gave him wrinkles while ash streaked his hair. Walking with a hunch and hanging onto Tenquis’s arm completed the appearance of an aged shifter. Not so impenetrable a disguise as the illusion Ekhaas had created, but it would do the job. If Tariic had people watching for Geth, they wouldn’t give him a second glance.

“You should hope they don’t,” Tenquis said when Geth admired his handiwork. “This kind of trick works better at night. Keep your face down so no one gets a good look at you.”

Geth had checked the direction Wrath pointed before they left and they went that way, west and somewhat north. The twisting, crowded streets of Rhukaan Draal forced them make frequent detours and left them guessing that they were going in the correct direction. Fortunately, the winding path didn’t require them to pass close to Khaar Mbar’ost.

The influence of the mighty fortress—or at least of its new master—seemed to have grown, though. Geth could feel a new edginess to the crowds in the streets, a new aggression and confidence among the dar. People of other races stayed out of their way. Weapons, not uncommon before, were even more apparent. Small groups of militia drilled wherever there was open space.

“You can thank Pradoor as well as Tariic,” Tenquis said. “She’s well-known. People put a lot of store in her words. The last few days she’s been preaching in support of war with Valenar and in support of Tariic.” He rubbed the horny spikes that edged his chin. “If she’s joined with Tariic, it would explain a few things.”

“Like?” Geth growled.

Tenquis pointed as they turned a corner and Geth followed his finger—not that what he pointed at would have been hard to miss. They stood on one side of a crossroads where five streets came together. At the center of the intersection stood a flat-sided pillar of white stone surmounted by a sculpture of four metal arms, three vertical and one horizontal, a very large version of the eight-pointed Octogram, symbol of the Sovereign Host. Carved into the pillar below it were the symbols of Dol Arrah, Dol Dorn, and Balinor, the gods Haruuc had chosen to venerate over those of the Dark Six. The monument seemed familiar. It took Geth a moment to remember why. Haruuc’s funeral procession had come this way, pausing briefly before the column. There were words written on the column, Geth remembered now. Lhesh Haruuc Shaarat’kor gives thanks for Darguun’s victory at the Battle of Marguul Pass.

The dedication was obscured by the naked body of a skinny elf that hung from a rope lashed around one of the arms of the Octogram. Dried blood made new symbols on the white stone, those of the Fury, the Mockery, and the Keeper.

“Bear and Boar,” muttered Geth. “Was he a Valenar?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. It’s hard to tell now.”

The people of Rhukaan Draal passed around the desecrated monument without looking up, although Geth noticed they did give it a wide berth. “Why hasn’t he been cut down?”

“I suspect it suits Tariic to leave him up,” Tenquis said tightly. “Maybe you’re right when you say Haruuc picked a fight with Valenar to avoid fighting all of Khorvaire, but what he’s started is going to be very bad.”

Geth stared at the body as it rocked against the stone, pushed back and forth by the breeze—then started forward. Tenquis grabbed him and held him back. “No. You can’t do anything for him and you’ll only draw attention to yourself.”

Breath hissed in and out of Geth’s mouth, but he turned away. “Tonight,” he said. “It feels like there’s going to be a storm tonight. I’m going to come out and do it then.”

“Fair enough.” Tenquis steered him out of the intersection and into the temporary shelter of a stopped wagon. “Check our direction.”

The sword was disguised just as he was, wrapped up in leathers and carried under his arm as an anonymous bundle. Geth slipped a hand through the leathers, grasped the hilt, and held it out just enough to tell which way it pointed. They’d drifted only a little from their course. They left the shelter of the wagon just as the carter, a fat
hobgoblin, appeared, ready to curse them for thieves. Tenquis flicked his tail at him as they strode off.

The farther they went, the more Geth was certain that he’d been this way before, though he didn’t recognize the buildings or the shops that lined the streets. The twists and turns that he and Tenquis followed, though … those seemed somehow familiar, except that the crowds were out of place.

Then he saw why their route was familiar. Empty the streets and put the crowds in front of the shops and on top of the buildings and the scene made sense to him just as the monument had.

“This is the same way Haruuc’s funeral procession came,” he said.

“It’s just a coincidence,” said Tenquis. “We’re staying on the larger streets and the funeral procession couldn’t very well have gone through alleys.” His nose wrinkled and his tail lashed. “You don’t think Chetiin could have taken the Rod of Kings out of the city, do you?”

“Maybe,” Geth said. His mind was only half on the answer. A coincidence? He had to work to make himself believe it. Belief came even harder as the crowd thinned out and the buildings of Rhukaan Draal became shacks and huts along the side of the road, thick at first, then scattered, and finally nonexistent. The roar of the first cataract of the Ghaal filled empty space.

Ahead of them, the great red stone arch cast a long shadow on the road as the sun, chased by clouds, set behind it. Tenquis’s steps slowed. “Check Wrath,” he said.

The sword pointed through the arch.

Geth didn’t put Wrath away. They walked up to the arch in silence and stole into its shadow. Geth paid no more attention to the carvings within than he had the first time he’d passed through. A tall iron gate closed the far end of the arch, but it wasn’t locked. It opened at a touch with something like a soft sigh and they slipped through. Geth walked with Wrath extended before him. The road ended and they paced through long, dry grass. Twilight was settling over the ridge of weathered rock that Haruuc had intended to be the graveyard of kings.

The great lhesh, a young warlord again, glared down at them from the heavy door of his tomb. Wrath didn’t waver. It pointed at the ridge below the outer structure of the tomb. Geth climbed the steep stairs up to the carved door and felt the sword dip in his hands. He walked around the tomb, just to be certain. Wrath moved like an iron needle drawn to a lodestone and what he felt was so far beyond amazement that it left him stunned.

“It’s inside,” he said. “The Rod of Kings is inside Haruuc’s tomb.”

Tenquis joined him and ran dark fingers around the seam of the door. “It hasn’t been opened.”

“It can’t be opened,” said Geth. “The pivots were meant to crumble once the door was closed.” He stared into Haruuc’s stone face. “Grandfather Rat, how did Chetiin manage to get it inside?”

“Magic,” Tenquis suggested. “Or just another entrance. Hobgoblins prefer to bury their dead in caves. The underground portion of the tomb was originally a cave, wasn’t it?”

Geth nodded and the tiefling stepped back, dusting off his hands and nodding around them at the folds and cracks of the ridge.

“It won’t be the only one. The builders would likely have walled off any connections, but a goblin wouldn’t need much space to wiggle through.”

Geth looked around at the ridge as well. “It would take days to find the entrance and a connection.”

“Then that leaves magic.” Tenquis patted the door. “I might be able to open this. Not now—I’d need to prepare—but I have an idea how it could be done.” He met Geth’s eyes. “If you think it’s necessary.”

“What do you mean ‘if I think it’s necessary?’” Geth asked. “Of course it’s necessary!”

Tenquis held up his hands. “Think about it,” he said. “We only found it because we have Wrath. No one else is going to think to look here, are they? The tomb is sealed. Unless we open it, no one is going to have any reason even bothering to try and look inside. The rod is safe with Haruuc. Maybe that’s what Chetiin intended.”

“Then why steal it from me?” Geth demanded. “We could have worked together. Maybe Chetiin just wanted to hide the rod somewhere safe for a while. I don’t know. I can’t even guess what he’s up to anymore.” He pulled his lips back in a snarl. “And where one goblin can go, so can others. No tomb is unlootable—and there’s a lot of loot in Haruuc’s tomb. Anyone who breaks in looking for treasure isn’t going to present much of a challenge to the rod if they pick it up by mistake.”

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them again. “How long will it take you to get what you need ready?”
In the afternoons at Khaar Mbar’ost, many of the warlords, councilors, and courtiers could be found walking and talking in the hall of honor. The hall occupied the full length of one of the fortress’s upper floors. Statues of dar heroes stood against the walls, and stained glass windows depicting scenes of famous battles dominated the distant ends. The air in the hall was generally soft with murmured conversation, though a few times Ashi had heard it ring with the sound of steel on steel as conversation erupted into argument and a brief duel.

Today it was quiet. The curse Ashi muttered under her breath as she entered seemed like the loudest exclamation in the big room.

There was no sign of Geth here, either. She looked back at Aruget, waiting beyond the door—in spite of Vounn’s insistence that the hobgoblin warrior accompany her everywhere, there were some places guards weren’t permitted—and said, “I’ll be back.”

Aruget’s ears pulled back just a little bit. Ashi had the distinct impression that he didn’t appreciate being dragged through Khaar Mbar’ost in her search for Geth, but Geth wasn’t with Tariic in the throne room today. He was finally alone. If she could find him, they’d finally be able to talk.

At the east end of the hall of honor, Munta the Gray leaned against the wall beside one of the tall windows. The stained glass had been tilted open to allow a cool breeze into the room. More than half the sky was covered in heavy clouds, beautiful day slipping into threatening evening. The old warlord held a goblet and sipped from it frequently. Furs had been bundled around his shoulders, but he faced into the wind with a drawn look on his face. He turned as she came near and his pensiveness faded a little.

“Korluaat, Lady Ashi?” he asked her. He gestured and a goblin servant offered Ashi a goblet before she had a chance to answer. The beverage inside was strong enough to make her nose twitch at the alcoholic fumes. She’d been served it once or twice at feasts in Khaar Mbar’ost—the name of the stuff translated as “hero’s blood”—but it wasn’t a drink she enjoyed. She smiled and mimed sipping a little of it before asking, “Munta, have you seen—”

But Munta spoke before she could finish, gesturing expansively at the horizon beyond the window. “Dagii’s out there somewhere,” he said and Ashi could smell the korluaat rolling off of him. “Chasing down elves, maybe being chased down himself.” He took a swallow from his goblet. “Tariic assembles a new army, ready to fight. I’ve never seen Ghaal’dar warlords so eager to work together. I’ve even heard that one of the Dhakaani clans have asked to march with him. The Kech Shaarat—the Blade Bearers. Have you met one of them yet?”

“Cho. That’s him.” Munta looked out the window again. “Real war, Ashi. And I won’t fight it. Tariic’s ‘honor’ to an aged warlord. I was old when Haruuc first proposed his dream of a land for the dar! What I’ve done for Darguun, what I’ve experienced, and Haruuc never denied me the chance to take up my sword again. Just recently in Droaam—” His ears flattened and he took another drink. “But Tariic won’t even let me take a place in the command tent. He gives me gold and grants favored rank to the warriors of my clan, but he won’t allow me to see the battlefield. And while he said it, I just bowed like a gnome. Maabet, he has a presence. He could be greater than Haruuc.”

Ashi pressed her lips together for a moment, resisting the urge to warn Munta of the danger that faced them, before she spoke. “Munta, have you seen Geth today?”

“Ah!” Munta gulped the rest of his korluaat, the loose skin of his throat folding in on itself as he swallowed. “I ramble like a gnome, too. I saw Geth this morning. He seemed to be in a hurry, but he said that if I saw you, I should tell you to talk to Razu if you hadn’t already.”

Ashi’s heart leaped. “Did he say why?”

“No. Some ritual. I suppose.” Munta looked down the length of the hall of honor and nodded his head. “She’s there.”

Ashi saw the head of Razu’s staff before she saw the mistress of rituals. “Ta mutut, Munta,” she said. “I’m sorry I have to leave you.”

The old warlord just grunted. “Come back when you want,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere.” He waved his empty goblet at the nearest servant.

Razu must have caught a glimpse of Ashi’s approach, because she ended her conversation with the hobgoblin
she’d been speaking to and fell into step alongside Ashi, guiding her to an empty part of the hall. “I have a message for you, Lady Ashi,” she said. “Geth told me to give it to you or to Midian, whoever I saw first. At the change of the second watch tonight, you’re both to meet him where the duur’kala sang and the sword woke.” She looked a little confused by her own words. “He said you’d understand.”

Ashi kept her face carefully neutral, even though her heart was now jumping like a child at play. “When did he give you the message?” she asked.

“This morning. I told him I’m no messenger, but he said I was the only one he trusted.” Her thin face flushed with pleasure.

“You did well, Razu.” Ashi hesitated for a moment, then asked, “Has it seemed to you that Geth has been acting strangely lately? Nervous and tense, maybe?”

Razu’s ears flicked and her mouth pursed primly. “Lady, he has held the throne as Lhesh Haruuc’s shava and now he guides Lhesh Tariic. If he seems tense, surely he has reason to be.”

“I see.” Maybe that made sense. Ashi bent her head to Razu. “Ta muut.”

The mistress of rituals bent her head in return and moved off into the hall. Ashi turned to the door where Aruget waited, holding herself to a sedate pace so that it wouldn’t look too much like she was rushing away. The goblet of korluaat, the level of the beverage undiminished since she’d picked it up, she left with a servant near the door. Aruget’s ears rose when he saw her.

“You found something,” he said softly as they walked away.

Ashi led him down the stairs before she whispered the message Razu had passed her. “I know where the duur’kala sang and the sword woke,” she said. “It’s the roof of Khaar Mbar’ost where Ekhaas, Senen, and another duur’kala worked a spell to wake Wrath so Geth could locate the Rod of Kings.”

Aruget’s ears dropped again. “The roof?” he asked.

She could guess what he was thinking. “A good place for a secret meeting, but also a good place for a trap. Maybe too good. If someone was planning an ambush, there are places that would create a lot less suspicion.”

“Maybe,” Aruget said doubtfully. “I’m coming with you.”

She glanced at him. His face was hard. “It is my muut.”

Ashi hesitated, then nodded. “We’ll go early. Just in case.”

“Safe hasn’t gotten us any answers so far. Let’s find Midian.”

When the time came for sleep, Ashi stretched out fully clothed on her bed, stared out the open window of her bedchamber, and waited. In her own chamber on the other side of the sitting room, Vounn would be pulling on nightclothes, slipping between sheets, and drifting off to sleep.

The night was dark—the gathered lights of Rhukaan Draal cast a thin glow on the underside of low clouds. The wind had dropped as if the clouds had choked it off. There would be rain before dawn. Ashi kept her mind alert with the same games she had played while stalking the Shadow Marches. Naming the constellations hidden by the clouds. Counting the bones in her hands against the ancient rhyme of the broken blade. Reciting her lineage, a task that, when she was part of the Bonetree Clan, she was only able to do one side of. Since coming to Deneith, she’d learned to fill in the other as well, eldest child of eldest child. “Ashi, daughter of Ner,” she murmured to the rafters of her ceiling, “son of Kagan, son of Tyman, son of Joherra, daughter of Wroenna, daughter of Maal …”

Each name was like a charm. In the tradition of the clans of the Shadow Marches, a bit of the power of each ancestor filtered down to her. The bloodline of House Deneith was the same, deeds accumulating in a heritage of honor, the magic of the Mark of Sentinel ebbing and flowing over time. As a girl, sitting and pointlessly sharpening the eternally keen blade of the sword that her father had inherited from his, had she ever dreamed that she would come so far and see so much?

She guessed that it was approaching the changing of the watch. Time to leave. She rose, slipped sword into scabbard by touch, and closed the shutters on the gathering storm. Hand on the door, she paused, gathered her will, and invoked her dragonmark. Warmth flashed through the pattern that covered her skin. She could almost imagine she saw a faint glow in the darkness, then the clarity that the mark granted settled over her like a splash of cold water. Silent as a shadow, she opened the door and crossed the sitting room.

Of the two guards on duty outside the chamber, only one—a young hobgoblin, new to the service of Khaar Mbar’ost—started when she emerged. The other was Aruget. He glanced at Ashi, then at the younger guard. “Remain,” he said in Goblin. “We will return.”
“Mazo.” The young guard thumped his chest with a fist.

They avoided the main stairs, instead taking the narrower flight of stairs that Ashi had raced up after Tariic’s coronation. Midian was waiting for them there and joined them in their silent climb. When she’d told the gnome about Geth’s message, he’d had the same suspicions as they had. Like them, he’d come ready for a fight. Just in case. In one hand he gripped a polished metal baton—a snap of his wrist, Ashi knew, would pop a slim curved head out of the shaft, transforming the baton into a deadly little pick. On his belt he wore several large pouches, a more convenient version of the backpack he’d worn during their quest for the rod and from which he’d produced a number of cunning magical devices.

“What are you carrying tonight, Midian?” she asked.

“What aren’t I carrying?” was his grim response. “I don’t think I entirely like this, Ashi.”

“I know I don’t,” said Aruget.

“Tell that to Geth when we see him,” Ashi told them both.

The stairs ended as they approached the top of the fortress’s central tower. They were forced onto the main stairs, but they encountered no one. When even the central stairs ended, only a dark, tightly wound spiral staircase remained. Midian produced a tiny everbright lantern from a pouch. A rotating cover allowed him to release a narrow slit of light, just enough for Ashi to see.

She put her foot on the first stair, only to have Aruget push her aside and take the lead, sword ready and ears high. Ashi clenched her teeth.

Midian just nudged her. “If he wants to go first, let him!”

A trap door—closed—covered a final set of steep open steps above a small landing at the head of the stairs. Aruget waited until she and Midian were with him, then gestured for Midian to close the lantern. Darkness cloaked the cramped space. Ashi’s first hint that Aruget had opened the trap door was a sudden cool draft that carried the smell of imminent rain. The hinges had been well-oiled. After a moment, she could make out the slightly less dark gap of the raised trap, partly blocked by Aruget’s head.

The hobgoblin’s vague silhouette turned. “He’s already here,” he whispered. “He’s early, too.”

“I don’t blame him,” said Ashi. She drew her sword. “Go.”

Aruget threw the trap door open violently and surged through so quickly he was out and looking around before it had even crashed down on the stones of the roof. Ashi came up hard after him, alert as well. About fifteen paces away, on the far side of the roof, a figure whirled around. A covered lantern snapped open, its light glaring into their eyes for a moment.

Geth’s voice came out of the dark. “Ashi!”

She felt a burst of relief. The roof was clear. Beyond the light of the lantern, she could make out the distinctive crouch of the shifter’s body, his thick hair blowing in the wind. He didn’t move.

She took a few steps toward him. “Geth! Rond betch, what’s been going on? We’ve been trying to talk to you since the coronation.” She shaded her eyes with her free hand.

“I know. I’m sorry. Things have gotten … difficult.” Geth shifted the lantern and opened its other sides so that light spilled across the roof, catching him in its glow. He was dressed in clothing Ashi recognized, but just as Midian had told her, he wasn’t wearing Wrath. She opened her mouth ready to ask him where the sword was, when two more things struck her.

He carried a lantern—but he didn’t need one. Geth could see in the dark.

And not only wasn’t he wearing Wrath, he wasn’t wearing the collar of black stones that had belonged to his fallen friend Adolan. He might have left the sword somewhere. He would never have taken off the collar.

Her sword snapped up. “This isn’t Geth.”

Too late.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Aruget jerk, his hand grabbing for his throat as something looped around his neck. A strangler’s noose of fine braided leather. The hobgoblin’s fingers were too slow and the noose tightened before they could close on it. Ashi spun, following the dark line of the leather cord.

As if he’d materialized out of the night itself, Makka stood behind the trap door. Where had he—? She found the answer before she’d even thought the question. A waist-high wall surrounded the roof. He must have been hanging over it.

The bugbear’s muscles bulged and he heaved hard on the cord. Aruget flew back, dragged by the neck, and slammed down onto the roof. His sword went skittering away. Ashi had a brief glimpse of his contorted face, hands still grabbing for the noose, and of Makka, dropping the cord. Her sword hung at his side, but he ignored it and
instead snatched a thick club from a thong hanging down his back.

Then whoever played at being Geth snapped shut the lantern.

Again darkness, this time overlaid by the bright afterimages of the lantern. The trap door banged shut, an obstacle to easy escape, and she could imagine Makka coming for her. “Midian, I need light!” she shouted, as she threw herself blindly aside. Just in time. Something heavy whistled past her. She lashed out with her sword, but found nothing except empty air.

“Close your eyes!”

“That won’t help!” A bulky shape shifted in the shadows. She struck again and came closer. This time her blow was blocked. The shape moved, angling for an advantage.

“Do it now!”

She squeezed her eyes shut—just as something shattered at her feet and an intense flash lit up the inside of her eyelids in shades of red. Makka roared. Ashi forced her watering eyes open again. Midian had his tiny lantern open and its light swung across the rooftop. Aruget, still down, dragged at the noose around his throat. Makka shook his head, blinked furiously, and backed away, club held warily in a guard position. Even though the glare of the flash still danced in her vision, she lunged for him.

He sensed her. The club slapped at her sword in an awkward parry. Ashi twisted and the blade skipped around to rip a thin line up Makka’s forearm. He growled and pulled back further. Dropping his lantern, Midian moved in on the bugbear’s other side with his pick held low.

Makka’s squinting eyes swung between them and he shouted, “Ko!”

At the far end of the roof, the figure that was not Geth bent and came up with a crossbow aimed at Midian. The bow steadied and snapped in the same movement.

Midian tumbled backward. The steelhead of the crossbow bolt made sparks as it hit the stone of the roof.

“He’s dead!” Ashi ordered the gnome, but he hardly needed to have bothered. Midian was already darting across the rooftop to prevent another attack. Ko … Ashi realized she knew the name. The changeling Geth had found imprisoned in Khaar Mbar’ost’s dungeons.

She spun back to Makka, teeth clenched. “Where’s Geth?” she demanded, thrusting at the bugbear. “Baano a Geth?”

He snarled in response and stopped her blow with a solid block. He was still blindingly mad but his eyes were clear. She pressed her attack, feeling her anger grow inside her. “Baano a Geth?” she screamed again.

“Waiting for you!” Makka roared in Goblin. His club swung back. “Fury give me strength!”

For the barest instant, the thin shadows of the rooftop seemed to pull tight around Makka, making the livid scar of the bat-winged serpent on his broad chest leap out in contrast. Then his club came around hard and fast, too fast for Ashi to avoid. It hit with all of the bugbear’s strength and the impact of it drove agony into her left shoulder. The hot rage behind the blow was like a physical force, throwing her across the rooftop. Her back hit the low wall, bringing another burst of pain and sending her toppling back.

Empty space and the sparse lights of Rhukaan Draal swung around her. Her sword dropped from her hand and vanished in the darkness below. She tried to throw her weight forward, back to safety.

A massive hairy hand seized her forearm, yanking her back and whipping her across the roof. Ashi caught a glimpse of Makka, then she was tumbling across the stones. She ended up flat on her back and gasping for breath. A single fat drop of water hit the center of her forehead. The rain had come.

“He’s alive,” she heard Makka growl. “For now.”

She forced herself to twist over onto her belly, then up onto her knees. On the far side of the roof, Midian fought the changeling who wore Geth’s face, pick flashing and clashing against a long, heavy knife. The changeling looked panicked. He gave ground with each exchange. The gnome had him overmatched. Much closer, however, Makka stalked across the rooftop. In the up-cast light of Midian’s lantern, his face was a demonic mask.

Aruget’s dropped sword lay within reach to her right. Ashi grabbed for it but her throbbing left shoulder gave out and she tumbled back to the rain-dappled stones. Makka raised his club.

Another figure launched itself out of the shadows, slamming into him shoulder first. Aruget. The tackle sent Makka sprawling across the roof. Ashi sucked breath between her teeth and lurched to her feet, bringing up the hobgoblin’s sword. Aruget, however, seized her arm and wrenched her around, dragging her toward the trap door.

“Aruget! No—”

“Down!” he rasped. His throat showed deep red marks from Makka’s noose. “Somewhere we can’t fall.”

Aruget twisted in his grasp. Makka was rising. Midian still battered at Ko’s desperate defense—but as Aruget
snatched up the lantern and sent shadows dancing across the rooftop, he glanced away. Ashi saw surprise flicker across his face.

Ko seized the moment of distraction. His blade licked past Midian’s pick and slashed down his side. The gnome jumped back, blood mixing with rain on the stones.

“Midian!” Ashi tried to pull away, but Aruget held her tight as he stooped to yank open the trap door.

Makka roared and charged them. Ashi screamed fury in return and tore herself free.

Aruget grabbed her again, spun her around, and dropped her through the door. Her scream turned into a yelp. She just missed catching her feet on the steep steps, and her knees buckled as she hit the small landing below with a jarring impact. The lantern clattered down beside her, the metal shield breaking off but the magical core shining steady. She looked up just in time to see Aruget pull the trap door closed after himself. A heartbeat later, the door jerked ferociously as Makka heaved at it from the other side, but Aruget had his feet hooked into the steps. He held the handle of the door with one hand and dug into a pouch at his belt with the other. It emerged holding some kind of nail or spike. The hobgoblin slammed the nail up into the wood of the door. There was a shimmer of blue light. Aruget released his hold and dropped down beside her.

The door continued to shake under Makka’s strength, but it didn’t open. Aruget took Ashi’s arm and pulled her to her feet. “Go!”

“But Midian—”

Aruget’s face was strangely harsh. “Midian can look after himself.” He forced her onto the spiral stairs.

Aruget let out a sharp hiss, then he grabbed Ashi once again, gripping her tightly. “Ashi,” he whispered in her ear, “you have to trust me. Forget Midian—this is about you and me now. I think I can get us out of this, but you have to trust me. I’m on your side. Understand?”

“I—”

“Good.” He pulled the sword from her hand. “Act defeated and frightened.”

He pushed her on down the stairs. The light of the lantern, left behind on the landing, faded quickly and Aruget pushed her a little too fast so that she stumbled and groped in the dark. Between her stumbling feet and Aruget’s sword and armor they made more noise than the soldiers coming up. A voice echoed along the stairs, asking in Goblin, “Who’s there?”

“I have her!”

The voice from below cursed, then shouted. “Pass her along! We’ll take her to Daavn.” Ashi could see the speaker, a larger hobgoblin at the foot of the spiral stairs, the light from the main stairs illuminating him.
“Maabet,” said Aruget. “I’m taking her to Daavn. I captured her. This is my muut.” He paused just above the large hobgoblin. “He wanted her brought right to him, didn’t he? Do you want to keep Makka waiting out in the rain while you take her”—he shook Ashi—“to Daavn? He’s already angry.”

The other hobgoblin hesitated, his ears up. Makka’s attacks on the door were loud. Finally the hobgoblin’s ears dropped. “Take her,” he said, jerking his head at the main stairs. Then he slapped the hobgoblin ahead of him. “Get moving!” he shouted.

He spared one last hostile glance at Ashi as she pushed past him, then she was off the spiral stairs and back in the open. Aruget stayed at her back. “Keep going,” he said in that strange deep voice. “Remember you’re my prisoner.”

They made it down only a few steps before a call came back to them from above. “You!” It was the large hobgoblin again. Ashi felt Aruget stiffen but he kept pushing her onward. “You can’t take her by yourself. She could get away from you. You better let me help you.”

“I can handle her,” Aruget growled. “Go back to your men.”

“They can open a door.” The other hobgoblin’s footsteps closed on them. Aruget paused. “Yes,” said the hobgoblin. There was ambition in his voice. “Enough muut in this to share—”

Aruget’s hand left her arm as he whirled. The other hobgoblin’s words ended in the sound of ripping flesh, a slight wheeze, and the clatter of a falling body. Ashi spun around—and froze, staring.

Not at the hobgoblin sprawled with his throat slashed open, but at the other hobgoblin on the stairs. The one who carried Aruget’s bloody sword and wore Aruget’s armor, but who didn’t wear his face.

He looked back at her for an instant, then his features blurred and reshaped themselves until Aruget faced her again.

Ashi’s voice almost caught in her throat, but she forced it out. “You’re a changeling?”
CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

28 Sypheros

Not the place for explanations.” Aruget took her hand and tugged her down the stairs. As soon as she was moving, he let her go and opened his stride, jumping down two and three steps at a time. When they reached a floor with access to the back stairs they had climbed on the way up, he led the way to them—then off again only a few floors down. The same floor where Tariic had his quarters.

“This isn’t a good place to stop,” Ashi said.

“It’s the last place anyone would look for us.” He walked with light steps down the corridor, selected a dusty looking door, and tried the handle. The door was unlocked, the hinges stiff. Aruget eased it open a little way and slipped inside, beckoning Ashi to follow.

She hesitated.

He frowned. “Trust me,” he said. He slipped through the door. Ashi grimaced and followed.

The room beyond had a musty smell, and by the light that leaked in from the corridor, she could make out fabric-draped bundles. Aruget pushed the door shut a little ways, leaving only enough of a gap to allow a thread of light into the room. He stayed close to it so that the glow fell across his face. Ashi had a gut feeling he did that deliberately, as if to ease some of her fears.

Then he did something completely unexpected. He bent his head and his features melted and reformed. His entire body shifted in stature and bulk. When he looked up again, he had red-blond hair and the fine features of a young half-elf. A young half-elf woman.

A young half-elf woman that Ashi knew. “Benti?” she asked as softly as she could manage. “Benti Morren?”

Benti smiled. “Hello, Ashi. It’s been a while—for you, at least.” Hard, cunning eyes narrowed. “You understand now, don’t you? I’m on your side. You can trust me. You must trust me.”

The urge to sit down washed over Ashi, but she didn’t trust any of the dusty bundles in the dark room. She and other friends had encountered the half-elf—or at least the person they had all assumed to be a half-elf—in the city of Sharn almost a year ago. At the time, Benti had been posing as a renegade member of House Lyrandar selling her services as an airship pilot. After she had aided them—and they’d aided her in return—they’d discovered that she was more than she seemed. In fact, she was an agent of the King’s Citadel of Breland, one of the so-called Dark Lanterns. In short, a spy.

And it seemed that hadn’t been her only secret.


Benti held up a hand. “Fast answers,” she said. “We don’t have time. Let’s start with when: I’ve been Aruget since the night you were attacked by Gan’duur raiders on your journey from Sterngate in Breland to Rhukaan Draal.”

“I remember that. We found you—Aruget—with a bashed skull after the attack. We thought the raiders had knocked you out.” Ashi pressed her lips together. “Where’s the real Aruget?”

“Buried under a collapsed sandbank near the spot where you camped. The scalp wound was self-inflicted. The raiders”—she shrugged—“a coincidence.”

The cool detachment in her voice made Ashi shiver. “Why?” she asked again.

Benti made a strange expression, as if her face was straining to move in a way it wasn’t meant to. Her lips twitched and she put fingers to one slightly pointed ear. “Spend too long as one race and you forget how other bodies work,” she said. Her hand fell. “Why? Because the King’s Citadel was suspicious when we discovered Tariic was returning from a diplomatic mission with two ladies of House Deneith and a wandering shifter carrying an artifact sword of Dhakaan. I knew both you and Geth, so I was assigned to investigate.” Her eyebrows twitched. “It’s turned into quite the assignment.”

Confusion churned in Ashi’s belly. “You couldn’t have told us earlier?”

Benti’s voice went cool again. “I shouldn’t be telling you now, but it seems to be my only choice. You have information I need. I’ve put together almost all the pieces of the puzzle.” Her green eyes met Ashi’s, and Ashi felt like they were looking right through her.
“The Rod of Kings,” Benti said, “tries to make its wielder into an emperor of Dhakaan. I heard Geth tell you that
the night Haruuc died. Chetiin killed Haruuc to prevent a war, but when Tariic brings that war to life, no one tries to
stop him. Instead, you, Geth, Ekhaas, and Dagii go to a tiefling artificer and have—what? a copy of the rod?—made
with the power to enhance Tariic’s presence. Geth tries to pass the copy of the rod to Tariic at the coronation. Tariic
discovers the substitution and sends Daavn to arrest Geth. Daavn fails, or so I assume, and Geth is replaced with a
changeling to keep his disappearance quiet. Now Makka, who previously wanted to kill you, is trying to capture you
—”

Ashi’s lips curled back. “Wait. How long have you known that wasn’t Geth?”

“I had my doubts since the evening after the coronation, but I wasn’t sure. Kill us and we return to our true form,
but changelings can’t recognize each other on sight any more than you can tell what color smallclothes another
human is wearing.” She flicked her hand. “Let me finish. Makka is now trying to capture you, probably because of
something you know or something that Tariic thinks you know.”

“Like where Geth might be,” Ashi said, the idea coming on her like a blossoming flower. “And whether he has
the true Rod of Kings.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Benti. “Which leads to the missing pieces of my puzzle. One”—she held up a finger
—“where would Geth be? And two”—she held up another—“why go to so much trouble for the rod when ambition
and history books can show any ruler how to be a tyrant?”

Ashi shook her head. “I don’t know where Geth is. He might not even be in Rhukaan Draal anymore. We thought
about running with the rod at one point. He might have done that. And the rod—”

She hesitated before saying anything more. Could she trust Benti with the ultimate secret of the rod? What if she
couldn’t escape Tariic’s grasp? Benti knew everything else—and as long as they were conspiring against a throne,
as Vounn had pointed out, a spy seemed like a good ally to have.

“The rod doesn’t just show its wielder how to behave like an emperor, it gives him the power to become one,” she
said. “The wielder of the rod can force people to obey his commands. The magic Tenquis put in the false rod is just
an imitation of the true rod’s power. The true rod is irresistible. My dragonmark can block its power and Geth is
immune because of his connection with Wrath, but those are the only defenses we know. When we found it, the rod
was used against us. Its power crushes your will.”

Even talking about the power of the rod, just contemplating what might happen if Tariic got his hands on it, left
her feeling cold. Benti, eyes narrowed in thought, didn’t, but just narrowed her eyes in thought. Finally she said,
“Midian knows all this?”

Ashi nodded. “He was there. He felt the power of the rod. He took the same oath to keep it a secret that all of us
did. It was his idea to substitute a false rod for the real one.”

“Was it?” Her eyebrows came together. “Do you think he knows where Geth might be?”

“If I don’t, he doesn’t.” Ashi’s lips curled back from her teeth. “And you left him to be captured by Makka. Tariic
could find out the power of the rod.”

“Don’t worry about Midian. Given how much interest Tariic is showing in the Rod of Kings, Ashi, I’d think he
may already know.”

Ashi stared at her. “That’s not possible. We kept it a secret.”

“Possible or not, we should assume it’s a fact.” Benti drew a deep breath. “Thank you for your help. Now I think
it’s time we got you to safety—and preferably out of Darguun.”

She concentrated and her face blurred once more, taking on the familiar coarse features, ruddy tones, and long
mobile ears of Aruget. Ashi found herself continuing to stare at the changeling, no longer in shock at the fluid
transformation but at the harshness of her tone.

“You’re going to leave Midian to Tariic? And what about finding Geth? You need me!”

“I don’t need you.” Aruget’s voice warbled like the voice of a boy becoming a man, then settled into its normal
pitch and accent. “I can find Geth. And I told you, Midian can take care of himself.” Eyes that had been green and
were now deep brown flecked with orange studied her. “You’re vulnerable, Ashi. Both Makka and Tariic are after
you now. If you really want to help Geth—and Ekhaas and Dagii—you run, and you keep yourself alive. If you want
to stay, though, you’re on your own. I can’t hold your hand anymore.” He adjusted his armor on a once-more bulky
frame. “Does Vounn have a plan for getting you to safety?”

Churning confusion and boiling anger settled into a sick feeling in the pit of Ashi’s stomach. Benti … Aruget …
whoever the changeling was, there was hard truth in his words. Geth had vanished, Midian was gone, Ekhaas and
Dagii were far away. Vounn wouldn’t be able to help her either. She’d already told her what she would have to do if
Tariic’s soldiers came for her. Aruget would look for Geth and the rod. Her usefulness was over—it was time to
retreat from the fight.

“Pater d’Orien,” she said. “Vounn told him I may be called back to Karrlakton. He’s agreed to use his dragonmark to take me there.”

“Then I hope he’s willing to see late night visitors.” Aruget eased the door of the room open again and peered out cautiously.

Ashi caught his arm. “Wait. What’s your real name?” she asked.

He smiled and his ears flicked. “Whatever one belongs to the face I’m wearing,” he said.

They moved swiftly between floors, dashing down the stairs and ducking into doors whenever a guard appeared—and there were more guards roaming the halls than Ashi had ever seen before.

There was no point going back to her chambers. Daavn would have anticipated that. Vounn had probably been woken already. Ashi was doubly glad she’d kept the meeting a secret. The lady seneschal would at least be able to tell the truth in saying she had no idea where Ashi had gone.

“How do we get out? The exits are going to be guarded.” Ashi murmured in Aruget’s ear as they crouched in another dusty room, waiting for a guard to pass.

“If you can’t be silent,” Aruget answered with a sly smile, “make a lot of noise.”

He led her away from the grand areas of the castle into a region of narrow corridors thick with the smell of cooking. They were near the kitchens. “When Ko kidnapped Vounn, he brought her this way,” said Ashi. “Tariic won’t forget to guard the back gate.”

Aruget’s ears twitched. “Kitchens contain many interesting things.”

“Knives.”


She looked at him questioningly. He shook his head. “This is something I’ll do more quickly alone.” He hurried her past a wide, high vaulted passage that led to the even wider caverns of the kitchens and down another. A pair of big doors, plain and scarred from frequent use, emerged from the gloom. Wet footprints showed on the stone of the floor—the doors opened to the outside of Khaar Mbar’ost and they’d been used recently. There would be guards on the other side.

Aruget went to a smaller door in the wall of the corridor and pushed it open, scanning the darkness inside. “Storeroom. Wait for me here and be ready to run. If I’m wearing a different face, I’ll wink. If I don’t come, get out on your own.”

Ashi stepped into the storeroom and was enveloped in the smell of unseen vegetables. She glanced back at Aruget. “Ko couldn’t see in the dark as Geth. How can you see in the dark as Aruget?”

“Let me keep some secrets.” He closed the door on her, leaving it open only a finger’s width. His footsteps, so quiet that if he hadn’t been wearing armor she probably wouldn’t have heard them at all, went back along the passage.

Ashi squatted down in the shadows and tried to recapture the same patience and alertness she’d felt while waiting for the meeting on the rooftop. “Ashi, daughter of Ner,” she murmured under her breath, “son of Kagan, son of Tyman, son of Joherra, daughter of Wroenna, daughter of Maal …”

Time stretched out. Patience didn’t come and there was no need to stave off weariness—Ashi didn’t feel like she’d ever sleep again. She should have asked Aruget to bring a knife from the kitchen for her. A crude blade was better than no weapon at all.

There would be questions when she returned to Karrlakton. The lords of House Deneith would want to know why she had come back so suddenly. What would she tell them? What could she tell them? What would she do—?

Running footsteps echoed in the passage. Ashi pushed herself to her feet and backed into the darkness of the storeroom. But when the door swung open, the dim lights beyond shone on Aruget. He dived inside, pulling the door almost closed behind him.

“Aruget,” she whispered, “what—?”

Anything she might have said was lost in an incredible boom that sounded as if someone had thrown a massive bell against the wall of the fortress. It was followed by a tremendous crash of collapsing metal. A quavering shriek started up, stretching on and on without pause.

One of Aruget’s hands found hers. The other pressed itself over her mouth. Out in the passage, the big outer doors were flung open and booted feet raced by. The opening of the outer doors nudge the door of the storeroom a little wider and Ashi caught a glimpse of hobgoblin guards running for the kitchen with drawn swords. The open doors
also drew warm air from inside the fortress. Suddenly she could smell smoke, weirdly scented and stinging.

“Go!” said Aruget. He released her and leaped for the storeroom door. She followed close behind.

Two unlucky guards lingered in the open doors. One saw them and opened his mouth to shout. Aruget’s sword took him across the belly and then back across the throat in two swift cuts. Ashi dealt the other one a hard punch to the jaw that spun him around and dropped him to his knees. Aruget turned and swung his sword a third time. The guard’s head leaped from his neck and rolled back into the passage. His body toppled to the side. Ashi started.

“Did you have to kill him?”

“Yes.” Aruget jumped for the doors, dragging them shut. “There’s an outer gate—open it!”

Beyond a jutting roof that gave shelter to the doors, rain came down in cascades, turning the small courtyard beyond into a vast black puddle. Ashi splashed her way through it. The outer wall of the courtyard was simple brick, meant to keep out trespassers more than to repel attackers. There were no guards—they must have all been huddled near the inner doors to stay dry. Heavy wooden doors in the brick wall were held shut only by a thick beam. Ashi grasped the rain-slicked wood, clenched her teeth, and hauled the beam free of one door before letting it drop. They didn’t need both doors open to escape. The freed door swung wide with only a tug. Aruget joined her and, side by side, they dashed through the gate and ran out into Rhukaan Draal.

The night was very dark. Wind-driven rain soaked Ashi’s clothes entirely. Aruget led her through a maze of sidestreets and alleys, always away from Khaar Mbar’ost but never in a straight line. Ashi flipped wet hair out of her face, wiped water from her eyes, and stayed with him. Once she thought she heard the sounds of pursuit, but they were gone as quickly as they appeared.

“What did you do in the kitchen?” she said.

“Korluaat poured inside a cauldron,” Aruget gasped. His breathing was more labored than hers, but he carried the weight of his armor and of a larger body. “Another cauldron jammed over top with noon paste to seal the gap. Set over the fire with a rag for a fuse.” He drew a ragged breath. “More pots piled around them. Kettle stopped up with cork and a bit of metal. Spice jars on the coals. No more questions.” He sucked in more air. “Bloody hobgoblins—not built for running!”

They splashed through puddles that stank like sewers and others that were already as deep as her shins. She stumbled over unseen obstacles and Aruget dragged her to her feet. They didn’t slow. Cold from her wet clothes numbed her skin, beaten back temporarily by the heat of exertion. Faces flicked past in the shadows beneath eaves and stairs—people without homes or simply those caught in the storm, seeking out any shelter they could.

It seemed like they’d been running half the night before the alley they followed opened onto a broad street running with water. Rain and shadow rendered it as anonymous as all of the others at first, but then Aruget slowed to a stumbling, wheezing walk and pointed ahead. Ashi looked—and a complex of buildings enclosed by a stout wall seemed to resolve out of the night. Beside tall iron gates, a crest depicting the head of a unicorn was illuminated by a muted but steady magical light.

The Orien compound. Ashi grabbed Aruget’s arm and all but dragged him the rest of the way. “Enough,” he gasped. “Let me go!”

She released him and seized the gates by their heavy bars instead. They were locked, of course. The compound beyond was broad and lit by a few everbright lanterns that shone steady through the rain. Empty wagons were drawn up against outbuildings, and she could smell the animal odor of horses and tribex. No people—human, hobgoblin, or otherwise—were visible, however. They were probably taking shelter.

Ashi rattled the gates. “Is anyone there?” she shouted. “I need to see Viceroy Pater d’Orien! It’s urgent!”

An iron rod was chained at one side of the gate. She seized it and hammered on the gates until they rang like chimes. “I am here on an urgent matter concerning Deneith and Orien!”

There was no response. None at all. She lifted the rod again and struck the gates harder. “Pater! Pater!”

A door opened, light flooding across the compound. A stiff-looking man in the uniform of a servant darted out into the rain and ran to the gates. Ashi recognized him from visits to the Orien compound—he was Tars, Pater’s manservant. His eyes were frightened and his mouth set tight. He slid to a stop at the gate and thrust a paper through the bars at her. “No one will answer you,” he said.

He glanced over his shoulder and stiffened. Another figure stood in the doorway. A hobgoblin warrior, armed and armored. For a moment it looked like he might come out into the compound but the fat form of Pater d’Orien appeared and drew him back. The viceroy threw a glance over his shoulder. Ashi couldn’t tell if it was meant for her or his manservant. Tars shuddered. The paper slipped from his fingers and he fled back inside.

Ashi clung to the gate, cold metal pressing wet clothes against her skin. An armed hobgoblin inside the Orien compound. One of Tariic’s soldiers? Almost certainly. Now that she’d seen him, she saw other things. A horse, still
wearing saddle and bridle, tucked into the shelter of an overhanging eave when every other beast was in a stable. A comfortably dry gatehouse that stood empty. Faces that peered from darkened windows but made no move to answer her call.

Aruget bent and scooped the paper Tars had brought out of a puddle. His eyes skimmed over it. His ears lay flat. “Ashi.” He pushed the paper into her hands.

A gust of wind tore at it and she had to stretch it tight, leaning into the torchlight that came through the gate to read it. Water was already making the ink run but she could make out what it said easily enough.

By decree of Lhesh Tariic Kurar’taarn, Ashi d’Deneith is accused of the murder of a soldier of Darguun. To offer her aid or interfere in her arrest is an offense to the throne and the people of Darguun.

The warning was repeated in the dark letters of Goblin, but it had been written in the script of humans first. A deliberate warning to Pater.


Hoofbeats sounded over the patter of rain and the rush of wind. Ashi’s head snapped up. Fear punched into her gut. One soldier sent to the compound as a messenger to prevent her escape—and a whole squad sent after to trap her. She whirled. “Aruget, we have to—”

She stood alone. Aruget was gone.

Six hobgoblins on horseback burst out of the darkness, swords drawn, the hooves of their mounts sending up sprays of water. They came to stop in a semi-circle around her, trapping her against the gates. One of them walked his horse forward a little and pointed his sword at her.

He didn’t have to say anything. Wet, shivering, and unarmed, Ashi crumpled the paper in her hand as she raised her head to meet his gaze.

“Geth.” Hands shook him hard. “Geth, wake up! There are horsemen outside.”

Sleep burned away like shadows in the sun. Geth opened his eyes and sat up. Fear punched into his mind as the compound as a messenger to prevent her escape—and a whole squad sent after to trap her. She whirled. “Aruget, we have to—”

Geth jumped up. He still wore his great gauntlet, though Wrath had been laid aside. He seized it. The blade seemed alert and happy, ready for its chosen hero’s moment of glory. He cursed the ancient sword. “How late is it?” he asked Tenquis.

“Most of the way through the second watch, I think.” The tiefling dashed around his workshop with quick movements, stuffing papers and trinkets into the pockets of his long embroidered vest. His tail lashed furiously. “This is Tariic, isn’t it? He figured you out—or someone gave you away.”

Geth didn’t answer that. Outside, hoofbeats had given way to footsteps. He pointed at the tool-covered table. “Get rid of those!”

Tenquis leaped to the table. His eyes flicked over it and he added a few more things to his pockets—then took up a heavy steel pry bar and jabbed it into an inner pocket of his vest as well. The massive shaft slid out of sight without even shifting the fabric. Tenquis gripped the collar of his vest, whispered a word, and the labyrinthine pattern of embroidery that decorated the garment seemed to writhe. Any hint of bulging pockets vanished. “Safe,” Tenquis hissed between his teeth, then he seized the edge of the table and heaved, overturning it and sending the remaining tools skittering across the floor in an anonymous jumble.

The crash brought an exclamation from those outside—and a command to attack. “Get out one of the back windows!” Geth shouted at Tenquis.

“They don’t open!”

The twin doors of the old barn burst in a shower of splinters under the shoulders of two big bugbears. Geth roared and charged to meet them, sweeping Wrath ahead of him. The twilight blade tore into the flesh of one of the bugbears, but the other managed to duck aside. A hairy fist wrapped in rings of scarred brass punched at him. Geth snapped up his gauntlet and brass screeched across black steel. Geth kicked the bugbear’s shins and followed up with another swing of Wrath that forced the Darguul to jump back.

But more soldiers were pushing through the door, and hobgoblin hands were tearing at the shutters over the front windows of the barn. Geth saw Tenquis bare his teeth and snatch a slim wand from a workbench. Shifting to one side of the fight, he flicked the wand with one hand and, with the other, dashed the contents of a tiny vial into the
air. Pale liquid leaped like something alive, flying farther than it should have and splashing in a ragged line under the windows and before the door. Thick greenish vapors rose up from it, a smoky curtain that brought shrieks of pain from the hobgoblins who thrust arms and faces through the broken windows.

"Paaldaask!" someone shouted. Spellcaster!

Four hobgoblins had made it through the door before Tenquis’s curtain had risen. Two charged for the tiefling while the other two moved warily to aid the bugbears menacing Geth. The shifter growled and made a low feint at the bugbear he’d wounded before. The soldier stumbled back, getting in the way of one of the hobgoblins, and Geth turned the feint into a whirling attack that brought him up inside the reach of the other bugbear. His armored fist drove hard into the Darguul’s gut. The bugbear wore a heavy leather jerkin but the blow still doubled him over and sent him reeling.

Geth stayed with him, pressing the attack. His foot came down on something hard and round—one of the spilled tools from the overturned table. Already pulled off balance by the swinging weight of Wrath, he staggered.

Geth caught a glimpse of Tenquis, wand stripped from his grasp and struggling with his own assailants, before a well-placed blow from a leather-wrapped club set his ears ringing and dark spots dancing before his eyes. Waves of nausea rolled through him, and he barely felt the pain as both arms were jerked behind his back and bound.

The door of the lhesh’s chambers opened, and Daavn, dripping water onto the rich carpets, strode in. “Geth and Ashi are captured, along with the tiefling artificer,” he said. “We found no sign of Arugut. He may have fled in shame.”

“He doesn’t matter.” Tariic sat in a vast chair, fully dressed in spite of the hour. “Geth and Ashi are the ones I wanted. Especially Geth. Did he have the rod?”

“He wasn’t carrying it. I searched the tiefling’s workshop, but I couldn’t find it. I have guards standing watch over the place, ready for you.” Daavn paused and added. “You don’t have to search yourself, Tariic. You’re the lhesh. There are soldiers I trust, clever goblins—”

“Not!” Tariic sat forward and his voice cracked like a whip. “I will search for the Rod of Kings. It’s mine. No one else is to so much as touch it.”

Daavn flinched, then ducked his head. “Mazo, lhesh.”

Tariic sat back in his chair. He glanced at Makka—and Makka glanced down at the prisoner he held by one shoulder.

Midian was pale, with crusted blood on his mouth and one eye swollen, but his voice was bold. “We had a deal.”

Rage burned in Makka’s gut. He squeezed and Midian screamed. He squeezed harder, and the gnome gasped.

Pradoor, seated again on the spindly carved table she favored as a perch, gave him a poke with her stick. He glared at her, then at Tariic. Pradoor might not have been able to see him, but Tariic could—and the lhesh didn’t even blink. Makka eased his grip. Midian slumped a little but Makka held him upright. “I swore an oath of vengeance,” he growled. “Will you ever let me keep it?”

“My needs come before yours. Let the royal historian go.”

Daavn started at the title and his mouth dropped open. Makka gave Midian another hard squeeze, then lifted his hand. For a moment, the gnome stood like a startled deer, ready to bolt at a moment’s notice. Then his little pink slip of a tongue darted out and licked his bloodied lips. “Thank you, lhesh. I promise, you won’t regret this.”

“You betrayed me and then your friends, Midian,” Tariic said coolly. “You’re an opportunistic little rodent, but don’t think you can dig your burrow a third time.”

Midian gave a wretched, scraping bow. “Never. Lhesh, when you came to me and said you were looking for a scholar to join your uncle’s search for the Rod of Kings—”

“Strange,” said Tariic, “I seem to recall that you came to me looking for a way to get into Darguun so you could pursue your research.” He rose so that he towered over the gnome. “I’ll be watching you. Remember that you’ve already had your chance to run but that you chose to bargain for a chance to stay.”

“I’m yours, lhesh!” He scuttled out of the room.

Daavn found his voice. “Tariic, I don’t like this.”

“It’s my decision, Daavn. Midian didn’t let Ashi slip out of Khaar Mbar’ost.” Tariic turned his eyes on Makka.
“Or allow her to escape a trap he promised was inescapable. Pradoor, will Ko recover?”

“I have prayed over him.” Her wrinkled face hardened. “The Dark Six speak to me, Tariic. I agree with Daavn and Makka. Don’t trust the gnome.”

“I don’t.” The lhesh seated himself again. “But, like Ko, he’s useful. Both have their price. Ko loves money. Midian loves history—and himself.” His ears flicked and he looked at Makka again. “You have the watching of him. If he turns against us, fulfill your oath.”

“What about Ashi and Geth?”

“If I don’t find the Rod of Kings at the tiefling’s workshop, I’ll ask them. And when they’ve answered me, you can have what’s left.”

Makka’s lips drew back from his teeth. “That’s a bad trade.”

“It’s the only one you’re getting.”

There was a tentative rap at the door of the chamber and one of the guards of Khaar Mbar’ost entered. He bent his head diffidently, not raising his eyes to Tariic. “Lhesh, you asked not to be disturbed, but this has arrived. The falcon carrying it was delayed by the storm.”

He held out a metal tube smaller than a goblin’s finger. A band of copper sealed it. Tariic took the thing and gestured for the guard to leave. When the door was closed, he examined the copper band and the design stamped into it, so small Makka saw it only as a darker dent.

“Dagii,” he said. He broke the seal, pulled the tube apart, and extracted a tightly wound bit of paper. He spread it out. His eyes narrowed and his ears went flat. “Daavn, all warriors in Rhukaan Draal are to be drafted in the city’s defense. Warriors of all clans within a day’s ride are to be summoned.” Tariic flung the paper down. “The Valaes Tairn have brought an entire warclan into Darguun. Dagii will meet them at Zarrthece.”

Daavn’s ears rose. “An entire warclan? Dagii’s army can’t face that. We’ll reinforce him?”

“We’ll defend Rhukaan Draal.” A wolf’s smile spread across Tariic’s face. “And Dagii of Mur Talaan will find muut and his death at Zarrthece.”
Dawn turned the horizon gray. Cold air trapped smoke and steam from quenched fires close to the ground. Ordered chaos stretched around Ekhaas as Dagii’s army broke camp. The commands of officers were sharp but unnecessary. Every soldier knew what to do. She watched, making note of the expressions on the faces of goblins, hobgoblins, and bugbears as they pulled down tents and packed away gear. Grim. Determined. Excited. Eager.

Her own belly trembled with anticipation, the bloodlust of the dar rising in her. Fear was a distant emotion. Battle was coming.

Footsteps, muffled by ground still wet from the previous evening’s storm, emphasized by the rattle of armor, approached from behind her. “No word from Khaar Mbar’ost,” said Dagii.

“Did you expect any?” She turned around—and stared for a moment.

Dagii wore the ancestral armor of the warlords of Mur Talaan once more, but it had been cleaned and polished until it flashed even in dawn’s half light. The dents and scratches in the heavy plates were scars of honor. The three tall tribex horns mounted behind his head and shoulders could have been banners.

Dagii’s ears flicked under her gaze, and he bent his head before he answered. “Time is short. Tariic will do better to prepare Rhukaan Draal. Where will you watch the battle?”

“From the command hill. If the lhevk’ruh permits it.”

“He will if the duur’kala of Kech Volaar promises to retreat to safer ground when the battle turns against us.”

Ekhaas scowled at him. “Duur’kala of the Kech Volaar can take care of themselves. You don’t have to worry about me, Dagii.”

“I’m not worried about you.” Dagii’s ears flicked again and his face tightened as he heard his own words. He lowered his voice. “I am worried about you, Ekhaas, but I’m worried about what you’ll carry as well. Senen asked you to record the story of our fight against the Valaes Tairn when we thought there were only warbands in Darguun. Now we’re facing a warclan. You have to survive to carry the tale of what happens today.”

She looked into his eyes, amber meeting gray. “When the time comes,” she said, “I’ll retreat with a sword in my hand and elf blood on my teeth.”

Dagii’s lips twitched, though he managed to keep a stern face. “Ban,” he said, but Ekhaas could hear a fierce pride in his voice. Her belly trembled again.

The sun climbed two handspans into the sky.

Below the low hill Dagii had chosen for his command, below the earthen ramparts thrown up to give a measure of cover, warriors waited in close lines. Ekhaas could pick out the individual companies by their crests and their colors, simple strips of cloth tied to armor or polearms. Seven companies of infantry. Two more companies of cavalry, some mounted on horses, others—in the ancient dar tradition—on battle-trained great cats. Leopards for goblins, tigers for hobgoblins. The cats were the only things that moved, pacing back and forth under the guidance of their riders, always kept carefully distant from the horses.

“They’re good and hungry,” said one of the handful of warlords Dagii had picked to stand with him on the hill. “Always go into battle on a hungry cat.”

“Hungry enough to keep them keen,” said another, “but not so hungry they stop to tear into prey. That’s one good thing about horses.”

Beyond the lines of the army stretched the rolling grassy plain that would be the battlefield. Short grass waved—except where it had been trampled down in a broad swathe before the army—like a long green carpet running for leagues into the east between hills on the north and a low ridge to the south. A well-worn dirt track along its center, passing right under the feet of the waiting army. The plain was a natural passage through this part of the land; both it and the track ended at Zarrthec, and together they were much of the reason for the village’s existence.

Tii’ator lay at the far end of the track. Ekhaas’s shoulders itched at the memory of the retreat along the plain after the skirmish with the Valaes Tairn and their discovery in the Mournland. The entire way, she’d expected to feel an elven arrow in her back, though none had come. “They’ll know we’ve found them out,” Dagii had said. “They won’t
bother trying to catch us. They’ll launch their attack—and this is the path they’ll travel to reach Rhukaan Draal. They won’t try to hide themselves. They’ll just move fast.”

“We won’t have much time to prepare,” Chetiin had commented.

“No. We won’t.”

Some time later, Ekhaas had realized that Chetiin and Marrow were no longer with them. She hadn’t seen the shaarat’khesh elder or the worg since.

Scouts left behind had confirmed Dagii’s prediction. If it hadn’t been for the storm that had rolled through, the warclan that rode under the swallow-tailed banner of stars would have been on top of them in the night.

On the track far out in front of the army, on the very edge of the trampled area, a solitary figure waited on a fine bay horse. Keraal.

The clear sound of a horn broke the air—and ended in a discordant honk as if the scout who’d blown it had succumbed to a sudden, fatal wound. The first death of the day, thought Ekhaas.

“They’re close,” said Dagii. “Drummers and pipers, as I ordered.”

A drum just behind Ekhaas began a low, slow beat. Warpipes droned. More drums and pipes scattered through the companies below joined in.

The first elves appeared over a rise in the distance, slim red-robed forms on white horses.

Some paused to stare at the Darguuls gathered before them. Others turned and raced back, maybe to alert their leaders. Still others continued to ride on until Ekhaas could see eyes above veils and arrows nocked on bows, but even they stopped just out of bow range of the waiting army.

The Valaes Tairn rode in clusters or alone. They had no structure, no formations, no discipline. As increasing numbers appeared and rode up to the edge of range, their lines remained ragged and shifting. If there were officers among them, Ekhaas couldn’t pick them out—or even detect their influence. When the lord of the warclan finally appeared, it was almost a surprise. Only the large, dark crystal that sparkled in his helmet set him apart from other warriors. Even the bearer of the swallow-tailed starry banner seemed more to linger near him than to ride at his side.

Ekhaas saw the lord of the warclan speak to one, then another, of the elves close to him, then for a long time, he simply sat and watched the dar.

Drummers and pipers played on.

“I have heard that one of the most difficult things about fighting the Valaes Tairn,” Dagii had said the previous night, “is drawing them into a battle. They fall back before a charge. They ride around a stand. They come to a fight on their own terms. Victory is victory.”

“How do you intend to engage them, then?” a warlord had asked.

“We make them curious,” Dagii had said, ears flicking. “Then we give them a reason to fight.”

On the battlefield, Keraal shook out and raised a banner. Tall and narrow, it had until last night been the red silk lining of a warlord’s fine cloak. Now it carried a crest of three black rings, one above the other, each with three stretched slashes along the outside, like a sword blade bent into a circle with the notched edge out. Ekhaas’s heart soared, not just because she’d been the one to supply the design, but for sheer awe at the sight of a banner that had not been raised over a dar army since the beginning of the Desperate Times. Atop the command hill and on the battlefield, she saw warlords and warriors alike stand straighter as they gazed on the crest, ears rising proudly, as instinct stirred in them.

Words rose in her, and her voice rang over the sound of pipes and drums. “As the armies of the Dhakaani emperor fought, so shall we! Behold the Riis Shaarii’mal! Behold the Three Tearing Wheels of Dhakaan!”

“Give honor!” shouted Dagii from her side.

Nine companies of disciplined dar warriors responded in unison, fists striking chests in a single salute sharp as a crack of thunder.

The Valaes Tairn shifted warily. Ekhaas bared her teeth. The elves knew their ancient enemy—and they knew the symbols of Dhakaan. The Riis Shaarii’mal had flown above countless battles between dar and elves in the time of the empire. To bring it forth again was a challenge, a declaration of rivalry. The leader of the warclan leaned over and spoke with one of the elves beside him. The rider nodded and urged his horse down to meet Keraal.

“Only one?” growled a warlord on the hill.

“Patience,” said Dagii.

Drums and pipes fell silent. The elf reined in his horse a few paces from Keraal. The hobgoblin raised the red banner. “I speak for Dagii of Mur Talaan, lhev’k-rhu of these warriors!” he roared in Goblin.

Behind his veil, the elf’s eyes narrowed in disdain. He answered in the musical tones of Elven, lilting nonsense to
many of the *dar* on the battlefield but clear to Ekhaas. “I speak for Seach Torainar, high warleader of the Sulliel
warclan—”

“Now,” said Dagii.

The drummer behind Ekhaas brought a stick down hard on the skin of his instrument.

On either side of Keraal, the trampled sod rose and flew back. Goblins hidden in camouflaged pockets popped up
onto their knees, raised compact crossbows, and sighted. The waiting elves jerked in surprise. The elf who had
ridden forward cried out and started to wheel his horse, but he was too slow. Ten bowstrings sang and ten bolts flew
—

—and ten scarlet flowers blossomed on the white hide of the elf’s horse. The animal wore light barding, but it
wasn’t armored everywhere and the goblin bolts sought any exposed flesh. The horse screamed and bucked at the
pain, fighting its rider’s attempts at control. The goblins were up and running from their hiding places, racing up the
dirt track to join the army. Keraal turned his horse and retreated as well, but slowly, mockingly. Bows rose among
the waiting elves and arrows buzzed but they were too far and their own man, struggling with his horse, blocked true
aim.

The wounded horse shrieked again. It stumbled once and its hindquarters collapsed as the strandpine sap that had
coated the goblins’ crossbow bolts burned into its blood. The elf leaped from the saddle and stared in horror at his
crippled mount trying to drag itself with its forelegs. Its hind legs kicked uselessly. Then the elf wailed nearly as
loudly as his horse, drew his scimitar and leaped forward to slash the beast’s throat. Blood sprayed him, dark against
scarlet robes. The horse’s screams fell silent, but the elf’s did not. Still wailing like a madman, he turned and raced
after Keraal.

His cries were joined by others as the ragged lines of the Valenar broke and elves streamed into battle. *The only things they hold sacred*, Chetiin had once said, *are their ancestors and their horses.*

Keraal put spurs to his horse and galloped up the track, the *Riis Shaarii’mal* snapping in the wind of his passage.
Arrows loosed by the charging Valenar traced a dark line behind him. Ekhaas stole a glance at Dagii. The young
warlord’s face was hard, his eyes intent. He held his left hand in the air, waiting … waiting …

He brought it down. The piercing voice of the warpipes rose.

And out at the edge of the battlefield, just behind the holes left by the emergence of the goblin snipers, long ropes
snapped up from among the grass, pulled tight by teams of bugbears lurking in the thin woods on either side of the
plain. Shards of broken glass worked in among the fibers glittered in the sunlight.

Charging horses hit the ropes hard. The trees to which they had been lashed thrashed violently, and the heavy
stakes that anchored them on the battlefield leaped. The long ropes sagged and snapped, but their damage was done.
Horses whinnied and fell, tumbling like toys. They screamed at broken and slashed legs, and their struggling bodies
brought down more horses that weren’t quick enough to turn sharply or jump high. Some struggled back to their
feet. Others didn’t rise at all. The first charge of the Valaes Tairn had been broken. But there would be another.

An outraged voice roared in Elvish for an attack, and those elves who had held back surged forward.

“Form up!” ordered Dagii and the great drum beat the signal. Lesser drums took it up and the Darguul lines folded
and split. Seven squares formed up on the battlefield, shields locked together. Dagii snapped more commands, and
five of the squares moved to meet the oncoming elves, warpipes wailing in their midst. Archers among the two
companies that remained in the rear sent clouds of arrows arcing down ahead of the marching companies. The elves
answered with arrows of their own—arrows that rattled as harmlessly as hail on the locked shields.

Above the din of battle, Ekhaas didn’t hear Keraal approach, but suddenly he was there. In his hand was clenched
the *Riis Shaarii’mal*. He dropped to one knee and held it out to Dagii. The warlord clapped a fist to his chest.

“Ta muut,” he said.

Keraal’s ears flicked. He rose and stabbed the banner’s shaft into the soft ground of the earthworks at the brow of
the hill.

The first wave of Valaes Täirm closed on the Darguuls. The beat of the drum changed, and the squares stopped,
two ahead, three behind. Shields parted slightly and spears thrust through. The armored turtles of the squares
abruptly became bristling porcupines. Charging elves screamed and howled, demons in their flying red robes. They
slashed at the air with their scimitars. Even on the hill, Ekhaas thought she could feel the earth trembling beneath the
driving hooves of their horses. She had heard stories that during the Last War, human armies that had faced a
Valenar charge had often crumbled before a blow was struck, their lines broken by sheer terror.

The Darguul lines stood strong. Valenar wheeled away, forced aside by the unyielding spear points. Crowded by
the rush behind them, though, they had little room to turn. Many were forced around the two leading squares,
splitting like a stream around stones.
The charge of those who swung too wide to the outside foundered as their horses’ hooves found the third trap hidden under the trampled grass: all of the baskets in Zarrthec and all of the cages of willow switches that an army could weave, hidden under all the loose branches that the forest could provide. Sticks and switches and baskets closed around hooves and legs, doing no damage but fouling the charge as surely as pits of mud. And as the charge slowed, more goblin crossbowmen concealed among the autumn-brown trees at the edge of the plain loosed their bolts—not poisoned this time, but enough to bloody the elves and drop them in their saddles.

The Valenar who flowed between the squares fared no better. They found themselves in broad aisles between the forward and back formations with nowhere to go except out to the sides where branches grabbed hooves or onward through narrower aisles between the three rear squares.

So they raced on—directly into the arrows of the two companies that had stayed behind. More elves fell, but others escaped the trap of the squares.

“Cavalry!” Dagii ordered and the command drum changed its beat. The rain of arrows stopped and the Darguul cavalry took the field, sweeping in front of the standing companies to meet the elves that had made it through the gauntlet. The Darguul horse thundered across the plain, a moving wedge composed of lances, but now the elves had room to move. They melted away before the charge and answered in kind. They streamed along the sides of the horse formation, scimitars slashing, and where they passed, hobgoblins died.

But behind the horse cavalry, they met the cats.

There were no formations for them to evade. The tiger and leopard riders fought as the Valenar did, alone and in clusters. The already-trampled grass became a mass of green and brown as hooves and paws chewed into the ground underneath. Ekhaas watched an elf rider dart close to a hobgoblin, lash out with a scimitar, and wheel away out of sword’s reach. The hobgoblin nudged his tiger mount. The great cat coiled and sprang. Massive claws seized the haunches of fleeing horse and bore it down. The impact flung the elf out of her saddle. A goblin-ridden leopard pounced on her before she could even regain her feet.

The beat of the drums changed again. The infantry companies pressed forward once more, squares altering shape to become blunt-nosed wedges with the brute strength of bugbears at their head. The horse company reformed and drove in behind them.

“We have command of the field!” cried one of the warlords on the hill.

Dagii’s ears pressed flat back against his head. “A blow has been struck,” he growled, “but the battle continues.”

Beyond the foremost of the charging companies, Ekhaas saw one of the Valaes Tairn raise his hand. An orb of violet glass flashed in his grip.

Purple-tinged flames exploded at the head of the nearest Darguul company. Bugbears became writhing torches an instant before dropping. Hobgoblins scattered. The marching wedge cracked like a bone thrown into a fire. With a wild cheer, elves wheeled their horses into the broken company as drums sounded and the Darguuls fought to recover their formation.

Other wizards rode with the elves. Yellow vapors engulfed trees where goblin snipers perched. When they faded, dry leaves and hobgoblins alike lay on the ground beneath. The tiger that Ekhaas had watched bring down a horse fell at the touch of an icy blue ray. Lightning crackled and arced among the spear points of another company. Across the battlefield, flame and frost and lightning ravaged the Darguuls, tearing openings for the Valenar to exploit. Here and there, hobgoblin warcasters responded with blasts of rippling force, but their spells were weak and few—dar were born to war, but elves were born to magic. Lightning-scorched shields parted and a warcaster thrust his staff at an elf wizard. The air shimmered between them, tearing at the elf’s red robes, but he held his ground and responded with a golden bolt that spun the warcaster around and sent him sprawling.

Arrows followed like a swarm of bees, tearing a hole in the Darguul company. Shields closed again, but the damage had been done and the formation was left with a gouge in its side. The company drew itself together, leaving the corpses of the warcaster and half a dozen warriors behind.

The early triumph of dar discipline over elven disarray was gone. In the moments when the battle shifted, Ekhaas could count more Darguul bodies on the churned ground than she could Valenar. Elven skill reasserted itself. Many of the Valaes Tairn had abandoned their horses to engage the hobgoblins on foot. The bristling spears of the surviving squares, so effective in warding off cavalry attacks, were little use against lithe foot soldiers who weaved between the shafts and wedged shields apart with scimitars. Armored squares dissolved into thick knots of hobgoblins fighting back-to-back, sword and shield against whirling scimitars. Though the great cats still stalked the battlefield, the remains of the Darguul horse cavalry had been reduced to a handful of mounted units fighting in shrinking clusters.

At the far edge of the battle, the starry banner of the Sulliel warclan moved into the thick of the fighting.
Dagii bared his teeth and retrieved his helmet, polished as bright as the rest of his armor. “There is no more command,” he said. “When war calls, all fight.” He scanned the three warlords who had stood with him on the command hill, then thumped his chest with his fists.

The warlords straightened like junior warriors on parade and saluted in return, then turned and hurried down the back of the hill. Keraal moved to retrieve the Riis Shaari’mal, but Dagii shook his head. “No.” He looked at Ekhaas. “Take it when you leave.”

Ekhaas nodded and forced her ears to stand high as she met his gray-eyed gaze. He nodded to her, then slid his helmet over his head. A visor of brass hid the upper half of his face, as if in reverse of veils worn by the Valaes Tairn, and gave him a cold, merciless look.

He turned to the final four warriors on the hill: the command drummer, the command piper, and Biiri and Uukam, the lhurusk who had accompanied them to Tii’ator. “You will protect Ekhaas duur’kala with your lives. Our muut survives with her.”

All four answered together. “Mazo, lhev’k’ruh!”

Then Dagii and Keraal were gone, following the warlords down the hill. Ekhaas looked up at the sun. Somehow it had already climbed another handspan and stood now at its zenith, an unblinking witness to the battle.

A voice shouted below. Ekhaas leaned past the earthworks and gazed down. The two companies that had been held in reserve stood straight. The one on the left, marching beneath the standard of an iron fox, moved forward, ready to take to the field. The lines of the other shifted and spread out, a frail bulwark to protect the command hill.

From around the side of the hill came the three warlords, Keraal, and Dagii. The warlords were mounted on good horses and Keraal was on his bay once more, but Dagii rode on one of the finest tigers Ekhaas had ever seen. It was enormous, large even for a tiger. Its striped fur shone like fire and brass flashed from the high-cantled saddle strapped across its back. Its eyes didn’t hold the sinister intelligence of Marrow’s, but there was cunning there and a lust for blood. Under Dagii’s guidance, it loped out to take a place at the head of the company.

Dagii raised his sword—then whirled it around his head and let loose a battle cry. “Bring honor to Darguun! Attack! Attack!”

The roar of his tiger nearly drowned out the cry. In an instant, the beast was racing across the battlefield for the nearest cluster of elves. Keraal followed close behind, chain whistling around his head. The warlords and the warriors of the company followed, too, warriors trotting at a pace that ate up the ground, yet kept them in formation. The elves that Dagii had chosen as a target were still just turning when the lhev’k’ruh reached them. His sword cut the head from one. The tiger’s claws tore another from his saddle. The weighted end of Keraal’s chain cracked the skull of a third.

Then they were through and plunging on. The dazed survivors they left behind lived only a few moments longer as the company of the Iron Fox rolled over them. Elves turned to meet the new charge like ants drawn to a dollop of honey. In the midst of them came the swallow-tailed banner of stars, and Ekhaas picked out the crystal-set helmet of the high warleader, Seach Torainar. Dagii must have seen the banner, too. He leveled his sword and shouted again, urging his tiger and his followers on.

The cheer that answered him came not just from the Iron Fox Company, but from all the Darguuls surviving on the field. New vigor seemed to flow into them, and they struck back at the elves. Formations drew back together. One piper, then another, and another, then even the command piper beside Ekhaas, began to play a fierce, determined tune.

Ekhaas looked down on the battlefield and clenched her teeth tight. The resurgence was glorious—and almost certainly doomed. Slim scimitars outnumbered heavy swords now. For every two elves that Dagii struck down, three more were ready to meet him.

“He turns muut into atcha,” said Biiri in awe. “If I survive, I will praise him before Lhesh Tariic!”

“Storytellers will chant his name,” said Uukam. He looked at Ekhaas, his ears high. “Stay as long as you can, Ekhaas duur’kala. Witness the end of a hero!”

She wasn’t certain she trusted herself to speak. She nodded silently instead—a nod that froze as a slow wind stirred, and the ghost of a song touched her ears. At first it was thin, so thin it could have been an echo, but then it swelled with Senen Dhakaan’s voice, as full and distinct as if the ambassador of the Kech Volaar stood beside her.

_The ghaal’dar Aruget brings news. Ashi d’Deneith has been arrested at Tariic’s orders. A changeling takes Geth’s place. Makka hunts. Beware, daughter of the dirge!_

Breath caught in Ekhaas’s throat. Ashi arrested? A changeling replacing Geth? What was happening in Rhukaan Draal? Her gut twisted. Dagii rode to his doom. The friends she had left behind were in trouble. Chetiin had vanished once more. For the first time since they had found the Rod of Kings and discovered the dangerous secrets it
held, she felt very, very alone.

“Ekhaas?” Uukam asked. “Is something wrong?”

She raised her head—and shook it. She’d been alone before. She’d traveled and fought alone for years before she’d met Geth, Ashi, and the others. Dagii faced his death. She could do nothing less. Whatever had happened to Ashi and Geth, she might be their only hope. Ekhaas pushed out the knots in her belly and forced herself to breathe again. She could still hear Senen’s song. As long as it lingered, the magic would carry back a reply. She looked down at the struggle on the battlefield, gathered her thoughts, and opened her mouth to sing—

Behind her, the music of the warpipes ended with a sudden moan from the pipes and a gasp from the piper. She whirled around, Biiri and Uukam moving with her.

The piper, throat slashed, hung in the arms of an elf. The drummer stood with the scimitar of a second elf at his chest. Six more of the Valaes Tairn crouched on the back edge of the hill, weapons ready.

Senen’s song faded.

The elves screamed and charged.
Uukam and Biiri drew their swords and moved in front of her with the reflexes of trained soldiers. Strategy flickered in Ekhaas’s mind. The elves must have made their way through the woods to the back of the hill. They were already too close to blast them with sound or sing fear into their souls. There would be no disabling all of them. This fight would be toe-to-toe and they’d need every sword at hand.

The elf whose scimitar hovered over the drummer’s chest drew back his blade, ready to strike, as the other elves charged. Ekhaas focused her will on him, drew on her magic, and let loose a wail like a ghost rising from the grave. The elf’s head snapped around, eyes wide. His scimitar paused, trembled.

And the hobgoblin drummer struck back. The short thick rods of brass that had beaten the great drum knocked the scimitar out of the elf’s hand, and cracked across his face. The elf reeled back but the hobgoblin stayed with him, raining blows with lethal rhythm.

Then the other elves were on her, Biiri, and Uukam. Curved blades crashed on the warriors’ shields. Two couldn’t hold back six—seven, as the elf who had killed the piper dropped his victim and joined the attack. Ekhaas snatched her sword from its sheath and thrust her free hand into the face of the first Valenar to come at her. Song burst from her throat, and light as bright as a sliver of the noon sun flared from her palm. Dazzled, the elf fell back a pace. Ekhaas stepped after him, chopping down with her sword. It screeched off of armor beneath the red robes, but the elf cried out and retreated.

Another took his place, swinging backhand as he whirled past. Ekhaas twisted her sword and the scimitar caught among the heavy teeth on the back of the blade. Biiri struck past her in a blow that sheared through metal and flesh. One elf down.

Two—Uukam cut through the torso of another, leaving her grasping at a terrible wound. Three—the drummer’s opponent didn’t rise as the hobgoblin straightened, drumsticks red with blood, chest heaving with exhilaration.

“Call for aid!” Ekhaas shouted at him. He dashed for his drum, but jerked and spun around between one step and the next. Two arrows sprouted from his back.

Where eight Valenar could go, more could surely follow.

Clenching her teeth, Ekhaas threw herself across the hilltop. Uukam and Biiri shifted instantly to protect their own backs. Four elves still faced them. One went after Ekhaas and hooked her foot with his. Ekhaas sprawled face first into grass and dirt. The impact knocked the wind out of her, but she forced herself to roll.

A scimitar gouged the soil a handspan behind her. She kicked blindly and felt her boot connect. The elf staggered back. Ekhaas got up on her hands and knees and scuttled to look over the back edge of the hill.

Six more of the Valaes Tairn were climbing the slope, two covering the ascent with arrows nocked. One swung his bow toward her. Ekhaas sucked air into her lungs, swept her free hand through the air, and forced out a thin, liquid song. The ground beneath and around the elves turned dark and shiny as greased leather. Their feet slipped out from under them, and they went tumbling back down the hill in a flurry of robes, scimitars, and wildly-loosed arrows. Ekhaas grinned—

—and pain like fire seared down her back with a force that knocked her to the ground. Gasping, she twisted. The Valenar she had kicked stood over her, raising his scimitar for another strike. Ekhaas kicked again, but he avoided her easily this time and shifted to get a better blow.

His foot came down on the pipes dropped by the slain piper. The sagging leopard skin bag collapsed under his heel and the pipes released one final startling bleat of sound. The elf leaped in surprise. Ekhaas pushed herself away from the edge of the hill and back to her feet. She could feel blood running down her back underneath the leather armor. Her back burned with every movement, but she could still raise her sword. The elf moved around her, picking the moment of his next attack.

“Ekhaas! With us!” shouted Biiri. From the corner of her eye, she saw him cut down one of the Valenar who menaced him and Uukam, just as Uukam struck out with his shield, forcing back the other two elves. The two soldiers turned as one, offering her a chance to reach their side.

Ekhaas took it. She feinted at the elf, then dodged past him to join Biiri and Uukam. Three hobgoblins fighting together now—but four elves circling them, death in the eyes that shone above red veils.
“We’ll force an opening,” Uukam rasped, his voice thick with exertion. “You run. Get to the woods.”

Fierce determination rose from Ekhaas’s gut up into her throat. Her ears stiffened. There would be no escape through the woods, but she also felt no desire to flee. Eight Valenar had taken them by surprise and they had still brought half of them down. They could take the other four. They would take the other four. “No!” she spat. “No running. We fight! We fight as the Dhakaani fought! We fight and win!”

Her voice rose in a song, harsh and martial, a song she’d heard Dagii’s soldiers chanting as they marched to the devastated clanhold of Ti’ator. It was no spell, but she wove magic into it, invoking the ferocity and discipline of an entire army prepared for battle. Biiri and Uukam stood straight as the song caught them up. New strength seemed to enter their arms, and Ekhaas’s as well. Her grip on her sword grew steady; the throbbing pain of her wounded back grew distant.

The Valaes Tairn appeared to feel the song, too. They glanced at each other, scimitars wavering slightly. Then one of them cried out in Elven, “For the glory of Kaelan!” and leaped forward.

Biiri’s shield snapped up to catch the falling scimitar—and Uukam’s sword cut beneath to tear open the elf’s belly. Without even a pause, he swung himself over the falling body, slicing with the lower lip of his shield at the next Valenar. The elf ducked under the sudden blow, only to meet Biiri’s rising sword. Ekhaas stayed with them, her back to theirs. The two remaining elves shouted and plunged at her as if to end the song. She dropped down and struck back in a low, wide arc. They moved like dancers, evading her sweep with ease.

Uukam and Biiri whirled, closed in on either side of Ekhaas, and brought their heavy swords around with a speed and force that turned elven grace into bloody tatters. Biiri’s blade cut the head from one elf. Uukam’s shattered the scimitar of the other and drove on into his chest. Red robes fluttered to the ground and torn flesh thumped down on top of them. Ekhaas’s song rose then faded away. For a moment, it seemed that the only sound was her and her companions’ breathing, the sound of triumph more certain and primal than any cheer.

Then the sound of the battle that still raged below the hill burst over them. The clash of metal. The shrieks of horses, the roars of great cats, the screams of the dying. Biiri’s sword, still raised, dropped. “Now we run, Ekhaas duur’kala,” he said. “Dagii commands it. You carry our muut.”

He moved to the earthworks at the brow of the hill to seize the crimson banner of the Riis Shaarii’mal, but when he reached it, he froze, staring down. Ekhaas rose from her crouch. Both she and Uukam went to stand beside him. Her ears flicked then went flat.

While they had fought atop the hill, the battle had shifted and surrounded them.

The reserve company that protected the bottom of the hill was a thin wall fighting raging opponents. The squares of the five companies that had first marched into battle were like sputtering flames, clinging to life. Even as she watched, two were extinguished completely as the elves surged and overwhelmed them. Bursts of lightning and fire flared here and there, wiping out more dar. What remained of the Darguul cavalry fought either with the reserve company or with the loose formation of the final company to enter battle, the Iron Fox. Maybe half of the Valaes Tairn warclan lay dead—but so did more than three-quarters of the Darguuls.

Along the seething border between dar and elves, Dagii fought Seach Torainar. The tall tribex horns mounted to the shoulders of Dagii’s armor marked the lhevk’rhu as surely as the flashing crystal in the high warleader’s helm did him. Bounding tiger leaped around wheeling horse. Hobgoblin sword and shield met deadly Valenar double-scimitar—two curved blades joined end to end through a single long hilt. Keraal fought close by, his whirling chain warding off any of the Valaes Tairn who tried to take Dagii from behind.

“Paatcha!” said Uukam in awe. “This is a battle worth dying in!”

“It’s a battle one of us must survive,” Biiri said. “Ekhaas duur’kala, if we don’t leave we’ll be caught.” He grabbed her arm and tried to pull her away.

She shook him off. “We’re already caught. There are elves at the back of the hill.”

Uukam cursed and raced across the hilltop to the back edge, then cursed again. “A squad of our cavalry fight them, but more come. Our riders won’t hold for long.”

“We could fight our way through,” said Biiri, baring his teeth.

“And be struck down by Valenar arrows while we ran.” Trembling eagerness ran through Ekhaas. “Dagii makes a stand. The battle isn’t over.” She spun and thrust her finger at Biiri. “Bring the drum! Play!”

“I can’t!”

Uukam snatched the bloody brass rods from the hands of the dead drummer. “I can.”

“Then do it. Beat a pace like a loping tiger. Biiri, watch our backs.”

Ekhaas stepped up onto the earthworks so that she stood beside the Riis Shaarii’mal. She took three deep, slow breaths, then one that was very deep. She reached down inside herself, drew up the power of the song that twined
around her soul, and sang as she never had before.

There had been words to the song she had sung for Biiri and Uukam. The tune had been familiar to them. What she sang now had no words, and the tune was ancient. Another duur’kala or one of the dedicated lorekeepers of the vaults of the Kech Volaar might know it. Ekhaas was certain that no one on the battlefield below had ever heard it, yet she was equally certain that it would fire the spirit of every dar, every true child of ancient Dhakaan, who did. The greatest glories of the past could never truly be forgotten.

Song rolled out of her belly and her chest as it had rolled out of duur’kala of old, but freshly infused with her magic—and from the first note, it seemed that what she sang was even older than Dhakaan, that it grew out of a primal need to fight for life and to triumph over death. The sensation was dizzying, but Ekhaas poured everything she felt into the song. Long hours of training in Volaar Draal had taught her how to project her voice, but even a duur’kala’s voice couldn’t carry unaided over the battlefield. A slim thread of magic stolen from the magnificent whole amplified and tied it to the rhythm Uukam beat out on the great drum. Both song and drumbeat rose into the sky and echoed across the plain, pure as sunlight and as powerful as a storm.

The battle paused, all eyes looking up at her in amazement, elven bright and dar dark. In the elves she could see a sudden tension, an instinctive mistrust of this martial music. In the dar, though, she saw exactly what she had expected. Wonder. Longing. Awe. Rage.

She sought out Dagii. The brass half-mask of his helm was raised to her—then he thrust his sword in the air. “Attack!” he roared. “Attack!”

The battle crashed back into motion. Dagii urged his tiger at Seach Torainar, but a ripple in the currents of fighting forced the two leaders apart. Quick-thinking elves launched a volley of arrows up at Ekhaas but the angle of the hill and a fold of the earthworks offered her protection. Or perhaps the song itself deflected the arrows. Ekhaas’s voice soared.

In her mind’s eye, she saw the glories of Dhakaan portrayed in the stories and artifacts that had come down through the ages to the Kech Volaar.

Carved cities and mighty fortresses.
Vast armies sweeping enemies before them—gnolls, elves, the dread daelkyr and their foul minions. Works of staggering majesty.
The magical songs of duur’kala and the wondrous creations of daashor.
The deeds of emperors and generals and warriors—heroes of the dar.
She channeled what she saw into what she sang, and her song was the song of the Empire of Dhakaan.

The beat of Uukam’s drum became the beat played by all the drums that had survived on the battlefield. The rhythm anchored Ekhaas to the fighting soldiers of Darguun. It carried her vision into living hearts, bringing a renewed energy to the goblin who rode his leopard against a Valenar horse, to the bugbear who laid about him with a steel mace that reaped lives as a scythe reaped grain, to the hobgoblin warcaster who beat his broken staff against the bleeding head of a staggering elf wizard. Ekhaas watched the reserve regiment at the base of the hill gather itself and throw back the Valaes Tairn. She watched the fragments of Darguul companies flow together, form themselves into wedges and force their way through their enemies to reach each other. She watched the Iron Fox Company, under Dagii’s command, take a position at the heart of the swirling battle.

And Valaes Tairn died—but so did Darguuls. Slowly, in spite of the valor of the dar, the battle turned back to the favor of the elves. A newly reformed company collapsed. A rush of elven cavalry drove the reserve company back to the base of the hill and shattered their lines. Beneath the swallow-tailed banner of stars, Seach Torainar whirled his double scimitar around his head and gathered elves for a rush on the Iron Fox. Dagii shouted and roared, urging his warriors into stronger lines to meet the attack.

“Maabet!” Biiri cried from behind her. “They’re through. They’re coming—the elves are climbing!”

The beat of Uukam’s drum faltered, then faded, and Ekhaas knew he had gone to aid in whatever defense Biiri could muster.

She sang alone. Her throat was raw. Her jaw and chest ached. She knew that the veins and muscles of her neck must be standing out, straining like the rigging on a ship in a storm. She looked down on the defeat of Dagii’s army and almost—almost—the sorrow of a dirge, of the fall of Dhakaan and the beginning of the hard Desperate Times, crept into her song.

No. She wouldn’t let Darguuls die with the sounds of mourning in their ears. She wouldn’t sing defeat before the Valaes Tairn.

Ekhaas reached deep into herself, flung her arms wide, and sang defiance. Her song soared again as she built on the old music, weaving a new vision into it. A vision of a homeland for an ancient people, restored to pride after
long millennia. A vision of a red tower above a sprawling, bustling city; of clan chiefs and warlords gathered in unity to take back the land that belonged to the dar; of a new age for hobgoblins, goblins, and bugbears. Haruuc’s vision.

She threw back her head and howled Darguun’s pride to the sky.
Another howl answered her.
And another.
And another.
And the elves of the Sulliel warclan were shouting in alarm and fear. Ekhaas’s gaze snapped back to the battlefield.

From the hills and woods on the northern side of the plain poured a river of black and gray and white. Small, lithe forms hunched over powerful shoulders that bunched and surged beneath thick fur. Goblins and wolves, the larger shapes of worgs among them as well. Taarka’khesh. The Silent Wolves, silent no longer.

Hope gripped her and her song rose, wild and triumphant. She howled and wolves howled back. Ekhaas heard startled shouts from Biri and Uukam and elven screams from the backside of the hill, and she knew that the Valenar who had sought to capture them had new problems. Across the battlefield, the taarka’khesh crashed into the elves, throwing them into disarray. Teeth snapped at the legs of horses. Short blades and crossbows bit into elf flesh.

Another rider joined Keraal at Dagii’s side. Dressed in black, he was all but invisible against the black fur of the great worg he rode, but Ekhaas knew him. Chetiin—and Marrow—had returned.

The double scimitar of Seach Torainar dipped and spun, gutting a goblin with one blade and piercing his wolf mount with the other. Then the weapon rose high and whirled. The high warleader raised a slim horn to his lips and blew a long, wailing note—and he wheeled his mount and raced from the battlefield. Everywhere, elves broke off their fighting to follow his retreat. Ekhaas might have been standing at the ocean’s edge, watching the tide turn. Victory had turned into a rout.

Those Valenar who were still mounted offered a hand to comrades on foot, or else turned to cover their escape. The taarka’khesh didn’t pause. Elves who stood to fight and horses too slow in their flight were overwhelmed by snapping, tearing jaws and stabbing blades. The retreat was a flurry of red robes and white flanks galloping away along the plain; the pursuit was a rushing shadow, night chasing day into the east instead of the west.

The desolation of the battlefield was revealed. Corpses of elf and dar, horse and great cat and wolf. Of the proud Darguul army, only the Iron Fox Company remained in any numbers.

Ekhaas’s song swirled to a final ringing note that filled the sky in triumph. The power of it faded from her body and left her trembling. Her right hand found a shoulder of the earthwork for support. Her left found the Riis Shaarii’mal. She plucked the banner from the ground and thrust it high.

A cheer rose from the survivors of the battle, muted and small amid the carnage, yet deafening in its own way. A rider turned his tiger, racing it across torn corpses and churned grass, and urging it up the steep slope of the hill’s front in mighty bounds. When the beast reached the earthworks, Dagii slid from the saddle, pulled his helmet from sweat-drenched hair, and dropped to his knees in front of Ekhaas. His ears stood tall. His shadow-gray eyes were wide with pride and adoration.

“Taarka’nu,” he rasped. Wolf woman.

Ekhaas’s strained throat could barely work but she forced her voice through it. “Ruuska’te,” she whispered. Tiger man.

He rose, put his hand over hers on the shaft of the Riis Shaarii’mal, and they turned to face the battlefield together. The survivors roared again, even louder than before.

The long shadows of late afternoon reached along the plain. The survivors of Dagii’s army gathered dar corpses. A pit would be dug and a cairn built over it. Later a proper monument might be erected to the heroes who had expected only to slow an attacking army and had instead defeated it.

The bodies of elves and their horses were left where they lay. Carrion eaters were already circling in the sky and gathering in the woods.

Most of the taarkakhesh and a number of the surviving great cat cavalry still pursued the fleeing Valenar. The howls of wolves and worgs echoed out of the east, relayed over great distances. “The elves make no stand,” Chetiin said, listening to the howls along with Marrow. “They may run all the way to the Mournland. Horses can outpace cats and wolves over long distance but the taarka’khesh will patrol the border for a time to make sure they don’t try to come back.”
“They’ll find their way back to Valenar,” said Dagii. He sat on a log, one bandaged leg thrust out before him. A scimitar had pierced a weak point in his armor. One of the taarka’khesh had offered him magic to heal it, but Dagii had directed him to chant his spells over Ekhaas’s wounded back instead. “Through the Mournland or down to Kraken Bay for passage on a sympathetic Lyrandar ship.”

Keraal, standing with his arms crossed, grunted agreement and added, “Lhesh Tariic owes a debt to you. He should greet you in Rhukaan Draal as a hero.”

Caught in the middle of a sip of numbingly hot herbal tea intended to soothe her throat, Ekhaas grimaced. She looked around. The four of them were, for the moment, alone. She wasn’t sure she wanted to speak in front of Keraal, but she didn’t think she had much choice.

“That may not happen,” she croaked. Her voice sounded as strained as Chetiin’s. “A song message from Senen Dhakaan came to me during the battle. Tariic has arrested Ashi, and a changeling has taken Geth’s place. She said Makka is hunting, too. I don’t know what that means, but—”

“Something is wrong,” Dagii said.

“I’m going back,” Ekhaas told him. “Ahead of the returning troops. I may be able to slip into the city.”

Dagii nodded. “I’m going with you.”

“No,” said Chetiin. The shaarat’khesh elder’s ears cupped. “Your place is with your soldiers. I’ll go with her.”

Keraal’s eyes had narrowed in suspicion. Dagii bared his teeth and flattened his ears. “There’s more happening than you know, Keraal. This may be a test of your oath to serve me.”

“Ban,” the other warrior snarled. “I see as well as a hawk by day.” He looked at Chetiin. “Your name’s not Maanin. You’re Chetiin.”

Marrow growled. The goblin’s ears flicked, but he nodded.

Keraal looked back to Dagii. “Did you hire him to assassinate Lhesh Haruuc? I hated him, but I wouldn’t have done something like that. If you did, you don’t have the muut or the atcha I believed you did.”

Breath hissed between Dagii’s teeth and his ears pressed back even further. “I didn’t—and Chetiin wasn’t the assassin. Suggest something like that again and I’ll pit my sword against your chains.”

Tension pulled at the air between the two warriors. Ekhaas’s hands tightened around her mug, but before she could say anything, Keraal bent his head. “I am without honor in this, lhev krhu,” he said in apology. “I doubted you.”

Dagii said nothing for a moment, then his ears rose slightly. “I have a story to tell you, Keraal, but it will wait for the journey back to Rhukaan Draal.” He looked at Ekhaas and Chetiin. “If Geth and Ashi are in trouble, we should hurry. It would take three days if we travel at the pace of the slowest survivor. A small company could make it in two. Tariic would think nothing of that—a victorious warlord isn’t slow to share his news.”

“Your arrival can serve as a distraction, then,” said Ekhaas. “Chetiin and I will go ahead. I know magic that can speed our travel.”

“Save your voice.” Chetiin scratched Marrow’s head. “You’re not the only one who knows something of swift travel. The Silent Clans will aid us. I guarantee that no one will know we’ve returned to Rhukaan Draal.” He glanced at her. “If you’re not too tired to leave tonight.”

Ekhaas’s ears stood tall. “I’m ready.”
CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

3 Aryth

Geth could smell burned flesh. It was his.

He could smell scorched hair and stale sweat, old blood and hot metal, charcoal and, curiously, the hint of sweet spices.

“Te laloo kaanii.” Daavn’s voice. The warlord of the Marhaan spoke Goblin. Without Wrath, Geth only caught the roughest meaning of his words. Something about healing quickly.

“Chiit so shiftaa,” said Tariic. Geth felt something poke at the skin of his side. With his arms stretched and bound over his head, his body was exposed and vulnerable. “Toma piisgo,” Tariic added. “So kaas te vusrii.”

Vusrii. To burn.

The touch of red-hot metal seared his other side and Geth jerked and screamed. His eyes snapped open to the same small, brazier-lit chamber he had seen for … who knew how long. He managed to evade the burning metal for a brief instant, but the it was back, pressed firmly against his skin. He howled and thrashed but the iron stayed on him. The gnarled hands of the waxy-fleshed goblin who held it were steady. Dark eyes flashed with greedy pleasure.

Finally the metal pulled away. Geth collapsed back against the inclined table on which he was stretched. Tariic moved close and clamped a hand over his forehead, holding him still. Eyes so brown they were almost red stared into his.

“Where is the Rod of Kings?” he asked.

Geth fought the haze of pain and forced out the same answer he had given again and again. “I don’t have it!”

“Te kuur doovol.” He tells the truth.

This time it was Pradoor’s shrill voice. Geth twisted his head under Tariic’s palm. He could just see the old goblin woman crouched beside a heavy rack of knives, white eyes shining like the sharpened blades. Symbols had been scrawled in a rough arc on the filth-crusted floor in front of her. At the center of the arc, smoke shifted from a metal bowl filled with coals.

Tariic cursed. “You’re certain?”

Pradoor’s fingers twined through a bunch of cords knotted together and strung with small, flashing tokens. “The Six lend me the wisdom to hear lies,” she said in the human tongue, accented but clear. “He tells the truth.” Her wrinkled face split in a smile. “But he doesn’t answer the question, does he? Ask another.”

Tariic’s ears went back and he looked at Geth again. “Who has the Rod of Kings, then?”

“I told you!” Geth groaned. The evasions came easily. “Chetiin stole it!”

“He tells the truth.”

With a growl, Tariic gestured and pointed at Geth’s belly. The goblin torturer nodded and turned to the brazier. Metal grated on metal as he exchanged the cooling iron for a fresh one. He didn’t speak. Tariic had shown Geth that he couldn’t—his tongue had been cut out—and that he couldn’t hear pleas, questions, or answers either. Deaf and mute, he was the perfect tool for extracting secret information.

The chamber was well-used. Had the torturer plied his trade for Haruuc?

Hot metal swiped across Geth’s stomach like a knife. He screamed again and strained against his bonds. Ropes creaked. Tariic slammed him back.

“What did Chetiin do with it?”

“He ran! He climbed down the wall of Khaar Mbar’ost and disappeared into Rhukaan Draal. I haven’t seen him since!” His voice cracked in an involuntary sob. Deep inside him, an inner voice was stronger. Hold out! He must not find it.

“He tells the truth,” said Pradoor again.

Geth looked up into Tariic’s eyes. “Just kill me,” he said. “Get it over with.”

Tariic roared and seized the collar of black stones that still hung around Geth’s neck—the torturer hadn’t been able to break or remove it, a strange property that even Geth hadn’t been aware of—in one hand and wrenched him up by it. “I have your sword,” he snarled into Geth’s face. “I have Aram. It hangs on the wall of my quarters as a
trophy. I know you’re hiding something. If you don’t tell me where to find the Rod of Kings, you will die by the Sword of Heroes!”

Geth bared his teeth. “You can’t wield Wrath. The Sword of Heroes won’t bear the touch of a coward.” Up close he could see the red burns on Tariic’s palms. “You’ve found that out already.”

Tariic’s ears went back flat and he shifted his grip on the collar, twisting it around his fist until the stones bit into Geth’s throat. Shadows swam in Geth’s vision. He saw the torturer’s face. The goblin looked disappointed. Geth sank down into warm oblivion—until the pressure on his neck eased. Air came rushing back. He thought he saw Tariic step back, fury on his face, and he thought he heard the lhesh say, “He won’t break easily. I don’t have time for this. Take him away.”

He gestured at the torturer, communicating instructions with signs. The goblin produced a leather bag and pulled it over Geth’s head. Something coated the leather, making his vision whirl again. His last sight as the bag came down was Tariic turning to Daavn. The last thing he heard were the words, “Bring me the tiefling.”

Hobgoblin guards marched Ashi, hands bound behind her back, through a stout door and into a room with high, narrow windows. Sunlight pierced the windows, bright enough to blind her after the darkness of her cell. Fire warmed the room. Carpets cushioned the hard floor and soft chairs waited for her.

Vounn stood across the room, before the fire. Ashi couldn’t hold back a gasp at the sight of her. She pulled away from the guards. “Vounn!”

Her mentor turned, crossed the room in three swift strides—and slapped her hard.

“You fool!” she said, her tone seething. She stormed past her to confront the guards. “Get out!” she said in Goblin. The hobgoblins looked baffled. Vounn flicked a hand at them imperiously. “Get out, I said! Wait outside the door. Where is she going to go?”

The guards glanced at each other, then bent their heads and retreated. They didn’t untie her hands. As the door closed behind them, Vounn whirled on Ashi again and thrust her furious face close.

“We’re being watched,” she whispered. Her voice rose again. “You killed a guard of Khaar Mbar’ost! Explain yourself!”

Ashi blinked. The first words out of her mouth were no act. “I didn’t kill any guard! It was—”

Vounn slapped her again. “You bring shame on Deneith!” she spat, then cried out and pulled Ashi into an embrace like a mother crying over a willful child—and whispered in her ear, “Aruget came to me. He told me what happened. Keep his name out of it.”

Now Ashi understood what she was doing. Dar culture was uncomfortable with touching—especially embracing—in public. Any Darguul watching them would more than likely look away at least briefly from this human affection. They had a few moments of privacy.

There was one question she needed answered more than any other, one thing that had haunted her while she waited in her cell. Only three people knew about their arrangement with Pater d’Orien to transport her away from Rhukaan Draal and could have told Tariic to send a warning to the Orien compound. Vounn had no reason to give her away to Tariic. Pater wouldn’t have sent a warning to himself. That left only one person who could have betrayed her.

“Have you seen Midian?” she asked Vounn.

Maybe Vounn had guessed the same thing. “Yes,” she said without hesitation. “He’s been avoiding me, but I’ve seen him. Tariic has appointed him historian.”

Ashi stiffened, rage flashing through her. Vounn held her still. “You look better than I thought you might after three days in a dungeon. Tariic wouldn’t let me see you. Has he questioned you about the Rod of Kings?”

“No,” Ashi said tightly. That was something she didn’t understand. She hadn’t seen Tariic—or Daavn or Makka—since her arrest. Had it really been three days? She’d spent a long time afraid that Tariic might torture her to find out what she knew or that Makka would come seeking his frustrated vengeance. There’d been nothing, only a little food and water shoved through a hatch in the door of her cell. “Where’s Aruget?”

“I don’t know. I only spoke with him once, but he leaves me messages. He knew I was coming here.” She hesitated, then added, “He told me to tell you he’d get you out.” She looked into Ashi’s eyes. “Don’t go with him.”

Before Ashi could respond, the older woman pushed her away and her voice grew angry again. “You don’t deserve it, but I’m working to have you released and banished rather than executed,” she said, a little loud for the benefit of anyone watching. “House Deneith supports you even if you’ve dishonored it.” Her eyes caught Ashi’s again and she said pointedly, “The negotiations are delicate. We’re risking much, but the evidence against you is
weak."

Ashi blinked again. Vounn still played the same balancing game against Tariic that had kept her free after the
coronation. Maybe that was why Tariic hadn’t tried to question her about the rod. Darguun still needed House
Deneith and a charge of murder, especially one that couldn’t be proved, wasn’t the same as one of conspiracy.
Escaping with Aruget would leave her a fugitive; if Vounn could negotiate her release, she wouldn’t be pursued.

If her negotiations were successful.

Mindful of watching eyes, Ashi bent low. “I don’t deserve this.”

“No,” Vounn said, “you don’t, but our lives belong to Deneith.” She turned and sat down in one of the chairs.
“There’s something you might like to know,” she continued casually. “Word has come from Zarrthec. Dagii’s army
met a Valenar warclan in battle and defeated them.”


“Dagii’s company returns to Rhukaan Draal today. Word comes that Ekhaas travels with him.” Vounn put disdain
into the answer, although her eyes were actually bright and warm. She gestured at the windows and Ashi became
aware of a distant buzz of activity somewhere beyond it. “A heroes’ welcome is being prepared. I’ll tell them of
your shame.”

Fear knotted Ashi’s belly—not for herself, but for Ekhaas and Dagii. They were walking into a storm of danger.
At least Vounn might be able to warn them. She bent her head, trying to make it look like she was suitably
dismayed. Vounn raised her voice and called in Goblin. “Guards! I am finished. Take her away.”

The door opened, and the guards returned, laying rough hands on her. Ashi managed a last glance back at Vounn.
Her mentor’s face was hard and cold but her lips were pressed together into a thin, pale line of concern.

There were few prisoners left in the larger cells of the dungeon. First the games, then the war, had emptied them.
A deeper level of the dungeon held other prisoners. Ashi had heard screams, muffled by distance and stone, more
than once while she sat contemplating her own fate. Her gut felt hollow as the guards marched her back through the
dungeon, and not just because she was hungry. Could Vounn find a way to have her released or would Tariic finally
come and take her down into the deep dungeon? Or would Aruget try to free her and should she let him?

The guards pushed her around a corner into the dead end corridor where her cell and a handful of others—empty
—waited, doors half open like pits of shadow.

Something moved suddenly in one of them and a glittering vial of dark glass flew through the air.

It hit the stone floor just in front of Ashi and shattered. At least, she thought it shattered. In the same instant that it
struck the stones, light flared from it, blue-white and bright. There was no sound of breaking glass, as if even sound
had been overwhelmed by the blinding light. Ashi was certain that she gasped, but she didn’t hear her own voice.
She felt the guards’ hands leave her, but heard nothing of them. She felt, rather than saw, a rush of movement. Out
of instinct, she jumped back, only to collide with a heavy object. One of the guards. His falling body knocked her off
balance. With her hands still tied, she stumbled hard into a wall.

This time she heard herself grunt. Vision and hearing were already returning. Against the fading glare of the
bright light, she made out the figure of the second guard flailing helplessly as if at an unseen attacker before abruptly
collapsing.

Her first thought was of Aruget—but then a small figure resolved out of the glare.

“Ashi?” asked Midian.
CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

3 Aryth

Rage swelled in her and she kicked out at him. “Midian, you double-crossing—!”

“Easy!” The gnome skipped aside, avoiding her kick. He raised his hands, but stayed well out of range. “And be quiet! There are more guards around. I can explain!”

As her vision cleared, Ashi got a better look at the bodies of the guards. The hobgoblins weren’t dead, only unconscious. Strange glass spikes, like small knives with a point but no edge, stuck out of them, expertly thrust through gaps in their light armor into flesh beneath. The points seemed to be hollow, their insides smeared with the remnants of something thick and green-black. Midian followed her gaze, and said, “Bloodspikes. I got them from an inquisitive of House Medani.” He pointed at a patch of dark, shattered glass surrounded by a slick of shimmering fluid. “That was mine. Light to blind, improved with a burst of silence to cover up any sounds. You can tell me I’m clever.”

“You betrayed me!”

“And now I’m rescuing you!” His blue eyes hardened. “What was I supposed to do? Aureon’s quill, you left me out on the roof with Makka! I’m lucky Tariic wanted us taken alive!”

Even through her anger, she winced at the rebuke. Aruget had said Midian could take of himself—and he had—but he was right. They’d left him behind.

Midian was watching her warily, his hand hovering close to a stiff pouch on his waist. Ashi wondered if he had another of the bloodspikes in there. She pushed her fury away and sat up, her bound hands making the movement awkward.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “We shouldn’t have done that.”

“Well, I’m sorry I gave you away—and that I had to wait so long to come for you. Tariic, Daavn, and Makka have been watching me.”

He moved around behind her. Ashi heard him draw a knife and cut at her bonds. “I’ve just seen Vounn. She said Tariic has appointed you royal historian,” she said.

“I thought it would make him trust me so I’d have a chance to get to you,” said Midian. “It didn’t work quite as well as I hoped. I’m here now, though.”

The ropes parted. Ashi stretched her shoulders and rubbed her wrists. So much for worrying whether to wait for Vounn to negotiate a release or go with Aruget when he came to rescue her. She was already rescued and once more a fugitive.

“How long will the guards stay unconscious?”

“Long enough, I hope.” Midian stuffed rags into the hobgoblin’s mouths and bound them hand and foot with rope from a coil produced from the cell where he had hidden. “Put them in your cell.”

She did. Even heaving them over her shoulders and dropping them onto the cold floor didn’t disturb their slumber. She pulled the sword belt off one and buckled it around her waist. “Ekhaas and Dagii are returning to Rhukaan Draal today,” she said as Midian closed and barred the cell door.

“I know,” said the gnome. “That’s the reason I was able to get away from Tariic. It’s going to be a shame to miss the party, but it will provide a distraction.”

“We need to warn them.”

He flinched at the idea. “There isn’t time.”

“We make time!” Ashi said, snapping her teeth on the words. “I sat for three days afraid Tariic was going to come and question me about the Rod of Kings. I don’t know why he didn’t, but I don’t want him to have that chance with Ekhaas or Dagii.”

Midian flinched again, and the color drained from his face. “I … uh, I know why Tariic didn’t come for you,” he said.

Ashi looked at him sharply.

He turned his eyes away. “I gave him Geth and Tenquis too.”

“What?” Ashi stepped back in shock. “How could you—? Wait. You knew where Geth was?”

“I didn’t!” Midian said, his voice rising like that of a protesting child. “After Makka caught me, I tried giving
Tenquis’s name to Tariic first. I thought he’d be interested in the artificer who made the false rod, but he wanted more, and that’s when I had to turn you over to him. When Tariic’s men went to arrest Tenquis, they found Geth too. He’d been hiding with him.”

Fear struck Ashi like a cold blade. “Rond betch. So Tariic has the true rod?”

“No.” Midian shook his head. “They couldn’t find it at Tenquis’s. Geth must have hidden it.”

“And where’s Geth now?”

Midian held out his hand—and pointed down. Ashi remembered the muffled screams she’d heard from the deeper dungeon. “No,” she breathed. “Do you know how to get down there?”

The gnome nodded. “Back to the main cells and down from there.”

Ashi spun around and raced back up the hall. The stone floors of Khaar Mbar’ost weren’t the soft ground of the Shadow Marches but she could still run silently enough. She burst into the wide room lined with the doors of the large cells.

At the foot of the stairs that led into the dungeon, a hobgoblin guard wearing the red corded armband of Khaar Mbar’ost froze in surprise. Ashi snarled and threw herself at him.

The impact slammed the hobgoblin back against the stairs. The guard got his hands on her wrists, but the wind had been knocked out of him and Ashi was stronger. Her fingers closed around his throat even as he sucked in new breath and wheezed—

“Ashi! It’s me!”

Ekhaas’s voice. Ashi jerked back. The guard beneath her pushed her hands away and narrowed his eyes in concentration. Ghostlight flickered and the illusion vanished, revealing Ekhaas’s familiar face. Ashi stared at her in astonishment. “What are you doing here?”

“Senen sent me a message. I’m rescuing you!”

“There’s a lot of that happening.” Ashi jumped up and helped Ekhaas stand. The few remaining prisoners in the large cells were staring out at them. Midian was staring too. The gnome stood in an archway of another, darker corridor, the one that led, Ashi guessed, to the lower level of the dungeon. “Midian beat you to it. Come with us—Geth and Tenquis are being held below.” She grabbed Ekhaas’s hand to drag her along.

The duur’kala resisted. “The real Geth?”

“Aruget told Senen.”

Aruget had gotten around. Ashi wondered where he was now. “It’s the real Geth.” She dropped her voice as she drew Ekhaas across to the dark corridor, and murmured the story the gnome had told her. “He didn’t know Geth was with Tenquis. I’ve heard screams. I think Tariic’s been torturing Geth to find out where he hid the rod. Will you be able to heal him if he needs it?”

Ekhaas’s ears flicked back. She gave Midian a long look. “I’ll try,” she said.

“You don’t need to,” said Midian. “I brought healing potions.”

“You knew Geth had been tortured?” asked Ekhaas.

“I guessed,” Midian said. “Him or Ashi.”

“Wait!” cried a voice in Goblin. Ashi turned to see a hobgoblin’s face thrust against the bars of a cell door. “Free us!” he hissed.

A soft babble of pleas for release joined his. The other prisoners had finally figured out what was going on. Maybe they didn’t speak the human tongue. Ashi glanced at Ekhaas and Midian. Both of them shook their heads, Midian instantly, Ekhaas after a moment’s consideration.

The first prisoner’s face turned hard. “Let us out or we call the guards. There’s a dozen of them below!”

“If we let them go,” Ekhaas said in the human language, “they’ll cause chaos in Khaar Mbar’ost. People will notice the escape. We’ll be found either way.”

The hobgoblin prisoner looked angry. He might not have understood the language of humans but he must have read their meaning in Ekhaas’s expression. His voice rose into a shout. “Guards! Escape! Escape!”

Other prisoners joined in, the din echoing in the dungeon. A moment later, the sound of rapid footsteps rose up the stairs from the lower level.

“Khyberit ghentis!” Ashi raised her stolen sword and turned to the stairs just as a hobgoblin guard emerged from them. His eyes landed on her and Ekhaas and widened.

But Midian was waiting. He dived between the guard’s legs and the guard went crashing to the ground. Ekhaas leaped to his aid but Midian was already on his feet and jamming another glass spike into the guard’s neck. Ashi
whirled on the prisoner who had started the commotion. He tried to pull back but she pushed her hand through the
bars, grabbed the front of his shirt, and jerked him forward. Hard.

“Do that again,” she snarled, “and you’ll die before you face the Valenar!”

She let him drop. The other prisoners fell back from the cell doors.

Ekhaas was looking down the stairs, her ears pricked forward. “There’s no one else coming,” she said. “Only one
guard?”

Ashi glanced into the cell. “Where are all the guards?” she asked in Goblin.

“Tuuk was bluffing,” answered one of the prisoners tremulously. “There were never that many and those there
were left a while ago. Tariic led them out.”

Ashi didn’t like the sound of that. She turned away, pushed past Midian, and trotted down the stairs to another
corridor. There was light at the bottom, but no sound. On the left and right were doors like those of the cells above,
small barred windows set in heavy wood. At the end of the corridor was a larger, even heavier door.

The floor of the corridor was streaked with smeared trails of dried blood connecting the cell doors with the heavy
door at the end. Ashi’s gut knotted. Her hand tightened on the sword.

Ekhaas touched her arm and pointed. Only one of the cell doors was closed and barred. Ashi crept closer.
Through the barred window, she could hear a strangely pathetic sound. A soft, whimpering growl. But the cell was
too deeply shadowed for her to see anything. Midian nudge her and held out a tiny everbright lantern, even smaller
than the one that had been lost on the roof. She opened it only slightly and held it up to the window.

The cold, magical light fell on Geth’s curled and trembling form. He lay on his side, facing the door. He’d drawn
his shirt over himself like a thin blanket. Where it gaped open, Ashi could see big patches of bare skin amid the
thick hair of the shifter’s torso and arms. The hair had been burned away. The flesh beneath was ravaged by healed
and healing scars. She directed the light to his face, frightened at what she might find.

Dirty. Haggard. But intact. Her heart skipped and her breath came sharp.

As if he’d heard it, Geth’s eyes snapped open, shining like an animal’s. The growl rose sharply and he pulled
back, rolling up into a crouch. “Geth!” Ashi said. “Geth! It’s us!”

He jerked. “Ashi!” He jumped to his feet and charged at the door, sharp teeth bared. “Let me out! They’ve taken
Tenquis!”

Ashi dropped the lantern to the floor and dragged at the heavy bolts that held the door. Geth stood on the other
side, shaking the door and making the job harder. The thick nails of his fingers gouged at the wood. His eyes were
very wide, the pupils as large and dark as a madman’s. Ashi could smell sweat, blood, and burned flesh on him. His
savage growl rumbled and broke.

She pulled the last bolt just as he slammed especially hard against the door. It burst open, throwing her back into
Ekhaas and Midian. Geth didn’t even glance at them, but just hurled himself down the corridor to the heavy door.
He hit the door with a muscular shoulder and whatever latch held it closed on the other side tore right out of the
frame. Running after him, Ashi caught a glimpse into the room beyond—

Shadows in deep corners. Dim, ruddy light glinting on sharp metal. A pale goblin jerking away from an angled
table to which a dark-skinned tiefling was bound, arms and legs outstretched. Blood dripping from the table and
pooling on the floor under it.

—then Geth slammed the door behind himself. A bestial roar rattled the broken wood. Metal crashed on stone.
There was a hiss like hot coals spilled into water and a sudden, awful stench, then a thin, wordless cry.

Geth didn’t look at Tenquis—at what had been done to the tiefling—a second time. Flayed skin, glistening
muscle, and exposed bone slid through his mind but the images were buried in the hot fury that fell over him. Fury
at what Tenquis had suffered. Fury at what he had suffered.

His charge into the room had sent a brazier crashing to the ground. Blood on the floor quenched the hot coals,
raising a haze of stinking smoke. The torturer cried out and tried to flee into the depths of the chamber but Geth’s
hand closed on his skinny neck. The shifter whirled him off his feet and slammed him hard into the stained boards of
an upright rack.

His free hand groped for and found one of the torturer’s knives. With another roar, he drove it through the pale
goblin’s shoulder and into the wood beneath. The impact jolted his hand. The goblin cried out against the grip that
strangled him, his pain as wordless as Geth’s rage. Another knife went into his other shoulder, sharp blade grating
on bone, and Geth released his hold on the goblin’s throat, seized his hand, and wrenched his arm out against the
board. The goblin struggled and flailed, but Geth ignored his kicks and flapping arm. He grabbed a third knife. The
goblin’s fingers clenched convulsively. Geth punched the blade through them and into the board, and jabbed a fist into the torturer’s belly before forcing his other hand out and impaling it too.

Pinned on the rack, the goblin squirmed and flopped. His heels and the back of his head beat against the wood. His screaming mouth stretched so wide Geth could see the ragged root of his tongue.

Rage threatened to give way to disgust, but memories of agony twisted in him. Vengeance for himself—for Tenquis—rose to choke him. The torturer became Tariic.

Hot fury turned cold as death. One of the irons the goblin had used to burn him lay on the floor, smoking in Tenquis’s blood. The metal was still hot enough to sting Geth’s hand when he picked it up.

He didn’t think the struggling goblin even saw him as he brought the heavy end of the iron down on his head. The screaming stopped after the first blow, but Geth beat the iron against the torturer’s skull until bone cracked and sagged like a half-empty wineskin. Then he turned away, hurled the bloody iron across the chamber, and raised his voice.

“Ekhaas!”

Ashi caught the handle of the door at the first heavy impact of body against wood and would have thrown it open if Midian hadn’t caught her arm.

“Don’t,” he said. His face was pale.

“Get off me!” Ashi spat at him, but Ekhaas seized her shoulders and dragged her back.

“No,” she said. Her ears pressed against her head. “He’s right. Let Geth do what he needs to do.”

Ashi still strained toward the door. “Geth! Geth!”

The thin wail continued, punctuated by short thumps and Geth’s terrible snarls, only to end abruptly with the wet, pulpy crack of breaking bone. There was a clatter of metal. Geth’s snarl faded into a guttural groan—then rose in a call. “Ekhaas!”

The hobgoblin raced to the door and pushed it open. She froze in the doorway for a moment before she stepped through and swiftly closed it after herself. This time the only thing Ashi glimpsed was Geth standing at Tenquis’s side.

She heard him, though. His words were hoarse. “What can you do for him?”

Ekhaas didn’t answer immediately, but then she said, “I’ll need a knife.”

And she started to sing. The song was soft and soothing, with echoes of energy to it. Ashi could hear Geth’s voice through it, murmuring something that might be comfort and encouragement—until another voice, Tenquis’s, leaped high in a wail before trailing back into a series of sobs. Ekhaas kept singing.

Midian gave Ashi a nudge and put a flask into her hand. “Drink?” he asked quietly. Ashi nodded and lifted the flask, though she didn’t drink from it. She could only stare at the closed door. Fabric tore in the room beyond and she could imagine a shirt or a cloak being shredded for bandages. Midian bumped her elbow, reminding her of the flask in her hand. She raised it again.

A hand came past her and plucked it from her grasp.

She whirled around, drawing her sword as she turned, to find Arug get putting the flask to his lips. The disguised changeling paused, unflinching in spite of the sword at his belly. “Don’t let your guard down,” he said, lowering the flask untasted. “You’re not out of danger yet.”

Heart racing, Ashi returned her sword to its sheath. “I could have killed you.”

“I could have killed you.” His ears flicked. “You’ve already been rescued.”

“Twice. Vounn told me you’d be coming but Midian, then Ekhaas, got here first.”

“I had to stop for something.” Arug et swung a sack from his shoulder and opened it so she could peer inside. Peeking out from among the muffling folds of a cloak were Geth’s great gauntlet and the hilt of Wrath. “I knew Geth wouldn’t leave without them. Tariic had them displayed as trophies in his quarters. He’ll miss them. We need to be gone before he does.”

“You knew Geth was here too?”

“I investigated.” He looked at Midian and nodded in cool greeting. “Saa.”

The gnome’s eyes narrowed. His lips pressed tight together. Ashi could guess what he was thinking. “None of us would be here if we hadn’t left Midian on the roof with Makka,” she told Arug et. “He made a deal to save his life. You owe him an apology.”

“He didn’t have to make a deal.” His ears pressed back. “He could have given up his life to save three.”
“And you’d do that?” Midian asked.

“Mazo.” Aruget’s eyes stayed on Midian but he turned his face toward Ashi. “I told you he’d be able to care of himself, didn’t I?”

Ashi ground her teeth. “Apologize to—”

The door of the torture chamber opened. Ekhaas emerged first. Her red-brown face was drawn and her amber eyes haunted.

Geth and Tenquis followed, the tiefling leaning so heavily on the shifter that Geth might as well have been carrying him. Blood spattered Geth, matting the patchy, half-burned hair of his bare chest. Tenquis shook with every step as if his legs might give out under him. His dark face was ash-pale and carried a sheen of sweat. His golden eyes were dull and seemed to stare off into some private nightmare. Breath came in shudders. His clothes—shirt, leather pants, labyrinth-patterned vest—hung awkwardly on his body, as if someone else had dressed him. They were mostly clean, though. No blood soaked through to betray an injury. His face was bruised and scraped as if a coarse gag had been bound into his mouth, but that was all. Geth seemed to have suffered more. For a moment, Ashi wondered what had been done to him or if Ekhaas’s magic had somehow healed him of any wound.

Then she realized that where the tiefling’s long, sinuous tail should have been was only a thick, bandaged stump. Geth’s mouth was set in a hard line. His gaze fell on Aruget. “He knows everything,” Ashi said quickly, but Geth didn’t seem to hear her. His eyes settled on Midian, whose eyes, in turn, were darting rapidly between each of them.

Geth continued without even a pause, as if he was determined to speak his piece before they left the dungeon. “He convinced us that you were actually the one behind Haruuc’s assassination”—Ashi couldn’t hold back a gasp, but Geth still didn’t stop—“and that it was a shaarat’khes assassin you hired who pretended to be Chetiin. I thought I found evidence that confirmed it, but I was wrong.” He half-turned his head to speak over his shoulder. “Ekhaas, Chetiin lied to us. He was supposed to go with you and Dagii to fight the Valenar, but he stayed in Rhukaan Draal.”

The shifter stood. He turned to look at all of them, fury twisting his face. “On the day of Tariic’s coronation, when I rushed up to my chambers, I caught him in the middle of stealing the true Rod of Kings. He betrayed us again!”

Midian’s eyes opened wide. Aruget stood frozen. Ashi’s stomach felt like it had turned over inside her. “So Chetiin has the Rod of Kings now?”

Geth bared his teeth and nodded. He might have added something, but Ekhaas spoke first. Her ears flicking rapidly. Aruget’s hand grasped her arm, urging her to silence. Geth’s attention was entirely on Midian, whose eyes, in turn, were darting rapidly between each of them.

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“Or maybe,” said Aruget, “Chetiin was right the first time he approached you.”

His heavy accent had vanished again, but Ashi wasn’t certain anyone else noticed it. All eyes went to Aruget, then followed his to Midian.

The gnome looked shocked, then his expression drew together in anger. “That’s impossible! I wouldn’t do something like that—and even if I did, where’s this shaarat’khes I’m supposed to have hired?”
“Dead,” said Chetiin. “Silenced so he couldn’t give you away and the assassination would be laid solely on me.”

“And I just hired another to steal the rod.” Midian pointed at Chetiin. “He’s trying to turn you against me again! Would the shaarat’kheshe agree to work with me a second time if I’d already turned on one of them?”

“There was no shaarat’khesh,” Aruget said calmly
Pain and fury seethed in Geth. Pain from the burns inflicted on him. Fury at what had been done to Tenquis. Fury and pain both for Chetiin’s treachery, as fresh and hot as if the rod had just been stolen or if Haruuc were newly struck down. The goblin torturer was dead, though, and with every breath, Geth promised himself that soon Chetiin would be, too.

But Aruget’s words broke through the rush of blood that roared in his ears. “There was no shaarat’khash.”

If there was no shaarat’khash involved in Midian’s scheme, that meant …

He looked at Midian again.

On the night they had first gone to see Tenquis, Ekhaas had used magic to disguise Geth as a hobgoblin woman. Midian’s pack and pouches were filled with strange and useful magical devices—one of them might easily have been capable of disguising a gnome as a goblin. The two races were about the same size and Midian was an excellent mimic. He fought well too. Surprisingly well for a scholar, even an adventurous one.

Geth thought back to the day he had investigated Chetiin’s room and confirmed that there was a ledge above the fireplace, just as the goblin had said. He’d encountered Midian in the hall afterward. He’d thought then that Midian hadn’t noticed the soot smudge on his face, but what if he had? The gnome could have investigated Chetiin’s room and discovered that the supposedly dead shaarat’khash elder was no longer where he’d been left. Midian would have realized that at least part of his plot had been uncovered. He would have had to act. But no …

“It’s not possible,” he said. “Midian wasn’t in Rhukaan Draal when Haruuc was assassinated.”

“Whose word do you have for that?” asked Aruget.

“The coin he brought back to Ekhaas from Bloodrun—”

“—could have come from anywhere,” Ekhaas said, her voice low. “The messenger we sent to Bloodrun to fetch him supposedly died of dust fever, didn’t he? What if he didn’t?”

The gnome made no reaction to the accusations. His face was expressionless.

Ashi spoke up. “I saw you at the beginning of the coronation ceremony,” she said to Midian, “but not later. Afterward when I talked to you about what happened there, you said you didn’t see anything because your view was blocked. But you didn’t stay, did you? You made sure I saw you, then you left to disguise yourself again and steal the rod.”

Midian’s silence was hard to ignore. He damned himself with it. He kept very still, back against a wall. There was a tension in him Geth hadn’t seen before, like a blade ground so keen the touch of a whetstone would break it.

“Why?” Geth asked him.

A cold smile split Midian’s face—and he sprang into sudden motion. One hand hurled the potion vials at Chetiin and Geth. The other whipped a knife, the blade stained black, from his belt as he leaped at Aruget.

A bad feeling about those vials gripped Geth. He stuck out his hands and dived for them, snatching them out of the air as gently as he could. Aruget swung a bulky sack up at Midian, but the gnome ducked around it with astonishing speed. His knife slashed, forcing Aruget back, then he was past him and running for the stairs. Ashi ran after him. Ekhaas shifted Tenquis so he leaned against the wall, and drew breath, ready to sing a spell at the fleeing gnome.

It was Chetiin who caught him, though. The goblin’s movement was as fast as a thrown knife. He bounded past Geth and actually seemed to run along the wall itself for several steps before launching himself at Midian. His arms wrapped around the gnome’s legs and brought him down. Midian’s knife flashed, but Chetiin twisted and the blade struck stone. Then Aruget was at his side, tearing the knife from Midian’s grasp and pinning both wrists with one large hand. Chetiin rolled free, grabbed the fallen knife, and held the stained blade to the gnome’s throat.

Midian went still, as if he knew further struggles were useless. His eyes were like chips of glass. He glared up at Aruget. “Dark Lantern?” he asked.

Aruget’s ears flicked as he hauled the gnome upright. He nodded to Geth. “Good catch. I doubt you would have wanted to drink—or breathe—those potions.” The hobgoblin looked to Ashi. “Or Midian’s wine. I don’t think you were intended to survive your rescue.”
“He called you a Dark Lantern,” said Chetiin. The captured knife didn’t waver, but Geth saw the goblin steal a glance at Aruget. “You’re an agent of Breland?”

“You can trust him, Chetiin,” said Ashi. “He’s a friend.” She caught Geth’s eye, then Ekhaas’s, and added, “An old friend.”

An old friend? Geth thought of the only other Brelish agent he’d ever known—the half-elf, Benti Morren. He glanced at Ashi and silently mouthed Benti’s name. Ashi nodded. Geth turned back to Aruget in confusion but the hobgoblin only held up a hand.

“Not now,” he said.

Ekhaas wasn’t so easily put off. “What’s a Brelish Dark Lantern doing in Darguun?”

“Getting more involved than I should be for someone whose orders were only to watch,” Aruget said. He gave Midian a gentle shake. “A better question would be what’s an agent of Zilargo doing in Darguun? We found out that Midian had attached himself to Tariic. We already had suspicions that Haruuc was up to something. I was sent to keep an eye on both of them, but I don’t think anyone ever thought it would go this far.”

Geth looked to Midian. “You work for Zilargo?”

Somehow Midian managed to look proud. “I work for the Library of Korranberg,” he said. His eyes went to Ekhaas. “That coin was from Bloodrun. You go there and look. You’ll find Koolt Dynasty ruins—”

His words ended at the touch of the poisoned knife to his throat. “I don’t care who you work for,” said Chetiin. “I want to know about Haruuc. I don’t particularly care that you tried to kill me in the process. I want to know why you killed him.”

“I think I know,” Ashi said. She moved forward, her eyes wide and thoughtful. “When Esmyssa ir’Korran told me that Zils negotiate instead of fighting wars, she said that Zilargo prefers to deal with stable rulers. Haruuc wanted the Rod of Kings to keep Darguun stable. If Midian helped him find it, Zilargo would have the stable neighbor it wanted and an agent with Haruuc’s trust.” She raised a finger. “But when Haruuc became warlike under the influence of the rod, it didn’t suit Zilargo’s plans, so Haruuc had to be removed. We thought he was killed to keep him from discovering the power of the rod or to prevent a war, but that was only part of it. He was also killed so that a lhesh more sympathetic and less warlike would come to the throne.” A second finger joined the first. “Tariic also trusted Midian. And he said that he wanted to bring Darguun into greater contact with the rest of Khorvaire.”

“Tariic wasn’t Haruuc’s heir,” said Chetiin. “Any warlord could have taken the throne.”

“But Tariic was in a better position than anyone else.”

Geth felt a chill in his belly. “Zilargo killed Haruuc? Gnomes were trying to influence the rulers of Darguun?” He looked Midian—who smiled—then at Aruget. “I thought Zilargo was supposed to be Breland’s ally!”

“In this game, there are no allies and no traitors,” said Aruget, “only opportunities. Haruuc started a small war to avoid a large one; Zilargo killed a king to keep their peace. I doubt if Breland would object to a more pliable lhesh either. If you ask in Zilargo, though, I don’t think you’ll find anyone who would admit to anything more than regret at Haruuc’s assassination.” He gave Midian another shake. “What do you have to say to this?”

The gnome looked at Ashi. “I’d say you have more imagination than I thought you did.”

Ashi’s lips pressed tight, and for a moment it seemed that she might lose her temper. She kept her emotions in check, however, and Geth could see Vounn’s influence in that. She raised a third finger. “After the assassination, Midian slipped out of Rhukaan Draal. Whether he actually went to Bloodrun doesn’t matter. He must have anticipated we’d send a messenger for him, though, and he dealt with him. When the city reopened after the mourning period, he returned—and discovered that by killing Haruuc, he’d only made things worse. For a little while, we were all working toward the same goal of finding a way to keep Tariic from succumbing to the curse of the rod.” She cocked her head to one side. “It’s even possible he came up with the idea of a false rod before he found out about the curse. We just gave him the perfect chance to propose it. He may have intended to steal the true rod all along.”

A growl escaped Geth. “And it might have worked if Tariic hadn’t recognized the false rod!” Another idea occurred to him. “Wait—why dress as Chetiin again to steal the rod? He couldn’t have known that I’d come rushing up from the coronation to get it.”

“He would have made sure someone else saw him,” said Chetiin. “Saw me. He had the perfect scapegoat.”

“I think he already knew you were still alive,” Geth said. “I may have given it away to him.”

“Even better. He would have turned you against me again.”

Geth felt blood rush into his face and the hate he’d felt since Haruuc’s death turned into a sick feeling of shame in the pit of his stomach. “He did,” he said. “Chetiin, you’re the one I owe an apology to. You’re no traitor.”
“No, I’m not,” the goblin said, “but I hold no anger for what you thought. You were manipulated. We all were.” He nodded to Midian. “Paatcha. Your plan was cunning.”

Midian’s eyes danced although there was no warmth in them. “What plan?”

The gnome’s smug satisfaction burned in Geth. He pushed Chetiin aside, bending down to snarl in Midian’s face. “You think you’re clever, don’t you? You think we can’t beat you. Well, you’re wrong.” He thrust a hand at Tenquis, still leaning against the wall and following everything with weary golden eyes, though color at least had returned to his face. “We know where you hid the Rod of Kings. Tenquis realized that the connection between Wrath and the rod was still active. We followed it.” He stepped back and looked at the others. “He hid the rod in Haruuc’s tomb.”

Surprise passed across all their faces, but none of it was as sweet as the look of shock and anger that finally broke through Midian’s mask.

Geth bared his teeth at him. “Yes,” he said, “it was clever, but now you’re not the only one who knows. Now we all do.”

“So does Tariic.”

Tenquis’s words—the first he had spoken—were unsteady, but angry and determined. Geth turned sharply to look at him. They all turned. The tiefling shoved himself away from the wall and stood straight, head held high. “I’m sorry, Geth,” he said. “I couldn’t hold back. Horns of Ohr Kaluun, I tried, but I couldn’t in the end.” He drew a shuddering breath. “I gave Tariic what he wanted.”

The sick feeling returned to Geth’s stomach. “He knows?”

Tenquis nodded.

“Clever,” said Midian.

They walked out through the front gates of Khaar Mbar’ost.

It was simple. It was direct. The great courtyard within the gates and the plaza beyond it were both crowded with Darguuls prepared for celebration of Dagii’s victorious return. No one paid any attention to them as they passed through, moving in small groups to avoid notice. Ekhaas and Ashi went first, Ashi’s face shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat that Aruget produced for celebration of Dagii’s victorious return. No one paid any attention to them as they passed through, moving in small groups to avoid notice. Ekhaas and Ashi went first, Ashi’s face shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat that Aruget produced from his sack. Chetiin and Tenquis followed, the tiefling hunched beneath a cloak, both of them tottering like frail elders. Geth knew it wasn’t much of an act on Tenquis’s part at the moment. Every few steps, he staggered a little before catching himself. Geth had tried to help him at first, but Tenquis had shaken him off in a flash of temper.

“I just need to find my balance,” he’d said through his teeth. “I’m used to having a tail behind me.”

There was deep pain behind the angry words.

When the other four were safely out of Khaar Mbar’ost, Aruget and Geth struck out. Geth kept his head down and stayed close to Aruget, trusting to the hobgoblin’s bulk to shield him. A cloak draped over his shoulder concealed both his great gauntlet and, held tight in his hand, Wrath. The sword seemed to echo his own simmering rage—and his fear. He could feel the Rod of Kings through the blade, a distant but distinct presence. The rod wasn’t moving. Tariic didn’t have it yet. It.

His eyes darted to the sack Aruget carried over his shoulder. In spite of having cloaks and hat, gauntlet and sword pulled out of it, the sack was once again full and heavy.

It shifted a little bit.

Aruget bounced it on his shoulder to disguise the movement and hissed, “Stop squirming.”

“I couldn’t feel my leg,” muttered a voice from inside the sack.

“I could make that permanent, Midian,” Geth said under his breath. “Move again, and you’ll be dead before you hit the ground.”

He’d been in favor of killing the gnome right there in the corridor outside the torture chamber, but others—primarily Midian himself, backed up by Ekhaas, Chetiin, and eventually Aruget—had persuaded him otherwise. Whatever Midian might have done, they all shared an interest in keeping the Rod of Kings out of Tariic’s hands. Only the gnome knew exactly where the rod was hidden in Haruuc’s tomb. If they were too slow in reaching the tomb, every moment might be precious. They needed Midian.

But not one of them trusted him. He went into Aruget’s sack. Geth couldn’t say that he cared if the gnome ever came out again.

And there was Aruget. He glanced at the hobgoblin—or rather, at the changeling wearing a hobgoblin’s face. Ashi had pulled him, Ekhaas, and Chetiin aside and whispered the truth to them.
Agents of Zilargo and Breland, shadows of two nations lurking in the twilight of Darguun.

“It’s more common than you know,” Aruget said abruptly. It was vaguely disconcerting to hear him speak without his familiar accent. “Everyone has their fingers in the jam jar.”

Geth blinked, then narrowed his eyes. “You knew what I was thinking?”

Aruget’s ears twitched. “I’m good at reading faces, and you had the look of someone who just got his first peek behind the curtain at a brothel.” He looked down at Geth. “We won’t be the only agents in Darguun. Every nation, every dragonmarked house has its eyes and its hands here. I’m certain Haruuc knew it. I imagine it pleased him. Being a part of the Shadow War is like a rite of passage—children don’t play these games.”

“Children don’t assassinate kings,” Geth said. “When did you know it was Midian and not Chetiin?”

Aruget shrugged, jostling the sack and bringing another soft grunt from Midian. “I suspected Midian was up to something when he made arrangements to leave Rhukaan Draal. I didn’t expect such a direct action, though. Assassination is a last resort. Killing the ruler of a nation is unheard of.” His voice was cool, unflinching.

“You couldn’t have warned us about him?” Geth asked.

“My orders were to watch. I work for Breland, not Darguun.”

Geth clenched his teeth. “Why are you helping us now, then?”

“Once I had the final piece, the puzzle turned out to be bigger than I thought.”

The sack chuckled quietly. “We’re cold-hearted bastards, Geth,” said Midian.

Aruget turned slightly so that the sack swung against the side of a wagon. Midian let out a muffled curse that Aruget covered with a well-timed cough—a cough that turned into a soft curse of his own. He twisted, giving Geth a little more cover, at the same time moving a hand across his face, as if scratching his nose. When he lowered his hand, his features had shifted just enough that he could have been any hobgoblin. “Keep moving but get your head down,” he said. “Tariic’s here!”

Geth heard the hoofbeats of trotting horses over the noise of the milling crowd in the plaza. He dropped his eyes, feigning great interest in his feet. His hand curled tight around Wrath. When Aruget paused, along with everyone around them, to turn and shout praise to the passing lhesh, he paused, too. He couldn’t bring himself to call Tariic’s name, though. The hoofbeats didn’t slow. When they’d passed, he risked a glance up.

Tariic rode on into Rhukaan Draal without even acknowledging the cheers of his subjects. Two hobgoblin guards followed him.

“Now we’re in trouble,” said Aruget. “If he goes to his quarters, he’ll notice that Wrath and your gauntlet are missing.” He quickened his pace.

Geth risked another glance back at Tariic. Haruuc’s nephew didn’t look happy. “He doesn’t have the rod yet.”

“It won’t be for want of trying. If he’s here, he’ll have left someone at the tomb. Daavn, probably. Maybe Makka too.”

Geth allowed himself a grim smile. “Good.”

Two hobgoblin soldiers guarded the great red stone arch, probably intended more to raise an alarm if anyone approached than to provide actual protection. From his hiding place among the shacks that were the fading edge of Rhukaan Draal, Geth didn’t even see Chetiin slip past the guards, but somehow the shaarat’khesh elder was abruptly behind them. One guard went down with a knife in his back. The other turned, only to meet a second knife as Chetiin dropped down from above.

“He’s got them both,” Geth growled. “Move.”

They raced for the cover of the arch. Ekhaas and Ashi took the lead, Geth kept pace with Tenquis, and Aruget stayed close to Midian—now freed from the sack. They all clustered in the shadows of the arch and peered through the open gates to the ridge where Haruuc’s tomb lay.

Half a dozen bugbears wearing the red corded armbands of Khaar Mbar’ost attacked the dagger-thick stone of the tomb door with picks, hammers, and bars. The banging of their efforts was louder than the rush of the cataract, but so far all they’d managed to do was scar the carving of Haruuc. Daavn and three more hobgoblins watched their slow progress along with Makka and, perched on his shoulder, Pradoor. Horses picketed to a low line cropped the grass close to them.

Ashi scowled. “Why so many?” she asked quietly. “Tariic could have hired a wizard to get into the tomb with magic, couldn’t he?”

“One more person who would learn about the rod,” said Aruget. “Tariic doesn’t have to explain himself to servants. And I doubt if anyone except Daavn, Makka, and Pradoor is going to survive long after that door is
Ashi’s scowl deepened.

“There are too many for me to hold with a song,” Ekhaas said.

“And Pradoor might resist it,” Geth added. His skin crawled a little at the memory of the blind goblin woman chanting her spell in the torture chamber.

“We don’t have to go through them,” said Midian. “I already have a way in, remember? I always planned on getting the rod out again the same way. I could slip in and get it without anybody knowing.”

Geth and all of the others only glared at him. The gnome shrugged. “You don’t think I’d bring it back to you? Send Chetiin with me.”

Chetiin’s jaw twitched. “I don’t value my life so little.” A wounded expression crossed Midian’s face and he hunched back in a sulk.

A little too far back for Geth’s liking. “Stay where I can see you.”

Wounded turned to frustrated. “Do you want to hold my hand?” He stuck out his arm.

“That’s not a bad idea. Does anyone have a piece of rope?”

Ekhaas did. Geth tied one end around Midian’s wrist and the other around his own. Midian gave him a sour look, but submitted before slouching back.

“I have a plan,” said Chetiin. He sketched lines in the dust to mark the course of the ridge and touched points along them. “A few of us show ourselves among the rocks of the ridge here and here. Daavn will try to protect the rod. He’ll send his men to hunt us down. Makka will certainly go as well. Once they’re away, the rest of us get up to the tomb.”

“Who takes the ridge?” asked Geth.

Chetiin considered. “Ashi, Ekhaas, and Aruget. If they stay close to the wall, they should be able to get into the shelter of the ridge without attracting attention.”

Ashi peered out at the rough landscape. “I can do it.” Ekhaas and Aruget gave nods of agreement.

Geth turned—the movement bringing a tug and a grumble of complaint from Midian—to Tenquis. “You’ll be able to get the door open quickly and quietly?”

The bandaged stub of the tiefling’s tail waggled and his golden eyes narrowed with hate. “I’d rather have a long knifepoint conversation with Daavn,” he said, “but like Grandmother says, there’s more than one way to sour milk.”

He gripped the collar of his vest and whispered a word. The embroidery of the vest writhed and the slight bulges of pockets reappeared. “I have everything I need.”

Then we’re ready.” He looked to the others. “Rat and Tiger dance for us all.” He stretched out his hands to Ashi and Ekhaas—and felt his left brought up short by the rope tied to Midian’s wrist.

There was no grumble of complaint and Midian’s arm didn’t yield. Geth turned.

Midian squatted behind him, unmoving and apparently intent on something in his hand. The rope that should have been tied to his wrist seemed to pass completely through it. Ekhaas hissed and swept a foot across the ground where the gnome crouched.

And a glittering crystal disk no bigger than a coin bounced off the stone of the arch. Midian vanished. The rope was tied to a bar of the iron gate.

“Tiger, Wolf, and Rat, I thought we searched him!” Geth snarled. “Where is he?”

Ashi pointed. “There!”

The sun shone off a shock of pale hair, just visible above the long grass on the near side of the grazing horses. Midian moved with such stealth that the grass around him barely swayed. It was easy to guess where the Zil was going: his own secret way into the tomb. Maybe he was going to fetch the rod for them just as he’d said, but Geth doubted it.

“I could stop him,” said Chetiin.

“No,” Geth drew Wrath. “We’re in a race now. Ekhaas, Ashi, Aruget—go!”

“Wait. Let’s put honey in the trap.” Aruget grabbed Geth’s chin and turned his face toward him. He studied the shifter, then let him go. Hobgoblin features melted and reformed. Ears shrank and hair grew out. Small eyes become large and wide. In only moments, Geth stared at himself wearing Aruget’s armor. Aruget-Geth smiled and said in eerie mimicry of his growl, “Daavn will be more likely to chase a face he knows. Ko isn’t the only one who can imitate you.”

He jerked his head and he, Ashi, and Ekhaas stole out of the gate, moving along the low wall in the opposite direction to the way Midian had gone. They ran low and fast, heading for the nearest fold in the ridge. Geth realized...
he was holding his breath.

“Midian has seen them,” Chetiin said. Geth swung around to look for the gnome—just in time to see his arm swing as he hurled something back at the horses, then dropped into the grass.

“Down!” Chetiin said.

They pressed themselves against the ground. Geth kept his head up just enough to see the hurled object—an ordinary stone—hit one of the horses on the flank. The startled beast reared just a little and danced forward a few steps. The other horses reacted to it, raising their heads and looking around.

The movement was enough to draw the eye of one of the hobgoblin guards. He swung around.

Ekhaas, Ashi, and Arujet-Geth were caught in the open. “Toh!” cried the guard. Daavn, Makka, the hobgoblins and bugbears all swung to look as well.

Their friends froze for an instant, then dashed for the cover of the ridge. Geth saw Daavn’s eyes go wide—and Makka’s narrow with bloodlust. He grabbed Wrath so he could understand the words that were shouted.

“One!” Daavn ordered. “Kill them!”

The guards were in motion as soon as the command was ordered.

“They’re mine!” roared Makka. He charged, swinging his fists and bashing hobgoblin guards aside, with Pradoor clinging to his shoulder and cackling like a mad thing. The other bugbears, picks and hammers still in their hands, stood still, obviously uncertain whom to obey. Daavn drew his sword and screamed at them to follow as he took off after Makka. The bugbears roared as Makka had and leaped to the pursuit. They didn’t bother descending the steep stairs cut up to the tomb but jumped from rock to rock across the face of the ridge.

The distraction had worked, although not just for them. Midian was up and running, stealth abandoned for speed. He looked to be heading for a particularly rough section of the ridge about two long arrowflights away from the gate. Geth waited a heartbeat longer, until Daavn and his men were well away from the tomb, then pushed himself to his feet. “Go!” he said. “Tenquis, can you run?”

“You should have asked that before,” the tiefling snapped, but he was up already and running nearly as quickly as Geth himself, if a little more unsteadily. Geth stayed close to him. Chetiin, faster than either of them, paused at the bottom of the stairs, then darted up ahead.

Tenquis was grimacing in pain by the time he reached the top, but he lurched over to the tomb door and ran his hands over the scarred surface. Geth felt a fresh burst of anger for Daavn and Tariic. The fine carving of Haruuc was nearly destroyed. Only his fierce, watchful face remained. Tenquis caught his look. “It can be repaired,” he said. “A good artificer or even a magewright with a little time can fix anything.”

The bugbears had taken their tools with them, but Tenquis reached into one of the pockets of his vest and pulled out the heavy steel pry bar Geth had watched him slide into it. He threw it to Geth. “When I tell you, work that in about there”—he pointed to the seam between the door and the frame where a bugbear’s pick had already broken a hole—and get ready to heave.”

“That’s not going to work. I told you, the pivots are broken.”

“And I told you an artificer can fix anything.” He pulled more objects out of his pockets: a couple of tiny flasks, a stick of bright red chalk, and several roughly polished stones. The flasks and the stones he set to the side. Taking the chalk in one hand, he spread the fingers of the other wide and touched them lightly to the door on the side where the pivots had been. His face took on a distant expression and, after a moment, he started to trace out strange lines on the door with the chalk.

Geth looked to Chetiin. The goblin crouched on the edge of the space before the tomb, watching the ridge where Ekhaas and the others—and their pursuers—had disappeared among the age-carved rocks. Shouts and cries, the scrape and clatter of metal against rock came back over the ridge. Their friends were doing their job, keeping Daavn and his men busy. Geth still felt fear for them in his gut.

“Have you seen them?” he asked.

“Glimpses,” said Chetiin just as Ekhaas’s voice rose in a song that ended in a crash and a short, swiftly silenced scream. Geth’s hands tightened on the shaft of the pry bar.

“Geth, I’m ready,” Tenquis said.

Both Geth and Chetiin turned around. Tenquis was dusting shimmering powders from the tiny flasks over the chalk-marked door and onto his hands. He nodded at the broken spot he had pointed out before and Geth quickly set the end of the pry bar into it. When he was ready, he nodded back to Tenquis. The tiefling took a deep breath. “As soon as you feel the door shift, work the bar with everything you’ve got,” he said. “We only have one chance at this.”
He picked up two of the stones, a near match in color and grain for the stone of the door, and held them against his palms with two fingers of each hand. He spread his other fingers and, stretching his arms, pressed them against the door at the top and bottom of his chalked lines. His eyes closed and his face tightened in concentration. His lips moved in a rapid, nearly inaudible whisper.

There was a clash of blades from the ridge and another sharp scream. Chetiin turned to look. Geth kept his eyes on Tenquis and his grip steady on the pry bar. He could feel sweat forming on his palms.

Tenquis’s teeth clenched. His whispers slid between them.

Stone creaked.

Through the steel bar, Geth felt a distinct vibration as the door shivered and rose by the tiniest fraction. He threw his weight against the bar, hauling at it. For an instant, steel grated against stone, then the tip of the bar caught again and held. Geth strained, his muscles cracking and popping.

The door moved.

Geth groaned at the weight of it. He ground his teeth together until they hurt and heaved harder on the bar. The thickness of stone that stood out from the frame grew slowly. A finger’s width. A finger’s length. Two fingers’ lengths. A dagger’s length.

Darkness appeared. Chetiin seized a loose rock and shoved it into the gap. Geth drew back the pry bar and thrust it into the darkness before the stone could crack. The heavy steel squealed as it took the weight of the door. Geth drew a breath and shifted, letting the ancient heritage of his blood give new energy to his muscles before he stepped around, worked his fingers into the thin gap and pulled. Tenquis moved with him, hands resting steady on the stone, whispers rising.

The gap grew. Geth could have slipped through sideways. “Enough!” he gasped at Tenquis.

“All the way or it will swing closed on us,” said the artificer, and even those few words interrupting his whispers brought new creaking from the unseen pivots. Geth groaned again and kept pulling. Step by step, back until the mouth of the tomb gaped wide. He waited for a shout from Daavn or one of his men as they caught a glimpse of what was happening and realized they’d been tricked. None came.

“Almost there!” said Tenquis—and pulled his hands away from the door, getting out from behind it. There was a crunch and a grinding sound as the magic that had held the shattered pivots together faltered. For an instant, Geth felt the unbearable weight of the door against his arms. He pulled with all his strength, trying to hold in the straining cry that threatened to escape him.

The door shifted one last time, then ground to a stop, striking the side of the tomb with a gentle tap. Geth’s arms and shoulders felt heavy and numb. His legs trembled, but he limped around to the front of the tomb and the doorway.

Chetiin was already standing in the shadows, poised at the top of a dark staircase. Tenquis pulled a stone that glimmered pale as moonlight from his pocket. Geth drew Wrath. He could feel the presence of the Rod of Kings pulsing in the sword.

They stepped down into Haruuc’s tomb together, moving away from sun and into shadow. The cold stench of cave damp and slow decay rose to meet them. Tenquis’s moonstone—shedding just enough light for shifter or dar or tiefling eyes to see—revealed walls that changed from worked stone to rough, natural rock as they descended. The stairs became rougher, too, hacked out of the floor of a steep passage wide enough for two broad-shouldered men to walk side by side. The words that the hobgoblin priests had spoken at Haruuc’s funeral came back to Geth.

Traditions tell that the People were born in caverns and lived there before we emerged to fight beneath the sun and the sky. When we pass through the gates of death, we return to caverns, the womb and the grave.

The steep passage grew taller. Glints of light shone ahead, reflections of the moonstone, and they emerged into a cave perhaps twice as big as Geth’s quarters in Khaar Mbar’ost and far taller, heaped with gold and treasures.

Lhesh Haruuc Shaarat’kor sat on his throne in the midst of this tribute, both eye sockets empty now as they stared at the stone sky.

Geth stopped at the bottom of the passage and looked on the remains of the father of Darguun, haste brushed aside by a curious sense of awe. He’d watched the corpse being carried down into the tomb, had walked with it through Rhukaan Draal. Haruuc was as dead now as he’d been then, yet somehow there was a particular solemn majesty about him. It wasn’t so much the wealth that surrounded him as it was the unnatural stillness of something dead, alone in the unchanging solitude of one of Eberron’s small secret places. Geth felt like an intruder. He lowered Wrath and bent his head in a nod of respect.

Tenquis must have felt it too. He bowed low, a flourishing gesture that was distinctly tiefling. Chetiin, however, didn’t move at all for a long, long moment and it took all that time for Geth to realize that this would be the first
chance he’d had to see Haruuc up close since Midian had attacked him.

When the goblin finally moved, he walked directly up to Haruuc’s seated corpse, knelt down, and opened a small chest that rested by Haruuc’s feet. From inside it, he took the ugly, crystal-set dagger named Witness—the dagger that had been stolen from him, the dagger that had killed Haruuc. He pressed the flat of the blade to his heart as he looked up at the lhesh and Geth heard him murmur, “You will be avenged, my friend.” He slid the dagger into an empty sheath on his right forearm, then turned back to Geth and Tenquis. “Find the rod,” he said.

Geth raised Wrath again and swung it around the cave. Awareness of the Rod of Kings prickled across his senses. To the left and across the cavern—the sword pointed directly at a pile of rolled carpets. Geth had to admit that it was a good hiding place. If by chance the tomb was pilfered while the rod was within, the fine but bulky carpets would almost certainly be ignored in favor of gold and gems. “There!” said Geth. He stepped toward the carpets.

Something flickered in the very corner of his vision, high up among the shadows of one wall of the cavern. Something pale, quickly obscured by the movement of something dark that gave a soft snap.

He threw himself back with a curse at the same moment a crossbow bolt hissed through the space where he’d been. It sank deep into the wood of a treasure chest. Shadows leaped across the cavern wall as Tenquis raised the moonstone. Its pale light revealed Midian, perched in the mouth of narrow crack, already sighting along the stock of a small hand crossbow once more. The gnome gave a crooked grin and winked at Geth before he squeezed the trigger.
The rocks of the ridge made a challenging hunting ground. Makka’s initial charge carried him to the arm of the ridge behind which Ekhaas, Ashi, and Geth had sought shelter, but his quarry had already vanished into the rough gray folds. At the point where a shallow gully broke the slope he paused and tested the air with flaring nostrils. They hadn’t lingered—they were moving higher. He crouched. “Get off, Pradoor,” he said. “Wait here.”

“And do what?” The old goblin woman clung tight to his shoulder. “Admire the sounds of battle? My place is with you. The age turns.”

Makka bared his teeth for all the good that it did. Her blind eyes didn’t see him. “I can’t fight with you on my back.”

“The age turns around both of us.” Pradoor’s fingers dug into him. “We serve—”

“—the Six,” Makka said through his teeth. “But the Fury puts my revenge before me.”

“Then why do you hesitate to follow her path?” asked Pradoor. “The Six reward those who serve.”

Makka snarled and rose to his feet just as rocks clattered along the arm of the ridge behind him. He whirled to find two of Daavn’s bugbear workers clambering over the crest of the slope. The other bugbears, iron hammer and pry bar in hand, paused at the sight of him. Makka tensed his ears, thrust out his chest, and growled.

The other bugbears hunched back. Their ears flattened and they ducked their heads, offering submission in the ancient manner. When Makka turned again and continued on up the ridge, they fell into line behind him. On his shoulder, Pradoor chuckled.

He felt like the leader of a tribe again. But better. Stronger. The favor of the Fury was on him.

The age turned around him.

Somewhere behind him, Daavn was shouting his name. He ignored it.

The peak of the ridge broke into a jumble of pits and crevices and more gullies, some shallow, some twice his height in depth, all of them offering hiding places. A scattering of stunted trees and bushes on the backside gave even more cover. The only figures visible were Daavn’s other workers. They saw him and the pair of bugbears that followed him and, one by one, they offered their silent submission. Makka gestured to them all with crisp movements, ordering them to spread out among the broken places of the ridge. His gut told him that his enemies wouldn’t have gone far—they would stay near the tomb.

Daavn and his hobgoblins came trotting up behind him with a clatter of armor. The warlord’s ears were back and his sword was out. “Maabet, I knew we should have killed them in the dungeon.”

Makka swung around to glare at him. “Their deaths are mine,” he said. “The Fury gives them to me.”

The guards with Daavn had the sense to flinch back, but Daavn just leaned into Makka’s anger. “If I find them first, I will kill them, gift of the Fury or not. They’re not going to stop Tariic from taking what’s—”

A weird, fluting battlecry and the sudden clash of weapons interrupted him. Makka knew the cry—it belonged to Ashi of Deneith. Shouts in Goblin answered it as bugbears converged on the crevice where the dust of battle rose. Makka put his back to Daavn and raced with them, leaping across the tops of mounds and spires. One bugbear reached the crevice before the others and dropped down into it with a roar, but his cry turned to a gurgle. The swirl of dust faded even as Makka reached the crevice. Two bugbears lay dead within, one stabbed through the heart, one with his belly ripped open.

Their assailants were gone, vanished into the maze of broken rock. “They’re close!” Makka shouted. “Look for them from above. They can’t hide from you.”

Even as the words left his mouth, one of the other bugbears yelped and fell hard on his face, his feet pulled out from under him by a loop of rope. Makka saw shock in the bugbear’s eyes as he was dragged back. Big hands clutched at the rock, but as half his body disappeared down into a pit, he thrashed abruptly and went still.

The lithe form of a shifter, spattered with blood, vaulted up out of the pit. Geth flashed a grin at Makka, thumped his chest in salute, then dived into another crevice.

Makka howled in rage. Daavn appeared, his guards in close formation behind him. Makka thrust a finger at the crevice. “Geth’s in there! You go after him and we’ll take the top!” He grabbed a bugbear with his other hand and
dragged him forward.

Daavn glanced into the crevice—and jerked back as a stone whistled past his head. The warlord’s face twisted in anger. He whirled his sword around his head in command, then he and his soldiers plunged after Geth. Makka raced to the edge of the crevice, shouting for the other bugbears to converge on him.

One of them didn’t make it. A *duur’kala*’s keening song rose on the air. Stone cracked and the worker who had been the first to submit to Makka vanished as the rock wall on which he stood collapsed. His cry rose above the rumble of sliding rock, ending abruptly.

At the same time, a hobgoblin gasped in pain. A blur of hair and blood, Geth popped up out of the crevice and dodged into another. Makka howled again. “It’s like fighting spirits, Pradoor! They strike and run!”

“Make them stand!” the goblin said, slapping his head. “The Fury favors you”—her voice rose—“as the Six favor all those who fight for Darguun!”

The words were met with a roar from *dar* throats, but they were more than just an inspiration. Makka felt the blessing wrap around him like the embrace of victory. Strength and confidence flowed into him. He ripped the bright sword of Deneith from its scabbard and turned, looking for a target. Any target.

Across the ridge, Ashi, a stolen hobgoblin sword poised to strike, rose up silently behind one of the two remaining bugbears. Makka pointed his sword—her sword—at her. “Fight me, Ashi of Deneith!” he bellowed. “Fight me!”

She jerked at the challenge, startled to be caught. Her intended target turned. Sword met steel bar with the ring of metal on metal. Weapons drew back for another exchange of blows.

Makka charged along the ridge. “*By the Fury, fight me!*”

He felt the power of the Fury move through him, binding him to Ashi. She felt it, too. Her eyes widened, but she didn’t let down her guard. The bugbear she fought swung his pry bar. Ashi turned it easily, then whipped her sword at his chest.

The bond between Makka and her tightened like a noose. Sudden pain wracked Ashi’s face—Makka felt an echo of it like the sweetest of stings. Her swing faltered and the killing blow became a flesh wound. Her opponent stumbled back.

Ashi tried to strike him again, but once more Makka felt the Fury’s power pull tight. Ashi’s face grew pale, the swirling lines of her dragonmark leaping out in sharp contrast.

Then he was on her. Human sword in *dar* hands clashed against *dar* sword in human hands.

Through their bond, Makka felt Ashi’s pain ease now that she submitted to the power of his challenge, but it had hurt her. He could see it in her face and feel it in her blows. She was slower than the last time they had fought—even if he was now fighting with Pradoor perched on his shoulder like a cackling bird. The old goblin laughed with glee. “For the Six!” she cried. “For the Six!”

“Close your mouth!” Ashi thrust at Pradoor.

Makka beat her sword down and slashed up on the return blow. Ashi pulled back, but the tip of the bright blade sliced through her shirt and drew a thin red line across her belly. She gasped and circled away. Makka turned with her.

Just in time to see Geth racing to her aid. The shifter moved low and fast like an animal, sword at the ready. Makka grinned. More sacrifices for the altar of his vengeance! He braced himself.

Instead of attacking, Geth slid to a stop and took up a position a spear’s length away from Ashi. Now they both threatened him—attack one and he was vulnerable to the other. It was a cold, calculating strategy. The shifter’s eyes were cool and hard.

And wrong. When he’d faced Geth before, on the dais at Tariic’s coronation, his eyes had been hot and alive with barely contained anger. The hobgoblins who had captured Geth had described his fiery, unflinching attacks. He hadn’t held back.

A strangely familiar sense intruded on Makka’s lust for vengeance. A familiar sense, and a memory: Tariic’s introduction of the changeling Ko, wearing Geth’s face but without Geth’s fear.

Ashi was Ashi, but whoever stood ready to attack him was no more Geth than Ko had been.

Pradoor still cackled on his shoulder, but the rhythm of battle was suddenly quiet in Makka’s heart. He stepped back, turning slightly as he went so that his opponents were forced to move with him—and so that the length of the ridge and the slope that faced Rhukaan Draal came into view.

The door of Haruuc’s tomb stood open. They’d been tricked. Ashi, Ekhaas, and the false Geth were only a distraction.

Conflict roiled inside Makka. Ashi and Ekhaas were here on the ridge and vengeance too long denied called out to
him. The Fury blessed his hunt. She’d taken him as her own. Vengeance was his sacred duty. But the Rod of Kings lay within the tomb, the key to Tariic’s ambition, the key to new power for Darguun. The key to new strength for the faithful of the Fury and of all the Dark Six.

The age turns.

Makka roared and drove directly between Ashi and the false Geth with a suddenness that brought a screech from Pradoor. He slashed left and right, driving his opponents back with powerful blows, then he was past them and running with long leaping strides across the face of the ridge.

“What are you doing?” Pradoor demanded, her words jolted by every step. “The battle—”

“A trick to get us away from the tomb. The door is open—they’ve come for the rod.”

“You have to stop them!”

“I will.” Makka’s teeth clashed together on a hard landing, but he stayed on his feet and slid down the final slope to the bottom of the stairs before the tomb. He grabbed Pradoor, dragged her from his shoulder, and planted her on the ground, turning her so that she faced the fight on the ridge. “Find some way to guard us.”

A smile creased Pradoor’s wrinkled face. She pushed his hand away, turned milky eyes to the sky, and started to chant.

Makka bounded up the steps to the tomb three at a time. He was at the door of the tomb when he heard a dull drone sweep over the ridge, but he didn’t stop to see what it was. Silent as grease, he slipped into the tomb.

There hadn’t been time for a discussion of strategy as they fled up the ridge, only two quick rules from Aruget. Bring down as many of their enemies as possible—and don’t get caught in an open fight.

Ekhaas heard the power that rang in Makka’s challenge to Ashi, and she knew immediately that Ashi had broken the second rule. Unfortunately, she couldn’t see what was happening. The song that had collapsed the rock wall under one of Daavn’s bugbear workers, tumbling him into the gully below, had also cut off her easy way out. She turned and raced down the other way to a shadowed gap that marked the way into another of the ridge’s broken passages. Had Tenquis’s attempt to open the tomb worked? She could only hope that it had and that the others were already inside, searching for the rod.

Swords clashed somewhere above. Ekhaas twisted around a corner—and stumbled over the body of one of Daavn’s guards. Her sword grated along rock as she caught herself.

On the slope leading up out of this gully, Daavn and his remaining guards stopped and turned back to stare at her. The warlord’s ears went back. “Go!” he ordered the guards. “Help Makka!”

They raced past him and vanished from sight. Daavn stood ready for her, commanding the high ground, his sword held loose and easy. “Sing, duur’kala,” he said. “Something sad. Something for mourning.”

A knife glittered in his hand, held by the blade and ready for throwing.

Ekhaas didn’t hesitate. A song would have brought an attack and Daavn had the advantage of higher ground. She threw herself at him, charging up the slope and sweeping her sword ahead of her, not high but low. At his feet.

The move startled Daavn. He drew back the throwing knife and released it with a snap of his wrist, but the cast was weak and wide. The slim blade rang on rock. Ekhaas’s attack forced him to hop and dance backward. By the time he had the opportunity to strike back, Ekhaas had secure footing even if she was still below him. Daavn’s sword swung down at her; she managed to raise her blade and block it. Metal skittered on metal, and for a moment the blades locked. Daavn’s lips drew back from his teeth.

“You’re not going to stop Tariic,” he said. “He’ll have the true rod.”

He kicked at her chest. Ekhaas felt the shift in his balance through their braced swords and twisted desperately to the side. The kick missed her and in the heartbeat that it took Daavn to recover his balance, she ran past him and up to the top of the slope.

She could see Ashi now, circling Makka and Pradoor with Aruget at her side. Daavn’s guards and the last of the bugbear workers were closing in. A song might scatter them, but first she would have to deal with Daavn—if she could stay away from the warlord’s sword. “How much has Tariic told you about the rod?” she asked him. “Has he told you that it’s cursed?”

“He’s told us that Haruuc didn’t know how to control its power.” Daavn lunged, whirling his blade. Ekhaas twisted aside and tried to reach under his extended arm, but Daavn was faster and closed his stance quickly. He snapped an elbow up, catching her under the chin and sending her staggering back.

The roar that erupted from Makka gave both of them pause. Ekhaas swung around to catch a glimpse of the bugbear charging past Ashi and Aruget, and leaping down the ridge in the direction of the tomb. Fear clenched a fist
in her guts. Their distraction had failed.

“Maabet,” cursed Daavn, then shouted orders. “Move in! All of you, move in!”

Ekhaas slashed her sword at his throat.

He blocked her with the ease of a practiced swordsman and forced her back across the ridge with a series of powerful, hammering blows. He smiled the next time they crossed swords.

“Did you know your friend Midian betrayed Ashi and Geth to save his own life?”

She felt him relax a little in anticipation of her surprise. She turned it against him.

“Yes,” she said and jerked her knee up into his groin.

He wore an armored codpiece that left her knee aching, but the force of the blow was still enough to make his ears droop and his eyes open wide. Ekhaas shoved hard against his chest with her free hand and he reeled back.

Right over the edge of a crevice in the ridge. He didn’t even teeter, but just went over. Ekhaas heard his armor strike rock twice as he fell. She whirled and ran to the aid of Ashi and Aruget.

She’d taken perhaps four paces when a dull drone filled the air. She looked around, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound, but it seemed to come from everywhere. Aruget, Ashi, and the guards and workers who had pinned them down broke off their attacks, looking around in confusion.

The brown body of an insect—a locust—landed on her arm. Its eyes were the same milky white as Pradoor’s. The drone turned into a thrum that reverberated in Ekhaas’s belly. The horses picketed before the tomb whinnied and shifted in fright.

And a vast swarm of the white-eyed locusts rose up from behind the ridge.

They came whirring down like a blizzard, only a few at first, then more and more. Daavn’s bugbears and hobgoblins shouted and fled, dropping tools and weapons. Ekhaas sprinted to Ashi and Aruget. “Makka has gone into the tomb!” she shouted over the thrumming of the locusts’ wings. Daylight was growing dim as the swarm clustered around them.

“I saw him,” said Ashi, “and I saw Pradoor chanting. I think this swarm is—” She broke off with a hiss of pain and plucked a locust away from the thin bloody scratch across her belly. “It bit me!” She hissed again.

So did Aruget. Blood matted Geth’s thick hair. The locusts seemed to be settling on it like leeches. The changeling could have been doing a bizarre dance as he swatted at them. Another locust settled on Ekhaas but this time it brought with it a stinging pain. She slapped it away and it left a smear of red blood behind. Her blood.

Two more locusts landed on the same spot. The thrumming of the swarm rose in pitch. Ekhaas’s fear rose with it. She grabbed for Aruget and Ashi and pulled them close, ignoring the bites of the locusts as they settled on her.

“Cover your ears!” she ordered, then drew a breath through barely parted lips and sang a burst of sound directly on top of them.

The song blew back the swarm like a stone thrown into a pond. Ekhaas felt the sound pulse through her body but it did more damage to the locusts than to her. The brown insects dropped in drifts all around them. For a moment, daylight returned and the thrumming vanished.

Only for a moment. Pradoor’s shrill voice rose. “Devourer, aid your servant! Let your hunger be manifest!” The thrumming returned, and the sun dimmed as a new swarm settled over them.

“Ekhaas, we have to get into the tomb!” said Ashi. “Geth and Chetiin need us!”

“We’d never make it,” Aruget said, and spat as a locust crawled into his mouth.

Ekhaas held tight to both human and changeling and drew them down into a tight huddle. Forcing her voice deep into her throat, she started to hum with the same pitch and resonance as the swarm. It was hardly a song, but when she drew up magic from deep inside herself, it took on strength and substance.

The thrum of the swarm became a roar, but no locusts landed on them. Ekhaas felt Ashi raise her head and look around. “Rond betch,” she said in amazement.

Aruget—shifter’s features melting back into a hobgoblin’s—raised his head, too, but he looked at Ekhaas. She could guess what he was thinking because she was thinking it, too.

Which would last longer: her hum or Pradoor’s chant?

* * * * *

Geth tumbled across the floor of the tomb, bashing aside treasures and scattering coins. He still felt Midian’s second crossbow bolt pass uncomfortably close to him. He landed beside a broad polished shield bearing the crest of House Deneith and snatched it up, ducking behind it like a turtle retreating into its shell. The high opening of the stairs leading up out of the tomb was a half dozen paces away. Tenquis stood there, still directing the dim light of his moonstone up at Midian.
“Drop the stone, Tenquis!” Geth shouted. “You’re a target!”

The tiefling flinched and flicked the stone away. Shadows lurched crazily. Geth seized the moment and ran for the stairs, still covering himself with the shield. In spite of the shifting shadows and the shield, another bolt from Midian’s hand crossbow glanced off the stone right beside his moving feet. Geth yelped and skipped, diving the last of the way into the cover of the passage.

“You’re only making this a challenge, Geth.” Midian’s voice drifted down from his perch above. “I’m a very good marksman.”

Geth, panting for breath, looked up at Tenquis. “Where did he get a crossbow?”

“If I was him,” said Chetiin from nearby, “I would have left a cache of weapons and supplies behind.”

Both Geth and Tenquis flinched this time. Geth twisted around and spotted Chetiin squatting against one wall of the stairs. “I thought you were still somewhere out there in the cave!” he said, almost choking.

“I thought we should talk without having to shout our business.” The shaarat’khesh elder stood up and added quietly. “I’ll deal with Midian.”

“You’re not going to get close to him,” Tenquis said. “He’s a good eight paces up and he’ll have clear aim on you.”

“You’re whispering,” Midian called out to them. “Speak up.”

Chetiin glanced up at Tenquis. “I’ll deal with him,” he said again, then looked to Geth. “When you have your opening, take it. Get the rod and run. Don’t wait for me. Just take it and run as far from Rhukaan Draal as you can. I’ll find you.” He put a fist to his chest. “Paatcha, Geth. Swift travel.”

Geth repeated the gesture. “Paatcha, Chetiin.”

The old goblin moved closer to the mouth of the passage and raised his strained, scarred voice. “Midian!”

This time the gnome made no response. Geth peered around the edge of the passage and up into the gloom near the cavern ceiling. Although the moonstone now lay on the floor somewhere beyond Haruuc’s withered corpse, its light still revealed Midian’s hiding place. The pale shape of his face was still there, and still partly obscured by the darkness of his small crossbow. “He’s waiting for you,” Geth murmured to Chetiin.

“I know.” Chetiin stepped a little further into the cavern, a shadow standing among shadows. “Midian, we have unfinished business!”

Midian’s first contact with Tariic had come in a letter. Master Davandi, it had read, mutual friends recommend your knowledge as an expert on the history of the Empire of Dhakaan.

Midian had smiled. He’d been expecting the letter. Their “mutual friends” had been other agents of the silent masters of the Trust, the body that served the Triumvirate—or was served by them, according to some suspicions, but that in any case served the interests of Zilargo. He’d been proud to take the assignment.

Both he and the Trust had underestimated Tariic’s ambitions, but regrets made poor excuses. The game wasn’t over yet.

Midian kept the crossbow aimed at Chetiin’s chest, kept his hands still and his breathing slow. This time he would finish the job—he’d cursed himself many times over the last several days for not making sure the old goblin was dead the first time. He’d had the stolen dagger, the stealer of souls, the Keeper’s fang. He should have used it on Chetiin as well as Haruuc.

Of the three figures in the tomb below, Chetiin was the most dangerous. Geth was fast but he couldn’t evade the bolts forever. Tenquis … the tiefling barely even merited aiming.

Chetiin stepped out of the passage leading to the stairs and into the cavern. The shadows cast by Tenquis’s moonstone gave him cover. The crossbow waved between two shadows. Midian clenched his teeth. Wait.

“Midian, we have unfinished business!” Chetiin called.

Now.

He squeezed the trigger of the crossbow. The light weapon kicked in his hand as the bent arms sprang straight and the taut string sang. His aim was good. He heard Geth try to call a warning. Too late. The bolt pierced Chetiin—and porcelain shattered, spilling coins across the tomb floor.

A tall vase. Not Chetiin. Midian’s jaw tightened. The scholar in him remembered the vase from his explorations when he’d first wormed his way into the tomb—Dhakaani, late empire, Riis dynasty. Beautiful work.

The assassin in him was already cocking the crossbow with a swift pull of the ratcheting lever, and dropping another bolt into the channel. His eyes didn’t stop scanning the cavern.

“You tried to kill me,” said Chetiin, and once more Midian thought he saw him, this time close to Haruuc’s
throne. “You tried to make it seem like I’d killed Haruuc. I admire that. Among the shaarat’khesh you would be honored. But—”

Midian shifted his crossbow to cover the goblin, though he didn’t squeeze the trigger. He wouldn’t be tricked a second time.

Chetiin moved, the light of the moonstone shining full on his face. Again the crossbow snapped.

The bolt caught only a fold of Haruuc’s cloak. Midian cursed. Fingers flickered on crossbow once more. Chetiin was good.

He was better.

Chetiin’s voice, sourceless now, continued as if nothing had happened. “—you used my face to kill a friend. However much I respect your technique, I can’t let that pass.”

Then there was silence. Geth and Tenquis peered around the edge of the passage. Geth’s eyes flickered toward the rod but he didn’t move. Waiting for an opening, Midian knew. He was tempted to put a bolt in the shifter’s forehead.

**Hold to your target.**

Midian turned his head side to side, making a show of searching for Chetiin, before calling out, “Nothing about the Rod of Kings? Nothing about breaking my oath to keep it a secret? Nothing about Zilargo?”

“Nothing.” Nothing nothing nothing …

Chetiin’s answer echoed from a dozen places around the cavern at once, but Midian knew that trick. He twisted and loosened his bolt at the point where the goblin would be standing.

And from above him dropped Chetiin, breaking away from the cavern wall like some great spider. His feet struck the crossbow and forced it from Midian’s grip. His hands caught the lip of the crack in which the gnome perched and his body curved back up so that his ankles hooked together behind Midian’s neck.

Midian threw himself back into the crack, dragging Chetiin with him. He’d taken a dagger from the cache he’d hidden in the tunnel. If he could draw it … but Chetiin didn’t give him a chance. The goblin’s speed and strength belied his age. He wormed around Midian and grappled with him, a primal struggle in the dark, cramped tunnel.

There was no room to maneuver. Midian glanced back to the mouth of the crack, glowing with the light of the moonstone, and kicked toward it. Maybe Chetiin had the same idea because he kicked, too.

They burst out into the open space of the cavern as if spat out of the mouth of some huge beast. Even as they fell, though, they pushed themselves apart. Midian twisted his body in mid-air and hit the cave floor in a springy crouch that absorbed the impact of the fall.

So did Chetiin.

They drew daggers at the same moment and circled each other briefly. Then Midian leaped.

Chetiin caught him with one hand, guiding him in a sweeping arc, but Midian grabbed the goblin’s arm in return and held tight. The momentum of his body dragged Chetiin off his feet and they both crashed into piled plates of silver and gold. In an instant they were rolling and wrestling, Midian with bared teeth, Chetiin with flattened ears.

Midian didn’t hold back or offer mercy. He knew Chetiin wouldn’t. Their business would be finished here.

Geth saw his opening. He sprinted across the tomb, past Haruuc’s staring eyeless face, and dived into the pile of rolled carpets, digging among them until his fingers touched stiff leather. He closed them and wrenched out the leather tube that he had seen the false Chetiin take from his quarters.

There was a weight to the tube that he knew well, but he’d been tricked one too many times. Fingers fumbling with the clasp on the tube, Geth opened it just a bit.

The dim light of the moonstone—broken by the struggling shadows of Midian and Chetiin—flashed on a shaft of purple byeshk, thick as his wrist, carved with ancient symbols. A touch of his hand to Wrath confirmed it. This was the Rod of Kings. The true rod.

“I have it!” he shouted. He pushed himself to his feet and dashed back across the cavern, closing the clasp again as he went. Midian let out a howl of frustration—that turned into a howl of pain. Geth resisted the temptation to turn and see who was winning the fight. He ran for the stairs, racing up them with Tenquis following close behind.

He was about halfway up, the light of day glowing in the tomb door and a strange thrumming roar growing in his ears, when something big, heavy, and hairy dropped on him.

There was no chance to think what it was or where it came from. Geth had a brief sense of something falling on him, then he was crushed flat against the stairs. His breath exploded out of his mouth. The ribs he’d broken in his dive out of Khaar Mbar’ost cracked again in a sharp burst of pain rivaled only by the blossom of fire that bloomed when his head bounced off the stone steps. He heard Tenquis yell, but the sound seemed very far away.
The leather tube jerked out of his hand. A massive, wide-shouldered figure blotted out the daylight as it bounded up the stairs.

“Geth!” Hands grabbed him and turned him over. Tenquis’s face spun above him. Geth couldn’t quite focus on him. He couldn’t quite breathe either. His body heaved with the effort of it. Tenquis cursed and dug in a pocket, coming out with a little leather flask that he opened, stuck under Geth’s nose, and squeezed.

Acrid orange dust puffed up into Geth’s vision. It tickled his nose, burned his eyes, and somehow opened up his throat. He gasped and air rushed into his lungs. His head stopped spinning, though it still throbbed mercilessly. “What happened?” he asked.

Tenquis was already trying to drag him to his feet. “Makka! He must have braced himself between the walls of the passage. Geth, he has the rod!”

That, more than the orange dust, cleared Geth’s head.

“No.” Fighting back the pain in his side and his head, he thrust himself up the stairs. He twisted his head around as he ran to shout back into the tomb. “Chetiin! Makka’s stolen the rod!”

He staggered out of the tomb door just in time to see the bugbear snatch Pradoor up from where she stood chanting and vault into the saddle of a terrified horse. He wheeled the horse once and his eyes met Geth’s, then he spurred the beast along the road back into Rhukaan Draal.
Horror mingled with rage in Geth’s gut and he latched onto the edge of the stone doorway to hold himself up. Tenquis, coming up behind him, grabbed his shoulder.

“Look there!” Tenquis pointed at a vast cloud of locusts that swarmed along the ridge.

Even as Geth turned his head, the cloud dissipated, the thrum of wings fading as fast as Pradoor’s chant. Some of the insects flew away, others dropped to the ground like a brown hail around the trio of bloodied figures that huddled at its heart. Geth’s fear surged again—then the figures stirred and Ashi, Ekhaas, and Aruget looked down at him.

“The rod?” called Ekhaas, her voice raw.

Geth pointed at Makka’s retreating horse.

“They have it?” Ashi asked. “After all that, they have the rod?”

Grim determination settled over Geth. “Makka has it, not Tariic,” he said. “We still have a chance to stop him.”

The other horses, calmer now that the locusts had gone, were still picketed. Geth let go of the doorway and moved for the stairs down to the ground—and would have pitched over if Tenquis hadn’t been there to catch him. The tiefling lowered him to the ground and pulled more flasks out of his pockets.

Geth pushed at him. Every moment they lingered Makka got closer to Khaar Mbar’ost. “There isn’t time for this!”

“You can’t stop him if you can’t walk,” Tenquis said.

“Listen to him, Geth. Tapaa te nuusha ka koor te hara—bind your wounds or bleed out your victory.”

Geth turned his head to see Chetiin climbing the stairs from the tomb. The goblin was bleeding himself. Long scratches tore the parchment-like skin of his face and a blood-soaked black sleeve clung to one arm. Far more astonishing, though, was the sight of Midian draped over the shaarat’khesh’s shoulder—limp and unconscious.

Chetiin answered Geth’s question before he spoke it. “This tomb was built for Haruuc, not his killer.” He dropped Midian. The gnome fell heavily, groaning as he hit the ground. Chetiin drew the dagger that had killed Haruuc and the blue-black crystal set in the ugly blade glittered. “Traitors die on the doorsteps of heroes.”

A desperate idea came to Geth. “Wait!” he said. “Don’t kill him.”

Chetiin and Tenquis both froze, the tiefling with surprise on his face, the goblin with cupped ears. Ashi, descending the ridge alongside Ekhaas and Aruget, cursed. Up close, Geth could see that the bloody appearance of the three came from dozens of tiny bites.

“Are you serious?” Ashi demanded as she slid down the last of the slope to land before the tomb.

“Yes.” Geth looked to Tenquis who held a flask motionless in one hand and a small heap of shimmering powders in the other. “Finish that,” he said, pointing at Midian, “then get out your orange dust and wake him up. Chetiin, do you know where his crossbow is?”

The goblin’s eyes narrowed and he gave a curt nod.

“Get it,” said Geth.

Chetiin didn’t move.

Geth saw the others exchange glances, then Ekhaas raised her voice. “What are you doing? Midian has turned on us three times.”

“Four,” he corrected her.

“And you still want to let him live?”

Geth struggled to his feet. “I’m trying to stop Tariic from getting his hands on the rod,” he said. “I don’t think Midian and his masters in Zilargo want it to happen any more than the rest of us do. We know him now. We won’t give him the chance to turn on us.” He moved unsteadily to Midian and nudged him with his toe. The gnome groaned again and Geth said, “If we can catch Makka, maybe we won’t need him. If we can’t, if Makka gets the rod to Tariic, I think we will.”

Midian’s features twitched—Chetiin dropped into a crouch, dagger ready to strike—and one bright blue eye opened, rolling around to look at them. “You’ll need me for what?” he croaked.

“Awake after all,” Geth said. He crouched down beside the gnome and bared his teeth. “If Makka gets the rod to
Tariic, we’re going to need all the help we can get, including you and your crossbow. We’ll have to finish what you started.” He looked up at the others. “We have to kill a king.”

They galloped back into Rhukaan Draal on the horses left behind. Chetiin rode with Geth, Midian with Aruget. The gnome looked as grim as any of them. Geth knew he’d guessed correctly. Even if Midian was a Zil agent, even if he wanted to capture the Rod of Kings for his own people, he didn’t want the rod under Tariic’s control. Or Tariic under the rod’s.

Beyond that, Geth didn’t trust him any more than a dog with a sausage. Midian rode with his hands tied behind his back. His crossbow rode with Ashi.

“I don’t like this,” said Chetiin in Geth’s ear, his voice pitched just over the thunder of the horses’ hooves. “Killing Tariic or working with Midian?” Geth asked.

“Both. And working with an agent of Breland.”

Geth glanced at Aruget. “We can trust him. Or at least we could trust Benti.”

“Exactly.” The goblin’s strained voice dropped even lower. “He did nothing until he was forced to.”

“When Ashi was in trouble.”

“When his source of information was in trouble. He works for Breland just as Midian works for Zilargo. Be wary, Geth.”

He said no more.

Ekhaas and Tenquis, knowing the city best, rode point. Makka was long out of sight. Any hope of catching him seemed gone, but Tenquis still led them toward Khaar Mbar’ost by the route he swore Makka would most likely have followed, although he’d warned them that it might be crowded.

“The city will come out to see Dagii return,” he’d said. “It will slow us but it will slow Makka, too.”

Except that the streets weren’t crowded. Most were less busy than when they had made their way out to Haruuc’s tomb. “Where is everyone?” asked Ashi.

A distant cheer answered her. “Dagii has crossed the Ghaal River,” said Ekhaas. “Everyone has gone to watch his procession.”

“By the sound of it, he’s near the Bloody Market,” Chetiin said.

Ekhaas’s face went hard and for a moment she looked like she might add something, but then she closed her mouth and put her ears back. Geth could guess what she was thinking. “Dagii needs to know what he’s heading into,” he said. “We need to warn him.”

“He already knows there’s danger,” said Ekhaas. Her ears flicked. “It’s best for him if he can deny any part in this.”

No one answered that. They all knew the same thing: the time for tricks and clever plans was over. If they wanted to keep the power of the rod a secret, to prevent Haruuc’s dream from destroying itself in the memories of a fallen empire, Tariic had to be the last to hold the Rod of Kings.

If they succeeded, they’d be the most famous assassins and thieves in Khorvaire—and the most hunted.

Riding alongside the noise of the crowd that cheered for the hero of the Battle of Zarrthec was like riding parallel to an unseen but rushing river. Along some of Rhukaan Draal’s straighter streets, Geth caught glimpses of the crowd, and once the flash of sunlight on spearpoints and armor like water seen through trees. After a long while, though, the shouting fell behind. Khaar Mbar’ost rose ahead—and the river fed into an ocean.

People packed the plaza before the red fortress. Off to their left, a wide path, kept open by bugbear guards, led directly to the gates of Khaar Mbar’ost. Warlords and dignitaries stood on a raised platform of about shoulder height, waiting for Dagii’s approach. As Geth and the others reined in their horses at the edge of the crowd, he saw familiar faces on the platform. Aguus of Traakuum. Garaad of Vaniish Kai. Iizan of Ghaal Sehn. Pater d’Orien. Senen Dhakaan. Munta. Vounn.

In fact, he knew all of the faces. Not so long ago, he would have been standing on the platform, too.

“I don’t see Makka or Pradoor,” said Ashi. “Or Tariic.”

“There,” Chetiin said.

The people on the platform parted to reveal the lhesh climbing up stairs at the back of the platform. Makka, looking around with the wariness of a hunter on edge, and Pradoor followed close behind him. The excited murmurs of the crowd turned into a roar of approval. Tariic stepped up to the front of the platform and raised the Rod of Kings. The roar of the crowd rose even higher.

“He has it,” said Chetiin.
Geth looked to Midian. The gnome’s lips pressed tight and he raised his eyes to scan the rooftops—also crowded with people—around them. He shook his head. “The plaza is too wide. Even with a more powerful crossbow I’d have trouble hitting him. With my little hand bow it’s impossible.”

“Don’t worry,” said Geth, “we’re going closer.”

“We’ll be recognized!”

“I’m counting on it.” A plan, desperate and dangerous but possibly their only hope, had formed in his mind. He slid from his horse and gestured for the others to do the same.

The hats and cloaks Aruget had used to smuggle them out of Khaar Mbar’ost had been abandoned by Haruuc’s tomb, but silver quickly procured more. Ashi kept her face down and her cowl—stinking of the hobgoblin beggar who been wearing it only moments before—well up as she fought her way through the crowd beside Ekhaas. A few paces away, Geth wore a similarly ragged and foul cloak. Ekhaas, along with Aruget, his features shifted to anonymity, blended into the crowd of other dar faces. Chetiin and Midian—arms unbound but now tethered to and closely watched by Aruget—simply moved unseen among the legs of larger figures. Ashi wasn’t sure if she envied Tenquis his role or not. Standing back with the horses, he didn’t need to wear a disguise, but it would be his job to get them out again once they’d done what they had to do.

Her palms were wet. She wiped them on the legs of her trousers.

“If we’d taken the rod and run after Haruuc died,” she murmured to Ekhaas in human language as bodies jostled them on all sides, “none of this would be happening.”

The duur’kala glanced at her. “If we’d taken the rod and run,” she answered, lips barely moving, “the succession would have been even more chaotic and Darguun likely would still have been at war with Valenar.”

“We’re going to force a new succession and we’re going to steal the rod.”

Ekhaas’s ears flicked and drooped. “But now we have war. Dar may not understand peace, but we understand war very well. There will be a new lhes in days, and he won’t need the rod as a symbol to unify the clans. He’ll continue the war with Valenar and that will be enough. Darguun will follow him. And without the rod’s dreams of empire, Darguun will remain only Darguun.”

“If the war drags on, Darguun will weaken. Other nations could decide to take it on. It could fall.”

Ekhaas gave a thin smile. “Even Dhakaan fell eventually, Ashi. We can only make certain Darguun does not fall today.” She stopped. “We part here.”

A sudden roar erupted from behind them at the edge of the plaza. It spread quickly through the crowd. Heads turned, even among those on the platform. Ashi twisted around.

At the end of the path through the plaza, two hobgoblins rode at the head of a column of soldiers. One wore chains wrapped around his torso like a badge of honor. The other, mounted on a tiger, wore the horned armor of the warlord of Mur Talaan and raised his arms in triumph.
Dagii—and Keraal—had reached the plaza.

“Now!” snapped Geth. His gauntleted arm rose and fell, dashing a vial of dark glass, surrendered by Midian, against the paving stones at their feet. Ashi squeezed her eyes shut.

The intense light released by the shattered vial flared even through her eyelids. All around them, cheers turned into shouts of alarm.

Ashi forced her eyes open again, throwing back her cowl with one hand and drawing her sword with the other. She whirled the blade around her head and let the fluting battlecry of the Bonetree Clan ripple from her lips.

Geth thrust Wrath toward the platform and howled, “Tariic Kurar’taarn! We come for you!”

Choshed and dazzled by the burst of light, startled by cries and swinging swords, the crowd surged away from them. Chetiin drove them back further, darting and tumbling among them like a furious black cat, his dagger slashing at legs. The line of guards trying to hold the crowd back from the path through the plaza buckled and fell as people moved. Out of the corner of her eye, Ashi had a glimpse of Keraal’s horse rearing and Dagii fighting to control his tiger, even as he caught sight of them.

Chaos erupted on the platform as well. Warlords flinched in surprise, then pushed forward like the trained warriors they were, struggling for a moment with the envoys and ambassadors who were trying to get back. Makka forced Pradoor behind him and drew his sword. Tariic, rod raised to greet Dagii, froze for an instant, then moved. The others on the platform had closed in behind him, blocking access to stairs. He turned, crossing the front of the platform away from her and Geth.

And Aruget, waiting just at the edge of the open space cleared by the panicked crowd, waiting for just such an attempt at escape, lifted Midian up onto his shoulders. In one smooth movement, the agent of Zilargo braced himself, brought down his crossbow, and aimed over the heads of the crowd. Ekhaas stepped in front of the pair, drawing her blade to turn back blundering spectators. The crossbow tracked Tariic for a moment, then Midian squeezed the trigger.

Ashi couldn’t hear the crack of the bow’s release over the noise of the crowd’s confusion, but she saw Tariic jerk and sprawl backward. The fletching of a crossbow bolt smeared with Midian’s entire remaining supply of strandpine sap protruded from his throat.

Tariic’s hand spasmed and the Rod of Kings fell from it.

Still howling, still waving Wrath, Geth sprang for the platform. Ashi and Chetiin stayed close behind him, and the remnants of the crowd parted before them. Before the rod had even stopped rolling, before greedy warlords could do more than stare at the prize before their feet, the three of them had vaulted onto the platform. Chetiin took one side of Geth and Ashi the other, twitching her sword back and forth to keep Aguus of Traakuum and Garaad of Vanishi Kai at bay, as the shifter scooped up the rod.

Standing close beside Aguus and Garaad, calmer than any other envoy, Vounn stood and stared at her. Ashi drew a breath between her teeth. “I’m sorry,” she murmured.

Vounn’s eyes opened wide. Her finger came up—and pointed at something behind Ashi. Aguus and Garaad stiffened as well. Ashi heard a soft curse from Chetiin. She threw a fast look over her shoulder. Like Vounn and the warlords, Geth had stopped and was staring. She followed his eyes down to Tariic’s corpse.

Red-brown flesh seemed to flow and turn dusky gray. Flat, harsh features became round and soft. Brown eyes so bright they were almost red turned white. Short, dark hair grew long and became pale.

A changeling, returned to his true form in death.

“Ko!” choked Geth. He flipped the Rod of Kings around to reveal the faint spiral Tenquis had made to mark the false rod.

Ashi gasped. “Where’s Tariic?”

“Here!”

Ashi whirled as those on the platform parted and the real Tariic stepped forward with the rod—the true rod—raised high. Protected by her dragonmark, she couldn’t feel the power of the true rod, but she could see it in the expressions of those around Tariic. It made the effects of the false rod seem as cheap and gaudy as gilded lead. The Darguul warlords who moved aside for Tariic stood straight, ears high, proud in his presence. The ambassadors and dragonmarked envoys looked even more frightened than they already had. A startled silence spread among the crowd as they saw that Lhesh Tariic still lived—and moreover that he stood before them like an emperor returned.

He swept the Rod of Kings across the platform and his voice almost trembled with eagerness. “Seize them, Darguuls! Seize the assassins!”

Within the arc that the rod described, every dar head—hobgoblin, bugbear, and goblin—turned to Ashi, Geth, and Chetiin. Those few envoys and ambassadors who hadn’t already retreated looked around in confusion. Vounn, still
standing in front of Ashi, opened her mouth as if to speak, but anything she might have said was lost as more than a
dozen of the most powerful and important warlords in Darguun surged forward.

“Run!” shouted Geth.
Ashi hesitated for an instant, as if she could seize Vounn and drag her free, then she spun and followed him and
Chetiin in a desperate leap from the platform.

Too slow. Arms wrapped around her in a tackle that sent her sword flying from her hand and brought her crashing
down.

“Maabet!” cursed Aruget.
Midian froze in the act of climbing down from his shoulder. Ekhaas felt a sudden nausea sweep through her.
The changeling who’d impersonated Geth. The false rod. Tariic had anticipated an attempt to recapture the true
rod. He’d prepared for it.
And they’d failed.

“Seize them!” Tariic shouted. “Seize the assassins!”
The command spread from the platform, sweeping over the crowd. Out to the limits of Tariic’s voice, it gripped
minds and souls. The crowd that had been scattering in panic turned and rushed back like the turning tide.

The line of Aruget’s jaw tightened, and he shook Midian off his back. “Ideas?” he said.

“One,” said Midian—and Ekhaas heard his crossbow clatter to the stones under their feet. She turned, but the
gnome was already sprinting past her and racing into the crowd, darting among a forest of legs. Chaos marked his
plunge, but he was fast, using his small size to evade the hands that grabbed for him.

Aruget looked at Ekhaas and his ears flicked. “We tried,” he said.

Then he was diving into the crowd, too. Even as he moved, though, Ekhaas saw his face and body shift and start
to change. Adult hobgoblin became youthful bugbear. A few hands grabbed for him, there was a flurry of activity,
but then nothing. His disappearance was even more complete than Midian’s—and it left an even greater hole in
Ekhaas’s gut. She dragged her sword from its sheath and swung it in a wide circle, forcing the advancing crowd
back for a moment, but where the blade passed, the crowd pressed in—

—until the roar of a tiger brought them and Ekhaas around. Above the heads of the crowd, Dagii appeared, his
tiger mount leaping through the mob as if through grass. In his wake, led by Keraal, came the soldiers of the Iron
Fox Company. Joy and anger warred in Ekhaas. Anger that Dagii had involved himself, opened himself up to
Tariic’s retribution. Joy that he’d come to her rescue. The last ranks of the crowd scattered as the tiger came to a
snarling stop before her. Ekhaas looked up at Dagii, her heart racing.

He stared at her with gray eyes as hard as the half-visor of his helmet and as cold as the Rod of Kings. “Ekhaas of
Kech Volaar, assassin and traitor,” he said, “by command of Lhesh Tariic, you are my prisoner.”

The hole in Ekhaas’s gut swallowed her.

The day in the dungeon, the day he had spared Ko from the arena, came back to Geth. Tariic’s-disapproval of his
mercy. His own promise to the dungeon keeper—“I’ll be back to talk to him when I can.” But he’d never made it
back and his mercy had returned to damn him.

There was no room in his fury—at Tariic, but especially at himself—even for cursing. He’d thought he was a
hero. He was a fool.

His feet hit the stones of the plaza and he sank into a crouch, Wrath ready, his gauntlet up. Chetiin landed beside
him. They were in the clear for the moment, but the crowd, summoned back by Tariic’s command, was swarming in
fast.

“Geth!”
Ashi. He twisted to face the platform. Ashi lay near the edge of it, struggling desperately but held by half a dozen
pairs of hands that tried to drag her back. Two of those pairs belonged to Aguus and Garaad.

The rest of the warlords caught in the rod’s power were jumping and climbing down from the platform.

“Geth …” Chetiin said in low warning.

“Watch the crowd,” Geth growled. “I’m going for Ashi.”

Before the goblin elder could say anything else, he moved, throwing himself against Tariic’s puppets. Confronted
by Wrath, the Darguuls drew weapons, though they didn’t strike to kill—Tariic’s command had been to seize. Geth
lashed out with the twilight blade, trying to drive them back while using the false rod, still gripped in gauntleted
hand, as a club against those who got close. For a moment, it worked—until Munta the Gray thrust himself between
the others. The old warlord’s sword caught Geth’s and held it. Dark eyes in a wrinkled face blazed. “Traitor!”

The hatred and ferocity in his voice made Geth bare his teeth. “Munta, it’s the rod! Tariic has—”

Nothing in Munta’s face or posture hinted that he even heard him. “You’re mine,” he snarled. “When I drag you
before Tariic, he will know I’m still fit for battle!”

He threw back Wrath and swung his own sword with a strength and speed that Geth wouldn’t have expected in
someone of his age. The shifter blocked the blow with his gauntlet, then jabbed at Munta with the false rod.

The old warlord’s sword whirled around and struck the rod at a sharp angle. The edge of the blade bit deep into
the byeshk. Geth thought he felt a sting in his hand as the magic Tenquis had woven into the false rod unraveled.
Munta must have felt something, too. He hissed and stumbled, dropping hard onto one knee.

“Sorry, Munta,” Geth growled. He swung the damaged rod down onto his gray head. Munta collapsed like an
empty sack.

Geth let the false rod tumble onto him as he jumped over the old warlord’s sagging body. More hands grabbed for
him. He struck them away with his gauntlet. Ashi saw him, and her struggles intensified. She freed a leg and gave
Aguus a hard kick in the chest. She freed a fist, but Garaad grabbed it again.

“Ashi, I’m coming!” Geth roared, but the crowd was all around him now. Every step was a battle. Chetiin was
fighting at his back, stabbing at knees and legs and chests whenever someone fell.

Somewhere a tiger roared. “Dagii!” said Chetiin.

Geth twisted his head around. Across the seething mob that filled the plaza, Dagii had drawn his mount up before
Ekhaas—but one glance at the warlord’s face told him that his appearance was no rescue. “Tariic has him. I don’t
see Aruget or Midian!”

Up on the platform, Tariic stood back with a look of supreme confidence on his face. To one side of him,
Pradoor’s head turned back and forth, ears twitching as the blind goblin listened to the sounds of the fight. To the
other, Makka strained like a dog on a leash, eager to join the battle but held back by his master. Geth grimaced. Tariic
didn’t need Makka’s strength to defeat them—the sheer numbers of the crowd would drag them down. Soon.

Then somewhere behind Geth, hooves beat on stone and a voice rose in a rasping shout—“For the blood and line
of Castalla!” Geth turned again, the other way this time.

Tenquis, mounted and riding at a full gallop, plunged through the crowd, splitting it apart. In one hand, he held a
rope gathering together the reins of the other horses; they followed him in a bucking, whinnying wedge of muscle
and hooves. The tiefling artificer rode with his head low over his horse’s neck, gaze fixed on the platform.

Hands dragged at Geth as he turned his head between lhesh and artificer. Tariic raised the Rod of Kings and drew
breath. One shouted command would halt the wild charge.

“Tenquis, watch out!” Geth roared.

But Tenquis had already released the other horses and pulled back on the reins of his own. The beast reared up on
its hind legs. Tenquis’s free hand flicked out. Pale liquid spread out from a vial clutched in his ingers and seemed to
evaporate on the air.

At the same instant, thick greenish vapor burst up in a smoky curtain around Tariic, Pradoor, and Makka.
Whatever command Tariic might have issued disappeared in a strangled cough.

And the anger and energy of the crowd seemed to drain away, as if only Tariic’s concentration had sustained it.
The hands that held Geth fell away. The forehooves of Tenquis’s horse clattered back to the ground and he urged the
animal around in a tight circle, driving the confused crowd further apart. “Take a horse and mount up!” he shouted
at Geth and Chetiin.

Geth glanced back to the platform. The warlords who had seized Ashi were as confused as the crowd below. Their
grips went slack—and Ashi pulled away from them, punching at one, cracking an elbow across Garaad’s face, then
twisting to her feet. Her eyes met Geth’s and she gave him a fierce grin. Relief spread through Geth, so sharp it made
him feel almost sick. He turned and leaped onto the back of the nearest horse.

Dagii’s gaze snapped around at Tenquis’s charge, but as the tiefling artificer cast pale liquid on the air and Tariic
choked on green smoke, the warlord blinked and his gray eyes cleared. He stared down and Ekhaas saw horror in his
face. “Taarka’nu, I didn’t—”

The hole that had opened in her closed a little, but not all the way. Her legs trembled. Her head spun. Tenquis was
already shouting at Geth. On the platform, Ashi was fighting free. Ekhaas looked up at Dagii and cut him off with
curt words. “Tariic has the true rod. Ride or he’ll have you again!”
His ears pressed back. “If I ride, he’ll have you. Take a horse. I’ll cover your retreat.” He whipped up his sword, whirling it around his head. “Iron Fox, forward! Take defensive lines! Protect the lhesh!”

Soldiers already in motion changed their step with disciplined obedience, rushing toward the platform. Ekhaas stared at Dagii. His eyes narrowed and his mouth curved in a smile that was both fond and hard. “Go, taarka’nu! Fight another day.”

Her ears rose. “Great glory, ruuska’te,” she said, then raced for Tenquis and the horses. Geth was already in the saddle with Chetiin clinging behind him. Ekhaas’s foot found a stirrup and she mounted.

The green vapor that burst around Makka seared his nostrils and stung his eyes, but at least he didn’t choke. Tariic, caught mid-breath, sucked the stuff in deep and doubled over in wracking coughs. Pradoor coughed as well, wheezing between gasps “What is this? What’s happening?”

Makka held his breath, tore the sword from his belt, and leaped through the smoke. Wisps of it caught in his hair and scorched his skin, but he could see again.

He could see revenge slipping away from him.

Geth and Chetiin were already on horseback. Ekhaas of Kech Volaar was mounting. Dagii was rushing forward as if eager to meet his death. Ashi of Deneith—

—was still on the platform and the way between them was open.

The rage of the Fury fell over him. Tariic had denied him his vengeance for too long! Howling the anger that had seethed in him since these taat had destroyed his tribe’s camp and his power with it, Makka charged. The sword of Deneith flashed in his grip. Ashi turned. She was unarmed. Defenseless.

Good.

He lunged.
Ekhaas saw it happen.

Between one heartbeat and the next, Makka burst through the veil of green vapor and charged with a roar like wind in the mountains. Ashi turned but the bugbear’s sword—the bright blade that he had stolen from her—was already thrusting at her belly.

Then, darting from among warlords clustered on the platform, Vounn threw herself between sword and victim.

There was a rippling in the air around her, and Ekhaas recognized the shield of force conjured by Vounn’s dragonmark. Ashi’s mentor twisted as she moved, using her phantom armor to deflect the blade.

It didn’t work. Makka’s mighty blow plunged his sword through the rippling shield into Vounn’s body—and through her into Ashi. The force of it slammed both women back so hard that Ashi’s arms seemed to wrap around Vounn.

Makka held them there for a long moment, then released the hilt of the sword. Vounn and Ashi fell together, joined by the honor blade of Deneith, hitting the platform with a hard impact that drove a cry of pain from Ashi. Ekhaas thought she saw Vounn turn her head to look at Ashi, thought she saw the lady-seneschal’s lips move before blood oozed from them and her body went limp. Ashi shuddered once, then her head fell back against the rough wood of the platform.

At the side of the platform, Pater d’Orien’s eyes went wide. He glanced up and met Ekhaas’s gaze, then his lips pressed together and his eyes lost focus as if he was gazing into the far distance. He took a small step—and vanished.

Somewhere far away, someone would learn very shortly of the murder of Vounn and Ashi d’Deneith.

And Ekhaas knew she wasn’t the only one to witness Pater’s disappearance. As the curtain of green vapor faded into drifting wisps, she saw Tariic staring with shock and dismay at the place where House Orien’s envoy had been.

Makka threw his head back and howled a second time, then spun to face Ekhaas and Geth. His body tensed, ready to leap—

Tariic’s voice cracked like thunder. “Makka, be still!”

The bugbear froze. Instantly. Completely.

Thought broke through Ekhaas’s shock. Their chance at escape was passing. She turned her horse sharply and reached out to grab the bridle of Geth’s horse, pulling it after her. The shifter was still staring at Ashi’s body, trembling with a rage so great it might shatter.

“Ride, Geth!” she ordered, but it was Chetiin who slid around Geth’s shaking body and snatched the reins from his hands. Tenquis slapped the horse on its hindquarters, then they were all galloping across the plaza, heading back the way they had come.

Ekhaas clutched her reins tight, expecting at any moment to hear the command from Tariic that would summon them all—or at least her and Tenquis—back, but it didn’t come. She heard Dagii shouting, ordering his men to protect Tariic. She heard more shouts as other warlords, knowing only that an attempt had been made on the lhesh’s life, tried to break free of the defensive lines and pursue them. She heard calls from the confused crowd.

And finally, just as they’d almost reached the edge of the plaza, she heard Tariic’s voice rise in a command that made her stomach lurch as if he’d called to her directly. “Dagii of Mur Talaan, stop them!”

She twisted her head and looked back over her shoulder to see Dagii turning his tiger after them, his face once more hard and cold. The rapidly thinning crowd that remained in the plaza scattered at the great cat took two huge bounds, closing at least a third of the distance between them.

Then they were around a corner onto an empty street and the plaza was out of sight. Ekhaas’s ears pressed back flat against her scalp. A horse could outpace the tiger in a distance race, but their horses had already run halfway across Rhukaan Draal. Dagii’s tiger was fresh. She looked at Tenquis, hunched over his horse’s neck, then at Chetiin and Geth. The shifter seemed to have come back to himself—he’d taken the reins from Chetiin, though his face was still twisted with rage and grief.

The same emotions gnawed at her. One day Makka—and Tariic—would pay for Ashi’s murder, but this wasn’t that day.
“Keep riding!” she snapped.
Geth looked at her, but she just looked away and reined in her horse, turning it around in the street. Behind her, hoofbeats slowed and Tenquis called her name. She ignored him.
Dagii’s tiger came leaping around the corner into the street, a streak of fire striped black and orange. Its master’s gray eyes fixed on her, and he raised his sword. Ekhaas’s hands tightened into fists. She drew breath, reached down into herself, and drew up magic.
The song that rolled along the street was not, however, hers. The voice that sang was high and clear. It danced and rippled, like sunlight falling on water or through the leaves of trees. It seemed to move around, coming first from a doorway, then a high window, then a deep shadow.
Dagii blinked and shook his head, allowing his tiger to slow to a walk as he looked around in confusion for the source of the music. Even the tiger seemed dazed.
Ekhaas held her horse still in the middle of the street as Dagii and his tiger came within a few paces of her, then turned around and went back the other way. She might as well have been invisible.
She knew the singer, even if she didn’t know the song. Looking around, she found her. Senen Dhakaan had pressed herself into a deep doorway. She met Ekhaas’s eyes and nodded. When Dagii had passed her again, she left off singing—though the song seemed to linger—and hurried to Ekhaas’s side.
“I’m sorry for Ashi’s death,” she said.
Ekhaas bit back her anger. “What are you doing here?”
“I saw you enter the plaza. When you left your horses at the street, I guessed this would be the way you’d leave. I slipped away before you attacked.” Senen’s ears flicked. “So the Rod of Kings commands obedience.”
“Aruget told you,” Ekhaas said. The changeling’s name tasted like dirt in her mouth.
“I guessed it just now. When the real Tariic appeared, your tiefling friend fled the plaza and covered his ears. I did the same.” She glanced at Dagii, still caught by her magic, then up at Ekhaas. “You’ll be an outlaw now. You should have told me everything. I could have helped you.”
Ekhaas bared her teeth. “This isn’t the time, Senen.”
“I know.” Senen stepped back. “A duur’kala should listen as much as she sings. I’ve been listening in Khaar Mbar’ost. Find refuge in Volaar Draal, Ekhaas. Take a message to Tuura Dhakaan: there should be no alliance. Lhesh Tariic Kurar’taarn will not be a friend to the Kech Volaar.”
“I don’t think Tariic will be a friend to anybody,” said Ekhaas. “What the rod shows him will destroy Darguun.”
“The vaults of Volaar Draal are deep.” Senen nodded toward Dagii and his tiger. “The song will fade soon. Ride now!”
She turned away without waiting for a response and vanished into an alley. Ekhaas realized that her hands, even clenched into fists, were trembling. She looked at Dagii one last time, then turned her horse and urged it back to a fast trot.
Tenquis, Geth, and Chetiin hadn’t followed her instructions. They’d stopped just around the next bend in the street and as she rode up, they fell in beside her. “Well?” growled Geth.
“We have a hiding place.”
“What good’s hiding?”
“It keeps us alive,” said Tenquis.
“Ashi’s dead,” Geth snapped at him, “and Tariic has the rod.”
Ekhaas looked up at the red bulk of Khaar Mbar’ost. The sun was settling into the west and lit the fortress of the lhesh up like a pyre. A pyre for Darguun and Haruuc’s lost dream. She looked back to Geth, her ears pressed flat. “We’ll find a way to take it away from him.”
Makka’s howl came so suddenly that what followed seemed like a blur to Ashi. The spinning of the world as she turned to meet his attack. The bright blade of her sword plunging at her. Vounn stepping into its path, trying to deflect it.

The shock as Makka’s blow drove Vounn’s body into Ashi’s and the sword through both of them. The sudden blossoming of pain—sharp metal into flesh, falling body against wood, body against body against metal against wood. Darkness swam across her vision, and Ashi cried out.

When her vision cleared, she was looking into Vounn’s eyes. She managed three words.

“That was stupid.”

Vounn’s lips twitched. “Our lives belong to Deneith,” she said, her voice wheezing in her throat, “but some things are bigger than the house. You were … right about Tariic.” One of her hands found Ashi’s where they held her. “I’m proud of you, Ash—ah.”

Her words ended in a sigh and bubbling blood.

Darkness swarmed over Ashi and dragged her down.

She smelled incense and heard prayers, too soft to hear the words but loud enough to recognize the language. Goblin. She could feel something warm and dry on her forehead—and something cold along her belly, right where there should have been searing pain.

The prayers faded into silence and someone coughed. The warm, dry thing on her forehead—a small hand—moved away. “She’ll live,” said Pradoor’s shrill voice. “So will the other one.”

“Good.” Tariic’s voice, hard and angry. “Get one of the gnomes from the House Sivis outpost here. I need to send a message to Breven d’Deneith in Karrlakton.”

Ashi opened her eyes to the bulk of Khaar Mbar’ost against a twilight sky. A silhouette moved over her. Tariic. She bared her teeth and tried to grab at him, but her arms moved less than a handspan. Ropes cut into her wrists. Tariic held out the Rod of Kings. “Be still!”

The command skittered over the shield of her dragonmark. “Blood in your mouth,” she snarled at him. She raised her head. She was still on the platform before the gates of Khaar Mbar’ost, though the plaza was empty now.

Dagii stood at her feet, standing stiffly in the presence of the lhesh, but his ears flicked a little when he met her eyes and his mouth twitched.

Makka crouched next to him, kneeling, yet at the same time almost straining to stand upright. Ashi recognized the power of the rod and allowed herself a little smile. She looked back up at Tariic. “Where’s Vounn?”

Tariic flicked his ears and gestured to her right with the rod. Ashi turned her head—and caught her breath. Vounn lay rolled onto her side just a few paces away from her. Her eyes were wide and staring, the wound inflicted by the Deneith honor blade gaping and ugly in her belly. The sword itself lay beside her, bright blade still stained with blood.

Pradoor had said “the other one” would live too. Who? Ashi twisted her head to the other side, wondering who else had survived, dreading the possible sight of more friends dead.

Midian’s bright blue eyes stared back at her from a face marked by the fading bruises of a savage beating. Hatred rose like bile in Ashi’s throat.

Tariic crouched down between the two of them. “Now,” he said, “what are we going to say really happened here?”
Raat shan gath 'kal dor.

“The story stops but never ends.”

—Traditional closing of hobgoblin legends.
GLOSSARY

Aguus: The hobgoblin warlord of the Traakuum clan. A contender for the throne of Darguun upon Haruuc’s death.

Aram: see Wrath

Aruget: A hobgoblin warrior in the service of Haruuc, assigned to guard Vounn and Ashi d’Deneith.

atcha: The goblin concept of personal honor, something which is earned and carefully protected. Compare with muut.

ban: Goblin expression of noncommittal agreement, roughly equivalent to “yeah, all right,” or “your funeral.”

Bloody Market, the: The largest market in Rhukaan Draal, the Bloody Market (Khaari Batuuvk in Goblin) is a chaotic mass of tents and stalls in a milling sea of bodies. Because the laws of Rhukaan Draal and Darguun are lax, nearly anything can be found for sale in the market, including slaves.

Breland: One of the original Five Nations of Galifar. Breland is a tolerant country with a keen interest in trade and commerce.

byeshk: A rare metal, hard and dense with a purple sheen.

chaat’oor: Goblin term for any species not native to Khorvaire, especially humans, but with the exception of elves. It is often loosely translated as “defiler.”

Chetiin: A goblin and an elder of the shaarat’khesh. Chetiin carries two daggers sheathed on his forearms, one of which (the dagger named Witness carried on his right arm) is a dangerous “Keeper’s Fang” weapon capable of capturing the soul of a slain enemy.

chib: Goblin for “boss” or “big man.” Used colloquially by goblins outside of Darguun to refer to any taller humanoid, including hobgoblins, humans, and dwarves.


cho: Goblin expression of informal agreement with or acknowledgement of a statement made, roughly equivalent to “yes” or “yeah.”

daashor: A goblin artificer, especially one from the time of the Empire of Dhakaan. The secret knowledge of the daashor has largely vanished, but at one time, they were capable of creating wonders. Most daashor were male.

Daavn: The hobgoblin warlord of the Marhaan clan and an advisor to Tariic.

Dagii: The young hobgoblin warlord of the small but highly honored Mur Talaan clan.

dar: Goblin for “the people.” It is the ancient collective term for the hobgoblin, goblin, and bugbear races.
**Darguul**: A goblin inhabitant of Darguun. Non-goblins living in Darguun are not generally recognized as citizens.

**Darguun**: The nation of goblins, founded in 969 YK by the hobgoblin warlord Haruuc of the Rhukaan Taash clan in a swift campaign that seized territory held at the time by the human nations of Cyre and Breland. Darguun was officially recognized as a sovereign nation in the Treaty of Thronehold in 996 YK. Translated, it means “Land of the People.”

**Dark Six, the**: Deities representing the violent and threatening aspects of the world, typically shunned in more civilized nations, but widely worshipped in Darguun. Once numbered among the Lords of the Sovereign Host, myth holds that they were cast out for their evil ways. The Six are: the Devourer (god of the ocean and destruction), the Fury (god of violence and madness), the Keeper (god of death and decay), the Mockery (god of treachery and murder), the Shadow (god of dark magic), and the Traveler (god of deception and change).

**Davandi, Midian Mit**: A gnome, a field researcher of the Library of Korranberg with a specialty in the history of the Empire of Dhakaan.

**d’Deneith, Ashi**: A former hunter of the Bonetree Clan of the Shadow Marches, Ashi turned her back on the clan after discovering her descent from House Deneith. She bears the Siberys Mark of Sentinel, a powerful dragonmark that patterns her entire body.

**d’Deneith, Vounn**: A dragonmarked heir of House Deneith, Vounn is a skilled diplomat with a distinguished career serving as the liaison between Deneith and its most important clients. She holds the title of Lady Seneschal, indicating her special responsibilities within the House.

**Deneith, House**: A dragonmarked house bearing the Mark of Sentinel. House Deneith operates services offering various forms of protection, including the mercenary companies of the Blademarks and the law enforcement services of the Sentinel Marshals.

**Desperate Times, The**: The dark ages of chaos after the fall of the Empire of Dhakaan. Particularly conservative members of the Dhakaani Clans might argue that the Desperate Times extend into the present, but most goblin historians agree that the Desperate Times ended with the domination of Khorvaire by humans, somewhere between 3,000 years (when the human Karrn the Conqueror established Karrnath) and 2,000 years (when Galifar I united the Five Nations in a single kingdom) before the present.

**Dhakaan**: An epithet claimed or given by popular acclaim among the Dhakaani clans to indicate allegiance with the ancient Empire of Dhakaan.

**Dhakaani Clans**: Clans of goblins, primarily hobgoblins but incorporating other goblin races, devoted to keeping alive the glories of the Empire of Dhakaan. Although they claim territory in the mountains of Darguun, they do not pledge allegiance to Lhesh Haruuc, nor do they hold any particular alliance among themselves. The Dhakaani Clans include the Kech Draguus, the Kech Nasaar, the Kech Shaarat, the Kech Uul, and the Kech Volaar.

**Dhakaani Empire**: see Empire of Dhakaan.

**d’Orien, Pater**: A dragonmarked heir of House Orien, Pater is Viceroy of his House in Darguun, in charge of his House’s operations in the country.

**duur’kala**: Among the Dhakaani Clans, particularly the Kech Volaar, duur’kala preserve the history and knowledge of past ages. Their music is the most common form of magic among the clans. Duur’kala means “dirge singers.” Because the magic manifests mostly in females, duur’kala are often called “daughters of the dirge” and elders are referred to as “mothers of the dirge.”

**Ekhaas**: A hobgoblin woman and a duur’kala of the Kech Volaar.

**Empire of Dhakaan**: An ancient empire ruled by hobgoblins, the Empire of Dhakaan stretched across southern Khorvaire millennia before the arrival of humans. Dhakaan was weakened by the Daelkyr War and collapsed
about six thousand years before the present.

**Esmyssa Entar ir’Korran**: Ambassador from the gnomes of Zilargo to the court of Khaar Mbar’ost.

**gaa’ma**: Goblin pejorative term for changelings. Literally translated, it means “wax babies.”

**gaanu duur**: “Daughter of the dirge,” an alternative term for duur’kala.

**gaa’taat**: A highly insulting Goblin term suggesting that someone is less than a child.

**Garaad**: The hobgoblin warlord of the Vanish Kai clan. A contender for the throne of Darguun upon Haruuc’s death.

**Gan’duur**: “Eaters of Sorrow,” a rebel clan of the Ghaal’dar, now crushed and disbanded. Their banner was yellow with the crest of a snarling dog.

**Gathering Stone, the**: The primary stronghold of House Deneith in Darguun, located at a major crossroad two days’ ride from Rhukaan Draal.

**Geth**: A shifter veteran of the Last War, rediscovering his worth after fleeing from deeds done in the past. He wields a great gauntlet, a magewrought gauntlet that is both shield and weapon, and the ancient Dhakaani blade named Wrath.

**ghaal**: Goblin for “mighty,” with specific connotations of prowess in battle.

**Ghaal River**: A mighty river in central Darguun. It is navigable from its mouth at Kraken Bay to the city of Rhukaan Draal, almost two-thirds of its length. Above Rhukaan Draal, the first of several cataracts breaks the river into dangerous stretches of white water.

**ghaal’dar**: The ancient name for the hobgoblin race, it means “mighty people.” In the present time, Ghaal’dar is also the name of the loose confederacy of goblin clans living in the lowlands of Darguun, especially in the broad area around the Ghaal River. Notable Ghaal’dar clans include the Gan’duur (“Eaters of Sorrow”), the Gantii Vus (“Hungry Flame”), the Ja’aram (“Bright Anger”), the Mur Talaan (“Horned Shoulders”), the Rhukaan Taash (“Razor Crown”), the Marhaan, the Ghaal Sehn, and the Pin Galaac.

**goblin**: A term that causes much confusion as it applies both to the small-statured goblin race and to the three related races of goblins, hobgoblins, and bugbears (as well as other less well-known races). The longstanding tradition of referring to the related races by the term “goblinoid” has been abandoned by forward-thinking scholars of Wynarn and Morgrave Universities, an attitude that is slowly spreading among the general population.

**golin**: Goblin for “quick.” Among hobgoblins and bugbears, it refers only to speed, but goblins use it to refer to intelligence as well.

**golin’dar**: The ancient name for the goblin race, it means “quick people.”

**guul**: Goblin for “strong.”

**guul’dar**: The ancient name for the bugbear race, it means “strong people.”

**Guulen**: See Rod of Kings.

**Haruuc**: Properly Lhesh Haruuc Shaarat’kor (“High Warlord Haruuc of the Red Blade”), founder of Darguun. As a charismatic young warlord serving as a mercenary of House Deneith, Haruuc saw an opportunity to bring the goblin races out from under the shadow of humans and give them a homeland. Finding allies in other warlords of the Ghaal’dar, Haruuc hatched a plan to turn on the nations that employed Deneith’s goblin mercenaries and seize power for himself. His plan culminated in a lightning-swift conquest of southern Cyre (including areas claimed at the time by Breland) in the summer of 969 YK and the subsequent founding of
Darguun. Assassinated on 8 Sypheros, 999 YK.

**Iizan:** The hobgoblin warlord of the wealthy Ghaal Sehn clan. A contender for the throne of Darguun upon Haruuc’s death.

**Itaai!** A Goblin war-command equivalent to “Attack!”

**Karrlaktion:** A city in Karrnath, ancient center of power of House Deneith. Warlords manifesting the Mark of Sentinel ruled in the area before the founding of Karrnath.

**Karrnath:** One of the original Five Nations of Galifar. Karrnath is a cold, grim land whose people are renowned for their martial prowess.

**Kech Volaar:** One of the smallest, but most influential of the Dhakaani Clans, the Kech Volaar devotes itself to gathering and preserving the history, knowledge, and artifacts of the Empire of Dhakaan. Duur’kala form a powerful class among them and their stronghold of Volaar Draal is known to contain deep vaults filled with the wonders of ages past.

**Keraal:** Former warlord of the Gan’duur. Once a rebel against Haruuc’s rule, he was defeated by Dagii of Mur Talaan.

**Khaar Mbar’ost:** Lhesh Haruuc’s fortress in the heart of Rhukaan Draal, constructed for him by House Cannith. Its name means literally “blood-colored fortified dwelling,” an allusion to the reddish stone facing used in its construction.

**Khaavolaar!** A Goblin curse of frustration or amazement. It is a contraction of “Khaar volaar” or “blood of the word.”

**Ko:** A changeling who attempted to kidnap Vounn d’Deneith by taking the place of one of her guards.

**Koolt:** A dynasty of the early Dhakaani Empire.

**Korluaat:** A highly alcoholic beverage favored by the hobgoblin warriors of Darguun (literally “hero’s blood”).

**Krakuul:** A hobgoblin warrior in the service of Haruuc, assigned to guard Vounn and Ashi d’Deneith.

**Kuun:** Surname of a line of heroes of the Dhakaani Empire, first carried by the warlord Duulan, a friend of Taruzh. Tales of the name of Kuun are closely tied to Aram, the legendary Sword of Heroes.

**Lhesh:** Goblin for “high warlord.” In the time of the Dhakaani Empire, a lhesh was a general given command of the empire’s armies for a set period of time. In modern times, Haruuc has adopted the term as the title of the ruler of Darguun.

**Lhevket:** “Skilled warlord,” the third highest formal rank in Darguun’s army. A lhevket-rhu is outranked only by a lhevket (“elder warlord”) or the lhesh.

**Lhikor:** “Warblade,” a warrior commanding a squad in Darguun’s army.

**Library of Korranberg, the:** The greatest repository of knowledge in Khorvaire and a central institution of life in Zilargo—some historians maintain that Zilargo’s unique form of government and internal security were modelled on the organization of the Library.

**Maabet!** An extremely ancient Goblin curse word still in use today. There is no known translation.
magebred: Any animal magically bred for enhanced characteristics (greater speed and endurance, for example), usually by House Vadalis.

Makka: Formerly the chief a tribe of bugbears living in the southern Seawall Mountains, now a rogue hunter looking for revenge.

Marguul: The bugbear tribes that dwell in the highlands of the Seawall Mountains in the west of Darguun. Paying only lip service at best to Haruuc’s authority, they live in independent, often hostile tribes.

Marrow: A worg from a pack allied with the taarka’khesh, but assisting Chetiin. Worgs resemble wolves the size of ponies, but are far more intelligent. They speak their own language and can understand others.

mazo: Goblin affirmative, stronger than “yes” and used specifically when discussing plans or acknowledging orders.

Mournland, the: A common name for the wasteland that was once Cyre, devastated by the unnatural disaster known as the Mourning. The borders of the Mournland are marked by dense banks of gray mist, behind which lurk dangerous monsters and phenomena. The Mournland forms more than half of Darguun’s eastern border.

Munta the Gray: The aged hobgoblin warlord of the powerful Gantii Vus clan.

muu’kron: An ancient goblin symbol of the Dark Six consisting of six strings knotted together and bearing small talismans representing the dark gods. Philosophers note that when spread out flat, the muu’kron form the Hexagram that is the more common symbol of the Dark Six.

muut: The goblin concept of ordinary honor or duty, something is gained by doing one’s job properly. Compare with atcha.

noon: A starchy grain, most often pressed into compact balls, that is a staple of the traditional goblin diet and that still forms an important part of goblin cuisine.

Orien, House: A dragonmarked house bearing the Mark of Passage. House Orien operates services related to travel, shipping and communication, including a postal service and the Lightning Rail. Orien also maintains the network of trade roads across Khorvaire.

Paatcha!: An offer of honor through admiration, spoken as a compliment or delivered as an imperative to troops. Literally “to offer honor.”

Pradoor: An elderly goblin priestess of the Dark Six. Pradoor is blind but claims to be guided by the Six. Her patron god is the Devourer.


Raat shi anaa: “The story continues.” The traditional opening to hobgoblin legends.

Razu: An old hobgoblin woman, the mistress of rituals in Khaar Mbar’ost.

Rhukaan Draal: The capital city of Darguun (literally “Crown city”), founded by Lhesh Haruuc on the site of a former Cyran frontier town to serve as a neutral territory where all Ghaal’dar clans would be equal. Over the course of thirty years, it has grown into a rough and sprawling city with a population of approximately 80,000.


Riis: a dynasty of the late Dhakaani Empire.

Riis Shaarii’mal: The Three Tearing Wheels, an ancient battle standard of Dhakaan depicting three notched
Rod of Kings, the: Properly known by its Goblin name, Guulen, the Rod of Kings was forged by the legendary Dhakaani dashoor Taruzh during the Daelkyr War and presented to the emperors of Dhakaan. Lost for millennia, it was recovered to serve as a symbol of rulership in Darguun, but bears both a terrible curse and tremendous power.

ruuska’tê: A goblin term of affection, literally “tiger man.”

saa: A casual Goblin greeting. A more formal greeting is saa’atcha, roughly equivalent to “It is an honor to meet you.”

Seawall Mountains: Mountains forming the western and northwestern borders of Darguun, a natural barrier between Darguun and Breland.

Senen Dhakaan: The ambassador of the Kech Volaar to Khaar Mbar’ost, a duur’kala, and Ekhaas’s superior.

Sentinel Tower: The primary stronghold of House Deneith, a massive keep in the city of Karrlakton.

shaarat’khesh: The Silent Blades. See: Silent Clans, the.

shaat’aar: A small sweet bun filled with honey cream. A common Goblin sweet.

shava: One of the most honored goblin traditions, shava is best translated as “sword brother,” someone a warrior trusts with his life. The relationship between shava is exceptionally strong and carries with it significant responsibilities and expectations. Most goblin warriors never even consider taking a shava.

Shadow Marches, the: A distant wilderness of marshes, home to tribes of orcs and savage humans.

Silent Clans, the: Although technically numbered among the Dhakaani clans, the two Silent Clans stand apart. They are formed entirely of goblins and are renowned for their stealth: the taarka’khash (“silent wolves”) are scouts, while the shaarat’khesh (“silent blades”) are spies and assassins. By ancient tradition, the Silent Clans do not take sides in any conflict, instead acting as mercenaries of complete impartiality and reliability.

Six Kings, the: An allusion to the six hobgoblin warlords brought together by Jhazaal Dhakaan approximately 17,000 years before the present to found the Empire of Dhakaan.

Sovereign Host, the: A religion found across much of Khovraire and actively promoted in Darguun by Haruuc as a civilizing influence. The Lords of the Host are Arawai (god of agriculture), Aureon (god of law and knowledge), Balinor (god of beasts and the hunt), Boldrei (god of community and hearth), Dol Arrah (god of honor and sacrifice), Dol Dorn (god of strength at arms), Kol Korran (god of trade and wealth), Olladra (god of good fortune), and Onatar (god of artifice and the forge).

ta muut: The most basic way of saying “thank you” in Goblin, ta muut literally means “you have honor” or more accurately “you do your duty.” Spoken as acknowledgment of a deed performed correctly, it carries no connotation of debt on the part of the speaker. For comparison, see Ya panozhii kita atcha.

taarka’khash: The Silent Wolves. See: Silent Clans, the.

taarka’nui: A goblin term of affection, literally “wolf woman.”

taat: Goblin term for someone of significantly lesser status than the speaker. Derogatory and insulting.

Tariic: A hobgoblin warrior of the Rhukaan Taash clan and nephew of Haruuc. He has a more worldly approach to culture, politics, and economy than more conservative Darguuls. A claimant to the throne after his uncle’s assassination.

Taruuzh: A legendary Dhakaani dashoor, creator of the original binding stones, the grieving trees, and the
sword Wrath. His stronghold, Taruuzh Kraat, was located where Tzaryan Keep now stands in Droaam.

**tying of hair:** A custom among goblin mothers, particularly hobgoblins, of tying distinctive knots in their children’s hair as a luck charm—not, as suggested by scholars of the Library of Korranberg, as a means to distinguish them among crowds of goblin children.

**To hold a sword by the blade:** A goblin expression for being in a risky situation.

**Toh!:** A Goblin warning cry (“Beware!”).

**Torlaac River:** A powerful river of southern Darguun. South of the river, the land rises to become the desolate and dangerous Torlaac Moor.

**Treaty of Thronehold:** Signed in 996 YK, the Treaty of Thronehold marked the end of the Last War. Among its many articles, it formally recognized a number of new nations (including Darguun, Zilargo, and Valenar) and bound all signing nations in a pact of peace.

**Valaes Tairn:** The proper term for the warrior elves of Valenar.

**Valenar:** The lands claimed by the Valenar elves as their rightful territory by virtue of ancient ties to the land dating back to conflicts with the Empire of Dhakaan. Recognized as an independent nation by the Treaty of Thronehold.

**Vanii:** A hobgoblin warrior of the Ja’aram clan and the last of Haruuc’s three shava, slain in battle against the rebellious Gan’duur clan.

**Wrath:** Properly known by its Goblin name, Aram, Wrath is the legendary Sword of Heroes. Forged from byeshk by the legendary Dhakaani dashoor Taruuzh during the Daelkyr War, it was wielded by the hobgoblin heroes of the line of Kuun before being lost in the slaying of the daelkyr lord of Jhegesh Dol. Legend says that Wrath will not bear the touch of a coward. Wrath was recovered from the ghostly fortress of Jhegesh Dol by Geth, who now carries the blade.

**Ya panozhii kita atcha:** The most formal form of thanks in Goblin. Translated, it means “I owe a debt to your honor.” It shows a deep indebtedness on the part of the speaker and is never used casually. Compare with ta muut.

**Zilargo:** The homeland of the gnomes, Zilargo has long pursued a diplomatic policy of neutrality and conciliation. Recognized as an independent nation by the Treaty of Thronehold.
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"...he weaves a tale that adds depth and breadth to the Forgotten Realms history."
—Grasping for the Wind, on Stardey
ABOUT THE AUTHOR


Don lives in Toronto, surrounded by gadgets, spice jars, and too many books. You can find him online at www.dbassingthwaite.com.