Thorn of Breland
survived her last mission in Droaam, thanks in part to mysterious new talents she gained.

Thorn ran a finger across her false mark. “Yesterday, Fileon asked me to tell him about the first time I killed someone with my aberrant dragonmark.”

And your answer appeared to satisfy him, Steel said. Of course, the mark you’ve been given doesn’t actually kill. The worst outcome I can imagine is that he will believe that you’re holding back.

But much as she’d prefer to chalk those skills up to the unpredictability of the monster nation, they’re still aiding her here in Sharn.

Even if you were somehow responsible, you have no mark of your own—and if you have no mark, it logically follows that you have no dragonmark.

“And are you so certain that I don’t have a mark?” She touched the dragonshard embedded at the base of her neck. “What about this? Could there be power within it?”

Could it be that Thorn, Dark Lantern of Breland, bears an aberrant dragonmark?
SON OF KHYBER
THORN OF IRELAND

KEITH BAKER
To Christopher Osborn, for his friendship and understanding. And to everyone who has helped to make Eberron a reality.
CHAPTER ONE

Callestan

Lharion 15, 999 YK

Rain mingled with blood on the floor of the alley, pooling around the corpse and the hatchet that lay next to his outstretched hand. Thorn pulled her blade free from the dwarf’s body and searched the walls around her for some avenue of escape. Nothing. The walls of the dead-end street were high, smooth, and slick with rain. The nearest window was far beyond her reach. And her enemies had already found her.

“Well. This is unfortunate.” The man paused in the mouth of the alley, considering the scene before him. His teeth flashed in the dim light of the cold fire torches. “Until now you were a simple cutpurse, dipping your fingers into our territory. A lesson was called for, certainly, but you would have survived it. Now … well, I can’t let you walk away from this.”

“He attacked me,” Thorn said. She held Steel in a loose grip, ready to throw the dagger. “I didn’t want this.”

“You can’t expect me to believe that.” The man was too well dressed for this district—his cloak enchanted to repel the rain, and beneath the cloak a shimmering glamerweave. He carried no weapons that Thorn could see. No one would come into Callestan without a weapon. From what Thorn had heard, the infants teethed on knives. That this man had no weapon meant that he had no need of one.

“You knew exactly what you were doing,” the man said. “I’m told you took four purses in the market, and a locket from a lady’s neck. All that and no one the wiser. No one except my man, of course. I know you’re not from Sharn, but you don’t develop such skills without learning how things work in the big city. We’ve made the arrangements with the watch. You make your arrangements with us. Everyone gets a taste, and everyone’s happy.”

Not yet, Steel whispered in Thorn’s mind. Keep him talking.

“I’ll give you the coins,” Thorn said. “Just let me keep the necklace. I’ve got to get something for this.”

The man laughed. “My dear, what backwater are you from? You’ve killed one of my men. It’s not a question of you keeping that trinket you stole. It’s whether we start by breaking your neck or begin at your ankles and work our way up.”

“You keep saying we,” Thorn said. “I just see you. And him, of course.” She prodded the dwarf’s body with her toe.

“Allow me to clarify.”

He snapped his fingers, and an ogre moved into the alley. Half again as tall as the man, the brute was a wall of muscle clad in black leather. His tiny eyes gleamed down at his prey, and thick, gray lips drew back from yellow fangs.

“Steel?” Thorn said, taking a step back. The back wall was painfully close.

The ogre’s smile widened. “Grogan prefers to work with his hands,” the man said. “He enjoys playing with his food.”

Thorn had actually been speaking to the dagger. Not yet, he repeated.

“We’re running out of time,” she muttered.

The ogre charged. The stench of him assailed Thorn’s keen senses, and as she rolled to the side, she felt the wind from his massive fist.

Thunder rolled through the alley. It was the ogre’s laughter, mocking her as she dodged a second blow. She caught a momentary glimpse of the man standing behind the brute, not even bothering to assist his enforcer. She had surprised the dead dwarf, but no pickpocket was going to beat this monster.

But Thorn was no mere pickpocket, despite her talent for the work. She was a Dark Lantern of the King’s Citadel, one of the hidden blades of Breland—and she’d already passed up two chances to bring the beast down. This wasn’t the first time she’d faced an ogre. Ducking beneath another swing, she had a clear path to bury her blade in his heart. A swift kick to the back of the knee could send him tumbling to the ground, where she could draw her knife across his throat. But she had a mission, and she’d invested too much time to let it go to waste now.

“Unnh!” His fist slammed into her shoulder. Pain lashed through her arm, and the force of the blow sent her reeling into the wall. For all her skill, Thorn couldn’t dodge the ogre forever. Before she could clear her head, Thorn felt a vise tightening on her injured shoulder—the beast had caught hold of her.
“Done now!” His breath was worse than the pain. He raised his free hand for a finishing blow.  
*The target is present*, Steel whispered. *You know what to do.*

The ogre expected Thorn to pull away from the blow; instead she threw herself into it, putting all of her weight forward. At the same time, she struck the brooch securing her cloak, snapping it open. The beast’s grip tightened around the empty cloak, and his fist swept over her.

Thorn had a clear line to the ogre’s heart. But instead of striking with her blade, she reached out with her left hand, pressing her palm against his chest. Light flared from a bloody pattern of red and black lines around Thorn’s right eye. Pain lashed through her, a burning river that flowed from her eye down to her palm. For a moment the agony consumed the world, blocking out all other thought. And then it burst out of her, pouring into the ogre. As agonizing as it had been for her, Thorn knew it would be far worse for the beast.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

The ogre howled and fell to its knees. Arcs of crimson energy were flaring around his body. “I’m sorry.”

*An excellent performance,* Steel said. The ogre moaned and collapsed. *The tears are a nice touch.*

Thorn hadn’t even noticed her tears. Just a reaction to the pain, she told herself. She’d done worse than this. The ogre wasn’t even dead. But Steel was right; the tears served the needs of the moment. Thorn dropped to her knees beside the ogre, taking a deep, sobbing breath as she leaned against its quivering chest. “Not again,” she murmured.

The man was stunned by the defeat of his champion. “What have you done?” he cried.

He traced symbols in the air. Thorn’s fingers tightened around her dagger as arcane energy crackled and burned around his hands. But even as the man opened his mouth to speak a word of power, he stiffened. Closing his mouth, he carefully lowered his hands to his sides.

“Better.” The new voice was raspy and dry, the rustling of sand against parchment. “Understand now. The blade against your spine is the lesser threat. Raise your hand against me, and your fingers will fall from it. Seek to invoke power, and you will choke on your tongue. I have placed my mark upon you, and your very blood obeys my will. Tell me this is understood.”

Thorn remained pressed against the unconscious ogre, convulsing with forced sobs. But from the corner of her eye, she could see that the wizard’s face had paled and shone with sweat. He nodded sharply, his hands pressed against his hips.

*Tell me.* The unseen man spoke quietly, yet his sandpaper voice seemed to fill the alley. “Open your mouth and speak, praying that I do not turn your tongue against you.”

“I understand,” the wizard stammered.

*Then understand further. You live only to carry this message. You and yours are never to threaten one of my kin. I do not care about her trespasses against you, nor the number of knives you command. You do not touch my kindred.* Tell me this is understood.”

“I didn’t know she was related to you,” the man said. “How could I? She’s new to the city, new, and sheaaaah—”

He cried out in pain, stiffening in response to the unseen torture.

“She wears her blood on her face,” the voice said. “You should have known. Never threaten my kin. *Tell me this is understood.*”

“I understand!” the wizard cried, dropping to the pavement.

“Then go. And know this: when I see you again, your heart shall fail you.”

The wizard staggered to his feet. Blood and filthy water had soaked his fine robes, and he fled from Thorn’s peripheral vision. As the sound of his passage faded, she heard the stranger approach, splashing through the pools of rain. Her instincts urged her to rise to her feet, to at least face this possible foe. But she had a job to do, and she kept her head pressed against the ogre.

She felt a hand against her shoulder—a gentle touch, the brush of a child’s fingers. She shivered.

“Rise, sister.” The voice was still harsh, but there was gentleness beneath it. “This struggle is ended.”

Thorn glanced up and finally saw her savior. He was a halfling, not even four feet tall, and he looked more like a beggar than a sorcerer. He wore a cloak and cowl of gray wool spattered with mud and held together by a host of patches. From what she could see of his face, his skin was dark and deeply lined; he was one of the oldest halflings she’d ever seen.

She brushed his hand away, using as much force as she felt she could without hurting the old man. “Don’t touch me!” she said. “You don’t understand. I can’t control it—”

He grabbed her wrist, holding it with surprising strength. “This is understood,” he said. “We share blood, you and I. You cannot hurt me.”
“What are you talking about? We’re not even the same race. How could we be related? What do you want from me?”

The halfling released her wrist and drew his tattered cloak back to reveal his left arm. It was a withered husk, swathed against his chest. His hand was clenched in a tight fist, but she could see the brilliant red and black markings that covered the skin. For a moment the crimson lines glowed in the shadows, then the light faded.

“We share blood. And I have come to take you home.”

*Well done,* Steel whispered as Thorn rose to her feet. The first part of her mission was complete.
**Chapter Two**

* * *

**Lower Dura**

*Lharvion 15, 999 YK*

The halfling led Thorn through a maze of alleyways and winding stairs. For an old man and a cripple, he moved with a quick, sure step, even when scaling rain-slicked stone.

“Where are you taking me?” Thorn asked. The little man didn’t look back. “The path to your new home is a long one, and it is not yet the time for revelation.”

Thorn stopped beneath a torn awning, rainwater dripping around her. “No, I think this is exactly the time for revelations.”

The little man glanced back at her; he slowed his pace but kept walking. “Stay where you stand, if that is your wish. We shall never meet again, and you shall never know the truth that lies within your blood. Is that your desire?”

Thorn paused for a moment, before moving to join the withered halfling. “If this is some sort of trick, I will kill you,” she said.

The old man smiled.

They climbed the steps in silence. A pair of planks half-hid a door with the seal of condemnation set into the wood. The halfling drew out a key on a light chain, opened the door, and slipped inside. Thorn squeezed through the gap in the plank barricade and followed the little man into the shadows.

The door closed behind her. There were no windows, and the room was fully dark. But Thorn could see the halfling perfectly, and she could smell the oil in the lamp he was struggling with. Two months ago, she’d thought that the ring she wore on her left hand sharpened her senses, allowing her eyes to pierce the deepest gloom. So much had changed over those last two months … and she still had more questions than answers. In any case, the halfling had no knowledge of her supernatural senses; and so she kept still, playing the part of the blind woman as he struggled with the lamp.

The lantern burst to life, crackling and sputtering. A thin mattress was set across a small table, with a chamber pot to one side. Shelves held salted meat and an assortment of weaponry. A safehouse, and not much of one.

Thorn drew Steel. “I don’t know what you’re playing at with your talk of a new home. I don’t know who you are. But I assure you, I’m not about to start a twisted little family with you here.”

The dry chuckle echoed off the walls. “Calm, sister. We are family already. And this is a place of trial, not a destination.”

Thorn kept her blade leveled at the halfling. “Tell me what this is all about.”

“No. I am not the one on trial here, and I need say nothing.”

“Trial?” Thorn said.

“I know what you are, and what you have been … Lantern Thorn.”

There it was. The success of her mission—and possibly, the length of her life—depended on these next few moments. “How do you know that name?”

“Do you deny that it is yours? That you are an agent of the King’s Citadel, one of the deadly eyes of the king?”

Thorn looked away. “I was. For years. Not anymore.”

“Yes … so I have heard.” He gestured at the mattress on the floor. “Put away your blade. Sit. There are many questions you must answer, if you are to earn a place in our family.”

“Family …” Thorn echoed. “You’re Tarkanan, aren’t you?”

The halfling smiled slightly, but Thorn could feel the intensity of his gaze. “Yes. I am Fileon, of the House Tarkanan. Were you looking for us?”

She had been. And she’d been watching this Fileon these last few days, even as he’d been shadowing and stalking her. But she needed him to believe otherwise, to trust her. I’m exhausted, she thought. Afraid. Betrayed. She embraced these feelings and let them flow through her voice and into her posture.

“No,” she said. “I was running. I just wanted to find a place to hide. And everyone knows that the towers of Sharn cast long shadows.”

“Then you are fortunate to have caught my eye, sister.” He ran his hand along his withered arm. “And I have
never been one to trust in luck. Put away your blade, and tell me of the one you killed.”

Careful, Steel told her. *His touch can kill. If he suspects you, this could be a ploy.*

Thorn was all too aware of the danger. Steel had worked with dozens of Lanterns over the course of the past century, and his advice to her was often annoyingly patronizing. This could be a trick, but it was a chance she’d have to take. Keeping her eyes fixed on Fileon’s, she slowly sheathed her blade. “I’ve killed many.”

“You know the one I mean,” Fileon said. “Your first true kill, slain with the power in your blood. The one whose death drove you from your life as a Lantern, changed you from a trusted servant of the king to a common cutpurse in the slums of Sharn. How did he die, your first kill? A helping hand, as you reached out in the heat of battle? Or was he your partner in more ways than one, slain in the height of your passion?”

“Damn you to Dolurrh,” Thorn growled. She let her fingers rest on Steel’s hilt but left the weapon sheathed.

“I am no stranger to the realm of the dead.” The halfling drew back his cloak, exposing his withered arm. “Born to House Jorasco, I was taught to preserve life. I studied the healing arts, learned the seven signs of grayroot fever and three ways to prevent infection in the deepest of injuries. I dreamed of the day that the mark of healing would appear on my skin, when the power of life itself would flow through my blood.”

Thorn said nothing.

“There is power in my blood,” Fileon said, “but it is no force of life. My first was a soldier. He was dying, but I knew strength remained within him. I fought the healer’s battle, trying to pull him back from Dolurrh’s door by will alone. I pounded on his chest and then pain tore through me, as if I had thrust my arm into the fire.”

Fileon brushed his fingers across his maimed limb, and for a moment the lines of his aberrant mark burned with a baleful light. Then it faded.

“Days passed before I awoke. My mother was there at my bedside, and she told me the truth of my blood. My father was not the man I knew. He was an heir of House Ghallanda, and it was the mingling of their marks that set this seed within me. She sobbed on the bed beside me, begging my forgiveness, and when I reached out to touch her —”

“No,” Thorn whispered.

“Yes. I was driven from the house, and I fled to the wilds. I could not bring myself to take my own life, but I couldn’t trust myself around the living. I spent years alone in the plains, hunting with no weapon save my deadly touch. Then a woman found me and showed me that I was not a monster. That I could control this gift. That I need not be alone.”

Thorn touched the mark surrounding her right eye, the twisted red lines mirroring the designs on Fileon’s withered arm. “You mean—”

“No,” Thorn whispered.

“Yes. We can help you. We can show you that this power is a blessing, not a curse. But there is much I would know before I will take you to our great hall. Surely you are carrying weapons and tools, remnants of your last mission for the Citadel. Remove each article of clothing and each object of value that you possess. Place it on the floor and tell me its function.”

It was a strange mirror of the way her missions typically began, with the Citadel quartermaster cataloguing and demonstrating her equipment. Now it was her turn to sort through her tools.

“Intrusion.” She had dozens of picks and similar tools concealed in her cloak and various pouches. She spread her cloak on the floor and laid the collection on top of it. Skeleton keys, wires for threading a simple lock, powders and stranger substances needed to detect and bypass magical wards.

The halfling smiled. “Good. Such skills will prove useful in the days to come. I will need to evaluate you further. But continue. What else do you carry?”

“Arcana.” A few more objects from hidden pouches. Spiders in tiny vials, scraps of wool, other items that were seemingly useless but played a vital role in performing various spells.

Fileon studied each object. “The spider’s walk will prove most useful. Invisibility… disguise … What about levitation?”

Thorn shook her head.

“A pity. Continue.”

“Concealed defense,” she said, holding up the silver bracelets she’d been wearing. She clicked them together, and the metal shifted and unfolded, each bracelet expanding into a vambrace of blackened mithral that covered most of a forearm. “Spellforged for enhanced durability and an increase in reaction time.”

Fileon nodded as she returned the bracers to their smaller size. “Continue.”

She held a bracelet in her left hand. She concentrated, and the silver band vanished. “There’s an extraplanar
pocket bound to each glove,” she explained. With a thought, she called the bracelet back. “Each one is capable of holding a single object at a time.”

“And what do you have within your right glove?” he asked.

He’s a sharp one, she thought. Setting the bracelets down, she brought her hands together, bracing herself for the weight of the weapon she called forth. It was an axe, with a haft of gnarled darkwood and deadly metal on either end. The axehead was a broad, curved blade, nicked and scarred from generations of conflict. The other end bore a double-edged spearhead. It was a brutal tool, the weapon of a butcher.

Fileon raised an eyebrow. “Strange design. And this is the work of the Citadel?”

“No. It’s called a myrnaxe, forged by the gnolls of Droaam. A trophy from a previous mission.” She set it on the floor, running a finger along the edge of the spearhead. “The lower blade is alloyed with silver and byeshk—there’re a lot of strange creatures in Droaam, creatures who can only be harmed by such metals.” The axe had been a gift from a mercenary warrior after she’d saved his life, and the silver spear had saved her when she’d been hunted by werewolves.

“Yes. A useful tool, to be certain. A thing one might use when fighting a massive foe. An ogre, perhaps.”

Dolurhh! He was sharp. Thorn hadn’t used the axe in that battle precisely because she’d known Fileon was watching—and she needed him to see her use her aberrant mark. “I suppose. I carry it for the silver, but I’m not really comfortable with the weight. I prefer a knife.”

“Then show me the blades you carry,” he said.

There were six of them. Three were balanced for throwing. One was a tiny knife, only useful if poison was employed. The fifth was a simple battle blade. And then there was Steel. Fileon’s eyes lit up when he saw the dagger, and he picked it up to study it more closely.

That was hardly surprising. Steel was certainly distinctive. Forged from blackened metal, he had a crimson circle inlaid on his pommel, and a red furrow running down the center of the dark blade.

Fileon glanced over at her. “A fine weapon. Do you know its name?”

“Name?”

“This is an assassin’s blade, from Savean’s forge. It has been a long time since I’ve held one, but it is not a thing you forget. So do you not know its name? How then did you come by it?”

Savean’s forge? The name meant nothing to her—and Steel had never spoken of his origins.

She’d taken too long to respond. “You try my patience, sister. I warn you, should I deem you an enemy, you will not leave this place alive.” The mark along Fileon’s arm burned with eldritch fire. “There is power in you, but I have lived with this darkness for decades, and you cannot stand against me. Now tell me: where did you get this blade?”

“She was my mentor. My guide.” My love, she thought, though she didn’t speak it aloud. “He taught me everything I know. And I killed him.” It was a lie; Steel had been given to her by her handler Zane, on her first mission after Lharen’s death. But it was close enough to the truth for her to draw on the emotion, reliving the pain and loss—and she saw Fileon respond to it.

“Your first kill.”

“Yes. The mission … it was bad. We lost the rest of the team. I was angry. Afraid. We were arguing, and I seized his wrist. I still hear that cry in my nightmares, see his face as he died.”

Fileon nodded, watching and waiting.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” Thorn said. “I still hear that cry in my nightmares, see his face as he died.”

Fileon nodded, watching and waiting.

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Fileon nodded, watching and waiting.
lost my arm. But yours is the path of madness. If you cannot master this pain, it will destroy you.”

Lovely, Thorn thought. Thanks for mentioning that, Zane. Her living tattoo was designed using the memories of a man who carried a true aberrant dragonmark, and according to Zane and Steel, the pain Thorn felt when she used it was the same as the true heir. Then again, Thorn had been living with pain ever since Far Passage.

“You won’t take the blade from me,” she said. “It’s all I have left of him. I won’t let it go.”

Fileon chuckled and set the pouch on the floor. “Have no fear, sister. It is my task to learn what you possess, nothing more. And take solace—you cannot be blamed for your first kill. You could not have known the power within you. You are innocent of that first death. The second and third—those are something different. But enough of this. Let me look at you. Remove your clothing and sit on the bed.”

She took a step back. “What?”

“Remove your clothing, child. I must study your flesh.”

Thorn shook her head. “My mark is on my face, and that’s all you need to see. I’m no Forgelight whore.”

The halfling laughed, but there was little humor in it. “Oh, sister, the fires of my passion burned out long ago. But whatever I have become, I am a healer still. You may bear your blessing on your face, but our marks are a heavy burden, and they can touch the mind and body in many ways.” He glanced meaningfully at his arm, then back at her. “You have spoken of the agony you feel when you use your gift. I would know the nature of it. It is possible I can ease your pain and prevent it from spreading.”

Thorn hesitated. It was a reasonable request, but under the circumstances full cooperation would be more suspicious than this resistance. She met his gaze for a moment, then pulled off a glove.

“Lie on your back, sister,” he said when she was done undressing. “Let me look at you.”

Surely he would expect Thorn to be uncomfortable with the situation, so she didn’t worry too much about him sensing her unease. But it wasn’t any modesty that troubled her as the crippled halfling ran his fingers along her skin. This was the ultimate test, and if Fileon’s powers were as great as he claimed, her life depended on the answer. Everything she’d said so far had been a lie—but the mark around her eye was the greatest lie of all. Zane had promised her it would hold up to any examination. But he wasn’t the one in the condemned building with the deadly hand of the halfling tracing the pattern on her face.

“Intriguing,” he said. “I’ve never seen lines quite like this before. But that is the nature of our gifts, what sets us aside from the Twelve. No two marks are exactly alike. Now turn over and lie down on your stomach.”

This would be the second challenge. Thorn did as he asked and heard a sharp intake of breath as Fileon looked at her.

Two shards of crystal were embedded in Thorn’s back. A deep purple Khyber dragonshard emerged at the top of her spine, while a rosy Eberron dragonshard protruded from the base. Fileon ran his finger around each shard.

“Is there pain?”

“Yes,” she said. There was no reason to deny it. The rosy shard gave her less trouble, but the shard in her neck was a constant torment, a dull pain that had become a part of her life.

“Of course,” he said. There was something in his voice that troubled her. He sounded pleased, as if he’d been expecting to find the shards. “How did this occur?”

“A mission. We were sent into one of the dragon-shard repositories of House Tharashk. I’ve never seen so many jewels. But we underestimated the wards. It was Mayne who triggered them. And suddenly this whirlwind rose up—a living storm of dragon-shards. It shredded Mayne. I was already running when it hit me. Lharen saved me, got me out alive. They removed most of the shards. But these two … they say that they’ve bonded with the nerves. They’d cripple me if they were removed.”

The story was a lie, but not far from the truth—even if it was Lharen who’d died, and Mayne who’d saved her. The stones were an old injury, not some secret weapon. Fileon ran a finger around the lower shard, surely noticing the many small scars on her back. Finally he stepped down from the stool.

“Most interesting,” he said. “But I see no cause for concern. Get dressed.”

“So we’re done?”

“We’ve yet to begin, Sister Thorn.” He smiled, and it was as cold and sharp as any blade. “You must learn to control your gift, and quickly. The one I serve has need of you. But it is my task to make sure you are ready for the challenges that lie ahead. And I make no promise that you will survive that experience.”

“I’m used to long odds,” she said. “If you can free me from this curse, I’ll do whatever you want.”

“There is no freedom for us, sister.” The halfling rubbed his withered arm. “But follow me, and you will learn what power is. Come. Destiny awaits.”
CHAPTER THREE

Dragon Towers

Lharvion 15, 999 YK

It seems the life of the aberrant isn’t all bad, Thorn thought. Sure, there’s the fear and prejudice. Possible madness and disfigurement. But for a bed like this, it just might be worth it.

She stretched, enjoying the sensation of silk against her skin. A flask of Zil brandy had helped to dull the throbbing pain of the shard in her neck. She could still feel the shard burning, but the drink put a comforting distance between her and the pain.

Fileon had brought her to the manor in the Dragon Towers district of Sharn. Thorn had spent the last week on the streets, living in alleys and living on scraps and salvage. A warm meal and strong drink were blessings, and it had been years since she’d slept in a bed to match this one. The private chamber was a pleasant surprise, but it confirmed the fears Zane had raised in her mission briefing. House Tarkanan was on the move.

The King’s Citadel of Breland had been monitoring the house since it first appeared and carved out a bloody niche in the underworld of Sharn. So far, it was just another criminal guild, and organized crime was a part of life, especially in the City of Towers. Now the Twelve claimed that the Tarkanans were involved in a plot that threatened dragonmarked houses and nations alike. True or not, the aberrant house were up to something. The Citadel had a rough idea of just how many members House Tarkanan had in Sharn, and if this data was remotely accurate, the house had moved its primary base of operations. Thorn expected she’d be sharing a room with half a dozen Tarkan soldiers, but she’d barely seen that many in her brief tour of the manor.

Following dinner, Fileon had brought her to her quarters and instructed her to rest. “Tomorrow you will be tested,” he told her. “Muster what strength you possess.”

She’d tested the door and found it locked. Nothing she couldn’t handle, but there was no need to risk raising suspicions. She had to gain Fileon’s trust so he would lead her to the true heart of the house.

So rest it was. Lying back against down pillows, she let her thoughts drift. The shard in her neck continued to burn, a dull beacon of pain that faded as she fell asleep.

Thorn dreamed …

The guard never heard Thorn’s approach. She clapped her hand over his mouth and drew her blade across his throat. He struggled wildly, but his strength quickly faded as the blood poured from his neck, and within seconds he was still. Thorn dragged his body behind one of the many crates scattered around the room. She pulled a cleansing token from her cloak and dashed it to the ground; it evaporated in a silent, iridescent burst that wiped the blood from the floor. Thorn took the wand that had fallen from the guard’s hand and tucked it into her belt. No trace remained of the death.

Secure, she thought.

Let’s go, Mayne’s voice returned.

Two shadows slipped out from behind the crates and joined her. Mayne and Lharen, her partners. It was Lharen’s magic that linked their thoughts. Mayne was their muscle, when it was required. So far, this job had taken more finesse than force. Whatever Minister Adal was developing here, he’d sunk a great deal of resources into protecting it. The mystical wards were lethal and well hidden. And the guards were surely members of the elite Knights Arcane, armed with powerful wands in addition to their own skills with sword and spell. The least of them could fill a room with flame with just five words. When facing such enemies, stealth and speed were the only options. Thorn and her companions couldn’t give these enemies time to bring magic to bear.

The target’s just ahead. Mayne’s thoughts pressed into her mind, calm and steady. Just ahead, beyond a narrow corridor. Two guards in the chamber.

If the information is good, Thorn replied.

Mayne shrugged.

Thorn slid along the nearest crate, peering carefully around the edge. She could see the passage, and it was narrow indeed. Barely wide enough to walk through, let alone swing a sword. She fixed her eyes on a point at the very center of the entrance. Watch and wait.
As she’d expected, there was a faint ripple, something an untrained eye might dismiss as a trick of the imagination. Thorn knew better. She drew a lens from a belt pouch and stared through the glass at the empty space; then she rotated the lens, looking through the other side.

*An alarm*, she thought. *And the hallway becomes a chokepoint for whatever they can bring to bear.*

*Can you silence it?* Lharen’s thoughts were a comforting presence in Thorn’s mind.

*Given time. But the focal point is inside the corridor. I’d be completely exposed, and with the amount of time it’s likely to take—I’m sure they’d see me.*

*So turn invisible.*

Thorn shook her head. *Not all of us are master sorcerers. I drew on all the energy I could muster to hide our tracks. If this is the end, I think surprise and confusion are our best weapons.* She pointed to the ring on her left hand. *Time to put these to work.*

Lharen nodded. *Night’s shadow.*

As far down the corridor as possible. Mayne, take point and left. I’ll follow. Lharen, stay back. Cover if you can, but we can’t risk you getting caught in the fire.

She could feel Lharen’s reluctance. He hated staying back when she was in danger. But his mystical skills were the key to accomplishing their mission. Thorn and Mayne were expendable, but Lharen needed to reach the target alive.

Mayne caught Thorn’s eye and raised his arm. A rectangle of shimmering energy appeared across his forearm, a shield almost as wide as the passage itself.

Thorn reached out for Lharen with her thoughts. *Now.*

Stepping out from the crates, Lharen swept his hand toward the hallway. “*Mabar asht tol!*” he said, flexing his fingers in an intricate pattern. A bolt of energy flowed from his hand, a narrow column of dark mist that moved with astonishing speed. The murky beam expanded as it moved forward, filling the corridor entirely.

Mayne charged, his shield raised in front of him. Thorn was right behind him.

She stepped into the shadows, and everything went black. But only for a moment. The ring on her finger was enchanted to let her eyes pierce the dark, and even as she pressed forward, her surroundings snapped back into view, painted in stark shades of black and white.

She felt a burst of heat, and Mayne staggered as something struck his shield. But the guards ahead were casting blind. They couldn’t see what was coming.

Mayne slammed into the soldier standing in the archway ahead, knocking him back and to the side. Thorn slipped in behind him. The second knight had raised his wand and was tracking Mayne’s movements, following the sounds of battle. Thorn knocked the wand from his hand, and followed the blow with a quick thrust at his throat. She didn’t expect it to be that easy, and it wasn’t; the soldier was fast and called out a word of shielding the instant his wand slipped from his grasp. Thorn’s dagger flew back from his neck, and it was all she could do to keep hold of it. He made a sharp gesture with his hand. A wind rose in the room, a gale that pounded into Thorn, pushing her back from her foe.

No time to waste. The soldiers were blind, but there was no knowing what alarms or wards they could activate. The knight raised his hand to cast another spell, and Thorn threw her dagger. The blade lanced straight through his outstretched palm, the point driving through his hand and pinning it to his chest. Hardly a lethal blow, but enough to cause him to choke on his spell.

He reached up with his good hand, but Thorn was on him. She drove her elbow into his chest, felt ribs crack, then slammed the heel of her hand against his nose. He fell to his knees, but Thorn couldn’t afford to give him a moment’s respite. Another blow sent him tumbling to the floor. She pulled her dagger free from his maimed hand and made a certain end of him.

An awful cry came from behind her, along with the foul stench of burning flesh and hair. Thorn turned in time to see the second guard collapse, struggling to put out the flames that had engulfed his head.

Lharen stepped out of the tunnel, flexing his fingers. “Arcanix be damned. When it comes to the mystic arts, no one beats a Brelish mage.”

“You mean Mayne?” Mayne said. “So I suppose you could build that?”

There was no question as to what Mayne was talking about. They had come in search of the arcane core, and now it lay before them. It was a massive pillar of twisted metal, pipes of mithral, silver, and adamantine coiled around the darkwood core like steel serpents twisting around the trunk of a tree. Glowing runes covered the exposed wood, and Thorn could feel the magical energies shift in the room as the sigils pulsed and flickered.
“Sovereigns and Six …” Thorn murmured. It wasn’t the size of the pillar that brought on the curse, nor the sensation of power tingling against her skin. It was the glittering wall surrounding the column, a tornado formed from shards of glass.

“What is it?”

“Dragonshards,” Lharen breathed. “The balance is amazing. Khyber, Siberys, Eberron—thousands, each one linked directly to the power of the core.”

“Lovely,” Thorn said. “Can we destroy it?”

Lharen shook his head. “I wasn’t expecting this. Stand back.” He raised his hands and whispered in an ancient tongue. Light and heat filled the air, a brilliant burst of eldritch power that flowed from Lharen and played across the stones … with no effect at all. Lharen maintained the mystic barrage for ten seconds before he had to stop, gasping for breath. “It’s as I feared. The shards will absorb any energy I throw at them. The ritual I’ve prepared can’t penetrate it.”

“There’s got to be something we can do,” Mayne said.

Lharen stared into the tower of glittering stones then sighed. “There is. Mayne, I’ll need your shield. And your cloak. Is it still charged?”

“A few moments left, no more,” Mayne said, unpinning the cloak and pulling off the bracer that held his mystic shield. “What do you have in mind?”

“The shards protect the core. So I’m going to have to get through the shards.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Thorn said, grabbing Lharen’s arm. “You’ll be torn apart.”

“Mayne’s cloak will provide me with a few moments of protection, and the shield will help.” Lharen grimaced. “I don’t expect to walk away from this. But I’ve beaten the odds before. Perhaps I’ll do it again—if not, I’ll finally pay my debt to the Keeper.”

“There’s got to be another way.”

Thorn still wasn’t convinced. “If I came alongside you, if I held the shield …”

“Then we’d both die. There’s no time for this. We need to act now.”

Thorn bit back her words. He was right. They were agents of the King’s Citadel; they’d all sworn to lay down their lives in the service of Breland. But walking into a wall of razors … she took his hand again, gently this time. “This will not be forgotten,” she said.

“I doubt you’ll get the bards singing of it, unless you want to start the war anew,” Lharen said. He was right, of course; none of their work could ever be known beyond the Citadel. Still, he smiled as he held her hand. “You remember. You survive this. That will be enough.”

He pulled free of the others and activated Mayne’s shield. Raising the hood of his cloak and wrapping the garment around his body, he took a deep breath and ran towards the whirling shards.

Rattling thunder filled the room, the sound of shards smashing and shattering against his shield. The fabric of Lharen’s cloak rippled, but its defensive enchantment was holding. Lharen was slowly pushing his way through the storm, and the charm repelled the stones before they could harm him.

He was almost through the barrier when the enchantment broke.

Lharen shuddered as the shards slammed into him. He howled, and he was surrounded in a bloody mist. The sound was a knife in Thorn’s heart. She’d told the truth when she had told Fileon that the scream still haunted her; she’d simply lied about its source.

And then he was through. He collapsed against the pillar, blood seeping through the torn cloak.

Thorn came as close to the barrier as she dared. “Lharen?”

The sorcerer coughed, blood spraying across the core, and Thorn thought he would fall. But he wrapped his fingers around a mithral tube and pulled himself to his full height. “I’ll survive,” he said then coughed again. He fumbled in his satchel and pulled a scroll from its steel case. “Long enough. Now move away.”

Lharen began the ritual as Thorn joined Mayne by the tunnel mouth. Blood dripped onto the parchment as he spoke, but Lharen’s voice never faltered. The words on the scroll burst into iridescent flame, a cold fire that flowed up Lharen’s arm. His voice grew stronger and deeper as the flames surrounded him. The scroll dissolved into ash and silver dust; the blaze flowed up along Lharen’s left arm and was gone.

Lharen dropped to his knees, but a handprint remained where he’d touched the core—a hand of fire, growing brighter with each moment that passed.
“Go,” he said, the pain making his voice tight. He coughed more blood. “My thoughts … hold the power in check. Get clear.”

Thorn nodded. Lharen’s blood was pooling on the floor. And none of them could survive another trip through the whirling wall. She still didn’t want to leave him. “I meant what I said, Lharen. This won’t be forgotten.”

“I know,” he said. “And I know——”

He jerked, choking. Then Thorn saw the crystal embedded in the side of his head, a shard that had pierced his skull. He fell forward into the deadly wall. Thorn spun and shoved Mayne with all her might, pushing him down the corridor.

And the core exploded.

A wave of force lifted Thorn and flung her down the corridor. This wave had teeth. Crystal shards filled the burning wind. Impact with the floor drove the breath from her lungs, and she could feel the dragonshores piercing her flesh, blood running down her back.

A strong hand pulled Thorn to her feet. Mayne. Blood ran from a few wounds, but Thorn had saved Mayne from the worst of it. “Can you stand?” he asked.

Wait, Thorn thought. This isn’t right. This isn’t how it happened. In reality, the force of the explosion had knocked her out. It had been days before she’d woken.

She felt dizzy. She reached out to stabilize herself, pressing her hand against Mayne’s chest.

He screamed. Her hand felt as though it was on fire, and she could feel energy flowing up from her arm. Mayne’s scream faded far too quickly, and he collapsed, dead weight against the ground. For her part, Thorn felt stronger than ever, as if Mayne’s strength had been added to her own. It was a familiar sensation. It had happened once before. In the Great Crag of Droaam, she’d been wounded by a werewolf who had once been her ally. She’d touched him, and he’d fallen, just like this—as if she’d stolen his life force to survive.

“But that’s not what happened here,” she whispered.

“How do you know?” The voice rang out from behind her. A woman’s voice, familiar and full of cruel mirth.

Thorn spun, her dagger in her hand. A mirror stood before her. She was dressed in a gown of black and red silks, the colors of a moonless night and fresh blood. Long boots of red leather covered her legs, and matching gloves ran up her arms; the fingertips had been removed, revealing curving nails painted with black enamel and sharpened into claws.

It’s only a dream, Thorn told herself. She’d passed out when she’d struck the ground, and she’d never seen Mayne again. They’d told her that he succumbed to his own injuries after getting her to safety—that a tiny dragonshard had found its way to his heart. But all that she knew for certain was that she’d passed out at Far Passage, and she’d never seen Mayne again.

“Who are you?” she demanded, dagger at the ready. Dream or no dream, she was ready for a fight. “What do you want?”

Her dark reflection laughed, tossing back her hair. The light caught a stone at the base of her neck, and Thorn felt a piercing pain against her own spine——

And then she was awake. Lying in her bed in Dragon Towers, the Khyber shard throbbing in her neck. She ran her fingers across the mark surrounding her right eye. It was a forgery—part Citadel magic, part Riedran living tattoo—and it seemed it was good enough to fool Fileon.

But was Fileon the one being fooled? When she had been assigned to the Far Passage, she’d been given her magical ring, told that it would let her see in the deepest shadows. That had been a lie. Thorn pulled the ring from her finger, as she had done many a night before. Her vision was unchanged, every detail revealed in sharp black and white.

*Never a gift at all.* It was the crone Sora Teraza who had said that—the infamous oracle of Droaam. *Never a gift at all,* she’d said, handing Thorn her ring. *This is not the gift you were given, and what you were given was not a gift.*

There was nothing for it. She needed to talk to her partner.

She leaned over and pulled her belt from the bedpost. She drew Steel and laid the blade across her legs. *We are not being observed by magical means.* His voice was clear and calm, a deep whisper in her mind.

“Good,” she said. “Let’s talk about the first man I killed.”
CHAPTER FOUR

Dragon Towers

Lharvion 16, 999 YK

You’ll have to be more specific. Steel’s psionic voice was calm, betraying no hint of emotion. The first man you killed on this assignment? Since we became partners? In your life?

“Why was I chosen for this mission, Steel?”

House Cannith and the Twelve are concerned about the apparent growth of House Tarkanan in recent years. Specifically, they believe that a new leader within the house poses a threat to their operations. Cannith barons approached the Citadel, which agreed to investigate the matter both as a favor to House Cannith and as a matter of Brelish security … and to eliminate the threat if it exists.

“I know all that,” Thorn said, slightly annoyed. The dagger’s psychic voice had a condescending tone that often got on her nerves. “But why was I chosen for this assignment?”

The nature of the mission precluded the use of any local Sharn Lanterns. You were available. You’re proficient in the operation of Riedran tattoos, something required by this assignment.

“That’s all?”

Need there be more?

“I don’t know,” Thorn said. She ran a finger across her false mark. “Yesterday, Fileon asked me to tell him about the first time I killed someone with my aberrant dragonmark.”

And your answer appeared to satisfy him. Of course, the mark you’ve been given doesn’t actually kill. However, given the diversity seen in aberrant marks, this shouldn’t be a concern. The worst outcome I can imagine is that he will believe that you’re holding back.

“Am I?”

No. The tattoo allows you to cause debilitating pain but would only kill someone who is in a severely weakened condition.

“I’m not talking about the tattoo.” Thorn held the dagger before her, studying the unreflective black steel of the blade.

What then?

“Toli. Perhaps you remember him? Tall, King’s Shield, a little hairy in the end … and dead because I touched him.”

Your point, Lantern Thorn?

“Do I have an aberrant dragonmark?”

Don’t be ridiculous. Surely you remember when this mark was applied. And it does not kill.

“But I do, it seems.”

Toli died under mysterious circumstances. Perhaps it was a side effect of the curse that transformed and controlled him. Even if you were somehow responsible, you have no mark of your own—and if you have no mark, it logically follows that you have no dragonmark.

“And are you so certain that I don’t have a mark? What if it’s hidden beneath my hair? What if it’s invisible?” She touched the dragonshard embedded at the base of her neck. “What about this? Could there be power within it?”

No, Steel said. One of my primary functions is the analysis and identification of magical auras. If there were any power in those stones, I would know.

Thorn said nothing. Steel knew as well as she did that auras could be hidden. And beyond that … Steel was the closest thing she had to a partner. But ever since Droaam, she sometimes wondered whether she could trust him. She knew that his first loyalty was to the Citadel. He’d withheld information from her before, sharing the details of a mission when he deemed it necessary. And he’d told her that her enhanced senses came from her ring—something she knew to be a lie. Was it an honest mistake? Or was he keeping secrets from her?

If you slept poorly, you have my sympathies, Steel said. But I suggest you set your concerns aside and focus on the mission at hand. Your observations show that Tarkanan has relocated its primary base of operations. You must earn their trust and make your way into the inner circle—and determine the identity and plans of their new leader.
“The Son of Khyber,” Thorn murmured.

Yes. And at the moment we know little save that name. It falls to you to learn his true name and nature. And as such, I suggest you prepare for the coming dawn.

He was right. She surely had a hard day ahead of her. “Fileon said that the mark might cause madness,” she said. “Perhaps I can use that.”

It would explain your strange habit of talking to your dagger.

“Madness.” Thorn smiled as she returned Steel to his sheath, but her suspicions lingered.

* * * * *

Thorn met her second Tarkanian at breakfast, and he came as a surprise. Dreck was a warforged, one of the construct soldiers produced by House Cannith. But he was no warrior. His metal body was tall and lean, with long arms and an assortment of rings on his delicate fingers. But what caught her eye when she met him was the acid-green mark traced across the side of his face, gleaming brighter than the torchlight. It appeared to be an aberrant dragonmark—something that surprised her and Steel alike. The warforged were artificial beings, with alchemical fluid instead of blood, and Thorn had never heard of a warforged manifesting any sort of dragonmark. The warforged set a plate of sausages on the table.

“You seem troubled, Sister Thorn.” Fileon handed Thorn a warm biscuit.

Breakfast was a simple meal, but after her days on the street, anything warm and fresh was a blessing. Fileon’s eyes were cold and appraising. Hardly surprising. Her cover story was sound enough and explained her skills and equipment, but revealing her background as a Lantern was a calculated risk.

“I don’t know if I belong here. I want to learn to control this curse. But I’ve heard of House Tarkanian. You’re thieves and assassins. Killers for hire.”

“And there is no blood on your hands?” A hint of a smile played across Fileon’s withered lips. “The dwarf you killed yesterday—that was for Breland, was it?”

“I was defending myself.”

“As are we. You are a citizen of a new nation, and you wear our flag on your face. And make no mistake, we are at war. The dragonmarked houses have long fueled the fires of public fear. How have you been treated since your mark appeared? What do you see when people look you in the eye, when they see the lines across your face?”

Thorn met his gaze. “No one paid me to kill that man.”

“A thousand pardons, beloved.” Dreck said, his voice deep and musical. His choice of words was strange, yet somehow seemed natural from him. Thorn wondered if he’d been designed to be a bard, or simply a living instrument. “I wonder what path you have walked. In your prior service, did you take payment from the crown? What do you truly know of those whose blood you’ve spilled? Are you so certain that your deeds served the people of Breland, and not simply the whims of king and courtiers?”

“You know nothing about what I’ve done,” Thorn snarled, rising from her seat.

Fileon’s voice was cold. “You are correct, of course. We know nothing of your life. But tell me: Do you know the origins of our house, Sister Thorn? Not the War of the Mark. Not the Tarkanian name. Just the house of thieves and killers. Do you know how we began?”

Thorn shook her head.

“You are younger than I, but old enough to remember the last decade of the war. In the north, the floating fortress of Chydris fell at the battle of Cairn Hill. To the west, the Daughters of Sora Kell emerged from the darkness to proclaim their kingdom of monsters. To the east, the loyalty of the goblins was called into question. King Boranel and his ministers were desperate to find new sources of power—forces that could be rallied within the borders of Breland.”

Thorn sat down. The last time she had seen her father, he’d been posted to Sterngate, to guard against goblin treachery. “I remember.”

Fileon took a bite of sausage, chewing for a moment. “One of Breland’s greatest resources was the King’s Citadel. The Dark Lanterns provided invaluable intelligence throughout the war. And we both know that there are silent killers among the Lanterns—though surely, assassination has always been a practice of last resort.”

“Make your point.”

“In 989, the Citadel forged a new unit. A squad of elite assassins. There were others who’d received the same training, who had the same equipment, but these killers had an edge that had never been brought to bear.”

“Aberrant dragonmarks,” Thorn said.

“Yes. Before that, aberrants were treated much as they were anywhere else. Even those who wished to serve the
nation were often driven into lives of crime or forced to hide their marks. And in truth, there were few aberrant marks of great power then—few who could kill with a touch. It was with my generation that the strength spoken in legends was seen again. The ministers of the Citadel sought to harness this force. And so we finally had the chance to work together, to unlock the full potential of our powers.”

“Why haven’t I heard about this?” Thorn’s hand slipped down to Steel’s hilt, but the dagger remained silent.

Fileon laughed, and the sound was cold and harsh. “We were an experiment, sister. We were effective, certainly. I assure you, the power that flows through my blood more than makes up for my weakness of limb. I have killed for Breland, as have you.”

Thorn tapped a finger against Steel’s pommel, but there was no voice in her mind. “So what happened?”

“We were discovered by agents of House Phiarlan, revealed to the Twelve. Oh, none of us know precisely what was said, but it’s not difficult to imagine. The barons raging before the king. Threatening to withdraw their support. The Sivis stones silent, no longer carrying word between armies. No more warforged, no siege staves from the Cannith forges. No Deneith troops. Against that, what were we? Useful tools. But not useful enough.”

“So you were disbanded.”

Fileon’s eyes narrowed. “We were betrayed. They sought to use us one last time. We were sent into Darguun. Sent to die. And most of us did. Those who survived found no support waiting, no egress from that hostile land. Lesser folk might have surrendered to the Keeper’s embrace. But Thora Tavin endured, and in her we all found strength. In time we made it to Sharn. By then we’d found proof of the betrayal, of the threats made and gold paid by the Twelve. We could not return to the Citadel. Yet the crown had done its duty to the houses. It abandoned us. There was no reason for them to waste precious resources pursuing us further. Tavin was determined that no others of our kind would be used as we had been used—or threatened by the houses. During the War of the Mark, Halas Tarkan decided to stop the persecution of his people, and turned frightened fugitives into an army. Here, in this manor, we swore to follow in his footsteps, to become House Tarkan, to gather our people and protect them from the Twelve.”

Fileon stood, his eyes shining, and he pulled back the sleeve covering his withered arm. Pulses of angry red light flowed across the ugly mark.

“We are killers,” he said, “and we are thieves. That is our destiny, scribed on our flesh by the Prophecy and made possible by the training of your king. But now we kill who we please, and we use that gold for the good of our own, to find the lost and help them control their gifts before they are taken by madness, prejudice … or the treachery of the Twelve.”

“And now …” He stared into her eyes. “You stand on the same precipice I found myself upon seven years ago. You served your nation loyally. But because of your blood, they have turned on you. And if you stand on your own, you will find that you have many enemies. Your mark is visible, hard to hide. There will be many among the common folk swayed by centuries of propaganda. They will call you monster. And there are those among the houses of the Twelve who enjoy hunting our kind. I’ve heard some Tharashk hunters and Deneith marshals actually cut the skin from their victims and keep the tanned hide as trophies.”

“Why should I trust you?” Thorn said.

He laughed, cold and hard. “It is I who should ask that question of you, my sister. For I am the only one you can trust. The lies of the Twelve have turned the world against you. And in this moment, you cannot even control your own body. Your gentlest touch could kill those you love, and the pain of that will eventually drive you mad.”

Thorn said nothing.

“I’ll tell you true, Sister Thorn. I don’t trust you. Were it in my hands alone, I would send you to one of our safehouses far from Sharn, let you learn your lessons in safety and solitude. But I have my orders.” He glanced at Dreck and scowled. “There are those who have taken an interest in you, fallen Lantern. And so it is time for you to make a choice. Time for you to embrace your new family—or to turn your back on us and face the world alone.”

“I won’t kill for gold alone.”

Dreck spoke again. “You know nothing, beloved. In days past we have taken gold for our deeds, but that will be the least of your worries in the days that lie ahead. We are your people now. We are your nation. And we have many enemies. Yesterday you killed to defend yourself. Are you willing to do the same tomorrow? Will you fight to protect others like yourself?”

Thorn looked down at the table. She rubbed her fingers across her dragonmark, letting her left hand rest on Steel’s hilt. The dagger remained stubbornly silent.

“Yes,” she said at last.

“At least there is some wisdom within you,” Fileon said. “We shall see if you have the courage to back your
words. Now come. Let us see what you can do.”
CHAPTER FIVE

Dragon Towers

Lharvion 19, 999 YK

Thorn tossed a pinch of powdered silver into the air and whispered three words in the language of dragons. The metal vaporized. Glittering smoke drifted across the hallway, and Thorn watched it drift. There. She saw the pattern in the smoke, a ghostly web traced through the mist.

“Pathetic,” Fileon said.

Thorn ignored him, holding fast to her memories of the nebulous grid. She drew out a length of mithral wire and straightened it into a long probe.

“I watched my daughter run this path,” Fileon said. “Half your age and mad as five rats. She reached the door before the quarter mark on the hourglass.”

Thorn knew the halfling was sneering at her. Over the course of the last two days, his disapproval had fixed in Thorn’s mind. Part of it was the typical bluster of the drill sergeant. But the more time she spent around Fileon, the more certain she became that he had been ordered to train her. And for whatever reason, he chafed at the command. Dreck stood silently beside the halfling, his metal face unreadable. His eyes were two different colors—one formed from red crystal, the other as green as the mark on his face.

She pushed Fileon’s criticisms from her mind, focusing on her task. Keeping the image of the ward in her mind, she slowly pushed the wire forward. If she brushed a single strand of the invisible web, she would unleash the power trapped within the ward. It was a deadly game, but one she excelled at. A moment later, the probe penetrated the field. Though Thorn couldn’t see the patterns, she knew that she’d threaded the wire through a nexus of mystical strands.

Thorn reached down with her left hand and picked up a vial filled with water infused with the energies of Mabar. Pulling out the stopper with her teeth, she poured a few drops onto the wire. The glittering liquid flowed along the length of the probe, and the instant it reached the end, Thorn whispered another incantation. There was no change in the air, no visible sign of success, but she felt a faint pressure in her mind as she spoke. She twisted the verse, drawing out syllables in response to this ghostly presence … and then it was gone. All that remained was the lock on the door, and compared to wrestling with the forces of the magic, it was a trivial task.

Fileon wasn’t impressed. “Don’t be so proud of yourself, Sister Thorn. Do you suppose we have barrels of nightwater in the wine cellar? Every drop of that fluid is precious. More precious than your blood.”

Thorn said nothing. Didn’t even shrug. She’d quickly learned that the best way to deal with these jibes was to show no interest at all. For the last three days, she had endured a battery of challenges, a grueling gauntlet designed to test her ability to operate both on the battlefield and in the shadows. And whatever Fileon might say about it, Thorn was confident she’d exceeded expectations. She drew Steel and idly spun the dagger in her hand.

“What’s next?” she asked.

Fileon smiled. An increasingly rare occurrence. He walked up to the door that Thorn had unlocked and opened it. Three beasts waited on the other side—rats the size of wolfhounds, savage creatures from the deep sewers of Sharn. They snarled as they caught sight of Thorn.

“Combat,” said Fileon.

The rats charged into the room.

Thorn had faced many trials over the past few days. The only ones she’d actually enjoyed were these combat sessions with Fileon and his daughter. Zae might just be as mad as five rats. Certainly, she spent more time talking to the creatures than she did to anyone else. And the rats listened to her, answered her calls, which was why she was here in the training room with her father. She’d summoned the massive sewer rats who were hounding Thorn and seeking to tear the flesh from her bones.

We’ve fought wyverns in Woodhelm and basilisks in Droaam, Steel whispered as Thorn vaulted over one of the beasts. I was made for greater things than killing sewer rats.

Thorn could hardly respond, with Fileon and Dreck watching her every move. She was bleeding from multiple bites, and she hoped the creatures weren’t carrying any sort of disease. The lead beast was harrying her, searching
for an opening to tear out a tendon. As it leaped at her, Thorn dropped into a three-point stance and slammed her mithral bracer into the rat’s mouth, shattering teeth and sending the animal skidding across the floor.

“You are a vessel for pain,” Fileon called out to her. “Don’t think. Feel. Feel the pain and anger of your enemies, and step out of their path.”

The halfling had some fascinating ideas about what Thorn should be able to achieve with her aberrant dragonmark. In these sessions he seemed to forget his anger, seeking only to help her to understand her gift. Unfortunately for Thorn, it was a gift she didn’t possess. Thorn wasn’t a vessel for pain. There was no deeper well of power for her to tap into. But she had talents of her own, gifts which might serve the same purpose. Her eyes could pierce the darkness, and in Droaam she’d learned that all of her senses had been equally enhanced. If she relaxed and let her instincts guide her, she could feel the motion around her. Even though she couldn’t see them, she could sense the rats darting around her, preparing to attack from all sides. As the beasts charged, Thorn leaped and twisted to the side, landing behind the rats.

“Yes!” Fileon said. “Now fight. And let the last one fall by your mark.”

Steel’s observation about the rats had been apt, and normally Thorn would have taken no pleasure in killing dumb animals. But these beasts had her blood on their teeth, and after spending so much time dodging them, Thorn was hungry for vengeance. Claws left gouges on wood as the rats charged her once more. A sweeping kick scattered her enemies, and the rest was Steel and blood. Thorn was swift and precise, knocking her enemies aside with her armored forearm and following with a deadly thrust.

Her final foe was the rat with the broken teeth. Blood dripped from his mouth, and he moved sluggishly; his dedication to the fight was impressive. But the outcome was never in question. Thorn caught the rat with an open-handed slap, and as their flesh met, she unleashed the power of her false mark. The tattoo burned against her skin, and as before, the pain was agonizing. Although it was no true dragonmark, she found that Fileon’s lessons helped her deal with the pain.

_Do not fight it. Do not feel it. Let it flow through you; do not seek to dam the river._

No easy task. Part of her wanted to claw her face, to gouge the mark from her skin. But she fought this instinct, focusing all of her attention on the rat. The pain was intense, but it lasted only an instant. The beast squealed and collapsed.

Thorn pulled out a cloth to clean the blood off of Steel and knelt down to examine her own injuries. As she did, the halflings studied her fallen foes. The girl Zae said nothing. Of course, she never said anything; her aberrant mark might allow her to communicate with vermin, but if she could speak the common tongue, she’d never had anything to say to Thorn. Zae dressed as a beggar, likely to move more easily through the streets of Sharn. Her hair was matted, her skin crusted with dirt, her body hidden beneath layers of filthy rags. At least four rats lived within her clothing—normal rats, not the giant beasts Thorn had just fought. But they glared at Thorn reproachfully from the folds of Zae’s clothing as the girl examined the dead.

Fileon, on the other hand, was more concerned about the fact that one of the rats was _not_ dead. Her final victim was still twitching and whining.

“Pathetic,” he said. “Were you so squeamish when you served the Citadel? The pain you feel is the spark that starts a fire. You must unleash the blaze, instead of clinging to the tinder.”

“It’s frightening,” Thorn said. “It doesn’t feel like a part of me.” This was both lie and truth. Thorn had no fear of her mark, but it wasn’t a part of her. She couldn’t learn to unleash its full power, because she was already using its full power; the living tattoo was designed to stun a victim, and no matter what techniques Fileon taught her, its power could not grow.

To her surprise, it was the warforged Dreck who spoke next. “You must feel it, beloved. Not as pain, but as anger. Turn the sensation into emotion, and turn that emotion against your foe. Let your anger grow, and it will serve as the vessel of your power.”

“But what if I don’t hate my enemy?” she asked. It didn’t matter either way, since these techniques couldn’t increase the power of a false mark. But she was curious to learn more about the forces that drove the aberrants.

“You must learn to,” Dreck said. “It is the nature of our gift and the burden we must bear. We are the children of Khyber, and our blessings are fury and pain. You must learn to hone your anger, to make it a blade you can unsheathe and release when battle is done.”

Thorn nodded. “I’ll try,” she said.

“No,” Fileon said. “Try, and you will fail. Try and you will die—and bring down those who are relying on you. You will have to do better than that.”

Dreck nodded. “There is fire within you, beloved. But you must seize it if you are to succeed. Doubt, and you will
fail. Find that ember of fury. *Know* that this power lies within you. Otherwise, you will fall.*

Thorn bowed her head. "I understand."

"Go," Fileon said. "Meditate on this. We will try again when you have had time to recover. But tonight is your last chance, sister. We have run out of time for child’s games."

"What do you mean?"

"The Son of Khyber is watching you, beloved." Dreck’s voice was soft and soothing, but Thorn could see Fileon scowling behind him. "We must ensure that you are ready for the work that lies ahead. Tomorrow you will venture into the world once more. Tomorrow you will face our true foes for the first time."

"True foes? Who—"

Fileon silenced her with a raised hand. The time for conversation was over. "Go. Meditate on the lesson you have learned here. We will continue at the seventh bell."

Thorn nodded and turned to go. Behind her, the halfling girl sat on the floor, stroking the fur of the shivering rat.

"The Son of Khyber," Thorn mused. She was sitting on the bed in her quarters, with Steel laid across her knees. He’d assured her they weren’t being observed, and she’d personally scoured the room to make sure there were no rats hidden in the walls. "So what do we know?"

"Child of Khyber" is a common term for those possessing aberrant dragonmarks, the dagger whispered.

"It might come as a surprise, but I do actually read the briefing materials. And yes, I would imagine that the leader of this cabal of aberrant assassins actually has an aberrant mark of his own. But what do we actually *know*?"

Very little. Until recently, the house was fully controlled by Thora Tavin. As the halfling said, Tavin seemed content to keep it as a criminal enterprise and shelter for those possessing aberrant dragonmarks.

"And yet Tavin is nowhere to be seen. This Son of Khyber seems to be in charge. And if I read the tensions correctly, the old guard—Fileon—doesn’t much care for it."

Agreed. Something has changed, and that is why we are here. Our liaison with the Twelve believes that this change in leadership reflects a change in direction for the house.

She ignored his reproachful tone—as if she’d forgotten her mission. "Strange. I thought I was one of the King’s Dark Lanterns, not some lackey of Merrix d’Cannith."

She found Dreck’s words echoing in her mind: Are you so certain that your actions served the people of Breland?

Steel had no face, but his mental voice had a reproachful tone. *The dragonmarked houses are valuable allies of the Brelish crown. Vital allies, should war begin anew.*

"This sounds like history repeating itself. The Citadel turned on Fileon’s unit because of pressure from the Twelve. Now I’m putting myself at risk in pursuit of their interests. What happens next? What if the houses decide that the Citadel shouldn’t employ half-elves? Do I find myself on a suicide mission in Darguun?"

An unlikely scenario, Steel replied. *House Lyranind is one of the most influential voices in the Twelve, and Boranel has always had strong ties to Medani. Both are Khoravar houses. It’s more likely they’d try to recruit you than have you killed.*

"Recruit me? From where I stand, I’m already working for them. And what if I do have an aberrant mark?"

You do not. And you are ignoring the greater issue. *This house takes its name from Halas Tarkanan. During the War of the Mark, it was Tarkanan who destroyed the greatest city of the age.*

"And who started the War of the Mark? The Twelve."

That’s not the point, and you know it. The city of Dorasharn was not built by the Twelve. Its citizens possessed no dragonmarks of any sort. Whether you place the blame on Tarkanan or the Twelve, tens of thousands of innocent people died in the struggle between them.

Thorn considered this. The stone in her neck pulsed against her bone, an echo of the pain she felt when she used the false mark. She heard Dreck’s words again: We are the children of Khyber, and our blessings are fury and pain.

*I must know, Lantern Thorn.* Steel’s whisper was cold and steady. *Are you confident in your ability to complete this mission?*

"I am loyal to Breland," Thorn said, laying her hand across the blade. "And I will do whatever I must to protect my country."

Then let us see what tomorrow brings.

Thorn slid off the bed and knelt on the floor in the corner of the room. She thought back to the lessons of the day: You must learn to hone your anger, to make it a blade you can unsheathe and release when battle is done. She might not have an aberrant dragonmark, but the ember of fury was there. And she wanted to let it go.
CHAPTER SIX

Dragon Towers

Lharvion 20, 999 YK

Dreck woke her early in the morning, his mismatched eyes gleaming in the dim light of dawn. Fileon was waiting for her in the dining hall.

“I wish I had a choice in this,” Fileon said to Thorn. “You are still a child when it comes to mastering your mark, and I doubt you are prepared to do what must be done.”

Thorn was growing tired of the constant needling. “It seems to me I’ve passed every test you’ve laid before me, ‘brother.’”

Fileon ran his fingers along his withered arm, and traces of crimson light followed the motion. “Watch your tone, sister. I have spent years training our kind, helping the Children of Khyber find the path to power. I have seen friends driven mad and watched my lover waste away. Now you come to us, just as the Son of Khyber said you would. A Dark Lantern with shards in her spine. An assassin with skills to match our best, touched by Khyber in our moment of need. Quite fortunate for us, yes?”

“Not so fortunate for me,” Thorn said. She couldn’t tell—was he questioning her story? She ran her fingers over her mark. “I’m the one who’s going to be spat on when people see my face.”

Dreck spoke before Fileon could respond. “Release this anger, both of you. Yes, beloved, our blessing is a burden. And you, Shaper of the Young, do not fear what destiny has given us. For what are dragonmarks but the symbols of the great Prophecy itself? It is fate that marked the Lantern and brought our paths together.”

“So I’ve been told,” Fileon said. He looked back at Thorn. “Perhaps the hand of Khyber truly is at work. If so, you should have no trouble with the task that lies ahead.”

She nodded. “You said that today I’d face our true foes. What did you mean by that?”

Fileon drew a leather cylinder from his robes and passed it over the table. It held two sheets of parchment. The first was a sketch of a brooch, an engraved circle crossed with a pin in the shape of a silver sword. The second was the image of a man—a weathered soldier with close-cropped hair and a grim stare, with the tell-tale lines of a dragonmark visible on his neck.

“This should be no challenge for one of your skills,” Fileon said. “Not so different from work you have done in the past. The brooch you see there is an heirloom of House Deneith. It is currently in the possession of Sorghan d’Deneith, of the Sentinel Marshals.”

“You want me to rob a Sentinel?” It was no easy challenge. House Deneith bore the Mark of Sentinel, and their magical gifts sharpened their senses and strengthened their defenses. The house brokered mercenary services across Khvorvare, selling the skills of soldiers and bodyguards. The Sentinel Marshals were the most elite agents of the house, empowered to pursue criminals and fugitives from one end of Khvorvare to the other. Still, she’d expected something more than this.

“If at all,” Fileon said. “I expect you to kill him then take the brooch from his corpse.”

And there it was. The true test. It was one thing for Thorn to steal something from a house enclave; property could be replaced. But killing a lord of the house, one of its elite forces … if Thorn was an agent of the Twelve, she’d have to refuse.

If she was an agent of the Twelve.

Her first response was simple enough. “I told you before. I won’t kill for gold.”

“This is no contract killing. We have many enemies, and this man is one of them. He hunts our kind for sport, using his authority to cover up his crimes. When the Sentinel Marshal tells the city watch that his aberrant victim was a wanted murderer, who do you think they believe?”

“And were his victims murderers?”

Fileon shrugged. “Not all. I can assure you, if he learned of your existence, he would take great pleasure in hunting you down. Should the Citadel choose to pursue you, Sorghan might well be the tool they use.”

Thorn hesitated. She knew what the Citadel would expect of her: agree to do the job, then find some way to save the innocent man without breaking her cover. But in that moment, she felt a pang of doubt. Fileon’s story of betrayal came back to her. And in truth, she’d seen fear and hatred in the eyes of strangers this past week, even in the
miserable depths of Sharn. She thought of little Zae being hunted by Deneith troops.

She pushed the image away. She had a job to do, and with that in mind, her course was clear. She picked up the parchment. “Very well.”

Dreck was watching her with his mismatched eyes. He spoke. “Pray pardon my impertinent words, beloved, but I would know your mind. When you were still in service to your king, would you hesitate to kill an assassin preying on the Brelish people?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” she said. “Because I chose to serve Breland. I wasn’t forced into it by a chance affliction. And just because I’ve been driven from the Citadel doesn’t mean that I’ve turned on Breland.”

Fileon joined in. “And what if our goals conflict with the interests of Breland? What if Sorghan is a Dark Lantern—a Lantern responsible for the deaths of hundreds of our people?”

Thorn met his gaze and held it. “You say that you were betrayed by Breland, Fileon. And I believe you. But you of all people should know what it means to serve the Citadel. If anything betrayed me, it was my own body. I killed Lharen. I’m the murderer here. I know that my life has changed forever, that there’s no turning back. And I’ll deal with this marshal for you. But Breland is still my home.”

Fileon nodded slowly, and in that moment his hard demeanor softened. “I would be disappointed if it were otherwise. Loyalty is a thing that must be earned, and I would think less of you if you were so quick to shed your allegiance. But you will learn the shape of things, as I have. Breland was your home. But now, the only shelter you will find is with those who share your mark. Khyber is your country now.”

Thorn relaxed. She’d guessed that Fileon was testing her again—seeing how quickly she’d abandon her principles, how eager she was to please him. It seemed that she’d made the right move.

“I appreciate all you’ve done for me,” she said. “Before you found me, I was alone. Afraid. You’ve helped me regain control of my life, and I’m grateful for that. If you want to send me after this Deneith murderer, I’ll do it. But don’t expect me to kill another Lantern. Not yet.”

“Acceptable,” Fileon said. “And so I leave you to your work. How you accomplish this task is up to you. We cannot call upon the wealth of Breland, and you will have to make use of the resources that you already possess. I have no tools or weapons to give to you. But there is one thing that I wish you to take with you.”

He knelt under the table, and a moment later he emerged again. There was a small bundle of gray fur in his hand, twitching and watching Thorn with beady black eyes.

A rat.

“I trust you, Sister Thorn. I believe that it is destiny that has brought you to us at this time. But I must be certain. You will carry these eyes with you, and through him, Zae will watch over you. Should you be caught, we will know. Perhaps we will be able to send aid.”

And should I betray you, you’ll know, Thorn thought. She’d been planning to find a way to warn the marshal, to give him a chance to escape. This would make things difficult. Of course, he is just a rat. It would be tragic if I happened to cross paths with a hungry alley cat.

Fileon lowered his hand to the table, and the rat scampered over to Thorn. “I trust you’ll take care of her,” he said. “Consider that your third task. I need to know that you can protect as well as kill. And I’m sure you understand the importance of preserving our lines of communication.”

Thorn smiled. “Of course,” she said, holding out her hand. The rat scampered up onto her arm. “I won’t disappoint you.” So much for the cats.

“And when we meet again, I trust that you will have the brooch in hand.”

* * * * *

The sun was setting against the mountains, and the tall spires of Sharn cast long shadows across the streets and bridges of Dragon Towers. The district was largely dominated by the enclaves of the dragonmarked houses, and most of the people on the streets bore the emblem of one of the houses somewhere on their clothing. There were few beggars. House Deneith supplemented the local constabulary with its own mercenary troops, and they took care to keep the riffraff off of their doorstep. Thorn had raised the hood of her cloak to hide her false dragonmark, and she put her hand on Steel as she made her way toward the Deneith enclave.

Silent protocol, Steel whispered in her mind.

Zae’s rat was nestled in one of Thorn’s belt pouches. It was quite calm. Thorn wondered if it was well trained, or if the aberrant girl was controlling its actions from afar. Fileon claimed that she would be watching Thorn’s actions. Could she eavesdrop on her conversations as well? The safest answer was to assume that she could. The silent protocol was simple: one tap for yes, two taps for no, a rubbing motion with her thumb if the answer was uncertain.
Do you intend to kill Sorghan d’Deneith?

She rubbed her thumb along the hilt. She was still considering her options, and none of them were especially promising.

The Twelve are the motive force behind this mission, and they will not look kindly on the murder of one of their own.

It was the wrong thing to say. She bit back an angry response. The rat was peering up from her pouch, and this was not the time to debate the politics of the Citadel.

“I wish I knew more about this Sorghan,” Thorn muttered at last, as if talking to herself. “I hate killing a stranger.”

A fair question, Steel said, though his voice was cold. Let me consider it.

It was times like this that Thorn wished she knew more about Steel. She’d received the dagger after Far Passage. Steel had admitted that he’d been assigned to watch her, to make sure she was fully recovered from the incident. She knew that Steel was over a hundred years old, that he’d worked with Dark Lanterns well before the Last War, back when the Citadel served the united kingdom of Galifar. But had he ever been human? Or was he some sort of construct or a bound spirit? In moments such as this, was he drawing on personal knowledge or somehow tapping into the library of the Citadel itself?

Sorghan d’Deneith was born in Karrnath and trained at the Sentinel Tower in Karrlakton, Steel said at last, but he has spent the last five years in Breland. According to the rankings of the house, he’s the most dangerous marshal in residence. However, he has a poor recovery ratio. He prefers to kill rather than take his quarry alive. As a result, he’s usually assigned to pursue criminals already condemned to death.

So even if he was killing aberrants, it was possible he was simply executing convicted criminals. Or Fileon might be telling the truth. Sorghan could be killing innocents between his legitimate contracts, using his reputation to cover his actions.

Thorn reached down and scratched the rat’s head. It looked up, staring at her with beady eyes. “What do you think, little one?”

Your course of action is clear, Steel said. You can’t murder a Sentinel Marshal. There are only three Tarkanans in residence in the manor, and two of them likely know the location of the Son of Khyber. Eliminate two of them, and force the third to reveal his location. A swift assassination completes the assignment.

Thorn’s temper rose. She’d already considered this and dismissed it. The mission was to evaluate the threat posed by the Son of Khyber and to kill him if it became necessary. So far, there was no proof that he was a threat. The Tarkanans were involved in organized crime, but in Sharn, the same could be said of nine out of ten members of the city watch.

She tapped Steel’s pommel. Twice.

You are losing perspective, Lantern. You have a mission. Don’t forget where your loyalties lie.

Thorn raised her thumb to tap the hilt—

And stopped. There was an ember of anger glowing within her—anger at the dragonmarked houses. She pictured the ambassadors of the Twelve giving orders to the Citadel. She saw the fear in the people around her, the change in their expressions when they saw the mark around her eye. She thought of Fileon, a man who’d sworn his life to Breland only to be sent to his death. And she made up her mind. Perhaps she could still find a way to spare the life of this murderous marshal. If not, it was the Twelve who had set this wheel in motion. Let them bear the price. She reached into her belt pouch and stroked the rat’s head.

“Very well, my friend. Let’s see what destiny has in store for us.”

Steel’s thoughts pierced her mind. Do you intend to kill Sorghan d’Deneith?

Thorn slid the dagger all the way into its sheath and continued down the street.
Black Blade ale,” Thorn said, licking the foam from her lips. She slipped a chunk of sharp Karrnathi cheese to the rat on her lap. “It’s hardly worth dying for.”

The rat nibbled on the cheese but gave no other response. Thorn wondered if Zae was watching at that moment and what she made of the comment. While Thorn didn’t care much for the brew, it had proven to be her ally tonight. Sorghan made his home in the Deneith enclave in Dragon Towers, a veritable fortress protected by the best soldiers and wards the house could muster. She’d cracked harder targets, but not many—and never operating on her own, with no resources to speak of and no allies. But Thorn knew soldiers, and she guessed that Sorghan wouldn’t spend his Farnight in the enclave canteen. At which point it became a question of identifying his favorite haunts. Thanks to Steel, she knew that Sorghan was born and raised in Karrnath. One could find Karrnathi Nightwood ale in any Ghallanda tavern, but Sorghan came from the city of Karrlakton, and that meant he’d been nursed on the product of the Black Blade Brewery. There was only one inn that served the brew in Dragon Towers: the Lion and Goat, whose trade sign was a statue of a chimera with the dragon’s head knocked off of it. A few greased palms confirmed her suspicions. Sorghan was a regular, and the barman expected him to show when the evening hours rolled by.

Her preparations made, Thorn made her way to the Deneith enclave, watching the gates from the shadows of the nearest alley. The sketch she’d been given was a good one, and she easily spotted Sorghan when he emerged from the stronghold. If assassination were her only goal, she could have struck on the street the moment he was safely away from the watchful eyes of the Deneith guards. But she still hoped to find a way to win the trust of the Tarkanans without killing the marshal, and so she’d shadowed him as he’d made his way to the inn. Now she watched him from a dark corner, surrounded by off-duty mercenaries and the scents of sweat and spilled beer.

Sorghan was drinking alone tonight, and lightly. It seemed that he was a man who never let his guard down. His back was against the wall, and his free hand rested on his blade. He’d worn his armor to the bar, dark leather reinforced with rivets of blackened steel. He was waiting for someone. He’d turned away two companions in the time it had taken Thorn to finish her beer. But he’d yet to notice her.

He’s protected from poisons, Steel told her. He has a spatial pocket woven into his right gauntlet, as you have in your own gloves. I can’t tell you what’s within.

She tapped the dagger once.

I trust that you know what you’re doing, Lantern Thorn. His chilly emphasis on the word “Lantern” suggested that he still had his doubts. My first loyalty is to the Citadel, and I will be obliged to give a full accounting of your actions.

Thorn lifted her hand from the blade and considered her options. Killing him wasn’t the challenge. As a Dark Lantern, Thorn had been trained in the arts of espionage and counterespionage. Skilled as she was when it came to bypassing a lock or shadowing a mark, assassination was her specialty. She’d already considered three possible ways she could finish Sorghan before he could rise from his chair. And if she’d just wanted him dead, that would have been enough. She’d studied the building, even gone so far as to rent a room on the upper floor. She could cripple him with a swift blow, take to the stairs in the ensuing chaos, and slip out the window before anyone could follow.

Unfortunately, his death alone would accomplish nothing. She needed the brooch, and she couldn’t predict how long it would take to retrieve it from his body. And in a room full of Deneith troops, every second would be precious. Besides, in spite of her anger at the Twelve, Thorn still hoped to keep Sorghan alive. She could look into Fileon’s claims once the mission was over, but for now she’d prefer to get Sorghan safely out of Sharn.

Thorn glanced down at the rat. The creature had finished the last crumb of cheese, and Thorn tucked it into her pouch. Time to act.

A trip to the bar provided her with two more flagons of Black Blade. So armed, she strode over to the corner and took a seat at the table.

“That seat is claimed, my lady.” Sorghan’s voice was deep and rough, and his gray eyes could have been chips of flint. Thorn could see the silver brooch, but he wasn’t wearing it on his cloak. Instead, it was pinned to his armor,
partially hidden by dark wool.

“Quite. It was good of you to save it for me.” She pushed a flagon across the table. “I’m happy to repay the favor.”

“I’m in no mood for company.”

“It’s not up to you, Marshal Sorghan.” Thorn let her hood slide back and ran her fingers along the edge of her dragonmark. “I’m afraid I’m on family business.”

Thorn had changed before entering the bar. There was more to the work of the Lantern than mere muscle and steel. During her days in the Citadel, she’d learned to work a few spells. It wasn’t something that came easily or often, but in times like this, it was invaluable. She’d woven an illusion that hid her face and form, and now she appeared to be a minister of House Deneith with the Mark of Sentinel traced across her face. She’d darkened her hair and sharpened her features, highlighting the Karrnathi ideals of beauty.

Sorghan’s eyes betrayed no hint of surprise nor emotion of any sort. Thorn was hard-pressed to tell if her disguise affected him on any level. “Continue.”

“You’re to return to Karrlakton, immediately.”

He remained utterly impassive. “And why is that?”

Thorn smiled. “I’m afraid it’s a delicate matter, Marshal. Not one I can discuss in such a public space.”

“A matter of some urgency, it would seem. Such that you could not wait for me at the enclave.”

Thorn shrugged. “My instructions are quite clear. There are things I am to share with you and you alone.” She looked away. “And I will admit to having a … personal interest in a private meeting. The tales of your exploits are most impressive.”

She saw the slightest hint of a smile on his lips. “Tales of my many victories in battle?”

Now she met his gaze and returned the smile. “Oh, those too. I have a room here. Perhaps when you’ve finished your ale, I could share my messages.”

“Why wait?” Sorghan pushed back his stool and rose from the table. “I’ve had enough to drink for the moment. And if you wish a demonstration of my skills, I should like to have my head clear.”

“Of course.” Illusion hid Thorn’s belt pouches, but she could still find them, and she reached down and ran her fingers along the body of the rat. The creature was slightly stiff, its breathing slow and steady. The soporific she’d slipped into the cheese had clearly taken effect. Smiling, she rose and walked to the stairs. “Follow me, Marshal Sorghan. We have much to discuss.”

The Lion and Goat might have had an exceptional selection of beer, but its rooms left much to be desired. Thorn’s quarters were cramped, the linens were stained, and there was a long crack in the mirror that hung on the wall. Thorn pulled the shutter on the everbright lantern, and the light of the cold fire filled the room. Behind her, Sorghan shut the door.

Thorn considered the situation. “This may be hard to—”

Sorghan was upon her before she could finish. He grabbed her hair and pulled hard, jerking her head back. He had a knife at her neck, a narrow dagger that felt like a sliver of ice.

“No words,” he said. “Hands on the table, spread wide.” He pressed the point of the frigid dagger against her throat.

Thorn’s instincts urged her to retaliate, to break his hold. But Sorghan was a Sentinel Marshal, and his reflexes could easily match her own. For now, it was best to play along. She leaned over, spreading her fingers against the desk. What game was he playing?

He pressed his hand down against the back of her neck, rubbing his fingers along the skin until he reached the embedded shard. Thorn’s illusion only fooled the eyes, and though he couldn’t see the stone, he could feel it.

“Drop the glamer,” he growled.

She tried to speak, but the instant she opened her mouth the chill blade pressed into her throat. She could feel her blood freezing on contact with the blade.

“No words.”

Thorn reached out with her thoughts, pulling on the threads of magic surrounding her. There was a tingle as the magic faded, and in that instant Thorn moved. She threw herself backward, slamming her head into his nose. She fell back with him, tumbling to the side before he could regain his balance and cut her throat. She rose to her feet, steel in her hand.

That went well, Steel said.
Thorn ignored him. “Stop. I’m trying to save your life, you fool!”

Sorghan laughed. “Of course you are. And the one who warned me that a piece of aberrant scum with a stone in her neck would try to kill me … I suppose that was a trick of some sort?” He drew his rapier, and his frigid dagger steamed in the warm air.

“Nothing is what it seems,” she said. “I’m working for the Twelve.”

“You own flesh proves you a liar,” he snarled. “No one of tainted blood could ever sit at Alder’s table.”

“I’m not an aberrant, you thrice-damned idiot! I’m working to infiltrate the Tark—”

Sorghan’s skills were as good as she’d heard. The dagger struck her before she’d even seen him move. The blade sunk into her chest, but she barely felt any pain. A terrible chill drowned all sensation. Her blood was freezing in her veins, and she could barely find the strength to draw breath.

“I care nothing for the schemes of weaklings,” Sorghan said. “It’s time we destroyed Tarkanen’s brood. Beginning with you.” He lunged, sword glittering in the light of the cold fire. He shouldn’t have gloated. The shock of the icy dagger’s blow had stunned Thorn, and if he’d struck immediately, Sorghan might have finished her. As it was, she had enough presence of mind to stagger backward, staying just out of his reach.

It was hard for Thorn to focus on anything except for the terrible chill, and she had no time to study the wound. At least the cold held any pain at bay.

Sorghan struck again, and this time there was no room to retreat. Instinct took over as Thorn stepped forward, knocking the blade out of line with an armored bracer and charging at Sorghan. Too close for him to bring his rapier to bear, she smashed him to the floor. There was no time for thought or regret. She lashed out with Steel, a blow that should have buried the blade in his throat.

But it didn’t.

It felt as if she’d struck a block of ice, as if the air had solidified before her blade. Sorghan was a warrior of House Deneith, heir to the Mark of Sentinel. And the powers of this mark defended the bearer from harm.

“Your blood is no match for mine!” Sorghan snarled as they wrestled on the floor. At the moment it was true. Thorn’s wound was sapping her strength. Her fingers were numb, her vision fading at the edges. Sorghan spun her to the floor and pulled his icy dagger from her chest, raising the steaming blade for the killing blow.

And in that instant, she hated him. Not for his bigotry, his treacherous attack, or even the fact that he was about to kill her. There was no conscious thought, just pure, primal emotion. And that rage gave her the strength she needed to press her open hand against his chest. For a moment, she felt nothing but fury, then Sorghan collapsed on top of her, his dagger clattering across the floor.

Sorghan was dead weight, and he slumped to the side as Thorn pushed him away. It was then that she realized that both cold and pain were gone. Blood stained her vest along a gash where the dagger had struck her, but the flesh beneath was pure and unmarred.

It had happened again.

Thorn rose to her feet, expecting to feel weak and unsteady. Instead she felt stronger than ever. Filled with energy. Sorghan lay still, and a quick examination confirmed her suspicions. He was dead. His skin was pale and cold, his mouth twisted in a grimace of pain, but there wasn’t a mark on his body.

She picked up Steel. “What happened to him?”

_He died. I should think that was obvious._

Thorn nearly threw the dagger at the floor. “This isn’t a joke, Steel! What did you see?”

_There was a burst of arcane energy at the moment you touched him, consistent with the use of a dragonmark or offensive spell. It would appear that you drew out his lifeforce and used it to heal yourself, as you did with Toli in Droaam._

“But I didn’t cast a spell.”

_If you say so._

Thorn shook the dagger. “I didn’t mean to kill him!”

_In doing so, you saved your own life. For the second time. A useful talent, in my opinion._

That was a sobering thought. “But I don’t know how. Have I … am I an aberrant?”

_Not unless you have a dragonmark. But there are other possibilities._

_“Such as?”_

_You could be a demon. Disguised in human form._

“Oh, brilliant deduction. And I never noticed?”
In this scenario, I’d assume that you’ve been concealing your identity for some sort of sinister purpose. Though admittedly doing a poor job of it.

Thorn took a deep breath, resisting the urge to fling Steel across the room. Fear and anger warred within her. The dragonshard at the base of her neck had come alive, burning against flesh and bone, and she seized on that familiar pain, using it to anchor her racing thoughts.

“I need to know what’s going on, Steel. I’ve been lucky so far. But damn it, this is my cover story. I’m supposed to be here because I can kill with my touch and I can’t control it. Well, guess what? I can kill with my touch, and I can’t control it. And I’ve got Sentinel Marshals trying to kill me. I’m really starting to think I’m on the wrong side of this one.”

You have no aberrant dragonmark—

She drove the dagger into the floor and released it. “You don’t know that! You don’t have any explanation for what’s going on. What if the mark is in the back of my throat? What if it just hasn’t appeared yet?”

Steel couldn’t answer when he wasn’t in her grip. The red disk on his pommel gleamed, almost like an eye.

“Damn it, Steel,” Thorn said. “I just keep thinking of Fileon’s stories. The Twelve sending him to his death. We aren’t doing this job for Breland. And now this. Sorghan was ready to kill me just because I was an aberrant. And for all I know, I am. For all I know, I do need these people.” Her dream of Far Passage returned to her mind, the vision of Mayne falling at her touch. The anger was gone. All that was left was the pain of the shards and uncertainty. She reached out and picked up Steel. “If I can’t control this, how long before I do kill someone I care about?”

I suppose you’re lucky that your only friend is a dagger. His mental voice was softer than usual. I apologize for questioning your judgement, Lantern Thorn. I hope that you have earned the Tarkanan’s trust with your actions. Sorghan’s death is unfortunate, but I can testify to your attempt to protect him. I sympathize with your concerns, but I urge you to set them aside and proceed with the mission.

“Well, I’m glad I have your approval. I’d hate to replace you.” Thorn picked up Sorghan’s fallen blade and tucked it into her belt. “Now, unless you’ve got something useful to contribute, I’ve got a murder scene to clean, a brooch to claim. And I suppose I might as well wake up the rat.”

That’s right, Steel whispered. I guess I’m not your only friend after all.

“So it seems.” Thorn studied Sorghan, considering how best to deal with the corpse. His words echoed in her thoughts: The one who warned me …

“And it seems I have new enemies, as well.”
CHAPTER EIGHT

Dragon Towers

Lharvion 20, 999 YK

Did you tell him I was coming?” Thorn asked. “Why would I do such a thing?”

If the crippled halfling was concerned, he gave no sign of it. He turned the brooch about in his hand. Thorn and Steel had examined the pin earlier. It bore the symbol of an eye surrounded by rays of the sun, an archaic symbol of House Deneith. The brooch was old and deeply worn, but according to Steel, it held no magical power. Beneath the table, Zae played with the little rat. Despite her curiosity, there were no signs that the girl had uncovered Thorn’s ruse.

“I don’t know,” Thorn said. “But he was ready for me. Who else could have warned him?”

“A Medani seer, perhaps? The House of Detection has strong ties with the marshals.”

It was possible. There were oracles among the Medani who could catch glimpses of the future, and it was reasonable to assume that they would help their dragonmarked cousins—though likely for a steep price. But Fileon’s attitude still troubled her. He’s too damned calm.

“I consider this a blessing,” Fileon said, as if reading her thoughts. “I would not have thought you could survive such treachery, yet here you stand. And he, dead at your touch. Fear and unexpected danger can often bring out the full power of a mark. So it seems with you.”

Except that I don’t actually have a dragonmark, Thorn thought. She still didn’t know what to believe. She’d studied her skin following her talk with Steel, using the mirror to examine every inch of flesh, even peering in her mouth and doing her best to study her scalp. She’d found nothing, not even a scar from Sorghan’s blade. The only things she could find were the false dragonmark across her eye and the two stones along her spine.

“So you’re not worried?”

“No. This matter will be settled soon enough. And it shows that you are ready for tonight.” “More tests?”

“No more tests. And yet no rest, beloved.” Dreck’s mismatched eyes gleamed as he strode into the room. “The night holds bloody challenges for us all. There is work to be done that requires the cover of darkness. Tonight you fight by my side. And should you survive, tomorrow I will take you below.”

“Below?”

“To our true stronghold in this city. To meet the Son of Khyber. He will show you where your destiny lies.”

Thorn drew her two daggers. Fileon had no objection to her keeping Sorghan’s blade, and the air around the chill steel steamed as she spun it in the air. “So what’s the job?”

“Follow.” Dreck took the Deneith brooch from Fileon and gestured toward the hall. “You both have parts to play in this piece, but there is another actor on this stage.”

Dreck led Fileon and Thorn into the dining hall, where a strange figure waited.

“Brother Brom has come up from the depths to assist us in this task,” Dreck said. “Mighty One, you already know the Shaper of the Young. This is Thorn, the newest blade to emerge from his forge.”

Brom was a dwarf. At least in part. At a glance, it seemed as though the right arm of an ogre had been grafted onto his shoulder. The palm of the huge limb rested on the floor, and Thorn guessed that the dwarf’s arm must weigh nearly as much as the rest of his body. That wasn’t the only oddity. Brom’s wild hair and beard were a swirl of colors, fiery red blended with black and gold. His left eye was a reptilian yellow, with a brushing of scales around the socket, and when he smiled, he revealed an assortment of teeth that seemed to have been chosen at random—the tiny teeth of a child or halfling set alongside sharklike incisors. He grinned and made an elaborate bow, stretching his long arm before him. “Enchanted, my lady.”

Fascinating, Steel said. It’s established fact that aberrant dragonmarks may cause physical disfigurement, but I’ve never seen anything like this before.

“I dislike being kept in the dark, Brother Dreck.” Fileon’s eyes gleamed. “I have done my work and done it well. I would know what our Son of Khyber has planned for my student.”

“See with your own eyes, Shaper,” Dreck said, his voice soft and musical. “You will serve at her side this
evening.”

Fileon blinked. “What?”

“The Son of Khyber knows of your talents, Shaper. You guide the young to mastery of their gifts, but your skills have not been forgotten. You have tested beloved Thorn these past few days. Now you will lead her in our struggle.”

Brom slapped the floor with his massive hand, and Thorn felt the impact across the room. “Let us to work!” he cried, carried away with his own enthusiasm. “I did not come here to talk. I came for blood and battle. What task awaits?”

Dreck’s face was a mask of steel, and he could not smile. But Thorn could hear the joy in his lilting voice. “Tonight we strike a blow against the House of Making. The Son of Khyber seeks a great treasure of the house, and we shall bring it to him before the break of dawn.”

“Cannith!” Fileon clenched his good fist, and his dragonmark burned with crimson light. “You might as well ask us to pierce the vaults of the Kundarak bank.”

Thorn had to agree. “You want us to steal from a forgehold?”

House Cannith were the master artificers of Khorvaire, and it was their hands that had built the warforged and untold wonders besides. Infiltration was a specialty of hers, and she’d made her way into the arcane libraries of Aundair and the sacred crypts of Karnath … but this was another matter entirely.

“Fear not, children of Khyber.” Dreck’s voice was calm. “Our leader would not send so few to face such a challenge. Our quarry is in Dragon Towers, well beyond the fortress walls of the Cannith enclave. Speed and force are called for. We leave none alive who can tell the tale, and we will travel directly to the depths thereafter.”

“And what of the grayblood trackers?” Fileon said. “How will you evade the eyes of House Tharashk?”

“Bah!” Brom dismissed these concerns with a wave of his left hand. His left arm was muscular and strong but seemed crippled next to his massive right limb. “We travel on the orders of the Son of Khyber and are guided by the wisdom of our steel brother. Do you think either would leave such matters to chance?”

“I know that Thora Tavin would never do such a thing,” Fileon said. “It was her hands that brought our house together, and she never set us against Cannith or Tharashk. Would you call down their wrath upon us when there is so much work yet to be done?”

Dreck held up the Deneith brooch. “Lady Tavin gathered the army, Shaper. The Son of Khyber will lead us to battle. Destiny unfolds, and he leads us down the path. And so you will walk with us tonight. You will watch for wards and deal with any guardians who cross your path. Brom will apprehend the target. Leave all other concerns to me.”

“As you wish,” Fileon said. He glanced at Thorn, and his eyes were cold. As if she were to blame.

Dreck spread a map across the table, an architect’s sketch of a manor tower. “The strife of others is our fortune. We have been following a marital dispute between two of the wealthiest Cannith heirs in the city. They severed their bond two weeks ago. Growing tensions caused the lady Ilena d’Cannith to purchase property beyond the house enclave.” He gestured at the map. “Torran Spire has been a Cannith holding for less than a week. We will surely have to overcome basic Kundarak seals and wards, but they have not had the time to place those defenses you fear, Shaper of the Young.”

“Hostiles?” Thorn asked.

“Minimal household staff. Ilena has yet to establish her household. What guards are present are likely to be automatons—golems or homunculi trusted to watch the house in the absence of its lady.”

This was reassuring. There was nothing to be done about Sorghan’s death, but Thorn didn’t want to make a habit of killing her supposed clients. At the same time, Sorghan’s voice echoed in her mind: No one of tainted blood could ever sit at Alder’s table. She’d already destroyed Tarkanan’s brood. Beginning with you.

Perhaps that hate was misplaced. Thorn had studied every inch of her skin before returning to Fileon, and she still found no trace of an aberrant dragonmark. Nonetheless, when she thought of the venom in Sorghan’s voice, the hatred in his eyes, it was hard to muster much sympathy for the man. She still didn’t know if she was an aberrant or not, but little Zae, the rat girl, was and she didn’t deserve to die because of it.

Dreck’s voice pulled her from her reverie. He ran a finger along the map. “You will enter here, beloved, with the shaper by your side. Follow this path to the servants’ entrance. With fortune’s favor, you won’t encounter any further resistance. You need not kill any you find, but do not hesitate to do so. Brom and I will wait beyond this door. Once you have opened it, we shall proceed to our target.”

“And Lady Ilena?” Thorn asked. She didn’t want to kill a Cannith heir, but she’d prefer not to be seen by one.

“Attending the Tain Gala this evening. I trust that her most capable guards will be with her. She won’t return until
“Very well,” Fileon said. “Let us be about this. But know this, Dreck. I will have words with the Son of Khyber when this is done. I see only darkness on the path ahead, and this is the last time I do his bidding unquestioned.”

“She has shown to be a difficult foe,” Dreck said. “I am certain that he will ask nothing further of you, once this night is done. But let us finish this final task as brothers.” He placed his hand against the map, and the emerald lines of his dragonmark pulsed across his face. “Cannith awaits.”

Torran Spire was on the very edge of Dragon Towers, clinging to the vast central column that supported most of the district. Mystical security aside, the doors were reinforced and barred from within. And so Thorn and Fileon made their way to a back window. The challenge soon became clear: the back of the spire projected out and away from Dragon Towers, and it was thousands of feet to the rocky shores of the Dagger River far below.

Despite his complaints, Fileon took point, and he proved surprisingly capable. The halfling made no sound as he slid up along the wall of Torran Spire, finding the slight irregularities in the stone with practiced ease. Even his withered arm proved no handicap, and Thorn guessed that there was magic at work, some spell supplementing his skill. Thorn, dressed in the simple black clothing she favored for silent work, followed at his heels. Thorn’s dark garb was enchanted to draw the shadows to her, helping her hide from sight. Wind whipped around her, tugging at her clothes and whistling in her ears.

Fileon had reached their target: a large window with enough of a ledge for the halfling to stand on. A gargoyle crouched over the casement, its frozen snarl revealing a fierce array of granite teeth. Such decorations were common enough in this city of towers, and Fileon gave it only a cursory glance before producing his tools and setting to work on the window.

Thorn wasn’t so confident. The gargoyle was as still as any statue, its dark skin a perfect match for the frame of the wide window. But there was a chill in the base of her spine—a shiver emanating from the crystal shard that set her on edge.


The air resonated with the power of the word, and Thorn let that energy flow through her, along her limbs and into her hands and feet. To this point, it had been strength and skill alone that allowed her to scale the wall. Now the touch of the spider held her fast to the surface, even as she let go with one hand to draw Steel. She couldn’t speak without alerting Fileon, but she didn’t have to. Steel could feel her touch, and they had codes for such situations. She pointed the blade at the gargoyle and traced a cross along the hilt. Threat analysis.

Little of note. A simple arcane lock on the window itself, but your companion seems to have that in hand. If it’s the statue you’re worried about, I sense no magical emanations.

That’s a start, Thorn thought. But she wasn’t about to let her guard down. She studied the statue, imagining what the beast would be like if it spread its wings and took flight, if life came into the granite eyes. What would it take to bring down such a creature? Thorn had been trained in the arts of assassination and knew many ways to cripple a human, dwarf, or elf. But Eberron offered many challenges to the would-be killer. Where would a gargoyle hide its heart? If she couldn’t rely on striking a vital organ with that first blow, what gave the best odds of crippling the creature?

Paranoia and preparation paid off. Thorn heard a faint click as Fileon pulled at one of the casement panels—and then the gargoyle was in motion. It moved with inhuman speed, catching the halfling before Thorn had time to react. The beast drove one palm into Fileon’s forehead, knocking him backward and off the ledge.

He might have been crippled and caught by surprise, but Fileon’s reflexes were remarkable. He spun in midair, reached out, and caught hold of the very edge of the ledge. He slammed into the wall below, but he kept his grip on the outcropping, hanging off the edge of Torran Spire. Blood was flowing into his eyes from the gash on his forehead, and his hands were scraped raw.

Even as Fileon was falling from the ledge, Thorn was in motion. She flung Steel at the beast’s eye, which was no longer stone. Regardless of whether there was a true brain behind it, few creatures with eyes could afford to lose them. But hitting such a target while hanging from a wall was no small task. Thorn struck close to the mark, but not close enough—and the gargoyle’s skin was nearly as tough as the stone it resembled. Steel caught the beast directly between the eyes with enough force to snap its head back, but the blade didn’t penetrate the skin.

Thorn had drawn the creature’s attention away from Fileon, but there wasn’t a moment to lose. Once the gargoyle took to the air, it would have the advantage—and that was assuming that it stayed to fight, instead of fleeing to warn its mistress. Trusting in the spider charm, Thorn pulled her left hand free of the wall and ran directly up to the gargoyle, the magic holding her feet to the stone. The enchantments woven into Steel drew him back to her, and she
caught him without thinking. Yet Steel would not serve for the task ahead. While she preferred to fight with finesse, sometimes sheer force was required. With a thought, she pulled Steel into the pocket of space bound into her glove and drew out the weapon that had been held within. It was the myrnaxe, the brutal weapon forged in the fires of Droaam.

While she hadn’t crippled the creature, Thorn’s blow had at least staggered the gargoyle. Now it was the focus of all her senses. She could see it straightening, its wings spreading to catch the air. Not fast enough!

Thorn sprinted past the struggling Fileon and straight along the glass of the closed windowpane, then she slammed into the gargoyle. She caught it with the iron-shod haft of the myrnaxe, and it felt as if she’d struck a wall. Yet it was sufficient. The gargoyle stumbled back, falling down against the roof. Without sparing a moment for thought, Thorn raised the myrnaxe and brought the spear end down against its chest, striking the spot where a human would keep his heart. Instinct and training guided her hands, but what happened next was enough to jolt her from her trance. She’d expected resistance. She’d seen how Steel bounced off its hide. Instead, she felt nothing at all as the spear slid through the gargoyle. Her hands were touching its chest, and she realized that she’d pierced the roof of the building.

The surprise came with a cost. The wound would have surely driven a human into the ground, but the gargoyle was more resilient. The roof vanished in a flash of pain as the gargoyle smashed the back of one stony hand across Thorn’s face.

Thorn staggered back across the roof, struggling to keep her balance. If not for the spider charm, she would have fallen. She called Steel into her hand, preparing for the gargoyle’s leap. But it never came. The creature was thrashing against the roof, flailing with its arms and legs. It was impaled by Thorn’s spear and, try as it might it, could not pull free. Shingles flew, and the beast carved deep gouges into the stone, but it could not stand. Mercifully, it was silent.

Thorn circled the pinned gargoyle. “I might not know how to kill you,” she whispered. “But I’m sure I can figure something out.”

Dispatching the gargoyle proved to be a simple if gruesome task. The greater challenge was prying the myrnaxe free of the corpse. The spear had sunk deep into the stone, and whatever strength had allowed her to strike the blow had faded.

“Be swift!” Fileon hissed behind her. As Thorn had anticipated, the halfling had been able to pull himself up on his own. Thorn held her tongue, devoting all her energy and attention to the axe. At last it slid free, and she drew it back into her glove.

“You waste our time,” Fileon whispered, but he nonetheless extended his good hand and helped Thorn down to the ledge.

“Sorry. I thought it might be a good idea to save your life. I’m sure you’d do the same in my place.”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t.” Fileon was still holding Thorn’s hand, and as he spoke, Thorn saw his dragonmark gleaming on his withered arm.

Before she could react, she felt a terrible numbness spread throughout her body—and then she felt nothing at all.

Fileon pulled his hand free, and there was something like sorrow in his eyes as he looked up at her. “I truly wish there was another way, sister. I had hoped you’d be crippled by the Deneith blade, but I should have known better than to trust in one of them. It seems I am my only ally—along with the gargoyle that killed you. It seems the Son of Khyber will have to alter his plans.”

Don’t be a fool, Thorn thought. Try as she might, she couldn’t move a muscle. She could only stare into Fileon’s eyes and hope he would see reason. She saw no hatred in his gaze. If anything, there was true sorrow.

Shaking his head, he pushed her off the ledge.
Focus!

The world was a blur, the wall of Torran Spire slipping past and the Dagger River approaching below. Thorn could hear the gale around her and her heart pounding within her chest, but she couldn’t feel anything. She was completely disconnected from her body.

Ledge!

The window ledge protruded from the wall, and Thorn reached out for it—or tried to. Her arms wouldn’t move. Her shoulder struck the ledge, sending her spinning to the side, but she felt nothing—gravity, wind … nothing.

Questions burned in the back of her mind. Why would Fileon do this? Have I been exposed?

But there was no time to analyze the situation. Unless she could do something, her remaining lifespan would be measured in moments. No time for reason. But she found a spark of rage and latched onto it. Anger at Fileon. But there was far more than that. She was still furious at Sorghan, the murderous bigot who’d nearly killed her. Still angry at the Twelve for setting this thrice-damned mission in motion. And there was still the burning pain of uncertainty—the mystery of Sorghan’s death, the question of her own aberrant powers. And in that moment of fury, the stone at the base of her neck came alive, cutting through the numbness and burning against the bone. For once, she welcomed the pain, seizing hold of it and letting it serve as a conduit for her anger. The magic of Fileon’s dragonmark shattered in the face of this rage, and suddenly Thorn could feel everything—the wind, the blood rushing through her veins, the torn skin where her shoulder had struck the ledge. She was in control once more.

But she was still falling.

While it had seemed an eternity, it had only taken seconds for Thorn to break the power of the dragonmark. She was falling past the foundation of Dragon Towers, past one of the so-called flying buttresses, magical supports that kept the towers from collapsing. Stretching out, Thorn managed to set her palms against the stone. A moment’s thought reactivated the spider charm—and suddenly her hands were anchored to the stone. Thorn swung her legs against the wall, bracing for the impact as best she could, but the pain was staggering.

Yet it worked. Her shoulders throbbed, but nothing seemed to be broken or dislocated. She’d survived the fall. Now it was time for revenge.

Relying on the spider charm, Thorn ran up along the buttress. Torran Spire was far ahead of her, but with magic on her side, she quickly closed the distance. She drew Steel as she leaped the gap between the buttress and the foundation of the spire.

Nicely done, Steel whispered. With his voice as cold and calm as always, it was difficult to tell if he was being sincere or sarcastic.

“I thought I was the traitor,” she said, panting and striding up the wall. “I didn’t expect to be betrayed quite so quickly.”

I’m sure your friends at the Twelve have much to say on the subject of aberrant stability.

“What friends? If Sorghan’s any measure, I don’t think I’ll be turning my back on anyone with a dragonmark any time soon.”

What do you intend to do now?

“I don’t know yet.” She’d reached the window to Torran Spire, and none too soon. The spider charm only lasted for a few minutes, and she’d nearly exhausted the enchantment.

Thorn slipped through the casement. While Fileon had a lead on her, Thorn had one advantage. She knew the path Fileon was taking, and the halfling would have to tread carefully. He’d need to be alert for any wards or traps that could bar the way. Following in his footsteps, Thorn could move with greater speed.

It was clear that Lady Ilena had yet to settle in her new property. The window opened onto a landing in the servants’ quarters. An open door showed a glimpse of a linen closet, with a mere two sheets tucked inside. The walls were bare, the floors devoid of any carpet. The Tarkanan estate was better appointed than this, and one of the leading lights of House Cannith would surely flaunt her wealth. Even the walls were bare white, waiting for the lady of the house to make her wishes known. The last time Thorn had seen a Cannith lord’s home, illusions had been
woven into the walls; the lord could shift the shade with but a thought. If Ilena had any such intentions, she had yet to implement them.

More’s the pity, Thorn thought. No carpet to muffle footsteps, bare white walls—hardly ideal for a stealthy approach. Can’t be helped.

She made her way along the corridor, listening for sounds of Fileon or anyone else who might be around. She heard nothing, but as she approached a corner, she caught a familiar scent in the air. Blood.

Sliding up to the corner, she extended Steel out around the edge, tracing a cross on his hilt.

Two bodies, he reported. No motion. Both dead. Blood on the floor. No sign of Fileon or any other threat.

Slipping around the corner, Thorn took in the scene: a boy in his late teens and a woman who might have been twice his age, both dressed in Cannith livery. A silver tray lay on the floor. A flagon of tribex milk was on its side, spilled milk mingling with blood. While she felt a touch of remorse for the slaughtered, there was little time for sympathy. Instead, Thorn’s eyes were drawn to the clues, reconstructing the battle from the injuries and the way in which the victims had fallen. Fileon had struck swiftly and with no hesitation. The boy never had a chance to defend himself, and Fileon had turned to the matron within seconds. No sign that the halfling had used his dragonmark, but he’d known exactly where to strike to cripple his foes before they could sound the alarm.

Born into House Jorasco, trained by the Citadel, she thought. A master surgeon, using those same skills as an assassin. She’d known his touch was deadly, but she’d never guessed that he would have such skill with a blade.

It was clear that Fileon was following the path Dreck had laid out for them, a route that led her through the servants’ quarters and down to the rear entrance. Soon she came to a set of enormous double doors, darkwood inlaid with brass. One door was slightly ajar, and Thorn spotted a drop of what seemed to be water on the handle—water charged with the essence of Mabar, no doubt, left behind when Fileon had bypassed whatever ward had been set upon the door.

Wasteful, Thorn thought to herself. It’s not as though he has barrels of nightwater in the wine cellar.

All else aside, it would take time to disarm a Cannith seal. And given that he’d stopped to kill the servants, Fileon had to be close.

Thorn slipped through the doorway, both daggers held ready.

Fileon struck in absolute silence, moving with deadly speed. Whether he’d heard Thorn’s approach or whether it was pure chance, the halfling was standing just within the doorway, and his blade was leveled at Thorn’s kidney. Keen senses and pure instinct saved Thorn. Before she even saw Fileon, Thorn felt the motion to her side and swung her mithral vambrace to meet the blow. Enchanted steel struck the bracer, but the mithral held.

“You?” Fileon hissed. Clearly he’d thought his victim would be another servant or a guard. His eyes were wild, and the crimson lines of his dragonmark burned like flames.

That moment of shock was all she needed. Fileon was fast, but not fast enough. Thorn swept his blade from his hand and planted a powerful kick directly in his chest. It was a solid blow, driving the breath from his lungs and sending him tumbling to the ground.

“Stay down!” Thorn flung Steel, and the blackened blade grazed the halfling’s neck before flashing back to her hand. “That’s your only warning. Why did you try to kill me?”

Fileon stared up at her but made no attempt to stand. “You have my sympathies, sister.” There was a hint of actual sorrow in his voice, though it was overshadowed by pain. For all his speed and skill, the halfling was still an old man, and Thorn’s kick might well have shattered a rib. “But this is not the time for revelations.”

“It’s exactly the time for revelations,” she said, crossing the room in three steps.

Fileon reached for her, the dragonmark blazing on his withered arm, but Thorn was prepared for the attack. She grabbed his wrist and activated her false dragonmark.

The tattoo flared around her eye, pain tearing through her nerves. But between the blazing stone in her neck and the agony she’d endured stopping her fall, Thorn barely noticed it. Not so Fileon, who felt Thorn’s pain increased by a factor of ten. The little man shook in Thorn’s grip, but she released him before he passed out.

“Why did you try to kill me?” she asked. She took a step back, making sure she was out of his reach.

“You have learned your lessons well, sister.” The halfling was shaking, gasping for air, yet he still managed to laugh. “I regret my actions.”

“You’ll regret them even more if you don’t tell me what I want to know.”

Fileon leaned back against the wall. “The Son of Khyber. He wants you below. Has need of your skills.”

Thorn frowned. “Why would you betray your leader?” Even as she asked the question, she realized the answer.

“He is not my leader,” Fileon said. “Thora Tavin raised me from the darkness. It was her courage and her cunning
that kept me alive in Darguun, her vision that built this house. This Son of Khyber, he changes everything. Sends Tavin away to build forces in other cities. Raises hopes and fears with his words. We were stable. Successful. Now he prepares us for war."

“War? What do you mean?”

“We’ve always known the struggle would come, sister. A time when the Twelve would move against us. He would strike the first blow, and in so doing, he would bring the war upon us.”

_It sounds as though the Twelve were right to be concerned_, Steel said. _You know your orders, Lantern Thorn. Evaluate the situation, and if this Son of Khyber proves a threat, eliminate him. The time for evaluation is done. Extract his location from this one. Kill the others. Complete your mission._

“That’s one way of looking at it,” she said. A time when the Twelve would move against us … meaning me.

Her anger stirred again. The thought of a merchant prince using the Citadel as a tool …

She was no paid assassin. She’d joined the Citadel to serve Breland, and she still didn’t see a threat to the crown.

“Tell me more about this war.”

Fileon sagged against the wall. His strength was clearly fading, and now Thorn could see bloody spittle on his lips.

I hit him too hard, she thought, Whatever skills he might possess, he was still an old man and a cripple. She felt a pang of guilt, and she knelt down next to him. “Fileon,” she said. “Let me help you—”

Old he might be, and crippled—but he moved like a viper, his hand wrapping around her wrist as light flowed from his dragonmark. A wave of vertigo swept over Thorn, that terrible numbness she’d felt on the ledge. But this time Thorn refused to surrender to it. Her anger swelled within her, and the fire from the shard in her neck spread throughout her veins, the pain drowning out the aberrant chill. Fileon’s eyes were wild, and the lines of his mark blindingly bright. She could feel his power growing stronger, but she would not submit. Every nerve was on fire—

And then it was over.

Fileon released her, and he fell to the ground. The light faded from his dragonmark, its lines pure black. The smell of seared flesh filled the air, and Thorn could see the burns surrounding the mark. His tongue lolled from his mouth with his last breath.

He bit his tongue, Thorn realized. The bloody spit … it wasn’t from internal injuries. He was just trying to get me close. Part of her felt a fool for falling prey to the trick, but she also found herself feeling some sympathy for the little man. He probably learned that trick serving the Citadel. There was a time when he fought for Breland—it was the Twelve that forced him into the shadows, that tore his loyalty away.

This time it was no trick. Fileon was dead.

_Your mission is clear_. Steel’s voice pulled her back from her reverie. _The others will not be expecting betrayal. Kill one of them. Interrogate the other. Learn the location of the Son of Khyber and eliminate him._

“I’m sick of this argument.” Thorn was still angry, and it was all too easy to turn this against Steel. “My mission is to evaluate the threat. I don’t know a thing about it. I don’t know who the Son of Khyber is. I don’t know where he is, what he’s capable of, or what the consequences of his death would be. You’re the historian. You tell me how many times an assassination meant to end a war has ended up starting one.”

There was no response, so she continued.

“I’m still not convinced there is a threat to Breland. You’re very concerned with the needs of the Twelve, Steel. But right now I’d like to hear what this Son of Khyber has to say for himself.”

_This is madness_, Steel told her. _You’ve nearly been killed three times._

“Not by the Son of Khyber. Besides, what do you expect?” She touched her eye. “Everyone knows we aberrants go mad.”

_You’re not one of them._

Perhaps, she thought. She could still see Sorghan’s face as he died. And although the details were fading, the dream of Mayne dying at her touch still haunted her. “It’s not your decision to make, Steel.”

_I cannot approve of this. You are threatening one of Breland’s strategic allies. If this goes wrong, I’ll have no choice but to report your actions to Zane—_

“Then do it,” she said, sheathing the blade. The shard in her neck burned in answer to her growing anger. “But stop trying to tell me what to do.”

Taking a deep breath, she hefted the halfling across her shoulders. Fileon weighed little more than a child. It took her less than a minute to reach the rear gate, and another to break the ward protecting it. With that done, she raised the heavy bar and pulled open the doors.
Dreck and Brom were waiting. The warforged was dressed in brown rags, a deep hood hiding his aberrant mark. At a glance, only his long, metal hands revealed his true nature, and he’d draw little attention on the back streets of Sharn. Brom was another story. The patchwork dwarf was dressed in battered chain mail that had clearly seen many battles. Steel sheathed his ogre’s arm, culminating in a massive spiked gauntlet. Dreck scanned the hallway, his gaze dropping to take in Fileon’s corpse.

“Yes,” Thorn said. “There’re a few things we should talk about.”
CHAPTER TEN

DRAGON TOWERS

Lharvion 20, 999 YK

Dreck knelt next to Fileon, running a hand along the halfling’s warped arm. “Our blessing is a burden, and all too
often frail flesh is too weak to bear Khyber’s touch.” He looked up at Thorn, his mismatched eyes gleaming. “Brom,
deal with this.”

Thorn’s hand tightened on Steel’s hilt, but Dreck was talking about the cooling corpse. The dwarf produced a
large leather sack. He lifted the dead halfling up with his giant hand and deposited him in the bag. There was magic
in the sack, as with Thorn’s gloves and satchel. Even after the corpse was dropped in, the bag still seemed to be
empty, and Brom folded it up and tucked it away.

“Do you want to know what happened?” Thorn said.

Dreck’s face was a steel mask, impossible to read. “I know what happened, beloved. He tried to kill you. Again.”
He raised a hand before she could respond. “The Son of Khyber has long known of the misplaced loyalties of the
Shaper of the Young. He was content for our kind to be criminals in the shadows, waiting for the time when the
Twelve would finally move against us. Lady Tavin herself understands the wisdom of Khyber’s Son and has gone to
take his words where they are needed. But it seems our shaper could not change his ways.”

“So I was a test?”

“Your eyes see clearly, beloved. There is no place in this family for traitors. Not at this late hour. The shaper
would not betray in plain sight, so we needed to see what he would do in the shadows. And I wanted to see how you
dealt with him. And so I have. Now let us move swiftly. We have work to do, and the bells of the tower have not
stopped.”

Thorn had nothing to say, and Dreck’s cold words were unnerving. But he was not actually accusing her, and she
was comforted by the fact that Brom, at least, looked glum. Dreck was more ruthless than she’d thought, but it
seemed that some of the Tarkanans still had feelings.

“Take the lead and be wary of wards,” Dreck told her. “I’m certain the chamber where our prize awaits will be
guarded with both magic and steel. Brom and I will deal with the living, but it falls to you to silence the alarms.”

Thorn nodded. She reached for Steel, but at the last moment she hesitated, remembering their last debate. He
might mean well, but she was getting tired of the dagger telling her what to do. Sorghan d’Deneith’s icy blade was
bound within her left gauntlet, and a thought brought it to her hand. She thought, Let’s try a silent weapon for a
time.

If there were any servants beyond the two Fileon had killed, they didn’t cross the path of the intruders. The halls
were still and empty, save for sealed crates and furniture still wrapped from moving. Thorn had expected the
treasure of the house to be held in a vault, but Dreck’s directions took them to the residential floor.

Brom fascinated Thorn. The weight of his oversized arm was clearly a burden he’d had to adapt to, and he used
the arm as if it were a third leg. There were studs on the palm of his spiked gauntlet, which Thorn now realized
helped him with traction, like nails in a boot. Beyond this, over time she’d noticed that the dwarf had a host of
unusual scars—scars in a variety of colors, some even traced in patterns of scales and what seemed to be chitin. She
finally caught a glimpse of his aberrant mark, rising along the back of his neck below his wild mane of hair. Black
and bilious green, it looked much like a constrictor snake crawling up his back, and it pulsed along with his
heartbeat.

There had been no challenges on the way up to the residential floor, but as she neared the top of the steps, Thorn
heard a sound—the faint scrape of metal on metal, an armored figure shifting its weight. She raised her hand, and
Brom and Dreck froze behind her. There were no voices, no breathing that she could hear … but there it was again,
the harsh scrape of shifting steel.

Thorn crept to the top of the stairway. Her dagger might not talk, but she could use it as a mirror, sliding the blade
around the corner and studying the reflection. What awaited them was not human nor even the warforged she’d been
expecting. Instead she saw a pair of dogs sitting on either side of a doorway. They were the size and shape of
wolhounds, but these were no living creatures. Even with her limited view, Thorn saw light glinting off armored
skin and long snouts filled with razors.

Iron defenders, she guessed. She’d seen the creatures at other Cannith facilities. Tireless homunculi, heavily armored and able to chew through platemail. While their senses weren’t as keen as hounds of flesh and blood, even a whisper would alert them to her presence. Slipping back to the others, she indicated the position of the defenders.

Dreck nodded. He gestured at her to stay where she was. Then he turned to Brom and pointed to the top of the stairs.

The patchwork dwarf moved with remarkable grace given his bizarre appearance, but he wasn’t made for stealth, and he knew it. A wide grin spread across his face, and he charged up the stairs, mail clanking and his armored fist tearing at the wood. The iron defenders howled as they intercepted him on the landing, an eerie call more like a horn than the voice of a living beast. And then they were upon him. The first raised its hind legs to rake with talon-tipped feet and sank its teeth into the flesh of Brom’s smaller forearm. The second snapped at the dwarf’s ankles and knees. They were trying to pull him down and savage him, and within seconds blood coated their snouts.

“The door,” Dreck said. “Go now.”

Thorn’s instinct was to help Brom. The guardians were tearing him apart, and blood was spreading across the floor. Yet the dwarf had not cried in pain. He was chuckling. A blow of his powerful arm sent one of the hounds sprawling. It rose to its feet and darted back at Brom, but one of its forelegs was bent out of shape, and it moved awkwardly.

For a moment, Brom met her gaze. Bloody spittle was dripping from his mouth, but he just laughed. “Go, little sister! Do your part!” He seized a defender in his massive hand and dashed it against the floor. It twisted in his grip and tore at his fingers, piercing the armored gauntlet.

Thorn darted up the stairs and leaped over the melee. She caught a glimpse of raw entrails dangling from a guardian’s snout and wondered how Brom could still be laughing. Dreck followed her, but as she jumped over the blood, he joined the fray, his blade striking with deadly precision and catching the guardians in the gaps between their armor.

Thorn pushed aside the sounds of battle and focused on the task before her. The door was a work of art in its own right. The frame made from Aereni livewood. Fresh ivy clung to the wood. The door itself was darkwood etched with the emblem of a tree beneath a starry sky, inlaid with gold and silver. It was fine work, but Thorn was concerned with the enchantments woven into it. The wards were stronger than those she’d dealt with at the entrance. This was more than a simple seal and alarm. If triggered, it would release a blast of energy that would flow down the hallway. A few drops of nightwater weakened the enchantment, but taken alone the waters of Mabar weren’t strong enough to counter the magic. Thorn whispered a word of power and watched the ripples in the air. This mystical echo was a critical tool, helping her gauge the response time of the ward.

Behind her, the sounds of battle raged on. Brom’s laughter faded with ominous swiftness, and Thorn hoped that the dwarf was still alive. But she couldn’t take her eyes off the ward. If she slipped and unleashed its power, they’d all be dead. She held a probe in each hand, silver needles tipped with Khyber shards, each extended into the weakened ward. She traced a pattern in the air, letting the faint ripples around the shards guide her motions. The Khyber shards could absorb and disrupt patterns of magical energy. But if she slipped out of the pattern, she’d trigger the explosion.

There was a thunderous clang as a metal object struck the ground next to her—the head of an iron defender, torn free from the body. The sound was a shock, but it didn’t break her focus. One final pass …

She felt a tingle along her skin, the energies of the ward dissipating harmlessly.

“Done?” Blood stained Dreck’s robes, along with the alchemical fluids found inside the defenders. But there were no tears in the robe itself, no signs of serious injury other than the bitten forearm. He held his long knife in his good hand.

“It’s safe to pass.”

Dreck looked over his shoulder. “Mighty Brom, your strength must serve once more.”

Brom was a ghastly sight. His chain mail was in tatters, and armor and clothes alike were caked with blood. One of his cheeks had been torn free from the bone, and it looked as if there was a deep gouge in his neck where a defender had caught him by the throat. It was difficult to see how he could still stand, let alone fight. Yet somehow he remained on his feet, leaning heavily on his oversized arm. He made his way to the door, and a strange huffing sound came from the gap in his throat.

He’s laughing, Thorn realized.

Brom raised his arm and slammed it into the door. One blow was all it took. Darkwood splintered as the door fell off its frame, falling into the room beyond. Brom charged into the room, with Dreck and Thorn close on his heels.
It was dark in the windowless chamber, and Thorn’s sight shifted into darkvision to compensate. Compared to the barren halls and chambers of the rest of the manor, this room was positively cluttered. The soft fur of a giant steelbone bear, a vast and expensive carpet, covered the floor. A four-poster bed sat against the far wall, and this was the source of the dim light in the room. An illusion had been bound into the canopy over the bed, an image of the night sky complete with stars, moons, and the golden Ring of Siberys. Glancing around the room, Thorn saw a miniature castle, a perfect model complete with tiny soldiers walking the walls. There was a pile of books, a map of Khorvaire pinned to the wall, a warforged about the size of a halfling—a warforged that was now darting toward her, with gleaming blades extending from its wrists. It was quick, but not swift enough to close the distance before Thorn could react. She kicked it squarely in the face, and the little warforged staggered back. Before it could regain its balance, Brom’s massive fist came crashing down. Quick as it might be, the warforged wasn’t as durable as iron defenders, and the one blow was enough to crack joints and leave it twitching on the floor; Brom continued to pound until it fell still.

“So what are we looking for?” Thorn asked.

“I would have thought that was obvious,” Dreck replied. “We have come for the greatest treasure of Ilena and Merrix d’Cannith.”

He gestured at the bed, and Brom pulled the comforter from the frame with a mighty tug. A child was hidden beneath the blanket, a boy of perhaps eight years of age, curled into a ball and staring with wide eyes.

“And now we have found him,” Dreck said.
You’ve used your mark to stun before,” Dreck said, looking down at the quivering boy. “Do so now. Incapacitate the child for travel.”

Thorn hesitated. This was the turning point in her mission. If she complied, Dreck would take her to the Son of Khyber. And she’d done far worse in the service of her nation. But still, this was a child—and the son of one of the most powerful men in House Cannith. All of her arguments with Steel danced through her mind. Lord Merrix would surely want her to protect his son at all costs, to abandon the mission and kill Dreck and Brom. But she wasn’t ready to give up yet. There were too many unanswered questions in her mind, and she wanted answers.

Dreck saw her reluctance but misjudged the reason. “Do you know how many aberrant children the houses have slaughtered over the centuries? Never mind the War of the Mark. To this day, there are enclaves where those born of two bloods are smothered in the cradle.”

Even as he spoke, Thorn heard Sorghan’s voice again: It’s time we destroyed Tarkanan’s brood. Beginning with you.

The boy was too frightened to speak. He pulled his arms and legs tight against his chest, staring at the bloody Brom.

I serve Breland, Thorn told herself. Not Cannith. I must see where this leads.

She knelt down next to the bed and took hold of the child’s arm. “I’m sorry,” she said, then she activated the false mark. This time there were no distractions, and she ground her teeth against the pain. The boy screamed as the agony coursed through him, and he finally collapsed against the bed.

“Take comfort, beloved. You have done well this day.” Dreck tossed her a coil of silk rope. “Now bind his limbs and still his tongue.”

Once she was done, Brom slid the boy into the enchanted sack, handing the bag to Thorn afterwards. It still looked empty, but there was surprising weight to it. Thorn had to throw it over her shoulder to support it.

“Move quickly,” Dreck said. “We must keep this treasure of Cannith hidden, but there is limited air within the sack. We must get below before he smothers. Beloved, you will travel with me. Mighty Brom will find his own way. We cannot afford to be conspicuous right now.”

Thorn nodded. “You’ll be all right?” she asked Brom.

The dwarf grinned. “It’s all in a day for me.”

It was easy to see why Dreck wanted them apart. No one would forget Brom. Aside from his massive arm, his armor was torn, and he was covered with blood and oil. But there was more. Thorn had seen the dwarf take terrible injuries. His cheek was torn, his throat slashed, and his stomach had been opened up. Now all of that had healed. Or had it? Russet scales covered Brom’s cheek—the scaly skin of a kobold, not the skin of a dwarf. Thorn could see a band of warty, green flesh across his neck—troll’s skin? He’d survived injuries that should have been mortal, but clearly there were lasting consequences.

“Now,” Dreck said, striding toward the door, “we must be below ground before the turning of the bells. Move as if all of the devils of Shavara were at your heels. Because if Lady Ilena learns what we have done here before we reach the Son of Khyber, they surely will be.”

Dreck abandoned his own bloody robes as soon as they were safely away from Torran Spire. He led her to an old lift, a floating platform used to bring cargo up from the industrial district that lay far below. As she followed the warforged onto the platform, she saw the word CONDEMNED etched into the surface in a number of languages.

“It serves our purpose,” Dreck said, in answer to her questioning gaze.

Kneeling, he traced a pattern on the floor with a finger. The lift shuddered and began to drop, falling and stopping with an uneven pattern that did little to reassure Thorn. Dreck had little interest in conversation, so Thorn finally took hold of Steel’s hilt.

Silent protocol, Steel said.
Thorn tapped the hilt once. Yes.

*Confirm: You have kidnapped the son of a baron of House Cannith—one of the most influential men in Sharn. And you intend to surrender the child to the Tarkanans.*

One tap.

*A dangerous decision. Do you believe the child is in danger?*

Thorn tapped the hilt twice, but then thought better of it and moved her thumb in a circle. *I don’t know.* Why did the Tarkanans want the child? If it was just a retaliatory murder, they would likely have killed him in the manor. Ransom seemed the more likely answer, and ransom would give her time to save the child once her mission was done. But it seemed that they were taking the child directly to this Son of Khyber, the leader she’d been sent to find. This seemed like a bold move, unless they truly had a foolproof way to avoid Tharashk trackers and Phiarlan scrying; Merrix d’Cannith would surely spare no expense to find his only irreplaceable creation.

*Sovereigns and Flame,* Steel whispered. It was the first time Thorn had ever heard the dagger swear. *I suppose there’s no simple way for Cannith to connect you to the kidnapping, but if the child dies and the Tarkanans expose your role in this … I know little of Ilena d’Cannith, but Merrix will want vengeance. Even if the boy survives, Merrix will want you punished for this.*

She tapped the blade. He was right, of course. And that was surely the point. An agent of House Cannith would never have agreed to the kidnapping, and Dreck knew that.

*I don’t approve of your actions, Lantern Thorn. I know you are doing what you think is best for Breland. You were sent to find the leader of the Tarkanans and what the house is working toward. We can only hope that you are about to do just that. But I advise you to plan your retreat. Gather what information you can, especially the location of their sanctum. Then be ready to take the child and flee. Let the Citadel deal with the threat.*

“Explain.” Dreck’s voice was cold and sharp.

Thorn started, releasing Steel. The lift shook beneath her feet, and the warforged was standing next to her.

“Explain what?” she asked.

He watched her closely. “You are troubled. Lost in your thoughts. Explain, that I may guide you.”

“It’s nothing,” she said. “I just don’t like the idea of killing a child.”

“His death would serve no purpose,” Dreck said, and she felt a surge of relief. His next words were less comforting. “But you must steel yourself to do far worse, if it becomes necessary. The last time our kind clashed with the houses, they showed us no mercy. I know it is difficult, but our path leads to war, sister. You must prepare for dark times and dark deeds.”

“I understand,” Thorn said. And she did. The Twelve may have led Thorn to this place, but if their war posed a threat to Breland, *that* was her concern. She’d save the child if she could, but Breland had to come first.

The lift shuddered and came to a halt. “Come,” Dreck said, hopping off of the platform.

They’d come to the bottom of Central Plateau, but Dreck’s goal was deeper still. The warforged led Thorn through a maze of alleys between warehouses. Centuries of slogans, curses, and gang symbols festooned the walls. It seemed the street cleaners never took this path. At last they reached a spiral staircase that circled a deep well. The air rising from the shaft was hot and foul, filled with the scent of body odor and feces.

“Pull back your hood,” Dreck told her.

“We want to be recognized?”

“Those who lie ahead will not aid house or watch. But they must see you for what you are.” As he spoke, he pulled back his hood, displaying the lurid green tangle of lines across his steel cheek. “Pull back your hood. Show the touch of Khyber.”

Thorn realized where they were going, just as they emerged from the stairwell and into chaos.

Khyber’s Gate.

An ogre snarled as Thorn walked into the subterranean plaza. Remembering Dreck’s words, Thorn met the beast’s gaze, running a finger along the mark around an eye. The creature stared for a moment then looked away.

The ogre was far from the only monster around them. A pack of goblins were chattering, clustered around some sort of game. Three orcs engaged in a loud debate with a hyena-like gnoll, shouting in a language Thorn didn’t know. A shifter with matted hair and long claws was wrestling with a bugbear, hissing and spitting as he grappled with the larger creature. At a glance, it was hard to tell if it was sport or a crime in progress.

Thorn had never been here, but she’d heard of it. Khyber’s Gate, the slum below the city. Where those unwelcome in even the lower wards made their homes. Humans mixed among the monsters, but they were an unsavory lot, with the look of deserters or worse. Thorn had heard that you could not buy a room in Khyber’s Gate.
Everyone was a squatter in this place, and you held your property with tooth and blade. The crowd around her supported that tale. Knives and clubs were everywhere she looked, and the faint scent of blood mingled with the foul smells she’d noticed earlier.

As grim as the crowd was, they made way for Dreck. Whether it was fear of the mark itself or the connection to Tarkan, the people of Khyber’s Gate knew to leave the aberrants alone. They were only challenged once, by a drunken orc with a rusty axe. Dreck’s mark flashed in the dim light, and the drunkard’s companions quickly pulled him away.

Deeper and deeper they went. They scrambled over rubble and through vast cracks in the thick foundations of the tower above. Finally they reached a small chamber, and Dreck took Thorn’s arm, pulling her to a halt.

There was a crack in the floor of the room, a jagged chasm just narrow enough that Thorn felt she could jump it without fear. The walls of the chasm glistened and shifted, and Thorn realized that they were covered with beetles. A few were scurrying around the walls and the floor of the room, but there were thousands crawling around the edge of the gap.

The beetles were the first thing to catch her attention, but Thorn quickly realized that they weren’t alone. She turned to find two strangers standing in the corner. Dreck showed no fear, so Thorn resisted the urge to draw her weapon.

The first one she noticed was the elf—though she was like no elf Thorn had ever seen. Her long ears and fine features were unmistakably elven, but her skin was jet black, and traced with patterns of pale white scars. Her silver-white hair was pulled back in a single braid, and it almost matched the unusual armor she wore—vambraces, shin guards, and a small breastplate formed of pale, glistening white material. Strangest of all was the weapon in her hand—a triangular object that seemed to be formed from three long, curved talons, joined by bone. A throwing wheel, but unlike anything Thorn had encountered.

Drow, she realized. She’d heard of the dark elves of Xen’drik, but it was rare to see one in Khorvaire.

As intriguing as the drow was, it was the man who drew her attention. The moment she saw him, Thorn thought of King Boranel, the one time she’d met the great king. There was no physical resemblance, but the stranger had the same sense of confidence, of authority. Some men became leaders, but others were born to lead—and this man was one of the latter. He was tall, strong, and clean shaven—likely a handsome man at one point in his life.

But then there was his mark.

Until that moment, the largest aberrant dragonmark Thorn had ever seen had been the one on Fileon’s arm. Most aberrant marks were fairly small, like the false mark around her eye. What she saw before her was something else entirely. He wore no glove on his left hand, and the sleeve of his black shirt was pulled back. As far as Thorn could see, the mark covered every inch of skin on his arm and hand, a twisting pattern of red lines that alternated between the color of wet blood and a burning, luminescent crimson. Yet this was only the beginning. The mark rose up from his collar, covering the left side of his neck and head, spreading out across his left cheek and up to his forehead. It covered his left eye, and unlike any dragonmark she’d ever seen, it had actually marked the eye itself. The white and the iris were black and glistening red, pulsing with ruby light as he looked at her.

Dreck dropped to one knee. “I have done as you asked, my lord. I have boy and brooch, and I have brought the woman with me. Sister Thorn, you stand before the greatest of us all, the man who will lead us to victory. You stand before the Son of Khyber.”

The stranger smiled at her, even as his discolored eye gleamed. He held out his gloved right hand. “Call me Daine,” he said.
**Chapter Twelve**

*Khyber's Gate*

*Lharvion 20, 999 YK*

Thorn,” she said, taking the man’s hand. His grip was strong, and he kept hold of her hand. It would be so easy to end this now. The chill dagger was held in her left glove, and she could call it to her hand and bury it in his heart before anyone could react. But she wanted to know more. She wanted to understand what he was trying to accomplish. And after all that she’d been through—the fight with the Sentinel Marshal, the strange powers she couldn’t control, her anger at the arrogance of the Twelve—she found herself wanting to hear what he had to say.

“Thorn. A good name. But not the one you were born with, is it?” As he spoke, Daine reached out with his left hand, gently tipping her chin to study her face more closely.

“Does that matter?” Thorn forced herself not to flinch at his touch. His fingers seemed feverishly warm, and the stone in her neck pounded in time with her heartbeat. And what does his mark do? she wondered.

“No. You’re not alone in that, among our company. We care nothing for the circumstances of your birth. When you come to us, you become part of a new family.” The Son of Khyber turned her head slowly from side to side. The lines running across his left eye pulsed faintly.

“Is there something you’re looking for?” Thorn said. “Not that I’ve got immediate plans for my chin, but perhaps I could save you some time.”

He released her hand and her head at the same time. The throbbing in Thorn’s neck faded, though not entirely. “My apologies,” he said. “I just wanted to examine your mark more closely.”

It was a reasonable explanation, all the more so because Thorn’s mark was a fraud. But she didn’t believe him. He was looking for something else—something he was expecting to find. Then she remembered Fileon’s reaction, back when he’d first examined her. The stones. He had wanted to see the shard in my neck. Why?

“Fileon told me that you wanted me here,” she said. “That you needed my skills. I’d like to hear more about that.”

“And you will, sister. We have many things to discuss. But this is neither the time nor the place. We met here for a reason, and we must resolve this matter quickly.” He turned his mark-stained gaze away from Thorn, and it seemed that a weight had been lifted from her—a pressure she only noticed in its absence. He glanced at Dreck.

“Show me what you have brought.”

Thorn placed the sack on the ground. Dreck reached inside, and a moment later, both bodies were forcibly ejected from the bag. The Cannith boy was beginning to stir, shifting against his bonds. Fileon lay next to him, his shriveled arm pulled tight against his chest. The Son of Khyber shook his head as he examined the dead halfling.

“A shame,” he said. “I’d hoped he could change.”

“He was Shaper of the Young,” Dreck said. “He could not be allowed to follow a different path. Had he not opposed you directly, he would still have poured poison in the ears of his students.”

“I know,” Daine said. “But I still hate to see any of us fall. Halas would have found a better way.”

Dreck said nothing.

“And the brooch?”

Dreck drew the pin from his robes and handed it to the Son of Khyber. Daine held it in his palm and studied it, and as he did, his aberrant dragonmark moved. The lines along his arm twisted and flowed, crimson snakes flailing against his skin.

Aureon’s Shadow! What was that? Thorn had seen dragonmarks before—aberrant and otherwise—but she’d never seen one come alive. She wanted to draw Steel, to get his analysis of the mystical forces at work in the chamber. But even as she let her hand drift toward Steel’s hilt, she saw the drow woman watching her. The dark elf held her bone wheel in a throwing grip, and the threat was plain. Not the best time to draw a weapon.

Daine’s mark had fallen still. He pinned the brooch to his dark cloak, replacing the plain pin he’d been wearing before.

“Why did you want that?” Thorn asked. Why would an aberrant leader wear a Deneith sigil? When he glanced her way, she shrugged. “I risked my life for the thing. It would be nice to know why.”

Dreck turned as if to reprimand her, but Daine raised his hand. “A fair question, and you’ve earned the answer.
It’s no weapon, and it holds no hidden power. It’s just a family heirloom, forged for my father. We parted with harsh words, and I wished to have it back.”

She didn’t need Steel to tell her he was lying. She’d seen the brooch. It was hundreds of years old, and the sigil hadn’t been used for centuries. But she was here to learn about the Son of Khyber, and even the lie could hold a trace of truth. “So you were born into House Deneith?”

Daine nodded. “Yes, and driven out by my kin. Just like poor Fileon. But there will be a better time to share stories, Thorn. Let us finish what you began.”

He knelt beside the Cannith boy. The child’s eyes were wide with fear, and he twisted in his bonds. Blessed Boldrei, I hope that you can forgive me if any harm comes to this boy, Thorn thought. But I have to know what Daine’s capable of.

“Be still, little one,” Daine said. His voice was surprisingly gentle. He took hold of the boy’s shirt, and with one sharp move, he rent the garment asunder.

Thorn was surprised by the action, but what it revealed was stranger still. There was a dark object embedded in the center of the child’s chest: black metal, a spark of red light. Daine grasped the object and pulled it free.

The boy convulsed, his feet kicking against the ground. And then he was still.

“Is he dead?” Thorn asked, curiosity warring with horror.

“He was never alive,” Daine said as he stood. “Not as we understand it. Behold the child of Ilena and Merrix.”

There was a sphere of dark metal in Daine’s hand, its polished surface marked with a single red circle. It reminded Thorn of Steel.

Daine’s mark came to life, crawling across his flesh. The crimson lines glowed, and the light grew ever brighter with each passing moment. Suddenly the dragonmark stretched out from his arm, a pack of blazing serpents lashing at the air. The web of light wrapped around the dark sphere and then pulled back, and for a brief instant Thorn saw a ball of shimmering blue light trapped within the ruby net. Then the mark was back against Daine’s skin, and whatever Thorn had seen within was gone.

Daine rose to his feet. His eyes were closed, and his lips were moving, though he made no sound. The burning light of the dragonmark had faded, but there were erratic pulses every few seconds. Dreck and the dark elf said nothing and made no sound, and disturbed as she was by the scene, Thorn thought it wise to follow suit.

At last Daine opened his eyes. The lines across his left eye gleamed, and Thorn was certain that the patterns across his face were in a different configuration than when she’d first seen him.

“You may return to your duties, Dreck,” he said. He looked at the dark elf. “Xu’sasar, dispose of the bodies and take Thorn below.”

“You will be alone,” the drow woman Xu’sasar said. Clearly she disapproved.

“I am never alone,” he replied. A glimmer of light passed through his dragonmark, and the lines along his arm rose up from his flesh once more. These glowing tendrils were an inch from his flesh when they froze. Daine clenched his fist and grimaced, and the mark settled back down against his skin. “Nothing in this place will hurt me. Now do as I say. I will address the house when I am ready.”

Dreck inclined his head. The drow woman clicked her tongue against her teeth.

Daine looked back at Thorn. He was gritting his teeth, and it was clear he was in pain. But he still smiled slightly as he met her eyes. And there was that same look in his eyes, that sense of recognition. “Welcome to House Tarkanan, Lady Thorn. Steel yourself. We have much to do in the days ahead.”

Before she could speak, he turned away and strode out of the room.

There was a change in the air when the Son of Khyber left the room—the sense that a charge had dissipated. Thorn realized that the stone at the base of her spine had been ice-cold for the past few minutes, chilling the flesh around it. She’d been so distracted by the stranger that she hadn’t noticed, and now it was the fading chill that caught her attention.

Fileon’s corpse and the body of the Cannith boy were still stretched out on the floor. Beetles and other insects were crawling across their skin. Thorn examined Merrix’s son, trying to make sense of what she’d seen. The boy’s skin was smooth and pale, and he wasn’t breathing. There were no obvious injuries, save for the hole at the center of his chest—the socket that had once held the metal sphere.

“Explain this,” she said to Dreck.

“It is just what it seems, beloved. A vessel of flesh grown to house the consciousness held within the sphere. The original child died seven years ago, and Lady Ilena could not conceive again. But Lord Merrix was determined to
produce an heir, even if he had to produce that heir.”

Thorn ran her fingers over the corpse, feeling its cooling skin. Studying the boy’s face, there was nothing to suggest that he was anything but human. “How many more of these are there?” she said. “Can he make them to look like specific people?”

“I do not know, beloved. I served in Lord Merrix’s household, and he forged my form with his hands. I learned of the boy before I fled. I know that he was first of his kind, and that the sphere that held his soul was something Merrix acquired, not his creation. But it has been a year since I parted ways with my maker, and I know nothing of his recent work.”

The mere thought that Cannith could produce people brought bile to her throat. And yet … the love of a parent was a powerful thing. Perhaps the boy was unique, created solely to fill the gap in Ilena’s wounded heart. She needed more information.

“Enough.” If the drow Xu’sasar felt any remorse or sympathy for the dead, she didn’t show it. She pushed the bodies into the chasm in the center of the room, leaning over to make certain that they had disappeared into the depths. She turned back to the others. “Come,” she told Thorn.

Thorn glanced at Dreck. The warforged nodded. “I have my own duties to attend to, beloved. But our paths will cross again, and soon. Until then, remember the lessons taught to you by the Shaper of the Young, not his betrayal. Let your instincts be your guide. They will teach you all that you need to know about the powers of your blood.” He reached into a pouch and produced a small stone that glowed with the pale blue radiance of cold fire. He tossed it to her. “You will be walking through dark places. Take this, and trust your guide.”

Strange as he was, Dreck was the last familiar thing in this place, and Thorn felt a pang of sorrow to see him go. She still didn’t know why he called her “beloved,” but she’d grown used to it. “Watch yourself.”

“Come,” Xu’sasar repeated. The drow had slipped up behind Thorn, and her voice was a whisper in Thorn’s ear. “The world below awaits.”
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Undercity

Lharvion 20, 999 YK

Do you seek battle?” They were the first words Xu’sasar had said since she’d led Thorn from the broken chamber. She didn’t break her stride even as she spoke. Thorn had to struggle to keep up with her, and a few times Thorn had nearly tripped on the loose stone and debris scattered through the abandoned halls. Xu’sasar had ordered Thorn to follow directly in her footsteps, and it was easy to see why; even while jogging, Thorn had spotted the rippling auras of a number of wards, and once she had nearly stepped on a tripwire.

“What?” Thorn asked.

“Your hand reaches for your blade. You slew Fileon. Do you wish to try my skills?”

“Not in the least,” Thorn said, and it was the truth. Thorn might not have seen the dark elf fight, but she’d seen enough to know that she wouldn’t want her as an enemy. Xu’sasar was lean and swift, moving through the rubble with the deadly grace of a scorpion. Thorn’s senses were sharp enough to sense the wind moving around an invisible man, yet Xu’sasar had slipped to her side unnoticed. “This is unfamiliar ground for me, and I feel better with a weapon in my hand.”

Xu’sasar stopped moving. She was standing on the remains of a collapsed pillar, and she spun in place to face Thorn, perfectly comfortable on the uneven surface. “Draw then, dreamer. But there is a saying among my people: ‘When you hold the weapon, you call the battle.’”

Xu’sasar still held the strange, bone throwing wheel in her left hand, and the light of the cold fire gleamed against her silver-white hair and her chitin armor. But it wasn’t the weapon that sent a shiver along Thorn’s nerves.

“Dreamer? What do you mean by that?”

“His word, not mine,” the dark elf said. She turned and leaped off of the pillar, resuming her jog through the dusty labyrinth. “It is the word he spoke, when he first saw your image.”

“Who?” Thorn asked. But it seemed that the dark elf had said all that she intended to.

He was surely the Son of Khyber, and Thorn’s dreams had certainly been troubled of late. She could still hear the laughter of the fierce woman in red. How would this aberrant warlord know any of this?

All disturbing questions. But now she finally had the opportunity to consult with Steel, and she wasn’t going to pass it up. She pulled the dagger from the sheath, feeling his presence settle into her mind.

It’s about time, he whispered. I’ll need a full debriefing once we are alone, but we must establish what we can as quickly as possible. You have identified the Son of Khyber.

Thorn tapped his hilt once with her thumb.

Yes.

Good. And from what I could hear, the Cannith heir was some sort of construct. You are certain of this?

Tap.

Perhaps you were deceived. Even if such a thing were possible, it would surely require a creation forge, and the Treaty of Thronehold saw the forges shut down.

Thorn’s irritation grew, but there was no way to discuss the issue with Xu’sasar around. She tapped the dagger twice. She gestured at the dark elf and traced a cross on Steel’s hilt. Threat analysis.

Interesting. The drow is this Daine’s bodyguard? Those scars on her skin are consistent with the tribal customs of southern Xen’drik. She’s a long way from home.

He fell silent for a moment as he studied the mystical energies around Xu’sasar.

The locket she wears around her neck strengthens her flesh, giving it the resilience of leather, he said at last. But it is her weapon that concerns me. It’s a protean blade, capable of shifting form and function. It’s stronger and sharper than steel, capable of producing venom to coat the blade. I suspect there’s far more to it than that; I’ve never sensed such power in a single object, and it’s difficult for me to unravel the threads.

Thorn tapped the dagger and turned her attention to her surroundings. The style of architecture had changed. In their wild sprint, they had passed through sewers, catacombs, and buildings in the style of ancient Wroat, half-buried by the disaster that had destroyed the first human city to stand in this place. But this hall had no rubble on the ground nor cracks along the walls. It was austere and solid, carved into the bedrock deep beneath Sharn. She
recognized the style from the Great Crag of Droaam. It was the work of the Dhakaani goblins, a citadel carved into the depths long before the first human set foot on Khorvaire.

“Are we close to home?”

Xu’sasar said nothing, but she clicked her tongue. Then Thorn saw the barricade. This too was goblin craft, a bunker of thick stone with merlin slits for archers. Thorn could hear people shifting behind the wall and caught a glimpse of a dark face watching her over the stock of a crossbow.

*Careful,* Steel told her. *There’s a great deal of power in this place. There are wards to either side.*

“Follow my footsteps,” Xu’sasar said at the same moment.

Thorn could feel the energy around her, and she spotted the marks carved faintly into the stone. Not a standard Kundarak glyph, but similar enough to those used by the House of Warding. Someone in the fortress ahead had been born into House Kundarak.

Xu’sasar led Thorn up to the barricade and around it. Half-a-dozen soldiers stood watch behind the wall, as motley an assortment as Thorn had seen in any mercenary crew. A massive half-orc in a battered breastplate towered over a gnome, a little man leaning on a crossbow taller than he was. A sour-looking dwarf wore a bandolier holding crystal-tipped rods and wands—the tools of an artificer. An archer wore the ragged uniform of an Aundairian commando, while the archer’s companion was clad in the armor of Breland’s elite infantry. All they shared was a sense of grim determination. Thorn had served in the Royal Guard before she’d been recruited into the King’s Citadel. She could recognize the recruit who would break in the first charge and the veteran who would hold the line with the last drop of his blood. These Tarkanans were a strange assortment, but they wouldn’t go down easily.

The hallway behind the barricade was open, but Thorn could see a portcullis ready to fall. The Tarkanans had chosen their sanctuary well. Narrow corridors. Wards and traps of unknown potency hidden across the hall. And a squad behind cover holding the gate. All in all, a strong position even without magic, and without a doubt the guards bore marks that made them dangerous opponents to an attacking force. It was exactly why she’d wanted to charm her way into the fortress. If she’d taken Steel’s earlier advice and had forced the location from Dreck, it would have been a challenging place to break on its own.

Fascinating,* Steel whispered. *It’s been well established that Sharn was built over Dhakaani ruins, but I’ve never heard of such a fortress.*

Perhaps with good reason, Thorn thought. She shouldn’t talk to Steel without Xu’sasar hearing, but she could always speak to both of them at once. “Some of the rubble in the last hallway—that was recent demolition, wasn’t it? You had to dig to find this place.”

Xu’sasar blew out her breath but said nothing more. But Thorn felt Steel’s approval.

Yes. *Most of the damage to the tunnels above is ancient, likely dating to the War of the Mark. But the broken wall in the shrine of the Nine, that was recent work. Which begs the question of how they knew where to look—though I don’t expect your drow friend to answer that.*

The hallway was narrow and sparse. Torches set into the walls shed pale cold fire light, and Thorn slipped Fileon’s glowing stone into a pouch on her belt. In truth, she hadn’t needed the light, but there had been no reason to let Xu’sasar or any of the others have the ability to see in the shadows.

Thorn expected to get a tour of the place, perhaps to be shown to quarters. But it seemed Xu’sasar had little interest in prolonging their journey. Sound and smell revealed the nature of their destination before Thorn actually saw it. Laughter and voices raised in conversation echoed off the walls, and the smell of broth and ale filled the air. It was the canteen, and as they entered the room, Thorn saw a score of people spread among six long tables. Elves, humans, and halflings rubbed shoulders with dwarves, gnomes, and others, and accents and clothing suggested the diverse lands from which they hailed. There were a few who seemed to have suffered from their marks, much like Fileon—a man with rotting skin, a woman whose dragonmarked hands lacked fingers—but most seemed physically sound. The strangest figure in the common room was also the most familiar—the dwarf Brom, who sat on the end of a bench with his massive arm resting against the floor.

“Thorn!” he called to her. He’d changed out of his bloody clothes and seemed to have completely recovered from his ghastly injuries. “Come meet the wretches you’ll be bunking with. And the rest of you, give our youngest sister a fair welcome! The last man to cross her is feeding the beetles now, or I miss my guess.”

Thorn turned to ask Xu’sasar if she had other plans, but the dark elf had already slipped away. The crowd quickly engulfed Thorn. The ale was warm and weak, the bread and soup no match for the delicacies she’d had in the manor in Dragon Towers. But the company was certainly interesting. The woman missing her fingers was called Palmer, and she proved to be remarkably adept at manipulating objects despite her warped hands. Shrew was a halfling, who chose not to shake hands due to his poisonous touch. The most unusual was Whisper, an elf whose mark absorbed
almost all sound in his immediate vicinity. He had to shout to be heard at all, and even then his voice was little more
than a murmur.

It was Brom who stayed by her side, and the dwarf soon showed her around the fortress. It was smaller than she’d
thought. Her guess was that there were a hundred people garrisoned in the subterranean keep. Barracks, armory,
infirmary, storeroom, training hall. There was little of interest in any of these places. But there was one place Brom
didn’t take her. Two guards stood at the top of a narrow stairwell leading down to a lower level of the citadel.

“What’s down there?” Thorn asked. She’d already guessed the answer, and Brom’s words confirmed it.

“The Son of Khyber takes his rest in the chamber below,” Brom told her. “Some say he sleeps on a bed of Khyber
shards. Others say he has gathered the bones of dragons. Whatever the truth may be, dark Xu is the only one allowed
in his chambers.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

Brom laughed. “The stories say that it’s for our own good. Have you seen the way his mark reaches out from his
skin? There’s those who swear that while Lord Daine sleeps, his mark can reach out of its own will and strike a man
dead.”

“Not exactly an inspiring trait for a leader.”

The dwarf slapped the floor with his mighty palm. “Wait until you hear him speak, little Thorn. Wait until you see
him in battle. He is a troubled one, yes, but he is not alone in that, not in this place. But there is a force within him.
He walks the path of the Prophecy, or I miss my guess.”

“What about that Xu’sasar? She doesn’t even have a dragonmark, does she?”

Brom shrugged. “She was at Daine’s side when he came to us in Dragon Towers. I don’t know what binds the two
of them together, but she never leaves his side unless he orders it.”

“Were you there? When he first arrived?”

Brom nodded. “Lady Tavin was our leader then. Daine walked into the hall as though he owned it, asked to see
the ‘eldest child of Tarkanan.’ None of us had ever seen a mark of such size before, and he has such confidence.
Lady Tavin came to the hall, and he said…” The dwarf tugged at his ragged beard, mismatched eyes closed in
thought. “‘You have done your work well. You have prepared our people for the war that lies ahead. But it is I who
must lead them in that struggle.’ Tavin took him to her quarters, and darkness fell before they emerged again. But
when they returned, she ceded her role to him. It was he who led us to this place, who diverted funds from our
business as a guild to establish these hidden fortresses.”

“How did he even know about this place?”

Brom pulled at his beard again. “That is a twisted knot. As I see it—” He broke off as the sound of a bell echoed
throughout the hall. “Assembly,” he said, taking her wrist and pulling her back toward the common room. “Quickly
now.”

Moments later they were in the main hall. Dozens of Tarkanans squeezed into the chamber. All eyes were on the
front of the hall, where the Son of Khyber stood. Xu’sasar stood behind him, a silent shadow. His mark pulsed with
ruddy light as he spoke.

“Brothers and sisters!” he called out. His voice was deep and strong, reverberating off the walls of the chamber.
“Children of Tarkanan. The time has come to seize our destiny. Tomorrow we go to war. Let the heirs of Cannith
sleep soundly tonight, for tomorrow we will strike a blow they’ll never forget.”

Thorn’s hand was resting on Steel’s hilt, and the dagger whispered into her mind. It sounds like you’re going to
have a busy night, he said.
The crimson mark of the Son of Khyber rippled along his skin, reminding Thorn of a flickering flame. His personality was a palpable force in the room. Absolute silence held the room as the assembled Tarkanans waited for his next word, and Thorn found that she was holding her breath.

Daine was silent for a moment, as he gazed over his assembled forces. His eyes met Thorn’s, and at that moment the shard in her lower back sent an icy chill through her nerves. Then he spoke.

“We stand on the eve of war. Those who fight at my side tomorrow may not survive the battle. I want you all to understand the nature of this struggle, to know why it is worth the sacrifice.”

A murmur passed through the hall, and a few people nodded.

“You all know the myth,” Daine continued. “How at the dawn of time, three dragons fought for dominance. Khyber tore Siberys to pieces and scattered him across the sky. Eberron bound Khyber. All natural life comes from Eberron, but the most remarkable creatures are those touched by one of the other Progenitors—the dragons born of the blood of Siberys, the demons that rose from the depths to rule the newborn world, and the other wonders and terrors that share our world.”

An interesting time for a fable, Steel whispered.

Thorn was equally puzzled. At the same time, she was entranced. Daine was a master storyteller, and it was hard not to be swept away with the fable.

“The Progenitors stand above the gods. They are the architects of reality, aware of all the paths the future might take. And for whatever reason, they chose to share these mysteries with mortals. The answers lie in symbols left by the fissures of earthquakes, the motion of the moons, glyphs traced out by lava flows and hurricanes. These are the pieces of the great Prophecy. And three thousand years ago, the Progenitors chose a new canvas for the Prophecy. The dragonmark, traced across living flesh.

“It took time for people to understand the meaning of the marks, the powers they possessed. But it soon became clear that there were two sorts of marks. The true-breeding marks of the Twelve could be passed from father to son. They were reliable. Predictable. And for the most part, constructive as opposed to destructive. Healing. Creation. Defense. The families who carried these marks quickly claimed them as gifts of Siberys, a blessing fallen from the sky.”

He held up his hand, and the lines of his mark danced across his skin.

“And then there were the other marks. Chaotic. Unpredictable. And dangerous. Marks of fear and fire. People who could kill with a touch or sow terror in the minds of others. Difficult to control, often dangerous even to the bearer. But dragonmarks nonetheless. They called these aberrant marks and said they were a sign of Khyber’s touch. And perhaps they are. But Khyber is a part of our world. Above, below, and between—you cannot have one without the others. Khyber’s voice can be heard in the Prophecy, and we have our role to play in the future of this world.

“In the past, our kind were almost as numerous as the children of the Twelve. We never know if we will pass our marks to our children, but our marks are free, not bound to any bloodline. We can appear anywhere. And so we spread across the nations. But we were scattered, and that was our weakness. We lacked unity. The Twelve saw us as threat and scapegoat. They hunted us, and by the time our leaders saw the full scope of the menace, it was too late. But even if we could not win this war, Halas Tarkanan was determined that we should not fall without a fight. He gathered our people and made of us an army. We lacked the resources of the Twelve, and propaganda turned every hand against us. We made them pay for their victory. But in the end we fell.”

It wasn’t just the dragonmarked who paid that price, Steel whispered. What of the people of Sharn?

The aberrants didn’t choose the fight, Thorn thought. Should they have just laid down and died? However, Steel couldn’t hear her thoughts, and he did not respond.

Daine continued. “For over a thousand years, the touch of Khyber was all but unknown. Where it appeared—usually when those of the Twelve mingled their precious blood—it was called a curse, the marks even cut from the flesh of the children who bore them. We were painted as monsters. But while we suffered, there was one blessing for the world. The rise of Galifar held the ambition of the dragonmarked houses in check. Their power grew, but they
could not challenge the Five Nations when they stood as one. It was no vengeance for what had been done to us. But it was a beginning.

“And so we find ourselves in the here and now. Galifar is no more, while the Twelve are more powerful than ever. House Lyrandar commands the air. House Cannith stands ready to produce legions of steel and stone. Phiarlan and Thuranni watch from every shadow. And the kings of this land are so afraid of each other that they dare not challenge the true threat. That is our role. That is why Khyber’s touch has been seen in greater numbers with each generation since the war began. We are destined to return balance to this world.”

He drew his sword, and its polished blade gleamed in the torchlight. Thorn saw a symbol on the hilt: the same sun-and-eye symbol she’d seen on the Deneith brooch.

“Some of you know my history,” Daine said. “Others do not. My name is Daine, and I was born to the Halar family of House Deneith, fifteen hundred and thirty years ago. Halas Tarkanan was my cousin, and in my younger days we clashed on the battlefield. Then my own mark appeared. If not for my cousin, I would have been killed by my own father.”

Impossible, Steel whispered. He wasn’t alone. Murmurs rippled across the crowd. Daine’s deep voice silenced the whispers. Somehow his calm voice made even the ridiculous seem possible.

“If this sounds like a miracle, it is. I fell in battle alongside my cousin. But my soul was saved from Dolurrh and trapped within dreams until destiny called for me. I have been freed from the Keeper’s grasp to finish the fight my cousin could not win. And I tell you that this time we shall not fail! This time we are the tools of the Prophecy, and we shall change the course of history!”

These words were met with a roar of approval. For all that his words seemed like madness, Daine’s presence was a powerful force, and the growing enthusiasm of the crowd was infectious. Brom pounded on the floor with his mighty fist, cheering the loudest of all. Only one person seemed unaffected by the speech: Xu’sasar. The dark elf stood in Daine’s shadow, silent and still.

Daine waited for the noise of the crowd to subside before he continued. “The founders of this House have done well to bring you together, and we have already begun to build our forces in other cities. This is our time, and our numbers will surely continue to grow in days to come. However, we will never be able to match the Twelve on the field of battle. They have fortress enclaves in every major city, private armies, resources gathered from fifteen hundred years of preying on the people of Khorvaire. So we will not fight them on the battlefield. We are no nation. We don’t need to conquer and hold territory. We shall strike where they are most vulnerable and be gone before they have time to react. And we strike tomorrow!”

We cannot allow that, Steel whispered. His voice was clear in Thorn’s mind even over the cheering crowd.

“Tomorrow we will destroy a forgehold of House Cannith. Each of you will have a role to play. Some will join me on the assault itself. Others will engage in acts across the city that will help to distract the house from our efforts. And the remainder will stay here, ready to defend, to tend to the injured, or to evacuate should the need arise. But make no mistake. As of this moment, you are soldiers. The War of the Mark begins anew. Together, we shall avenge every child of Khyber unjustly slain, and save Khorvaire itself from its deadliest foe!”

Daine raised his sword as he spoke, and his mark burned with brilliant light. The crowd roared and shouted, brandishing weapons and stomping their feet. Thorn rose with them, cheering with the crowd. But it was a show for those around her. Behind the mask, her thoughts were racing. And Steel’s whispers confirmed her fears.

He has to die, Steel said. Tonight.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Undercity

Lharvion 20, 999 YK

Many of the Tarkanans remained in the common room after the speech, drinking and discussing the challenges the morrow would bring. Others had retired to the barracks, choosing to rest for the exertions that lay ahead. Thorn wandered the halls until she found a quiet corner. Drawing Steel, she crouched on the balls of her feet, her back set against the wall. There was a chance someone might come this way, but she wasn’t worried. When she thought back to Zae and her rats, it seemed unlikely that anyone would question a new girl muttering to her dagger.

“So why does he have to die?”

Don’t start this again. Tomorrow they plan to destroy a Cannith forgehold. Aside from the lives that would be lost in such an action, House Cannith is a strategic partner of our nation.

“And Karrnath, and Thrane, and Aundair …”

All the more reason to prevent this attack. The goods produced locally are those most likely to reach Brelish markets. Suppose that Karrnath launches an attack against us. Even if we haven’t alienated the house, if their production facilities within Breland have been destroyed, Karrnath will likely receive the greater share of their goods.

“So Daine was right,” Thorn said.

About what?

“‘The kings of this land are so afraid of each other that they dare not challenge the true threat.’”

Since when did House Cannith become a threat?

“The moment it started producing human warforged.”

“I’m still unconvinced that what you saw was what it appeared to be. And you are not one of these people. They are murderers.”

“And I’m not? Barely a day has passed since I killed a Deneith Sentinel. By touching him, let me remind you. He said I deserved to die for my tainted flesh, and he almost killed me. So he wasn’t my enemy?”

He was fooled by Fileon and the false mark you wear on your face—

“And would have killed me because of it.”

He was fooled by your mark. He was indeed your enemy. And perhaps Merrix is as well. But House Deneith is not. House Cannith is not. You are an agent of Breland, Lantern Thorn. The parameters of this mission have always been clear. Learn what House Tarkanan is planning. Identify their new leader. And if necessary, eliminate him. It has become necessary. It’s not simply a question of stopping tomorrow’s attack. For years House Tarkanan has been content to play a minor role in the criminal underworld. This Son of Khyber has turned them into soldiers. If he is removed, the will to fight may die with him. Will you fulfill your duty?

Thorn sighed. As much as she hated it, he was right. This was her mission. “Yes.”

Your evaluation?

“I’ll have to act alone. I’m sure I could get away from here. But they’ve got a strong defensive position at the main gate, and there’s an evacuation plan in place. As you say, the primary goal has to be to kill Daine, and a frontal assault would surely give him time to escape.”

Agreed. And truth be told, I don’t entirely trust the commanding officer of the Sharn Dark Lanterns. You have a plan?


It seems unlikely. There are a few cults that claim that the Keeper saves the souls of heroes from Dolurrh so they may be returned when they are needed. But there’s no documented evidence of it ever happening. Although …

“Yes?”

There was a Daine who fought for Deneith in the War of the Mark, a master swordsman and commander of troops. But the accounts of the battles say that he was killed by Halas Tarkanan.

Thorn frowned. “Whose records?”
Almost all accounts of the War of the Mark were recorded by scribes of House Sivis.

“Who surely wouldn’t have any interest in skewing the story to avoid any mention of an officer developing an aberrant dragonmark and shifting sides.”

There was a pause as Steel considered this. I see your point. Nonetheless, I suspect it’s just a story he’s using to influence his troops.

“Good. Because if he has been pulled back to this world after being dead for fifteen hundred years and charged to change the course of history …”

Yes?

“I’d imagine history won’t be so pleased when I spoil its plans.”

Perhaps he has been chosen to change the course of history, and you’ve been chosen to change it back.

Thorn shook her head. “I hate prophecies.” She stood and spun Steel in one hand. “Let’s see if we can cut the threads of fate.”

* * * * *

Two guards stood on duty when Thorn finally made her way to Daine’s chambers. She did her best to ignore them, fixing her eyes on the hallway ahead, and as she’d hoped, the two sentinels barely acknowledged her as she walked between them.

Well done, Steel whispered. The dagger was in her hand, but thanks to the glamer she’d woven, he appeared to be a bone throwing wheel. Thorn’s skin was pitch-black, while her blackened mithral vambraces now appeared to be made of opalescent chitin. The guards didn’t see a half-elf recruit. As far as they could tell, she was Xu’sasar, the one person always allowed in Daine’s personal quarters.

It was a calculated risk. Odds were good that the dark elf was already down below. But even if the guards had seen her pass earlier, Thorn was trusting that they wouldn’t question the drow. Given the talent for stealth Xu’sasar had displayed when dealing with Thorn, she hoped that the guards would just think that they’d somehow failed to notice when Xu had come up from below. Thorn focused on mimicking Xu’sasar’s graceful gait. Her spell might give her the appearance of the dark elf, but it was a challenge to match her unusual movements.

She was carrying the sack she’d been given up on the surface—the bag she’d used to transport Fileon’s corpse and the Cannith child down to Khyber’s Gate. The plan was simple enough. Kill Daine, Xu’sasar, and anyone else she found below, then take the body of the dark elf with her. Once clear, drop the disguise and dispose of the body, leaving the "escaped" dark elf to take the blame for the murder.

No torches lit the hall below, and Thorn’s vision shifted into the gray tones of darkvision. She moved as quietly as she could, sliding slowly along the edge of the wall. What surprised her was just how far the passage went. She’d assumed that the commander’s quarters would lie directly below the rest of the fortress. Instead, the tunnel led away from the halls above. Veins of smooth basalt ran through the rougher stone. The passage had been carved through the rock itself. But for what end? Why push away from the rest of the base?

The answer soon became clear. The narrow tunnel opened into a massive chamber. A basalt altar stood in the center of the room, a long dark table carved from the floor itself. Narrow niches covered the walls, and Thorn could see a stub of bone protruding from the nearest of these.

A crypt, Steel mused.

“More like an ossuary,” Thorn whispered, thinking back to a previous mission. It seemed a likely assessment. Glancing in one of the nearby alcoves, Thorn saw a dozen goblin skulls grinning up at her. And there were tools scattered about the altar—rusted knives and remnants of shattered pottery, likely tools and salves used by embalmers.

Then she saw the net.

Four pillars of dark stone surrounded an altar. But these columns weren’t ceiling supports, as Thorn had first thought. Instead, a wide net was stretched out between the pillars, the rope in remarkably good condition considering its apparent age. Bones were trapped within the mesh. More than just bones: Thorn could see pieces of rusted armor and decaying cloth. The remnants of a hundred bodies or more, suspended a good twenty feet from the floor.

There are open shafts in the ceiling, Steel observed. This must have been a central repository for bodies. A corpse would be dropped into a pit somewhere above, and routed here, falling into the net until the embalmers could tend to it. From the looks of things, they had a little more work than they could handle.

“I hate it when work piles up,” Thorn said. She examined the room closely, watching and listening for any signs of motion, but there was nothing. Bits of bone were scattered across the floor, pieces that had slipped through the net
above. Eerie as it was, the room seemed to be empty. Thorn could see the mouth of a tunnel on the opposite side of the chamber, and so she carefully began to make her way across.

She was almost at the altar when Xu’sasar struck. The drow woman had been pressed against one of the pillars, and now she stepped out behind Thorn. Her bone wheel spun through the air, curved points glistening with venom. Fortunately, Thorn had been expecting an attack. There was no time for conscious action, but the instant she heard the whirl of the wheel, Thorn rolled down and to the side, twisting to face her opponent. The throwing wheel smashed into a pillar behind her, and Thorn heard the rattle as shards of stone fell to the floor. The wheel spun back through the air before she could move, returning to Xu’sasar’s hand with supernatural swiftness.

“I do not fear death,” Xu’sasar said as she drew back for another throw. “And I am not afraid to slay my reflection.”

Thorn rolled behind the altar before the blow could land. As before, there was a shower of shards as the bone wheel struck the stone pillar. The force of the throw was amazing, as was the fact that the bone was unaffected by the impact. Thorn couldn’t risk being hit. But she did have one advantage. She could see in the darkness, but she’d also been able to fight a medusa with her eyes closed, guided solely by sound and scent. Xu’sasar had managed to take Thorn by surprise, but now Thorn was able to pinpoint the dark elf’s position, even as she crouched behind the altar. She heard the whisper of the bone blade as it returned to Xu’sasar’s hand, heard the soft sounds of the dark elf creeping closer to Thorn.

Xu’sasar leaped over the altar in one swift motion, a jump surely empowered by magic. Her bone weapon had shifted both shape and mass, and now it was a long blade on a short haft, wielded in both hands. But Thorn was ready. When the drow was at the apex of her leap, Thorn rose and hurled the bag of holding at her. Thorn couldn’t catch the dark elf in the sack, but the heavy leather folds caught Xu’sasar full in the face, and she landed off balance. She was still swift enough to raise an armored wrist to block Thorn’s attack, but Thorn wasn’t striking with Steel. She wrapped her fingers around Xu’sasar’s forearm and activated the false dragonmark.

The tattoo burned around her eye, and Thorn felt the fire flowing through her veins. Xu’sasar stiffened, but she didn’t cry out and she didn’t fall.

Xu’sasar clenched her teeth, and a hammer slammed into Thorn’s chest—a powerful kick that sent her reeling backward. Thorn barely managed to stay on her feet. Luckily, the pain had slowed Xu’sasar. The tip of the bone glaive burned as it scraped against Thorn’s shoulder, and Thorn prayed that there wasn’t enough poison in the wound to bring her down.

Now the advantage was with Xu’sasar. The length of her long blade moved with deadly speed and kept her out of Thorn’s reach. It took every trace of Thorn’s skills to hold her foe at bay, and she had to give ground with each exchange. Xu’sasar was pressing her back to one of the stone columns. And then Thorn had her plan.

Reaching with her free hand, Thorn summoned the myrnaxe she had bound within the glove. Let your instincts be your guide, Fileon had told her. Thorn drew on his lessons. She didn’t try to summon the mysterious energy that lay within her, the burst of power that had saved her in the past. She just focused on the throw, on putting all of her strength into the blow. And the power came, responding to her need.

She threw the axe one-handed, but she barely felt its weight. It was a clumsy blow, and Xu’sasar was able avoid the deadly blade. But the drow was still disoriented from pain, and the sheer force of this blow sent her sprawling backward. Another step brought Thorn to the pillar, and a slash with Steel severed the rope supporting the overladen net. The cord was thick and unnaturally tough, perhaps strengthened by alchemical means, but it still gave way to Steel. Before Xu’sasar could rise, an avalanche of bone and rusty metal was upon her—brittle corpses of goblin soldiers flowing down in a ghastly torrent. Darting back, Thorn escaped the bones, but Xu’sasar was buried beneath it. Skulls rolled across the floor, and the crumbling breastplate of a fallen bugbear scraped against the stone.

Thorn tightened her grip on Steel and studied the heap of bones. She’d managed to pin Xu’sasar, but it was unlikely that the dark elf was seriously injured. Thorn needed to finish her quickly, before she could work her way free from the bones. She studied the scattered bones, searching for any signs of movement, listening for the sound of labored breathing. But the motion she heard came from behind her, as someone entered the room.

It was Daine. His sword was in his hand, and the blade glowed with pale, silver light that illuminated the room. His dragonmark twisted around his arm, rippling like flame.

Thorn froze. She was still disguised as Xu’sasar, and the true dark elf was completely hidden beneath the bones. Steel was in her hand. She could finish this here. If Daine lowered his guard, one well-placed throw was all it would take to cripple him. She waited, watching, searching for the opening she needed.

“Thorn,” Daine said. She felt a chill in the crystal shard as she met his gaze. “I thought I might see you tonight. Come. You and I have much to discuss.”
Chapter Sixteen

The Undercity

Lharvion 21, 999 YK

Thorn kept Steel at the ready. Despite his words, Daine was still on his guard. It would be difficult to strike a lethal blow at this distance, and she just didn’t know what he was capable of. Draw it out, she thought. Wait for him to slip.

“I don’t understand,” she said. It was hard to perfectly match Xu’asar’s style and idiom, but the magic that hid her face also altered her voice. And fortunately, if Xu’asar was alive, it appeared that she’d been rendered unconscious by the flood of bones.

Daine smiled, but his sword never faltered. He raised his dragonmarked hand. “I can feel you, Thorn. It’s part of my gift. When I touched you before, I tasted your soul. It will take more than such a little spell to hide your presence from me. And I know why you are here. You came to us from the Dark Lanterns, but you never truly left their ranks, did you?”

Part of Thorn wanted to hurl her blade, to fight or flee as quickly as possible. And yet, there were no signs that Daine had alerted any guards. And his confidence was both unnerving and curious. What did he know about her?

“If you believe this, why am I still alive?”

“Because in spite of what you may believe, we are not enemies. Come. Lower your glamer and listen to what I have to say. And if I am wrong”—he slowly lowered his sword—“you will have your chance to kill me.”

Close and strike, Steel told her. Finish this. “And Xu’asar?” Thorn said.

Daine glanced at the mass of bones, and the lines traced across his left eye gleamed. “She will live. And I think this is a matter best kept between the two of us.” He turned and walked slowly out of the chamber. “Follow or fight, as you will.”

His back was exposed. Now was the moment. There were a host of vital areas Thorn could strike. Still she hesitated. If he wanted her dead, he could have turned the whole garrison against her. He actually wanted to talk to her. Why?

Lantern Thorn, do your duty! Steel said.

“Perhaps I am,” she whispered, returning the dagger to his sheath. She followed Daine from the hall, kicking the skull of a young goblin out of the way.

Images of Khorvaire were engraved on the walls of Daine’s chamber—tactical maps ranging in scope from a detailed map of Breland to a broad view of the entire continent. Chalk lines covered the walls, notes and details that only made sense to the Son of Khyber. In-depth maps of Sharn had been glued to one part of the wall. Aside from the maps, the room was surprisingly austere. Writing supplies were set atop a battered chest, and the only piece of furniture was a stone slab covered with a thin blanket, which presumably served as a bed.

“I don’t sleep much,” Daine said, following her gaze. “I’ve spent too much time in dreams, and there are things I’d rather not see again.”

Presumably he was referring to the strange tale he’d told the assembled crowd, of being a man drawn out of time. Did he truly believe this? Still, at the moment, there were more pressing issues.

“You say you know who I am.” Thorn didn’t feel like listening to Steel at the moment, but she still kept her hand close to his hilt. As curious as she was, it was hard to imagine what he might say that would turn her from her path.

“Yes,” Daine said. “A Dark Lantern, troubled by dreams and dragonshards.”

“And how can you know that?”

He looked at her, his gaze oddly distorted by the dragonmark running across his left eye. For the first time, she felt a sense of uncertainty about him. Up to now, he had always been the strong leader, never a sign of doubt or weakness. But now he hesitated, and for a moment she felt that she was looking at just Daine, as opposed to the Son of Khyber. “You heard the story I told before. To you it may sound like madness, but I lived through it. I spent centuries in dreams, and I saw glimpses of what lies ahead—glimpses of the Prophecy. I saw you at my side. I don’t know why. I don’t know exactly what role you have to play in the challenges that lie ahead. But I know that you are
a part of this, and I told Fileon to watch for you.”

“And yet you know that I serve the Citadel. Aren’t you afraid that I’ll kill you?”

He smiled. “Not as simple as you might think, I assure you. And I knew it was a risk.”

“And yet you brought me down here. Why?”

“Two reasons, I suppose. I know that the Twelve have coerced the Citadel into investigating our actions. They know that we have been building our forces, though they don’t realize the danger that they face. I believe that when you learn all the facts, you will do the right thing.”

Thorn considered this. “That’s one. What’s the other?”

“You’ve been sent to kill me. And I think that you could, when the time is right. But not tonight.”

They say madness is the price of an aberrant mark, Thorn thought. “So what are these facts that will stay my hand?”

“Lessons you’ve learned these past few days. You’ve heard of Fileon’s betrayal. In Sorghan d’Deneith you’ve faced the blind hatred of the houses.”

Thorn laughed. “Not much of an argument. One bigot hardly incriminates his entire house, regardless of how vile he is. And Fileon’s tale is just that: a story. From someone I’m surprised you of all people would ask me to trust, I might add.”

“Tell me you don’t believe it. Why are you here now? As a tool of the Twelve. Today they command your service. Tomorrow they might call for your death. Tell me you’re comfortable with these merchants buying your services. I’ve heard that you told Fileon that you wouldn’t kill for gold. Tell me, then: what is it you were about to do?”

Thorn said nothing. These were the same fears she’d already had. He might just as well have been reading her mind.

Daine smiled. “Tomorrow we will destroy a Cannith forgehold.”

“So you’ve said. I fail to see the benefit to Breland.”

“That’s because you’ve never heard of our target. We’re not going to attack the central enclave. The strike will target a facility hidden below Sharn: the personal holding of Merrix d’Cannith.”

Thorn frowned. “So it’s not a public facility. It’s still supplying industrial support to Breland—”

“Nothing done in this forgehold will ever be shared with Breland. This isn’t just a private workshop. Lord Merrix has a creation forge here in Sharn, in direct violation of the Treaty of Thronehold.”

Thorn wrapped her fingers around Steel’s hilt. The dagger’s presence flowed into her mind, and she could feel his surprise. The creation forges were the greatest inventions of House Cannith. They were the engines that produced the warforged, living soldiers of metal and wood. During the Last War, Cannith had produced tens of thousands of warforged, selling them to every nation. When the struggle came to an end, the Treaty of Thronehold included the provision that all creation forges would be destroyed—an effort to limit Cannith’s power and prevent an arms race.

If Merrix had a working creation forge, he was challenging the direct orders of the sovereigns of Khorvaire. And if he had a creation forge, he could have a warforged army of his own.

What is his proof? Steel asked.

“How would you know about this?” Thorn asked.

“You’ve seen the boy,” Daine told her. “That … thing in the shape of a child. Tell me that doesn’t concern you, that you don’t see the danger it represents.”

Thorn said nothing, but the image of the corpse flashed through her mind, the body with the socket in its chest.

“Dreck learned of the boy, knew that he’d been made in a secret forge, but he couldn’t find its location. But the boy knew the place of his birth.” Daine turned up his left palm, and the glowing dragonmark crawled across his skin. “I have power to bind souls within my mark. I can still hear their voices, and with effort I can draw on their memories. Merrix’s son had a semblance of a soul trapped within its shell. I saw the forge itself through that boy’s eyes, and it’s his memories that will lead us to it.”

As before, the lines of the mark began to pull free of Daine’s skin, rising up from his palm. As it did, the stone at the base of her spine grew even colder, and Daine himself winced. He clenched his fist, pressing the mark against his flesh, and the chill in the stone passed.

“Fight at my side tomorrow,” Daine said. “Give me the chance to prove what I have told you. My people are no threat to Breland. It is the ambition of the dragonmarked houses that threatens us all. They are no longer afraid of Galifar. They are using you. And unless something is done, it is only a matter of time before the balance of power fully slips into their grasp.”
Thorn considered it. “And Merrix can hardly complain about the loss of a forge he’s not supposed to possess.”

Daine nodded. “Nor can he seek vengeance against your Breland for an action taken by the criminals of House Tarkanan. Perhaps your king cannot risk angering the Twelve. But let us do what must be done.” He held out his gloved right hand. “I need you for this, Thorn. I need your skills. Will you help me do what must be done?”

I suppose—

Steel’s voice was cut off as Thorn released the dagger and took Daine’s hand. “I will.”

He smiled, his dragonmarked eye gleaming in the torchlight. “I thank you for your trust. Tomorrow you will see that it is a battle worth fighting. For the moment, I suggest you rest. We’ve got a challenging day ahead.” He glanced toward the door. “I think it’s best that you avoid Xu’asas for the next few hours.”

Thorn nodded and turned to go. She took hold of Steel as she retraced her path through the hallway.

A hidden creation forge, Steel mused. I hate to admit it, but he’s right. We’ve always known Merrix was an ambitious man. If he’s hiding such a thing from Boranel, who knows what else he’s been doing? Being able to gather intelligence and destroy the forge while blaming it on the Tarkanans … it’s an invaluable opportunity.

Thorn knew that tone. “But …?”

We still don’t know that it’s true. And even if it is, he admits to stealing the soul of that child, artificial though it may be. If you believe his claims, he stole his own body from a descendent of his. Be careful. It may be that his goals serve Breland. But how long will that last?

“I don’t know,” Thorn said. “All I know for certain is that I could use a good night’s sleep.”

Very well then, Steel whispered. I trust you’ll have pleasant dreams.

The dagger never laughed, but Thorn could feel his mirth as she released him.
Had the appetite, I would feast on your flesh, little half-elf. But instead I will give you to the storm.”

The voice was as loud as thunder, and Thorn could feel the vibrations through the floor. Impressive as it was, it was nothing next to the speaker. Drulkalatar Atesh was a lord of the first age of Eberron, a giant with the head of a tiger and vast leathery wings painted in black and crimson. Lightning crackled around his hooked talons, and as he raised his arms, a howling wind whirled around him, pressing Thorn against the floor.

Memories rushed back to her. Droaam. The Stormblade mission. She’d tracked down the architect of disaster, only to find that he was a demon in disguise.

Drulkalatar raised his hands, and arcs of lightning surrounded Thorn, crackling around her. She dropped to her knees, howling in agony. Pain tore through every muscle, and she could feel bones breaking under the pressure. Her body was twisting, joints coming apart, blood burning in her veins. And then the pain was gone. Her blood still burned, but now this felt right. The fire was a source of power and comfort, the same energy she’d used to fight Fileon. She spread her wings and glared down at the little demon.

She’d become a dragon, with scales the color of fresh blood and long, black talons.

“Storm?” she snarled, and now it was her voice that shook the room. “I prefer fire.”

She could feel the fear of the tiger-headed fiend. But that surprise was mingled with familiarity. He knew her.

He spoke a name. Her name. But it slipped from her mind the moment that she heard it. “Begone from this place!”

She laughed at him, and her angry words took the form of fire, scorching his flesh and burning holes in his shielding wings. He called the winds to fight her, throwing her back with a hurricane blast. She stumbled but still lashed out with her tail, smashing him to the floor.

“Why are you doing this?” he cried when the tide of battle calmed for an instant. “You know what I want. Leave me be, and together we will revel in the savage time that lies ahead.”

She laughed, and they clashed again. He struck at her with bolts and blades of lightning, but the raw magic in her blood was so powerful that the blasts shattered without touching her. He summoned hosts of feral beasts to his aid and laughed as they swarmed toward her.

“I know what I am,” she told him. “I am the Angel of Flame. And your plans end here.”

Fire flowed from her mouth, engulfing the oncoming horde. When the flames settled, Drulkalatar’s minions were ash, and the fiend himself was scorched, the flesh nearly flayed from his bones. Before he could cast another spell, Thorn pounced, her massive fore-paws pinning him to the floor.

“Why?” he asked, staring up at her. “Why would you do this?”

“I don’t know yet,” she said. “But I will.”

“I cannot die,” he said. “You of all creatures should know that. I will return. And you will pay for this.” He spoke that name again, and as before, it slipped away from her ears.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “And my name’s Thorn.”

Reaching down, she caught the crippled demon between her jaws. She raised him up in the air, slowly crushing him. And then, as she felt his resistance fading, she unleashed her anger. Fire flowed through her teeth, and Drulkalatar was at the heart of the flames. His bones melted away, his body vaporizing in the intense heat. But she could still feel the last trace of his presence, the essence of his evil. His spirit. And before he could slip away, she swallowed him. She felt a flash of pure hatred, surprise, and fear. And then he was gone.

Thorn’s eyes snapped open. She was lying in her bunk. The crystal shard in her neck burned against her flesh, and for a moment she felt Drulkalatar’s presence at the heart of it, as if the demon lord were driving a red-hot dagger into her spine. She staggered off the bunk and made her way to the infirmary, clutching at her neck.

“Dreamlily,” she told the halfling minding the stores. The narcotic was one of the few things she’d found that could ease the pain of the shards when it reached this level. And she still felt Drulkalatar’s gaze weighing on her, the
gleaming eyes of the predator.

The halfling hadn’t seen Thorn before and was readying his stock to tend to any Tarkanans who might be injured in the attack on the forgehold. Even before he opened his mouth, Thorn knew that he wasn’t going to help her. “What seems to be the probl—”

She gripped the front of his shirt and lifted him off the ground. Her pain and anger must have triggered the mysterious power within her, for he felt all but weightless as he rose in her grip. “Dreamlily,” she snarled. She tossed him back against a pile of bandages, harder than she’d intended. “Now!”

The halfling rose to his feet and scurried over to a chest of drawers, producing a small clay vial from within. He tried to find his voice and to protest as he turned around, but Thorn’s fierce gaze silenced him, and he handed her the vial. She stood there, glaring at him, and he reluctantly gave her a second vial.

Thorn swallowed the acrid liquid as she strode from the room, and a chilling numbness spread across her nerves. The stone still burned, but the pain was a distant thing, something she’d heard about but forgotten. She made her way back to her bunk and collapsed on the plank. Around her, Tarkanans were beginning to stir, some arming and preparing for the morning meal. Thorn simply pulled Steel to her and lay on the bed, wrapping her arms around the dagger.

Not such a good night, then.

Thorn said nothing. The dreamlily held the physical pain at bay, and the memories of the dream began to fade. But painful pieces remained. The agony as the lightning took her, and the lingering sensation of Drulkalatar’s eyes watching her. She’d had the same dream at least once a month since she’d left Droaam, each time more vivid and painful than the last.

The mystery was almost as bad as the pain. The dream was as much as she could remember about the conclusion of her mission to the Great Crag—and like a dream, the memories were hazy and hard to focus. Her handlers at the Citadel said it was likely an effect of facing a powerful demon. Such creatures warped reality with their presence, and they could twist memories without even trying. What had truly happened that night? In the dream, she’d become a dragon. And it felt so real, so true. Her tail, her wings, the fire in her blood… it was as if these things had always been a part of her, something she had simply forgotten.

Floating in the cocoon of the dreamlily, she replayed the dream in her mind. It was fading again, slipping away. But there was one point she hadn’t seen before. The fire in her blood, the anger that seemed to give her remarkable bursts of strength, the power that she felt when she’d drained the life from Sorghan… she’d felt it in her dream. It was the burning power of the dragon’s blood.

But what did it mean?

And who was the Angel of Flame?

“One on your feet, sister Thorn!” It was Brom, leaning on his massive arm. “The time for sleep is done. We will be working together this day, and there are many preparations to make.”

Thorn looked at him. The dreamlily highlighted his unusual features—the reptilian eye, his wildly mismatched hair and teeth, the patches of scales and chitin scattered across his skin. For a moment she was gripped by the thought that she was looking into a mirror reflecting her soul, that she’d suffered psychic injuries as terrible as Brom’s physical afflictions. She opened her mouth, trying to find the words to explain, but now the dreamlily caught her tongue. “I see myself in your teeth,” she told him.

Brom frowned, puzzled. “Shake off your dreams, little one. There’s a war to be fought.” He scooped her out of bed with his powerful arm and propped her up against the bunk. The pain of the shard was fading, and as usual, it was drawing the dreamlily haze away with it. The dose she’d taken should have kept her sedated for hours, but ever since Far Passage, she’d found that even the strongest narcotics could only affect her for a few minutes. At least they still helped with the pain. She worked through the fading fog, gathering her equipment and following Brom. But she could still hear the words from her dream echoing in her head. This time it wasn’t the demon’s threats that haunted her. It was her own voice.

I am the Angel of Flame.

What did it mean?
I thought I was done with sewers,” Thorn muttered. The Cannith forgehold was hidden deep below the foundry district of Ashblack, and the Tarkanan force had spent the better part of an hour trudging through muck and grime. It was fortunate for Thorn that she had a nose clip in her basic kit. Some of the others were still wincing from the stench. But even without the odor, she was still covered with mold and excrement. The glamorous life of the Dark Lantern, she thought.

It was hard to imagine Merrix d’Cannith coming through the sewers, and according to Daine, he didn’t. There was another way to reach the forgehold, but it was infested with wards and guards, and if they were pursued, the Cannith forces would know the lay of the land. Once he knew where the forgehold was, Daine had been able to plot a different route—less scenic, certainly, but safer for what they had in mind. If Daine was right, the gate to the forgehold lay just ahead of them. It was time to set the plan in motion.

Thorn and Xu’sasar took the lead, relying on darkvision as they crept forward through the light-less tunnels. This ability still bothered Thorn. Useful as it was, it was one more power that she couldn’t account for—senses sharper than even her elven mother had possessed. But now was not the time for doubts or questions.

She spotted a series of runes carved into the floor ahead, and she raised her hand. Xu’sasar froze as Thorn examined the sigils. They were painted black, barely visible against the dark stone, but there was no mistaking the purpose or power of these warding runes. Concentrating on them, Thorn could feel the energy surging, waiting to be unleashed.

“Aaren,” she whispered. For a moment, the runes were outlined in violet flames, and then the fires faded. A part of Thorn was surprised. For all his confidence and charisma, she still couldn’t entirely believe the story of the Son of Khyber. Yet he claimed to have plucked this password from the memories of the Cannith heir, and it had indeed shut down a ward she’d have been hard-pressed to break on her own.

Thorn pulled a piece of chalk from a pouch and made a mark along the floor. She didn’t know how long it would take the runes to recharge, and she wanted to make certain Daine and the others spotted the trap. Gesturing to Xu’sasar, she made her way forward.

The gate lay just ahead. A powerful illusion masked it, and most people would never guess that the cracked wall of the ancient tunnel was a magical facade. Even now, Thorn could feel the magic pressing against her mind, quietly suggesting that she look the other way. Of course, this was exactly what she’d been trained to spot, an illusion that hid the gate.

But the gate wasn’t what she was here for. The warding runes were just the first line of defense. The second was better hidden and far more dangerous. It was pure luck that the Cannith baron had decided to impress his son by revealing it. For all his confidence and charisma, she still couldn’t entirely believe the story of the Son of Khyber. Yet he claimed to have plucked this password from the memories of the Cannith heir, and it had indeed shut down a ward she’d have been hard-pressed to break on her own.

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But the gate wasn’t what she was here for. The warding runes were just the first line of defense. The second was better hidden and far more dangerous. It was pure luck that the Cannith baron had decided to impress his son by revealing it. Thorn paused, closing her eyes. She listened to the sounds around her: the rustle of a rat moving along the dusty stone, the pounding of her own heart, the whisper of Xu’sasar’s movement. Now she listened to the wind, feeling the faint flow of air against her skin and building a picture of her surroundings. The greatest challenge was not trying too hard. This gift was most effective on an instinctive level. It was hard for her to consciously process this information. But if she could just let go of her thoughts and feel, she could—

There.

The invisible guardian was perfectly still, but Thorn had a clear image of it in her mind. An armored figure. Likely a warforged. Taller than a troll. Long, razor-sharp blades extended from each arm. Merrix had lowered the cloaking magic to show the guardian to his son, and according to Daine both armor and blades were made of adamantine, one of the hardest metals ever produced. A single stroke would cleave through bone, and Steel could never pierce the armored plates. But if she let her senses paint a picture, Thorn could see the gaps in the construct’s armor, the places where joints exposed fibrous bundles. Warforged anatomy was quite different from human, but they still had their weaknesses. And over the last thirty years, the assassins of the Citadel had made sure to learn them. Mouthing a silent prayer to Olladra, Thorn flung Steel.

The dagger flew straight and true, catching the invisible guardian in the neck. The enchantments woven into Steel pulled him back to Thorn’s hand, and viscous fluid began flowing from the gaping wound. The guardian turned to
Thorn, but it was moving slowly, disoriented by the blow. It staggered as it looked for its enemy.

Instead, it found Xu’sasar. The dark elf’s senses weren’t quite as sharp as Thorn’s, but she’d been trained to fight in absolute darkness. Now that her enemy was moving, she could track it by sound alone. Xu’sasar wielded her macabre weapon with its blade like a long, curved tooth set atop a haft of bone. Despite its appearance, Xu’sasar easily parried the blows of the adamantine blades with her strange glaive, and her return strike drove straight through the construct and impaled it against the wall. It struggled, waving its arms and trying to strike at the dark elf, but she danced out of its reach. It was left to Thorn to finish it. She struck with Steel, slashing away at the leathery skin. Dreck stood to Brom’s right, and emerald energy flickered around his metal fingers as his mark glowed. For his charge. To his left, the gnome Ash smirked and flexed his fingers. Black flames rippled along his scarred skin. Dreck took point with Thorn’s team. The aberrant warforged had memorized the plans of the building. He knew the corridor and the secret passageway. He led them to the creation forge. Their task was to destroy the forge itself. Daine had taken Xu’sasar, Scrapper, and four of the others and had headed elsewhere in the base. Thorn didn’t know what he was up to.

The battle had taken less than a minute. If they were lucky, the first disorienting blow had kept the guardian from alerting its masters. They’d find out soon enough. As Xu’sasar pulled her weapon free from the metal corpse, Thorn jogged back along the corridor, signaling to the rest of the strike force. Move up!

Moments later, they were gathered outside the main gate. Thorn would have preferred a stealthy approach, but there were no other options. The forgehold had no windows. Its walls were thick stone hardened by mystical rituals. And if there were any other entrances, their young informant hadn’t been aware of them. There was only one option for the Tarkanans: the front gate. And this would take more than a simple word to bypass. Safe passage required an enchanted amulet, a form of key. But there were always other alternatives.

Daine gestured at the wall. “Scrapper. Thorn.” Scrapper was a dwarf, an excoriate of House Kundarak. As Thorn had guessed, she was the one who maintained the wards protecting the Tarkanan fortress. Her aberrant mark helped her shatter spells—a potent gift, though it took a toll on her body. A touch of her hand was all it took to disperse the illusionary wall, revealing the adamantine door that lay beyond. Warding runes covered the gate, and the air around it rippled with mystical power.

“Sister?” Scrapper whispered. Her voice was raspy and dry, as if there was something unfinished in her throat. Thorn stepped up to the gate, and the two set to work on the overlapping layers of defensive magic. Thorn was impressed by the quality. It was mostly Kundarak work, but clever dragonshard focusing lenses amplified the energies. If Thorn was reading the runes correctly, the wards would completely disintegrate anyone who triggered the trap. Apparently Lord Merrix was perfectly willing to sacrifice innocents to preserve his privacy. Fortunately, Thorn and Scrapper were quite good at what they did. Runes began to glow, a flickering pattern of words blazing along the rim of the double doors. The runes blinked and burned and flared into brilliant light—then faded completely.

Scrapper nodded, and the two of them stepped back. It was time for others to take the lead. Brom took his place in the center as the door began to slide open. He was wearing his massive battle gauntlet and grinning as he prepared for his charge. To his left, the gnome Ash smirked and flexed his fingers. Black flames rippled along his scarred skin. Dreck stood to Brom’s right, and emerald energy flickered around his metal fingers as his mark glowed.

Guards stood just within the hall—six identical warforged, slender soldiers carrying silvered halberds. But it seemed that no alarms had been sounded. The guards weren’t even looking at the Tarkanans as the gates opened. They certainly weren’t prepared for the brutal attack that followed. Dreck shattered his victims with bolts of green light. Ash crackled and burned around his left arm. “Break into your teams, brothers and sisters. You know your tasks. Be swift, and show your enemies no mercy—for they will show none to you. To work!”

Dreck took point with Thorn’s team. The aberrant warforged had memorized the plans of the building. He knew the path to the creation forge. Their task was to destroy the forge itself. Daine had taken Xu’sasar, Scrapper, and four of the others and had headed elsewhere in the base. Thorn didn’t know what he was up to.

“Be not afraid,” Dreck said. “The greatest dangers are past. This is a workshop, a place for research. It might have been hidden and hard to enter, but there should be no deadly traps within.”

“You’re placing your trust in the memories of a child—and a toy child at that,” Thorn said. “I’d be cautious.”

She wondered how long the forge had been operating in the depths of Sharn. It was an impressive facility. Surely...
they’d used one of the structures from the ancient undercity as the foundation of the hold. Still, to do something like this without alerting the local authorities would take time. Of course, this was Sharn. It was quite possible that a few well-greased palms had ensured that records of goods and transportation were conveniently lost, or that suspicious activities were ignored. Thorn knew that there were all too many in this wretched place who put love of gold above their duty to the nation. The time could come when the houses would just buy the Five Nations, Thorn thought glumly.

The sharp sound of metal against metal drew her from her reverie. Up ahead, the hallway widened into a large chamber in which every surface was painted an unblemished white.


Once again, the battle was brutal and swift. Two Cannith magewrights were working with three warforged. The constructs were a strange design, something Thorn had never seen before. They were covered in thick armor, with barely any gaps she could take advantage of. Beyond this, each warforged warrior possessed four arms. The upper two arms ended in hands and gripped weapons. The lower two terminated in spiked maceheads, clearly capable of dealing massive damage.

Had the warforged been fresh, it could have been quite a challenging fight. But the Tarkanans had arrived at the end of the magewrights’ trial. One of the warforged was already stretched out on the floor, his armor split open to expose a mass of fibrous muscles and alchemical fluids. Another had lost one of his mace arms, and another limb was crippled and useless. Both survivors were covered with dents and moved unsteadily.

Thorn didn’t hesitate. The magewrights were the greater threat. There was no telling what mystical abilities they might possess. And although they were human, they were knowingly operating an illegal facility in her nation.

The female magewright gasped as Steel’s point emerged from her partner’s throat. She reached for a wand at her belt, but before she could pull it free, she cried out and dropped to her knees. This was the work of Koyna, a Tarkanan whose mark attacked its victims with their own worst fears. Thorn sprinted forward, finishing the woman as quickly as she could. She was prepared to kill, but the gruesome powers of Koyna and Ash still turned her stomach.

One of the battered juggernauts turned to Thorn as she severed the magewright’s spine. It moved surprisingly quickly, considering the amount of damage it had sustained. She saw a blur of motion, an iron giant bearing down on her with murder on its mind. Then Brom slammed into it, sending the construct spinning sideways. His war gauntlet rose and fell, each blow denting the armor of the warforged. It lashed out with a spiked mace, tearing a great chunk of flesh out of Brom’s stomach, but the dwarf never relented. The sound was like a hammer against an anvil, pounding over and over until the warforged lay still.

The final warforged proved to be more of a challenge. Ash sprayed it with fire, but the juggernaut charged through the flames, moving inexorably toward the giggling gnome.

Dreck stepped between them. The aberrant war-forged was no match for his armored cousin in terms of mass or strength, but his mark glowed as he struck. He simply slapped the juggernaut with his open palm, and each blow left spots of rust spreading across the guardian’s armor. One of its arms fell to the ground, the joint rotted through. Ash poured flame into the new gap in its armor, and the juggernaut staggered and collapsed.

“Friends of yours?” Thorn asked Dreck.
“No design that I have seen,” Dreck replied. “But this is a place for the unusual.”

So it would seem, Steel whispered. You’re lucky those soldiers were already damaged. If Merrix has the capacity to mass-produce such warriors down here, perhaps there is something to the claims of this Son of Khyber.

A moment later, they reached the chamber of the creation forge. But there was a problem.

A barrier.

“The child had no memory of this,” Dreck said, staring at the brass gate that stretched across the hallway. It shimmered in the light of the cold fire, and while it clearly was not part of the walls around them, Thorn could see no handle or keyhole.

“Little to fear,” Ash said, chuckling. Even as Dreck raised his hand in protest, Ash unleashed a torrent of flame against the door. A moment latter, his giggles turned to screams. Though it seemed to be simple brass, there was power bound within it. It sucked up the fire and then unleashed a column of blue light back against the gnome. Even from a distance, Thorn felt a chill. Ash was frozen solid. He toppled as his cry faded. His corpse struck the ground and shattered into steaming chunks.

“Stop!” Thorn cried, before Palmer or Dreck could react. She walked slowly toward the brass barrier, holding Steel before her.

Interesting, Steel said. I sense no magical emanations, yet the rippling alone suggests arcane energy.
“It’s reversing spell energy,” Thorn murmured, intrigued. “Even your divination is a magical act.”

I believe you’re right. Impressive.

It was more than just impressive. It was amazing. Ash’s fire turned back against him in the form of ice. Steel’s divination returned a false report. Even abjuration was a magical effect. If they tried to dispel the field, odds were good they’ d just reinforce it. But there was no lock or handle on the door. Magic had to be involved.

Thorn lifted a ring of crystal-tipped keys from the fallen magewrights, and she tested these against the door. But there was no keyhole nor any sense of mystical resonance between key and gate. As she studied the barrier, she felt a tingle run through the stones in her spine, as if a charge of energy had flowed across her and instantly faded.

Alarm, Steel said. From elsewhere. Daine’s team must have run into trouble. We need to act quickly.

Thorn produced her probes and lockpicks, testing the seal on the door. Nightwater had no effect. Then she had a thought. She turned to Dreck.

“Can you perform a sealing infusion? Lock the door?”

The warforged’s face was a metal mask, lacking any expression. But his confusion was easy to see. “Certainly. But why?”

“Do it. Seal the door.”

Dreck stepped forward and set one palm against the door. He wove patterns in the air with his hand, leaving shimmering trails in the air. At last he gripped the glowing pattern and thrust it against the door.

The door slid open.

Reversing the energy, Steel whispered. So “close” becomes “open.” Clever.

“Clever enough,” Thorn said. “Brom, take point. Dreck, we need you to destroy the forge. Stay back with Palmer until we’re sure the room is clear. Koyna, with me.”

They had entered the heart of the forgehold. Where the earlier halls had reused old walls, here the architects had broken down the ancient structures and built anew. Walls and floor alike were built from a dark green stone. Linear patterns were carved into every surface and inlaid with different metals, creating a dizzying labyrinth of designs spread around them. Soon the hall opened into a vast circular chamber with a domed ceiling, large enough to serve as a sporting arena. A massive pillar dominated the center of the room, built from the same green stone. The lines from the floor ran up along this central column. But the post was also studded with dragonshards—a pulsing mosaic of golden Eberron shards, shedding a brilliant light across the room. Large coffins were spread in a ring around the central pillar.

It is a forge, Thorn thought. The warforged must emerge from the coffins when the work is complete.

But at the same time, the image of the shard-studded pillar sent a shiver through her. These dragonshards were embedded in the column, not whirling around it. But looking at the pillar and knowing she was there to destroy it, she couldn’t help but think of Far Passage.


“Yes, Dreck,” said a new voice. A man’s voice, deep and stern. “You know what to do.”

Flames engulfed Dreck. He cried out as the fibrous cords that served as his muscles strained and snapped, and cracks and spots of corrosion bloomed on his metal plates. There was a rasping gurgle, and he was gone. Nothing was left, not even ashes.

“Strange.” The man was standing in the shadow of the central pillar. A tall man with short, dark hair. One hand rested against the stone column, while the other held a long metal rod tipped with the sculpted head of a gorgon. The stranger was reaching his middle years, but he was still handsome and confident. It wasn’t easy to forget that face, and Thorn had seen it before.

Merrix d’Cannith, baron of the house.

“I don’t know what that thing was, but it wasn’t one of my children,” he mused. If he considered them a threat, he didn’t show it. “I wonder what I could have learned from his corpse.”

“You’d best be looking to your own corpse,” Brom said. Thorn knew he was waiting on her word to charge, and he might not wait much longer. “You may have done in poor Dreck, but there’s four of us to the one of you.”

Merrix laughed, and as he did, the silvered lines in the floor burst into brilliant light. Thorn and the others shielded their eyes, and in that moment of distraction, Thorn could feel the lids sliding off the coffins. Six figures rose from these cradles. Blades extended and locked into place. Warforged soldiers, armed and ready for battle.

“Let’s finish this,” Merrix said. “And then we’ll see what I can learn from your corpses.”
Thorn studied the two closest warforged, gathering as much information as she could in the seconds before they could act. The first was the same type as the juggernauts they’d encountered in the testing hall, a heavily armored warrior with blades and spikes bristling from its four limbs. But it was the second one that worried Thorn. This unusual warforged was lean and quick, and Thorn found that its slender build and graceful movements caused her to think of it as female. Dark enamel armor covered the warforged. The blade of a short sword extended from each of her arms, and the metal had the dark sheen of adamantine. And there were three more just like her, closing in.

“Pull together!” Thorn cried. “On me!”

Too late. To this point, the Tarkanans had done well when it came to following her lead. But none of them had known her for more than a day, and faced with this unexpected threat, each of her comrades acted alone. Brom crashed into a juggernaut, bringing the construct to the ground. Palmer lashed out with tendrils of energy, as though her dragonmark were stretching off of her ruined hands to entangle her enemies. And Koyna turned on Merrix himself, the purple and black strands of her dragonmark gleaming as she sought to unlock the fears hidden in the mind of the dragonmarked lord.

They’d done well in their initial assault and in the training hall. But now they were outnumbered, acting on impulse, and they’d lost the element of surprise.

Brom pounded at the juggernaut, leaving dents in its armored shell. But focused as he was, he didn’t see the lean warforged as it slipped up behind him and plunged both adamantine blades into his lungs.

Palmer was holding two warforged at bay with her lashing tendrils, but countering their attacks was as much as she could manage.

Koyna fell to the spiked fist of the juggernaut. If her psychic blow had any effect on Merrix d’Cannith, it didn’t show. He stood by the central pillar, smiling as the blood began to flow.

One of the slender warforged left Brom and slashed at Thorn with her adamantine blades, and Thorn dropped beneath the blow. He’s made his own Dark Lanterns, she thought. Nothing good can come of that.

The warforged was swift, and her adamantine blades could slice through Steel if Thorn was careless. She had to time every parry perfectly. But less than twelve hours had passed since Thorn had fought Xu’sasar, and as quick as this warforged was, she was no match for the drow. Thorn began to see the rhythm of her enemy’s attacks. Warforged could learn and improve, but this one had just emerged from her cradle. It was impressive to see such skill in what amounted to a newborn, but Thorn quickly saw the patterns. The next time the warforged made a thrust, Thorn stepped in close, pinning the construct’s arm. Before the warforged could get the leverage for a thrust with her second blade, Thorn drove Steel into its throat. This time, the sudden surge of strength came without any conscious thought; it was just a natural part of the blow. Backed by her inhuman strength, the thrust tore through the construct’s neck. There were many differences between warforged and human, but the ability to survive decapitation wasn’t one of them. The warforged stiffened as it fell to the ground.

I’ve got to get to Merrix, she thought. But it was too late.

Palmer was only a few feet away, covering Thorn’s back. The others had fallen. Koyna lay in a pool of blood, and Brom was a ghastly sight. And there were still four warforged left—one juggernaut, and three of the assassins. The constructs circled them, waiting for the right moment to strike.

“Why don’t you drop your weapon?” Merrix asked. “We both know I can’t let you live, but there are certainly more pleasant ways to end this.”

Thorn looked up at him, but his eyes only lingered on her false dragonmark. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Perhaps I won’t live out the night. I know this. But if your tin soldiers take one step toward us, I’ll bury this blade in your throat.” She nodded at the warforged corpse lying at your feet. “I promise you I have the skill.”

She was bluffing. She could try, certainly, but Merrix was far away, and as a Cannith lord, odds were good that he had mystical protection. She needed him closer. Steel could analyze magical energies, but not from this distance.

“And I promise you that I have defenses you know nothing about.” Merrix smiled, but Thorn could see the tension in his eyes. He was a gambler, and a good one. But so was she. And she had another card left to play.
“Do you love your son, Lord Merrix?” The blood faded from his face.

“What do you know about my son?” he said. He took a step forward without thinking, knuckles white against the shaft of the gorgon’s scepter.

“Call off your dogs and let us finish our work, and you just might see him again.” In Dolurrh, she added silently.

“You lie,” he said. “Tharashk has sworn he’s nowhere in this city.” He took another step forward.

_His robe is enchanted to absorb elemental energies_, Steel said. _There is a field emanating from the scepter that provides some defense against physical attacks, but it’s far from impenetrable. He’s also carrying a shard charged with a short-range teleportation effect—likely only good for one use, but enough to get him away from here._

She’d only have one chance. She needed that unnatural strength, but she still wasn’t completely certain how to control it. In the last two battles, it had come to her in a moment of tension and fury, not unlike a surge of adrenaline. Now she was calm and calculating—but she still didn’t know what to do.

And she still needed him closer to be sure of the shot.

“I took him from Ilena’s tower,” Thorn said. “I’m the one who silenced his cries. And I’m the only one who can bring him back to you. Kill me, and you’ll never see him again.”

Merrix’s eyes widened. Arcane energy crackled around his scepter. “You will not die tonight,” he said, taking another step forward. “You will not die for a long, long time. You will tell me everything that I wish to know, and if you have harmed my child—”

“Harmed him? Why would I harm anyone with an aberrant mark?”

That did it. Righteous anger turned to confusion and fear, and in that moment Thorn threw Steel.

It was a perfect throw, certain death for a defenseless man. But no fire flowed through her veins, no burst of inhuman might. There was a flare of ectoplasmic energy as Steel struck Merrix’s defensive enchantments, and the blade pierced the field and drew blood. But the spell saved the lord’s life. Merrix’s hand rose to his throat as Steel flew back to Thorn’s grip, and he staggered back. “Take them!” he called out to the warforged, choking on blood.

“But take that one alive!”

“Fare you well, sister,” Palmer whispered. And then the warforged were upon them.

No time for thought. Thorn had one advantage: the assassins all seemed to have the same basic training. She was able to use the lessons she’d learned earlier. But there were too many of them.

Palmer fell quickly, and Thorn stood alone. She didn’t even think. She just moved, darting between a shifting maze of adamantine blades. She could smell her own blood, and she knew she’d been hurt, but she just kept moving, trying to stay on her feet until something changed.

And then it did.

The construct in front of her spasmed as the bone wheel cut into its neck. A swift kick from Xu’sasar finished the job, knocking the assassin’s head from its body. Now Tarkanans were all around Thorn. Daine was fighting the juggernaut, ducking beneath its blows and lashing out with his gleaming blade. The dwarf Scrapper fought at his side. Her leather armor was caked with dried blood, but Scrapper refused to fall. She clenched her teeth as an assassin’s blade grazed her shoulder, but managed to wrap both hands around her opponent’s wrist. Scrapper’s aberrant mark shattered spells, including the mystical forces that animated the warforged. The construct twisted in Scrapper’s grasp, but couldn’t break free … and now the rootlike tendrils that served as warforged muscles became brittle, snapping as the assassin convulsed. Within moments, the warforged shattered, falling to the ground in a heap of metal and dust.

It was over within moments, and the Tarkanans faced Merrix.

“You?” he said, gazing at Daine. He still seemed to be in shock. “Lei’s lapdog?”

Daine shook his head. “Things have changed. I didn’t expect to find you here, Lord Merrix. Now I can thank you personally for the wonderful gifts you’ve given us.” He had the sack of holding in his hand, and he reached in and produced a steel half-sphere studded with dragonshards and glyphs. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen one of these, but there are some things you never forget. Now!”

On his command, Xu’sasar and Thorn leaped forward, both moving to grapple with the dragonmarked lord. Not fast enough! Merrix must have already been planning his escape, for as fast as the Tarkanans were, their hands closed on empty air.

“Thorn,” Daine said. “Is he still here?”

Thorn closed her eyes, extending her senses around her. “No,” she said at last. We’re the only ones left. He had a teleportation charm.”

“Very well.” Daine looked around the room, evaluating the injured and the dead. “Scrapper, help Brom. Xu, you
take Palmer. Head for the gate. Now.”

Thorn stayed with him as the others dragged off the injured. “What about the forge? Dreck is gone.”

Daine smiled slightly. “It’s under control.”

He set the flat side of the half-sphere against the stone column, whispering an incantation over it. A pattern of light flowed across the dragonshards, and they began to pulse rhythmically.

“I suggest you run,” he told her. “I’m sure Lord Merrix has made improvements, but in my day these were very unstable.”

He loped for the gate, and she ran after him. They had just reached the entry hall when she heard a mighty groan behind her, the sound of a giant bellowing in torment. This cry of misery and pain reverberated throughout the hall, surrounding her and shaking the ground itself. She felt a sense of mingled anger and despair sweeping over her, and she had to concentrate to drive the alien emotions from her mind.

“Keep running!” Daine shouted.

The Tarkanan survivors were waiting at the gate. The moaning had grown louder, and combined with the sound of crashing stone, it drowned out Daine’s orders. The aberrants didn’t need instructions. The moment they saw Daine, they ran for their escape route. They passed through the first hidden hatch and made their way into the sewers. There Daine called them to a halt, resting against the scum-encrusted wall. Thorn could still hear the terrible howling in the distance, but it didn’t seem to be drawing any closer.

“Well,” Daine said. “I’d call that a good start.”
CHAPTER TWENTY

The Undercity

Lharvion 21, 999 YK

The Tarkan fortress hummed with activity. The infirmary was filled to capacity. Soldiers engaged in combat drills, while the noncombatants gathered supplies in preparation for swift evacuation.

As for Thorn, she was deeply troubled. She had no regrets about the destruction of the creation forge. But she’d done her best to kill Merrix d’Cannith, lord of one of the most powerful families in the world. And what was she supposed to do now? She slipped into a shallow alcove and drew Steel.

“You’re the sharp one. What happens now?”

It’s a good question. This attack may have served the interests of Breland. That doesn’t mean that the next one will. This Son of Khyber remains a disruptive force in the world. The logical course of action is to kill him during this moment of chaos and return to the Citadel.

“I know,” Thorn said. “Still … those warforged assassins. Why would Merrix have something like that? What if Daine’s right, and the Twelve are plotting against Galifar?”

Then someone will have to stop them. Perhaps an enterprising agent of the King’s Dark Lanterns.

“Which is exactly what I’m trying to do now,” Thorn said. “What was that weapon Daine used to destroy the forge?”

A necrotic resonator, Steel said. This is the first time I’ve ever observed one, as they were outlawed centuries ago. But I’m fairly certain that’s what it was.

“Why were they outlawed?”

The necrotic resonator absorbs the fear and agony of a scene of mass death, releasing it later as necrotic force. In addition to the sheer destructive power of the blast, it typically leaves restless spirits haunting the area for centuries to come. Those who sought to outlaw the weapon said that it bound the souls of the victims, trapping them in madness and eternal suffering.

“So this was a relic?”

No, I don’t think that it was. From my brief observation of the casing and the cut of the shards, it looked to have been made within the last century. If I had to guess, I’d say that it was charged during the Mourning.

Thorn slapped the wall with her free hand. “And there you are,” she growled.

What?

“Daine took that weapon from Merrix’s own workshop. He’s making warforged assassins in violation of the Treaty of Thronehold. Now he’s making explosives out of the Mourning itself? Why?”

It could simply be that the weapon is outlawed by his own house—

“With good reason.”

—and he believes that he can prove its worth and then sell it to, say, Breland.

Or conquer Breland with his bombs, his war-forged, and his Deneith army. And let’s not forget the Lyrandar playing havoc with the weather and flinging lightning down from their airship fleet.”

A colorful image. But do you truly believe—

“Thorn.” The Son of Khyber was walking toward her.

Thorn had been whispering, and she felt confident that he hadn’t overheard her words, but nonetheless she sheathed Steel and stepped out from the alcove. “Yes?”

“Walk with me,” he said. “We have things to discuss.”

Daine said nothing until they reached the lower level of the fortress. Bones still littered the floor of the crypt, and Thorn kicked a skull out of her path.

“The presence of Merrix changes things,” Daine said, his tone weary but determined. “I had hoped that they might spend days or weeks trying to determine just who was responsible for the attack. Even a Medani seer would have trouble drawing information from the forgehold at this point.”

“And now?”
“You saw. Merrix recognized me. And while he may not know any of the others, he knows House Tarkanan is to blame. This place has ancient protections against divination, and I have my own personal protections. But I know Merrix will bring every power he can to bear. Tharashk trackers. Medani inquisitives. The master scryers of House Phiarlan. Our defenses won’t hold up for long. And so we need to conclude operations in Sharn and relocate as quickly as we can.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Thorn asked. She hadn’t drawn Steel, but something about the situation troubled her. “You barely know me.”

“You don’t know me, then?”

It was hard for Thorn to read his expression beneath the pulsing lines of his dragonmark. But the tone of his voice caught her attention. She could feel the sorrow and uncertainty beneath his weary determination. He was looking for something from her, and she didn’t know what it was.

“How would I know you?” she asked.

“It’s nothing. You just remind me of someone I knew a long time ago.” He shook his head. “Foolish, I know. You weren’t even born when I died for the first time.”

Thorn raised an eyebrow. “So you’re serious about that? You’re telling me that you actually fought in the War of the Mark?”

They’d reached Daine’s quarters, and he turned to face her. “I know it’s an unbelievable story. Yet it’s true. There is work to be done in this age that only I can do. And so my soul was caught between life and death, until enough time had passed and a proper vessel could be prepared.”

“Vessel? So this—”

“This is not the body I was born in,” Daine said. He sat down on the hard stone bed and ran his fingers along the bare skin of his left arm. The sense of sorrow was stronger than before.

“What happened?”

“Back before I died, back when my mark first burned its way across my body, I was thrown into another world, a place of magic and wonders. I battled strange beasts and overcame treacherous spirits and finally made my way to the palace of the Queen of Dusk herself.”

Aureon’s Word, she thought. Aberrant marks had always been said to cause madness, and he possessed an exceptionally large mark.

Daine shook his head ruefully, and for a moment Thorn thought that he’d heard her thoughts. “I know what you’re thinking. Soldier from the past, marked by destiny, champion of the feywild … how can it be anything but madness? And yet, this is the nature of our world, Thorn. Great powers are all around us. The balance of the thirteen planes and the gateways waiting to open. The Sovereigns watching from on high, if they truly exist. Dragons and demons fighting wars measured in millennia. Just look at your own life.”

“What about it?” Thorn said. “I serve Breland.”

He smiled, his dragonmarked eye gleaming. “So there are no mysteries in your life, then?”

Well … except for strange bursts of strength, sucking out a man’s life, and the fact that I can see in the dark—and that someone in the Citadel might know more about it than they’ve revealed? No. But Thorn kept her thoughts to herself, speaking calmly. “We were talking about you.”

“So we were. I’d been drawn into another plane of existence. The Queen promised to show me the way home, in exchange for certain … services. And she told me that whatever happened in my war, I would not die until my work was done. I thought I spent years in that place, but when I returned home, only days had passed. The war was at its height. I worked with my cousin. I met many brave souls. And I saw all too many of them die.”

Thorn nodded. The story still sounded outlandish, but it was clear that he believed it. He was lost in thought, reliving the events of the past.

“I was here, in the old city of Sharaat, when my cousin broke the earth and brought the towers crashing down. My body was crushed within the rubble. And yet I did not die. Instead I found myself bound within the dreams of dragons, trapped within their fears and desires. It was all I could do to hold on to my sanity and sense of self. Time had no meaning. And then this man”—he tapped his chest—“this man came before the dragons. ‘The way is prepared,’ they told me. ‘Take this gift, and walk the world once more.’ There was a battle, and then I awoke. You can’t imagine what that was like, returning to reality after centuries of alien dreams. But my freedom came with a price. The soul born in this body was left behind. My freedom damned him to my prison.”

He’d killed the Cannith child without hesitation, but Thorn could hear remorse in his voice now. She sat down beside him. “Do you know who he was?”
He laughed ruefully. “A man named Daine, of all things. A scion of House Deneith, carrying my sword and bearing an aberrant mark.”

“That’s quite a coincidence.”

“No coincidence at all. Every piece of it arranged. I’ve studied the principles of the thing, these last few years. It’s all about creating sympathies between the things you wish to join. The forces that want me here today went to a great deal of trouble to arrange this. Just look to Xu’sasar.”

Thorn was wondering where the dark elf fit into this puzzle. “What do you mean?”

“My predecessor found her in Xen’drik. While crossing through the planes, she met a being she considers to be the Traveler—the spirit who gave her that weapon. He told her what would happen, and told her that she would have to protect me after the change. My predecessor’s other companions weren’t too pleased when they realized what had occurred. Without Xu, I would never have made it to Sharn. No coincidence there. She was told what would happen and what she had to do.”

How could any of this be true? It certainly seemed like madness. And yet Daine’s voice was calm and steady, still ringing with that sense of regret.

“You don’t seem too pleased about it,” she said.

He looked at her, and she felt the chill at the base of her spine. “I am here because I must be, not through any choice of my own. I have stolen the body of a man who might have been a hero. I have devoured the souls of children, and I fear my own dreams. No, I am not pleased.” He looked away, but the icy touch remained. “Can you imagine what it’s like to be a ghost in another man’s body? Am I even alive at all? Or a few memories saved to serve this purpose?”

“So why play along?”

Daine stood, and now regret turned to anger. “What else am I to do? Everyone I knew and cared for has been dead for centuries. Those who destroyed them are now lords of the land. I am being used. I know that. I am a weapon in the hands of a higher power. But their desires and my vengeance follow the same path, and I will have that vengeance.”

His mark was rippling now, tugging against his skin. Thorn let her hand drift down to Steel’s hilt. 

_Madness, _the dagger whispered. _Assume that mark of his does what he says, that he’s actually taken the mind of the child into his own. How could such a power cause anything but madness? He’s concocted this wild tale to justify his actions, nothing more. He’s served his purpose. Destroying the creation forge was likely a good thing. But you should be done with him now._

It seemed all too likely. She tightened her grip on the hilt. She could draw and strike. Daine had turned away from her, and she could cripple him in any number of ways. And yet …

“So what now? You said we need to conclude operations in Sharn. What operations? And why are you telling me?”

“Well you should ask. I’m telling you because I need you. Because you have more tactical experience than anyone else in my brood, even Fileon. And because you aren’t one of us. I can’t ask you to do this because of your mark. I want you to do it because it is the right thing for your nation. I want you to realize that the houses are a threat, so that even after I am gone, someone will remember and be on guard.”

He’d regained his composure, and his charisma was undeniable. Thorn wanted to believe him. But she still felt that there was something he wasn’t telling her. _You don’t know me, then? _Why had he asked her that?

“So you need me,” she said. “For what? What happens next?”

“Next?” He closed his fingers across his palm, and crimson light flowed across his dragonmark. “Next, we kill an angel.”

_Well, that’s logical_, Steel said. _That certainly takes madness off of the table._

Angels were a thing of myth—mighty spirits of light and radiant energy said to inhabit the higher planes of existence. Sometimes they were said to serve the Sovereigns. In other tales they were said to serve the Sovereigns. In other tales they were said to be guardians guided by destiny itself.

“We’re going to kill an angel,” Thorn repeated. “To fight the dragonmarked houses.”

Daine nodded. He reached into the bag of holding and produced a curious object—a cage made from bars of many metals, with gems and dragonshards embedded at the sockets. It was small and fragile. Thorn thought that Daine might break it if he were to simply close his hand on it.

“Another of Merrix’s creations that he chose not to share with Breland,” Daine said. “This is an extremely potent weapon. It could shut down every enclave that the twelve has in Sharn—provided it has access to sufficient power.
And that’s where the angel comes in. Do you know why Sharn’s towers are so tall? Why no other city has ever matched its height?”

She had an idea. “The towers couldn’t stand on their own, but the flying buttresses support and stabilize them.”

“Yes, but there’s a reason the buttresses aren’t used elsewhere. Sharn stands on a manifest zone—a place where the borders between planes are weak. It draws energy from the crystal sea of Syrania, home to hosts of angels. I cannot claim to an understanding of the ways of angels, but I know this. When an angel rises up and seeks to claim the mantle of a god, it is cast down to earth and bound so it can never rise again. And Sharn is where the spirits above dispose of their refuse.”

“So there’s a fallen angel in Sharn?”

“More than one,” Daine said. “They are beings of tremendous power and raw malevolence. Some have built cults in the darkness below the city. Others simply fester in their rage. But all of them are dangerous, driven by hatred and wounded pride. Personally, I wonder if the presence of these foul spirits is one of the factors that spreads moral decay throughout this city. Whether or not this is true, they are vile spirits best destroyed. Eliminating the fallen can only help your nation.”

Thorn’s hand was still resting on Steel. Such spirits do exist, he told her. Three hundred years ago, there was a battle beneath Sharn, when a paladin of the Silver Flame led a band of warriors to hunt down one of these radiant idols in the tunnels beneath Sharn. The bold crusaders were all killed, and it took nearly a hundred soldiers, priests, and wizards to contain the spirit. It could not be killed. I believe it is bound in the dungeon of Dreadhold to this day.

“What makes you think you can defeat this thing?” Thorn asked.

“It’s what I was born to do,” Daine said. “To bind what cannot be slain. You have skill I need, and I think you have untapped depths within you. Xu’sasar is fearless and deadly. And we will have the help of another—a specialist in such matters. Lucky for us that he developed an aberrant mark and joined our house.”

Thorn felt another chill as fire rippled through Daine’s mark. “And there he is,” Daine said, looking at the door. He raised his voice. “Welcome!”

A man walked into the room—handsome, dressed in clothes of black silk trimmed in silver, his dark hair well-groomed. His gray eyes locked onto Thorn’s. He smiled, and she felt a chill run down her spine that had nothing to do with the embedded shards.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
The Undercity
Lharvion 21, 999 YK

Drego Sarhain. They’d met before, when Thorn was undercover at the Great Crag of Droaam. Drego was a sorcerer and spy in the service of the nation of Thrane. They’d worked together for a time, uncovering the identity of the demon who wanted to release a horde of werewolves and skinchangers against the people of the Five Nations. And that’s when Drego had betrayed her, claiming that despite the massive casualties, such a catastrophe would reunite the Five Nations—albeit, reuniting them under the banner of the Silver Flame. The medusa Queen of Stone, Sheshka, had turned Drego into a statue—and Sheshka’s curse was no easy thing to lift. Thorn wondered how Drego had escaped.

This changes everything, Steel whispered. What’s an agent of Thrane doing with the Tarkanans?

He was right. To this moment, there had only been two players on the board: Tarkanan and the Twelve. But what was Thrane’s interest? Thrane and Breland were still bitter rivals at the end of the Last War, and while Boranel and the young Keeper, Jaela, had sought to normalize relations, many of the powerful cardinals had other ideas. Was Thrane trying to use Tarkanan against Breland? The Son of Khyber knew Thorn’s true allegiance, but he’d introduced her to Drego as a member of his house. Did Daine know who Drego really worked for? Despite the silver trim on his fine clothes, the Thrane had abandoned the arrowhead symbol of the Silver Flame he’d worn in Droaam. She needed answers, and quickly.

She had to give Drego credit. He didn’t show the slightest sign of recognition or surprise. He smiled and extended his hand, brushing his lips against her proffered fingers. “And how lucky we are to have such a lovely addition to our family,” he said. He held on to her hand as he continued to speak. “What gift does your mark possess?”

Drego knew Thorn was a Brelish agent and that mere months ago she hadn’t possessed an aberrant dragonmark. He was testing her—undoubtedly curious to see what the quartermasters of the Citadel had devised. She smiled and let a faint trickle of power flow from her false dragonmark. It was just a touch of pain for her—a razor running down the edge of her skin—but Drego grimaced and pulled his hand away.

“I’m sorry, Brother Drego,” she said coyly. “It’s easier to show than tell. What of you? I can’t even see your mark.”

Though he was still sweating from the pain, Drego wasn’t one to pass up such an opportunity. “It’s hidden by my clothing, sister. But if you’d like a private viewing, that could certainly be arranged.”

That was certainly the Drego she remembered. He’d pursued her throughout their time in Droaam. She still wasn’t sure if it was entirely a game, or if there was some spark of truth behind it. Even when he’d turned on her in Droaam, he’d still asked her to take his side and come with him. She didn’t trust him, yet there was something between them, something she couldn’t easily explain. Even now, she found herself enjoying the interplay and wanting to draw it out. “So what does it do?”

“My gifts relate to spirits, sister,” he said. “I may not have power to match our mighty Son of Khyber, but my powers help me track and battle fiends and other immortals. Beyond that, I studied the arcane arts before my mark manifested, so I have a few other tools in my arsenal.”

“Impressive,” she said. “Tracking and binding fiends. How do you measure against an exorcist of the Silver Flame?” Thrane had long been known for its corps of exorcists.

“Interesting that you should ask,” Drego replied. “I was in fact raised in the church, and for a time I served the nation. But despite the powers of my mark, the mere fact that it was aberrant was enough to turn my superiors against me. I was cast out from my duties. I’m grateful that Tavin and the Son of Khyber have given me the chance to put my skills to good use.”

So there was his story. There was even the chance that it was true—though Thorn didn’t believe it.

Daine had remained silent throughout their banter, and now he spoke again. Whatever vulnerability or remorse he’d let Thorn see had vanished. He was the Son of Khyber again, confident and in charge. “You made good time, Brother Drego. Did you acquire the information we require?”

Drego nodded. He produced a leather scroll case and handed it to Daine. “Everything’s there. I don’t have an exact location, but certainly a place to begin.”
“Very well. I will need time to study this and to prepare for the challenge ahead. I suggest that the two of you rest and enjoy yourselves as best you can during this time. We go to face an immortal, a being who gazed down on Eberron before the first human was born. There is every chance that we will not return.”

Thorn held out her hand, reaching for his arm. “Is there anything I can—?”

“No.” He brushed her hand away. “If you see Xu’sasar, tell her she may return. I will call you when it is time. Now leave me. Both of you.”

Thorn and Drego looked at each other for a moment. Thorn knew he was thinking the same thing she was—waiting for the other to move first. She smiled and walked past him. Despite the bravado, she felt a shiver through her nerves as he followed her.

They were in the Chamber of Bones when he reached out for her. Perhaps he was only going to lay his hand on her shoulder, but there were all too many spells that could be cast with a touch. She felt the movement as he reached for her. The next instant Steel was in her hand, and the tip of the dagger was set against his throat. Only then did she turn to look at him.

“No offense intended … Nyrielle.” He smiled as he said her name. “You’ve always been better than I at finding your way around in the dark. I’d hoped you’d be my guide.”

Thorn had been so distracted that she hadn’t noticed when her sight shifted into the spectrum of grays. She knew Drego had no similar gift for seeing in the dark—or hadn’t when last they had met. Nonetheless, he seemed to have no trouble keeping his eyes fixed on hers.

“Of course,” Thorn said. “I’m always glad to lend a hand to an old friend. Let me show you a few of our sights.”

A moment later Drego was on his knees. Thorn stood behind him, her forearm pressing against the back of his neck, Steel laid against his throat. “We call this the wall,” she said, driving Drego’s forehead against it with a firm tap. Steel said nothing, but Thorn could feel his amusement.

“Hardly … a way … to treat … family,” Drego gasped.

Thorn pressed her knee into the small of his back. “What are you doing in Breland, Drego?”

Considering the situation, he remained remarkably composed. “Being horribly mistreated,” he said.

She slammed his forehead against the wall again. “Don’t push me, Thrane. I was willing to work with you when we were both on neutral ground—and even then, you betrayed me. Give me one good reason not to kill you right now.”

“You’re about to fight a fallen angel,” he said.

“So it seems.”

“You’ll need me to survive. My dragonmark may be as false as yours, but I am trained to battle creatures not of this plane. I can find this radiant idol, and I can help you destroy it.”

Thorn considered this, letting Steel’s edge press against Drego’s soft skin. “And how did you come to be here? What do you stand to gain?”

Remarkably, Drego still had the aplomb to chuckle. “Brelish. You see the world in shades of gray, but sometimes it is black and white. I’m a flame-bearer of the church, Nyrielle. I’ve sworn to protect the innocent from supernatural evil, and that means driving these horrors from the world. For hundreds of years, the Church of the Silver Flame battled evil across all Five Nations. Then the war came. Now we are not trusted. We are seen as agents of Thrane, when we actually serve a power that would shield every nation.”

“The Silver Flame has churches throughout Breland,” Thorn growled. “Why do we need you to come in and solve our problems?”

“You don’t have a priest in Breland worth my spit,” Drego said. Thorn could almost hear him rolling his eyes. “This nation has always been riddled with corruption. Graft and greed drives your hierophant, not the Voice of the Silver Flame. Those with the courage to fight evil either fled to Thrane during the war or have been held in check by their corrupt superiors.”

Interesting, Steel observed. So he admits that he’s a spy, but claims that he was sent into Breland to assassinate an evil spirit.

“This is hardly the first time this has happened,” Drego said. “Throughout the war, Flamebearers worked in Aundair, Breland, Cyre … even as far as the Lhazaar Principalities. Yes, we want to see Galifar united by the Silver Flame. But faith must always come before politics. The Flame exists to battle these creatures. It is our duty to protect all innocents, regardless of nationality, from these beasts.”

“It’s a pretty story,” Thorn said. “Perhaps even enough to keep me from killing you as a spy. But the last time I put my trust in you, you betrayed me and nearly unleashed a plague upon my nation.”
“Oh, that,” Drego said. “If you’re going to keep bringing that up, we’re never going to—”

Thorn called on the false dragonmark, letting the pain flow through her and into the Thrane. She held back its full power, but it was enough. He thrashed beneath her hand, gasping for breath.

“I’m not an ambassador tonight, Drego. I’m not playing the courtly game. I need a reason to let you live, and I’m still waiting to hear one.”

Drego was still breathing heavily. “I understand,” he said. “Let me … let me explain.”

And he was gone.

Thorn cursed. He’d used this trick the last time they’d fought—slipping between layers of reality. He was behind her. She spun, but fast as she was, it wasn’t enough. She saw a flash of silver light, and then the breath was crushed from her lungs. She was caught in a field of pure force, a gleaming hand that mirrored Drego’s clenched fist. Thorn struggled, fighting to summon the unnatural strength that had aided her in the past, but to no avail.

“I’m not playing games this time,” Drego said. His face was pale in the argent light cast by the hand, but his voice was steady. “What I did in Droaam had nothing to do with Breland. I sought to change Khorvaire itself. What I do now has nothing to do with Breland. I am here to destroy the ancient evils lurking below Sharn—something that will actually help your people. So kill me if you will. But if you do, you’re the one hurting Breland.”

He opened his hand, and Thorn’s bonds vanished.

“So what will it be?” he asked.

Thorn looked into his eyes, searching for any signs of his true intent. For the moment, he’d lowered the mask of the playful courtier. She could see his concern. He knew he was taking a risk by releasing her. But more than that, she could see that he wanted her to believe him. Why was her opinion important to him? Back in Droaam, he’d been determined to spare her life. Why?

She slid Steel back into his sheath and held out her hand. “Very well,” she said. “I’ll work with you, Drego Sarhain.”

He smiled and took her hand. She tightened her grip and pulled him to her, slamming her right fist into his chest. Her supernatural strength rose to answer her anger, and Drego flew back and collapsed among the brittle bones.

“I’ll work with you,” Thorn said. “But betray me again, and you’d best kill me quickly. Because you won’t get another chance.”

Drego groaned. He tried to rise then fell back among the shattered bones. Thorn smiled and left him alone in the darkness.
CHAP ER TWENTY-T WO

The Undercity

Lharvion 21, 999 YK

Thorn stopped by the infirmary on her way to the barracks. She’d wanted to check on Palmer. She was surprised to see Brom still there, stretched out on a bier with his oversized arm propped against the floor. A halfling was kneeling next to him, suturing a wound on his chest. As Thorn watched, a rat crawled up along the woman’s arm and severed the thread with its teeth.

“Zae?” Thorn said.

Fileon’s daughter looked up from her work. She’d abandoned her beggar’s rags, and was wearing a simple black robe. Her eyes were wide and dark. “True,” she said. It was the first time Thorn had ever heard her speak.

“What are you doing here?”

Another rat hopped onto the table, a long needle gleaming in its mouth. Zae took it and began to thread it, but she kept her eyes locked on Thorn. “My father taught me the healing arts. Do you remember him?”

It was a chilling question, but stranger still coming from Zae. The girl spoke in a soft, lilting voice. There was a strange distance in her eyes, and it seemed that she actually wanted to know the answer to the question. Thorn noticed that both the rats were watching her.

“Yes … I remember him.”

“I want to,” Zae said. “I remember what he taught me.”

Thorn relaxed slightly. Strange as the girl was, Zae didn’t seem to be on a quest for vengeance.

“We’ve left the high towers,” Zae said thoughtfully, looking back down at the injured dwarf. “But I like it here. There’s so many stories.”

Thorn let that pass “What’s wrong with Brom? I thought he could regenerate from any injury.”

“My father taught me my lessons on Brom,” Zae said, running a finger along the patterns of scales and chitin traced across the dwarf’s skin. “He told me that the gifts … the gifts of Khyber are unpredictable. When Brom heals, the damaged flesh is often replaced with elements of other species. In your last battle, he suffered severe internal injuries. His gift has kept him alive, but he hasn’t woken up. I suspect that one or more internal organs were damaged, and have returned in an incompatible form.”

Zae’s voice grew stronger as she spoken, and for a moment it seemed that it was Fileon who was speaking. Thorn tried to push the thought aside. “So … he might have a kobold’s heart?”

“Yes,” Zae said. “Something incapable of providing the flow of blood he needs.”

“What can you do?”

The halfling smiled “It’s a game my father taught me. I need to cut him open and find the parts that don’t belong. Then I cut them out, and keep doing it until he grows a part that works.”

Thorn was surprised by his cavalier attitude. “Has this happened before?”

“Oh, yes,” Zae said. “I’ve kept a few of the more interesting things I’ve found inside of him. Would you like to see?”

“No thanks,” Thorn said. “I need to get some rest before my next task … and I think that my dreams are strange enough as it is.”

The halfling shrugged again and returned to her work. A rat crawled up her back and peered down from her shoulder.

*Drego was watching her when she woke.

Her sleep had been mercifully free of dreams. As she rose from the darkness, she felt the dull ache of the shards burning against her spine—and she felt Drego. Even before she opened her eyes, she knew he was there. In part it was his scent, and in part she just knew that it was what he would do. He was bold, she had to give him that. And again she wondered why he was so interested. It had to be more than sheer physical attraction. They served different nations, and he had to know that she’d kill him if Breland demanded it. So what game was he playing?

She kept her eyes closed, her breathing slow. How long had he been standing there? How long would he wait?
Minutes past before he finally spoke. “Nyri,” he said softly. “Nyrielle. It’s time.”

She opened her eyes and stared at him. “I thought you’d keep your distance for a time, brother Drego. And in this place, my name is Thorn.”

“You’ve always been dangerous … Thorn. I could see that the first time we met. But whatever you may think, I’ve never been your enemy. I know that you’ll see that in time. And I want to be close at hand when you do. I truly hate to take you out of bed, but the others are waiting.”

Thorn slid off the bunk, pulling her cloak from the floor. She ran a hand along its various hidden pockets, wondering if Drego had searched through its contents while she slept. It seemed unlikely. Drego’s strength lay in his magic, and while he might be able to weave a spell of invisibility, he had little talent for practical stealth. “Lead the way then. I think I’ll follow this time.”

There was a great deal of activity in the fortress. The canteen had been stripped, and Tarkanans were packing crates and dragging goods away. It seemed evacuation was the order of the day.

“I know I was a little brusque earlier,” Thorn said as they wove a path between the Tarkanann laborers. “I never expected to see you again, and that ‘plot to release a plague of werewolves’ kind of stayed with me. Can we start over?”

“I should like nothing better, sister Thorn.” He even sounded like he meant it.

“Good.” Thorn drew Steel, hiding the blade against her wrist. “So tell me, how have the last few months changed Drego Sarhain?”

Drego launched into the tale of how his comrades had rescued him from Droaam, and of heroic battles with dark forces in the months between. There was nothing of substance to the story, just as Thorn had expected. It was Steel’s report that she wanted to hear.

I’m afraid nothing has changed, he whispered. I sense no active enchantments or sources of magical energy.

She’d feared as much. It was the same as her first meeting with Drego. It was highly unlikely that he was operating without any sort of magical tools, which meant that he had a way of blocking divination. Thorn examined him, looking for clues. The belt was new, as was the darkwood wand hanging from a sheath—surely a tool for focusing his sorcerous powers. He wore a locket that she remembered from their last encounter. To her chagrin, she found her thoughts drifting as she studied him. He was a handsome man, quite athletic for someone who relied on magic to solve his problems. And while she knew his banter was just that, there was definitely electricity between them. It was unfortunate that she’d never truly be able to trust him.

His story was suspicious but not impossible. Under Galifar, the champions of the Silver Flame battled supernatural threats across the continent. And there were always tales of corruption within the church, especially in Breland.

Thorn tapped the hilt and quietly sheathed the dagger. They were passing through the Chamber of Bones, Drego lighting the way with a floating ball of argent flame, and it was time to prepare for her next meeting with the Son of Khyber.

* * * * *

Xu’sasar, Daine, and Brom were waiting for them. It seemed that the unorthodox surgery had worked. Brom was hearty as ever, and he’d even taken the time to hammer out the dents in his war gauntlet. Xu’sasar had polished her chitin armor, and the opalescent plates gleamed in the light of the cold fire. Her silver-white hair was a shroud of moonlight drifting around her slender frame. The vicious bone wheel in her hand was a reminder of her deadly talents.

If Daine had made any special preparations for the battle ahead, Thorn couldn’t see them. His boots were still crusted with the muck of the sewers, and there were bloodstains on his armor. The change was in his demeanor. The tension she’d felt earlier had vanished, and he smiled as he saw her.

“Well met, brother and sister,” he said. “I hope you are ready for the challenge that lies ahead.”

Thorn waved a hand. “Any day that goes by without battling an ancient force of evil is a day wasted, that’s what I always say.”

Now Daine’s smile was strained. “There is truth to what you say, but do not think to laugh at what we face. Drego, what we know of our quarry comes through you. Xu’sasar and Thorn know little of the danger. Please, explain.”

All eyes turned to Drego.

“Very well,” he said. “The first thing to understand is that there are worlds beyond the one we know, higher planes of existence and dark realms that lie just beyond the shadows. Potent spirits inhabit these planes, spawned by
the sheer magical energies of these realms. There are many such spirits, from the devils of Shavarath to the
treacherous rakshasa spawned by Khyber itself in the first age of our world. Angels are born of the highest realms
within the Astral Sea. They are not gods, but many claim to serve the gods. And even the least among them wields
fearsome power. Every angel embodies a particular concept. An angel of war may be straightforward enough, armed
with a blade of fire and deadly skill. But the greater angels hold dominion over less tangible forces—joy, honor,
even love. Some sages say that the angels watch over those mortals who embrace their values. Others believe that
the angels are a reflection of the influence those values have in the world, and that if honor leaves the world, its
angels will fade.”

“You said this was a fallen angel,” Thorn said. “How’s that different from a devil?”

Drego shook his head. “The two are completely different. Devils are tied to dark concepts—hate, fear, greed. What
we’re dealing with is a radiant idol, an angel punished for pride by being imprisoned on Eberron. It still
possesses its original appearance, and its powers are still tied to its original dominion.”

“So who are we dropping in on tonight?”

“Do not speak this name casually,” Drego said, and there was no trace of his usual levity. He traced lines in the air
as he continued. “You must understand the sheer power of the being we face. He has likely influenced the lives of
thousands of your countrymen, Thorn, and just speaking his name could draw unwanted attention to us.” He made a
last flourish in the air, and Thorn could just make out a translucent pattern of rippling arcane energy that dulled all
sounds beyond and kept Drego’s voice close. “Tonight we shall destroy Vorlintar, the Voice of the Innocent and the
Keeper of Hopes, Fifth among the Fallen of Syrania.”

The shimmering glyph burst into flame, burning without substance, and then it was gone.

“Call him by his titles,” Drego said, “But do not speak his name.”

“Keeper of Hopes?” Brom asked, and his chuckle echoed off the walls. “He doesn’t sound so terrible.”

“And he wasn’t, when he was a force for light. Now he holds to his dominions, but he has become a force for
darkness. He is indeed the Keeper of Hopes—the hopes that he has stolen from all those who fall under his sway. He
devours innocence, leaving pain and despair. As we draw closer to his throne, you will feel his talons tearing at your
mind. You must be strong and hold him at bay, for a clean death is far better than a life without hope.”

Daine spoke. “And when blades are drawn?”

“He is a creature of pure spiritual energy, not a being of flesh and blood. Iron will serve as a distraction but
nothing more. He cannot be killed by it. He cannot be killed at all. Even if you tear him apart, his essence will
reform.”

“And that is why I am here,” Daine said. He raised his left hand, and the lines of the mark roiled along his palm.

“My mark can bind any soul, be it human, demon, or angel.”

“So why am I here?” Thorn asked. “Drego, you’re the tracker and exorcist. Lord Daine, you’re the binder of
spirits. Brom brings brute force if it’s required. What do you need me for?”

Daine’s left eye gleamed as he looked at her. “We may face many challenges before we ever see the Keeper of
Hopes. And my gift has its limits. Before I can take such a powerful spirit, we will need to weaken his resolve,
distracting him with pain and battle. Beyond that …” Whatever he was going to say caught in his throat, and he fell
silent for a moment. “You’ll know when the time comes. Until then, I’m charging you with the safety of your
brother Drego. If we are to succeed in the tasks that lie ahead, we will need his skills. Xu’sasar is my shield. You
will serve as Drego’s.”

Thorn glanced over at Drego. He winked at her.

“I’m sure that my lovely sister would never allow any harm to befall me,” he said. “Now if you’re all ready, let’s
bring down an angel.”
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Fallen

Lharvion 21, 999 YK

Fallen.” Thorn said. “It’s obvious, really. Where else would you find a fallen angel in Sharn?”

Lower Dura was one of the most miserable wards of Sharn. Dura was the oldest quarter of the city, and time had taken its toll on the lowest sections of the towers. Lower Dura was a wretched collection of slums and ghettos, and Fallen was the worst of it. The same magic that empowered the flying buttresses enhanced all forms of flight and levitation, and the architects of the city had taken advantage of this. The most dramatic proof of this was Skyway, an entire district suspended above the tallest towers by sheer magical force. But there were a number of smaller, free-floating towers scattered around and above Sharn, home to those nobles who wished to flaunt their wealth. Strange as it seemed, the towers were quite stable. But there was an exception to every rule, especially in Sharn. In the early days of the Last War, one of the floating towers of Sharn ceased to be a floating tower. The spire plummeted thousands of feet, breaking apart as it fell. The fragments of the tower struck the old district of Godsgate, a temple district that had long ago seen its churches converted into tenements. The district was devastated. The council of Sharn had no intention of pouring gold into Lower Dura, and people were left to fend for themselves. Those who could afford to do so left. But others stayed, either out of pride or because they had nowhere else to go. Tales quickly spread around ruined Godsgate, which soon became known as Fallen. Some of these stories said it was haunted by the howling hordes of those who had died in the great collapse. Others said that the heart of the district was inhabited by feral savages, people whose ancestors were driven insane by the disaster—or that the council of Sharn used it as a brutal asylum, driving madmen and those with incurable afflictions into Fallen. Whatever the truth of these tales, the City Watch shunned the district, and it was a haven for deserters, criminals, and the worst dregs of the city.

Thorn had never been to Fallen. But if any place in Sharn was bereft of hope, this was it. Once the buildings around them had been temples to the Sovereigns and lesser faiths. Now the mosaics were shattered, and inscriptions were worn away by time or gouged out by human hands. The smell of rot and urine filled the air, nearly as thick as in the sewers they’d traversed before. There were a few people scattered around the streets, ragged clothes barely covering filthy skin. Most fled at the sight of the outsiders, ducking into alleys or through broken doorways. A few just glared at the strangers. One old woman muttered as Thorn drew close, shaking something within her fist; finally she opened her hand, revealing human teeth marked with strange symbols.

This was just the outer edge of the district. It was only when they moved in deeper that they saw the horror responsible for its name. The spire that had fallen from the sky had been a massive tower built of smoked glass. Huge chunks of mystically hardened glass had smashed into temples and tenements, and the streets were still filled with rubble. Many of the shards still lay where they’d first fallen, and Thorn caught a glimpse of bone through cloudy glass. Where the rubble had been shifted, there were makeshift barricades and shelters.

“This is what comes of reaching for the sky,” Drego said. “Though it seems the Brelish have yet to learn that lesson. That blue and gold tower up there is a recent addition, isn’t it?”

He glanced back at Thorn as he spoke, but Brom answered before she could. “What’s your answer, brother?” he rumbled. “Would you keep your eyes on the ground?”

“If you seek the heavens, faith is a stronger ladder than stone,” Drego said.

“But a hard one to find,” Brom replied. “I was born in this place. It was rubble from the Fall that took my arm when I was a boy. If you wish, I could take you there and we could dig for the bone. I found no solace in flames or gods. They brought me nothing but pain. But at night I could always look up at the lights and imagine the day when I would climb the tower and take my place among the stars.”

“You see the heavens, faith is a stronger ladder than stone,” Drego said.

“Yet if that glass tower had never been built, you’d still have your original arm,” Drego said.

“The fall brought madness and terror to the district,” Brom said. “But misery always had a home here. The towers are a source of hope. Proof that there is something better, if you have the strength to reach for it.”

“I don’t see much in the way of hope here,” Thorn said.

A pair of gleaming eyes watched them from a nest built from refuse and bloody cloth It was difficult to say if the eyes belonged to a gnome, a halfling, or a human child, but they held only savage fear.
Brom nodded. “Yes. It’s worse now than it was. And if that is the doing of this beast that lies below, I shall enjoy crushing the life from him.”

No one had an answer to that, and the quintet continued on in silence.

The attack came at the heart of the district.

Before the fall, the Glass Tower had been a vast structure. There were pieces of the tower larger than the house Thorn had grown up in. Drego had led them into a narrow tunnel formed from the collapsed walls of two buildings, and now he stopped. Closing his eyes, he raised a hand and let his fingers drift through the air, as if he were dragging them through the water of a stream.

“We’re close,” he said quietly.

Thorn didn’t have Drego’s gift for sensing spirits, but ambushes were another matter. Shifting gravel, flesh brushing stone, the faint sound of nervous breathing; there were people at the mouth of the tunnel behind them, preparing to act. Thorn tapped her hand, drawing the attention of the others and gesturing backwards. “We’ve got company,” she whispered.

Xu’sasar clicked her tongue. “Ahead as well,” she said quietly. “Four, spread to the sides.”

Daine considered this. “They’ll attack the first of us to emerge then try to pin the survivors in the tunnel. Luckily we have a surprise of our own. Brom, take point. Draw their attention. Xu’sasar and I will follow.” He glanced at Drego. “I trust you can hold the tunnel?”

Drego smiled. “Certainly.”

“If I may …” Thorn produced two small, round stones from a pocket in her cloak. “These might help.”

Daine nodded and took one of the stones. “Good. Move out. Throw in fifteen.”

The group split up. Drego and Thorn turned around, moving back the way they’d come. Drego flexed his fingers, and silver fire flickered in the darkness. They could see the mouth of the tunnel, but there was still no sign of the enemies lying in wait.

Fourteen.

Fifteen.

Thorn hurled the stone at the mouth of the tunnel.

When the stone struck the ground, a mighty boom rolled down the passageway, echoed by the thunderclap caused by Daine’s stone at the other end of the tunnel. Even at a distance, the sound caused Drego to clutch at his head. Their unknown enemies were at the center of the blast, and the sound should leave them dazed and deafened, crippling their ability to coordinate with one another. Now came the question: would the strangers flee or press the attack?

The answer came soon enough. The strangers might not be able to hear, but they still howled in rage as they rushed into the tunnel. After the suspense of the ambush, the reality was a disappointment. Thorn was half-expecting angelic minions, beings wielding swords of flame or terrifying magic. Instead, the people charging them were men and women, humans and dwarves and a few halflings, with matted hair and filthy skin, dressed in bloodstained rags and armed with chunks of rock and simple clubs. Far from being fearsome warriors, the attackers were sickly and emaciated. Thorn could see ribs beneath the skin of the man in the lead.

This ragged pack didn’t seem like much of a threat, but Drego wasn’t taking any chances. Twin rays of argent fire lit the tunnel. One struck the leader in the chest, and the smell of scorched flesh filled the air. The second bolt struck the woman at his side, catching her full in the face. It was a horrific sight, as skin and hair were burnt away by the blast. Even a strong man would have surely collapsed in shock, yet the strangers didn’t even pause in their charge.

Thorn leaped forward, interposing herself between the strangers and Drego. The scorched man lashed out at her with the chunk of stone. Thorn easily deflected the wild swing, slamming her armored forearm against his wrist, but she was surprised by his strength and speed. There was motion to her right, and she turned to parry the blow, only to find herself eye to eye with the maimed woman, whose hair formed a burning wreath around her ruined face.

For a moment, pure revulsion overcame all rational thought, and in that instant the woman struck. Her club was bare wood, a spar from a fallen roof, but she was just as strong as her companion. The club snapped against Thorn’s left arm, and the bone snapped with it. Thorn screamed. Once again, the crystal shards came to her aid. Ever since the stones had lodged in her back, they’d been a constant source of agony, and she’d had to learn to work around the pain. Now she pushed the torment away, driving it into her cry, letting her scream become the pain, flowing away from her.

Steel was in her right hand, and Thorn focused her thoughts on the dagger. The feel of the hilt in her hand. The...
reflexive motion of the thrust, as much a part of her as a yawn or a laugh. She was still screaming as Steel’s point pierced the woman’s throat. Thorn jerked the blade to the side, slashing through flesh.

But the stranger would not fall.

Blood poured down her chest, and her face was a scorched ruin, but she remained on her feet. Before Thorn could back away, the woman grabbed her broken arm. The pain was excruciating, and Thorn almost dropped Steel. Marshalling her strength, Thorn slashed at the woman’s arm. She felt Steel slice through muscle, and her opponent released her.

Unfortunately, the burned woman wasn’t alone. Thorn sensed the motion behind her just in time, and the stone that would have crushed her skull merely struck her in the back. Nonetheless, the raw force of the blow knocked Thorn to her knees, and she could feel blood flowing down her back. Her one solace was the fact that the scorched woman had fallen along with her. Blood was bubbling at the woman’s throat, and it seemed that she was finally succumbing to her injuries. But there was no time to savor this victory.

Thorn rolled to the side, gritting her teeth against the pain when her broken arm struck the floor. The raging man’s rock smashed against the floor, and before he could draw back for another blow, Thorn drew her blade across his legs, severing the rigid tendons. He might be impervious to pain, but his fury couldn’t help him stand on crippled legs, and he collapsed beside her. He pushed himself up on one arm, twisting around, and for the first time, Thorn had a really good look at his face. What she saw surprised her. It wasn’t the savage fury she’d expected; instead, there was a terrible hunger in his eyes, a desperate sorrow. He drew back the stone, preparing to hurl it at Thorn’s face, but she was faster. Steel pierced his wrist, and the bloodstained rock fell from his hand and clattered against the floor. The man, teeth bared, lunged at Thorn as Steel returned to her hand. Her thrust caught him under the chin and drove Steel up through his skull. He shuddered and finally lay still.

The third man should have finished her.

He was a dwarf, with insects crawling in his matted beard and the same lost look in his eyes. His club was a shard of Cannith hardened glass, tough as stone, already raised over his head. Steel was trapped in the corpse of Thorn’s last foe, and her own injuries had sapped her speed. She didn’t have the time to parry or the strength to roll away.

But the blow never fell. The dwarf stood over Thorn, an instant away from the finishing blow … frozen.

“Well, do something.”

Through the haze of pain, it took Thorn a moment to recognize the voice. Drego. His words were enough to break Thorn from her stupor. She reached out. Her hand locked onto the dwarf’s leg. This time, the rage came more easily, even for this stranger. The pure, visceral hatred flowed through her, washing away her pain. Fire coursed through her veins, but this was a comforting, cleansing heat. The feral dwarf fell to the ground as the sensation faded, and Thorn pushed herself up, using both her arms. She was weak, exhausted … but her broken arm and shattered ribs were whole again. Just like in the battle with Sorghan, and with Toli in Droaam. She’d torn away her enemy’s lifeforce and used it to preserve her own life.

“I’m impressed, beloved.” Drego’s voice seemed to come from all around her, a whisper flowing around her head. “How much of you remains, beneath this ghost?”

Ghost? Thorn tried to form the words, but she had no strength left. She fell to the ground, and exhaustion drew her down into darkness.
A chill gripped the air, and the stone felt cold against Thorn’s cheek. It took a moment for her to get her bearings. There was no pain. Whatever injuries she had suffered had been healed. But she was stretched out on the hard floor, and Steel wasn’t in her hand.

She opened her eyes—

And saw the skull. It towered over her. Each of the curved teeth lining its vicious maw was longer than her forearm. She could have crawled inside one of the vast eyesockets. Bone, teeth, and the curving horns atop the skull were all as black as basalt. Disoriented as she was, it took Thorn a moment to recognize it for what it was: the skull of a dragon. She stared at it, puzzled.

As consciousness returned, Thorn realized that she’d been moved. She wasn’t in the passage in Fallen. She was lying on the floor of a vast cavern. Or was it a cavern at all? Now she could see that it wasn’t stone beneath her. It was glass or crystal, dark purple in color. As if the entire chamber had been carved from a massive Khyber dragonshard. Even as this information clicked into place, she realized something else. She was naked.

A voice echoed through the room. Drego. “So this is where you keep them. It’s touching.”

Thorn’s first thought was to cover herself, but she pushed it from her mind. She’d been a soldier before she became a spy, and on the battlefield, privacy was a luxury. It was anger that drew her to her feet. “Where are you?” she snarled.

“Here.” Now the source of the sound was easier to track. He was standing just behind the enormous dragon skull. “Just admiring your collection.”

She stalked around the skull, armored in her fury. What she found was enough to break her angry resolve. Drego had his back to her. The wall before him was covered with niches, scores of alcoves of various sizes. Each alcove held a skull, and for a moment it seemed that the sightless sockets were all glaring at Thorn. The bones came from creatures of many races. The polished, slender skull of an elf sat alongside the remnants of a human skull that had been split apart by a blade. A narrow silver crown sat atop the shattered remains. Drego was examining what appeared to be the skull of a massive tiger, though there were certain elements of jaw and skull that seemed more human than bestial.

“He’s certainly seen better days,” Drego said, resting a hand on the skull of the great beast. He glanced back at Thorn and smiled. “You, on the other hand, look lovelier than ever.”

Thorn didn’t return the smile. “What is this place? And what have you done with my clothes, you twisted bastard?”

Drego laughed. “There’s no knots in my lineage, I assure you of that. As for your clothing, it’s just waiting for you to claim it.”

He pointed. Following his gesture, Thorn saw the gown standing just beyond the skull, supported in midair as if worn by an invisible woman. The red silk was the color of wet blood, set against panels of black so deep it seemed more like shadow than silk. Long gloves of red leather rose almost to the shoulder, seemingly filled by unseen flesh. She’d seen it before. In her dreams.

“This isn’t real,” she murmured.

“Perhaps,” Drego said. “Or perhaps this is the one thing that is real. Don’t you want to see how it fits?”

“No,” Thorn turned back to him. “Who are you, really? What is this place?”

“I may be the only friend you truly have,” Drego told her, running his fingers along the top of the tiger’s skull. “And this is a place you carry within.”

“And this is a place you carry within.”

“If you’re such a great friend, give me answers instead of questions.”

Thorn knew that she couldn’t trust anything in this place, but the man was a perfect match to Drego—from the gleam in his eye to his mischievous grin. “Perhaps I could. But you aren’t asking the right questions.”

It’s a dream, she reminded herself. Punching him won’t solve anything.

“Oh?” she said. “What should I ask?”
“Who are you?” he asked.
“I know the answer to that,” she said. “Nyrielle Tam. Thorn, of the King’s Dark Lanterns.”
“That’s two answers,” Drego said. “You began as one. You became the other. And how did that happen?”

It was a surreal conversation to be having, all the more so while surrounded by skulls. But if it was a dream, there was no reason to hide from it. “My father.”
“How so?”

Memories rolled through Thorn’s mind. The few images of her mother, before she’d returned to Aerenal. Her father, dressed in his red cloak and armor. And the man who came to tell her of father’s death. “He was a hero,” she said. “He loved Breland, and he died for it. Breland is part of us. And in the service to the king … I guess it just seemed like the only way to be close to him again.”

Drego brushed an imaginary tear from his cheek. “And so we know how Nyrielle became Thorn. But what brought you to this place? You’ve got all the pieces. You just need to put them together.”

“Well, my true and only friend, perhaps you’d like to get me started?”

He shrugged. “Why are you here with the Son of Khyber?”
“It’s my mission. To learn what he’s doing. To kill him, if need be.”

Thorn didn’t fully believe her own words, and it was no surprise that Drego didn’t either.

“All of this is for Breland? No doubts about yourself? You’re not concerned about, oh, killing people with a touch?” He looked over his shoulder, studying the racks of skulls. “Good to know.”

“What do you know about that?”

Drego met her gaze, and his eyes gleamed like silver. “It’s not about me. It’s about what you know. But you don’t want to face it. You’re afraid that you have an aberrant dragonmark. That you belong with Daine. And maybe you do, mark or no.”

Thorn could feel her anger growing within her. The fire was burning in her blood, the heat she felt when the strength surged through her. But this wasn’t a swift burst. It was slowly building, threatening to burst through her skin. The air grew even colder. Or did it just feel that way because of her feverish heat?

“What do you know?” she asked.

Drego raised his palms. “I’m not your enemy. I can tell you this: you have no dragonmark, but you have been marked. Look around you. Tell me what you see.”

“A lot of skulls, and a Thrane asking for a bloody nose.”

“Not simply skulls,” Drego said. “Remains of the fallen. You remember Drulkalatar, don’t you?”

He ran his fingers along the enormous tiger’s skull, and now Thorn realized what the strange proportions reminded her of. The demon. Drulkalatar Atesh, the tiger-headed fiend she’d fought in Droaam.

“But he was … swallowed,” Thorn said. “By a dragon.”

“I imagine so,” Drego replied. “But look beyond the trappings and to the room itself. Where are we?”

A cave. She looked around, searching for anything unusual. The chamber was quite large, but now Thorn realized that there were no exits. They were sealed inside. Within walls of purple crystal. A giant—

“Khyber shard,” she murmured.

“Yes,” Drego said.

“Khyber shard,” she murmured.

He reached back to scratch his neck, and that’s when Thorn realized that the pain was gone. The shard in the back of her neck was missing. The Khyber shard in the back of her neck.

“Yes,” Drego said, even though she hadn’t spoken. “Why do you think it hurts?”

Earlier, Thorn had thought that the skulls were glaring at her. Now she realized that they were. Every skull had shifted in its alcove, so the sockets were facing her. Drulkalatar’s eyes glowed with emerald flames, and she could feel his malevolent thoughts pressing against her mind. Now there were whispers, faint voices speaking just beyond the range of hearing.

“Prisoners yearning to be free,” Drego told her. “And quite a collection it is.”

The whispers were growing louder. She could hear pleas and promises, tormented cries and vows of vengeance.

“But I didn’t kill all these people,” she said. “The shard was an accident.”

“What do you really know about what happened that night?”

“Who are you?” Thorn asked. The skulls were howling now, the chattering chorus hammering against her thoughts and threatening to drown out her words. “Who are you?”
“The answer lies below,” Drego said in Thorn’s voice. When he spoke again, it was with his words. “Are you hurt? Nyrielle?”

The words mingled with the cacophony around her, and the noise pulled at her, tugging her down. Dizzy and disoriented, she dropped to her knees. She couldn’t see Drego anymore, but his voice still sounded in her head.

“Thorn?”

She collapsed to the ground, giving in to the frenzy around her. As the darkness overtook her, Drego spoke a third name.

But the word was lost in the madness, and the world faded to black.

* * * * *

“Nyrielle? Are you hurt?”

Thorn was lying on the hard ground. She winced as consciousness returned. Her left arm was bruised but unbroken. It was the shard in her neck that caused her to gasp. It felt as if the shard were a burning dagger pressing into her spine. The words of the dream came back to her, and the memory of the screaming skulls. Prisoners yearning to be free.

“Thorn?” It was Drego, running a hand along her face. “Can you hear me?”

Thorn opened her eyes. The smell of burned flesh and hair were enough to tell her that she was back in Fallen. She was fully dressed, and she could see Steel next to her, still buried in the stranger’s corpse.

She looked at Drego. There was none of the smirking bravado she was used to. He seemed truly concerned. “I’m fine,” she said. “I just … passed out for a moment.”

“You’re sure you’re not hurt? You screamed, and I thought … your arm …”

“It’s nothing,” she said. She raised her left hand and flexed her fingers. “See?”

She rose to her feet. The three people she’d fought were sprawled out just as she remembered, along with a fourth feral man whose burns spoke of Drego’s handiwork. “What were these things?”

“Victims of the Keeper of Hopes,” Drego said. “Left with one single solitary hope: that if they spill enough blood in their master’s name, he will lift his hand from them. They feel no pain, sorrow, or remorse. It’s amazing what a man is capable of, when he’s fully committed to the cause. And killing was all that these poor souls had left to cling to.”

“So this is the touch of an angel.” Thorn pulled Steel free from the corpse. “Very well. I had my doubts before, but if you and Daine can destroy this thing, I’ll be at your side.”

“We’d better find the others,” Drego said. “This way.”

Thorn grabbed his arm before he moved away. “Drego.”

“Yes?”

“When I was unconscious … what did you do?”

Drego looked puzzled for a moment then rolled his eyes. “Please. You were only down for a few moments, and I’m not one to take advantage of a friend.”

So it was a dream. “We’re friends, then?”

“Was that ever in doubt?” Drego asked. He winked. “I may be the only friend you truly have.”

He sprinted down the hall before she could respond.
Why did you question Drego Sarhain? Steel said. It was always difficult to read the emotions behind his psychic whispers, but there was a hint of frustration at being left in the dark. You were unconscious for a brief period of time, and I felt no magical emanations. All I heard was his voice as he tried to rouse you. Of course, my view was limited by the fact that I was left buried in the brains of one of your foes. What did you see?

Thorn tapped the dagger twice. As much as she wanted to talk things through, now was not the time. Daine and the others were waiting just ahead, and as she approached, she saw that they were standing over the corpses of another four feral humans. There were spatters of blood across Xu'sasar's pale chitin armor, and Brom had a new patch of green scales across his forehead, but none of them was seriously hurt.

“Any troubles, Thorn?” A curious intensity lit Daine’s gaze as he studied her. Crazy as it was, she felt as if he’d been expecting the ambush.

Could this have been some sort of test? What does he know about me? It seemed ridiculously paranoid. If Daine wanted her dead, he’d had ample opportunities to kill her himself.

But her death might not be his goal. She still had the deadly touch that might prove useful. Despite the words of dream-Drego, could she have an aberrant dragonmark after all?

At this stage, conjecture served little purpose. “No,” she told him. “We survived. They didn’t.”

Daine chuckled. “I suppose that’s what it always comes down to, yes? And I’m sure there’s worse yet to come. Let’s keep moving.”

“It’s not far,” Drego said. He closed his eyes, searching for whatever spiritual thread he was following. “There. Follow me.”

They’d reached the heart of Fallen. Buildings had shattered, and the walls of different buildings had fallen onto one another, creating an eerie patchwork labyrinth. It was hard to believe the structure could be stable, but the disaster had happened decades ago. Anything that would fall too easily likely already had. Rubble and refuse from the disaster choked the passage. While anything of value had been scavenged long ago, there were still remnants of the past. A wooden comb. The broken wagon of a wandering vendor, with fading paint proclaiming the best pies in Dura. Half of a child’s rattle, protruding from beneath a fallen flagstone. The air was unnaturally still. There were no vermin nor any signs of human habitation. Just the desolation left by the fall.

“It reminds me of the war,” Daine said. “Not the early days, when the streets were filled with those hoping to escape the coming conflict. But the end, during the siege.”

“Where did you fight?” It was difficult for Thorn to identify Daine’s accent, but if she’d had to guess, she’d have said he was Cyran.

“Here,” he replied. “Not your war. The struggle with the houses. It wasn’t a clash of armies as such. Deneith had its troops, but their task was containment, ensuring that we couldn’t escape. It was the others who did the killing. The siege engines of Cannith raining destruction from the sky, and the steel marauders prowling through the alleys. The swarms of predatory birds twisted by House Vadalis, sparrows with venomous spurs and a thirst for blood. Phiarlan assassins skulking through the shadows. Anyone who remained in the city was marked for death, aberrant or not. Those who did flee were cut down by the Deneith guard. This was where the war would end, and both sides knew it.”

It was still difficult for Thorn to believe Daine’s tale that he had fought in the War of the Mark. But she could hear the conviction in his voice, and the pain. She thought of the things she’d seen on the battlefield. Warforged titans scattering squads of soldiers. Sorcerers raining destruction down from airships. If he was correct and the Twelve planned to turn their weapons against the world, unlikely as it seemed, it was a horrifying thought.

She looked at Daine. “So how did you die?”

He paused, perched on the piece of rubble he’d been scaling. “I don’t recall the moment of my death. The houses were making their final move, driving deep within the city. We’d lost contact with the Dream-breaker, one of the mightiest among us. Halas called the leaders together—his lady, myself, Kalara of the Ten Terrors—to discuss our fate.”
Everyone had heard of Tarkanan and the Lady of Plague, but the others—the Dreambreaker, Kalara—were new to Thorn. “What was he like? Tarkanan?”

“The greatest man I ever met. Even when we were enemies, I admired him. If people had listened to him sooner, if he could have built his army back before the purge began, he might even have won the war—or at least have created a sanctuary for the aberrants that the others could not touch. As it was, I think he always knew how the struggle would end, but he was determined to give our people hope and to make the houses pay for the blood they spilled.”


Daine nodded. “That was one of his names, yes. He was the first Son of Khyber. Sivis propaganda said he was the Devourer himself, and it was an easy lie to tell, for his mark gave him power over the destructive forces of nature. But his mind was his greatest weapon. If he’d been unmarked, he might have unified the Five Kingdoms centuries before Galifar. And the world would be a different place today.”

“So what happened when he called you together?”

“He knew the end was hours away. He’d always known this time would come. But now, sensing their victory, the houses had fully committed their forces, bringing everything into the city.” He looked away, studying the rubble around them. “Aberrant dragonmarks … they’re tied to our blood, to our life. Sometimes this causes tragedy, madness, or infirmity. But it can also be a source of power. You can learn to channel your lifeforce into your mark, amplifying its power at the cost of personal suffering. Halas was a master of this art. When our defeat drew near, he proposed to bring the battle to an end, to combine our forces and bring the city itself down on top of them. His mark would shatter the walls and bury them in stone, while the Lady would call the vermin from the depths to devour them, and Kalara would drive any who survived to madness. They would pay for this power with their lives, but at this point, it was a small price to pay.”

“And you?”

“My mark is ill-suited to striking down armies, and I’d never learned to channel my life into it. I couldn’t help. So, Halas asked me to take the few children that were still with us and to try to escape. And I did try. I remember facing a Cannith construct, a soulless beast whose life I could not steal. Two of the children were dead, and I had only my sword. I remember the ground shaking when I charged the beast, and then … then it fades. A forest … a pool of calm water … I see these images, but I don’t remember how they fit together. And then I was trapped in the dragon’s dreams, waiting for over a thousand years.”

“Plucked out of time to do someone else’s dirty work,” Drego said. “Sounds like dragons to me.”

Daine raised an eyebrow. “And what do you know of dragons, my friend?”

Drego raised his hands disarmingly. “Oh, nothing, really. Just all of this business about the Prophecy … it seems like they’re just using you to get what they want.”

“No,” Daine said. “This is my cause. My destiny. I do not know who arranged it or why. But this is the battle I was born to fight. I’ve simply been brought forward to a point where we have the chance to win.”

“I hope so,” Drego said. “I truly do. But I’m from Thrane, and in my land, dragons are symbols of greed.”

They continued on in silence.

While Thorn tried to fight it, it was hard not to feel a sense of despair when faced with the devastation around her and the echoes of Daine’s story. Her thoughts kept drifting back to her own lonely childhood, the feeling of loss whenever her father returned to the war, the unanswered question of why her mother had abandoned her children. Those thoughts were troubling enough, but now they mingled with the horrors around her. She imagined herself as a child, crawling through the wreckage of the fall and looking for her family—searching, already knowing what she would find.

“Stop.”

At first, Thorn didn’t even recognize Drego’s voice. The vision had been so strong that she’d forgotten her quest and companions. As she returned to her senses, she could see that she hadn’t been the only one. Brom’s human eye was full of tears, and even Xu’sasar had drifted away from the group to pull at the remnants of a dress buried in the debris. Daine had a distant look in his eyes, as if he were looking into the past.

“We draw close to our quarry,” Drego said. “By his mere presence, he seeks to pull your hopes away. You must stay focused and resist these visions. Let him sink his claws into your soul, and you will soon be no better than those unfortunate creatures we killed at the tunnel.”

Daine nodded. “Yes. Remember that even in this place, we stand together, and we will succeed. Hold onto your hope, for that will be the most important weapon in the battle that lies ahead.”

Thorn cleared the cobwebs from her mind. Behind her, Brom wiped the tears from his eye then loudly blew his
nose.

“And here we are,” Drego said.

There was a door ahead of them. The building had once been a cathedral of the Sovereign Host, and there were images of the Nine carved around the great archway. Considering the devastation all around them, this structure seemed remarkably well preserved. But there was something wrong. The faces of the nine Sovereigns were filled with fear and despair, and their hands were raised as if trying to ward off whatever might emerge from within. The double doors were black oak, bound with bands of silver—a clear sign something was wrong, as scavengers should surely have stripped this precious metal. The doors were slightly ajar—perhaps enough for a halfling to slip through.

“Stay back,” Thorn said. She drew Steel and approached the archway.

“There’s strong magic all around you, Steel said. Enchantment and illusion, the world itself is being tainted by this angel’s thoughts.

“Lovely,” Thorn murmured. “Don’t trust your eyes,” she warned the others. “I don’t know how extensive his powers are, but things may not be what they appear.”

She studied the air within the open doors and cast a pinch of powdered silver forward, but there was no indication of any sort of ward. Unless they’re hidden by his illusions, she thought.

“I think it’s safe,” she said at last.

Daine drew his sword, and it gleamed with a pale light. “Brom, take the lead. Thorn, Drego, follow on my mark. Anything that moves should be considered an enemy. We need to press forward as quickly as we can.”

Brom grinned, looking forward to the battle ahead. He strode up to the door, raised his mighty fist—and then paused. He set his hand back on the ground again and sat there, staring at the gate in front of him.

“Brom!” Daine said. “The door!”

The dwarf shifted his weight slightly, started to raise his hand, and again he stopped.

“What is it?” Thorn asked.

“I … I don’t know how to open it,” he said. His voice was quavering, filled with doubt.

“Just push it.”

“But … what if I can’t? What if I’m not strong enough?” He continued to mutter to himself, seeming not to hear their words.

Psionic attack, Steel told her.

“Oh, that’s news,” Thorn said.

Drego was talking to Brom, whispering words of encouragement. Thorn had other ideas. Stepping forward, she chose a tender spot and poked the dwarf with Steel. He fell forward with a yelp, staggering into the door with his considerable bulk, and the gates opened wide. Brom looked back at her, puzzled, but it seemed the pain had broken the enchantment.

“Move!” Daine said.

Shaking his head slightly, Brom turned back and charged. Thorn and Drego were next through the door. What lay beyond was so at odds with the rest of Fallen that Thorn knew it couldn’t be real. There was no rubble or dust in the great hall. Candles gleamed on pillars and pedestals—and in the hands of the parishioners. For the hall was filled, in a seeming mockery of a service. Scores of people were inside, staring at the altar. They might have slipped through the crack in the door, small as they were, but she wasn’t looking at a congregation of halflings.

They were children.

Some were clearly denizens of Fallen, filthy urchins dressed in torn rags. But others must have come from higher districts, somehow drawn down into this hellish place. Whatever force had brought them here held them paralyzed, and there was no reaction as Brom moved among them. Thorn prayed that this was just another illusion, but the answer seemed all too clear. Drego said that Vorlintar fed on innocence, and here was his unfortunate flock.

“Xu!” Daine hissed behind her.

Glancing back, Thorn saw that the dark elf had produced her bone glaive, and that Daine had caught the haft of the weapon as she was readying a swing.

“We do not fight this army?” Xu’sasar seemed truly puzzled by this revelation. “They may be passive now, but surely they will rise to defend their master.”

Thorn tried to push that thought from her mind. The sight of the assembled children was bad enough. The thought of having to cut her way through a clawing mob was a true nightmare.

“Only if necessary,” Daine said.

The dark elf blew out her breath, and her weapon retracted, shifting back into the throwing wheel. “It reflects
poorly on the soul when one is killed by children,” she said.


“You cannot prepare for what lies ahead.” The voice filled the hallway, deep and resonant. It was accompanied by the sound of chimes, faint music ringing through the air. “None of you will leave this place. Some few of you may be lucky enough to die. The rest will join my choir.”

Surely some illusion must have hidden him from them earlier. For where there had once been empty space, there now stood an angel. He spread his mighty wings, and the chains hanging from each feather rattled and chimed. The great doors of the hallway slammed shut. Every candle extinguished. And the laughter of the Keeper of Hopes echoed in the darkness.
Thorn’s vision shifted to compensate for the darkness. The first thing she saw were the angel’s wings—outspread and glorious, with long feathers as dark as a moonless night. The source of the chimes became clear, for there were chains attached to every feather. Strange weights were bound to the ends of the chains—weights of many shapes and sizes, engraved with symbols Thorn didn’t recognize. Their purpose was clear: for all his glory, Vorlintar could not rise from the ground.

The raven wings drew Thorn’s attention, but the figure between them was nebulous and enigmatic. Her first impression was of a wraithlike being, cloaked in shadow, with long arms and hungry, grasping hands. No … it was her father, as he had been on the day that he left them for the last time. Or a whirling mass of dragonshards surrounding a great pillar. The sight was overwhelming and disorienting. She turned her eyes away, and not a moment too soon. Confused as she was, Thorn hadn’t even noticed the angel’s approach. Now, guided by the rattling of the chains, she realized he was almost upon her. She rolled to the side, and while she couldn’t see the angel’s hand, she felt a chill as it passed close to her skin.

Thorn’s companions moved. She heard the whir of Xu’sasar’s bone wheel and a ringing crash as it struck the wings of the chained angel. If Vorlintar felt any pain, he gave no sign of it. But that was just the prelude. Brom ran across the hall, smashing into the Keeper of Hopes with enough force to dent steel and shatter stone. Yet the angel was unmoved by the blow. He caught Brom by the neck and lifted the dwarf into the air. A horrible sound filled the air, a despairing wail torn from Brom’s throat as he flailed in the angel’s grasp.

Thorn moved behind Vorlintar. Steel was in her hand. One thrust could bury the blade in the angel’s spine. But how did she know he even had a spine? How could she hope to succeed when both Brom and Xu’sasar had failed so completely? Brom’s strangled cry was already dying, and she knew there was no way to save him. Her only hope was to flee, to try to save her own life.

No!

These weren’t her thoughts. There was always a way. There was always hope.

She wrestled with her doubts, struggling with the terrible malaise and fear—and then the despair broke.

Thorn struck with the speed of a viper, burying Steel in the back of the angel’s neck. His scream echoed throughout the cathedral, an unearthly howl of pain. There was no time to savor her triumph. Vorlintar lashed back with his wings. The sheer force flung Thorn back, and the impact of a chain against her forehead made the world go white. She rolled with the blow, twisting to land on her feet. A thought called Steel back to her. He flew from the wounded angel and into her hand. Streams of shadow and dark wisps of smoke poured from the injury.

Brom lay crumpled on the ground, and Xu’sasar was standing frozen, likely paralyzed by the same doubts Thorn had struggled with. Drego and Daine stepped into the fray. Drego raised his hands, and argent flames illuminated the room. “I know you, Vorlintar.” His voice was clear and strong. “Fifth among the Fallen, bound in this place for coveting that which you were born to inspire. My light will strip away your power and constrain you to the fate that awaits you.”

Drego thrust his hands forward, and bolts of silver light flowed across the room. Yet Vorlintar laughed, raising his hands and blocking the flames with shields of shadow.

“What mockery is this?” the angel said. “Your hopes are hidden from me, but I shall pry them from your soul.”

Drego’s magic couldn’t reach the Keeper of Hopes, but the onslaught was holding Vorlintar’s attention, and now Daine strode forward with his blade drawn and his dragonmark pulsing in the dim light. Thorn circled around the other side. Vorlintar was beating his wings, and the lashing chains made it difficult to close in. Still, she just had to wait for an opening.

“You are alone in this place, fallen one,” Daine said. “You cannot stand against us all. End your struggles and accept your fate.”

“Oh, I always have hope,” the angel said. “Just as long as I have innocents.”

The children rose to their feet.

It was just as Thorn had feared—a mob driven by the same feral fury as those they’d fought in the tunnel. They
weren’t armed, but the sheer numbers would be deadly.

“Xu’sasar!” Daine snapped.

Whether it was the order or the change in focus, the dark elf broke free of the trance. She didn’t hesitate. She leaped across the room, an impossible bound that sent her flying through the air and right into the midst of the savage youths. Her weapon shifted into a long bone staff, and she lashed out as she landed and knocked a child to the ground.

Thorn wanted to help the dark elf, but she knew the angel was the greater threat. She flung Steel at Vorlintar’s back, and the angel hissed as the blade struck home. Then she saw something that made her heart sink. The wound she’d made in the angel’s neck had vanished, as if he’d never been injured.

This revelation brought new waves of despair. Even Daine seemed to feel it. He had reached the angel and his blade was held high, yet he did not strike. Thorn could only assume that he was struggling with his own doubts. She tried to think, to come up with a solution, but all that she could think about were the people she had failed. Lharen. Mayne. Her mother.

Then a new hope appeared. Brom slowly rose to his feet, unsteady yet strong. Thorn smiled—

And then Brom swung his huge fist at Daine.

No! Xu’sasar couldn’t last long on her own. Daine was struggling with Brom. Drego’s silver flame was growing dim, slowly being consumed by Vorlintar’s shadows. And Thorn couldn’t hurt the angel with Steel.

So she’d have to find another way.

Dropping Steel, Thorn charged Vorlintar. His wings buffeted her, but inhuman strength flowed through her. She slammed into the angel and wrapped her arms around his chest.

Now, she thought. She tried to remember the sensation of killing the Sentinel Marshal, of draining the life from the man in the tunnel. But nothing happened. Whatever the nature of the power, it wouldn’t answer her call. And now strength was fading. The angel was thrashing, his chains flailing against her skin, and she couldn’t hold on for long.

No. She could. Thorn had never been one for grandiose dreams. All she wanted was to serve her country, to know that her father would be proud of her. And that was enough. She was fighting for Breland and the memory of the best man she’d ever known, and she had no intention of failing either one. There was always a way. There was always hope.

The angel screamed again.

Hope. That was her weapon. Vorlintar consumed hope, and he could not claim hers. He struggled, howling, but Thorn locked her hands together and refused to let go. He would fall. They would find a way. She was sure of it.

The shadows the angel had summoned vanished, and Drego’s flames washed over him. For a moment Thorn thought she would be burned, but she felt only the slightest tingle against her skin. Not so Vorlintar. The angel’s thrashing grew weaker. The weight of his chains pulled him to the ground.

Daine moved forward and placed his hand against the angel’s forehead. His dragonmark burst into light, and the lines of it flowed off of his skin and wrapped around the head of the Keeper of Hopes. The angel’s cries suddenly silenced, and he stiffened in Thorn’s arms. As she held him, his body began to fade beneath her hands, as if he were turning into mist. There was a jangling sound as one of his chains fell to the floor. Another followed, and another, and then there was a crash as dozens fell at once. Thorn’s arms closed on empty air. Daine held a ball of writhing shadows in his hand, bound in the brilliant lines of his mark. He took a deep breath and closed his palm, crushing the sphere. He gasped as inky blackness spread from his hand along his mark, flowing up his arm.

“Thorn, get back!” Drego cried. “Stay away from him!”

Daine’s face was a mask of pain. The shadows spread to his face, moving across his eye. He dropped to one knee, his fist still clenched, every muscle bulging.

Thorn snatched Steel off of the floor. “What can we do?”

“He’s right, Steel whispered. I don’t know what this is, but there’s immense power at work. You need to stay clear of it.

It seemed that the shadow-touched mark was fighting to pull free of Daine’s body. Inky tendrils rose from his skin, lashing at the air. It was a terrifying sight, and yet Thorn couldn’t just stand by and watch. She was sure that she could help. You’ll know when the time comes, he’d told her. And she did. Sheathing Steel, Thorn walked to Daine’s side and set her hands on his shoulders. Immediately, she felt a surge of warmth in the shard in her neck. Only this time, it wasn’t pain.
“You can do this,” she said. The words came to her without thought. “Remember who you are. Remember what you’ve done. What’s one more to one such as you?”

Daine stiffened at her touch. Then, as she spoke, crimson light burned at the shadows along his skin. The ruddy glow reclaimed the lines of the dragonmark, and the mark itself pulled back against his flesh. He gasped, falling forward and catching himself with one hand.

“You have my thanks, my lady.” His voice was ragged. “I knew I could count on you.”

Thorn didn’t even know what she’d done or where the words had come from. Yet it had felt terribly familiar, as if she’d done it before.

“Of course,” she said.

“Xu,” Daine said, rising to his feet.

Thorn saw that Brom was sprawled out on the floor behind him. Daine was still unsteady on his feet, but he pushed past Thorn toward the mass of savage children.

The battle was over. The children were sprawled across the room. A few bore signs of injury, but others seemed completely unharmed. As Thorn followed Daine, she saw that all of the fallen were smiling, their faces frozen in expressions of joy and peace.

Not so Xu’sasar. The dark elf had held her own, but the children had possessed the manic strength of the marauders at the tunnel, and she’d fought dozens of them. She was covered with bruises, and there was something wrong with her left leg—a sprain, if not a broken bone. Blood was flowing from her mouth, and Thorn wondered if there was internal bleeding.

Daine took her in his arms. She looked at him, and her pale eyes were glazed. “It reflects poorly on the soul … when one is killed … by children,” she whispered.

“You’re not dying here,” he told her. “Drego!”

“I cannot let you … stand alone,” she said. “The spirits told me … danger still to come.”

“I will not be alone,” he said. “And you have done your duty to the spirits.”

“Brom’s dead,” Drego said, coming up behind them. “A mercy after what that thing did to him.”

Daine looked up at him then back at Xu’sasar. “Help her.”

Drego looked down at the injured woman. “There’s little I can do——”

“Do it.”

The Thrane knelt beside Xu’sasar, studying her wounds. Even weak as she was, she refused to cry out in pain. But it was plain to see that she was in agony. It was then that Thorn remembered what she had in her cloak. Finding the proper pocket, she produced the second vial of dreamlily that she’d taken from the Tarkanon stores.

Xu’sasar resisted when Drego tried to give her the medicine. “Weakens the mind,” she murmured.


On his order, she swallowed the potion. Her breathing slowed, and she relaxed.

Drego studied her for a few more moments. “She’ll live,” he said. “I need to splint the leg, and she needs to rest. But as long as she avoids any strenuous activity, she’ll survive.”

“Do what you need to do,” Daine said. He looked away, and Thorn finally had a good look at him. His dragonmark had spread, covering his entire neck and a wider portion of his face.

“What happened?”

“Vorlintar,” he said. “He’s bound within my mark. It’s difficult to hold such a powerful spirit. Fortunately for me, I had an experienced mentor.”

“Your mark’s spreading.”

“I know. It always does. I imagine the spirits I had bound were released when I died. When I returned to the flesh, my mark was the same size as when it first appeared. With each new spirit, it grows. I can feel it, writhing against me, struggling to be free.” As if to illustrate his point, the lines along his arm twisted and shifted. “But I held it before, and I can contain it now.”

Thorn said nothing, just watched the aberrant dragonmark as it crawled on his flesh. Drego called them back.

“I’ve done what I can,” he said. “But we should get her back to the haven.”

“No,” Daine said. “There is no haven in Sharn. Not anymore. My orders to our brethren were to evacuate as soon as we left. If Cannith hasn’t found it yet, they will soon.”

“So where are we going?” Drego asked. “Xu’sasar can’t fight.”

“And she will not be joining us,” Daine replied. “I will speak to her alone. As for us, we have one more angel to
find.”
“What do you mean?” Drego said.
“I want you to take us to the Cardinal Point.”
“The Cardinal Point?” Drego said. “You mean …”
“Yes,” Daine said. His mark gleamed against his skin. “Tonight we face the Angel of Flame.”
I am the Angel of Flame. The words from her dream echoed in Thorn’s mind, and she found that her hand had tightened around Steel’s hilt. “We’re going to fight a dragon?”

If Daine meant her any harm, she could see no sign of it. He frowned, puzzled. “No. An angel, an embodiment of fire. I do not know its proper titles, only that it holds power over flame. Drego, perhaps you could enlighten us?”

The Thrane nodded, but Thorn could tell that he was surprised by the topic. As before, he wove a pattern with his fingers, creating a ward that shimmered in the air. “The guardian of the Cardinal Point is one of the Burning Host of Syrania, the vanguard that stands against the fiends of Shavarath. She is Vyrael, the Ashen Sword, Eighth among the Burning Host.” As before, the translucent sigil caught fire and burned away in the air. “Hers is the strength of smoke and flame. Less subtle by far than our fallen foe but easily as dangerous in battle. Why her?”

“Do you have another suggestion?” Daine asked. “I found tools in the Cannith vault that will help us survive the battle. And her defeat will give me the power that I need.”

Steel was buzzing in the back of Thorn’s mind, but she was already asking the question. “Power to do what exactly?”

“I told you before. I liberated a weapon from the Cannith forgehold, and now I intend to turn it against the houses. If I can absorb enough power into my mark, I can shut down all house operations in Sharn.”

Thorn nodded. “Yes. And that’s where we began. The forgehold was illegal and operated without Brelish sanction. Defeating this monster was a service to the people of Sharn. Shutting down legitimate businesses … That does nothing but hurt Breland.”

“It’s not about Breland!” Daine roared, his mark blazing with crimson light. “Why can’t you see that? The Five Nations are dying, and with each day the Twelve become more powerful. I have seen the horrors they can unleash. Forget your petty nationalism for one day and look to the fate of the world! The houses must be stopped!”

His fury was as powerful as it was unexpected. Thorn could see faint veins of darkness running along the lines of his mark, and she guessed that the strain of absorbing Vorlintar was still weighing upon him.

“This weapon is one more tool that they made without your knowledge—one more tool that they would use against your people. Let me turn it against them, and you will see the horrors they were prepared to unleash—and gain a weapon you can use against them, when the time comes. Tarkanan cannot win this war alone. We know that now. The Twelve turned the world against us. Now we will reveal them for what they truly are.”

His mental state is continuing to deteriorate, Steel said. Safer by far to take this weapon from him, whatever it may be. If it is as vital as he says, better to have the artificers of the Citadel study it.

Unless it can only be wielded by the Son of Khyber, Thorn thought. It all seemed incredible, but what if he was telling the truth? What if he had been preserved from Dolurrh, drawn through time to change the course of the future? Her encounters with Merrix and Sorghan mingled together with her disturbing dreams and Daine’s dark tale of the War of the Mark.

“Why now?” she asked.

“Because there may not be another time. Sharn is Syrania’s latrine, where the angels throw their refuse. Here we can prey upon these fallen spirits to get the power that I need. I don’t know where I could find another radiant idol, and I must leave Sharn within the day. Merrix couldn’t recognize you, but he knew this body. I cannot stay here, and I cannot return to Sharn again. I need to finish my work quickly and then regroup with the others to the north. You will have to decide if you wish to join us, or if your loyalty to your nation is more important than this struggle. But I cannot fight this battle without you.”

Steel’s voice was cold. It’s your decision, Lantern Thorn. Just remember the oaths you’ve sworn and the reason you were sent here.

Sent by the Twelve, Thorn thought. Not by Breland. They’d already made a lapdog of King Borenal. How much further would they go?

Steel could sense her hesitation. You’re a Dark Lantern of the King’s Citadel, charged to uncover threats to Breland. The decision is yours, but you will have to live with the consequences.
“Very well,” Thorn said, speaking to Daine and Steel at once. “Where do we find this burning angel?”

Daine had asked Thorn and Drego to wait outside the cathedral while he spoke to Xu’sasar. The two of them sat on chunks of rubble, looking at the debris. Ruined as it was, somehow it seemed less desolate. Perhaps the district would be rebuilt one day. Perhaps hope would return to Fallen.

“What do you think about all of this?” Thorn asked.

Drego shrugged. “I’m always ready to drive one of these celestial interlopers from our world. As for declaring war on the Twelve? That I don’t know about.”

“Do you think he’s right? Is this his destiny?”

Drego looked at her, and his silver-gray eyes gleamed. “I’d rather discuss our destiny. If he’s right, and this comes to a true war against the houses, I’d hope that you and I could be on the same side.”

“Why do you do that?” Thorn said.

“What?”

“This schoolyard flirtation. You’re a handsome man, but by now I think you know me well enough to know that it won’t influence me. So why bother?”

Drego put a hand over his heart, staring at her with a playfully soulful expression. “Can’t a man be a fool for love?”

“So they say,” Thorn said. “But you’re not nearly the fool you seem to be, are you?”

Drego looked at her, and there was a subtle change in his expression. She was used to seeing a hint of mockery and mischief in his eyes, whoever he was dealing with. Now there was something different in his gaze. Something closer to respect. “Perhaps there’s a side of me you haven’t seen.”

“Oh, I think I’ve seen it once before. When you almost destroyed my nation.”

Thorn expected Drego to look away, but he held her gaze. “You deserve more than Breland.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “That’s it? That’s your best line? You’re not even going to tell me how a war with the Twelve would reunite Galifar and bring us all together again?”

Drego didn’t smile. “I could. But perhaps I’m tired of this game, of hiding my true feelings behind this childish flirtation. Maybe it’s time to set aside the masks.”


Drego shook his head. “There’s no point. Have you ever been in love, Lantern?”

This certainly wasn’t where she had expected the conversation to go, but she followed the path. “Once, yes.”

“And what became of your beloved?”

“We served together. One mission, I came back. He didn’t.”

“And do you still think about him? Do you see him in your dreams?”

“Yes, I suppose I do.”

“Now imagine you were asked to serve with a doppelganger, someone who looked just like him but who was nothing like him. Someone with the mind of a child, filled with foolish beliefs. What would you do?”

Thorn frowned. “Aureon’s Word, what are you talking about?”

Drego laughed, and just like that, the mood was broken. The mischievous gleam was back, the sly smile. “My apologies, my lady. I thought a little pathos might make for an interesting change from the schoolyard antics.”

Thorn studied his face. She had a knack for reading people, and he seemed utterly sincere. On the other hand, he’d fooled her in Droaam. She wanted to press the point further, but before she could speak, Daine emerged from the cathedral. Xu’sasar was with him, leaning on her bone staff to keep weight off her injured leg.

“We must go,” Daine said. “Drego, do you know a path to the Cardinal Point?”

Drego glanced over at Thorn, a curious expression in his eyes—a combination of mischief and curiosity. “Yes, I believe I do.” He rose to his feet and held out a hand. “Lady Thorn, are you ready to fight your second angel?”

She stood on her own, ignoring the proffered hand. “Always. What about Brom?”

“There’s nothing more to be done for him,” Drego said. “At least, with Vorlintar defeated, the souls of his victims can finally rest.”

“So we’re just leaving him here?”

“This is war, Thorn, even if it is only the first day of it. There will be time to mourn the fallen when it is done. This place was his home, and through his actions it is a better place. He will be at peace here.”

Thorn nodded. He was right, of course. It wasn’t the first time she’d had to leave a body behind. She turned to
Xu’sasar. “Will you be all right?”

Apparently Xu’sasar’s people had no custom of the sentimental farewell. “Fail him, and I will hunt your soul in the final lands,” she said. She looked back at Daine. “Die well.”

He turned to Drego and Thorn. “Come. Destiny awaits.”

Thorn’s hand slid down to Steel’s hilt.

_I hope you know what you’re doing, Lantern Thorn._

So do I, she thought.
To Thorn’s surprise, Drego led them back into the cathedral. He summoned a sphere of silver flame to light his path and walked through the nave. The cold fire cast pale light across the dead children spread around the hall. It was a strange and horrible sight, mitigated only by the beatific expressions on the faces of the fallen. Thorn hadn’t been able to save them, but at least they were free of Vorlintar.

Drego paused, closing his eyes. Thorn drew Steel. Surely no one could fault her for keeping a weapon ready in such a place.

*I’m certain he’s using some form of divination, but I’m still sensing no mystical energies*, Steel whispered.

Whether it’s training or a tool, it’s a powerful abjuration. I wonder what else he’s hiding.

“Yes,” Drego said. “I thought so. Follow me.”

He made his way along the western wall, passing by chapels dedicated to individual Sovereigns. With the death of Vorlintar, the angel’s illusionary influence over the cathedral was fading. When the angel was alive, the hall had appeared to be pristine. Now Thorn could see the cracks in the walls and the shattered benches. The statues of the Sovereigns were still intact, and freed from Vorlintar’s influence, their expressions were those Thorn knew from her youth. Stern Aureon, loremaster and lawmaker. Gentle Arawai, source of nature’s bounty. Mischievous Olladra, fortune’s queen.

What made you think Daine wanted to you fight a dragon? Steel said.

Thorn rubbed her thumb against his hilt. What do you mean?

The Angel of Flame. When Daine used the name, you asked if you were going to fight a dragon. Why would you think such a thing?

Thorn brought the blade up to her mouth. “Sarmondelaryx,” she whispered. “What can you tell me about her?”

There was no response from Steel. Thorn was momentarily distracted as she navigated a narrow flight of spiral stairs down to the catacombs of the church. The ancient steeps were thin and steep, often slick with moss or half-crumbled away. Once they reached the bottom of the stairs, Thorn repeated her question. “What can you tell me?”

This time she’d spoken too loudly. Both Drego and Daine glanced back at her. “About our destination,” she continued. “This ‘Cardinal Point’.”

The crypts below the church were narrow and dark. Thorn had expected it to be cold, but instead, there was a definite warmth in the air.

“It’s where the walls between Syrania and Eberron are the weakest,” Drego said. “The mystical center of the city. It’s the energy of Syrania that sustains the flying buttresses and the other forms of levitation so common in Sharn; ultimately, that energy flows from the Azure Sky of Syrania.”

“Fascinating,” Thorn said. She tapped Steel.

*It’s irrelevant to our mission.*

Thorn tapped his hilt twice. Usually Steel loved a chance to play Morgrave scholar. “Tell me,” she whispered.

*The Angel of Flame* is one of the titles used by the dragon Sarmondelaryx, but it’s only mentioned in Bal Thurin’s treatises. She was generally known as the Red Wyrm, or more infamously as the Bane of Thrane.

She tapped the blade again. Some say that it was her defeat of the prince that paved the way for the rise of the Silver Flame, Steel whispered, sounding vaguely annoyed. *The people of the land were deeply loyal to the Sovereign Host and Dol Arrah at the time. Many scholars say that the devastation wrought by the Angel of Flame—along with her defeat of the man seen as the Sovereigns’ chosen champion—caused many to lose faith in the old gods. It’s only one factor, certainly, but*
They’d continued to descend as Steel spoke. There was a pleasant warmth in the air, though Thorn noticed that Daine and Drego were sweating profusely.

Steel was continuing the history lesson. *Though best known for her actions against Thrane, Sarmondelaryx mostly targeted individual heroes, slaying the greatest champion of an age and then disappearing for decades. Some stories say that she’d made deals with the Keeper, and that she devoured the souls of heroes as part of some gruesome pact. Her last recorded appearance was her battle with our friend Harryn Stormblade, and that was hundreds of years ago. Most likely she’s long dead… certainly no threat to Sharn or Breland. Much unlike our friend here.*

Thorn sheathed Steel once more, remembering the illustrations of the hero Harryn Stormblade battling a fierce red dragon centuries before and the strange dreams she’d had of becoming a very similar dragon.

“Here we are,” Drego said, his voice pulling Thorn from her reverie.

There was a gap in the floor—a sharp drop that revealed a tunnel with smooth, curved walls of pure black stone.

“Volcanic,” Drego said, “but not natural. When Halas Tarkanan leveled the old city, he drew magma up from below. There’s tunnels like this scattered around the depths.”

“And this will take us to the point?” Thorn said. “That’s odd.”

“The Cardinal Point wasn’t made by human hands, or goblins,” Drego replied, peering down into the tunnel. “It lies beneath the city, but it’s a natural feature of the region. This is the quickest path. Though I should warn you, it’s going to get hot.”

“Here.” Daine held out his hand. Three small objects lay in his palm. “I took these from the Cannith vault. Set the plugs in your nostrils, and breathe through your nose. They should purify the volcanic gases and cool the air to a safe temperature. They’ll provide basic protection for the skin, but don’t try swimming in molten rock.”

Thorn took one of the plugs and fitted it against her nose. While the air wasn’t that warm to begin with, the instant the plug was in place, she felt a rush of cooler air against her skin. She tried breathing through her nose. The air was almost chilly and had a vaguely floral scent.

Daine produced the bag of holding. Rooting within, he pulled out an assortment of climbing tools: a knotted rope, pitons, hammers. “I understand you’re quite the climber,” he said to Thorn. “Perhaps you could manage the initial descent.”

Thorn nodded, taking one end of the rope and looping it around her waist. “*Shalitar,*” she said, invoking the same spell she’d used to scale Torran Spire. She felt a tingle as the magical energy spread across her hands and feet, giving her the spider’s gift to grasp the wall.

It was fortunate that she knew the spell. The lava tube was deep and wide, the walls exceptionally smooth. Thorn soon passed beyond the range of Drego’s silver light, but the darkness wasn’t complete. There was a faint light from the depths, a ruddy crimson glow. It was another hundred feet before she finally reached the cavern floor and secured the rope.

Daine had little trouble with the descent. Drego was less athletic than the other two, and he took longer to make his way down his rope. If not for the knots tied along the length of the rope, he surely would have slipped and fallen. Daine and Thorn waited at the cavern floor, watching the Thrane struggle with the rope.

“I’m glad you’ve chosen to take our side,” Daine told her. “I know it’s a difficult choice. This will be an ugly battle, unlike anything Breland has ever seen. But it’s the right thing to do.”

“I’m not choosing sides,” Thorn said. “If this fallen angel is anything like the last, I’m doing my nation a service. But I won’t be joining you when you leave Sharn. And when we meet again, we may not be on the same side.”

Daine glanced away, but Thorn saw a flicker of emotion pass across his face. Guilt? Doubt? Was there something he wasn’t telling her?

“Your loyalty to Breland is admirable,” he said, “though I find it somewhat surprising.”

Thorn scowled. Having just heard this speech from Drego, she didn’t care to hear it again. But her curiosity got the better of her. “And why is that?”

“Foolishness, I suppose. You remind me of someone I used to know, and I can’t imagine her being quite so loyal.” He turned to face her, the lines of his mark shifting along his face as he spoke. “You may not have an aberrant dragonmark, Thorn, but your mark lets you kill with a touch. Does it matter how you do it? You’ve more in common with us than with the beggar, the blacksmith, or the countess. They’ll fear you when they learn what you can do, just as they fear us. Can’t you see that?”

“Whether they fear me or not, they’re still my people,” Thorn said. “My father died defending this nation, and he believed it was a worthy sacrifice. You died before our nation came to be. I believe that Breland has kept the best
aspects of old Galifar. I will not turn on the Brelish, and I cannot believe that they’ll turn on me.”

Daine held her gaze for a moment, and it seemed as if he were trying to look through her, to see something beneath the skin. Then he shook his head. “I hope you’re right. I have no desire to make an enemy of you or Breland. But I was brought back to fight the Twelve, and I must follow my destiny.”

Drego had finally reached the ground, and Daine turned away again.

“Let’s go,” he told Drego. “And quickly, before this wretched heat burns my feet away.”

The floor seemed cool enough to Thorn, but she said nothing as Drego led them down the lava tube. It was as wide as a great hallway, and while the heat didn’t trouble her, there was considerable soot and steam in the tunnel; she took care to breathe through her nose, but the steam was still soaking her clothes and beading against her skin. They descended deeper and deeper, until Thorn was certain that they had dropped below the level of the Cannith forgehold or Tarkan fortress.

And then they came to the lake.

The sloping passage opened into a wide chamber. Thorn couldn’t see the far wall, but it was the floor that drew her eyes. Steam rose from the cracked black stone, and between the cracks came the fierce glow of molten rock. Drego stared at the lava hissing around the cracks in the floor and breathed deeply through his nose. “It seems we have the Traveler’s own luck today.”

Thorn moved to his side. “This wasn’t in the plan?”

“Not at all,” Drego replied. “We’re almost there. There’s a tunnel to the southwest that will take us directly to the Cardinal Point.”

“A tunnel to the southwest … on the other side of the lake of fire,” Daine said.

“Indeed.” Drego sighed. “That’s the problem with plotting a course through an unstable volcanic region. It’s, well, unstable.”

“There’s no time to go back,” Daine said. “By now … there’s no safe haven for us here. We need to finish our work, and quickly.”

Drego shrugged. “Tell that to the pit of fire.”

Thorn had been studying the molten lake. “How solid is that crust? Could we walk across it?”

Drego shook his head. “The crust might not crack immediately, but it would never support all of our weight. It hardly matters, though. The heat is more than our shields could take. Even if you didn’t end up in the molten lava, you’d still sear the flesh from your bones.”

“It couldn’t support all three of us …” Thorn said. “But just one of us might have a chance.”

“You’re not listening.” Drego said. “The heat—”

Thorn raised a hand, and Drego fell silent. Her thoughts were racing. “Daine. You have the bag of holding?”

He nodded, but he wasn’t smiling. “It’s not a safe form of transport. There’s a limited supply of oxygen and no means to open the bag from within.”

“Which means I’d better move quickly.”

“Wait,” Drego said. “You want us to climb inside the bag and then run across the firepit while carrying us?”

Thorn grinned. “Exactly.”

“I’d always heard Brelish were mad, but—”

“She’s right.” Daine threw the bag to Thorn. Once again, there was something in his eyes—an emotion she couldn’t quite read. “I believe in you. You’ll make it across. Just keep moving. Don’t stop for any reason.”

Thorn nodded and glanced at Drego. He sighed. “Well, at least as I’m suffocating I can tell myself ‘it could be worse—you could be burning to death.’”

“I’m glad I have your confidence,” Thorn said. She spread the mouth of the magical sack as wide as it would go. “Climb inside.”

Daine disappeared into the bag without a moment’s hesitation. Drego paused. “Whatever you do, just keep moving. Don’t stop for any reason. Just keep moving forward.” To her surprise, he actually smiled. “See you on the other side.”

Moments later, she threw the sack over her shoulder and readied for the run. Even with both of the men inside it, the bag only weighed about twenty pounds … but the thought of that extra weight on her back didn’t help her confidence. She studied the cracked surface ahead, searching out the most solid-looking path, and breathed deeply through her nose.

And she ran.
The stone shifted as soon as she set her weight upon it, cracks spreading from the point of impact. But Drego was right—as the crust collapsed, Thorn was already moving forward. It was a sickening, disorienting experience, with the rock splitting and sliding below her, shattering stone revealing the molten lava below.

She could see the passage now, another tube on the far wall, coming close with every step.

Almost there …

Then the stone split beneath her feet. She struggled to find footing, something to push against, but it was too late; her legs were already sliding into the lava below.
Thorn refused to panic. As her feet slid into the molten stone, she swung the heavy bag forward. The weight and momentum pulled her flat against the stone ahead, and mercifully, the impact didn’t shatter it. She drew Steel with her free hand and slammed the blade through the porous crust. This time, the surge of inhuman strength answered her call, and using Steel as a piton, Thorn pulled herself forward, dragging her legs out of the lava. She was ready to crawl forward, but she found that she could still stand, that there was still strength in her legs. She loped forward, barely thinking as she crossed the last few yards to safety. As soon as she was safely in the tunnel, Thorn collapsed to the ground, waiting for the agony to come.

But it didn’t.

Thorn was amazed that she’d even been able to walk. Her clothes were smoldering from where she’d fallen against the crust. She assumed that the intense heat had burned away the nerves, and she had to force herself to look down at her legs. What she saw was a shock. Her boots and the lower legs of her pants were tattered and burnt, almost completely destroyed. But the skin below was completely untouched. She could feel the rough stone of the tunnel beneath her feet.

She held Steel over her legs. “Explain this.”

*What do you wish me to explain?*

Thorn shook the dagger. “How did I survive that? I just plunged my foot into molten lava, and I’m not even hurt!”

*The charm you’re wearing provides basic protection against extreme heat.*

“I know that! But not against lava—so what happened?”

*I have no explanation. There was a momentary surge of transmutative energies when you pulled yourself free, but that does not account for your initial survival. Have you encountered such heat before?*

Thorn glared at the dagger. “Of course. I go swimming in lava all the time.”

*Don’t limit yourself to lava. Have you ever been badly burned?*

“Of course I have. When I was three, I stuck my hand into the cooking fire. And I was almost killed by a Karrnathi pyromancer on the Blackrod mission.” She hesitated. “There was the sorceress in the Great Crag.”

During that mission, a fight had broken out in the chambers of the medusa queen, and an Aundairian sorceress had thrown a fireball into the room before fleeing. The blast nearly killed Queen Sheshka, but had no effect on Thorn at all. That was also the first time she’d used her life-draining touch. In the madness that followed, that particular detail had slipped from her mind.

*So nothing since Blackrod?*

“No … nothing,” she said.

*There’s no logical explanation. I suggest you submit to a physical examination when you return to the Citadel. At the moment I suggest you release your companions before they suffocate—unless you’re having second thoughts about this mission.*

Thorn shook her head, sheathing the dagger. Thoughts were whirling through her mind. Her unnatural strength had first come to her in the Great Crag. She’d survived the fire. It was in Droaam that she’d learned that her enhanced senses were somehow a part of her, not granted by magical tools. And it was there that she had killed a man with her touch. All in Droaam. Her first mission after Far Passage.

*What do you really know about what happened that night? The voice from her dreams echoed in her mind.*

Then she heard her own words again. *I am the Angel of Flame.*

It was madness. But so was her survival.

She didn’t want to think about it anymore. She wanted to fight something, to channel the confusion into anger. She opened up the sack and reached inside. She felt someone’s hair and pulled Drego out through the opening.

“I’m glad to see that worked,” Drego said. He glanced down at her feet and raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t like those boots?”

“Just get Daine out of the bag,” Thorn said. “Let’s kill an angel.”
“We’re close,” Daine said. He drew his sword, and cold fire gleamed along the silver blade. “As before, we’ll need to weaken her before I can safely absorb her. Drego, I can’t imagine your flame will be of much use.”

“Not to worry.” Drego drew his wand and twirled it between his fingers. “I have other options.”

“I have a few tricks of my own, courtesy of Lord Merrix.” Daine produced a crystal sphere from a pouch. “This should buy us a little time. Thorn, you handled yourself well before. Are you ready for what lies ahead?”

Thorn nodded. She didn’t have any cunning plans, but she was certainly in a mood to stab something.

Daine paused, then he spoke again. “I know that you both have your own reasons for being here. We do not share blood or mark, and you have your own agendas in this matter. But you have been worthy companions, and whatever follows this battle, I thank you for standing at my side.”

Thorn could see the sorrow in his eyes. He doesn’t think we’ll all make it through this, she realized.

“Even as she said it, she realized it was true. Though Daine’s war wasn’t her own, she admired his dedication. He was challenging one of the most powerful forces in Khorvaire, and there was a part of her that thought it was a battle worth fighting.

“Nothing more need be said. Let us go.”

Thorn drew Steel and ran through her weaponry as she followed the others. The bare rock beneath her feet was a strange feeling, but there was no time to consider that mystery further. She had the myrnaxe bound in her glove, and her false dragonmark—though she doubted that mere pain would incapacitate a fallen angel. It seemed foolish to fight such a creature with a dagger, but they’d managed to defeat the radiant idol already. How hard could the second one be?

They were making their way up a rising slope. A flickering radiance filled the hall above—the light of a bonfire in the chamber above.

“That’s it,” Drego whispered.

“Wait!” Thorn grabbed his arm and pulled him back, almost dragging him off his feet. There was something on the floor ahead. The faintest pattern visible against the black stone. Thorn threw a pinch of silver in the air, and the glyph burst into flame. Even Thorn could feel the heat pouring from the burning sigil. She studied it, and by the time Steel spoke, she’d already come to the same conclusion.

You can’t disperse this with the tools you’re carrying, he told her. The power is beyond Kundarak work. Anyone touching the symbol will be incinerated.

“You’d best let me go first,” Thorn said. “And if you see anything like this … don’t touch.”

The next glyph was hanging in the air—an even more impressive feat. Thorn ducked beneath the flaming brand and crawled along the floor. At last she reached the top of the tunnel and peered into the room that lay beyond. What she saw was madness.

Once this chamber had been the great hall of a goblin king. The style was reminiscent of the Tarkanan sanctuary, simple and ascetic. Thick pillars supported the high roof, and the remnants of a few tattered banners hung from the walls, bearing the symbol of a skull and battle-axe. Streams of glowing lava snaked across the floor of the room, staying molten even with exposure to the air. And the flaming glyphs were scattered across the room, emblazoned on floor, wall, and pillars alike.

But these were the least of the wonders to be seen. The ceiling of the hall was high above her head, and floating debris filled the space between floor and roof. Some of it was simple stone, chunks of columns or walls that had shattered in Tarkanan’s quake. But there were charred bones drifting through the air, and enormous pieces of armor. No, not armor. An armored leg, larger than that of a troll, was floating past her, and she could see that it was solid—filled not with flesh and bone, but with metal and stone. Not warforged, but some sort of construct. Studying the bones, she spotted a few scorched corpses that still had scraps of identifiable uniforms, and she could see the edge of a gorgon seal.

The seal of House Cannith.

Cannith had been here before, and all evidence suggested that it had been a disaster. It might have been a coincidence that Daine had brought the Cannith weapon here. Or perhaps he was following in the house’s formidable footsteps.

Then she saw the throne. It had been hidden behind the drifting torso of a steel giant, and now it slowly came into view. The throne of the goblin king, torn from the floor and set loose in the air. And there in the great chair sat Vyrael, the Ashen Sword, Eighth among the Burning Host. Every feather on her wings was an individual flame, and her face was a mask of brass wreathed in fire. Her body was hidden beneath a robe darker than the blackest soot. A
sword lay across her lap—a greatsword forged from dark, pitted iron. It was a brutal weapon, one that had seen many battles.

The fallen angel was a majestic and fearsome sight, but it seemed she was not omniscient. If she was aware of Torn, she gave no indication of it. She remained perfectly still, save for the flickering flames of her wings and her glorious mane. Thorn crept along the wall, slowly making her way behind the angel. The throne was a good ten feet off of the ground, but there was a lot of floating refuse in the air. As long as it would support her weight, she could use the debris as a springboard to reach her enemy.

Vyrael still seemed to be unaware of her presence. Under normal circumstances, it would be a simple task. A quick leap, surprise attack, slash her throat before she had time to raise her blade. But after fighting Vorlintar, Thorn wasn’t even sure these beings had internal organs. Daine had a weapon he’d planned on using, so for now, she’d wait.

It didn’t take long.

Thorn’s attention was locked on the angel, and she didn’t see the others enter. But she saw Vyrael’s reaction. The Ashen Sword spread her burning wings and rose into the air, hovering above her throne. Brilliant flames engulfed her blackened sword, and the train of her robe drifted like smoke. Her angry voice was as harsh as the beaten brass of her mask, and it echoed off the walls.

“Spawn of darkness! You are a fool to come before me. A thousand fiends have fallen to my blade, and I will not suffer your presence in this place. Prepare for battle!”

“You’ve never met a fiend like me before,” Daine said. “Let’s see what you can do.”

Vyrael dived toward him, and battle was joined.
CHAPTER THIRTY

The Depths

Lharvion 22, 999 YK

Vyrael swooped down on Daine, a blazing raptor with a flaming sword. The Son of Khyber didn’t flinch. He held the crystal orb he’d stolen from Cannith in one hand and his sword in the other. He flung the orb. It smashed into the angel’s mask and shattered, dissolving into a cloud of mist.

No, not mist.

Ice.

Frost coated the Ashen Sword, extinguishing her burning mane and wings. She fell from the air, careening off the arm of a shattered construct before falling to the floor. Steam poured off of her as she rose from the ground, fire battling the mystical ice. Though her flames were extinguished, she was still ready for battle, and she raised her blade to meet Daine’s assault.

But Daine wasn’t the first to strike. Thorn stepped up behind the angel and drove Steel into the back of her skull. Liquid fire flowed out of the wound, burning a path through the ice. If Vyrael were a woman, the blade would have sunk deep into her brain, but as Thorn feared, her foe lacked the weaknesses of mortals. Nonetheless, the blow caught Vyrael’s attention.

The angel spun, her long blade carving a deadly arc through the air. If not for the ice, she might have finished Thorn then and there. As it was, Thorn was able to raise her vambraces just in time to block the blow, and the blade rang off Thorn’s mithral bracers. While Vyrael had the proportions of a slender woman, her strength was inhuman.

The blow sent Thorn staggering back, her arms numb from the impact.

She’d done her job, though. In facing Thorn, Vyrael had turned away from Daine. The Son of Khyber struck.

He’d held back in the battle with the Keeper of Hopes, but now he wove a deadly web with his shining sword. His first stroke left a burning gash across the angel’s back.

Vyrael turned to face him, and it seemed impossible that Daine could match her. Her sword was longer, and her strength greater. But he had been one of the finest swordsmen in the War of the Mark, and it seemed that his skill remained. He evaded her powerful swings with apparent ease, and whenever the angel dropped her guard to make an attack, he was there, a quick thrust leaving a burning wound on her chest. And he wasn’t alone. Thorn stayed behind the angel, darting in and striking whenever there was an opening. And while Drego kept his distance, he hurled blasts of dark energy from his wand. Vyrael howled whenever one of these struck home.

Try as she might, the Ashen Sword seemed unable to counter them. She couldn’t match their combined talents. Yet at the same time, they seemed to be making little actual progress. For every blow they landed, a previous wound melted away.

And then she exploded.

“Fools!”

The word echoed across the hall as she spread her wings. The frost had finally melted, and a blast of fire rolled out from her wings, engulfing Daine and Torn. Torn felt only the faintest warmth as the flames licked around her, but she had to look away from the brilliant light, and she heard Daine cry out in pain.

“Fools!” the angel called again, rising into the air. “You think to match my might with your petty magics? I am of the Burning Host, forged from eternal fire to battle shadow and fiend. I am the guardian of this gate, and no little tiger shall challenge me.”

Her sword blazed again, and when she swung it toward the ground, a gout of flame flowed down at Drego. The Trane threw himself out of the path of the blast—

And onto one of the burning glyphs scattered across the floor. He screamed as the sigil exploded, disappearing in the burst of fire and smoke. Thorn was surprised by the shiver that gripped her heart, but there was no time to go to him.

“You can’t win this battle,” Daine said. His dragonmark was glowing, and there were familiar veins of shadow running along the crimson path of the mark. There was a new weight in the air—the echo of the despair she’d felt when fighting Vorlintar.

He’s drawing on his power, Torn realized.
“No!” Vyrael cried. Her flames increased in intensity, until it was nearly painful just to look at her. Thorn couldn’t feel the heat, but it was clear that the others could. Daine staggered back a few steps. But he continued speaking, and Thorn could feel the growing misery in the air.

“You are no guardian,” he cried. “You are a prisoner, forsaken by those above you, cast out of Shavarath and Syrania to sit beneath this miserable city. You are no eternal flame. You’re guttering candle, burning away your last moments.”

“No!” the angel roared, and another wave of fire exploded from her outstretched wings. “I am eternal! I am the glorious flame, the light that stands against the darkness, the fire that cannot be extinguished. My glory shall be your doom!”

Vyrael raised her blade above her head, and it glowed with a light as intense as the sun itself. Somehow, Thorn knew Vyrael was preparing a blast even more powerful that what she’d flung at Drego, a burst that would incinerate bone itself. Yet even as the angel raised her blade, Thorn was in motion.

She bounded onto a floating chunk of rock and leaped atop the head of a Cannith construct, a massive metal mask slowly spinning in the air. As Vyrael pronounced their doom, Thorn leaped on her from behind. Calling on her own unnatural strength, she grabbed hold of the angel’s burning wings and crushed them in her grip, pinning them to Vyrael’s body. Despite her apparent resistance to heat, she could feel these flames. Yet it was enough. Vyrael tumbled back to the ground, the two of them striking hard. The angel twisted and squirmed against her, but Thorn caught hold of her arms, pinning her to the ground.

“You cannot do this!” Vyrael cried. “No mortal can survive my fires! I—”

“You may be part of the Burning Host,” Thorn said, silencing her enemy’s complaints with a knee to the back. “But I’m the Angel of Flame.”

Vyrael raged and screamed, but she couldn’t break free. And though the searing heat pained her, it didn’t actually burn Thorn’s skin. The angel thrashed and howled, but slowly her fires began to diminish.

And Daine was there. He set his hand against her mask, and Thorn could hear it sear his flesh. Daine didn’t flinch. The brilliant tendrils of his dragonmark wrapped around Vyrael’s head, and the angel screamed again, even louder than before. The temperature dropped sharply, and the brilliant flames of Vyrael’s wings flickered out, one by one. Now the angel’s dark robe was smoke, and her body collapsed into mist, flowing into Daine’s fist. Moments later, all that was left was the mask and the battered blade, which fell to the ground.

Daine rose to his feet. A ball of darkness was caught in his palm, flickering with bursts of flame. He took a deep breath and closed his fist around it. Then he screamed, a howl of pain as horrible as Vyrael’s had been. The lines of his dragonmark were truly burning, the flames spreading up his arm. Daine opened his eyes and stared at his hand, gritting his teeth to cut off his cry. His eyes widened with the effort of concentration, and the flames against his skin vanished. But the mark itself was still glowing with a baleful radiance, shining in the darkness. Thorn could see the mark spreading across Daine’s skin, claiming more space on his flesh.

“I have it,” he said, his breath slow and labored. “I … I’m in control. Find Drego. There is work to be done.”

Thorn nodded. She’d dropped Steel when she was wrestling with the angel, and she called him back to her hand as she ran to where Drego had fallen.

Something’s not right, Steel whispered. Thorn’s attention was on Drego. He was stretched out on the floor, badly burned but still breathing.

“Never trust an angel,” he murmured as she knelt beside him.

Lantern Thorn! I believe there is danger.

“What is it?” she asked. She knew Drego had healing supplies, and she searched through his pouches to see if anything useful remained intact. She found a vial of cooling salve and began to rub it into his burns.

“If only I’d known …” Drego muttered. “I’d have tried this long ago.”

“Shush,” she said.

Fallen angels, also known as radiant idols, are a documented threat in Sharn. The Citadel has encountered such beings before—exiles from Syrania punished with imprisonment in our world.

“So?”

Every one is different, but all share the same punishment. They cannot fly. The air is taken from them. You saw the chains on Vorlintar’s wings.

“And?”

Vyrael was flying.

“Get up,” she told Drego. Though he was hurt, the initial shock had been the worst of it. Just the few minutes of
rest had done wonders for him.

Vyrael wasn’t chained. She’d said it herself: *I am the guardian of this gate*. Daine told her she was a prisoner when he channeled Vorlintar’s powers. Powers which caused doubt and despair, twisting the truth.

Daine was kneeling before the throne. He had produced a number of tools from the bag of holding, and he was assembling a strange device. At the center was the shard-studded sphere she’d seen before, but he was connecting it to a set of crystal-tipped tubes. As she watched, his dragonmark flared and pulled away from his skin, momentarily forming winglike shapes along his back.

“What is that thing?” Thorn asked. Steel was in her fist.

Daine kept his attention on his work. “I told you. A weapon that will shut down all house operations in Sharn.”

A terrible thought occurred to her. “And how will it do that, exactly?”

He stood and turned to face her. She could see that his mark had spread to both of his arms, and shadows swirled within the crimson light. “This is the Cardinal Point. The heart of the connection between Syrania and Sharn. And this … this will sever that connection.”

“What does that have to do with the houses?” Thorn demanded. “They aren’t harvesting power from Syrania. That energy is what sustains the flying buttresses, and the skycabs, and the …” Her voice trailed off as she realized the truth.

“Yes,” he said. “When the connection between the planes is broken, the buttresses will fail. Skyway and the floating spires will fall onto the city below, and the remaining towers will collapse under their own weight. It will shut down all house enclaves in Sharn, because there won’t be any Sharn when I’m done.”

“Why would you do this?” she said. “You’ll kill hundreds of thousands of innocent people.” She could already guess at the answer. Now she understood the strange sorrow she’d seen in his eyes.

“There just aren’t enough of us,” he told her. “We can’t fight this war alone. We can’t defeat the Twelve. But this … this weapon is a Cannith creation. We’re deep underground. We’ll survive the devastation. And when you take this weapon to the Citadel, when you tell them that Cannith is responsible, all of Breland will rise up in arms. All of Khorvaire will see the danger they represent.”

“Tt’s never the same when she’d fought Fileon. And the same spell Drego had used against her allies in Droaam.

“This is what has to happen,” Drego said, stepping forward. He seemed to have completely recovered from his injuries; his clothes weren’t even burned. “You need to understand. Try to remember, beloved. There’s much more at stake than Breland.”

In that instant, a half-dozen pieces came together in her mind. A corpse that vanished, without even leaving ashes to mark its passage. Drego’s arrival so soon after that death. Drego … a sorcerer of considerable skill, who seemed to have some talent for transmutation or illusion. But most of all it was the way he said that one word—Beloved.

“Had Drego been Dreck all along? Was he just watching House Tarkanan … or had he been watching her?

She had no voice to ask the question. She called on Lantern discipline and raw fury, but both shattered against Drego’s mystic bonds.

“So it’s ready?” Drego asked.

“Almost,” Daine replied. “I just need the power of one more soul. One more outsider.”

“What?” Drego cried. “How do you expect to accomplish that now?”

Daine laughed. His dragonmark burned even brighter, and as he stretched out his hand, long tendrils of energy lashed out and wrapped around Drego, digging into his skin. “We’ve come to the end of the game. My mark lets me taste the souls of those around me. I recognized both of you as soon as you entered my presence. You’ve been a valuable ally, Drego Sarhain. And now you will give me the power I need to finish my task and fulfill my destiny.”

Drego writhed and twisted in Daine’s grasp, and suddenly he changed. He was taller, stronger—and he had the
head of a tiger, deep black fur traversed with stripes of flame.

“You’re nothing next to Vyrael or Vorlintar,” Daine said. “But you’ll do.”

All the pieces suddenly fell into place. In Droaam, Drego had aided the demon Drulkalatar, the tiger-headed
demon lord. Even in her dream, he’d hovered by the creature’s skull. He hadn’t been working for Thrane at all. He
must have been Drulkalatar’s ally all along.

And even as she realized this, something else became clear. Drego had released her from her spell.

She didn’t hesitate. Drego howled as Daine’s dragonmark dug into his skin. And Thorn stepped forward and
thrust Steel into Daine’s eye, slamming her free hand against the pommel and driving the blade into his brain.
Chapter Thirty-One

The Depths

Lharvion 22, 999 YK

It was a perfect blow. Thorn had killed enough men to know that. But she’d never fought the Son of Khyber. Daine jerked, and Drego collapsed to the ground as the crackling tendrils released him. For a moment, Daine’s good eye focused on Thorn, and she saw that same look of sorrow.

He fell into her arms. At least, his body did. Daine’s flesh became dead weight against her, but as he collapsed, his dragonmark remained, a mass of pulsing crimson lines in the rough shape of a man. Ignoring Thorn, it reached out for the crumpled form of Drego, wrapping new tendrils around the stunned demon. Thorn lashed out with Steel, but the blade passed through the glowing dragonmark with no effect at all.

You’ll know, he’d said. You’ll know what you have to do.

And in that moment, she did.

She reached out, thrusting her hand into the middle of the glowing dragonmark. She remembered Toli falling at her touch. Sorghan d’Deneith. And she remembered the dragon in her dream, swallowing Drulkalatar.

And she pulled at Daine’s soul.

It was a bitter struggle. The thing she was fighting was more than just Daine. She could feel Vyrael’s burning rage and the despair of the fallen Vorlintar. And now that she’d proven herself a threat, the composite being had turned its hatred against her. Thorn could feel the power of the unbound mark tugging at her, seeking to consume her spirit.

She’d managed to channel this power, but she still didn’t fully understand it.

But there was someone who did.

She thought of her dreams, of the gown in the crystal room, the great dragonskull, the dark reflection she’d seen in Far Passage. She felt the pain of the Khyber shard in her neck, and she embraced it, pulled it to her.

Time slowed to a crawl. Then the thoughts flowed through her mind.

What have we here? It was a strange sensation, feeling another force think with her mind. It seemed as if they were her own thoughts, but they were filled with cruel joy.

Daine, Daine. I always knew I’d have you some day. And a pair of angels as well.

The balance had changed. The voice within Thorn took charge of the struggle, twisting the dragonmark wraith’s power against it, cooling and crushing it with its own rage. And the instant its resolve broke, the force within Thorn pulled against it. Thorn felt a terrible sense of disorientation, and the shard in her neck burned.

The ghostly dragonmark was gone. Yet the force in her head remained. Now it struggled with her, seeking to push her into the stone.

You’ve had your time, Nyrielle. Now it’s my turn.

It was a horrible sensation, as if all of her thoughts and memories were being compressed into a ball and crushed.

Don’t fight, girl. You can’t possibly match me.

For a moment, she couldn’t even remember who she was. But there were things she could never forget, and she drew those out.

The face of her father when he returned from the wars.

The last time she’d seen her mother.

Lharen’s soft words in a darkened room.

And as she drew on these memories, she felt power growing within her. She forged her emotions into a vise, and she wrapped it around the alien presence in her mind. Slowly—too slowly—she forced it back into the prison of the shard.

And then it was over.

Daine’s corpse lay on the floor, the dragonmark gone from his flesh. The tiger-headed fiend she’d known as Drego was also stretched out across the ground, slowly stirring. Thorn placed one knee on Drego’s chest, and Steel against his throat.

His eyes opened. His features blurred, and now it was the handsome Thrane who lay beneath her.

“That won’t accomplish anything,” he told her, gesturing toward Steel with his eyes. “I can’t die. If you kill me,
I’ll just be reborn.”

“Drulkalatar said the same thing,” she replied, running her free hand along the soft skin of his cheek.

He paled.

“Who are you?” Thorn asked. “What is this all about?”

He chuckled softly. “So you still don’t remember. You still think you’re Thorn.”

“I am Thorn.”

“You’re Sarmondelaryx. The Angel of Flame. The Devourer of Souls. Condemned by the Conclave of Argonnessen—and yet, they need you, if the Prophecy is to fall as they wish it.”

“And what does that make you?” she said.

“One of the true children of Khyber, born in the first age of this world. Not the mightiest of my kind, certainly. But cleverer than many with more power. I served the ancient Lords of Dust in the war against your kind—the war over the Prophecy, the struggle to shape the future. Then I met you. Or, I suppose, I met her.”

“And I suppose you fell in love?”

“I don’t expect you to understand. You’re just a child now. But you could be her again. Embrace the dragon within you. Embrace your power. Let us be together again and mock dragon and tiger alike.”

What he was saying was horrifying, and yet she knew it was true. The dreams, her senses, the way the fire wouldn’t touch her …

All gifts of Sarmondelaryx.

“No,” she said. “I am who I am.”

“For now.” Drego grinned, the same playful grin she’d seen so many times. “But every time you draw on her power, she grows stronger. It’s only a matter of time.”

“So I won’t use her powers.”

“You’re being used,” Drego told her. “How did you happen to be in the right place to fight Drulkalatar, and why were you able to transform in that battle? You’re a puppet, and you don’t even know who’s pulling the strings. Release Sarmondelaryx. At least she’s the mistress of her own fate.”

Thorn pressed the blade against his neck. “You’re lying. Why should I believe anything you say?”

Drego laughed again. “I admit, my nature as a spirit of deception does rather work against me here. But ask yourself: How did this all happen? What are they using you for? How far does it go?”

Thorn said nothing. Could he be telling the truth? Was there a conspiracy within the Dark Lanterns, or did it go even higher than that?

“Come with me,” Drego said. “Keep your identity for as long as you can. I’m patient. But there are things I can show you, things you can’t begin to imagine. I do love you, flawed as you are. Let me show you a new world.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, staring into his silver-gray eyes as she shoved the dagger into his throat. She watched as the mischievous twinkle faded, then she pulled Steel out and stood. “Maybe next time.”

She wiped off the blade and sheathed it, then walked over to the eldritch machine Daine had been building. It was easy enough to disassemble. She put the pieces in the bag of holding, and after thinking about it, slid Daine’s body into the sack. Then she drew Steel again.

Do you want to discuss this? he whispered.

“Discuss what?”

_Drego’s story. This claim that you’re a dragon._

“I’m Thorn,” she said. “And I’ve got a job to do. The Citadel needs to learn about Lord Merrix’s little side projects and to decide how to handle the Tarkanans. And I need a shot of dreamlily and a few stiff drinks. And a new pair of boots.”

_After all this, you’re going to go looking for dreamlily?_”

“Now more than ever.” The shard in her neck was burning again, and the vision of the chamber of skulls filled her mind. She thought about Daine and the angels and the cruel voice that would be waiting in her dreams. “I will find out what’s been done to me. And if there’s a conspiracy among the Lanterns, I’ll uncover it. But until then, I swore an oath to protect Breland, and that’s what I’m going to do. But tonight … tonight I’m going to raise a glass to the Son of Khyber. He may have gone astray at the end, but I believe that he was a good man at the start, and he deserves to be properly laid to rest. And I hope the Citadel will take his warnings seriously.”

_You’re advocating war with the Twelve?_”

“No. But perhaps … perhaps if we watch the houses more closely, if we warn the other nations of our concerns,
we can avoid the horrors he was so afraid of. Perhaps there’s a better way to achieve his destiny.”

Thorn threw the sack over her shoulder and made her way toward the tunnel. She thought about Daine, and as she did, the burning in the shard faded. In its place, she felt a sense of peace.
Perhaps my dreams won’t be so bad after all, she thought.
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Keith Baker discovered DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® in elementary school, and this was the beginning of a lifelong interest in games of all sorts. In 2002 he quit his day job to become a full-time freelance writer. Much to his surprise, in 2003 his world Eberron® was selected as the finalist in the Wizards of the Coast Fantasy Setting Search. He is the author of the Dreaming Dark trilogy.
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