Thorn of Breland has had her fill
of questions she can’t answer, and governments
and powers turning her into a pawn.

“The twentieth of Olarune,” Vron said. “On that day, young Drix was traveling in Cyre’s southern woods when he encountered a group of eladrin. Believing him to be responsible for the death of their own prince, they pierced his heart with a cursed blade. From what we can tell, this happened at the precise moment that the Mourning began.”

Now Breland and Cyre introduce her to Drix, a strange young man, who says he comes from the eladrin of Shaelas Tiraeth, the Silver Tree—strange elflike beings who claim responsibility for the Mourning … and claim they can undo it.

“The queen of the feyspire told me that she’d gather the lords when the time was right,” Drix said. “But she needed me to find two more stones, and bring them with me to the spire.”

“It seems these eladrin have been hidden on Eberron far longer than we knew,” Vron said. “The shard used to preserve Drix’s life is one of a set.”

“She said I’d find them in the last days of the searching moon, in the shadow of a broken blade,” Drix said. “Two kings would meet, and I would find two stones, wrapped in thorn.”

Are the strange stones embedded in Thorn’s spine the key to undoing the Mourning? Perhaps the masked eladrin lord she dreams of knows …
THORN OF BRELAND
by Keith Baker
An agent of the Dark Lanterns, Thorn serves her country in the cold wars of the Five Nations. But during her missions, strange memories and powers are surfacing within Thorn: the memories and powers of an ancient, deadly dragon.
The Queen of Stone
The Son of Khyber
The Fading Dream

THE CHRONICLES OF ABRAXIS WREN
by Paul Crilley
The cleverest inquisitive in Sharn (or so he says), Abraxis Wren is as quick with his sharp wit as he is with his rapier—and between the two he makes plenty of enemies. With the help of his long-suffering assistant, Torin, there’s no crime too puzzling, no criminal too quick for Abraxis Wren.
The Night of the Long Shadows
(Available as an e-book)
The Taint of the Black Brigade

LEGACY OF DHAKAAN
by Don Bassingthwaite
A new kingdom rises—and threatens to collapse—as Lhesh Haruuc, ruler of the goblin nation, unites his disparate peoples under the powers of the Rod of Kings. But when the artifact’s charisma proves dangerous, it’s down to a band of unlikely heroes to save the nation of goblins.
The Doom of Kings
Word of Traitors
The Tyranny of Ghosts
For generations, all the world of Eberron knew was war. The five nations—Aundair, Cyre, Breland, Karrnath, and Thrane—clashed long after the warring heirs of Galifar had died, allying and attacking as the tides of battle shifted. Then the Mourning—an atrocity no nation claimed—wiped Cyre from the face of Eberron.

**THE TREATY OF GALIFAR ENDED THE LAST WAR.**

Though the war is over, the world abounds with reminders of a magical arms race, the spectacular technology born of magic and ambition. The influential dragonmarked houses ply their magical skills in trade instead of weapons. The warforged, a race of living constructs, strive to find a place in a world that resents them. The lightning rail and the elemental airships that once sped weapons across Khorvaire now haul goods and travelers.

**THE TREATY OF GALIFAR REDREW BORDERS**

Where once a sprawling empire claimed the continent, disparate nations now clutter the landscape. Only four of the Five Nations still stand. Warrior elves defend their ancestral lands in Valenar. Goblins and monsters have established kingdoms of their own and demand recognition. Rebels take old grievances to the streets, and the dragonmarked houses gather power in secret. And no one has forgotten the old hatreds.

**THE TREATY OF GALIFAR SPURRED DIPLOMACY**

In the shadows of the cities and on the frontiers of the fledgling nations, a new kind of hero arises. They are veterans of the Last War, looking for closure. They are spies tasked with protecting their realm from new threats and old. They are inquisitives investigating crimes, trying to make a living while avoiding the state’s attention. They all want to forget the Last War …

**BUT THE LAST WAR WON'T FORGET THEM.**

**THE NEXT WAR IS BREWING.**
To Jennifer Ellis, for dreams and inspiration
PROLOGUE

Cyre
Olarune 20, 994 YK

Drix ran through the forest, death close on his heels. Thorns tore at his skin, but sheer terror blocked out the pain. His foe crashed through the underbrush behind him, and he could feel the heat of its gaze, imagine those burning eyes and hungry teeth. There was nowhere to run, no safe haven in the southern woods.

His foot caught on an exposed root, and Drix tumbled to the ground. He ignored the agony; there was no time for it, nor time to run. He rolled onto his back, raising his crossbow and searching the darkness.

“Go away!” he shouted. “Leave me alone. I’m armed.”

It was a painful exaggeration. He’d built the weapon himself, and he’d never used it on anything larger than a rabbit—and the sad truth was that a few of those rabbits had survived the first bolt. Still, his father would have been proud; Drix was a tinker to the end. Even as the bushes shook and death came for him, Drix’s last thoughts were of ways to build a better crossbow.

He fired the instant it cleared the underbrush. His hand shook at the last moment, and the bolt struck soil. The fox that had burst from the shrubs was as surprised as he was; it stared at him for a full second before scampering off into the shadows and disappearing from sight.

Drix sank back to the ground, breathing deeply. “Nothing to worry about,” he told his crossbow. “Situation entirely under control.”

The crossbow said nothing. At least she’s not mocking me, Drix thought.

He felt like a fool. He’d traveled from Callan to Seaside many times with his father and never strayed from the path. And his first time walking the woods alone, he let fear drive him into the thorns. He had a full year left as an apprentice, a year of wandering the countryside and facing the world alone. He was just in the first week, hardly an auspicious start.

Still …

He’d seen those eyes in the darkness. And something had followed him off the trail. A fox wouldn’t chase a man, but Drix was certain he’d heard claws scraping against the soil behind him. Perhaps it was just his imagination playing tricks on him when he was walking the road alone for the first time. Or maybe—just maybe—he had outrun his pursuer in his wild scramble. And if that was the case, it could still be out there.

He might have outrun his enemy before, but Drix wouldn’t be running again for a while. He ran a hand along his left leg, wincing as he touched the ankle—sprained at the very least. Twine from his pack and pieces of a broken sapling formed a splint, and with the help of a makeshift staff, he was able to walk. But there was the problem. Where should he walk to? He was still two days away from Seaside making good time, and it would take nearly as long to go back to Callan. He’d made the choice to walk the Southern Wood, as his family had done for generations. But when you were hurt and possibly hunted, it was a bad place to be.

The music came with the breeze, a warm wind that flowed through the trees and tugged at his hair. He heard soft pipes and the faint cry of a fiddle. There was a flicker of light in the distance, a hint of a warm fire. Whoever they were, they were far from the main path. But lumberjacks or hunters might well have set up a camp in the deep woods. And the music was welcoming. Perhaps he’d just imagined the eyes in the darkness. Either way, the thought of companions for the night was a comforting one. And if they had need of a tinker’s skills, well, that’s what his apprenticeship was about. He could sharpen an axe, fix a broken trap, show them ways to build a better snare. Perhaps fortune was with him after all. Perhaps it was the night he truly began his new life.

As he stumbled through the woods, he searched for the right words to say, an introduction to offset his shabby appearance, to convince his potential hosts to trust his skills. There were no signs of the pursuing beast. All he could hear over the night breeze was the faint sound of the music. And ever so slowly, the light grew brighter and broader, and the music grew louder. It was a camp for sure, a celebration by the sound of it. The laughter and faint voices
were still too far to hear.

A glimmer caught his eye, something twinkling on the ground. It hurt to bend down, but there was something metal on the ground. Reaching down into the darkness, he felt cool leather and steel against his skin. It was a knife—a lovely weapon, with red leather wrapped around the pommel and patterns of gold beaten along the steel blade.

“Where did you come from, little one?” he murmured.

As his fingers closed around the hilt, Drix could feel the handle move, steel and wood mysteriously shifting to perfectly fit his grip. It was a princely weapon, to be sure—and a costly one. If he held it until he reached Seaside, he could probably get more for the knife than he’d earn in the next five years with the Tinkers’ Guild. For a moment he was tempted, but his upbringing and the desire for a warm fire won out. The weapon must belong to the people at the camp ahead. Returning it would undoubtedly earn him a friendly welcome and a good meal, and that was all he really needed. And if a grateful host felt a greater reward was called for, well, he’d be happy to accept it.

“Hello?” The source of the music was still some distance away, but Drix could see a clearing ahead, and he pushed toward it. “Is anyone there? I think I’ve found something of yours.”

There was no response, not even a shift in the music. He tried again, shouting with all the volume he could produce as he stepped out of the trees.

“Hello! I’m over here—”

As he stumbled again, his shout turned into a cry of pain as he caught his twisted ankle and fell to the ground. For a moment the pain blinded him. His vision cleared and he screamed again.

He hadn’t stumbled on a root. He’d tripped over the body of a boy, younger than Drix, his silk clothes stained with fresh blood. His long, golden hair was spread out over the ground, his skin pale and white. His chest was a ruin. He’d been stabbed through the heart, and it had the look of a barbed blade, something that had torn the flesh apart as it had been pulled free.

The riders were upon him before Drix had time to collect his thoughts, a half dozen figures in colorful cloaks and polished chain mail, slender soldiers with gleaming blades and eyes that shone in the darkness. Their mounts were graceful, white horses with red ears and coppery eyes, mares that moved through the woods in utter silence. Swift and silent as they were, they were no match for the woman leading the party. Drix never even saw her dismount; one moment she was on the back of a horse, and an instant later, she was standing over Drix, kneeling down to study the body of the boy. She wore a gown of black and silver, and moonlight eyes gleamed against pale skin. Her dark hair was bound by a circlet of golden leaves. A crystal shard was set into the circlet, shining with the same lunar radiance as the woman’s perfect eyes. She was the most beautiful woman Drix had ever seen, but as she knelt over the fallen child, her face froze in fear. She laid a gloved hand over the boy’s chest, and the stone in her crown pulsed with a brilliant light. Yet when she drew back her hand, nothing had changed.

The woman turned to Drix, and there was fury in her gaze. Her words were like a song, so musical that it was hard for him to make perfect sense of them. It was an Elven dialect. He’d learned the old speech as a child, but he’d rarely spoken it and never heard a voice like that. It was a demand, an angry one. He thought she said, “What have you done?”

“I didn’t do this!” he cried, trying to gather his thoughts and reframe it in the Elven tongue. “Found like this, not by my hand!” They couldn’t blame him. It wasn’t as if there were bloodstains on his clothes. It wasn’t as if he were holding a bloody dagger in his hand.

Except he was.

The weapon he’d found in the woods had changed. No longer was it a smooth blade with pretty patterns of gold along the steel. The blade was ugly and jagged, a barbed weapon made to shred flesh. And it was covered with drying blood. He could even see a shard of silk caught in one of the teeth.

“No!” he cried. “Not mine! Not my hand!” He let the knife fall and struggled to rise to his feet, his ankle burning with pain. He had to run, but he could barely stand.

The queen caught the blade before it hit the ground. She was on her feet even as he rose, and her voice was a simple cry of rage. She struck before Drix could find his balance, the blade sinking into his heart. He felt a horrible chill, followed by bright pain as the blade was torn free. Then he was falling again, warmth spreading over his chest as he collapsed atop the dead boy.

The blood of our hearts … is one, Drix thought. He couldn’t feel his arms or legs, just that fading spot of pain and warmth in his chest. Then something pulled him away. It was the queen who’d stabbed him, her pale eyes and the stone in her crown blazing as she stared at him. The sky itself was on fire, a brilliant light that turned the woods to shadows. And another shadow rose above the trees, a great spire, a lone tower that he should have seen long before, seared into his vision by the blinding sky.
The fire in the sky grew brighter even as Drix’s vision faded. He could still hear the faint strains of music, and only one thought went through his head as the queen tore her crown from her head and knelt over him.

It’s a dream, he thought.

Then it ended.
CHAPTER ONE

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Wroat, Breland
Barrakas 20, 999 YK

It was raining in Wroat, but the downpour couldn’t wipe the stench of smoke and urine away from Westgate. A pair of filthy dwarves were quarreling over the corpse of a dead rat, likely the first real meat either had seen in days. Others watched the fight from alleys and broken windows.

Wake up. This is no place to let your mind wander.

The voice was a whisper in Thorn’s mind, cold and sharp as a blade. Hardly surprising, given the source. She tightened her grip on the hilt of her dagger. “Trust me, Steel,” she murmured. “I know what I’m doing.”

Then perhaps you’d enlighten me. You’re supposed to report to Essyn at the eighth bell. Why are we across the river?

“There’s someone I have to meet. It’s not a mission, Steel. Nothing you need to worry about.”

When it brings you to Westgate at dusk, it’s definitely something I have to worry about.

A warforged scout scuttled toward her, a battered soldier made from leather and iron and given life so he could die for the crown. He held out his arm in a pitiful gesture, and Thorn saw that the little scout was missing his left hand. He wore a sign around his neck that read Need Repairs, Copper for Steel. Sovereigns Smile on You.

Thorn quickened her pace, moving out of his path.

No sympathy for the constructed?

“They aren’t all daggers with shining souls,” Thorn murmured. She drew Steel from his sheath, laying his blade across her inner forearm. “Alley to the left. Junk pile just ahead. Three more scouts lying in wait. And in case you didn’t notice, your little friend was missing his hand because he had a retractable sword in his forearm.”

You’re awake after all. My apologies.

“I’ve been to Westgate before.”

A century ago Westgate was a thriving market. I remember a poet from Metrol in that square; he’d drawn a larger crowd than you’d find at the Sharn Opera.

“And I suppose you killed him?”

Of course. He was inciting people against the queen. And he rhymed “Wroann” with “groan.”

“So the Last War was fought over Cyran poetry?”

You have to draw the line somewhere, Lantern Thorn. Gro-ann is as good a place as any.

“Very funny. Now I’m afraid it’s into the glove for you. My contact has a thing about weapons.”

Steel vanished before he could respond, drawn into the pocket of space bound to Thorn’s gauntlet. She could produce him with a thought, but for the moment she needed him out of the way. The dagger was her partner, but what lay ahead was between her and her blood; she didn’t want the Citadel involved.

The little room smelled of bandages and antiseptic salves. An oil lamp spilled light across the room—a small chamber dominated by a camp bed with bloodstained sheets. A young man sat on the bed, dipping a surgical blade into a copper bowl filled with clear fluid.

“I’ll be with you in a moment,” he said without looking at her. “Unless you’re just here for dreamlily or alcohol, in which case you can save us both time by leaving.”

“I wouldn’t mind a drink, Nandon,” Thorn said softly. “But I came looking for a friend.”

The man’s fingers tightened on the knife as she spoke. He looked at her, one eye a clear, emerald green, the other a cloudy white. He stood up, carefully setting the bowl on a bedside table. The scalpel was still in his hand. “And what makes you think you’ll find one here?”
She tossed a package on the bed. “I brought you a birthday present.”

Nandon kept his good eye on her as he picked up the parcel. He unwrapped it with one hand, keeping hold of the scalpel. At last he glanced down at the wooden case. “Jorasco?” he said, noting the dragonmarked seal. Setting down the knife, he opened the case. It was a full kit from the House of Healing, complete with panacean salves and a cleansing blade. The blade alone was worth more than all of the goods Thorn could see in the shop. The half-elf took out each item in turn, checking the seals on each vial. At last he looked back at Thorn.

“Very well,” he said. “You’ve bought time, not a friend.”

“I wanted to help you on your birthday, little brother. I’d hoped you’d do the same for me.”

Nandon scowled. He hated being called “little brother,” and not without reason; her extra five minutes didn’t give Thorn a great deal of seniority. Still, when they were children and alone, it had always been Nyrielle who’d stood up to the bullies, Nyrielle who made sure they had food.

“Not the first present you’ve given me, Sister.” He stared at her, and she looked away from his pale eye. “Are you certain you want me to return your favors?”

Thorn shook her head. “I don’t have time for this, Nan. I came here because I thought that we could help each other. Because something strange is happening to me, and I thought it might be happening to you as well. Because I thought my brother might like to see me on our birthday. If I’m wrong, just say so and I’ll let you get back to your slum.”

Nandon stood up, his good eye gleaming. “You can’t just walk in here with a handful of healing potions and dismiss what I’m doing here. This is your fault.”

Thorn was surprised by his vehemence. “What’s my fault?”

“This.” He waved a hand, taking in the blood on the bedclothes and the squalor of the surroundings. “All the work of little boys and girls playing at soldiers. You know who lives in this slum, Sister? Veterans who lost their homes in the war and those too badly crippled to work.”

“It seems I’ve been busy.”

“You and the rest of them. You couldn’t wait to follow in Father’s footsteps, couldn’t wait to sharpen your sword and shed more blood.”

Thorn fought to hold her temper in check. It was an old argument, one they’d been having since the day their father died. “The people you care for, Nandon, your cripples and homeless veterans, who destroyed their homes? I fight the enemies of our nation. The people who did that damage.”

“You’re still working for war instead of peace. As long as the Five Nations struggle with one another, there will always be more victims.”

“Who said the Five Nations were fighting?” Thorn said with a smile. “I’m looking after Oargev of Cyre today.”

Nandon opened his mouth then closed it again. “The Prince in Mourning?” he said slowly.

“That’s right. Lord of New Cyre, where our king has graciously allowed tens of thousands of Cyran refugees to settle in the wake of the Mourning. I know you think I’m a soldier, Nan. But believe it or not, I want peace too.”

He shook his head. “And what would you do then, if the Five Nations are reunited?”

“The same thing our father wanted,” Thorn said. “Come home to my family. I’m relying on you to start one.”

For a moment his gaze locked with hers. Then he smiled for the first time since she walked through the door. “I don’t know about that.”

“Why not? Surely you haven’t split with Calassa?”

The tension ran out of him. He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Nyri. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that. I just … I lost a boy today. Green fever.” He tapped the case she’d given him. “If I’d had this a day ago, he’d still be alive. But people down here can’t afford Jorasco goods. They can’t afford magic, and without it, it’s all too hard to work miracles.”

Thorn stepped forward and held out a hand. He ignored it and embraced her, holding her close for a moment. Then he took a step back and looked at her.

“So … something strange, you say?”

Thorn hesitated for a moment, trying to find the words. “Have you noticed anything unusual about yourself these last few months?”

“Certainly. My allergy to dustmoss has gotten worse. My memory’s not as sharp as it used to be. And I’m quick to lose my patience with evasive sisters. Do you have a point?”

“How well can you see in the dark?”

“My vision’s as good as it ever was, at least since the accident,” Nandon said. “Our mother’s blood still runs in
my veins. Why? Is your eyesight failing you?"

“No, no. I’m not talking about seeing clearly in starlight, Nan. I mean full dark—reading a book in a closet at night."

Nandon frowned. “Of course I can’t do that. Are you … are you saying that you can?”

Thorn nodded slowly. “Yes. And that’s just the beginning.”

Nandon looked away, the scowl back on his face. “I don’t know what this is about—” He fell silent as he looked back and saw what Thorn was doing. She had her hand in the oil lantern, holding her palm to the flame. There was no smell of burning flesh, no pain; the flame licked against her skin without touching it.

“That’s trivial defensive magic,” he said.

“Which I’m not using,” Thorn replied. “And I’ve faced far worse than a candle flame. I survived an Aundairian fireball. On my last mission, I fell into a river of lava below Sharn and walked away without a mark. I don’t know what’s going on, Nandon. I thought … I thought maybe you were going through the same thing.”

He pulled her hand from the lamp, studying the skin and sniffing it. Then he held out a finger and gingerly extended it toward the lantern flame. He pulled it swiftly away the moment it made contact. “It seems not. You’re serious about this, Nyri? You swear this isn’t some sort of prank?”

“On our father’s name, Nandon. I wouldn’t joke about this. I don’t know what to think. I thought I might be developing an aberrant dragonmark, but I’ve looked everywhere I could and found nothing. It’s … it’s frightening. I’d hoped that as a healer—and as my brother—you might be able to give me some answers.”

Nandon nodded gravely. “I need you to tell me everything. From the very first symptom.”

And so she did. She told him how her senses had grown so sharp that she could not only see in deepest darkness, but sense the presence of an invisible man from the sound of his feet and the shifting currents of air. She described the bursts of strength that had let her throw an ogre across a room, though she couldn’t maintain that power for more than a moment. She reiterated her seeming immunity to fire. Thorn revealed the troubling dreams of the woman in red and the silver tree with leaves of gold. After taking a deep breath, she quietly mentioned the deadly touch that came in her moments of deepest pain or fury, snuffing out the life of an opponent and using that power to heal herself. As she spoke, he examined her, testing her claims and searching for any signs of a dragonmark or other exterior trait that could explain her evolving powers. It didn’t take long for him to find the first anomaly: the crystal shards embedded in her neck and spine.

“Where did these come from?” he said.

“I can’t tell you everything,” Thorn said. “It was a mission—”

“And it’s more than my life is worth to know, hmm? Is it more than your life is worth? Because this is definitely unusual.”

“It’s just shrapnel. There was a magical weapon that was both empowered and protected by a swarm of dragonshards. It exploded when it was destroyed, and I was struck by a number of shards. They couldn’t remove those two.”

“And did they say why?” Nandon rubbed a salve across the stone in her neck, and a numbing sensation spread across Thorn’s skin. He put on a pair of spectacles with a strange assortment of lenses and began shifting between them.

“They said that the shards had bonded to the nerves, that they couldn’t be removed without causing considerable damage.”

“And so they have.” Nandon prodded at the top stone, but due to the numbing gel, she could barely feel the touch. “Do they cause you pain?”

“The top one, absolutely. It’s been getting better, but at times it’s agonizing. The lower one, no. Occasionally I feel chills but nothing more.”

He poked at the stones again. “And I just have to ask, as you’re a hero of Breland and queen of the shadows … I’ve heard you Lanterns are trained to evade divination magic, so you can conceal all your magical tricks and weapons. Are you using those techniques now?”

“No.”

He sighed. “I was afraid of that. I don’t know what this is about, Nyri, but I don’t like it. I’m not picking up any sort of magical resonance from these stones. But they are completely bonded to you. I can’t say for certain with the tools at my disposal, but I think they’ve actually fused to the bone itself. That shouldn’t be possible without powerful magic, and yet there’s no energy in the stones.”

“Which means what?”
“The first possibility is that this accident where you were injured involved a wave of transformative energy, and you’re still feeling the impact. Or it could be that the stones are themselves shielded—that there is magical energy within them, but that it’s shielded to evade detection. I just can’t imagine why someone would do that, if these were just random shards among thousands.” He sat down on the bed, tugging on a strand of hair. “But if there’s no power in the stones, there’s no explanation. Is there anything else you haven’t told me?”

Thorn hesitated. “There is one other thing,” she said at last. “On my last mission, a man told me … I was a dragon.”

“A man told you this? Just idle conversation?”

“Well, he wasn’t exactly a man … more of an ancient demon of deception. So you see my problem.”

Nandon sighed. “You do lead an interesting life, Sister. I’ll grant you that.”

“Is it possible?”

Nandon looked at her. “Of course it’s not possible. You’re my sister. You nearly took my eye playing with sticks when we were children. Your mother was an elf, your father a man as normal as any other, and we were born at nearly the same moment. If you were a dragon, don’t you think you would have eaten Gali Das those days he used to beat us?”

“I wish I could have.”

Nandon frowned. “Still, it would explain the immunity to fire and even the sharp senses. Fundamental traits that persist even through a transmutation in form. In the tale of the Thirteen Thieves, the dragon can sense the boy even when he’s invisible, just as you describe. But it’s foolishness. How could you be a dragon? Where are your wings?”

“Well, the same mission where I discovered my keen senses, I thought that I became an actual dragon.”

Nandon stared at her. “And you didn’t think this was worth mentioning?”

“I was battling a demon, and in another plane of existence … reality was distorted. Honestly, I didn’t know what to believe. It’s never happened since then. I’ve tried to force a change and nothing happened.”

Nandon was on his feet, searching the shelves. “I don’t know, Nyri. I don’t know. What does your Citadel say? Surely they have better tools for a broad-spectrum mystical analysis than I do.”

“Nothing at all. But honestly … I don’t know who to trust anymore, Nan.”

“You’re the one who chose a life in the shadows,” he said.

“I know. And I still believe in what I do. But something is happening to me, and I don’t understand it.”

“It’s going to be all right,” he said. “Let little Nandon sort things out for once. Just let me draw a vial of your blood and take a lock of your hair. I have a few ideas, but it will take time to get what I need and perform the rituals.”

“Thank you,” Thorn said, feeling a slight tingle in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Nandon. Sorry I haven’t been here. It’s just—I’m doing what Father would have wanted.”

He raised a hand. “Let’s not start that now. You need my help; I’m helping. Let’s make sure you’re all right. Then we can debate what’s best for Breland and what our father should have done. For now you’re my patient as well as my sister. And I imagine you’ve got places to be. You said you had a prince waiting for you?”

Traveler’s tricks! Thorn grabbed her jerkin. “Yes, and I’ll need to run if I’m going to make it by the eighth bell. How long until you’ll know anything?”

“Three days, at the least. More likely a week or two.”

“You know how to contact me in an emergency. Otherwise I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

He embraced her once more, holding her tighter than before. “Don’t be gone so long this time, Nyri.”

She nodded then broke the hug and headed for the door. “May Olladra smile on you, little brother.”

“And you, my sister.”

Thorn broke into a run as soon as she was on the street. A thought brought Steel back into her hand.

*And was it a productive meeting, Lantern Thorn?*  
“We’ll see,” she said. “But it was certainly worth the trip.”
CHAPTER TWO

Wroat, Breland
Barrakas 20, 999 YK

Thorn arrived at the Cyran consulate as the final bell was ringing the hour. Footmen were preparing the royal carriage, hitching the team of stallions and polishing the brass. Thorn had become quite familiar with that carriage over the course of the past few weeks, ever since she’d been assigned to Prince Oargev’s security detail. When she’d been sent to the refugee settlement of New Cyre, she’d seen the assignment as punishment. She’d pushed the edge of her orders in her previous mission. For all that she was looking after a prince, he was a prince without a country; his current holdings were temporary gifts. Thorn and the three King’s Shields assigned to Oargev were more an honor guard than anything else—a show of Breland’s continued friendship with the last branch of the Cyran crown. As expected, the journey to Wroat had been entirely without incident. For all that Oargev was a celebrity, her skills were wasted there.

Something was different. There was a second coach in the courtyard, a drab vessel compared to the grand royal coach. Yet the prince’s footmen were preparing it as well, and Thorn could see a magewright inside the cabin inscribing protective glyphs on the floor. Then there was Essyn Cadrel. Dressed in bright silks, Essyn had the look of a bard, and that’s what he’d been in his younger days. Since the Mourning, he’d been Prince Oargev’s confidant. Thorn had quickly discovered that he was also the closest thing the prince had to a spymaster. Oargev was a passionate man, but he’d been raised as a noble and a knight, not a schemer. It was Essyn Cadrel who kept one ear to the ground and one to the window, pulling on the threads scattered across the shadows. If Cadrel was personally inspecting the coach, there was more to it than an idle delivery.

A man in the dress of a mercenary guard caught sight of Thorn and raised a hand. She didn’t recognize the uniform, but she knew his face. “You’re cutting things close,” he said.

Thorn grinned. “I was through the gate when the bell rang, Jovi. Lovely outfit you’ve got there. Did the prince dress you tonight?”

Jovi smiled and touched a finger to one of the spots of rust on the chain shirt he was wearing. “The old man did, if that’s close enough. And I’m guessing he’ll have some ideas for you.” He snorted. “I’ll wager you didn’t expect to be playing dress-up at the whim of a landless boy when you swore your oath to the Shields, eh?”

“True enough,” Thorn said. Of course, she’d sworn a different oath than Jovi.

Both Thorn and Jovi served the King’s Citadel, the elite forces of the Brelish crown. The Citadel was divided into multiple arms: The King’s Swords were the toughest soldiers in the land, called in when brute force was the only answer. The King’s Wands specialized in magic, including investigating mystical crimes, protecting the land from supernatural threats, and bringing arcane power to bear in times of war. The King’s Shields were the bodyguards of the royal line, trained to spot any threat and ready to lay down their lives to protect those placed in their charge, in the case before Thorn, Oargev ir’Wynarn.

Both Jovi and Oargev believed that Thorn served the King’s Shields and that she was there to protect Oargev. In fact, Thorn belonged to the fourth arm of the Citadel: The King’s Dark Lanterns. The Lanterns were the eyes of Breland, and its hidden hands—spies, inquisitives, and when the situation called for it, assassins. Jovi, Delru, and Lanner were there to protect the prince. Shield Thorn had to protect him too. But Lantern Thorn was there to watch, though so far, there’d been little to see.

Perhaps that night would be different. “So what are we dealing with? A decoy operation?”

“It seems the thorn is sharp.” Essyn Cadrel was an old man with lines around his eyes and snow white hair that fell to his shoulders. “Though I admit it’s a tired, old plot. Yes, his highness has an appointment on the island tonight with his noble cousin Boranel. The royal carriage will be taking Parliament Road to the Queen’s Bridge. We’ll follow a different route, with the prince inside.”

Thorn frowned. “Why the extra precautions?”
The adviser waved one hand dismissively. “Truth be told, I’m a touch ashamed of this production. There’s been a few rumors. Nothing confirmed. Hardly even credible.”

Steel stirred in Thorn’s grip. Then why the effort?

The question was already on Thorn’s lips. “It seems like a great deal of work for a threat you don’t actually believe in.”

Cadrel shrugged. “His highness has been troubled of late, and he demanded the extra effort. I do whatever I can to comfort my prince.”

That seemed plausible enough. While Thorn hadn’t spoken much with Prince Oargev, she’d spent a great deal of time around the young prince over the course of the past two weeks, and he had seemed to become increasingly agitated as they drew closer to the Brelish capital. “What about these rumors, then? What’s the nature of the threat?”

“An embarrassment to us all. You’ve spent enough time among us to know just how passionate the young prince is about restoring Cyre. But there are those among his scattered subjects who expect him to work miracles … as if he could somehow lift the mist from the Mournland with a wave of his hand.”

Thorn nodded. Oargev worked closely with the lords of the Five Nations. But ever since the Day of Mourning, there had been those who were unsatisfied with his diplomatic efforts. Breland had given refugees a place to live, but many among them wanted a true kingdom of their own, and some were angry Oargev hadn’t made it happen. “I’ve heard about the riots in Stormreach and Fairhaven,” Thorn said. “But you think that some of the refugees might actually attack the prince? What would that accomplish?”

Cadrel spread his hands sadly. “Who can decipher the whims of madmen, my dear?”

“How solid is this? Do we have a sense of numbers and organization?”

“Not at all, I fear. Truly, Shield Thorn, this is more a matter of intuition than anything else. I collect rumors, and I’ve heard many since we arrived in this fair city. Cyrans speaking angrily in a Riverside tavern. An officer’s blade from the Fifth Crown turning up in a flea market. An accusation that some among the King’s Wands are selling arms to dissidents. I’ve heard a dozen other tales, and there’s no reason to assume that any of them are connected. And yet … I’m a storyteller, my lady. To weave a fine tale, you always start with disparate threads. It’s bringing them together that makes it art. And here, tonight … I see a group of elite soldiers, trained in the use of sword and wand. I see powerful weapons gone missing from the king’s own arsenal. An appointment our lord cannot pass up, and an attack on the royal carriage. Most likely just a fanciful tale, but his highness likes a good story, and he doesn’t want to see this one come to pass.”

Seems a little farfetched, if that’s really all he’s got, Steel said. There’ve been tales of corruption within the Wands for the last century. Nonetheless … the Fifth Crown is an urban strike force, trained to make assaults deep within enemy territory.

Thorn tapped Steel’s hilt thoughtfully. She’d clashed with the Fifth Crown at the end of the war, well before she’d received Steel. She’d been lucky to survive the experience. A resentful group of former soldiers, selling all they could to raise enough gold to buy mystical weapons on the black market … it might be unlikely, but she could see why Cadrel would be concerned. “What’s the plan?”

“Gal will take the prince’s place in the royal carriage. The house guards will join him there, so anyone who knows our staff will see them. His highness will travel in this coach, disguised and guarded solely by you Brelish. We’ll follow Blackmarket, and take the King’s Bridge—a foolish route, to be sure, but that’s the point. A merchant envoy, bringing goods to Brokenblade Castle.” He glanced at her black clothing and the vambraces of blackened mithral protecting her forearms. “Do you have something in gray?”

“I think I can find something suitable.” She closed her eyes and let her fingers pass down along her torso, crafting an image in her mind. She could feel her clothing changing with her thoughts. Her working clothes were formed from shiftweave, fabric enchanted to hold a wide range of forms. A moment’s work and she was dressed in the clothes of a simple laborer, complete with mud stains on her gray breeches; puffy sleeves covered her vambraces. “Satisfactory?”

“I would prefer a darker gray but it’ll do. I believe that’s his highness approaching now. I’d like you on the back of the coach, if you will.”

A group of guards in Cyran green and gold escorted a handsome young man, the jewels on his crown sparkling in the light of the cold-fire lanterns. Thorn had met Gal back in New Cyre; the changeling’s family had served the Cyran crown as body doubles since before the Last War. A strange life to be sure, yet one he excelled at; if she didn’t know the plan, Thorn would never have guessed the difference. Gal had mastered Oargev’s cocky smile, his confident stride, even the way he wore his crown just a little cocked. And he’d even worked in the tension Thorn had noted in the prince, the faraway look in his eyes.
Footmen helped the false prince into the carriage. Guards took their posts, and a few cavalry soldiers spread out in
front and behind. The great gates were opened, and the coach rolled out onto the streets of Wroat.

Those who followed were less remarkable. A group of servants loaded a few casks and crates on the smaller
wagon. Smiling, Essyn Cadrel made an elaborate gesture, and his clothes shifted and changed. He was no
doppelganger, but as a bard, he’d learned a trick or two with illusions. Within seconds he was a little younger, a little
plumper, with clothes suited to a middle-class merchant, not ostentatious enough to stand out, but prosperous
enough to possibly have business at the castle. Three footmen helped him into the coach and followed him up. Only
the keenest of watchers would have recognized the youngest member of the trio as Prince Oargev himself and the
others as King’s Shields.

Thorn took her place on the back of the coach. Jovi mounted a lean, gray mare and took point. Then the coachman
cracked his whip and the carriage rumbled forward, out onto the streets of the Lower Crescent.

* * * * *

If you ask me, we’re running from the prince’s own fears.

“I don’t recall asking.” Thorn held Steel tight against her inner arm, hidden by the baggy sleeves of her gray
blouse.

It’s been four years since the Mourning. His people are still scattered, confined to ghettos and resettlement
camps.

The coach bounced on a misplaced cobblestone, and Thorn tightened her grip on the rail. She kept her eyes on the
crowds milling around the edge of the streets, but no one seemed to be paying any mind to the merchant carriage.
“And he blames himself.”

Exactly. We know there are militant Cyran factions out there. Dannel’s Wrath attacked the Lyrandar shipyards in
Stormreach a month ago, promising it will get worse until the Cyrans receive new lands. But in their statements
they’ve never even mentioned Oargev.

“So he’s afraid that his people blame him … and equally afraid that they just don’t care.”

Precisely.

There was a glint of metal in the crowd, a blur of motion. Thorn shifted Steel into a throwing grip. There! A
halfling with a tiny blade in one hand and a leather purse in the other. He was ducking between the legs of the
crowd. Thorn’s thoughts raced, evaluating the little man’s path and speed. A cutpurse, or so it seemed; a woman in
the crowd was already waving her arms. Likely it was just random chance that was bringing him toward the wagon,
and Thorn wasn’t paid to take on the duties of the City Watch. But there was no telling what might be hidden in that
pouch, and it seemed as if his path would take him directly under their carriage.

The moment the halfling broke from the crowd, Thorn threw Steel. It was a sound blow, and the pommel of the
black dagger struck the cutpurse directly on the bridge of his nose. He dropped the pouch and staggered backward,
blood dripping from his broken nose. The crowd descended on the thief, and a watchman pushed his way toward the
halfling. There’s one good deed for the day, Thorn thought. Steel flew back to her hand. She caught him and nearly
dropped him; his psychic cry was as shocking as a blow.

Western inn! Second floor! Magical attack!

Thorn acted without thought. She could see a gleam of light from the corner of her eye, but there was no time to
throw Steel again. Grabbing the railing, she flung herself around the edge of the coach, placing the body of the
carriage between her and the enemy. She was reaching for the door when the blast came. Her skin tingled and the
world was filled with flame and screams of pain. Broiling wind washed over her, threatening to fling her from the
carriage. But she kept her grip, ignoring the stench of burning hair and flesh. The screams were coming from behind
her, from the bystanders caught in the blast. The coach itself was still intact. The shielding glyphs carved into the
coach had done their job well. Still, there was no telling how long the glyphs would last against a determined assault
or what other weapons or spells the attacker could bring to bear. The King’s Shields could protect the prince if there
were a ground assault; Thorn intended to take the fight to the assassin.

One quick pull and she was on top of the carriage. She could see the scorched wood on the opposite side of the
coach; strong as the defensive enchantments were, they wouldn’t take another blast. And there was the shadowy
figure standing in the window of a nearby inn, a wand leveled at the carriage. Thorn didn’t hesitate. It took her two
steps to reach the edge of the coach, and on that second stride she leaped, flinging herself into the air.

“Kharbys!” Thorn snapped out the word as she jumped. A buoyant wave of magical force lifted her into the air. It
wasn’t true flight, but the little spell was all she needed. The man in the window ducked out of the way as she came
crashing in. Thorn rolled to her feet, lashing out with Steel, but the man was out of her reach. He raised his wand,
but she was already charging.
Thorn knocked the wand aside before the man could unleash whatever spells were held within, and the weapon skidded across the floor. She made a quick thrust, hoping to catch her enemy in the shoulder and cripple him before the fight even began. She wanted to take him alive if she could. Oargev aside, the man had crippled or killed a host of civilians in the blast. She wanted to know exactly who was responsible for that.

Her enemy wasn’t going to make it easy for her. Thorn hadn’t seen the buckler in his hand, but he knocked Steel out of line with a swift, confident blow. Then the buckler was gone, replaced by a dark blade driving straight at her exposed breast. She twisted away, feeling a shiver of pain as the blade grazed her shoulder.

Only then was Thorn able to recognize details about her foe, as their blades clashed and they circled the room. His weapon was formed of shadow bound to a solid hilt, and it could shift between sword and shield to be whatever he needed. With each thrust and riposte, she was able to see more. Straight thrust, sidestep and move in, keep the distance close. Human. Male. Silver-gray hair. Gray eyes. Ugly scar on the left side of his face. Striking with the shield, evade and use the momentum against him. Dark skin. A build pairing speed and strength in equal amounts. Loose, black clothes sewn from enchanted shiftweave, more effective than any mundane camouflage. A blow to the throat, parry and lash out with a pommel to the face. A badge on his collar, a silver wedge with gray enamel. Leg sweep, leap over and kick low.

The kick connected and the man staggered back. Thorn didn’t hesitate; she threw Steel, burying the blade in her enemy’s right shoulder. She didn’t call him back; she wanted the assassin off balance. Instead, she ran forward, raising her empty hands for an overhead blow.

A weaker man would have been in shock from his wounds, but her opponent didn’t hesitate. His shadow-blade shifted into its shield form, and he brought it forward to meet her fists. An easy defense if she struck with her empty hand. But as the blow fell, she reached into her left glove and pulled another weapon out of the space bound within—a wicked axe with a long, curved blade on one end of the haft and a vicious spearhead on the other. Thorn didn’t strike with either blade; she just brought the full weight of the axe down on her enemy’s injured arm. As she’d hoped, it was more than he could bear. The man dropped to his knees, his shadowy weapon collapsing into the form of a short rod and rolling from his grasp. Holding her axe with both hands, Thorn knocked him to the floor, pressing one knee into his chest and the haft of her axe into his throat.

“Enough,” Thorn hissed. She could feel blood matting her sleeve, and the shard in her neck pulsed like an angry wasp digging into her spine. She wanted to drive her spear into his throat. “You’ve got an appointment across the bridge, you bastard.”

The man struggled ineffectively, blood flowing from his shoulder and his breath coming in ragged gasps. A moment more and he’d pass out. He met Thorn’s gaze, and his eyes were wild. “The prince will fall,” he rasped. “And Galifar burn until our home has been returned.”

“You’re not burning anything—” Even as she spoke, Thorn felt an awful spark of doubt. The wand! It had fallen across the room …

“Just coming to that conclusion, are you?” Thorn pushed through the rubble as quickly as she could, dodging the chunks of wood that fell from the ceiling. “What’s out there? Are there more of them?”

No significant mystical signatures. But I didn’t sense the presence of the assassin until he charged the wand for the initial strike.
“Lovely.” A moment later she was out of the smoke and back in the clear air of the street, or at least as clear as riverside Wroat ever was. While the walls of the Cyran coach had survived the blast, one of the wheels was shattered, and those horses that had survived were too badly injured to move. One of the King’s Shields was helping Essyn and Oargev out of the battered wagon. The other Shield, Delru, had leaped down from the coach and was scanning the streets. He leveled his crossbow at Thorn as she emerged then lowered it as he recognized her.

“The Watch and the Wands should be here in minutes,” he said as Thorn approached.

“We’re not waiting,” she said.

“Jovi’s not back—”

“Which means he may have died buying us the time you’re wasting,” Thorn snarled. “This wasn’t the work of one man. Lanner, take point on that alley. Your Highness, stay close to him.”

Delru grabbed her arm. “We should wait for reinforcements to—”

“Down!” Thorn saw the spark in the shadows even as Steel cried a warning in her mind. She slammed into Essyn Cadrel, knocking him to the ground and shielding him with her body. The spark became a flash, the raw power of the storm harnessed by arcane skill. Delru’s silhouette was seared into Thorn’s eyes as the lightning engulfed him, and the shattered remnants of the carriage fell all around her. She felt the sheer power of the lightning as it passed over her, and just the force of its wake was enough to set her nerves tingling.

“Get to the alley!” Thorn pulled Cadrel to his feet and shoved him toward the edge of the street. She could see Lanner in the mouth of the alley, shielding the prince with a field of shimmering energy projected from his bracer. Delru hadn’t been so lucky. Thorn could see a shirt of light chain mail gleaming in the gaps in his smoldering clothes. The enchantment in the armor had saved the bodyguard’s life, dispersing the full force of the blast. But his skin was charred and cracked, and he’d fallen to one knee. It was a miracle he was still conscious, and he wouldn’t be running anytime soon.

“Go!” he cried, voice rough with pain. Thorn was searching for some sign of their assailant, but Delru had already found the target. He loosed a bolt from his crossbow, firing into a tavern; glass exploded from the other windows as Delru’s quarrel released a charge of concussive force. He pulled back the winch, a second quarrel sliding automatically into place. “Go! I’ll cover you.”

There was no time to hesitate. Thorn raced across the street, and Lanner shifted his shield to make room for her. She slipped past the two Cyrans. “Follow me. Lanner, keep close to the prince. Quickly!”

Wroat was the first human city in Breland, far older than Sharn. When Galifar united the Five Nations, he rebuilt Wroat to be a jewel of the newly unified kingdom … and in the process, he left segments of the old city buried and forgotten. Thorn sprinted down an alley, the others close behind. Cracked steps led down to a rusted gate.

“No light!” Thorn hissed as Lanner reached for a sunrod. “Form a line and hold hands. I’ll guide you. Lanner, I want you at the rear, and you keep that shield up.” The darkness posed no obstacle to Thorn, and she led them quickly and carefully through the abandoned tunnels, warning them of gaps in the stone and other hazards.

“Aren’t we heading the wrong way?” It was Essyn Cadrel. “It seems to me that we’re moving away from the King’s Bridge.”

“We are,” Thorn said. “You were ambushed on your way there. Whoever attacked us knew your plans. They might have prepared a contingency. So the last thing we’re going to do is to follow your original path. There’s a footpath that runs underneath the Queen’s Bridge. There’s a host of guards at that gate; once we’re there, we’ll be able to get safe passage to the island.”

“Clever,” Cadrel said. “I suppose that it helps a bodyguard to be able to think like an assassin.”

“Oh, yes. I’m doing excellent work tonight. But I’m not the only one, am I?” She tightened her grip on Cadrel’s hand. “Those killers knew exactly where to find us. Either they attacked every coach that left the consulate, or they knew about the decoy operation. How do you explain that?”

“Do not doubt my friend Essyn.” It was the first time Prince Oargev had spoken since the attack. His voice was strong and steady, but there was a great sorrow to it. “This is not his doing. I have seen the anger growing in the eyes of my subjects. I have heard the whispers among my servants. I am certain I have been betrayed by someone within the consulate.”

“I do accept some of the responsibility, Your Highness,” Cadrel said. “I … For all that I proposed the scenario, I didn’t take the threat as seriously as I should have. I saw the pieces and crafted a possible story from them, but I didn’t truly believe it would come to pass. I should have been more careful, should have restricted the number of
servants who even knew of the plan. It’s just that I still have trouble imagining any of our own people wishing to do you harm.”

Thorn had her own thoughts on the matter, but it was not the time for them. “We need to get you to the castle. The Citadel will get to the bottom of this.”

“Perhaps they will do so sooner rather than later, Lady Thorn. For the Citadel is our destination.”

“What?”

Where Oargev had retreated into silence, talking was clearly a comfort for Essyn Cadrel. “Perhaps you thought this was a simple diplomatic visit. But we are not going to Brokenblade Castle tonight. We aren’t here to discuss the census of New Cyre or the tax burden we’ve placed on Breland. No, we’ve been called to the tower of the King’s Citadel to speak with Boranel and Lord Vron. The message revealed all too little, though with recent events, I understand their concerns about our security. Nonetheless, one thing was clear: it concerns the Mourning.”
The king of Breland was in a foul mood.

“I assure you, boy, I will find whoever is responsible for this outrage and make them pay if I have to do it with my own two hands!” King Boranel ir’Wynarn roared. “To unleash such forces against my blood in my own city! There shall be a reckoning, I assure you of that.”

The conference room was deep in the Tower of the Citadel. The walls were stone quarried from the Black Pit, infused with mystical energies that served as a natural shield against all forms of scrying. Magical symbols were inscribed around the border of the walls, creating a field that prevented any sound from escaping the room. There would be no eavesdropping there.

“We know that you had nothing to do with this attack, Your Highness.” Essyn Cadrel spoke for the Cyrans. Prince Oargev sat silently at his side; Thorn wasn’t sure if the prince was still recovering from the attempted assassination or if he simply didn’t know how to deal with his boisterous cousin. “And we are grateful for the service of your Shields; if not for your Thorn, we might both have perished.”

The king turned to Thorn. “Is that so?”

Thorn felt cold sweat on her skin and struggled to find words. Protecting the Prince of Cyre was one thing, but he was Boranel. For a moment she was little Nyrielle Tam again, listening to her father’s tales of the great deeds of their king. Her father had been her hero, but Boranel had been his hero. “I was part of a team, Your Majesty. Without Lanner and Delru, there’s no telling what would have happened.”

Boranel nodded. “Well said. But this isn’t the first time your deeds have been brought to my attention. Sit with us, Thorn. Take some wine.”

“I’m just here escorting the prince, Your Majesty. I doubt that I’m cleared for this briefing.”

Boranel chuckled. “You are if I say you are. Sit. Drink. Perhaps you could tell us a tale of one of your adventures while we wait for Vron.”

“There’s no need to wait.”

Thorn breathed a sigh of relief as the Lord Commander of the Dark Lanterns entered the room. Vron was cast in shades of black and white. If his skin was as white as snow, then his eyes were shards of ice, clear and colorless. His hair was soft and pale, snow falling onto the frozen ground. He wore the black dress uniform of the Dark Lanterns, and a silver medallion gleamed at his throat.

“Be seated,” Vron said. “We have much to discuss tonight. The first order of business: the attack on the Cyran entourage. Allow me to add my apologies to those of the king, Prince Oargev. If I had the slightest warning that such a plan was afoot, I would have ensured that you had additional protection. I have teams investigating the scene of the attack, and I assure you that you will know the results as soon as we do. However, there is one thing we can do immediately.”

Vron walked over the Thorn. “Lantern, I understand you directly engaged one of the assailants?”

Thorn nodded. “Yes, my lord.”

“Take my hands,” he said, holding his arms before him. His fingers were long and slender, his grip warm. “I want you to remember the battle. Think about your opponent—every detail, every angle. The sound of voice and breath. Relive that moment for me.”

And so she did, closing her eyes and placing herself back in that moment. Pieces began to come together. Dark shiftweave, the flash of metal at the neck. The words he’d said in the moment before his death. The prince will fall, and Galifar burn …

“Until our home has been returned.” It was the voice of the assassin, there in the room.
Thorn opened her eyes, and there he was. Piercing gray eyes, the twisting scar running down his cheek. Mid-thirties, most likely, despite the silver in his hair. He held up his hands, and smoke flowed from the palms, solidifying into the wand and the misty shield Thorn remembered.

“Your conclusions, Lantern?” His voice was slightly distorted, an effort to synthesize an accent from the few words Thorn had heard.

“Setting aside the wand, he’s well equipped for urban operations—shiftweave and a weapon that’s both versatile and concealable. I don’t recognize the weapon, but his sword and wand style suggests either the Fifth Crown of Cyre or the Royal Eyes of Audair.” Thorn cast her mind back, reliving the battle again. “His accent sounded like southern Cyre, and the slogan is a modified version of that used by Dannel’s Wrath.”

“Just one moment.” It was Boranel. The king had risen from his chair and strode over to examine the assassin. “You’re saying this brute was Cyran? Attacking his own lord?”

“It’s a possibility.” The killer’s Cyran accent faded as he spoke, returning to the cool tones of the changeling Vron. “Dannel’s Wrath is a group of Cyran militants primarily active in the city of Stormreach; they advocate the creation of a new Cyran state in Xen’drik, including Stormreach itself. But in the past, they’ve shown little hostility toward the prince.” He turned to the Cyrans. “Your Highness, Master Cadrel, do you have any thoughts on the matter?”

The prince wouldn’t look at the effigy of the assassin; his forehead glistened with cold sweat. Cadrel spoke for him. “I’m sorry, my lords, lady. Surely you understand that this has been a difficult evening for his highness.”

“I’m sure it has,” Boranel growled. “And an even worse one for the King’s Shields that died protecting him, along with the civilians caught in the crossfire. My subjects, Cadrel. If you know more about this—”

“I assure you, Your Majesty, I’ve never met this man in my life.”

“There’s something wrong with him,” Thorn said. She stood up, walking carefully around the disguised Vron. The changeling had drawn the image directly from her mind, and she cast her thoughts back. “Look at his left side. These scars—what injury would cause this sort of puckering?”

“I’m no healer,” Boranel said. “It’s the work of magic, I should think.”

“That’s only the beginning,” Thorn said. “His left arm is longer than the right. His leg as well. I didn’t notice it, not consciously, yet thinking back, there was something strange in his movement.”

“Interesting,” Essyn Cadrel said. “Yes, I see it now. As if he was a figure of wax, warmed and then stretched a little.”

“And what about that pin on his collar?” Thorn said. “That’s not the Fifth Crown insignia or Royal Eyes. So what is it? It’s easily removed. So why wear it on an assassination?”

Vron ran his fingers over the pin. Boranel squinted at it and shook his head. Cadrel examined it for a few moments then stepped away. “All this is based on a fleeting glimpse,” he said. “Perhaps you missed a crucial detail.”

“I assure you, the technique has been quite effective in the past,” Vron said. “I drew the image directly from Thorn’s mind, and the mind remembers more than we can imagine.”

“Be that as it may,” Cadrel said, “we can’t be certain that this man is everything he seems. This warping effect suggests a flawed perception; his accent could be the same as well. If you have something else to discuss—”

“I know him,” Oargev said. All eyes turned to the prince. “Your Highness,” Cadrel said, raising his hands. “You’re exhausted.”

“I know him,” Oargev repeated. “I should have known it would be him.”

Vron released the image, and the color slowly drained from his skin and his eyes. His clothes shifted, the weapons disappearing from his hands; a moment later the commander of the Dark Lanterns was restored. “Pray continue, Your Highness. Who tried to kill you?”

Oargev stared off into the distance. “His name is Cazalan Dal. He served with the Fifth Crown, as you surmised. He was devoted to my mother, Queen Dannel. And when the war came to an end, he swore to serve me.”

“Your Highness,” Cadrel said. He reached out and placed a hand on the prince’s arm. Oargev pulled away and rose to his feet, turning to face Boranel. “You have shown us nothing but kindness since the Mourning, Cousin. You gave us shelter when all other doors were closed. But I was born to be a king, not a glorified mayor. My people want their homeland restored.”

“I am a king, Oargev,” Boranel said. “And I’ve been a soldier. The hardest battle you’ll face in either arena comes when your people want something you cannot give them. The Mourning wasn’t your fault. And you can’t make it go away.”

“You don’t know that,” Oargev said, and there was a hard edge to his gaze. “You don’t know what caused the
Mourning."

“Five years and none of us know,” Boranel said.

“I’ve been trying.” Oargev looked back at the changeling Vron, as if seeing the man he had been moments before. "I gathered the best Cyre had to offer—soldiers, wizards. And I brought them together in the Covenant of the Gray Mist.”

Finally the pin made sense. A silver and gray wedge, with a black hand on top of it. “And Cazalan was in the Covenant?” Thorn said.

“The first to take the vow,” Oargev said.

“I met Cazalan Dal,” Cadrel said. “He had dark hair and no disfigurement whatsoever. How could this be him?”

“Until I sent him into the Mournland,” Oargev said sadly. “We can’t imagine the things he saw there. He came to me in New Cyre a year ago, twisted as you saw him. What had been done to his mind was worse than his body. He begged to be relieved of his duties. And I … I sent him back. He was still the best I had. And I needed to feel that I had accomplished something.”

All you did was send a man to die, Thorn thought. She kept her words to herself.

“Oargev …” Boranel said.

“I should think that you of all people would understand, Cousin. You are Breland in the hearts of your people. For those who fought and died for our kings and queens, I am the last of the royal line. I am Cyre. It falls to me to find a way to restore our homeland. Yet here we are, almost five years later, and what have I achieved?”

“Don’t demean your work with New Cyre,” Cadrel said, putting a hand on the prince’s shoulder. “Your Majesty, Your Highness, together you have created a beacon for Cyrans to rally around.”

“A village,” Oargev said. There were tears glittering in the corners of his eyes. “It’s not enough. I’ve heard them whispering. Saying that we’re Brelish in all but name, that I’ve betrayed my mother. The anger grows. They need someone to blame. I thought Cazalan would bring me an answer. Instead the Mourning has turned him against me.”

“It’s a battle you can’t win,” Boranel said. “You need to face that. You need to find a way to make your people understand.”

“There must be an answer,” Oargev said. His fists were clenched, forehead shining with sweat. “And I will find it.”

“And perhaps we have,” Vron said.

“Not every problem has a solution. There’s a time to—” Boranel’s voice simply faded in his throat as he realized what the changeling had said. “What do you mean?”

Vron smiled. “So far we’ve only talked about the attack on his highness. I asked you here for an entirely different reason because, as it turns out, we have our first lead on the Mourning.”

Oargev’s eyes widened. “Explain.”

“I will, Your Highness. But please sit. It’s not a simple story, and if you wish to hear what I have learned, you must be patient.” As the others took their seats, Vron walked across the room and placed a hand on the wall.

Light spilled across the black stone. The glowing colors flowed together, swirling around like oil over water. Within moments the glow resolved into the image of a tower in a forest. The trees were dusted with ice and snow, and a harsh wind tugged at the branches. The walls of the tower gleamed in the sunlight. It’s covered with ice, Thorn thought. No, it’s made of ice. She could see the shadows of people moving within the walls, and three shapes rose from the top of the spires: fierce griffons with fur and feathers of pure white, wearing armor that seemed to be carved from ice. Each griffon had a rider, knights in ivory armor carrying bows and lances. The beasts drew closer and closer, and the lead warrior raised her hand, twisting her fingers in the complex patterns of a spell. Suddenly the wall went black.

“We retrieved those images from the woods of western Karrnath,” Vron said. “We’ve never been able to scry on the location for more than a minute. The Karrns discovered the tower three years ago; as far as they know, there was nothing in that forest until that point. The fortress is garrisoned by a group of elves that have no cultural bonds to Aerenal or Valenar.”

“Eladrin.” The voice belonged to a newcomer, a young man standing in the doorway. He was dressed in rough-spun peasant clothes, and what stood out the most was his gear—an assortment of belts and pouches overflowing with tools and sundry goods. His hair was short, sandy, and disheveled, and a slight beard covered his chin. He grinned, as if talking with kings and princes were an everyday occurrence. “They look like elves, but they’re not. They call themselves eladrin.”

“You can speak in a moment,” Vron said. “Until then, let me focus on the critical facts. This forest is in the
domain of a Count Jadan Thul, a Karrnathi warlord who served with distinction during the Last War. We know that Thul sent envoys to these strangers and received no response. These eladrin never ventured more than a few miles from the tower and took no overtly hostile action against Thul or his holdings. But they refused to explain their presence or indeed to make any sort of contact with Count Thul.”

Essyn Cadrel raised an eyebrow. “A colorful story but what does it have to do with the Mourning?”

“Indulge me a moment more,” Vron said. “As you might imagine, Count Thul was perturbed by the presence of these strangers in his domain. However, his forces had been seriously depleted in the Last War, and he needed time to rebuild. In Olarune of 998, Thul moved against the citadel of ice. He suffered a stunning defeat. Though few in number, these strangers possess warriors with skill to rival the Valenar and arcane power to match that of Aundair. And yet, since repelling Thul’s attack, they have taken no further action, and they have ignored envoys from Thul, from King Kais of Karrnath, and our own ambassadors.”

“Get to the point,” Oargev snapped. The prince was on his second goblet of wine, and his hand was shaking slightly.

“I understand your frustration, Your Highness. But everything needs to be in context. You see, the Karrns are not the only people who have encountered these eladrin.” Vron tapped the wall again, and a map of Khorvaire appeared.

“As of last week, we’d managed to locate and identify three different eladrin towers, each of which appeared sometime within the last four years. In addition to the ice fortress in Karrnath, there is a tower along the northwest edge of the Krhaal jungle of Darguun, and another here, in Zilargo. But in all this time, we’ve never been able to get an agent inside one of these eladrin fortresses. We knew next to nothing about their origins, intentions, or capabilities. Until last week.”

Vron turned to the young man. “This is Marudrix Juran Cannith. Years ago—almost five years, in fact—he stumbled upon one of these mysterious towers. A fortress in Cyre, not far from the old village of Seaside.”

“They call it Shaelas Tiraleth,” the tinker said. “It means ‘the Court of the Silver Tree.’ Because it’s the largest of their cities and there’s this big tree and, well, it’s—”


To Thorn’s surprise, Cadrel spoke calmly. “Patience, Your Highness. I would see where this leads. Lord Vron, you said that this discovery occurred almost five years ago. Was it a date of any special significance?”

Vron smiled. “Indeed it was. The twentieth of Olarune. On that day, young Drix was traveling in Cyre’s southern woods when he encountered a group of eladrin. Believing him to be responsible for the death of their own prince, they pierced his heart with a cursed blade. From what we can tell, this happened at the precise moment that the Mourning began.”

Oargev was on his feet. “I don’t understand. Are you suggesting that my nation was destroyed in an attack against a farmboy?”

“That would be ludicrous, Your Highness.” Vron looked over at Drix, who was fidgeting. “But it seems that they know more than we do about it. Drix?”

The young man took a step forward. He tugged at the buttons of his shirt. “Lord Oargev …”

“Your Highness,” Cadrel corrected quietly.

Drix flushed. “Your Highness,” he said quickly, “I can’t explain to you all the things I’ve seen. I’m a tinker and I’ve got no skill with words. These eladrin … their city … it’s a magical place. A place of wonders—”

Oargev rose to his feet, and his eyes were hard. “Get to the point, boy.”

“They say they can end the Mourning.”

“Get to the point, boy.”

Oargev stepped closer to Drix until he was barely inches away from the tinker. His voice was quiet and steady, colder than Thorn had ever heard it, and his hand was on the jeweled hilt of his dagger. “Is this a joke, Vron? Are you laughing at my people and our pain?”

Drix spoke before the changeling or the king could respond. If he was afraid of the prince, he didn’t show it, but his smile had faded slightly. “They aren’t your people,” he said, his quiet voice carrying across the still room. “And you don’t know their pain.”

That was all it took. Oargev’s dagger was in his hand, the blade gleaming in the light. “How dare you?” he hissed. “You know nothing!”

Thorn took a step forward, intending to interpose herself between the two, but she heard a voice in her mind, Vron’s voice. Hold, Lantern! She froze, but it seemed she was the only one who heard the telepathic order.

“Oargev!” Boranel roared, rising to his feet. Essyn Cadrel knocked his chair aside in his haste to rise. Quick as they were, they weren’t fast enough to interfere.
“I know pain,” Drix said. He grabbed the dagger by the blade, the edge sinking into his flesh as he wrapped his fingers around it. His grip was strong, and he pulled the weapon free from Oargev’s hand. The prince staggered back, his anger turning to surprise.

Thorn made her way quickly to Drix’s side. He was shaking slightly, and she could see blood flowing between his fingers. Whatever could have driven him to do such a thing? His hand was still clenched tightly around the blade; they’d need a healer and quickly. Behind her, Cadrel and Boranel had reached the shocked prince, each taking an arm.

Then Drix opened his hand. There was a strange moment of silence as the blade fell, clattering against the floor. There was blood on his hand but only a trickle, not the fountain Thorn expected to see. The knife had indeed cut to the bone, but the wounds seemed to melt away. There was still blood against the skin, but his maimed hand was whole again.

“Sovereigns and Six,” Boranel whispered. “What is this?”

“A demonstration.” Vron’s voice was cold and stern. “Prince Oargev, sit. In light of what you have been through recently, I have indulged your theatrics to this point, but you are a guest in this city and this nation, and you would do well to remember that. King Boranel, you have my deepest apologies for this display. Now if you will sit down, I will explain everything.”

Essyn Cadrel helped the prince back to his seat. The prince was still shaking, but Cadrel’s expression was simply thoughtful.

“I know the story I’ve presented sounds ludicrous,” Vron told them. “Mysterious elves appear in Cyre on the Day of Mourning, and now claim that they can reverse the cataclysm. And yet, as you yourself said, Prince Oargev, it’s been almost five years and we still know almost nothing about the Mourning. What we do know is that these eladrin have access to magic we cannot duplicate.” He looked at Drix. “Show them.”

The tinker pulled open his shirt. Thorn’s eyes widened.

There was a stone embedded in his flesh. A crystal set into his left breast, where his heart should be. They stared at the large, clear jewel that appeared to be filled with swirling gray mist.

“We don’t know exactly what it is,” Vron said. “Just that it holds a power unlike anything we’ve ever seen from Cannith or the Arcane Congress. It can’t be removed, and it heals any injury Drix suffers within moments.”

“They called it the Heart of the Spire,” Drix said. While his breathing was slightly ragged, his voice was steady and strong. “They said … that they took my heart, so they gave me theirs. That its strength would allow us both to survive until the wound could be healed.”

Oargev’s temper was building again. “What does this have to do with the Mourning?”

To Thorn’s surprise, Drix actually smiled. “I’m just a tinker. This sort of magic is beyond me. But they told me that if they could restore me, they could restore the broken land as well,” Drix said. “That when they’d struck at me, they’d been crippled as well. And that by healing my wound, they could heal all our wounds.”

Oargev scowled. “I was wrong to draw my blade beneath your roof, Vron. But you do me a disservice by subjecting me to these ravings.”

“Patience, Your Highness.” Cadrel was examining the stone. “We have been quick to judge and to lash out. We still haven’t heard all that Vron has to say.”

“Thank you,” the changeling said. “We are faced with a number of simple facts.” He pointed at the map on the wall. “The feyspires exist. The events in Karrnath show that these eladrin possess both military might and magical skill. And yet we knew nothing of their presence until after the Day of Mourning. Now we have word that the eladrin say that the disaster crippled them even as it destroyed Cyre, and it is the Mourning itself that brought the hidden cities into the open. Ridiculous? Perhaps. But when coupled with proof of magic we cannot duplicate, it’s something we at least have to consider. And then there is the claim that they can restore stricken Cyre. It sounds like a fairy tale. Yet it’s just possible that we are living in a fairy tale, and we have nothing to lose from testing their claims.”

“I agree with Vron,” Boranel said. “Listen to yourself, Gev. Mere moments ago you were complaining when I told you there might be no answer to the Mourning. Now one has been placed before you and you don’t even want to test it?”

Oargev raised his hands, cheeks flushed with shame and wine. “I apologize again. This … I … You must understand. I’ve struggled with this for years. I face nightmares both awake and asleep. Nothing I’ve tried has borne fruit, and just hours ago I was attacked by a man I once trusted as much as anyone in this room. I shouldn’t have lashed out at you, and we should follow any lead.”

Cadrel patted the prince’s arm. “We’ve all been under too much stress of late,” he said. “So what is the next step?
We need to heal this lad, is that all?"

Vron glanced at Drix. He’d closed his shirt, and he ran a finger over the hidden stone.

“They need to remove the stone,” Drix said. “Cure the wound.”

“It sounds simple enough, I know,” Vron said. “Unfortunately, it’s anything but. Healing balms and spells treat
the stone as if it was a living part of him. We’ve tried to cut it out ourselves, but any wound heals instantly. The
artificers tell me there’s a phenomenal amount of power in the stone, and if there’s any truth to the idea that the
stone is linked to the Mourning, well, we don’t want to do anything too dangerous. We can’t remove it. But they
can.”

“So why haven’t they?” Oargev said. “What are they waiting for?”

“The stones,” Drix replied. “The queen of the feyspire told me that she’d gather the lords when the time was right.
But she needed me to find two more stones, and bring them with me to the spire.”

“It seems these eladrin have been hidden on Eberron far longer than we knew,” Vron said. “The shard used to
preserve Drix’s life is one of a set. Apparently some of these crystals have been lost, and Drix needs to find two
more before he can return to the spire to be healed.”

“She said I’d find them in the last days of the searching moon, in the shadow of a broken blade,” Drix said. “Two
kings would meet, and I would find two stones, wrapped in thorn.”

“Interesting,” Cadrel said. “The searching moon would presumably be Barrakas, and we are in its last days.”

“The Citadel stands in the shadow of Brokenblade Castle,” Vron said.

Cadrel nodded. “And if we grant his highness his true title as King of Cyre, two kings are indeed meeting
tonight.”

“Which leaves …” Thorn paused. “You can’t be serious.”

“We haven’t worked closely in the past, Lantern Thorn, but I assure you, I’m always serious.”

“What do you mean?” Oargev said. “‘Wrapped in thorn.’ Do you know where these stones are hidden?”

“Come, Lantern,” Vron said. “Show us a stone wrapped in Thorn.”

Turning her back to the others, she pulled up her hair, revealing the glittering crystal embedded in the base of her
skull. It was far smaller than Drix’s stone heart, and there was no mist swirling within, but the tinker gasped when
he saw it.

“Yes!” Drix said. “That’s one of them. She showed me, in my thoughts. The queen.”

“This is no fey treasure, Lord Commander,” Thorn said. “You know exactly how I came by it.” The shards in her
spine were shrapnel, the scars of the explosion at Far Passage. There had been thousands of dragonshards
surrounding the arcane core, and Thorn had been struck by dozens; the two she retained were simply the only shards
they couldn’t remove.

“There’s still a great deal we don’t know about that incident,” Vron said. “Could you show the other shard,
Lantern?”

“Yes, sir.” None of this makes any sense. Still, she pulled her shirt up, revealing the lighter stone embedded in her
spine.

“Two stones,” Drix whispered. “And you’re Thorn.”

Oargev and Boranel seemed equally baffled by the turn of events.

Cadrel spoke first. “And so it seems that our life is just a fairy tale,” the old bard said. “Grand in its way. What
comes next? A ritual under the towering oaks of the Eldeen Reaches with five moons in the sky?”

“I have no idea, my lord.” Vron gestured to Drix. “The boy is supposed to take the stones back to the feyspire in
Cyre. The stones can’t be removed from Thorn, so clearly she has to go with him.”

“Now young Thorn has irremovable shards?” Boranel grumbled. “What happens when hers are removed? Will
Galifar be restored?”

“We can only hope so, Your Majesty,” Vron said. “When I first heard Drix’s tale, I thought of you, Lantern. It
seems improbable to say the least, yet no more than the idea that the Mournland could be restored.”

The stones removed … The stone in her neck was like a dagger digging into Thorn’s flesh. She’d been told that
she’d simply have to bear the pain; the idea that it might be possible to have the stone removed was unhoped for.
“Where are we going?”

“To Shaelas Tiraleth, the spire in Cyre,” Vron said. “You may be the first Brelish citizen to see the inside of an
eladrin fortress, Thorn.”

“In Cyre,” Thorn said. “In the Mournland?”
“Surely we’ll be sending a team,” Boranel said. Thorn could see the general in him coming to the fore. “I’ll put the full resources of the Citadel to the task. Wands, Swords, Shields—it will be our war against the Mournland.”

Drix raised a hand, but it was Vron who spoke. “I’m afraid that’s impossible, Your Majesty. If you’ve been listening to the tale, you know just how paranoid these eladrin are. Drix was told to bring the stones when he returned and nothing else. Even if that wasn’t a concern, you know just how dangerous the Mournland is. With all due respect, Lantern Thorn, you are expendable. We’ll give you the supplies you need, but should you fail in this, it will not be a dramatic blow to Breland. Placing a massive chunk of the Citadel’s forces in such a dangerous field—I cannot condone it, Your Majesty.”

Boranel sighed and the spark in his eyes faded. “Very well, Lord Commander. You were chosen for your judgment. The Lanterns have shed light in the shadows before. I trust you will do so again.”

“You’re not going alone.” It was Oargev.

“I beg your pardon, Your Highness?” Vron seemed genuinely perplexed.

“You’re talking about the fate of my kingdom. The quest I have grappled with for five years. If you think I will stand by while you battle for my nation, you are sorely mistaken.”

“You can’t,” Drix said. As before, the tinker didn’t seem to be concerned with the fact that he was refusing the demands of a king. “I’m just supposed to bring the stones. They don’t like strangers.”

Essyn Cadrel stepped between the two before Oargev’s wrath could grow. “While the boy is impertinent, this time I must agree, Your Majesty. We’ve discussed this before. You are the last of your line, and if you fall, Mishann’s claim is lost. You must remain safe. For Cyre’s sake.”

“I know that,” Oargev said. “I want you to go.”

Cadrel blinked. “Your Highness?”

“You’ve already shown that you understand this business better than I do. You said it yourself, that our lives were becoming a fairy tale. You’re the man who first told me those tales, just as you’ve told me of your adventures. You’ve wandered the world before. Who better to serve me now? Go with them. For Cyre.”

“No,” Drix said. “No strangers.”

Oargev’s face tightened. “Don’t tell me what to do, boy. You claim to hold the fate of Cyre in your hands. I need to trust that you are what you say, that any of this is the truth. If you want my blessing on this, you will have the eyes of the crown upon you. Go with Essyn or I swear I will do everything in my power to stop you.”

Vron raised a hand, but Boranel stopped him before he could speak. “It seems reasonable to me,” Boranel said. “Your boy here will have his stones. Perhaps these elves would bar their gates against a squad of our best. If they’d close their doors against one old man, they’re a cowardly bunch indeed.”

Vron inclined his head. “As you wish, sire.” He turned to Cadrel and Thorn. “I’ve already prepared for the journey; there’s a boat waiting at the Brokenblade dock, ready to take you along the Cyran coast. I’ll need a few hours to gather additional supplies for you, Master Cadrel, and I’m sure you need time to settle your affairs. But I would leave before morning. The sooner we move on this, the better.”

Cadrel was still considering the whole affair. “You’re sure about this, Your Highness?”

Oargev nodded.

A grin slowly spread across the old man’s face. “So be it. I will do my best not to let you down and to return with tales more wondrous that I ever spun in your youth.” He turned to Boranel and bowed. “With your leave, Your Majesty.”

“Of course, and well said.” Boranel clapped Cadrel on the back and walked toward the door. “Sovereigns and Six! I wish I could be going with you. First things first, though—let’s arrange a proper escort for you this time, both to get back to your consulate and to see Oargev to New Cyre. You’ll have every Shield the Citadel can spare until we have you safely home again.”

“Very well, Cousin.” The prince paused by Thorn, looking into her eyes. She could see the fear and uncertainty warring within him. “You served me well this last month. I owe you my life. Serve my people in this, and you will have anything my throne can offer.”

“It’s my honor to serve, Your Highness,” Thorn said with a polite nod. “May the Sovereigns watch over you.”

“Wait a moment, Lantern Thorn.” Vron took Drix outside.

Thorn studied the glowing map on the wall and ran her fingers over the stone in her neck. She was just about to talk to Steel when Vron returned.

“What can I do for you, Lord Commander?”

“For a start, forget that title.” Vron smiled and as he did, his face softened and flowed. His skin was the same pale
white, his eyes still shards of glass. They were just smaller and sharper. Cheekbones were higher, his chin slightly pointed. He was still a changeling … a different changeling.

“Zane?”

“For the moment.” Zane was Thorn’s personal handler; he’d recruited her into the King’s Dark Lanterns.

“Was Vron ever here?”

“He was in every way that matters, wasn’t he? There’s a certain level of decorum to a royal briefing, and Oargev surely expected the Lord Commander. But we Lanterns have to deal with more complex situations than the Shields or the Blades. His majesty knows what Vron is doing right now; if my mask keeps Oargev happy, all for the good. Besides, you’re my agent.”

Thorn nodded. It wasn’t the first time Zane had come to her in an unexpected guise, though she’d never seen the changeling impersonate a changeling before. “So what is it you wanted to tell me?”

“What do you think of this assignment?”

Thorn hesitated but she’d never minced words with Zane before. “It seems ridiculous. Do you actually think we can restore the Mournland?”

“No,” Zane said. “I don’t. It’s an entertaining story, and if it somehow turns out to be true … well, it would be a boon to give the thousands of Cyran refugees living off Brelish taxes somewhere else to go. But I think we both know just how likely that is—just as we know that those stones in your neck aren’t eladrin relics.”

“So what am I doing?”

“I don’t believe that these fey are responsible for the Mourning,” Zane said. “Nonetheless, their power is clearly a force to be reckoned with. As far as we can tell, young Drix is essentially immortal. Imagine an army of soldiers possessing such power. Who knows what other secrets are hidden within the walls of that tower? If you can somehow restore Cyre, wonderful. But your primary mission is to acquire as much information about the eladrin as you can, including anything that could provide Breland with an arcane advantage in future conflicts.”

“I see.”

Zane frowned. “Cadrel is a problem. If there are secrets to be gleaned from the tower, we want them to benefit Breland.”

“Are you telling me to eliminate Essyn Cadrel?” Thorn wanted that point to be absolutely clear. She liked the old man. If Zane wanted him dead, he’d have to give an order.

Zane sighed. “It’s not your mission, Lantern Thorn. But the Mournland is a dangerous place, and I’m sure you’ll have your hands full protecting Drix. Make that your priority: don’t risk anything to keep Cadrel alive.”

“Understood. Is there anything else?”


“Steel was,” Thorn said. “He was dead center when he detonated the wand, and then the ceiling collapsed. Steel said there was little left of him.”

“Try ‘nothing.’ I received the report from the search teams while I was outside. No traces of any of the attackers, save for the damage of the battle. Bodies, equipment—nothing whatsoever.”

Thorn considered that. “So either someone purged the scene, and quickly, or they all survived.”

“Yes,” Zane said. “And we still don’t know what they were after to begin with. So be careful. Your assassin mentioned the prince by name, so odds are good Oargev is the target. We’ll keep a watch on him. Still, it’s an unknown, and I hate unknowns. Be careful.”

“Of course.”

“Good,” Zane said. “Report to the quartermaster for equipment. Your boat leaves the docks in three hours’ time.”

He left without another word. Thorn remained in the black room, staring at the glowing map. She sat down in one of the chairs and drew Steel.

“Did you get all of that?”

“Of course. So now you’re going to fix the Mournland.”

“Are we? I thought I was going to rob some elves and maybe kill an old man.”

“I’m sure you’ll do what’s best for Breland.”

She knew she wouldn’t make it in time. She couldn’t find the path. She was running through the forest and searching for the light. Hundreds of fireflies swarmed through the woods, false sparks trying to lead her astray.

A wave of pain rolled through her. It wasn’t a scream. It was the agony of the land, shared by everything around her. Trees shook and a multitude of cries rose up in the night, wolf and songbird united in torment. If Thorn couldn’t find her way, they’d all be dead soon.

At last she reached the clearing, and there it was. A tree, its trunk cast in silver, polished to a mirror finish. Boughs spread wide enough to cover a great hall, covered with glowing leaves of gold. She ran and as she did, she could see that the tree was even taller than she’d imagined. Its limbs were twined with the stars, and she could feel its roots sinking deep down into the earth. The tree didn’t draw sustenance from the soil, no—it was the earth that drew strength from the tree. It was a tree of worlds, binding earth and sky together, forming a bridge between shadow and substance.

And she was too late.

The mirror finish was growing cloudy, cracks running up along the trunk. Leaves were falling and the stars with them. She couldn’t see the roots wither, but all around her, both plant and beast withered and died. She could feel the life running out of her own body, feel her flesh rotting on the bone. She could barely stand, and she staggered toward the tree, hoping that it might be different than before, that she would reach the tree in time to stop the decay, to save herself.

She never had and now it was no different. Her legs gave out beneath her and she fell. The earth cracked around her as razor-edged shards of silver fell from the sky. The tree was dying, and there was nothing she could do.

Thorn woke up with a start.

She desperately wanted a breath of fresh air, a cool, night wind to clear her thoughts. A glance at the window reminded her why that wasn’t going to happen. It wasn’t a window at all; it was a porthole, with the murky depths of the Thunder Sea stretching out into the darkness. And all around her was a low thrum, a vibration that she could feel in the floor and air alike, the pulse of the elemental spirit driving the ship through the water.

Nightmares were nothing new for her, especially since Far Passage. She often dreamed of Lharen’s death and the shards ripping through her flesh. But this dream was something else. She’d been dreaming of the tree for almost a month. Although it was not every night—not quite—it was always the same, though each time the vision was stronger.

Stupid dreams. She’d hoped that Nandon might be able to tell her something about it, that it might be connected to her other troubles. She’d had other nightmares over the past years, visions of the horrific deeds of the dragon Sarmondelaryx and a woman who could be Thorn’s twin dressed in red leather and black silk, a woman who was also somehow Sarmondelaryx. Haunting as those were, those were of a different order of magnitude than the dreams of the silver tree. The vision that pulled her from her sleep had a visceral power that pulled at her.

Thorn was wearing her nightshirt; she whispered a word, and the fabric twisted and stretched, shifting to her traveling clothes. She picked up Steel.

“What’s the good word?”

Ten bells and all’s well, he said. At least, the ward preventing this vessel from cracking beneath the pressure of the water is stable, and the magic that purifies the air you breathe continues to function. Despite having been banished from her house, your captain seems to have the elemental empowering the vessel under control. For the moment.

“Yes … thanks for reminding me just how many things could go wrong on this little boat.” Thorn pulled on her gloves and slid her bracers into place on her forearms. She picked up Steel again and tapped the blade on her palm,
sighing.

Is something troubling you?

“Our companion. Marudrix.”

I should like to properly analyze his aura. There’s a limit to what I can do when sheathed, and I would have liked to have observed his recovery when Oargev attacked him.

“We could stab him.”

You don’t like him?

Thorn sighed. “No … he seems like a good kid, I suppose, if a little strange. But I don’t like his family.” Just months earlier, Thorn had been assigned to infiltrate House Tarkanan, a criminal guild formed by people with aberrant dragonmarks, a group long oppressed by the dragonmarked houses. House Cannith had been the motive force behind the assignment, and Thorn was still angry about the merchants giving orders to the Brelish crown. “Merrix d’Cannith was operating a creation forge in Sharn. A direct violation of the Thronehold edicts and a threat to Brelish security.”

Then I suppose it’s lucky for him that someone destroyed the forge instead of passing the information to the proper authorities.

Thorn flushed. “It was necessary to maintain my cover. Besides, you know Sharn. Merrix would have just bought off the inspectors.”

I see. And is it your opinion that Merrix posed an imminent threat to Breland? You stopped him just before he could set his warforged army in motion?

“Perhaps you’ve forgotten the warforged assassins he had down there? It may not have been an army, but the terms of the treaty are quite clear, and he was violating them. When someone with that sort of power considers himself to be above the law, that’s a threat.”

And you’re not simply trying to justify the fact that you were responsible for the death of his son.

“His son was a monster!”

His son was an artificial creature. As an inorganic sentient myself, I’m not sure I like this term “monster.”

“He was making warforged that looked human. Who knows what he would have done with that power? Spies. Assassins. Replacing people in positions of power.”

Giving his barren wife a child.

Thorn resisted the urge to pull Steel into her glove. “Enough. House Cannith was violating the restrictions placed on its behavior by the Treaty of Thronehold and using the Citadel to fight a personal battle. Tell me that neither of these things trouble you.”

I can’t argue either of those points, Lantern Thorn. Though I don’t see how either apply to Marudrix.

“He’s Cannith—”

And it’s quite a large family. Far larger than the Citadel itself. Do you hold yourself responsible for the actions of every agent of the Citadel?

Thorn frowned. “I just don’t like working for Cannith again.”

And I don’t believe you are. While Marudrix may be a member of the family and an apprentice of the Tinkers’ Guild, there was no mention of Merrix or any other member of the house. If anything, the stranger question is why he made his way to the Citadel instead of turning to his family.

Thorn considered that. “True.”

For all you know, he’s an excoriate like the captain of our ship. Perhaps he was driven from the house for questioning Merrix’s policy on secret creation forges.

“That’s not something to joke about.”

No, I suppose not. Still, perhaps you should find out more about his connections to the house.

“I suppose I will.” Thorn ran a hand over her pouches and pockets, making sure all her tools were in place. Satisfied, she walked out of the crew quarters and made her way toward the helm.

Shargon’s Tooth was a small vessel, built to carry commando teams behind enemy lines. Given that her companions weren’t in the cabin, there were only a few places they could be. She found Drix and Cadrel in the chamber that served as a galley and observation deck, just behind the helm. Drix had a small crossbow set on the table with wheels and twine laid out on a cloth next to it; he was polishing a gear. Cadrel looked over as she entered.

“Our guardian rises,” he said. “Did you sleep well, my dear?”

“Well enough,” she replied. “Let’s get to business. Would you mind clearing the table?”
The tinker looked sadly at his unfinished work. He carefully folded the cloth and tucked his tools away. As soon as the space was available, Thorn laid out a map.

“Scrying is unreliable in the Mournland,” she said. “This map is the best we have, based on the preexisting geography of Cyre and what information we’ve received from survivors and scouts, including you, Drix.” She pointed at a spot along the southern coastline. “Your report places this eladrin spire roughly here, northeast of the old village of Seaside. We’ll be making landfall as close to Seaside as possible. We know that the Green Road is still partially intact. That will serve as our guide as we move toward the southern woods. From there, it’s up to you to show us the way.”

Drix nodded. “I remember the path,” he said. “But you won’t be able to sleep. The forest … it’s different now. Hungry. You can’t stand still.”

“We’re prepared,” Thorn said. She reached into the pouch at her side. Like her gloves, the space within was larger than the pouch itself; a thought called the leather wineskin to her hand. “The good news is that we’ve got Irian tears. A few drops of this will keep you going through the night and help fight the effects of exhaustion. You don’t want to take too much of it, but we should be all right.”

“Good news, hmm?” Cadrel said. “I trust there’s bad to follow it?”

Thorn sighed. “I’m afraid so.” She reached into the pouch again and drew out a thin rod. Six inches of it were covered with a rubbery, greenish substance. “Troll sticks. Not actual troll, I think, but you wouldn’t know it from the taste. The stick grows the meat; it takes about three hours for it to grow back. It’s about as unpleasant as anything you’ll find in the Mournland, but at least it’s not poisonous. So that takes care of basic survival.”

“There’s nothing basic about survival in what lies ahead of us,” Drix said. “Food’s good but let’s not forget about the ghosts. And the hungry wind. And the voices in the mist.” He smiled slightly, as if he were remembering a childhood vacation.

“Good questions,” Thorn said, privately wondering how many of those things were real and how many existed in only the tinker’s head. “I need to know what you can do in a fight.”

“I was stabbed through the heart,” Drix said. “Does that count as a fight?”

“You walked away from it, so I guess that counts. That stone of yours … just how effective is it? Will it really protect you from any sort of injury?”

“I don’t know,” Drix said with a shrug. “It healed me from the stabbing. And the boulders. And the bear. And the crab that glued me to its back …”

*I know he sounds slightly mad,* Steel said as Drix continued to list his misfortunes.

“Slightly?” Thorn smiled at Drix, drumming her fingers against Steel’s hilt. She wondered how many of his supposed injuries actually occurred.

*Nonetheless, the power I’m sensing in that stone is remarkable. And something that will stand out to anyone else who might look for it.*

Lovely, she thought. “Do you know how to use that crossbow?”

“Hmm?” Drix said, ceasing his reverie of pains. “Well, not that one specifically. I’m still working on her. She’s not finished. But she means well. When I’m done, she’ll aim herself.”

Thorn sighed. “And you, Cadrel? I see you’re wearing a blade today. Do you know how to use it?”

“Indeed.” Cadrel stepped away from the table, and suddenly his short sword was in his hand. “I know I did little to impress you in our last altercation; I thought it best that I stay by the prince. I’m no match for you, my dear, but I’ve fought a few duels in my day.”

“And magic? I know you can weave a disguise. What other surprises do you have?”

“It’s a poor entertainer who reveals every trick,” Cadrel began.

“And a foolish one who goes to the Mournland,” Thorn said. “This is no stage, Cadrel. I need to know exactly what you’re capable of.”

“You wound me, my dear. Still, this is an adventure unlike any I’ve ever been on; I suppose I must bend my own rules. I do know a few tricks of illusion, yes. I can disguise my own face and form. I can cast a false image for a minute or two, though one without sound or substance. Once upon a time, I could hone this to craft a burst of bright light, dazzling an opponent for a few moments, though I’m afraid it’s been some time since I’ve tried such a thing.”

Thorn nodded. It was still more than she’d expected; perhaps the old man wouldn’t be the liability she’d thought. Still, an elderly duelist and a tinker with an unfinished crossbow? Not the most impressive team she’d worked with.

“Cadrel, would you give me a moment alone with Drix?”

Essyn smiled, giving a slight bow. “Certainly. I’ll go check with our lovely captain; we must be close to our
destination by now.”

Thorn turned back to Drix as Cadrel left the room. The tinker was looking wistfully at his crossbow. She studied him, noticing the curve of his eyes, the slight points to his ears. “It seems we have something in common,” she said. He looked up at her, puzzled.

She tapped an ear. “Elf blood. How far back in your line does it go?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “My father was Khoravar, and his mother.” The word literally meant child of Khorvaire, but the more common term was half-elf—the blended race formed from the mingling of human and elf blood. Thorn was Khoravar herself, but first generation; her mother was an elf from the island nation of Aerenal.

“I didn’t realize there were Khoravar in House Cannith,” she said. “I thought only humans could carry the Mark of Making.”

“That’s what they say,” Drix said sadly. “My mother took me back to Making once, to meet my grandparents. To go to school there, I think. They didn’t want me. The Jurans are tinkers, and that’s all we’ll ever be. That’s what they say. Dirt in our blood.”

“Did you talk to your family about this?” She pointed at his heart.

“My family is dead,” he said, looking away. “Killed in the Mourning. The barons in Breland didn’t want me before. I’m not going to them now.”

Thorn nodded thoughtfully. He seemed sincere enough. There were times when he seemed a little unhinged, but at the moment it seemed it was just pain, emotional or otherwise. “Why are you doing this?” she said. “With that stone, you’re all but immortal. Why would you want to give that up?”

He looked at her, and she could see the sorrow in his eyes. “It’s not mine. Not me. It’s the Mourning. I can feel it. The sorrow, the anger … I can feel it.”

He seemed serious. She squeezed Steel’s hilt. “Really?”

“It weaves my flesh and blood together, but the pain … the pain never truly goes away. It doesn’t belong in me. I know that.”

It’s possible the stone holds psychic impressions of the dead, Steel said. Considering he’s just said that he’s in constant physical pain, delusions seem more likely.

Even as she listened, Thorn felt a pulse of pain from the shard embedded in her neck. Her stones were just shrapnel, not magical gems, but she’d lived with them for almost a year, dealing with the pain and sheer sense of wrongness that came with them. In the darkest times, she’d turned to drink and dreamlily to chase that pain away. She was slowly growing used to them. The pain was still there, but it wasn’t as crippling as it had once been. Still, there was a time when she’d have done almost anything to escape from it. If Drix felt anything like she had, she could understand why he’d want it out.

“I know you think the pain is driving me mad,” Drix said. “It’s not. It’s not. It’s the voices. The faces. I need to make it stop, to let their spirits rest.”

“I understand,” Thorn said. She felt a flicker of sorrow and a touch of guilt for having let her distrust of Cannith get the better of her before. Magic stone or not, his life was tough enough as it was.

Drix sighed, looking out the porthole. “Why are we traveling underwater, anyway?”

Thorn shrugged. “It’s just a safety precaution. These vessels were built during the Last War, used to sneak behind enemy lines. The Mournland may be neutral territory, but the last thing we need is a chance encounter with Darguul slavers. This way we get to Seaside quickly and safely.”

“So we’re safe here?”

“We should be,” Thorn said. “Between the speed of the vessel and our reinforced hull, no natural creature can pose a threat to us. And we’re too far down for a ship to even notice us.”

The impact surprised them both.

There was a groan of strained wood. Thorn braced herself against the table as the floor shook. Drix’s unfinished crossbow slid across the floor, and Drix stumbled and fell to his hands and knees.

“Of course, I’ve been wrong before,” Thorn said.
CHAPTER FIVE

**The Thunder Sea**
**Barrakas 22, 999 YK**

Thorn drew Steel as she headed for the helm. “Report,” she said.

There was a momentary fluctuation in the bonds connecting the elemental to the ship. “That’s not a good thing.” The floor rolled beneath her as Thorn made her way down the narrow hall, and she braced herself against the wall to keep from falling.

Essyn Cadrel was already on the bridge with Captain Shaeli. The captain’s dragonmark was glowing slightly in the dim light, and the Khoravar woman cursed under her breath. She clung tightly to the gleaming wheel.

Thorn saw Cadrel’s eyes widen, and she realized Steel was still in her hand. She lowered the dagger. “What’s going on?”

“It seems we’ve found a souvenir of the Last War,” Cadrel replied.

“Cyran breacher,” the captain said. The words were an effort.

“I fought on the ground,” Thorn said. “What’s that?”

“A nightmare,” Shaeli said. She gasped as the ship shuddered again.

Breachers are a joint creation of House Cannith and the binders of Zilargo, Steel told her. A warforged leech built to prey on elemental vessels. The first impact must have been it latching onto the hull. Now it’s fighting the captain for control of the elemental core. If it overcomes her willpower, it’ll loose the elemental and shatter the vessel. Even if it doesn’t, it will carve a hole through the hull.

“Lovely.” Thorn murmured. “How do we fight it?”

“No weapons,” Shaeli said. Her breathing was shallow, her voice strained. “I’ll try … to surface. You might survive the wreck.”

I’m afraid she’s correct. On a normal ship, you might be able to target the breacher from above. On this vessel, by the time it penetrates the hull, it will be too late.

“Get to the hatch,” Shaeli whispered. “Lifeboat.”

“And what about you, Captain?” Cadrel said.

“Must remain … If I let go … it’s over.”

The ship shook again. Thorn’s mind raced. There was no way for her to fight an enemy outside the ship, and if it punched a hole in the hull, the water would finish them before battle was an option. Then a memory came to her. Merrix d’Cannith shattering a warforged soldier with a single touch, in the tunnels below Sharn.

Drix was still in the galley when she returned. He’d spread the pieces of the crossbow across the table again and seemed oblivious to the threat.

“Drix!”

“Oh, hello again.” He smiled at her. “What’s wrong?”

Thorn pulled Drix from his chair, sending tools and twine tumbling to the floor. “We’ve only got a few minutes before this ship gets cracked like an egg. Can you do anything about it?”

“What could I do?” Drix said, seeming honestly curious.

Thorn strode into the hall, pulling Drix with her. She could feel the vibrations as the breacher drilled into the hull, and she followed the sensations. “You’re Cannith, aren’t you? Can’t you do anything?”

“I’m just a tinker,” Drix said. “I fix things. Make things work better.”

Host above, Thorn thought. He certainly isn’t Merrix. “Have you ever fixed a warforged?”

“Yes,” Drix said.

They entered the heart of the vessel. There ahead of them was the elemental core—a swirling sphere of the bluest
water Thorn had ever seen, suspended in a cage inscribed with glowing sigils. The sphere was shaking, pseudopods lashing out to strike at the bars. And to the side, Thorn could feel the breacher grinding into the wall, separated from them by less than a foot of wood; if not for the mystical force strengthening the hull, it would surely be through already.

“How? Just hammering the plates? Or with magic?”
“I’ve been working with magic,” he said. “But I’ve still got a lot to learn. It’s hard.”

The breacher could break through at any time, Steel warned her. Or the elemental could break its bonds. In either case, this is the worst place we could be.

“I know,” she said, returning the dagger to his sheath. “Tell me what it’s like.”
“A warforged … it’s magical but also alive. You need to reach out with your thoughts. Feel the threads of life.”

The liquid sphere pulsed, and the ship rocked as it did. Thorn could feel the vibration of the construct digging into the wood, and she could imagine the metal beast latched onto the hull.

Drix was oblivious to the threat, lost in his memories. “You follow the threads, search for the breaks, let your strength flow into the broken strands to bind them together …”
Thorn pushed Drix up against the shuddering wall. “Can you feel what’s on the other side of this?”
Drix looked nervous but he pressed his hand up against the hull. “Yes.”

“Can you feel those threads of magic?”
Drix closed his eyes. “Yes … but it’s strong. Bright. It’s not hurt.”

“I know. But you can touch those threads? Feel their strength?”

“Yes,” Drix murmured. The boat rocked again, and a cascade of sparks fell from the golden cage surrounding the elemental core.

Thorn was no artificer, but she knew a thing or two about magic. She thought about the lessons she’d learned, the techniques she used for breaking through mystical wards. “You know what it’s like when a thread breaks. Can you break the threads you see? Use your strength to tear at them instead of mending them?”

“That’s not the way it’s supposed to go,” Drix said. “It’ll hurt—”

“It’s the only chance we have,” Thorn said. “It’s hurting the ship, Drix. It’s going to destroy the ship and kill us all unless you can make it go away. Make it let go.”

Drix frowned and Thorn could feel his tension growing. His fingers twisted, clinching into fists. “I … can’t …” he said. “They’re too bright. Too strong.”

“Keep trying,” Thorn said.

Suddenly a hand gripped her shoulder, pulling her back. It was Essyn Cadrel. “There’s no more time!” He grabbed Drix and Thorn saw that there was a crack running down the hull. “Come on!”

He turned, tugging Drix with him as they headed toward the top of the ship. The cracks were spreading. There was nothing more to be done. By the time they reached the top hatch, the ship was shuddering and shaking. The crystal orb set into the wall by the hatch was half-filled with pale blue light.

“We’ve surfaced,” Cadrel said. “Quickly now!”

Throwing open the hatch, they stepped out onto the deck of the elemental ship. Salt spray filled the air, and the sky was a dim gray, the morning sun lurking behind thick clouds. Behind them, a ring of water rose from the surface of the sea. It was the extension of the elemental that propelled the ship through the ocean, and the elemental’s pain was plain to see. The ring contorted, struggling against invisible bonds. There was a lifeboat clamped down by the hatch.

“Careful!” Thorn shouted, grabbing Drix before he fell. The surface of the ship was slick, treacherous even if the vessel weren’t twisting and rocking. Cadrel pulled the tarp from the boat, and Thorn pushed Drix to it. “Just get in!”

Cadrel knew how to handle a boat, which was a good thing; it was all Thorn could do to keep herself and Drix from tumbling into the water. Soon they were free. “Oars!” Cadrel cried. “We need to get as far away as we can!”

The stricken vessel was just fading into the fog when the wards finally fell. The ring surrounding the ship snapped, two great tentacles of water rising into the air and flailing at the clouds. For a moment they stayed suspended in the air, waterspouts quivering in the light of early morning. Then they fell. As the ring collapsed, the ship burst asunder. The elemental core had broken free of its bonds and exploded in a torrent of water.

“Row!” Cadrel said.

Chunks of wood showered down from the sky, splashing into the water around them. Then the shock wave hit. The little boat was flung up on a watery cliff then slammed back down into the ocean. Thorn’s oar was torn from her grip, and for a moment she was falling toward the water. Cadrel caught hold of her arm and pulled her down to the
Thorn wanted to sink onto the floor of the little boat, to just lie there and forget about the chaos of the past hour, the sacrifice of Captain Shaeli. She knew better. She drew Steel and looked at the ocean, searching for any signs of motion beneath the heaving water. “Stand ready!” she called to the others. “That breacher is still out there!”

Cadrel nodded. He drew a wand from his belt. Drix stared into the ocean, clinging to the boat. “I don’t feel it,” he said. “The water’s empty.”

“Would you bet your life on that?” Thorn yelled, shouting over the ocean spray.

“Yes,” Drix said. He picked up the oar that had fallen to the bottom of the boat, smiling slightly. “We’re safe now.”

I’m not sensing anything either, Steel said. The power of the elemental is fading. I’m not sensing any other significant magical signatures.

“Wouldn’t it be shielded from divination?” Thorn said.

“Possibly,” Cadrel said. He was watching the ocean, tracking any ripples with his wand. The boiling water was settling down. “Maybe it was destroyed in the blast.”

Unlikely, Steel said. Breachers were designed to bring down elemental vessels. They were built to survive it.

“I suppose.” The waters were calm, and there was no sign of metal in the depths. “If it really was an old weapon, I suppose it makes sense … crippling shipping but allowing civilians to escape.”

“What else could it be?” Cadrel said. “Seaside was one of our important ports. Naturally it was defended. With the Mourning … well, you’ll have to forgive us if disabling old weapons hasn’t been at the top of our list of priorities.”

“I suppose,” Thorn said. “It’s just … Shargon’s Tooth was designed to evade just that sort of defense. It’s shielded against basic divinations. For that breacher to find us, we must have bumped right into it. And the breacher itself has just been out here, unsupported, for five years; it can’t be in top condition.”

“I don’t see a better explanation,” Cadrel said. “It’s damned inconvenient for us, to be certain. We’d best hope these elves can help us home.”

“Eladrin,” Drix pointed out.

“Yes, eladrin,” Cadrel said. “But this has to be chance, Thorn. No one is building breachers anymore. No one could have known our route. This isn’t some sinister conspiracy, just a trick of the Traveler. So take heart. We all survived it, didn’t we?”

“You seem to have forgotten Captain Shaeli.”

Cadrel was crestfallen. For once he seemed to be at a loss for words.

Thorn looked away. Cadrel was right and it certainly wasn’t his fault. And the Tooth had been protected from divination, which meant that as unlikely as it was, the logical conclusion was that they had come across it themselves, that it was just bad luck.

Drix was leaning over the edge of the boat. Debris from Shargon’s Tooth was scattered around them, thrown far from the ship by the force of the elemental shock wave. Stretching as far as he could, he reached into the water and hauled a dripping piece of wood from the ocean. It was the little crossbow he’d been working on.

“It seems all of the laws of probability have fallen asunder,” Cadrel said. “Now I suggest we start rowing. I know I’ll be happier when we reach dry land.”

“You won’t,” Drix said. He was examining his crossbow, removing the sodden string and checking the gears. He didn’t look at Cadrel as he spoke, but his voice was calm and clear. “there’s no happiness ahead. Only mourning.”

“Lovely,” Thorn said. She slipped Steel back in his sheath and picked up her oar.
The dead-gray mists,” Cadrel said. “The tears of Cyre.” The barrier stretched out before them, a dense wall of fog that reached the limits of sight and rose up to touch the sky. Thorn had heard of the mists that defined the borders of the Mournland, but she’d never actually seen them. As their boat slowly drifted toward them, she felt a chill run across her skin. The fog was slightly luminescent and constantly churning, as if stirred by a strong wind, but there was no wind whatsoever and no sound at all. And there was the stench of death. The scent changed any time her attention slipped. Rot and corruption … fresh blood … burning hair and flesh. Staring into the silent mist, it was all too easy to let the scents paint a vivid picture of what lay beyond.

“How far until we reach the shoreline?” she said.

“I don’t know,” Cadrel replied. “The mists cling close to Cyre. Less than a mile, to be certain. We’ll find out when we run aground.”

“I know where we need to go,” Drix said. He set down his oar and moved to the back of the boat. “The mists don’t bother me. You row. I’ll take the rudder.”

Cadrel glanced at Thorn and raised an eyebrow. “And how is it the mists don’t touch you, boy?”

“Call me ‘boy’ again, and I’m going to start calling you ‘old man,’” Drix said with a grin. He certainly didn’t seem to be put out by their eerie surroundings. “They touch me. You just get used to it after a while, and it took me a long time to find my way out of this place. The mists reach into your heart, feeding your hopes and spilling out sorrows. Just keep rowing. Don’t let go of your oar. And don’t dwell on anything bad.”

“I’ve faced sorrow before,” Thorn said.

“Then you’ll face it again and worse,” Drix said. “Find someone to talk to. A friend who’s always there. Your dagger, perhaps. He seems like a kind soul.”

Thorn found herself smiling, in spite of the grim wall ahead. She tapped Steel’s hilt. “Did you hear that, little dagger friend? You’ve got a kind soul.”

“You shouldn’t mock him,” Drix said. “You’ll need every friend you can find.”

“Right.” She patted Steel’s hilt again. “I’m sorry, little dagger.”

Very amusing, the both of you, Steel said. I just hope he actually knows where you’re going. I’ve heard many unpleasant stories about traversing the mists, and even sheathed I can sense the negative energy ahead of us. Be careful.

“Are you prepared, Lady Thorn?” Essyn Cadrel had set his oar in position, raised and ready for another stroke.

“Not yet,” Thorn said. “Drix, you can get us to the coastline, but there’s no telling how far this extends from there. How’s your sense of direction once we reach land?”

Drix looked into the mists. “Good enough. It’s not just a matter of direction. If you spend enough time in the mists, you can recognize the voices. It’s sort of like wind, but it’s emotional. You learn to follow your feelings. I could do it with my eyes closed. And closing your eyes isn’t a bad idea, actually. You might want to do that.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Thorn said. “But you can do it? How long do you think it’s going to take?”

“There’s no way to know, really,” Drix said. “An hour. A day. Two at the most.”

“We could be walking in that soup for two days?”

“Perhaps,” Drix said. “You won’t really notice if we do. You’re going to have other things on your mind.”

“Which is why we need to be prepared.” Reaching into the supply pack, Thorn pulled out an assortment of gear. She tossed a harness at Cadrel, an array of straps and hooks. “Put this on. I’m going to link us together. We don’t want to get separated in this muck.” She ran a length of rope through connecting loops and produced other pieces of equipment. “You’ve got the troll rod if you get hungry. The cold-fire flare will help in the dark—”
Drix shook his head. “No lantern will help in there. You’ve only got one source of light that matters—hope.”

Thorn stared at him, but he seemed to be completely serious. “I’m going to ignore that,” she said. “But even if it’s true, we may need the light on the other side. Careful with the Irian tears; only take a sip if you’re feeling completely overwhelmed or exhausted.”

“‘Irian tears,’ Cadrel said, running a finger along the fluid-bearing pouch at the top of the harness. “Marvelous. The light of the Sovereigns, distilled into wine.”

“Let’s hope Olladra has greater gifts for us than wine,” Thorn said. She took her seat and hefted her oar. “Ready?”

Drix nodded.

Cadrel shrugged. “I suppose I am.”

The prow of the boat disappeared into the mists. Then it was all around them.

The first thing she noticed was the silence. The mist absorbed all sound. She could feel her oar strike the water, but she couldn’t hear the splash. The rich scent of blood surged into her nostrils, and for a moment she could see through the fog, see the ocean of blood around her, stripped bones bobbing on the surface like driftwood. Then the vision faded, and she was back in the cold, damp gloom.

It was one thing to hear the effect described, another to actually be caught within the isolating gloom. “Cadrel?” she said. “Drix?”

There was no response. We’re moving forward, so they must both still be there, Thorn thought. If Cadrel stopped rowing, we’d be going in circles.

Just to be sure, she reached out to where Cadrel had been. She felt the pressure of his body against her hand. Still there. Nonetheless, there was a disturbing numbness to the sensation, a slight chill in her nerves with no sense of the warmth in the old man’s body. Another vision flashed through her mind, of the mist clearing to reveal the rotting corpses sharing the boat with her, Drix’s dead eyes staring straight ahead.

Just keep rowing, she thought.

With no sight and no sound, there was no way to know how close they were to the shore and only the vaguest sense that they were moving forward at all. At times the mist clung to her skin; it was more like thick cobweb than fog, and she could feel it tugging at her arms, trying to reach beneath her gloves and caress her skin. She clenched her teeth together and kept rowing, and the sensation passed.

It might have been hours. It might have been minutes. The hardest thing was holding on to hope. She told herself that every stroke was bringing her closer to shore, but she couldn’t really believe it. More and more, she found herself thinking that she’d never see the light again, that they’d never find their way out, that she’d be rowing until the oar rotted away and she was left alone to drift in the mist.

Was it beginning to fade? She could see Cadrel next to her, his silhouette becoming clearer with each moment. Or was it Cadrel? The shadow seemed too lean, a younger man, lacking Cadrel’s beard. Then he spoke.

“So you still don’t remember. You still think you’re Thorn.”

It took all of her will to hold to her oar, to continue rowing. She knew she was imagining it. But she remembered that voice and those words.

Drego Sarhain.

When she’d met him, he was serving as an agent of Thrane. In time, she’d discovered his true nature. He was a demon of deception, an ancient fiend engaged in a shadowy war she still knew nothing about. And in their last meeting, he’d claimed to know things about her she still didn’t want to believe.

“You’re Sarmondelaryx. The Angel of Flame. The Devourer of Souls. Condemned by the Conclave of Argonnessen, yet they need you, if the prophecy is to fall as they wish it. Embrace the dragon within you. Embrace her power. Let us be together and mock dragon and tiger alike.”

“No,” she whispered. She knew the voice was only in her imagination. But in the utter silence and gloom, it was easy to drift into the memory, to have something to hold on to. She remembered that gleam in Drego’s eyes as he looked at her.

“Every time you draw on her power, she grows stronger,” he whispered. “It’s only a matter of time.” She could see him, lying on the ground and looking up at her, her dagger against his throat.

And the boat ran aground. The jolt shook the vision from her mind, and she was back in the utter silence of the mists.

Setting down the oar, Thorn reached out, finding Drix and Cadrel. Fears lingered at the back of her mind as Drix’s hand closed around hers, but she pushed them away. The water was cold and silent, and a moment later, they were on dry land.
Drix took the lead, and Thorn let the rope play out to give him a little room. The ground shifted beneath her feet: sand. Once she had a hand free, she drew Steel.

“I don’t know if you can hear me,” she said. “But I’m thinking Drix had the right idea.”

_I can hear you perfectly_, Steel said. The world around Thorn was silent, but his whisper was still clear in her head. _Are you having difficulty?_

“Thank Onatar for the smith that made you,” Thorn said. After the endless silence, the familiar voice was an anchor. “I can’t hear a damned thing.”

_Fascinating. It must be some sort of mental effect—an illusion of sorts, affecting your ability to perceive your surroundings. Have you been experiencing other delusions?_

“You might say that.” Although she couldn’t hear them, she felt twigs crack beneath her feet, and in her mind’s eye, they were bare ribs, bones picked clean and strewn across the beach. The stone she knocked out of her path felt like a skull. flashes of sorrow and anger flowed through the back of her mind, and she wondered if that was what Drix meant by his emotional winds, if the feelings were literally moving across the landscape.

_Perhaps you can’t see it_, Steel said, _but you are walking across a field of bones. I’m sure that’s not the best thing for your mental state._

While his voice was a comfort, Thorn found it hard to focus on it. Drix was just ahead of her, a shadow in the mists. And once again, that figure began to change. Thorn could see only the silhouette, but she remembered the woman from her dreams. Her own reflection, wrapped in red leather and silk.

“You’ve had your time, Nyrielle.” It was Thorn’s own voice, cold and cruel. “Now it’s my turn.”

For a moment the mists around her shifted. She could see the tunnels deep below Sharn, the chamber where she’d killed the Son of Khyber. She remembered that struggle in her mind as the spirit within her fought to get out …

Then she walked into Drix. He’d stopped moving, kneeling down as if to lace a boot. And still the voices whispered in the back of her mind. Was it truly him? Was he possessed? She couldn’t hear a thing, could barely see him, and she held out her hand just in time to keep Cadrel from walking into her. Yet there was no sign of tension in the shadow, no fear. And for a moment she saw the faintest pulse of light—the stone in his chest. Had he stumbled? She reached out to take his hand, to help him to his feet. He pressed something into her palm, a small disk of metal. She couldn’t see any details through the mist, but it was thicker and larger than a coin. He closed her fingers around it and disappeared into the fog, drawing out the rope again.

“Steel?” She touched the tip of the dagger to the disk, using her thumb to trace a cross on his hilt. It was a signal: _threat analysis._

_The mists themselves are charged with magical energy_, he said. _If the object you are holding has any mystical aura, it’s being hidden._

She closed her eyes. “Just keep talking, Steel,” she whispered. “Tell me what you see.”

And he did: a beach covered with bones, a long passage up the hill. Thorn could feel her enemies all around her. She could feel the shard embedded in her neck as it began to burn against her bone, hot and angry. She ignored it all, just concentrating on Steel’s voice, on the give and tug of the rope, and on the object in her hand. It was slightly warm, a faint echo of Drix’s touch. She could feel engraving on the surface, a hinge. A moment more and she found the latch, and the disk split open. It was a locket. Running her fingers along the edges, she imagined what might be inside. She knew her father had carried an image of her and Nandon into war, though he’d fallen far from the place she found herself. Was it a child? A lover? A parent? She thought of all of the people she wanted to remember, the people whose faces mattered to her, and between those thoughts and the calming voice of Steel, all the despair and the fear faded away.

Then she stepped out of the mists.

The return of her senses was staggering. In the mist every sense had been dulled, but outside she was flooded with sensation: the scuffing of her feet against the ground, the sound of a hinge squeaking as a door swung in the wind, Drix’s voice, the breeze against her skin, the smell of dirt and sweat and rotting wood. She closed her eyes and ground her teeth together, trying to drive it all away. Steel was whispering, Drix was talking, and it was all too much.

“Be quiet!” she roared. She took a deep breath and pushed it away, slowly drawing in each piece, one sensation at a time: Essyn Cadrel, stepping out of the mists behind her, the scent of damp soil, an utter lack of any animal sounds—no birdsong, no scurrying rodents—Drix just ahead of her, wood structures channeling the wind. They were in a town. The faint breeze blew, cool and carrying an all-too-familiar scent.

She opened her eyes and tightened her grip on the rope binding her to Drix and Cadrel. A quick slash with Steel severed the connection. “Both of you. Back. Hide in the mists if you have to.”
“I wouldn’t.” She’d heard that voice only once, but Thorn remembered it clearly. “My soldiers are already in there, waiting for you.”

Cazalan Dal stepped out from the shadows of a shattered building, into the light of a cold-fire streetlamp.

“Welcome to Seaside, my lady. I’m glad you could make it.”

The scar running down his face bent with his smile, and his dark sword took shape in his hand.
Once upon a time, the streets of Seaside had been filled with life and laughter. It had been a resort before the Last War, and even during the war, it was a favored destination for Cyran sailors seeking to forget the terrors of battle. The people of Cyre had always been proud of their unbreakable spirits, their ability to sing and laugh even in the darkest times.

No one was laughing in Seaside that day.

Thorn had heard of places in the Mournland where the dead wouldn’t rot, where you could find soldiers whose bodies were perfectly preserved, still bearing the wounds from a battle fought five years past. Not so in Seaside. They’d crushed bones on the beach, but there were no bones to be seen in the city, only clothes. A dress was spread across the cobblestones in front of Thorn, its bright blue and yellow pattern muted in the dim light. A colorful parasol lay a few feet away, the handle wedged between two stones. Even as she was evaluating the threat, Thorn realized that there were clothes spread all around the street, gowns, uniforms, even the gleaming mound of an abandoned chain mail shirt. There were boots and gloves. It was as though the people had vanished completely, leaving only their clothes behind.

Cazalan Dal stood in the center of the empty street. A silk scarf was caught beneath his boot, crimson folds fluttering in the faint breeze. The soldier was dressed in the same black uniform he’d worn in Wroat. He held his dark sword in his right hand, and a wand in the left, leveled at Thorn and her companions.

“Well, this is a surprise,” Thorn said, keeping her tone light. It wasn’t entirely. Ever since Zane had told her that the bodies hadn’t been recovered in Wroat, she’d had an uneasy feeling about the Covenant of the Gray Mist. Right then she needed to keep him talking. She traced a cross on Steel’s hilt as she spoke. “Are you saying that you tracked us through the mists?”

“You talk a good game; I’ll give you that,” she said. “But surely you don’t expect us to fall for ‘I’ve got friends hiding in the mists.’ What’s next? A dragon behind the building?”

“No dragon. And I didn’t say they were my friends. But they are here, nonetheless.” He raised his sword, and two arrows emerged from the mists and whistled down the street to either side of him. “Only a few can see so well as to shoot in the mists, but I assure you, they aren’t alone.”

He’s using the same equipment as before, Steel reported. Shifting blade. Shiftweave clothing. Evocation in the wand and charged for use—the blast of fire, unless I miss my guess. I don’t know about his friends in the mists; I still can’t penetrate it. Beyond that, there’s something about him I can’t put my point on. A faint aura that surrounds him and infused him, not unlike that of the mists themselves.

The wand’s the problem, Thorn thought. If it was the same as the one he’d carried in Wroat, a single blast could engulf all three of them. And while fire might not hurt her, she didn’t have any sort of special immunity to arrows in the back of the head.

“Covenant Dal.” Essyn Cadrel hadn’t spoken since they entered the mists. He took a step forward, a slight smile on his face. If the passage through the mists had left him on edge, he didn’t show it; he seemed perfectly at ease. If anything, his voice was stern, almost reprimanding. “You swore an oath to our king, soldier. You swore to lay down your life for our nation. Explain to me what could bring you to break that vow. What could possess you to threaten the last heir to Mishann’s throne?”

“I swore an oath to our nation,” Dal said. Thorn’s eyes were fixed on the wand, but Dal’s attention never wavered. “And I spent my years here. This is our nation. Look at it! I have seen it. It’s touched my heart. I know our
land better than you, old man. And I will give our people what they need.”

“And what is that?” Thorn said. She shifted her grip on Steel, watching and waiting.

“I’m afraid you’ll never know,” Dal said. “This ends—”

Thorn was still holding the locket Drix had given her. She threw it straight up in the air. The motion was all that mattered. For an instant Cazalan Dal followed it with his eyes, and the point of his wand wavered slightly, drifting up and out of line—exactly where Thorn needed it to be. She threw Steel, his blackened blade nearly invisible in the shadows. It was a perfect throw, striking the wand directly. The impact knocked the wand from Dal’s hand, catching it in Steel’s quillons, and drawing it back as the blade flew back to her hand.

Thorn wasn’t waiting for the blade to return. She was already charging forward. “Go!” she cried, pointing at the storefront to her right. She didn’t have time to see if Cadrel and Drix understood. She caught Steel and threw herself fully into Cazalan Dal, summoning every ounce of strength she could find. The soldier staggered backward, trying to bring his weapon to bear, but Thorn was too close; he couldn’t get the angle. She kept the pressure up, pushing him back through the half-open door of the darkened shop. He tripped and fell over, striking the floor hard. Thorn dropped down and pressed her arm against his throat, silencing any cries. She studied his face as she whispered the words of a spell, feeling the familiar tingle spread across her skin as she stole his appearance. It lasted for only a few minutes, not long enough for deep infiltration, but it was the perfect thing to distract him.

It took only a moment. Thorn smashed Steel’s pommel into the man’s temple, ending his struggles. “Hold him,” she told Drix and Cadrel. Then she snatched the wand from the floor and leaped out the door.

Thorn had mastered only a few spells during her arcane training at the Citadel, but those tricks had saved her life on many occasions. Equally important, she’d learned how to activate the most common magical tools and weapons, such as the standard-issue offensive wand.

The first soldier was emerging from the mists when she unleashed the fireball. Thorn saw only his blade and his arm, more than enough to target the spell. She let her anger flow into the wand, envisioning the energy as a flame spilling out of her, expanding into white heat as it burst through the wand. The result was spectacular. A bolt of flame leaped from the rod, striking the soldier in the chest, and he disappeared from view as the bolt exploded outward in a mighty sheet of flame. If the man screamed, the sound was swallowed by the mists; when the flames died down later, he was nowhere to be seen.

It was too much to hope that the blast had caught all of the soldiers, and sure enough, two more emerged a moment later. An archer and a swordsman, both wielding weapons formed of solid shadow, scanned the street for any signs of the enemy.

“Quickly! Form on me!” Thorn called. The two ran up to her.

“What happened?” the swordsman said. He was bald, his head covered with sores and boils, and his eyes were as gray as Dal’s. “Where did they go?”

No one else had emerged from the mist. Let’s hope this is all of them, she thought. She pointed the wand at the ground and activated it again.

The world disappeared in flame. The light was blinding, but it lasted only an instant. When her vision cleared, she found herself standing at the center of a circle of scorched stone. The soldiers were on the ground around her, twisted and still. Once again, she was untouched, she’d barely even felt the heat. Turning away, she ran back into the shop.

Drix took a step back when she walked into the store, and she let the glamour fall.

“Wake him up,” she said. “We need to find out where their camp is, how many more there are. Sovereigns and Six, were they expecting us?”

“I’m afraid you won’t get those answers from Cazalan Dal.” Cadrel was kneeling next to the fallen soldier. “He’s dead.”

“Impossible,” Thorn said. “I didn’t hit him that hard.”

Cadrel looked up at her, a strange expression on his face. “Perhaps you don’t know your own strength. You fractured his skull with that final blow.”

She noticed the blood spreading across the floor. In the heat of the moment, she hadn’t even noticed the surge of draconic strength, for all that she’d banked on her immunity to fire to save her life when she set off the wand. “There’s no time to waste. Cadrel, search the body. Drix, do you know where we are?”

“Yes,” he said. “The Street of Crowns. We need to get to the eastern gate.”

“Then lead the way. Quicker is better.”

“Nothing,” Cadrel reported, standing up. “Nothing at all. No coins in his pouch. No traveling papers. Nothing
“Strange,” Thorn said. “It probably means they have a base nearby … and that means we’d better leave before they come looking.”

Drix had already stepped outside. When Thorn and Cadrel followed, they found him rummaging around on the ground. Standing up, he turned and tossed something to Thorn, a tarnished, silver disk that glittered in the light of the ever-burning torch. It was the battered locket, the chain snapped off, the rim of the lid bent and jammed. If there had ever been a picture inside, it had been burned away.

“You never know when it might be needed again,” he said. Then he started jogging down the street. “Come on, then!”

“There’s something strange about that boy,” Cadrel said.

“I can’t argue that,” Thorn said. “But I just might like it.”

She ran after him, Cadrel close on her heels.
They’re your people,” Thorn said. “Surely you’ve got some idea. They were waiting for us.”

It was difficult to keep track of time. The sky was hidden by the glowing, gray mist; it might have been midnight, but it might have been noon. They’d run for as long as they could stand it, trying to get away from the empty city and to escape possible pursuit. The land around them was withered and gray. They followed the old trade road, which proved to be a gloomy path. Seaside was a port town, and most of the traffic came by sea. But there had been travelers on the northern road on the Day of Mourning. The first caravan had been devoid of all signs of life, just like Seaside itself. Horses’ harnesses stood empty, coachmens’ uniforms caught in the seats or on withered branches. The second was perfectly preserved with no signs of cause of death or even fear on the faces of the travelers. Their eyes were still open, and they looked as if they’d be warm to the touch. They were simply frozen, caught halfway on a journey they’d never complete.

“They aren’t my people,” Cadrel said. “They might have been once, but now they are creatures of the Mournland. Who can explain the madness this place might bring?”

“I can see how spending too much time here might drive you mad,” Thorn said, glancing at Drix. The tinker was whistling cheerfully, ignoring the conversation. “But that doesn’t explain the breacher. Or how Dal survived the first attack. Or how he got to Seaside before us. You anticipated the attack on the prince. So you must have known something.”

“It’s possible he’s telling the truth,” Steel whispered. But it seems unlikely. He’s supposed to be Oargev’s eyes and ears.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Thorn said, addressing Steel and Cadrel at the same time. “When was the last time you had a report from the Covenant?”

“To be honest—”

“Are you sure this is the right time for that?” Thorn said.

Cadrel sighed. “My dear, we may be allies this month, but we both know that there can only be one king of Galifar, and if you’re being honest with yourself, you know who that should be. You serve your king. I serve mine.”

“Does there really have to be a king of Galifar?” Drix yelled back.

“Yes,” Thorn told him. “We fought a war about it. Perhaps you remember.”

“Oh. That’s what we were fighting about? Are you sure?”

Thorn sighed. “Master Cadrel, I believe you were about to be honest with me, which would be a refreshing change. When was the last time you had a report from the Covenant?”

“They never reported to me,” Cadrel said. “The Covenant was handpicked by the prince and reported to him directly. I remember when Cazalan Dal was chosen, and I remember seeing him at New Cyre once or twice. But they always found their way to the prince without me; I heard their news from him.”

“Why would they avoid you?”

“I don’t think they were avoiding me as such,” Cadrel said. “You saw the situation in New Cyre. Today I may be Oargev’s closest confidant. But he’s had quite a few favorites over the years, some more trustworthy than others. I think the agents of the Covenant consider themselves to be the direct servants of the Cyran crown and consider any intermediary to be beneath their notice.”

“Servants who now see fit to destroy that crown.”

“Which brings us back to madness.”
“I think it’s going to rain,” Drix called back. A faint roll of thunder followed his words.

“They’re well organized for madmen,” Thorn told Cadrel. “And I’d like to find out how they knew we’d make landfall at Seaside when we never planned on it. I hope you’re being honest with me, Cadrel.”

Cadrel spread his hands. “I am as transparent as glass, my dear.”

“Perhaps you weren’t listening,” Drix said again. “Rain.”

Something in his tone gave Thorn pause. “You’re wearing a cloak, Drix.”

“Yes, but it’s—oh. You don’t know.”

Cadrel heard the fear. “What is it, lad?”

“The rain … it’s dangerous.”

“I don’t understand,” Cadrel said. “It burns? How bad is it?”

“You know in Seaside? The way the clothes were left behind, but no bodies?”

“What about it?” Thorn was afraid she already knew the answer.

“That’s because it rained. The cloak will be fine. But if it gets too wet, well …”

Dolurrh. Literally. “We need shelter. How much time do we have?”

Drix looked at the sky. All Thorn could see was the swirling, gray mist; she had no idea how he was predicting the weather. Perhaps it was just something he felt, like the emotional currents in the mist itself. “Three minutes. Maybe four.”

There was no time for a clever response and no shelter to be found. The ground around them was gray and barren; perhaps the deadly rain wiped out all life. Whatever the truth, there wasn’t so much as a tree trunk to be seen.

“You’ve been here before,” Thorn said. “You survived it then. What did you do the last time?”

“I climbed in a hole,” Drix said.

“We don’t have time to dig now.”

“I know,” Drix said. “And I’m not sure it’s big enough for all of us.”

The thunder came again, louder. Cadrel looked up at the sky. “Perhaps we could make a sort of tent of our cloaks …”

“Ask him about the hole,” Steel said. “Quickly. Ask him how big it is.”

Brilliant, Thorn thought. But she repeated the question.

“We might all fit,” Drix said. “I just don’t know about the air. We’d have to leave it open a bit. More than I’d like. It might drip in, and that’s no good.”

“What do you mean?” Thorn said. The thunder rolled again. There was no time for guessing games.

“Just … show us the hole!”

Drix laid his cloak down across the ground. He stuck a few stakes into the hem, securing it against the ground.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Cadrel said. “But if this … rain … soaks through the cloth, it will kill us, yes?”

“I don’t know if it kills,” Drix said. “But we’d certainly go away. That’s why I’ve got the hole.” Reaching into one of his many pouches, he took out a piece of soft, black cloth. He unfolded it, spreading it out across the ground.

Wonderful, Thorn thought. He is mad. If we’re lucky, that means he’s wrong about the rain too.

Drix continued to spread the black cloth across the soil. It was a broad circle, about three feet across. He looked up and smiled. “Do you want to go first, Thorn?”

“Go wh—?” The question died in her throat. Drix’s hand was resting on the black circle—no, in the black circle. As if it were resting on the rim of a giant hole.

“It’s an extradimensional pocket,” Steel said. Like your gloves and your pouch, but with a far larger opening. It’s an amazing design; I’ve never seen one that could be folded that way.

“It was a gift,” Drix said. “But you’d better get in quickly. We’re running out of time.”

Thorn slid beneath the makeshift tarp and pushed her foot into the portable hole. There was nothing there, just open space. She could feel a change in the temperature; it was pleasantly warm in the hole. Gingerly she dropped down along the edge. The space inside was wider than the mouth. She stood in a small, spherical chamber, perhaps six feet across.

A moment later, Essyn Cadrel dropped down after her. “Remarkable,” he said.

Drix followed. Reaching up, he grasped the edges of the hole, and to Thorn’s surprise, he pulled them together.

He’s folding the cloth, she realized. I wonder what happens if someone else picks it up?

“I can’t close it,” he said. “There’s not enough air for all of us. We’ll have to leave it open. Just try to stay away from the water.”
The thunder came again, and they heard the rain, rattling down against Drix’s cloak. It sounded more like hail than rain, heavy drops pounding against the cloak like staccato drumbeats. Cadrel murmured a word, and a globe of cold fire appeared in his hand, filling the tiny chamber with light. Thorn could see more details. They were standing on a red blanket of soft wool with an image of a warforged warrior stitched into the surface. The walls were covered with sketches, sheets of paper pasted against the dark surface; most of them appeared to be designs for small crossbows. It seemed that Drix had been working on the crossbow problem for some time. Tools were scattered underfoot, along with winches, stocks, and other pieces of half-built weaponry.

The first drop of water soaked through the cloak and fell to the floor. It looked harmless enough, but the memory of those empty streets and the abandoned caravan was enough to keep Thorn from putting Drix’s warning to the test.

“How long will this go on?” Cadrel said. A drop of water landed on his sleeve, and he hissed in pain.

“I don’t know,” Drix said. “It’s rain. It might only last for a minute; it might last for hours. Or days. I never had to leave the hole open before. It never really mattered.”

“The opening’s too big,” Thorn said. The water dripped in more steadily, a pool beginning to form on the ground.

“If air is the problem, we need to make the hole narrower, to make a tube.” She picked up a few long crossbow bolts. Drix saw what she was doing; rooting around, he produced a sheet of leather and some twine.

“Let me do it.” He quickly wrapped the quarrels in the leather and lashed them together. He worked two additional bolts through the bunch horizontally, creating a base to hold it up. There was only one problem.

“There’s too much water coming down,” Thorn said. The cloak was soaked, and it was flowing more freely.

“There’s no way for you to close the opening without getting wet.”

Drix said nothing, just took a step forward. Thorn caught his shoulder.

“You’re the reason we’re here. You’re the only one who knows where we’re going. And if not for you, we’d all be dead right now. We need you.”

He smiled at her gently and brushed her hand away. “Don’t worry about me.”

He took a step forward and pushed the makeshift tube up through the opening. Water flowed down his arm, and he cried out in pain. But he kept moving. He reached up, pulling at the edge of the hole, drawing it more tightly around the quarrels. His sleeve was soaked, and Thorn could see the flesh and muscle shriveling, wasting away as the damp cloth pressed against it. It should have taken only seconds to dissolve his arm and surely kill him.

But it didn’t.

She could see the damage. A drop of water then another fell onto his face, and as they slid down his cheeks, they dug ugly furrows, flesh and blood seeming to evaporate at the touch, tearing holes though his cheeks until she could see tooth and gum. Yet as quickly as the flesh dissolved, it reformed. The ugly gashes knit themselves together without leaving even a scar. It was clear that the experience was terribly painful; Drix was moaning quietly, trembling as he worked with the cloth. But he was alive.

*It’s the stone*, Thorn realized. Just as it had healed the cut from Oargev’s dagger, it was protecting him from the painful rain. It was amazing but it was clear that he was in agony. At last he finished wrapping the tube and collapsed to the floor. The flow of water had almost completely stopped.

Thorn knelt down beside him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You did it,” she whispered.

He moaned slightly and laid his head against her shoulder. He was still trembling. Cadrel’s globe of cold fire faded, and Thorn could see that the stone in Drix’s chest was glowing slightly, an orb of light beneath his shirt.

“Amazing,” Cadrel whispered.

Drix moaned again. Outside, the thunder roared and the rain kept pouring down.
CHAPTER NINE

* * *

The Mournland
Barrakas 24, 999 YK

Hours passed. The rain slowed but never enough to let them leave. Drix silently fiddled with the pieces of his little crossbow. His wounds were completely healed, but he was still shivering and didn’t want to talk.

“Would you like to hear a story?” Cadrel said.

“Hmm?” Thorn said, turning her drifting attention back to the bard.

“A story,” he said. “It’s what I used to do, you know. I’ve just remembered one that you might find interesting. And I’d be quite interested to hear your thoughts on it, Marudrix.”

The tinker looked up. “I’d love a story. Can you put a crossbow in it?”

“This isn’t one of my own,” Cadrel said. “No, this is an old tale, older than Galifar itself. A story of the elves. And I wonder if it might have something to do with the people we’re going to see.”

“Let’s hear it,” said Thorn.

Cadrel took a deep breath. When he spoke, his voice was low and resonant, filling the hole. “Have you ever wondered why elves don’t sleep?

“When the world was young and Eberron still spoke to her children, the land belonged to the giants, and the worst of all the giants was the Titan King Cul’sir. His heart was filled with greed. There was no treasure he did not covet, and his power was great. The smaller creatures hid in fear of mighty Cul’sir. The goblins cowered in the deepest caverns. The dwarves climbed the highest mountains. The gnomes hid in the darkest woods. There was only one race that had no fear of the giants: the elder elves, oldest of the old.”

“I’m guessing elves wrote this story?” Thorn said.

Cadrel gave her a reproachful look and continued.

“The elder elves had no fear, for they had been granted gifts by the Sovereigns and dominion over many things. Summer. Winter. Joy. Dreams. No one giant—not even the Titan King—could match this power. This arrogance was their undoing, for their treasures merely drew the eyes of the greedy Cul’sir. Alone, he could never have challenged an elven citadel. But he assembled the first army of giants, and he brought it to the City of Song and Silence. Had they been silent and hidden, he might have passed by unknowing. Instead, their voices were raised in joyous sound, and so the giants found them, butchered them, and enslaved those few that they spared, stripping them of their magic and mixing their blood with mud. Six elven cities remained, and the lords of the six cities gathered around a silver tree—”

“They probably gathered in the tree,” Drix said. He’d set down the crossbow and was listening intently.

“I told you, Drix. It’s not my story.”

“Oh, I know. But I’ve been there. If there was only six of them, I think they’d go inside.”

Thorn opened her mouth to question that, but then she remembered his words at the Citadel. All her attention had been focused on Boranel and Oargev and on keeping the prince of Cyre from killing the tinker. She hadn’t even thought about the name of the city or how it might relate to the image that had been haunting her dreams. “Does it have golden leaves?”

“Not so much anymore. It used to. Why?”

Cadrel cleared his throat. “I understand that these are unusual circumstances, but in Cyre it’s considered rude to interrupt. And as we are in Cyre at the moment …”

“Sorry,” Drix said. “I really would like to hear the rest of the story.”

Cadrel looked at Thorn and she nodded.

“Very well. The lords of the six cities gathered around—or possibly in—a silver tree. Their combined might was a thing to inspire legends. The Prince of Winter held a sword that could freeze the blood of an army with a single
stroke. The Lord of Joy wore a jewel so lovely it could cause the hearts of his foes to burst with joy. But greatest among them was Shan Doresh, the Lord of Dreams. His was the power to draw out the heart’s desire and make it real for a time. But these dreams would not last, and he could not restore those slain in the City of Song and Silence. He urged the others to join together in an army, certain that together they could defeat the Titan King and free those they had taken as slaves. But the others were afraid to fight. And when the battle came, the Lord of Dreams and his subjects found themselves alone.

“The Titan fought elf for a full twelve days and twelve nights, with the dark magic of the giants matched against Shan Doresh and the hopes he inspired in his people. Cul’sir knew he could not defeat the Lord of Dreams alone, and so he bargained with the Shadow and received a fearful boon. When Doresh next drew on his gifts, he and his people were pulled fully into the realm of dreams, and they were never seen again. The lords of the elder elves were so ashamed and so terrified that they fled into the deepest shadows of the world, finally falling through the cracks in those places into the realm of Thelanis. And this is why the elves don’t sleep today; they are too ashamed to face Shan Doresh and acknowledge their cowardice.”

“Isn’t that a bit of a stretch?” Thorn said, settling her hand against Steel’s hilt.

“It may be,” Cadrel replied. “But you saw those images at the Citadel—how much they looked like elves! Combine that with this level of magical sophistication we’re seeing. Where have these eladrin been all this time? Hiding on another plane is the only answer than makes sense. And planar studies have shown time and again that Thelanis is our closest planar counterpart. Shifting across that barrier in response to a disaster, hiding there, either coming across occasionally or having our people stumble through the wall and finding them—it’s quite a story but not an impossible one.”

“I suppose not,” Thorn said. “Does it matter to us?”

“Perhaps it doesn’t,” Cadrel replied. “But it’s the chance to learn the truth behind one of the oldest stories I know; I hope you’ll understand if I’m somewhat excited.”

“Of course,” Thorn said. “And thank you for the story. But now … it sounds to me like the rain’s stopped. So if we’re going to get to the bottom of this story—or any other—I suggest we climb out of this hole and get on with our journey.”

* * * * *

Time passed, though the dull gray sky and the effects of the Irian tears made it difficult to say just how long. Thorn felt as if she’d been walking for a week, but rationally she knew it couldn’t have been more than a day. She was still troubled by the memory of Drix’s wounds melting away. Zane’s words echoed in the back of her mind. *Imagine an army of soldiers possessing such power.* And Cadrel’s casual comment, *We may be allies this month, but we both know that there can only be one king of Galifar.*

“Almost there,” Drix said. “There’s the forest up ahead.”

Thorn had heard that the southern forests of Cyre were one of the most beautiful places on Khorvaire—lush and temperate, filled with color and wildlife. What stood before them was a pale shadow. The trees were the first actual living vegetation Thorn had seen since they’d entered the Mournland, but they were just barely alive. Only a few of the trees had any leaves, and there were no sounds of wildlife, not even insects in the air. Thorn saw motion out of the corner of her eye, and she thought it was a snake winding its way up the trunk of a tree. Closer inspection revealed a more disturbing truth. It was a long vine, tipped with an ugly barb.

“Roots, unless I miss my guess,” Cadrel said. “There’s no sustenance from the sun, and who knows if there’s any rain to be had here … or if there is, if the trees can benefit from it. I imagine it seeks sustenance from other sources.”

“A new voice rang out through the woods, strong and confident. “You have good eyes, mortal man. Perhaps I’ll let you keep one of them.”

Thorn cursed and traced a cross on Steel’s hilt. “Back to back, all of you.” She could see shadows all around them. How could she have missed them before? Had they been truly invisible, or were they simply that good at the arts of stealth? She reached into her pouch, calling for the fireball wand she’d taken from Cazalan Dal, and her fingers closed on empty air. The wand wasn’t in her pack anymore.

“Don’t!” Drix shouted. “Don’t hurt them. These are my friends.”

Thorn wasn’t sure who he was trying to protect. “We mean you no harm,” she called.

“Your intentions matter little to me,” the voice said. The speaker stepped out from behind the trunk of a dying tree. He was lean and graceful, clad in a tunic made from overlapping crimson leaves. His face was hidden behind the visor of his helm, which was carved from darkwood and bore the curling horns of a woodland tribex. He held a long spear in one hand, both head and shaft made from a single piece of polished darkwood. “We are guardians of this path. This one has been here before, and we will not bar his way. But you, leave now and leave in peace, or stay
and become our prey.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time you struck an innocent, from what I’ve heard,” Thorn said. She heard a rustling around her, the murmured voices of the other guardians. “And I assure you, I won’t fall alone.” Behind her, she heard Essyn Cadrel draw his blade.

“Stop!” Drix stepped in front of her. “We’ve been called. We’re here to save the tree.”

The guardian lowered his spear, leveling it at Thorn. “We knew you would return, Marudrix the Maimed. But you were never to show others the way.”

“Other,” Drix said. He turned to Thorn. “Show them.”

It took a moment for Thorn to realize what he was talking about. A stone wrapped in thorn. She turned her neck and pulled back her head. “This better be enough,” she said. “I’m not showing the other one.”

There was another torrent of whispers, voices murmuring in the shadows. Thorn couldn’t quite hear the words, but the sounds were all she needed. In Droaam, she’d been able to spot an invisible sorcerer by the sounds he made and the changes in the pressure in the air. Drawing on those senses was much like opening her eyes; the challenge was to trust her instincts, to let her subconscious paint a picture. If she tried to fight it, to control it, the flood of information was overwhelming. She just listened and let those whispering voices tell her about her hidden foes.

Once she was truly listening, she could hear far more than just voices. She could hear a boot shift against soft soil, the sound of a gloved hand changing its grip on a spear, a bowstring held taut. She could even smell them, faint scents of leather and sweat: six of them, using the trees for cover, two archers.

The whispers revealed the presence of the hidden foes, but Thorn’s eyes were locked on the knight in the horned helm. He was surprised to see the stone in her neck. It took him a moment to recognize it for what it was. “Taeli sha,” he whispered, an Elven phrase Thorn had heard often in her childhood in Wroat … This cannot be! He took a step forward, and for a moment, he loosened his grip on his spear.

That instant was all that Thorn needed. She threw herself forward, racing across the clearing. She closed the distance in three steps, grabbing the shaft of his spear with one hand and pulling hard as she planted a quick kick squarely in his chest. The warrior staggered back, gasping for air and releasing the spear. Thorn wasn’t finished. She could feel the archers stepping out from behind their tree cover. Dropping the spear, she vaulted forward, flipping over the shocked soldier and landing directly behind him. Not a moment too soon, as an arrow intended for her slammed into the shoulder of the fey knight. Spinning around, Thorn wrapped one arm around the warrior’s neck. She summoned Steel into her free hand, setting the point against the throat of the eladrin soldier. She knew where the archers were and kept the body of the knight between them.

“Why don’t you show yourselves and lay down your weapons,” she called out as Cadrel and Drix gaped at her. “And perhaps we can sort this out peacefully.”

What happened next was too quick for the mind to follow. One moment she was holding the knight by the throat. Then her arms were empty. And there were four spear points leveled at her chest—four grim eladrin in redleaf armor and darkwood helms surrounding her. The two archers were also in the clearing, both covering Essyn Cadrel. Nothing could move so quickly; they’d teleported, crossing space in the blink of an eye. Thorn could see the tension in the spearmen. They were ready to strike the moment she moved, and they were surrounding her on all sides.

“So perhaps you won’t be laying the weapons down,” Thorn said. She slowly raised her hands. “I’m sure we can still sort this out peacefully. What do you think?”

The last words were directed to Steel more than to the eladrin. She hadn’t expected the balance of power to shift quite so quickly, but it was what she was there for—to learn as much as she could about the threat posed by the feyspire.

_Their gear is on par with Cannith third-tier enchantments—the leaves are stronger than steel scales_, Steel reported quickly. _More important—there’s an extraplanar resonance clinging to the ones that jumped. I won’t try to explain, but they won’t be able to repeat that trick for some time._

The fey warriors were waiting for a signal from their commander. Thorn could feel the knight in the horned helm standing behind her, smell the blood flowing from his wounded shoulder. She remained still as he brushed her hair aside, studying the shard embedded in her spine.

“You have spirit, young one,” he said. “But spirit alone is not enough to earn you a welcome in the City of the Silver Tree. And this stone does not belong with you; we shall take it from your bones.”

“Don’t do this, Casoran.” Drix had been silent, but he took a step forward. “She’s innocent. As I was.”

“Be silent and still, Marudrix. You do not command my blade.”

“No, you serve the Silver Lady. And it was she who told me to return when I had found the stone wrapped in Thorn. Would you defy her?”
The eladrin took a step back, letting Thorn’s hair fall down to cover the stone. “I am the guardian of this path. Do not presume to tell me what to do.”

For a moment, the eyes of the eladrin were on Drix, and that moment was all Thorn needed. She could channel only a limited amount of mystical energy at a time, and she knew only a few tricks, but those spells had proven invaluable in the past. She could alter her appearance with an illusionary guise. She could hide all trace of her passage. She could leap great distances or scale sheer walls with the ease of a spider.

And she could turn invisible.

It was a difficult spell, requiring constant concentration, and the cloak was shattered if she took any sort of hostile action. But when she was surrounded by enemies, it was the perfect thing. She’d woven the arcane patterns in her mind as Drix argued with the horned knight, and when she released it, she vanished from sight.

The eladrin surrounding her thrust their spears forward, but they met empty air. Thorn had dropped to the ground the instant the concealing magics took hold. She rolled backward, out from the center of the ring. She was on her feet again before the fey had time to react, and once again she had her arm around Casoran’s neck and Steel’s tip at his throat. She prayed that Steel had been telling the truth when he’d said they couldn’t teleport again.

“Now where were we?” she said as the mystical cloak faded away.

“A stalemate at best.” It was one of the archers. His bow was still trained on Essyn Cadrel. “You may slay our commander, but your companion will fall. And should you kill your hostage, you will be the next to die.”

“That’s right. And maybe I’ll take two or three more of you with me. What good does that do any of us?” Taking a deep breath, she released the knight and took a step back. “We didn’t come to fight. We came here to protect Drix. He tells me your queen wishes to speak with me. And if you really do have a silver tree in your city … tell me, does it have leaves of gold? And is the bark beginning to crack? Because if it is, I’ve been dreaming about it for weeks now, and I really think I need to see your queen as quickly as possible.”

The archers had trained their bows on her, and the spearmen were ready to charge. But the knight in the horned helm held up a hand, and they took a step back. He turned to face her, blood still dripping down his leafy armor where the arrow was lodged in his shoulder. “I was right, halfblood. You do have spirit. And if you’ve heard the call of the Tree, then it is not my place to strip the stone from you. Let us go to the spire.”

“All of us,” Thorn said, pointing to Cadrel. “If your queen wants to meet me, she can meet my friend as well.”

“As you wish,” the knight said. He reached up and yanked the arrow from his shoulder, flinging it to the ground. He didn’t flinch or cry out, though blood flowed from the ugly wound. He pressed his hand over the gash, and when he pulled it away, the only trace of the injury was the blood drying on his armor. “Follow me, then. The Silver Tree awaits.”
Bless Arawai and her wonders,” Cadrel breathed as the city came into view.

Thorn could only agree. She’d seen it in her dreams, yet she’d failed to grasp its wonder. Shaelas Tiraeth … in the Elven tongue, it meant Court of the Silver Tree. And so it was—in more ways than one. Thorn remembered the tree in her dreams, the gleaming boughs reaching up toward the sky, and when she’d heard it was tied to the fey city, she’d imagined a vast courtyard open to the sky. The truth was far more spectacular.

The city was the tree.

In her dream, Thorn had seen ivy rising up along the trunk. The ivy was still there, but she could see tiny figures walking along it. There were windows in the great trunk, tiny slivers of light almost hidden within the creases of the metallic bark. This must be what it feels like to be an ant, Thorn thought as she stared up at the majestic tree.

Even as she let the awe wash over her, Thorn could see the rot that was setting in. In her dream, the trunk had been mirror bright, but the silver in front of her was dull and clouded. She could see long cracks running through the bark, and she remembered the shards that had fallen around her in the nightmare. In places, light spilled out as broken walls opened into interior chambers. If there were any golden leaves left on the tree, they were lost in the branches hidden in the mist. The rest of the branches were stripped bare.

“Sir Marusan,” Cadrel said, amazement still heavy in his voice. “It’s the tale of Sir Marusan.”

“I don’t know if we have time for another tale,” Thorn said. They were walking slowly, and the gates of the Tree were still far ahead of them.

“Oh,” he said, “it’s quicker than the last, my dear. The first version was recorded before Galifar was founded. Perhaps you’ve heard of Kessler’s *Lost in the Woods*? Marusan’s tale was the foundation. He was a knight—in most versions of the story, at least. In some he’s a farmer. In others, a prince. Not Harryn Stormblade or the Shield of Making, but a good man. On the day of his wedding, he goes riding in the woods. There he finds a great city that is also a tree, and he’s imprisoned by the cruel elves that live there.”

“They aren’t that cruel,” Drix said. “They’re just skittish, really.”

Thorn glanced at the nearest soldier, but his closed helmet hid his expression. “I’ll take your word for it. So what happened to this Marusan?”

“Apparently it had been some time since these elves had encountered a human. Their greatest wizards were curious to learn more about him. So they starved him and froze him and burned him … never enough to kill, just to see what it would take to bring him to the edge of death.”

“They did this at this Silver Tree? The one we’re going to now?”

“So the story has it,” Cadrel said.

Drix shrugged. “They were kind enough to me. Well, aside from the stabbing.”

“Perhaps the wizards learned all they needed from Marusan,” Cadrel said. “So time and again, they pushed him to the edge of death. But Marusan was a man in love. And that love gave him strength he’d never known he’d possessed. He was determined to survive so he could return to his beloved. And that courage impressed one of the daughters of the king, who freed him from the pit and told him how to find the path to his home. But there at the gate, the faerie king blocks his path. The elf lord is armed for war and orders Marusan to return to the pit. The knight knows that he can never defeat this otherworldly champion. And so he does one of the hardest things he’s ever done. He begs. He drops his sword and falls to his knees. And he tells his story—tells the fearsome king exactly what he left behind, and why he cannot wait any longer. Tears fall from Marusan’s eyes as he speaks of his beloved, and his warm tears melt the heart of the dreadful warlord.”

“Let me guess,” Thorn said. “The king lets him go, Boldrei herself appears to bless the union, and everyone lives happily ever after?”
“That’s how it plays out in Tasker’s play,” Cadrel replied. “The original story is darker. In this tale, Marusan learns that the city of the tree moved between Thelanis and Eberron, and that time passes differently in the faerie court than it does here. In the week that he’s been imprisoned by the elves, a century has passed in the world beyond. His beloved is long dead, having married another.”

“Well,” Thorn said. “I do love a happy ending.”

“What happens next?” Drix said.

Cadrel smiled. “Marusan realizes that he left his heart in the city of the tree, with the woman who helped him escape the grim pit. He tries to go back to the city, but he can’t find it; the forest has swallowed up the trees. He spends the next few years wandering the woods, trying to find the lost path, and when he finally returns to his domain, he finds the elf woman waiting for him. She’d followed him out, leaving her city behind.

“The story ends there. Maybe they were married and ruled a great kingdom. Perhaps it didn’t last.” Cadrel shrugged. “A week ago, I would have told you that it was just a story. That it was a fable about patience. That was before I saw this. A city that is a tree, hidden in what was once one of our greatest forests. It still seems amazing that it could have been here all this time.”

“I don’t think it was,” Drix said. “They were reluctant to talk about it when I was there, but I think the city does move between the planes, that it isn’t always in the woods. And even when it was, it was hidden. Somehow, when they stabbed me, that concealment was wiped away.”

Cadrel looked over at Thorn. “Tell me that doesn’t interest you, my dear. Magic that could hide a thing like that—keep it hidden so well that we know of it only through an all-but-forgotten story.”

“I’m sure it interests you as well … and for the same reason.”

Cadrel smiled. “Ah, Thorn. We live in different worlds, you and I. You serve one of the greatest powers of Khorvaire. Your masters seek to determine the fate of Galifar and Khorvaire. I am only concerned with protecting my people. There are so few of us left. I wish to know the truth that lies behind the Mourning. But it will take more than a cloak of invisibility to bring back fallen Cyre.”

He sounded sincere and for a moment, Thorn wondered if she’d misjudged him. Then she remembered the sorrow in his voice when he’d spoken of the torments Marusan had faced in the dungeons below the city of the tree. He told a good story, but he was a spymaster too. “And your friend Cazalan Dal? Any new thoughts on him?”

Cadrel heaved a great sigh, and for an instant, he seemed to be a much older man. “I still have no idea what those madmen hope to accomplish. It was a mistake for my lord to send our best into such peril and a loss to our nation that they have fallen to madness. There are too many mysteries in this world. At least the answer to one of them lies before us.”

“Let’s hope so,” Thorn said. They’d almost reached the great tree, and she could see a gate down at the very base of the trunk, nestled in the valley formed by two spreading roots. “It’s interesting that the Mourning destroyed all the other trees and left this one alone.”

“We are the ones who felled the trees.” It was the knight in the horned helm, the first time he’d spoken since they’d begun traveling. “You saw what became of them in the grove where we found you. After the blood of our prince and this one soaked the soil, the greenery that survived the tainting grew thirsty. The plants sought our blood, and the region had to be cleansed. The hungry trees you saw are mild compared to the savage roots that besieged us in the first days.”

“What else can you tell me?” she said to the eladrin warrior, tapping Steel’s hilt as she spoke.

“It is not my place to speak to you,” the knight said. “I will let my queen tell you what you need to know.”

Steel was more forthcoming. I have to agree with Cadrel, he told her. It is a wonder. One of the rarest products of Aerenal is what the Aereni call viraletha—livewood. These trees are infused with extraplanar energy, and this sustains them even if the tree is uprooted. I’ve seen a ship with a livewood mast with a dryad living inside it.

Thorn ran a finger along Steel’s blade, lingering on the tip. It was a signal she’d established after one too many long-winded explanations: Get to the point.

This tree is not an artifact. It’s alive. And it doesn’t belong here.

Thorn tapped the hilt of the dagger. Yes?

When the soldiers teleported in your earlier fight, they weren’t teleporting in the same way that heirs of Orien do. After the teleportation effect, each of them was suffused with extraplanar energies. I believe that they slipped out of our world and into Thelanis, returning at a different point in space and time. Something is anchoring them to this plane, though. They can only remain in the Feywild for a split second before being forced back here.

Thorn ran her finger along the point again.
I’m sensing that same energy flowing through the tree. It validates what Drix said … and even Cadrel’s story. It’s not of this world. It’s a piece of Thelanis anchored here.

Thelanis … Thorn knew all about the history of the Five Nations. She knew twenty ways to kill a man during a waltz. She even knew a touch of magic. But metaphysics and planar cosmology weren’t one of the core subjects at the King’s Citadel. Still, every child of Khorvaire knew the basic stories of the outer planes … shadows of the world, realms embodying certain aspects of reality. Dolurrh, the domain of the dead. Shavarath, the heart of war. And Thelanis, the faerie court, a place of magic and mystery. In the stories, the powers of the lords of Thelanis seemed limitless. A faerie king might lay a casual curse on a mortal that would afflict the hapless person’s bloodline for generations to come, or turn dirt to gold with a snap of his fingers.

Or replace a boy’s heart with a crystal shard, Thorn thought.

The energy flowing through the tree is almost overwhelming. But the necrotic energies suffusing the soil are equally powerful—far stronger here than they were within the mists. The Mournland is consuming the energies of the tree, and that’s responsible for the decay that you see.

They walked between the vast roots of the tree, which rose around them like walls sculpted from silver. There were no sentries standing watch at the gate, though Thorn saw archers looking down from the ledges formed by the wide strands of withered ivy. A face was carved into the door. Once it might have been a handsome male elf, but half of the face was worn away, and the other side was starting to crack. With all that they’d seen and all that she’d heard, Thorn wasn’t terribly surprised when the wooden lips moved and a deep voice issued from the gate.

“Two come before me I’ve not seen before. Tell me, Sir Casoran, should I open the door?” It spoke in the Elven tongue with an accent Thorn had never heard before.

The commander took a step forward and answered in Elven. “I bring visitors to see the Lady of the Tree. Open your door. I will stand for their actions.”

A crack ran down the center of the gate, and it slowly swung inward. The knight led them inside.

The hall that lay beyond the door was vast, as grand in its size as the entrance to Brokenblade Castle in Wroat. Yet Brokenblade felt alive. Even when Thorn had visited late at night, the castle was bustling with guards, pages, and emissaries attending to critical business. By contrast, the Silver Tree felt abandoned, a haunted castle whose inhabitants had vanished in a time long past. No one was waiting inside. A few floating globes of light, scattered far apart and flickering and unsteady, created scattered pools of illumination in the gloomy hall. It took only a moment for Thorn to realize that they moved. One drew close and she saw that it was a tiny, winged sprite, glowing with an inner radiance. It shivered, faltering in its flight, and that was when the light faded. It caught itself quickly, and the light returned.

“Guest quarters,” Casoran told the spirit. The creature nodded, darting forward. The knight glanced back at them. “Follow, and for your own safety, stay within the light. And you”—he looked at Thorn—“sheath your blade, lest it be taken from you. It is a dangerous thing, to carry bare steel in our citadel.”

Unfortunate but hardly unexpected, Steel said. I will listen. Study every detail, Lantern.

“Understood,” Thorn told the knight and Steel at once. She sheathed him on her belt instead of hiding him in her glove; from the scabbard, he could at least hear what was going on around them.

“It’s horrible,” Drix told her quietly as they ventured deeper into the hall. “Look at the cracks along the walls! When I was here, the hall was filled with light and music. There were hundreds of sparks in the air, like stars filling the sky. Now … look there.”

Thorn followed his gesture and saw a host of carved wooden sprites, perched in alcoves in the walls.

“They’re dying,” he whispered. “The tree … I think it’s absorbing their energy to survive.”

“Lovely,” Thorn said, keeping her voice low. She stepped over a large crack in the floor, a fissure that ran across the length of the hall. “Could that happen to us?”

“I don’t think so,” Drix whispered. “I think it’s because they’re part of the tree to begin with. Still, probably best to keep to the light.”

The hallway narrowed, branching into multiple paths; their hovering guide led them up a curving passage. The walls were rounded, every surface carved from silvery wood. The hall was filled with light, though Thorn couldn’t see any source of illumination aside from the little sprite; it was as if the air itself was glowing. Only when the air grew warmer did Thorn realize just how cold it had been in the outer hall. They passed doorways with signs and symbols carved into the surface of each portal. Thorn heard faint music and laughter, and she could smell the recent passage of many people, of wine and hot food. A tavern, she thought. The next door was open. She caught a glimpse of an old elf—no, an eladrin; she was beginning to see the differences herself—polishing a bow while another was setting fletching on arrows. Weapons lined the walls around them. It’s a shop … or an armory. It really is a city.
The old bowyer looked up at her as they passed. He wore a wooden mask, carved with elf features, the expression calm and impassive. Something about it troubled her. It was so mundane. Why wear a mask with so little expression if not to conceal something below?

Farther and farther they rose along the trunk of the tree, and they passed more and more people. Most were eladrin, their faces hidden by masks, and most were somber and still, like mourners at a funeral. Then a group of gnomes ran past them, laughing and shouting at one another; they were dressed in clothing of many vivid colors, and their unmasked faces were filled with mirth. It was as surprising as a flash of lightning on a dark night, and over just as quickly.

At last they reached their destination, a suite of rooms at the end of a hallway. A sentry stood in the hall outside, but closer observation revealed that it was another statue, the spear and the hand that held it both formed of smooth darkwood. Were you alive too? Thorn wondered. Are you watching even now, or are you just a warning?

“Stay here until someone comes for you,” Casoran said. His eyes gleamed within his horned helm, points of silver fire. “This is for your safety as much as ours. Until you have the blessing of the lady, the Tree will not accept you, and you would be in grave danger if you walk these halls alone. Rest. You will find food and drink within. Take a moment of ease.” He glanced at Thorn and Cadrel. “If the lady does not approve of your presence, it may be the last chance you have.”

“There’s that famous Mournland hospitality,” Thorn said. She smiled at her companions and held out her arms. “Well, gentlemen, shall we see what the chef has prepared for us?”

“Anything would be better than those thrice-damned troll sticks of yours,” Cadrel said, taking her arm. “Of course, in the tales, it’s often unwise to eat the food of the fey.”

Thorn glanced at Drix as they walked into their quarters. “Well, sir? You’ve been here before. Did they enchant you with their wines and culinary wonders?”

Drix shrugged and ran his hand over his hidden heart. “I don’t know. I haven’t been able to keep food down since they brought me back.”

“Not exactly encouraging,” Thorn said. “But for a good bottle of wine, I think I’ll take my chances. Let’s eat, my friends. Then we can determine watches. I know I could use some sleep, but I want a pair of eyes open at all times.”

“I haven’t slept since they brought me back either,” Drix said.

Thorn looked at him. “You’ve led a strange life, Drix Cannith. But if it means I’ll get a good night’s sleep, I’ll live with it.”

“Always glad to be of service.” He smiled and strangely that made Thorn feel better. They were deep in the Mournland, in an odd and haunted city, surrounded by fey of unknown power and purpose. On the one hand, it was unnerving. One the other, it was what she loved about being a Lantern. Who knew what challenges they would face in the morning?

“Let’s raise a glass of whatever they have, then,” she said. “To surviving the journey. And don’t worry, Drix, I’ll drink for you.”
The giant towered above Thorn, a muscle-bound brute three times her height clad in glittering black chain mail. He swung his maul at her, the massive metal head of the weapon larger than she was, and she leaped out of the way, feeling the wind as it slammed into the ground just behind her. Thorn jabbed at him with her short spear, catching him on the arm before darting away. It was a solid blow, but against a beast of his size, all but futile. He was bleeding from a score of wounds, and yet he fought on, and one blow of his maul was all it would take to shatter her bones. She needed to finish the fight quickly. She stepped through space, catching a fleeting glimpse of the serene woods of Thelanis before returning to the ugly battle.

The jaunt brought her up onto the broad shoulders of the giant. As he turned his head to look at her, Thorn drove her spear into his eye, slamming it into the brain beyond. The soldier bellowed in rage and pain, dropping his weapon and trying to pull the spear free, but all he managed to do with his clumsy efforts was to drive it deeper still. Thorn knew a mortal wound when she gave one, but there was no time to wait for the beast to realize he was dead. Leaping from the shoulders of the stricken giant, she landed on her feet, drawing her sword as she searched the field for the banner of her lord.

Shan Doresh had committed the full force of the Fortress of Dreams to the struggle, but the Cul’sir host was a terrifying foe. All around her, Thorn’s brothers and sisters matched their speed and skill against the might of an army of giants. Steel and darkwood were the least of the weapons being brought to bear.

A giant raised his hand, and lightning lashed down from the sky, scattering Thorn’s kin. In return, one of the dreamshapers called forth a vision of hope—an image of their lord, as tall as a giant himself, wielding a curved sword that glowed like the moon itself. The dream titan charged the storm summoner, and lightning clashed with lunar radiance.

There was no time to watch the battle. Thorn had troubles of her own. She caught sight of the lord’s banner ahead, the half-closed eye held within the horns of the crescent moon, moon and eye shining in the darkness. But the enemy was upon her. The giant was smaller than the warrior Thorn had just brought down, and he wore robes instead of armor. He was a slaver, not a soldier, and was surrounded by a half-dozen thralls, the unfortunates Thorn’s people had come to save or, failing that, avenge. She’d heard that they had been twisted by foul magics, that they weren’t truly eladrin anymore, and looking at them, she could believe it. There was no light in their eyes, just dull whites and dark pupils. They were the eyes of a creature born of Eberron, not an heir to Thelanis. Could that spirit be returned? It was beyond her knowledge, but she didn’t want to kill them if she could avoid it. They had no such compunctions. Whether they were driven by enchantment or merely beaten into submission, they charged her, wielding knives and clubs. She tried to leap through space, but it was too soon; it was difficult to reach Thelanis in that time of shifting. If she could just push past the and, bring down the slaver, perhaps the slaves would be released.

It was a fine thought, but the slave warriors had no intention of letting her through. It was all she could do to stay alive as they slashed and swung at her, harrying her from all sides. She struggled to defend herself, but there were too many. The world went white as a club caught her in the back of the head. There was a flash of pain as a dagger tore the flesh of her arm. Her blade fell from stiff fingers, and she knew the end was near.

Then he was there. Shan Doresh, the lord of the fortress. His silver armor gleamed, the lunar eye at his breast blazing with his fury. He raised his hands, and the slaves dropped their weapons, falling to the ground in deep slumber. The slaver froze, his face a mask of fear.

For a moment she dared to hope. Then a voice thundered across the battlefield, louder than any mortal voice should be. “I TIRE OF THIS GAME, LITTLE ONES. YOU AMUSED ME FOR A TIME, AND THAT TIME IS OVER.”
She felt a strange tingling in her nerves as the voice roared around her, a terrible sense of vertigo. Was the world... was the world fading?

“YOU ARE CREATURES OF TOO MANY WORLDS. BORN IN THE FEYWILD, BROUGHT TO OUR LAND, AND DRAWING ON THE POWER OF DREAMS. TWO WORLDS TOO MANY... AND ONE YOU’VE NEVER TRULY SEEN. LET DREAMS BE YOUR HOME NOW, AND LIKE A DREAM, BE SOON FORGOTTEN.”

Her lord held his hands high, and she could see reality rippling around them. For a moment she hoped that he could counter whatever vile sorcery the Cul’sir emperor had prepared. But the chill was spreading throughout her. It was like shifting through space, but it wasn’t the warm woods of her home that were taking shape around her. Just cold darkness and she was falling into it, falling and falling and falling...

Thorn woke with a start. There were fingers brushing against her neck, a gentle touch against the stone. For a moment she thought of a man she’d met in Droaam, before sleep faded and instinct took over. She’d slept with Steel in her hand, and she rolled off the bed and onto her feet. A thought and the bracelets around her wrists extended along her forearms, becoming the blackened mithral vambraces she wore in battle. A second thought was all it took to shift her nightclothes into her working uniform.

“You need not fear me.” There was a woman sitting on the bed, a woman in a long, gray gown, her face hidden beneath a golden veil. “I have come to see my prophecy fulfilled.”

Thorn remained on her guard. The dream of battle had been so vivid, so real, and she still felt the adrenaline rushing through her veins. She was angry and the stone in her neck burned against the bone. She wanted to lash out …

She took a deep breath and tried to center herself. “Your prophecy. The stone wrapped in Thorn.”

“Yes.” The woman laughed and rose to her feet. She was taller than Thorn expected, easily six feet. Her arms were sheathed in long gloves of golden silk, and a circlet of golden leaves held her veil in place. Thorn could see that the gray of her dress was actually silver, gleaming in the light. But there were dark lines running all through the fabric, as if it were tarnished. “That’s the thing about prophecy. You never know how it will be fulfilled. I knew that Marudrix would find the stones, that all the stones would come to the circle. I assumed it was literal thorn, that he’d have to make his way through a maze of briars to find our lost treasures. Instead he brings you.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Tira of Shaelas Tiraleth, the Lady of the Silver Tree. Casoran told me that you’d heard my call. I have summoned the stones and their keepers, so together we may heal this wounded land. Come, Lady Thorn. Your companions await, as do the stranded lords of Thelanis.”

“Drix? Cadrel?”

“As I said, they await you at the heart of the tree. Come, I will explain all, but let me tell the tale to all of you at once.”

Something about the fey queen troubled Thorn. Her voice was beautiful, but the veil … something was wrong with the silhouette beneath it. Or perhaps it was just the pain. The stone in Thorn’s neck felt like a white-hot dagger digging into her spine. The shrapnel had caused her great pain after the accident, but in the past few months she’d thought she’d finally made her peace with it. But it burned as badly as ever. She thought back to the lessons she’d learned in her time with House Tarkanan, dispersing the agony and anger, letting it flow through blood and muscle, giving her strength.

Tira’s eyes gleamed behind the veil. “Relent, spirits,” she said suddenly. “Whatever has happened to you, it is not her doing. All of you, release your anger and be at peace.”

With those soft words, the pain flowed away like water. The stone was quiet again.

“How did you do that?” Thorn said.

“All things in time,” the lady said. “Come now. Let us find your friends and bring the seven stones together. Trust me, Thorn. Sheathe your weapon.”

Unlikely, she thought. But she was there to gather information, and that was clearly the path to follow. She returned Steel to his sheath.

“The other lords and ladies may greet you with anger,” the woman said. “You are a surprise in many ways. Let me explain, to you as well as them. Now take my hand, and let the story begin.”

Thorn held out her hand as the woman approached, but she kept her free hand on Steel’s hilt.

For a moment, she felt the woman’s skin, warm against her hand. Then the world fell away again.

* * * *

The world took shape around her in a blur of warmth, silver, and voices. She was in a large chamber with a
domed roof. A round table filled the heart of the room, and Thorn and the lady had appeared in the open center. Walls and table alike were formed of the silver wood of the tree, beautiful and polished. People were sitting all around them. She heard Cadrel before she saw him then caught a scent of his cologne; he was sitting behind her, next to Drix.

“Lady Tira. Good of you to finally grace us with your presence.” It was a man’s voice, hard and cold. The speaker was an eladrin, but like Tira herself, he was unusually tall. His skin was pale, his hair dark, his eyes filled with a bitterly blue light. He and his retinue were girded for war, wearing ivory armor that Thorn recognized from the briefing in Wroat. They were the eladrin of the north, from the ice citadel in Karrnath. “And what have you brought us?”

“Patience, Lord Syraen.” Tira placed her hand on Thorn’s shoulder and gestured to Drix. “Be seated and I will begin.”

“Good.” The eladrin sitting across from the winter lord was dressed in robes of green and gold, and sparks of emerald light drifted around his head like fireflies. “We have troubles of our own. Even now, the goblin hordes are howling at my gates. To leave now, taking the heart of power … you had best know what you are doing, Tira. And I trust you will repay this favor in full.”

“Favor?”

Whoever the green lord was, he’d gone too far. Thorn was looking away, making her way over to Drix, but she felt the woman’s anger, a charge building in the air like lightning in a storm. When she looked back, Tira’s eyes burned like the sun. Whether it was magic or the sheer power of her personality, Tira seemed to tower over the others.

“Lord Joridal, I advise you to remember who I am and where you are.” Her voice was little more than a whisper, but the floor seemed to shake with her words. “The Silver Tree. First of our seven cities. The bridge between worlds. Your city is just one branch of the tree—and no branch can live if the trunk rots away. This is no favor you do me. This is about our survival.”

“So you say.” The woman who spoke wore armor made from overlapping leaves, and roses were woven within her long, red-gold hair. Her eyes burned with golden light. “The city of Rose and Thorn prospers as it always has. I came out of respect, not need.”

Tira’s anger had calmed. “Your city has always been close to this world of mud. But surely you realize that the period of the shift has continued for longer than it ever has before. The problems of Joridal, the threat facing Syraen … none of these would be an issue if we could just return home. But we can’t. And we never will until we restore the roots of the Tree itself.”

“I know I’m last to the party,” Thorn said. “But Aureon’s word! What are you talking about? Who are you exactly?”

Cadrel smiled and Drix laughed aloud. Hmm, Steel whispered. Thorn wished she could draw the blade, but the best she could do was to keep her hand on his hilt. You don’t want to be too subtle, now.

All of the fey turned to look at her, and the lords all began to speak at once, anger and curiosity flowing together in a mass of words. Then Tira raised her hand, and silence fell across the chamber. It was utter and unnatural, and Thorn could see a few of the lords still trying to speak; no sound would fill the air. At last they settled, and Tira spoke again.

“I said that I would explain all when we were gathered. And now we are. By my own hand, I brought a curse down upon our people. It is my fault that we are stranded in this world, revealed and threatened by those we thought unable to touch us. And it is by my hand that the curse shall be broken. This is no simple task. It will take all our strength and all our power. I need Ourelon’s Gift brought together again. And this is why I have petitioned you for all these years, why I have spoken to you through the shards. You know my sight reaches far, and I know what must be done if the curse is to be broken. This is the time. The light of Irian shines upon the world. The influence of Lammania grows. Now we can wipe the bloodstains from the soil and restore our bond to our beloved homeland.”

“That’s fascinating,” Thorn said before anyone else could speak. “With the understanding that when I say ‘fascinating,’ I mean ‘completely incomprehensible.’ I’m still waiting for an actual explanation.”

The ice lord hissed and started to rise, but Tira raised her hand, and he returned to his seat. She looked at Thorn, her eyes gleaming beneath her veil. “We are lords and ladies of the Faerie Court. Each among us holds dominion over a realm within perfect Thelanis, or consorts with the ruler of such a realm.”

“So what brings you here?” Cadrel said.

Tira’s eyes flashed. “Human, you are only in this place out of respect for those you travel with. Speak out of turn, and I will sew your mouth shut with a glance.”
Cadrel raised his hands in a placating gesture. “My apologies, Lady. As a storyteller myself, I have heard many
tales of your land and your people; my curiosity got the best of my manners. Please, continue.”

“Thelanis and your world have always been closely bound. Surely you know that there are times and places where
it is possible to pierce the veil that lies between the two. So it is with our spires. Long, long ago our cities fell from
Thelanis into this world. The first of our rulers met with the dragons, who at that time were the rulers of Eberron.
We exchanged gifts, formed bonds between our people. And the Silver Tree became the bond between our worlds, a
living link that would hold the two together.”

“So why haven’t we heard of you before now?” Thorn said.

“We made our pact with the dragons before humans had learned to speak, before the race of elves even existed.
And we spent but a little time in this world, as you measure things. As the moons wax and wane, so it is with the
planes. When all things were in proper alignment, our spires would fall from Thelanis to your world, and when the
influence changed, we would return to the realm of our birth.”

“So you come and go,” Thorn said. “That still doesn’t explain how the Cyrans missed the enormous tree city
shifting in and out of alignment.”

Tira nodded. “Trusting as we were, we had no fear of this world. And this cost us dearly. Seven cities came to this
world. One was destroyed long ago, sacked and leveled by the giants who rose to power when the dragons fell back
to their lairs in Argonnessen. A second fell in battle. You see the representatives of the five surviving spires before
you.”

“Only one fell in battle?” Cadrel said. “How did that happen? Surely you all fought to—”

He never finished the sentence. The Lady of the Silver Tree gazed at him, her eyes blazing, and his voice died in
his throat. “I warned you once. I did not call you here, human.”

“But you called me here,” Thorn said, “and he is with me.”

“And for that reason I shall restore his voice when we are done here and not before.”

Thorn considered protesting, but a glance around the room changed her mind. It was clear that Cadrel had touched
a nerve; all of the fey were watching him, eyes burning with anger. “Very well, then,” she said. “Two of the spires
fell. And so…”

“Most of us realized that your world held nothing for us but danger and ill fortune,” Tira said. “And so we wove a
great glamour, a cloak that spread out from the roots of the Silver Tree to conceal every branch. Your kingdoms rose
around us, but the power of the glamour kept them from ever building too close to us or from seeing our spires when
they fell back to your world. A few individuals found us, yes, and through these few, we formed bonds to your
world. But we were content to watch from afar, seeing your kingdoms rise and fall.”

If this is true, the power is remarkable, Steel whispered. A spell channeled through a single focus, cloaking a half
dozon cities for thousands of years. It seems improbable but we know the giants of Xen’drik possessed magic we
have yet to replicate, and the power of Argonnessen is legendary. But what does this have to do with the Mourning?

“So what went wrong?” Thorn asked.

“He did.” Tira looked at Drix. “Just years ago as you measure time—a mere moment to us—my son was hunting
with us. He drew ahead of us, but I had no fear; my sight is strong, and I’d seen no danger.” She looked at the
ground. “My sight is strong, but the future is never certain. We found him dead on the ground. This man—little
more than a child himself at that time—stood over him, a bloody blade in his hand. Fury overtook me, madness at
seeing my nightmare made real. I seized the knife and stabbed the boy myself.

“The moment the blood of my child and this man of Cyre mingled on the ground, the earth trembled and shook.
The glamour snapped and broke. I felt the land itself being torn apart, nature twisting on the most basic level.”


“There is no coincidence,” Tira replied. “At that time, I didn’t know who this child was. You see the mingling of
our blood in his features—human and fey.”

“He’s half-elf. So am I.”

“You carry debased blood in your veins. You are descended from the slaves of Xen’drik. Marudrix … he is of us.
I told you that there were those who found us, even through the glamour. His ancestor was such a one, a brave
warrior who won the heart of one of our own.”

Cadrel tapped her arm. He couldn’t speak but he mouthed a word: Ma-something … Marusan. Marusan. The
knight in his tale. Marusan … and Marudrix.

“This was before I rose to wear the Circle of Leaves,” Tira continued. “Else I might have seen it in his features.
But that man … he became a bridge between our worlds, as the Tree itself was. His descendants became the keepers
of this forest. My predecessor even gave them one of Ourelon’s shards, to preserve the memories of those who fell between our visits.”

The ice lord rose to his feet again. “The line of keepers was extinguished over five cycles ago, when the Preserving Shard was lost to us. This is impossible!”

“I can discipline you as easily as the human, Syraen.” Tira’s eyes blazed. “Yes, we thought the line of keepers destroyed. And once again we find that our sight is not so perfect. This boy was of that blood. I struck him in anger, struck him for a crime he did not commit, spilled that blood upon that of my own son. And in so doing, I unraveled the foundation of both our worlds and set the Mourning in motion.”

Thorn looked at Cadrel. He couldn’t speak, but his expression mirrored her thoughts: She really thinks she caused the Mourning by stabbing Drix. We’re in the Tower of the Silver Madwomen.

Then she noticed that no one else was smiling or questioning it. The expressions of the fey were cold and grim.

“I’m sorry,” Thorn said. “I mean no disrespect, but you’re serious about this? Perhaps you didn’t realize it, but out beyond your woods, we’ve been fighting a war for the last century. The Mourning only targeted Cyre. Why would your curse do that?”

“You are mistaken,” Tira said. “The Mourning didn’t target Cyre.”

Thorn didn’t know what to say to that. She was even more surprised by what happened next.

She’s right, Steel said. But ask her what she means.

But Tira continued on her own. “Trust me, we are aware of your wars and your kingdoms. Your Cyre was a changing beast. In days past, it was far larger than it was that day. So if the curse struck at Cyre, why didn’t it affect the nation of the goblins, or the elves to the east?”

Exactly, Steel said. And it wasn’t even tied perfectly to those borders; Darguun and Valenar were simply quick to seize what little land remained outside the mists.

“What’s your explanation?” Thorn said.

“The curse should have spread across your world and ultimately through the bond into Thelanis as well. The moment I realized what was happening, I acted to save the boy. I bound the Shard of Life to him, the shard of the Silver Tree. And in doing so, I bound the curse to him. It is not your Cyre that holds the Mourning. It is Estara, the kingdom that stood here before your Galifar conquered it and gave it to his daughter. Marudrix is of the blood of the keepers of the wood and, through lost Marusan, a prince of Estara.”

Drix had been barely paying attention throughout all of that; perhaps he’d heard it before. But that snapped him back. “What? How am I a prince?”

“You are a prince of a lost kingdom. In the eyes of magic, you are that kingdom. In saving you, we stopped the advance of the mists, symbolically binding them to you.”

“This is ridiculous.” It was the ice lord again. “How dare you bind one of our greatest artifacts to an outsider? That is the source of our weakness. That is what drains the life of the tree. You have given its heart to a mortal.”

“You were not there, Syraen! I assure you, the glamour fell as the boy lay dying. Go outside and you’ll see the soil still tainted by his blood.”

The Lord of the Emerald Lights spoke, his sparks swirling around his head. “Either way, you are the one who brought this misfortune upon us.”

“And I am the one that can bring it to a close,” she said. “I have spent every moment since that day studying the matter. And I know what can be done.”

“And what’s that?” Thorn said.

“Keeping Marudrix alive holds the curse at bay, binding it to him. To bring it to a close, he must be healed completely. The unjust stroke must be undone. We must take Ourelon’s shard away from him and restore his heart again.”

The fey fell to arguing again. Next to her, Thorn heard Cadrel take a sudden sharp breath.

“Olladra smiles,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“What do you make of this?” she said quietly, rubbing her thumb against Steel’s hilt as she spoke.

“It seems most unlikely,” he replied. “But in my day, I’ve heard many stranger stories. We’re dealing with the fey, Thorn, with a woman who can hide a city from view or steal my voice with a glance. As unlikely as it seems, it is the sort of thing that would happen in one of the old tales.”

I have to agree, Steel said. It’s far more likely that it’s a vast coincidence. Yet as long as there is any chance that it is true, that this could somehow restore the Mournland or help us understand the true power behind it, we have to follow through. Getting the Cyran refugees out of Breland alone would be a tremendous boon to the nation. Beyond
that … if she can remove that shard from Drix, that means it could be claimed for Breland. If it can be proven that
the Mourning no longer poses a threat, the war will begin again; you know that as well as I do. Acquiring such a
tool for Breland—not attached to a Cyran tinker—would be a great success.

Good enough. Thorn drew Steel and rapped against the table with his pommel. “Enough!” she shouted. The others
paused and looked at her with varying degrees of surprise and anger on their faces. “Say we believe you. What is
this next step? What have you learned?”

Tira glanced at the other fey, her eyes still burning behind the veil. “I sacrificed one of Ourelon’s shards to save
the boy. The shards are bound together, just as our cities are bound together, just as the boy is bound to the soil. At
this time, under these moons, if all the shards are brought together, like will call to like.”

“What are these shards?”

“Fragments of the gift the dragon Ourelon gave to the first lord of the Silver Tree, or so say the memories bound
in the stone,” Tira replied. “Each tied to one of the spires, each holding great power. The strength of the spire is tied
to the stone. So Syraen is correct; in surrendering my stone to Drix, I weakened the Silver Tree. Yet the alternative
was far worse.”

Syraen spoke again. “You require all the shards for your mad plan, sister. But you know as well as I how many
have been lost. The Preserving Shard. The Stone of Dreams. The Quiet Stone. Have you found them all?”

Tira looked at Thorn. “Show them, girl. Show them my prophecy made manifest.”

And this is where it all falls apart, Thorn thought. Might as well see it through. She turned around and shifted her
uniform to simple peasant clothes. Pulling her blouse at neck and waist, she revealed the shrapnel in her spine.

A hush fell over the room. Then the voice of the Rose Queen broke the silence. “Impossible.”

There was a gust of cold air, and Lord Syraen was by her side. “Hold, woman,” he hissed.

Thorn wanted to punch the arrogant eladrin in the throat, but she resisted the urge and let him run cold fingers
along her spine. In truth, she was as surprised as they were.

“Tira speaks the truth,” he said at last. “The Quiet Stone and the Preserving Shard, held in mortal flesh.” He drew
a sword with a pale blade that steamed in the warm air of the council room. “At least these can be cut free.”

Thorn was moving even as he drew the sword. The words had barely left his mouth when she kicked him in the
chest, calling on every ounce of her unnatural strength. The fey warlord staggered backward, gasping for air. The
others got on their feet. Thorn rolled away just in time to evade the net of emerald lights that flashed through the air.

The Rose Queen raised her hands, and bramble vines unfolded from her hair. Only one of the fey remained distant
and uninvolved—a gnome dressed in robes that shimmered with the shifting colors of a rainbow.

Drix was at her side, his tiny crossbow in his hand. Cadrel was there as well, his rapier gleaming. It seemed
impossible that they could stand against the eladrin and their retinues, but she was glad for the help.

The battle ended as quickly as it had begun. “Enough!” Tira roared and her voice had the force of a gale,
slamming the combatants back. Once again she towered above them, her eyes blazing and her golden crown
gleaming. “Her blood may be mixed with the soil, but this woman is a guest beneath my boughs, and you will not
harm her here!”

Syraen’s warriors were standing at his side, blades of ice glistening in the silvery light. “Then perhaps we shall
take our leave and await her beyond your gate. How can you allow this to occur? Two of the greatest treasures of
our people, in the hands of a mortal? This is our chance to reclaim what we have lost!”

“You’re all mad,” Thorn said. “These are no treasures in my back. This is shrapnel from an explosion. I’m lucky I
lived through it. I was struck by dozens of shards; these are just the ones they couldn’t remove.”

“Both of you know nothing,” Tira said. “Thorn, these are no common crystals in your spine. Syraen is correct.
They are two of Ourelon’s shards. The Quiet Stone in the base of your spine was the heartstone of our spire in
Xen’drik, the city that fell to the giants. The Preserving Shard holds the spirits of our greatest leaders; it was placed
in the care of Marusan’s line and lost when the vile wyrm laid waste to the woods.”

“Then how—?” Thorn began. She shut her mouth when Tira looked at her, before the fey queen turned to her
magic to do the job.

“Syraen, I have devoted myself to the study of the shards. Once they are bound to mortal flesh, they cannot be
removed by force. Aside from killing the bearer, the blood and anger would taint the shard forevermore. This curse
began with an act of violence; you cannot end it with another. You shame our people with your behavior, and if I did
not need you to bring this curse to an end, I would order you to return to the Winter Citadel immediately. Sheathe
your weapons now. I remind you that though the walls may crumble around me, this is my seat of power, and you
will show me due respect!”

Thorn was barely listening. Her thoughts were racing. What did she mean? Vile wyrm … holds the spirits of our
greatest leaders.

The winter lord slowly sheathed his sword. “I will aid you, Tira, because you speak the truth. The fates of our spires are linked. My people wish to return to the land of the long night, and if it is your curse that binds us here, we will help you break it. But know this: I will not forget how you have treated me this day. Nor will I forgive you for bringing this plague upon us to begin with. I stand beneath your boughs, and I will bow to your will today. I suggest you never seek my hospitality again.”

“So be it.”

“I see one problem with your plans, Lady Tira.” It was the gnome. His voice was soft and pleasant, and the colors of his robe swirled as he spoke. “You said that all eight shards would be required. You have found two of the lost shards. But what of the third? Where is the Stone of Dreams?”

Tira’s eyes dimmed behind her veil. “I do not know. In my visions I saw all eight of the stones in our circle. I never saw how they arrived, and it seems my vision was clouded. I can only hope that we can restore the wound with seven of the shards, but I fear it will not be possible.”

“Then rejoice, Lady Tira.” The voice was deep and confident and seemed to fill the room. The speaker stood in the doorway, a tall man dressed in black and silver. He wore a hooded cloak, and a silver mask sculpted to resemble a handsome eladrin. There was something familiar about him … Then Thorn saw the brooch tied to his cloak. A crescent moon with an opalescent stone held between the horns. He reached up to remove the mask, and for a moment Thorn felt an inexplicable sense of dread. But the face below was as handsome as the mask itself and even more familiar. He looked directly at Thorn and smiled.

It was the man from her dream.
CHAPTER TWELVE

Shaelas Tiraleth, the Mournland
Barrakas 24, 999 YK

If Thorn was surprised by the stranger, the fey were shocked. Tira’s expression was hidden beneath her veil, but she seemed to be at a loss for words.

“I hope you’ll forgive me for letting myself in,” the man said. He was an eladrin—though his eyes were darker than his cousins’, and he was somewhat more muscular, but the fey features were unmistakable. He dropped to one knee. “Now that I am here, I present myself as a guest and formally ask for your hospitality, Lady Tira.”

“Who are you?” Tira said, her voice tight.

“You know who I am,” he said. “Shan Doresh, lord of the Dreaming Citadel.”

“The Dreaming Citadel was destroyed long ago.”

“What would you know of it?” The man rose to his feet. His voice was steady, but his dark eyes gleamed. “When the Cul’sir enslaved our kin, I came to this council and I called on your predecessors to gird themselves for war, to destroy those who would commit such atrocities. Instead they hid behind shadows and illusions, leaving my people to face the titans alone.”

“It is true,” Tira said. “When Shan Doresh came to the Council of the Silver Tree, my grandfather and the other lords and ladies refused to aid him, seeing only madness in his plan. But Shan Doresh was blinded by his dreams of glory and vengeance and led his people to their end. None of those who fought at his side were ever seen again, and the spire never returned to Thelanis. And so the question remains: Who are you to taunt us with this deception?”

“There is more to reality than even you know,” the man said. “When we stood alone against the Cul’sir horde, we struck fear into the heart of their emperor. He could not defeat us in battle. And so he used treachery. From the lowest eladrin to the mightiest ghaele, when we walk this realm, we are creatures of two worlds, poised between Thelanis and Eberron. The emperor and his wizards caught at that thread and unraveled it, twisting our connection to the Faerie Court and binding us to a new realm: Dal Quor, the Region of Dreams. We fell from this reality, and for an untold time, we existed only as dreams in mortal minds, rarely seen and quickly forgotten. Time in that place is different even than in fair Thelanis, and you cannot conceive of the lengths we went to find our way back to this world. In the end, something pulled us back, reestablished our connection to the material plane. I can only believe it was you, Lady Tira—that the mystical shock wave that flowed out of the Silver Tree reached us even in the dark shadows of dream.”

“So you truly claim to be—”

“It is no claim,” the man said. “I am Shan Doresh. I faced the emperor Cul’sir in battle. I bear the Stone of Dreams, given to me when Ourelon’s Gift was shattered in this chamber. I have spent an eternity in dreams, and now I have returned.”

“To what end?” it was Syraen who spoke, suspicion hard in his voice.

“To aid you in your time of need, of course.” Shan Doresh ran black-gloved fingers over his gleaming brooch. “We were overwhelmed when we were drawn back into this world. So much has changed. We’ve spent the last few years in the darkness, learning what it is to be truly alive again. I have studied the nations of this world, and I have seen the troubles that face you now the glamour has been stripped away. Shae Joridal under siege. Taer Syraen poised to start its own war. The Silver Tree crumbling away. Ourelon’s Gift scattered and squandered. When I last walked this world, no nation on Khorvaire could threaten us, for all that your ancestors lived in fear. Today the young races have grown bold, while you are all but forgotten.”

He fixed Cadrel with his dark eyes. “Tell me, human, and tell me true: You have seen the wonders our people can produce. You live in a world at war. Do you not wish to have such powers for your own people?”

“You’re asking the wrong person,” Cadrel said with a smile. “My people have no stake in the war anymore. Our nation was destroyed. If these remarkable theories are correct, it was the actions of this woman here that did it.”
“Yes,” Doresh said. “She brought a kingdom to ruin with a single stroke. Unusual circumstances, to be certain. Perhaps you would not use such a thing yourself. But tell me that there are not those among your kind who would stop at nothing to harness such power, who would use it to dominate this land.”

Cadrel looked at Thorn, a nervous smile playing at his lips. “Well, Cyre did not start the war; all we ever sought was peace—”

“And what of me?” Cazalan Dal stood in the room. “Sent into the Mournland in search of what? A way to reclaim the ravaged land? Or a way to harness its power—to find a weapon that could be used to force the other nations to their knees?”

The winter eladrin moved toward the Cyran soldier, glittering blades drawn. Tira’s eyes were blazing, and Thorn held Steel ready to throw. Cadrel’s face was ashen. Then Cazalan shivered and faded away.

“Such is my power,” Shan Doresh said. “To bring dreams into the open. You know this man and his mission, Essyn Cadrel. Once he served your nation; now he may want power for himself. But he wants power. As does your king, Nyrielle Tam. And the Karrnathi warlords that mass their forces around your spire, Shan Syraen. I looked out upon the world, and I saw our people in fear. I felt your call through the stone, Lady Tira. And I knew why the Citadel of Dreams had been called back to this world. Your ancestors refused to aid me in my time of need, and I will not repeat that mistake. I hope that this act of faith will forge a new bond between us, that when I come before this council in days to come, you will remember my wisdom.”

“I would hear more of this now,” Syraen said.

“And I,” Lord Joridal added, emerald lights darting around his shoulders.

“We have much to discuss, to be certain. But perhaps this is a conversation best kept to the ghaele. And the safety of the Silver Tree is surely the first step in securing the future of our people. Lady Tira, you have said that time is of the essence. Tell us of the ritual that will save this land and the Tree. What must be done?”

Tira’s expression was hidden behind her veil, but her voice was cold. “Like calls to like. The bonds between the stones must be strengthened. I have prepared a vault below, where the ritual will be performed. For now, the shards must be left alone for a time, allowed to bond away from their masters.”

Syraen raised an eyebrow. “You would have us surrender the greatest treasures of our people?”

“I would. For hours only. They will be sealed in the vault.”

“And what of us?” Thorn said. “I’m afraid I can’t just give you my shards.”

“You are not the master of the shards that you bear,” Tira told her. “You need not be separated from the stones. But you will have to be sealed in the vault and to remain still while the connections are established.”

The Rose Queen laughed. “You wish us to leave our gifts alone with these outsiders? You are mad, Tira.”

Shan Doresh spoke before Tira could respond. “Your fears are understandable, my lady. Still, unless much has changed since I last walked these halls, the vaults of the Silver Tree are all but impregnable, and I can’t imagine they open from the inside.” Reaching up, he removed his brooch and held it out to Tira. “I trust you, Lady. I place the future of my people in your hands, as the future of every spire rests on the fate of the Silver Tree. And I hope the rest of you will do the same.”

The gnome lord was first to follow. “You have stepped from the shadows of our history, Doresh, to remind us of a time when we put fear before wisdom. We will not make that mistake again.” He drew a golden chain from around his neck, the stone glowing within.

Syraen said nothing. He simply drew his sword from its scabbard and set it down upon the table. Joridal and the Rose Queen grimly followed suit, surrendering their treasures.

Cadrel stepped forward. “I hope you will forgive my impertinence, great lady. But if you are sealing my companions in a vault, I’d prefer to remain with them than to be alone outside. I am a storyteller by trade; if they must lie still for hours, I can help them away the time.”

“By all means, keep them together,” Syraen growled. “I’d rather have them all trapped than have one of them running around.”

“Very well,” Tira said. “Follow me, and I will show you the room where you will change your world.”

“* * * * *”

“Well, that was an interesting hour,” Thorn said. She was sitting cross-legged in the middle of an elaborate arcane seal painted on the wooden floor. Each of the fey treasures sat in a similar seal, spread around the room. Drix was lying on his back in a circle in the very center of the room, adjusting the pulleys on his crossbow. Cadrel paced around the edge of the chamber. “I’m not even sure which ridiculous claim to begin with. Drix here is the cause of the Mourning. Drix is the only thing that saved us from the Mourning. The shards of shrapnel in my back are ancient
artifacts of great power, despite the fact that they have no magical auras and were, well, shrapnel. And now some ancient champion—who I dreamed about, by the way—has appeared from the past to either save us all or incite the spires against us. I couldn’t quite tell. Is that about it?”

“Well—”

Thorn cut Cadrel off before he could complete his sentence. “Oh, and Drix is both a Cannith heir and the prince of a long-forgotten kingdom.”

“I liked that part,” Drix chimed in. He tested the pull on the crossbow.

“Still—” Cadrel began.

“Oh, and let’s not forget that your Covenant of the Gray Mist was created to unlock the secrets of the Mourning so they could be used against the rest of us. Anything you’d like to add to that, Essyn?”

“You’re not a fool,” Cadrel said, “so don’t play the part. Yes, we wanted to harness the power of the Mourning. But tell me, do you truly believe that your Citadel isn’t working on the same thing? That the Royal Eyes of Aundair don’t have teams in the Mournland this very moment?”

“The Royal Eyes are bastards, I’ll give you that. But—”

“Still, the Mourning is the greatest mystery of the age,” Cadrel continued. “And the greatest opportunity. We fought each other for a hundred years. The Mourning ended the war in one day, and fear of the Mourning is the only thing that keeps that war at bay. Whoever harnesses that power will dominate the next age.”

“And you want it to be Cyre?”

“I suppose you want it to be Breland? We had the best claim to the succession. We lost our home to this power. The Mourning took everything from us. If we could use it to get it all back, we had to try. Oargev never knew the true purpose of the Covenant, of course. There’s quite a lot the young prince doesn’t know. And now it seems the Covenant has its own ideas … unfortunately.”

Thorn sighed. “I wish I could argue with you, but I’m sure you’re right. Aundair, Karrnath, even Breland … I’m sure they’re all trying to harness the power of the Mourning. Which brings us to the next point. All of these nations, pouring their gold into studying the Mourning. And now they say it’s Drix. Do you think you can turn him into a weapon?”

“Drix said. “But any design can be improved.”

Cadrel laughed. “No. I don’t think stabbing children is the next evolution of warfare. Besides that, if you believe that story, I don’t think it was simply a matter of someone stabbing Drix. I think it had to be the queen. And she had to act in anger.”

“And you believe that?”

“Honestly? No. But it makes a wonderful story. I’m sure it was a coincidence. But it’s brought us to this vault, given us this chance to study these treasures and tools. So what do you think? Once we steal them, how do we divide up the shards?”

He sounded utterly sincere, and Thorn looked over in surprise. For a moment he kept a straight face; then he burst out laughing. “I’m sorry, my dear. But it was worth it just for the look on your face. And tell me the thought hadn’t occurred to you.”

“Of course it occurred to me,” she said. “And I’m sure Lady Tira expected as much. We’re at war and if each of these shards has power to match the one in Drix’s chest, we’d be fools not to want them. But we have no idea what other powers the eladrin possess. Their friendship could be far more valuable in the days ahead than a handful of artifacts we can’t reproduce.”

“True, true.” Cadrel said. “Still, it’s an interesting exercise, isn’t it? And we have nothing but time. I’m sure you’re an expert when it comes to breaking and entering. I saw the guards, the thickness of the vault door; you’ve probably seen a dozen wards and traps that slipped by my old eyes. So what would you do if it was in your hands?”

“I wouldn’t,” Thorn said. “I don’t want to make enemies of these people. Any theft would surely be blamed on us. Right now the worst thing I can think of would be for someone to break in here and steal these treasures and somehow get away with it.”

“That’s unfortunate. Because that’s exactly our plan.”

It wasn’t Cadrel who spoke. The bard looked as surprised as she was.

It was Cazalan Dal. And he wasn’t alone.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Shaelas Tiraleth, the Mournland
Barrakas 24, 999 YK

When they’d been sealed in the vault, Lady Tira had made Thorn and the others surrender their weapons and magical equipment. “We are trusting you with our greatest treasures,” she told them. “Surely you can trust us with yours.” Drix had convinced them to leave him with his crossbow as a way to pass the time, but he had no bolts for the weapon. And all of Thorn’s tools were waiting for her outside the vault—her mithral vambraces, the gloves of storing that held the myrmaxe, her cloak with its myriad tools and weapons, even Steel—she was unarmed and outnumbered.

The Covenant of the Gray Mist carried the same weapons she’d seen them with before: shifting blades in one hand, and wands in the other. Surely they wouldn’t use fireballs in such an enclosed space, Thorn thought. That left far too many options, from paralysis to a burst of fire with a tighter focus.

Thorn’s first instinct was to attack, to strike as hard and fast as she could, to try to even the numbers before they could react. She held it in check. There were four of them—too many. And two of them had already grabbed Drix and Cadrel and were holding blades to their throats. Thorn rose to her feet as a third soldier approached her, a grim woman with gray eyes and a long blade.

“We won’t keep you long,” Cazalan said. His voice was the same dry rasp she remembered from the attack on the prince. He had a small sack in his hand, and he picked up the icy blade of Lord Syraen and slid it into the opening. The sword should have pierced the cloth, but instead it vanished into the bag.

An extradimensional bag. He’s going to walk away with it all, she thought.

“If thought you were dead,” she said. “I suppose I should have cut off your head and kept it as a keepsake.” It was half a joke, half serious. She studied the woman next to her. She was confident and that was to Thorn’s advantage.

“That might have worked,” he said. “I suppose I should have cut off your head and kept it as a keepsake.” It was half a joke, half serious. She studied the woman next to her. She was confident and that was to Thorn’s advantage.

“That might have worked,” he said. He dropped the emerald amulet of Lord Joridal into his sack. “Spend as much time in the Mournland as I have, and death becomes a friend. And for this … I forgive you my two deaths.”

“Forgive me?”

“We’ve known of this citadel for years now. We’ve been searching for a way to penetrate its defenses. But even teleportation is of little use if you don’t know where you’re going. Once we knew they’d let you inside, it was just a matter of getting close enough to establish a scrying focus. You became our eyes and ears.”

“We might have worked,” he said. He dropped the emerald amulet of Lord Joridal into his sack. “Spend as much time in the Mournland as I have, and death becomes a friend. And for this … I forgive you my two deaths.”

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Why this? What use could you have for these stones?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Cazalan said with a smile. He put the shimmering jewel of Lord Pyrial into his bag. “When we act, the world will know.”

“Teleportation. Scrying. That’s quite a lot of power in the hands of a ragtag band of scavengers.”

“We have our backers,” Cazalan replied as he took the Rose Queen’s sigil from its circle. “As you’ll learn.”

“No,” Drix said, catching Thorn’s eyes. “This ends here.”

His captor was pinning an arm behind his back and holding a blade to his throat. He threw his weight back against the soldier, knocking him off balance. But Drix was no soldier. Before he could break free, the man drew his knife across Drix’s neck. In that moment, all eyes were on Drix, and that was all Thorn needed. She slammed a foot down against the foot of her own guardian. The woman howled in pain, dropping her guard. Thorn pulled her wand from her weakened grasp then grabbed the woman and flung her at Cazalan, calling on her full reserves of strength. It was as easy as throwing a blade; the woman seemed to weigh nothing in Thorn’s arms, but she sent Cazalan tumbling to the floor. There was no time to waste; Thorn was already leveling her stolen wand at Cadrel’s captor, tracing the activation pattern in her mind.

I hope you’re not a fireball, she thought.

There was a ripple in the air, and the man stiffened. He didn’t move as Cadrel pulled free.
The throw had incapacitated Thorn’s captor, and Cadrel’s guard was paralyzed. But there were two left. Cazalan pushed the body of his partner aside, reaching for the last gem. Thorn leaped forward—not fast enough. She saw the fourth soldier tracking her movements with his wand, and her muscles went numb. She struck the floor hard, falling to the ground; she felt nothing and she couldn’t move at all.

Thorn had discovered many gifts over the past six months. Once in a truly desperate moment, a moment when she thought she was going to die, she killed a man with her touch. In her time with House Tarkanan, she’d honed that gift and learned to control it more easily. It was painful. More than that, it was somehow connected to the dragon Sarmondelaryx. She could still hear Drego’s whispers … every time you draw on her power, she grows stronger. But it was the only thing she could think of. Dal used us. Tricked us. Thorn tried to harness that rage, focus it into a razor point, smash it against the numbing charm.

Nothing. She saw Cazalan pick up the final shard and slip it into his bag. Fury flowed through her, and that moment of pure anger was all it took. Feeling flooded back through her. There was no time to rise to her feet. Unarmed, on the floor, there was only one thing she could do. She reached out just catching his leg with her outstretched arm. And she called on that anger again.

Tightening her hand around Cazalan’s ankle, she reached out, searching for the fire within him so she could consume it.

She found nothing.

The power was still a mystery. But every time she’d used it in the past, she’d been able to feel a force within her victim, to feel the energy within, to feel it as she snatched that away and consumed it. Searching in Dal was like grasping at water. Her hand was tight around Cazalan’s ankle, but it might have been dead wood.

“Too late,” he said with a smile. Then he was gone, nothing in her hand but air. All of the Covenant soldiers had vanished, even the ones they’d incapacitated. Thorn and Cadrel looked at each other from across the empty room while Drix rubbed a hand over his healing throat.

“This is an outrage!”

Lord Syraen was fuming, his eyes glowing white hot with his anger. All of the fey lords were shouting.

“I placed my trust in you,” Lord Joridal said, glaring at Tira. “My spire is at war, and I left it to pursue this quest of yours. And now you have taken my greatest weapon from me … and set it in the hands of humans!”

“I, too, have wolves at my gates,” Syraen snapped. “With the Stone of Winter in my hands, I had no fear of them. Now what will I do? How could you allow this to happen?”

“I allowed nothing,” Tira said. “You look to the wards on my vault. Our preparations were perfect. It should have been impossible to teleport in or out.”

“And yet they did!”

As Thorn had suspected, the fey had been observing the vault through magical means. They’d responded quickly to the theft—but not quickly enough.

“We did what was necessary!” Tira said. “Unless we can save the Tree, all will fall.”

“So you say!” Syraen snarled. “And yet it was you who placed our gifts within your vault, without even sentries to watch them—”

“There was no need for sentries in the vault. I tell you, teleportation was impossible. Study the seals yourself. The room was anchored!”

“This argument is pointless,” Shan Doresh’s voice rang out across the room, and the others fell silent as he spoke. “What is done is done. It seems you have brought disaster upon your people once again, Lady Tira. It was your hand that brought this curse upon the Tree, and your call that led us to this ruin.”

“You placed your trust in me,” Tira said. “And I in you, despite your fantastic claims.”

“Listening to my tale placed you in no danger,” Doresh said coolly. “For my part, my trust has cost me dearly. Once again, I have undertaken a great risk to protect our people, and again, my people have paid the price. I should never have returned to the Silver Tree. And I will not do so again.”

“Wait!” Cadrel shouted. All eyes turned to the old bard, Thorn’s among them.

Cadrel walked between the eladrin, raising his hands. He was indeed a master storyteller, and he drew on all of that presence; even the angry Syraen stilled his rage. “I know that this is your loss, that I am not one of you and cannot truly understand what this has cost you. Yet surely you are stronger together than apart.” He paused in front of Shan Doresh. “You said it was your gift to make dreams manifest, but it was my nightmare that you showed. Now that nightmare has fallen upon you all. If you are the hero you say you are, will you abandon your people when
“You know nothing of nightmares,” Doresh said quietly. “While I have spent hundreds of your lifetimes walking among them. My subjects have endured torments you cannot imagine, all because the ancestors of those who stand in this room lacked the courage to stand by my side. I thought this to be the righteous path. I thought I could find common bond with those who abandoned me so long ago. But they are not my people. My people await me, and I will have to tell them that we have suffered again due to the arrogance of our kin. So leave me be, human. And you, ghaele of the Silver Tree. We will not see each other again.”

He threw his dark cloak over his shoulder, and in that instant, he was gone.

“True words,” Syraen said. “This council is broken, Lady Tira. The Silver Tree crumbles, and it is time for us to see what fate awaits the boughs as they fall. I must return to my people, to make ready for the moment these humans attack me. I pray I will not fall prey to their guile as easily as you have.”

Something was nagging at the back of Thorn’s mind. She played the events over in her mind again and again, struggling to fit the pieces together.

“No!” Tira raised her hand, and silvery light gleamed around her fingers. “Do not leave. Not yet. If we cannot face this together, we will surely fall.”

“You will surely fall,” the Rose Queen said. “Perhaps the Tree will grow again in more fertile ground.”

“A pity,” Cadrel whispered to Thorn as he returned to her side. “To come all this way only to see such discord. Still, I suppose their weakness is a boon for our people.”

That’s it, Thorn realized.

“Stop!” she cried. “All of you. Stop fighting. I know what’s happened here.”

All eyes turned to her, but none were friendly. “As do we,” Syraen growled. “Your kind stole our greatest treasures.”

“An impossible theft,” Thorn said. “And one that makes no sense. A nightmare that has turned you against one another. And the one truly responsible is here in this room.”

The ghaele all looked at Tira. “I don’t understand,” the veiled lady said. “What is it you accuse me of?”

“I’m not accusing you,” Thorn said. Steel was in her hand, and his point was pressed against Cadrel’s throat.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

\* \* \ *

The Mournland
Barrakas 24, 999 YK

Cadrel laughed. “Well done, my dear.”

Then he was gone.

But he didn’t go far enough. Thorn had her full attention on the bard, her supernatural senses keyed to any trace of his motion. Even as she felt the air rush in to fill the void in space, she felt a displacement to her left, just at the door to the chamber. It was an excellent trick. Not only did he teleport, but he’d wrapped himself in invisibility; the doorway seemed to be empty. But Thorn could feel his presence, and she let that instinct guide her as she threw Steel.

Cadrel cried out in pain as the blade caught him in the back of the knee. Blood spattered across the floor as he returned to view, falling to the ground. Quickly Syraen was upon him. The winter lord wrapped one hand around Cadrel’s neck and lifted him off the ground. There was a sharp chill in the air, and ice formed around the bard—a layer of frost that grew and spread, becoming a coffin binding Cadrel, leaving only his head free.

“What is this?” Tira said, her eyes flashing.

Thorn walked over to the trapped man. “Do you want to tell them, Essyn? Is that even your name?”

Cadrel grinned. “Not the one I was born with, no. But it’s good enough for you.”

Thorn turned to look at Tira. “No one could teleport into or out of your vault. Yet somehow, our enemies did. But why? How did they know where we were? What treasures you possessed? What do they even think they’ll do with your shards? It seems that I have two of them, and they’ve brought me only pain.”

“Explain yourself,” Syraen said.

“Cadrel said it himself, just moments ago,” Thorn replied. “When this journey began, these soldiers attacked the prince of Cyre. It had nothing to do with you or your gems. It was his fear, the fear that his people would turn against him.”

“So?”

“At sea, the captain faced an old nightmare, a weapon she’d hoped never to see again, and one that claimed her life. On land, my suspicions were confirmed when it seemed that we’d been followed. But even then I was afraid that we’d been followed. But I didn’t know what my enemies wanted. And nothing they said explained it. Only here did they seem to have a purpose … and one that made no sense. If they were following us, using us to get to you, why try to kill the prince in the first place? And possessing scrying and teleportation magic … this Covenant of the Gray Mist may be a tough group of soldiers, but they don’t have the resources for that sort of magic.”

“I was scrying on the vault,” Tira said. “I saw what occurred.”

“You saw what you feared,” Thorn said. “As we’ve seen since this journey began. Nightmares made manifest. And who was present at every occasion? My friend Essyn Cadrel, a man who had no true need to be in the vault with us.” She set Steel back against his throat. “When I took the wand from Cazalan in Seaside, it vanished when the fight was over. When I touched him in the vault, I felt no life in him. I don’t think he teleported. I think he was never there to begin with.”

“Then where are the stones?” Syraen said.

“I thought glamour was your specialty,” Thorn said. “If I had to guess, I’d say they were wrapped in illusion. Hidden so we couldn’t see them. And that you gave them to Shan Doresh just before he left, didn’t you, Cadrel?”

He laughed. “The Citadel should be proud. Too little and too late, of course, but well done.”

“Who are you really?” she said. “I’ve seen you cloak yourself in illusion, back during the attack on the prince. And then you brought his nightmares to life. But why?”

Cadrel smiled and as he did, his face changed. His beard turned to smoke and drifted away. His skin became soft
and smooth, suffused with a rosy hue. His ears became long and pointed, with silky, black hair flowing around them. He was a young, handsome eladrin. Only one thing marred the image. At first Thorn thought his pupils had expanded to fill his eyes. Then she realized that he didn’t have eyes. Just empty holes opening into a hollow shell, as if his face were a mask filled with swirling mist.

“I’m Essyn Cadrel,” he said. “Or I have been for as long as you’ve known him. I’ve stood at the prince’s side since the Day of Mourning, planting the seeds of doubt and fear in his mind. And I’m Cazalan Dal. I’ve been many others since my return. But I was born Kalas Tan Doresh, a child of the Fortress of Dreams. I fought by the side of my lord when the eladrin of the Silver Tree fled in fear, and I suffered with him in the long nightmare that followed. Once I wove dreams. Now I can make your nightmares reality. And so I have.”


“Much like the death of a beloved prince,” Cadrel said. “Yes. It was our hand that guided you to that path, our hands that slew your son, Tira. We who gave you the tools of your destruction.”

“Kalas?” Tira whispered. “Why would you do this? Why would Doresh?”

Cadrel shook his head. “I’ve said all that I will tell you for free, fallen queen.”

Syraen stepped forward and Thorn could feel the temperature drop around him. “You seek to bargain, thief? I will freeze the blood in your veins. I will chip away your flesh until you beg to share your secrets.”

The former spymaster smiled. “I look forward to it. You cannot imagine the things I’ve seen, the nightmares I’ve experienced.” He glanced at the assembled fey. “Oh, I’d hoped to escape. I didn’t think any of you were bright enough to see through the game. But I knew there was the chance you’d capture me. I know exactly what you can do. Freeze my flesh. Scour me with thorns. Strip the joy from my soul. In time you might break me, yes. But not time enough for you.”

The chill grew deeper as Syraen stared at the prisoner. He glanced back at the others, and Thorn could feel the doubt weighing down on them all. She didn’t know exactly what those stones of theirs did, but it was clear that the loss was a very heavy blow; it seemed as if all the fire had gone out of them.

Then she considered Cadrel’s words again. “You’ve said all you’ll say … for free.”

Cadrel looked at her, the smile still on his face. His eyes were deep shadows, but she could imagine the twinkle of the old man. “Yes.”

“What is it you want?” Tira hissed.

“I’ve already taken everything you have to offer me,” he replied.

“You’ve taken all they have,” Thorn said. She reached back and ran her fingers over the stone in her neck. “Is this what you’re looking for?”

Cadrel’s smile widened. “If only it were that simple, dear girl. Still, you have something these old twigs lack.”

Thorn took a step toward him. “And what would that be? Don’t tell me you want secrets of the Citadel?”

Cadrel laughed. “No, I am done with your kingdoms now. There is only one thing you can give me.”

The room was utterly still; around her, the fey lords might have been statues. “What would any man want from such a lovely young lady? A kiss, of course.”

Thorn shook her head, sighing. She’d been drawn in by the tension of the moment, by the energy of it, but of course it had all been a game. Then she noticed that the eladrin were still watching her. The tension hadn’t vanished. If it were a joke, she was the only one who could see it. “Wait,” she said. “You’re not serious?”

“Of course not,” Tira said. Her veil flowed as she stepped forward, laying a hand on Thorn’s shoulder. “We could never ask such a thing of you.” Her voice was cold and grim.

“An easy thing for you to say, Lady of the Silver Tree.” It was the Lord of Emerald Lights who spoke, his radiant attendants subdued. “You already were doomed when this day began.”

“You dare—”

The room fell into chaos, the lords and ladies shouting at one another. Ice spread where the Lord of Taer Syraen struck his fist against the table, and green radiance filled the room. And out of the corner of her eye, Thorn saw the creature who had once been Cadrel smiling.

“Enough!” she cried.

None of them listened. “We have suffered enough indignities at your hands!” Syraen roared at Tira. “If you think I will allow one more—”

She drew Steel. “You want to explain this?” she muttered.

*It’s always possible they’ve all gone mad, he said.*
“That was my conclusion,” she murmured.

But from what I’m gathering, they consider the kiss to be an act of grave risk and that they would somehow be indebted to you for taking this risk.

Thorn shook her head. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She thought about the sensations that flowed through her when the surge of unnatural strength imbued her muscles. She drew on that again, only it wasn’t strength she sought. She imagined the voice of a dragon, echoing across the plains.

“Enough!” Thorn roared.

For all that she’d known what she was trying to do, she hadn’t truly expected it to work. Her voice was a thunderbolt, reverberating through the room; even the proud fey clutched their heads. All eyes turned back to her.

Thorn strode over to Cadrel, still trapped in his frigid prison. Even his empty eyes were wide.

“You want a kiss,” Thorn said. She glanced at the others. “You don’t want me to do it. So it seems this discussion is all about me. You.” She looked at Cadrel. “What exactly are you offering?”

“Three questions I will give you, and the answers told truthfully.” Eyebrows raised innocently over hollow sockets. “All for a single kiss, one memory for an old man to take with him to his grave.”

The Lord of Emerald Lights began to speak again, and Thorn silenced him with a piercing glare. “Now,” she said, looking at Tira. “Setting aside the fact that this little tragedy isn’t my problem. Why are you so concerned about me giving my old friend here a last kiss before Lord Syraen freezes his toes off?”

“Because this tragedy isn’t your problem,” Syraen hissed.

“He’s told you what is in his heart, nonetheless,” Tira said. “And what we all fear. You are not sworn to us. You cannot take such a risk with no gain.”

“Such a risk?” Thorn said. “It’s not my first kiss.”

“Fool of a girl,” Tira hissed. Her voice was filled with exhaustion. “Have you learned nothing? Have you never heard the tale of the princess sent to slumber for a thousand years, of the maiden turned to glass by my father’s touch? You walk in the world of stories now. This one harvests nightmares. There’s no knowing what he truly has in store for you.”

Thorn glanced at the imprisoned spy. “Is that it, Cadrel? Are you a lady-killer?”

His shoulders were bound in ice, but he managed a convincing shrug with his eyebrows. “I cannot promise your safety, my dear. That’s what gives spice to the story, isn’t it? I will hold to my promise: one kiss before you or I leave this room, and you will have three answers. As to whether you will survive the experience … there’s only one way for either of us to find out.”

He craned his neck forward, pursing his lips. An instant later, the ice was all around him, his head completely encased in the frigid prison.

“I have lost enough today,” Syraen said. “No more.”

Thorn turned to face him. “You’re afraid, is that it?”

The eladrin rose to his full height, glaring down at her. “Beware, woman. In this moment I owe you nothing.”

It’s the stories, Steel whispered. But Thorn understood.

“That’s right. You owe me nothing. And you’re terrified that I’ll do you a favor.”

“You’re learning.” It was the gnome who sat across the way. “This is our world and our way. Weakened as we are, we cannot shoulder an unknown debt.”

“Fine,” Thorn said, thoughts racing. A part of her wanted to walk away. Her task had been to escort Drix to the Tree, and she’d done that. Stories of the Mourning, the theft of the stone—none of that affected Breland.

Still, there was the mystery of it. Cadrel had been advising Oargev for years, and yet Cadrel’s deception had been designed to make the fey blame Cyre for the assault. Cadrel and Shan Doresh might be striking at the eladrin, but who else was getting caught in the crossfire? What might she learn by following through? Was she really afraid of a kiss?

She wanted to unravel the plot. Cadrel had almost pulled off the theft in her shadow. She wanted to know why. And if she could find some benefit for Breland, all the better.

“I can help you,” Thorn said. “So let’s talk terms. Mine are simple enough. I’m here as a representative of Breland. If I do this, you’ll open your gates to my people and accept ambassadors from the court.”

“Impossible,” Tira said, and the others nodded in agreement. “Look at the chaos you alone have brought with your arrival. We want nothing to do with your kings and your wars.”

“Just as well, I suppose,” Thorn said. “We don’t have much interest in yours. So I suppose I’ll be on my way.”

“Wait.” The eladrin woman raised a hand. “We cannot make promises to your king or to your kingdom. It is you
who will take the risk on our behalf.” She looked at the other fey. “So what say you, ghaele all? Will you pay for her
services?”

Thorn thought about a sharp reply, but she was curious to see where Tira was going. The entire situation had a
dreamlike quality to it. Cadrel’s betrayal, Cazalan Dal, all of it … it was almost like listening to a story, and she was
curious to see what would happen next.

One by one, the lords and ladies nodded.

Tira turned to Thorn. “Very well. We make this offer to you, not to your king, not to your country. Help us in this
matter, with these questions and where it may lead. Help us and we shall each pay you in our own coin.” She looked
at the others.

The gnome set a pendant on the table, a silver chain set with a stone that shimmered and shifted like the colors of
his robe. “Within the walls of my citadel, we value words more highly than gold,” he said. “And I believe you are
one who relies on her wits as well as her blade. Wear this and you shall understand any words you hear spoken. And
any who hear you will understand you, as if you speak the tongue they both know and expect from you.”

_The stone holds a strong divinatory aura_, Steel said. _It seems plausible. I’ve heard that House Sivis already has
such a thing._

Thorn nodded. “Impressive,” she said. “And still, something I could buy myself if I had a little more coin. Not
exactly a stone of immortality.”

“We cannot offer what we have already lost.” It was the ice lord, blue light gleaming in his eyes. “Nor would we,
as it was that foolish action that has brought this dilemma upon us. You mock us, girl, and still I offer my blessing.”
He removed a silver brooch from his cloak and set it on the table. “I offer protection. Wear my sigil and the cold will
not touch you. You will never feel the chill of winter, never suffer discomfort or harm from the frost.”

_Confirmed_, Steel said. _Elemental protection._

Again, it might be a useful trinket for her, but she hadn’t come there on a treasure hunt. How did any of that serve
Breland? “A generous gift, to be sure,” Thorn said. She looked at the next eladrin.

Emerald lights spun around Lord Joridal, reflected in the gold of his robes. “I brought no jewels or treasures,” he
said. “But my gift is one that transcends mere gold or silver. I offer you comfort. Aid us in this matter, and I will
place my mark upon you. You will find that old friends cross your path sooner than expected, and new ones come to
your door.”

_That seems difficult to quantify_, Steel murmured. _It’s an intriguing idea, but he may simply be covering for the
fact that he has nothing to offer._

Thorn was inclined to agree, but there was no need to embarrass the man; she’d gathered his spire was under
assault, and it was hardly surprising that he had little to offer. She looked at the Rose Queen.

“Mine is the City of Rose and Thorn,” the woman said. “I will not open my gates to your kingdom. But should
you serve us in this and live to tell of it, you will be welcomed with any you should bring.”

_Well, that’s something_, Steel said. _Only one … still, a personal invitation, and a welcome._

Yes, Thorn thought. The other gifts were intriguing, yet left her nothing of great interest to take back to Zane. But
that last … at least it opened the door for future exploration.

Only Lady Tira was left. “Perhaps it was my hand that set this tragedy in motion,” she said. “And so I must offer
the greatest gift of all. I know you do not believe in what we seek to do. You do not believe that we can save your
land by saving Marudrix. And so I make my offer to you. Aid us in this matter, and I will tell you the truth.”

“The truth?” Thorn said. “About what?”

“About you,” Tira said. “There are secrets within you. Even now, I can see that they weigh upon you. I do not
know how you came by the Preserving Shard or the Quiet Stone. But serve me in this, and I will tell you. If you
forge this bond between us and survive it, I will reach through that bond to read your soul. I will tell you all you
wish to know about your past.”

“I need to think about this,” Thorn turned away, staring at the glittering prison that held Cadrel. She rubbed Steel
against her palm. “It still seems like madness.”

_I cannot offer any guidance in this matter_, Steel whispered. _It might be best to return and inform the Citadel of
Cadrel’s betrayal as quickly as possible. On the other hand, you were sent to gather information about these
creatures, and you are certainly doing that. And there is one more factor._

She tapped Steel thoughtfully.

_The Mourning. The tale that first brought us here. Unlikely as before, yet still … What if there is truth to it? What
if they can bring an end to the Mourning?_
“What can you tell me about the risks?” she said.

“Nothing,” Tira said behind her, and Steel echoed the word in her mind. “All we know are that he draws on fear and nightmare.”

Thorn walked over to stand before the icy coffin. She thought about Cadrel. About the time she’d spent with him at the galas in Sharn, the trek through the Mournland. She thought about his smile and the strange, dark eyes, and what she still saw of the old man in that face. He was playing a game, certainly, but what was it?

“Let’s break the ice,” she said. “I’ll do it.”

“I knew you’d see the wisdom in it,” Cadrel said once he could speak again. “There are so many things I can tell you … if you survive, of course.”

The spymaster was still bound in his prison of ice, staring at her with those inky eyes. The pits of shadow made it difficult for Thorn to read his expression, but still, she didn’t feel menace in him. What are you playing at? she thought.

“Let’s get this over with.”

She leaned forward but Cadrel pulled his head back. “I’m supposed to kiss you with my hands bound in this way? With you pressed against the ice? Oh, my dear, this hardly seems fair or pleasant for you. Would you ask a master to play an instrument without his hands?”

“You didn’t say anything about the bonds,” Thorn told him. “If you want the kiss, let’s be done with it now. Otherwise, I’m taking the next boat to Breland.”

Cadrel glanced up toward the heavens for a moment. “It is your loss, my dear. Though perhaps the ice will be sufficient to reduce my ardor, to keep from overwhelming you with the fire of my passion. Perhaps—”

Thorn put one hand behind his head and pushed her lips against his …

And the world fell away.
A moment earlier she’d been pressed against a slab of ice, staring into the shadow-filled eyes of a traitor. When
she looked around, the ice was gone. She wasn’t in the fey citadel anymore. She was in a hallway that had haunted
her dreams for the past year. Behind her, a wall of whirling dragonshards rose from floor to ceiling, a glittering
whirlwind that could tear a man to pieces.

Far Passage.

The man in her arms was as familiar as the room, tall and lean, his black shiftweave pulling the darkness to him.
Vambraces of blackened mithral, just like those she wore, covered his arms. He pulled back from the kiss, and his
smile was as warm as she remembered.

Lharen. Her mentor when she’d first joined the Dark Lanterns. He’d died in that very room—died destroying the
mystic core that lay behind them.

He frowned as she took a step back, but she wasn’t fooled. She reached down for Steel, but he wasn’t there. She
was dressed as she’d been on the mission, and she hadn’t received Steel until afterward—when Lharen was dead and
she was still recovering from her injuries.

“Amusing,” she said. “Very clever. I’ve dealt with changelings before, and I’m not in the mood for games now. I
gave you what you asked. Now it’s time for answers.”

He was good; she had to give him that. For someone who’d never seen Lharen before, Cadrel managed his
expressions perfectly. The look of concern was just as she remembered it. “There’s no time for talk,” he said. “I
don’t expect to walk away from this. But I’ve beaten the odds before. Perhaps—”

Those were his final words, the last thing he’d told her before diving into the core. She wasn’t about to listen to it
again. She hit him, swinging her fist forward and letting all rage flow into her arm. The strength of the dragon
surged through her, and she felt bone snap beneath her fist. The false Lharen flew backward, falling into the storm of
shards. The cry was choked off in an instant, and he was gone.

She was still in the hall. Still looking at the mystic core and the whirling crystals, flecks of blood scattered across
the floor. She’d expected it all to fade. And yet … she was still there. What did it mean?

“How did that feel, beloved?”

The voice came from behind her, and Thorn could feel the familiar presence, a scent she’d come to know as well
as his voice: Drego Sarhain.

She turned to face him. “I’m not your beloved, Drego.”

He wore the guise she’d seen at their first meeting, the black and silver doublet of a Thrane courtier. Lharen had
been rough, scarred by fire and battle. Drego’s skin was perfect and unblemished, not a hair out of place. “You
could be,” he said.

She shook her head. “I’m not having this conversation. You’re no more real than Lharen was.”

“Which is to say, I’m just as real as he was,” Drego replied. “And it seems to me that you’ve little else to do. We
can sit here in silence if you’d prefer.”

“What do you want?” Thorn said. “And you can stop pretending, Cadrel. I know this is you.”

“Oh, it is, on some level,” Drego said. “Your friend deals with nightmares. The death of your first real lover. And
you and I … well, it seems we have unresolved issues. If I’d been in his place, I might have looked for something a
little darker to work with, but perhaps it was all he could do with the opening you gave him. Love. Are you afraid of
my love, Thorn?”

“You don’t love me,” Thorn said. “And you’re not here now.”

“A part of me is. I’m a memory. A fear,” he said. “I love the shadow within you. I love the dragon waiting to be
reborn. You’re not Sarmondelaryx. You’re not the one I gave my heart to in ages past. But you will not last. In time, she will crush your spirit and take your life from you.”

“You sure know how to win a girl over.”

Drego shrugged with that easy grin she remembered so well. “I’m just telling you what you already know. This is your nightmare, after all. The more you use her power, the stronger she becomes. And yet when you struck that shadow a moment ago, the one you thought was this Cadrel, you drew on her strength.”

“I—” She didn’t have an answer. He was right. She was getting used to the power, beginning to rely on it.

Drego smiled. “Perhaps there is too little to hold on to in your life.”

“There is plenty good in my life,” she said.

“Oh?” Drego stepped toward her. “A brother you barely speak to. Father and mother gone. A country your only love, a country you don’t even know whether to trust. What really happened in this place, beloved?”

Thorn stepped back. Part of her wanted to throw him across the room, to banish the shadow as she’d banished the shade of Lharen. And yet … the doubt was a dagger in her heart.

So many things didn’t add up. The Citadel had given her a ring, told her it sharpened her senses and let her see in the dark, but she knew those were talents she drew from Sarmondelaryx. Someone in the Citadel had wanted to keep that knowledge hidden, to prevent her from noticing the change that had taken place, the change that had occurred when the stones were embedded in her spine. The eladrin claimed the stones were ancient treasures, ancient treasures that just happened to be thrown at her as shrapnel.

“I’d love to hear the answer,” she said.

“I wish I could give it to you,” Drego said. “I’m not really here. I’m only a shadow, conjured to do Cadrel’s bidding. But he doesn’t know what he’s called. I am far older than he, and there is a spark of me even in this shade. So I will tell you this: I gave my heart to the Angel of Flame long before you were born. And yet I told you the truth beneath Sharn. Flawed as you are, I love you as well. You are the flower I will treasure, even knowing it will fade. You may be doomed, but do not go easily, Nyrielle. Don’t fall to the likes of this one.”

He took another step toward her and she matched it. He looked at her, and she remembered that gleam in his eye from the first moment in a wagon in Droaam, remembered seeing it fade in the tunnels of Sharn. She leaned in and kissed him.

The ice was cold against her chest, her doublet wet with the melt. She released Cadrel’s head, staring into the shadowy pools of his eyes. He was surprisingly subdued, seemingly lost in thought. Then he blinked, finally focusing on her.

“I’ve paid your price,” she said. “Now I believe you owe me answers.”

He nodded. He looked at her again and found his voice. “Three questions. Three answers, told in truth.”

“The first is simple enough. Oargev. Cadrel … the real Cadrel. Dal. What part did they truly play in all this?”

The man in the ice smiled slightly. “Such a fine story we crafted for you, and all gone to waste now. You never met Cazalan Dal, my dear; he died in the Mournland months ago. The man you met in Sharn was a figment drawn from Prince Oargev, still tormented by guilt over his failure to his people. Having established Dal in your minds, it was easy enough to use him again. If all had gone as planned, my cousins would have blamed your five nations for their loss and gone to their graves believing that it was their own incompetency that had brought them to such an ignominious end.”

“So Dal was just your stalking horse,” Thorn murmured. “And Oargev had nothing to do with this.”

“The young prince had no hand in this matter, it’s true,” Cadrel said. “But he has many fascinating dreams for New Cyre, secrets your Citadel would just love to learn. Would you like to hear them? You have two more questions, my dear. I can tell you what these sad ghalei wish to know. Or I can share some of what I’ve learned in my service as Oargev’s spymaster … and some of the schemes I’ve set in motion.”

Thorn hadn’t even considered that. Whatever his true nature, it seemed that the creature before her had been posing as Essyn Cadrel for some time. And yet … it was part of the game. She could see it. He was torturing the eladrin again, and she wouldn’t serve as his pawn. She’d agreed to take their coin, and she’d see her promise through.

“I’m not letting you slip away so easily,” Thorn said. “My second question: Why did you steal the shards?”

“We have suffered torments you cannot imagine, spent an eternity in a realm of horrors. And all because our cousins left us to our fate. At first we wanted vengeance against the giants. We swore to find a way to escape and make the Titan Cul’sir pay for our pain. As lifetimes passed, we realized that wouldn’t be enough. The giants were
the agents of our downfall, but it was our kin who set everything in motion. If they’d fought at our side, we could have defeated the giants then and there. We never would have suffered. And so they would suffer as we had suffered. They would see their world fall to nightmares. They would feel flesh twisting from within. Perhaps you’ll show us what lies beneath that veil, Lady Tira?"

“You’re just gloating,” Thorn said. “You promised me an answer. Why take the stones, specifically?”

“You’ve heard the reason. You’ve seen it already. The Tree cannot survive without them. And the spires cannot stand without the Tree and without the shards to protect them from their enemies. Even as they rot from within, our cousins will be crushed from without. They will see their dreams turn to horror.”

“Then my third and final question: Where has your master taken the shards?”

“Where you cannot follow, and that is the truth.” Cadrel laughed. “To Taer Lian Doresh, the Fortress of the Fading Dream. Even if you could find it, you could never reach it in time.” His eyes flickered over to the ghaele.

“And no fey force will ever breach its walls. He has long prepared for your coming, Lords and Ladies. The walls of the fortress are girded against your powers. He has gathered your names and those of your followers. He will feel you as you draw near and break you in his place of power. You may as well return to your demesnes. Watch the Silver Tree fall and your spires rot from within. The world will be your grave … your nightmare made real.”

“Enough!” Tira said. She raised a hand, and masked guards surrounded the imprisoned bard. “Take him away. Imprison him in a cleft cell. Let no living guard observe him, lest his fears be used against us. And have Marudrix brought to this chamber; we will have need of him.”

The eladrin murmured but Tira would not speak until Cadrel had been removed. Drix was brought into the chamber and smiled as he saw Thorn. She nodded at him, but Tira interrupted before they could speak.

“Fellow ghaele, we have been deceived and abused. Our enemies sought to turn us against one another and came within mere moments of succeeding. The ritual I have prepared to heal the wound and cleanse the Tree … it must be performed within the next three days. It will be a hundred years before the planes are aligned again, and by then the Tree will be dust.”

“What are we to do?” the Rose Queen said. “We cannot find our foe, and we cannot fight him.”

“Oh, we can find him,” Tira said. “I am no fool. I had my doubts about Shan Doresh the moment he arrived, though I admit I thought him an imposter, not a true and vengeful revenant. I placed my mark upon him.”

“A scrying mark,” Thorn said. That was the same trick the false Cazalan Dal had said he’d used on her. “Then you can locate him?”

The Lady of the Silver Tree nodded. “But it will take all our strength and more. Marudrix, we will have to draw on the energies of the Stone of Life.”

Drix frowned. “I thought you said you couldn’t take it out without the other stones?”

“There is more to its power than simple healing, child. Far more. I cannot remove it from you yet. But we can focus the ritual through you. I simply need you to reach inside, to feel the power and shape it.”

Drix looked at Thorn.

“What are the risks?” Thorn said.

“It is our nature to hide from prying eyes,” Tira replied. “I will need the power of the heart if I am to pierce Shan Doresh’s natural wards. But there is no danger to Marudrix; we simply cannot proceed unless he opens the way.”

Drix shrugged. “Sounds interesting,” he said.

Tira led the way to a chamber higher in the tree. There were long cracks in the silver walls, a cold wind whistling through the narrow gaps. A circle was engraved into the floor, a vast seal covered with spidery symbols and sigils. The other eladrin had been silent throughout the questioning, and they remained subdued; most seemed lost in their own thoughts, perhaps considering the impact of the loss of their treasures. Each one walked to a place in the ring, and slowly the sigils around them burst into light, cold fire spreading out across the entire seal.

Tira led Drix into the center of the room. “Lie down,” she told him and he complied. She walked backward, taking her place on the edge of the ring. She looked at Thorn. “Remove your dagger from the chamber, if you will.”

 Thorn could feel Steel’s disappointment, but she could hardly argue with the fey queen. She concentrated, slipping Steel into the pocket of space within a glove. The stone in Drix’s chest began to glow. It still pulsed, like the beat of a heart.

“Can you feel my touch, Marudrix?” Tira’s voice was quiet, yet it filled the room.

“Yes,” he said softly.

“Don’t be afraid. Don’t resist. Feel the stone. Feel the energy within it.”

The pulses were brighter.
“I want you to reach out with each beat,” Tira said. “Feel the energy as it flows away from you, as it spills out into
the world.”

“Yes,” Drix murmured.

Even Thorn could feel the energy, a tingling rippling over her skin with every pulse. The light in the stone was
nearly blinding.

Tira called out. Her words were meaningless to Thorn, but she’d taken the gifts of the other lords, and even as she
heard the strange sounds, she knew their meaning. Join together, brothers and sisters. Reach through the roots. Let
us be as one.

The others began but they were not speaking; they were singing. It was a song of hope, of desire, a chance to see a
dream made real. The light of the stone and the seal pulsed and flowed, and Thorn could feel the energy around her
as a physical force. It was an amazing sensation—a warm wind, yet one that touched only her spirit.

The glowing lines of the seal had risen up from the floor, and they formed a cage of light around the eladrin and
Drix. As they sang, the lines twisted and shifted. For a flash, Thorn saw a crescent—the moon-and-eye symbol of
Shan Doresh. The shimmering symbols spread out and realigned and pulled back in to form a labyrinthine pattern.
The song sped up as the lines shifted, focusing on a single section of the maze, pulling in, closer, closer …

The song became a scream. The white-silver lines of light turned blood red, and for an instant Thorn saw a
monstrous shape outlined in the glow: a face—just a face—but the eyes were blazing pools, the mouth a hungry pit
of flame. Around Thorn, the eladrin were screaming, and those howls of pain and fear were still forming a
horrifying song.

Thorn couldn’t reach Drix. Whatever that thing was, it was completely surrounding him. But she seized Tira and
pulled. The eladrin was rigid, and some force held her in place. Cursing, Thorn called on the dragon’s strength,
feeling the familiar anger and might. Whatever power was binding Tira, it was no match for the dragon. She
staggered back from the circle and collapsed, dead weight in Thorn’s arms.

And with that, silence and darkness fell over the room. The snarling horror vanished; the eladrin fell to the
ground; and the light slowly faded from Drix’s heart, down to the faint pulse that was always there.

It took an hour for the eladrin to recover, and none of them were pleased. Tira had called them back to the room
with the silver table and served wines and cordials. The lords and ladies drank deeply, and though no one spoke,
Thorn could tell the tension was building with each moment.

Tira leaned against the table. Her eyes were dim, her breath ragged. “We can do no more. Were we to try again,
that horror might manifest itself fully. And yet it was not a completely wasted effort.”

“But we didn’t see anything,” Thorn said.

Tira raised her head. “Details, no. I saw the wider picture. I saw enough. Taer Doresh has returned to its first
ground, the land it held in the time of my grandfather.” She gestured at the wall, and a map of Khorvaire took shape
across the surface. “There, in the northeastern woods.”

“The wilds of the Lhazaar Principalities,” Thorn said, studying the map. “Far from anything. Can you teleport
there?”

Tira shook her head. “Only a few among us possess the power to travel such distances, and we could not take
others with us. And you heard the prisoner. Doresh is expecting us. He will have wards to keep us from slipping
between worlds. All we would do is alert him to our presence.”

Those words were enough to break the spell of silence that had gripped the ghaele. “Perhaps we cannot defeat him
in time,” Syraen said, his voice filled with cold frustration. “We can defeat him nonetheless. Let us assemble our
forces. If we are to fade from this world, let us go in battle.”

The gnome-lord of Pylas Pyrial shook his head. “Your people are warriors, Winter. Mine are poets. I will not send
them to die. If our spire falls, better that they find new homes among the people of this world. We may never return
to Thelanis. But we do not have to fall.”

“What if we go?” Drix said.

“I agree with Pyrial,” the Rose Queen said. “I would still see how the bough survives without the trunk.”

“What makes you think they will let you be?” Joridal said. “How did the goblins find us so quickly? What stirs
the Karrns to aggression? Perhaps you will survive the fall of the Tree. But if these dreamers want their vengeance,
they will come for you, and they have the stone of your spire.”

“What if we go?” Drix said.

“Joridal is right,” Syraen said. “We have been attacked. We must strike back while we can, or we give our foes
the chance to strike again. We will not live in fear.”

While they were talking, Drix took a piece of parchment out of one of his pouches. He rolled it up, creating a cone. He drew a few symbols on the parchment then took a deep breath and held it up to his mouth. When he spoke, his voice was as loud as thunder.

“What if we go?”

The ghaele fell silent and looked at him.

“He’ll sense your presence,” Drix said, “because you’re creatures like him. But what if Thorn and I go? What if we get the stones for you?”

All eyes turned to Thorn.

“You swore to serve us in this matter,” Tira said. “With the questions and where they lead. And I still hold the truth of you. What say you?”

That I’d like a simple job fighting ogres and werewolves, she thought. And yet … What really happened in this place, beloved? She heard Drego’s voice in her mind and wondered what Tira might be able to tell her.

“It doesn’t matter. We’d never get there in time. Even with an airship.”

“I wasn’t thinking of an airship,” Drix said. “There’s an Orien enclave in Ascalin, abandoned since the Mourning.” He rubbed a hand over his heart. “I think … I think I could get the teleportation circle working. Take us to the closest circle. There’s got to be one nearby, somewhere in the Principalities.”

Thorn looked at the map. “And then we charter an airship, or a Vadalis bird. It’s possible. But how would you get an Orien circle to work for you?”

“Trust me. I can do it.”

Thorn looked at the eladrin. “Ascalin is still too far away if we’re traveling by foot. We could try this. But you’ll need to get us to Ascalin and quickly.”

“It is done,” Syraen replied. “My retinue came on hippogriffs. If you speak of the ruins of the north, my soldiers can take you there. It would be hours, no more.”

“Then let’s get ready,” she said.

Drix hugged her then. Her first instinct was to push him away, her Citadel defense training flashing to the fore. She pushed it down and hugged him back.

“We can do this,” he said. “Together. We can save the world.”

“Recover the shards, no more,” Tira said. “You cannot conceive of the power Shan Doresh has at his disposal.”

Syraen nodded. “Save the Tree. Bring us the stones. If there is war to be fought, we shall fight it.”

“I’m not arguing that,” Thorn said. “Just give me my equipment and show us to the hippogriffs. Let’s take the battle to the dreaming citadel.”
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Ruins of Ascalin The Mournland
Barrakas 25, 999 YK

Where’s a griffon when you need one?” Thorn muttered. It was the first time she’d ridden a hippogriff, and it was proving to be a difficult experience. The beast balked at the unfamiliar sensation of Thorn on its back. Luckily the beast had been trained to follow the movements of the flight leader, and rough as it was, all Thorn really had to do was hold on. And with Drix on his own hippogriff and the flight leader well out of earshot, she finally had the chance to have the conversation she’d been waiting for.

She drew Steel, holding tightly to the stirrup horn with her free hand. “I think we’ve got a few things to talk about.”

What did you have in mind?

“I still think this idea that the Mourning was caused by stabbing Drix is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

I’ve never disagreed with that. However, it may very well be the source of the malady affecting the Silver Tree itself. The levels of necrotic energy around the Tree were far higher than anywhere else we’ve been in the Mournland. As deadly as the region is, there is a sickness in that place. Curses are real. Even if they are deluded to think that they destroyed Cyre, they may well have sealed their own fate.

“In which case, saving them and leaving them in Breland’s debt may be the best outcome.”

Yes, even if only one has agreed to negotiate, it’s still a worthwhile outcome. Of course, if you could acquire the stone in Drix’s chest yourself, you know Breland could use immortal soldiers.

“And that’s my real question,” Thorn said. “The shards in my back. Why do they believe that they are fey treasures?”

Why do you believe that they aren’t?

“You told me they weren’t magical!”

They do not radiate an aura of magical energy. That’s a far cry from saying they aren’t magical.

“So you think they’re shielded.”

It’s the most logical explanation. “The Quiet Stone,” they called it. What if its power is to conceal? I know that you’re trained to resist divinations, but your talent for it has always been remarkable. I’ve never been able to detect the aura of any item in your possession. Even now, I know your inventory—your gloves, bracers, shiftweave, pack—but I can’t read the auras of any of it.

“So let’s pretend that is indeed the case, that there’s a magic stone in my back and I’ve never known about it. How is that possible?”

The shards were already there when I was assigned to work with you. I was told it was an accident during the mission at Far Passage.

“That’s right. We were sent to sabotage an arcane core. There were hundreds of dragonshards bound to the core—I was struck by a score of them. Our fey friends said one of these stones was stolen by a dragon. How’d they end up in the hands of an Aundairian arcanist? And how does it just happen to be the stone that hits me?”

It does seem rather unlikely. I fail to see any more logical alternative, however.

“I wish I did. None of this makes sense.”

I’m more concerned about Essen Cadrel. If we are to believe what he said, it sounds as though this eladrin had been impersonating him for an extended period of time … since he first reappeared following the Mourning and took his position in Oargev’s retinue.

“It would explain how Oargev’s childhood jester developed the skill to be a spymaster,” Thorn said.

To what end? This Shan Doresh seems focused on vengeance against the other eladrin. So why infiltrate the Cyran court? And if he accomplished that so easily … Do they have agents in other nations?
“You’re right,” Thorn said. “Something doesn’t add up. Keep thinking about it. That’s our destination up ahead. Stay alert. Strange auras, the slightest fluctuation in mystical energy … if you sense anything, you tell me.”

Understood.

The hippogriffs dropped down toward Ascalin. Thorn blinked, squinting down at the streets below. There were people on the streets, and the cold-fire lanterns were still burning. She could see a crowd gathered around a street performer, a man performing tricks with trained animals. After the lonely desolation of Seaside and the slow rot of the Silver Tree, it seemed impossibly mundane. She could see farmers selling their wares in the small market square, a group of children playing circle games, a procession leaving the temple of the Sovereign Host. For a moment she smiled. Then she realized something was terribly wrong.

No one was moving.

The children were frozen in their game. The spectators were raising their arms to cheer for the performing, but there were no cries of joy, no laughter, no applause. It was a moment frozen in time. And there was something else. Where the cold-fire lanterns spread their light, Thorn could see that the city was gleaming. It seemed as though the city were covered with a thin layer of ice, for all that it was too warm for anything to freeze. But she could see the light reflecting off every surface and even off the people standing around the lampposts.

Thorn held Steel out as the hippogriff swooped toward the ground. “Impressions?”

None at this distance, he replied. Strong necrotic resonance, the same energies I’ve felt across the Mournland. Not especially powerful, though—not anything compared to the darkness around the Silver Tree.

The hooves of the hippogriffs left craters in the ground when they landed, cracks spreading out from the point of impact like fine spiderwebs. It wasn’t ice after all; it was glass. Thorn slid out of the saddle, carefully testing the surface. Not as bad as slick ice, she thought. But certainly treacherous footing. They’d come down in a wide avenue, and there were a few people standing on the edge of the road. Whether it was a function of the glass or an effect of the Mourning, they were perfectly preserved. Each spectator was covered in a layer of glass an inch thick, the surface smooth and clear.

There’s nothing magical about the glass itself, Steel told her. And no signs of burns of the flesh, as you’d expect if molten glass fell from the sky. I’m guessing that they suffocated.

“It must have happened within moments,” Thorn said. “Look at their expressions. No fear, not even surprise. It was over before they even knew what was happening.”

Drix dismounted, handing the reins of his hippogriff to the eladrin flight master. “Eerie, isn’t it?”

“You knew about this?”

Drix nodded. “I spent some time wandering after I left the Silver Tree, after it all happened. I just … Ascalin was on the route my father traveled. I’d survived. I hoped I might find him here.”

Thorn looked at the child trapped in glass. “And did you?”

Drix shook his head. “No. Not here. Not in Kethelfeld or Greenbarrow or any of the others. I walked the old path, and I never found him.” His eyes were distant for a moment, lost in the past.

“You just wandered across the Mournland by yourself? How did you survive?”

He smiled faintly, running a finger over his hidden crystal heart. “It’s easy to survive when you can’t die. I don’t eat. I don’t sleep. I’ve had my bones crushed and flesh burnt and far worse than that. It never lasts … bones mend the moment they break, clothes turn to ash but the flesh remains.”

“And you’re not afraid to give that up? To let them take the stone away?” Thorn was honestly curious.

“I want it to end,” he said. “I want to sleep again. I want an end to the pain. And this …” He gestured at the frozen city. “If this is somehow tied to me, if I can restore the land, any price would be worth that.”

“You really believe that? Do you think it’s that easy?”

“None of this makes sense,” he said. “Look around you. What could cause this? I know the idea that restoring my heart could somehow heal the land … it’s ridiculous. But this is a mad world, and if it’s possible, I won’t let that chance slip away.”

“You came here for a reason, and you waste time we do not have.” The flight master was one of Lord Syraen’s guards, and he shared his lord’s icy demeanor. “You, maimed one, you know where you need to go?”

Drix nodded. “I know the way to the Orien enclave. It’s not far.”

“I will wait here for a time, to ensure that you have accomplished your task. Then I will depart with my beasts.”

“Then lead the way, Drix,” Thorn said. She saw a rat crouched in an alley, frozen in glass yet still watching. “We may be heading toward a fortress of nightmares, but I’ll be just as happy to leave this place behind.”

They passed a cutpurse, frozen in the moment of his theft. A beggar with his hand held out, eyes pleading behind
the glass. Finally they reached the enclave. It was located on the largest plaza in the little town, along with outposts of a few other dragonmarked houses. A gnome stood outside the Sivis message station, hand outstretched.

Something was wrong.

It took her a moment to make sense of it; then she realized. The gnome’s hand wasn’t encased in glass. She saw that there were others around the plaza and shards of glass scattered around the ground.

She paused by a dwarf dressed in the robes of a Kundarak banker. Glass still covered much of his body. His face was frozen behind its translucent mask. But the glass around his waist was cracked and broken away, and fragments were scattered all around him.

“Someone chiseled this away,” she said. “His belt’s been cut … to remove his pouch, I’m guessing. He’s missing a finger too.” The wound was jagged and rough, but there were no bloodstains, and the flesh was still fresh; it seemed that the glass wasn’t the only thing that prevented decomposition. “Looters.”

It made sense. They weren’t far from the Valenar border. And if there was anything truly worth stealing in that place, it would be in the coffers of the dragonmarked. Glancing around the plaza, she could see that a number of doors and windows had been forced open, glass shattered so the salvagers could get into buildings. The Orien house was among them. The unicorn seal of the house was carved on the door, but it had been scarred and cracked when the looters forced their way into the building.

“I suppose we should be grateful,” she said. “I left my glass-smashing tools in my other gloves.”

Drix paused fifteen feet from the entrance, staring. “I suppose,” he said. “But … where’s the sentry?”

“What sentry?”

“I passed through this plaza before. There was a guard at the Orien gate. Trapped in glass like the rest. Now there’s nothing there. Why would someone take his body?”

“I don’t think they did. Not all of it, at least.” Thorn approached the gate cautiously. Large slabs of glass were heaped around the doorway, refuse from the efforts to force the door. She carefully shifted a few pieces aside, revealing the shadow seen through the glass. A leather boot, still trapped in the glass, with a good part of a leg still in it. The body had been snapped with sheer brute force; it was the work of a sledgehammer or maul. She picked up a smaller shard and tossed it to Drix. “Take a look—links of chain mail in the glass. I think our looters were searching for keys or other ways to bypass security. They just shattered the body with a maul and picked out what they needed. As for the missing pieces, perhaps there’s predators we haven’t seen. We should certainly be prepared for anything. Can you sense anything unusual?”

“Unusual? Not really.”

It wasn’t Drix she’d been talking to. I believe you are correct. There are still residual traces of energies on the doorway … an old ward, broken when it was, well, broken. They likely hoped to find a key charm on the guard, and perhaps they did.

“Anything else?” Thorn said.

“Nothing you haven’t already figured out,” Drix said. “You’re very clever.”

Isn’t that sweet? Steel said. I’m sensing active auras within the building. Nothing specific, especially at this distance, but I’d be careful.

“Let me go in first. Stay back until I say it’s safe.” She made her way gingerly across the broken glass and slid Steel’s point inside the doorframe.

There’s no glass inside the building, he reported. The cold-fire lanterns are still burning. There are bodies, perfectly preserved, but I see no signs of life. Minor auras—the lanterns, environmental cooling charms—nothing threatening.

Thorn stepped through the door, setting her back against the wall as soon as she was inside. “Whatever happened to these people, it must have been off-peak hours,” she said. There were only four bodies in the lobby. A clerk lay slumped across the reception desk, a slip of paper still clutched in her hand and a few copper crowns scattered across the desk. A man had fallen to the floor before her, a package under his arm, ready to send by Orien courier. And there was a courier, coming out of the main hallway. All three were dead, though without a mark on them.

She leaned out the door and gestured to Drix. “Come in but stay behind me. I don’t think we’ll find anything alive in here. What are we looking for?”

“The main circle chamber. It shouldn’t be hard to find.”

House Orien bore the mark of passage, and transportation was their trade. The greatest minds of the house had developed many tools to channel the power of their dragonmark, from the saddle that lent speed to a mount to the lightning rail coaches that had become a vital part of the economic infrastructure of Khorvaire. Their most wondrous
power was teleportation. Most Orien enclaves contained teleportation circles, and when the proper ritual was performed, goods or people could be transported from one circle to another in the blink of an eye. It was a far more efficient form of travel than the lightning rail or the Lyranadar airships, but the ritual that linked the circles was expensive, and it could be performed by only an Orien heir with a potent dragonmark. Thorn didn’t know how Drix planned to activate the circle without the mark, but it had been his idea, so she assumed he had a plan.

While she’d never been to that enclave, it was a place of business, and teleportation, a service offered. Signs on the walls pointed the way to different parts of the outpost, and it took only a moment to find the path to the teleportation circle.

“I’m the first around every corner,” she whispered to Drix. “You peer around and don’t follow until you see my signal. Do you understand?”

He shrugged. “I suppose. What are you worried about? Everyone’s dead and they wouldn’t have wards on the main chamber, would they?”

“We’re not taking any chances.” The fact of the matter was that the bodies had her on edge. They were too pristine, too clean; she couldn’t help but wait for one of them to stand up or for a hand to tighten around her ankle. She’d fought undead in the past; she still remembered the Koralat case in Karrnath, the madman’s manor filled with the walking corpses of his servants and kin, her own partner reaching for her throat with no sign of recognition in his glazed eyes. Perhaps the people of Ascalin were truly dead. And perhaps they weren’t.

She held Steel to the edge of the passage, tracing a cross on his hilt.

More bodies, he told her. I’m not sensing any wards. It appears to be safe.

“We’ll see.” She slipped around the corner. Something crunched under her foot, and she knelt down to examine it. It was a shard of glass, as long as her finger, loose on the floor. The looters must have brought it in with them, she thought. There were a few other chips scattered around. The air was still, the hall was silent. There was something … a smell, faint but unmistakable: blood.

The source of the scent was up and around the next corner. She moved cautiously, avoiding the scattered shards of glass and making no sound as she slipped across the hallway. The scent grew stronger as she drew closer to the corner. Drix ventured into the hallway behind her, his little crossbow in his hand. Thorn indicated that he should hold his position and slid Steel around the edge of the wall.

Four bodies, Steel told her. Messy business … blood on the walls and the floor. No one living. I can sense a few enchanted weapons, other minor magical auras … animated rope, pack of holding, Irian tears.

“Orien colors?” she whispered.

No uniforms. Dark clothing, painted armor, but no obvious insignia.

Sounds more like looters than guards, she thought. So what killed them?

The other bodies they’d found had been perfectly pristine. The victims might have simply fallen asleep. As such, the carnage Thorn found in the hallway was a shock.

“Messy business indeed,” she murmured.

Blood was spattered all over the walls and pooled around each of the corpses. There was an elf woman in dark chain mail, a short bow still clutched in her hand; a muscular half-orc; a human with a wand in his hand and two more tucked into his belt, a vest covered with pockets that likely held components for spells and rituals. The last body, a dwarf in a long, leather coat, his beard soaked with blood, caught Thorn’s eye. She noticed the dragonmark on his forehead and the scarring around it. It was the Mark of Warding, and the branding was something she’d heard of but never actually seen. A dragonmark heir expelled from a house was called an excoriate; in the distant past, the houses had actually cut the mark from the flesh of the victim. That practice had been abandoned before the rise of Galifar, but she’d heard that there were branches of some houses that still engaged in ritual scarring or branding for excoriates whose crimes against the house were especially severe. The Mark of Warding was used to craft mystical wards, locks, and alarms. But a gifted heir could learn to use the mark to shatter wards or open locks, and Thorn guessed that’s exactly what the dwarf had done.

Something’s very wrong, Steel said. Their weapons are out, but they aren’t in fighting postures. The wounds … dozens of small wounds.

“What’s that?” Thorn whispered. Something glittered in the neck of the elf: a shard of glass.

A memory rose in her mind. Far Passage. A man falling into a wall of whirling dragonshards. The shards of glass scattered across the hallway suggested an explosion. She studied the area, searching for any signs of danger, any hint of magic or a mundane trap. There was nothing, just blood, glass, and the bodies of the hapless explorers.

She prodded one of the shards of glass on the floor with Steel. There was blood on its edge.

If you’re searching for magical resonance, I don’t sense anything new.
Thorn examined the closest body, the elf woman. From a distance, she’d noticed the glass in her neck; upon closer inspection, she could see that there were other bits of glass buried in her skin, even fragments caught in the links of her chain mail.

Drix stuck his head around the corner. “Can I come in yet?”

Thorn sighed. “Stay there for now, Drix. I think that’s the chamber at the end of the hall. You can follow once I’m there.”

He nodded. “Where’d all the glass come from?”

I suppose if you spend months in the Mournland, an inexplicable pile of broken glass is more unusual than four dead bodies, Steel said.

“I don’t know,” Thorn said. “Just be careful.”

Thorn took a step back, whispering a word of power. Mystical energy surged through her, and she ran forward and leaped up and over the carnage, the power of the spell carrying her farther than muscle alone could manage. It was an easy jump, and she landed on her feet. She paused to examine the hall ahead, searching for any hints of mystical or mundane security, and found nothing.

Then there was a tinkling sound behind her, almost musical. Thorn’s sharp senses warned her of what lay behind her, even as she turned to see with her eyes.

The shards of glass were rising up from the corpses. Fragments of glass floated in the air, spinning and whirling. It was a storm, focused around a central core, and she could see that there were pieces of a fifth body within it—a hand, a head, the rest hidden by the glass. The Orien guard. The man missing from the front gate.

I hate the undead, she thought.

The storm of glass filled the hall, the shards slashing into the corpses scattered across the floor. It flowed slowly toward Thorn. She threw Steel at the heart of the storm, and he flew straight and true, and if the glass wraith even noticed the attack, it gave no sign of it. An instant later Steel was back in her hand. “Any ideas?” she said.

Certainly … send for an exorcist. There’s nothing solid in there to attack. Smashing every shard to powder might render it harmless, but that would be a challenging task.

“You think so?” The storm moved slowly, and Thorn inched back, keeping space between herself and the razor wind. “Could we push through it?” Thorn said, raising Steel.

Not if you want to stay alive, Steel said. You couldn’t possibly survive the passage. The circle chamber is just ahead, and if it follows the typical Orien model, it will have a strong door. Get inside. Seal the portal.

“I think you’re forgetting someone,” Thorn said.

You’re not going to get Drix through.

“We can’t leave without him,” Thorn pointed out, backing slowly away from the whirling glass. “Unless you know how to activate an Orien circle.”

I know that it can’t be done while you’re dead.

Sovereigns and Six, Thorn thought. The glass storm had pressed her almost all the way to the teleportation chamber. There was no more time to think, and none of her tools or spells would affect the spirit.

Even as the thought passed through her mind, she saw a figure silhouetted in the glass. A cry of pain filled the hallway—Drix’s voice. A moment later he stumbled out of the razor cloud. Dozens of slivers of glass were embedded in his skin, and blood was beginning to soak into his rough-spun clothes. A six-inch shard was projecting from his neck, and for a moment Thorn was back at Far Passage, seeing her partner shredded by the whirling dragonshards. Drix should have been dead on his feet. And Thorn could see that he was in agony, barely able to stand.

Thorn caught him as he fell, her strength surging with her anger. She threw the tinker over her shoulder and spun around. The teleportation chamber was just at the end of the hallway, and she sprinted as fast as she could, barely feeling Drix’s weight. The storm was close behind her, and an outlying shard grazed her neck as Thorn launched herself forward. One step … three … ten …

She let Drix fall to the ground as soon as she entered the room. Turning, she threw her full weight against the heavy door, pushing with everything she had. It had been five years since anyone had breached the chamber, and the hinges were stiff from disuse. Thorn strained against the heavy, wooden door, and slowly it began to shift. The storm had just reached the arch as Thorn drove the gate home. A handful of slivers slipped by as Thorn pressed the gate against the frame. As soon as the door was sealed and barred, the glass fell to the ground; whatever magic had brought it to life couldn’t reach through the heavy gate.

She could hear the storm raging outside, tearing into the wooden surface of the door. Seconds passed and it was as
fierce as ever; clearly the spirit’s wrath wasn’t about to subside. Thorn held Steel up. “How much time do we have?”

That depends how large of a hole it needs to make in the door in order to squeeze through, Steel told her. Perhaps ten minutes before there’s a breach.

There was a ragged gasp from behind her. Drix’s eyes were open, and she knelt down next to him. It was a ghastly sight. The storm had struck from every side, and his flesh was studded with shards of bloody glass. Something else caught her eye—a pale glow coming from beneath his shirt, by his left breast. A faint radiance pulsed with a steady beat.

It was the crystal heart, keeping him alive.

“Can you hear me?” she said.

He nodded slowly and pushed himself up with one hand. He opened his mouth, and the ragged gasp came out again. Reaching up, he closed his fingers around a shard buried in the side of the neck, pulling out a piece of glass the size of a knife blade. As soon as the glass was free, the wound sealed up. He opened his mouth and closed it again, running his hand along his neck.

“The circle,” he said. “Help me reach it.”

Thorn helped Drix stand and supported him as they made their way across the chamber. The circle, a ring of mystical symbols nearly fifteen feet across, filled the center of the room. They’d been carved into the wooden surface of the floor then filled with some sort of metal that gleamed like quicksilver in the cold-fire light. Maps covered the walls of the chamber. Khorvaire was spread across three walls, with the familiar landmarks of Breland to the left, Cyre straight ahead, and the coastline of the eastern shore to the right. Sparkling points of cold fire gleamed on the map, and Thorn recognized many of them as the locations of the greatest cities of the land—Sharn, Passage, Fairhaven, Flamekeep, Korth. There were at least a hundred points of light spread across the map, and all too few in the Lhazaar Principalities, where they were supposed to be headed.

“There,” he said. There was a podium in the back corner of the room with a mosaic of polished dragonshards set into the top. One large Siberys shard was set into the center of the podium, and as soon as they were close enough, Drix reached out for it. He leaned against the column as he wrapped his hand around the crystal sphere and closed his eyes.

There was a chill in the air, and Thorn could feel a charge building, the pressure of a rising storm. Then the circle burst into life, cold flames licking across the quicksilver runes. The points on the map flickered, flaring up one at a time then fading again.

“Are those the other gates?” Thorn said.

“Yes,” Drix murmured. “This … is a conduit for the power of the dragonmark. The links … are here.”

“You don’t have the dragonmark,” Thorn said. The scraping of glass against the door was growing louder, and her thoughts raced as she tried to come up with another idea to keep them alive. There was no furniture whatsoever in the room, nothing that she could use to reinforce the door.

“No. But I have power. It’s like … a lock pick. You need to feel the shape of the lock, to let the energy flow into the pattern it’s searching for.”

“We don’t have much time, Drix. Can you do this?”

The glow from Drix’s crystal heart was brighter, the pulse speeding up. “It’s not right. It’s not … what I expected.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can feel them. I can feel the circles. The map. And something else. Another layer. Hidden.”

“That’s fascinating,” she said. “And perhaps you’ll have a chance to investigate it when we don’t have an angry spirit carving its way through the door. Can you get us to Tantamar?”

“Closer,” he said. His eyes were closed and sweat ran down his face, mixed with blood from his wounds. “Closer. I can feel it. Pull away the shroud. Yes …”

“We don’t have time, Drix!” Thorn shouted. “Get this thing working and—”

She broke off as new sparks spread across the walls. They were darker, points of crimson light. Some were clustered close around the original gates; there were two additional gates in Wroat, and Sharn was a burning knot of lights. Others were off on their own, scattered in the wilds.

Secret gates? Thorn thought. House Orien has a network hidden from the public eye?

Any other time Thorn would have been desperate to study the map, to make a note of every location. But the sound of glass scraping against wood was growing ever louder.

She held Steel in front of her. “Study these points. Remember what you can.” Her attention was focused on the
east coast, the great expanse of the Whitepine Forest. “There! Drix, you’re right. South of Tantamar, near Mutiny Harbor. Can you isolate that gate?”

“Trying,” Drix said through clenched teeth. The sparks flared up, one at a time, coming ever closer to the gate they needed. Even as the focal point drifted east, there was a splintering sound and a few fragments of wood fell to the floor.

“Flame!” Thorn swore. “If you can’t isolate it, then get us to Tantamar.”

“One more moment . . .”

“We don’t have another moment! Get us as close as you can, but do it now!”

Another chunk of wood struck the floor. A shard of glass fell through and shattered against the ground. As Thorn’s spirits fell, Drix cried out. The crystal heart pulsed with a brilliant radiance, a beacon of light even beneath Drix’s torn clothes. The glittering flames shrouding the teleportation ring rose up toward the ceiling, a curtain of cold fire. Drix staggered away from the podium, and Thorn caught him before he fell.

“Now,” he cried. “It won’t last long.”

Lifting him up in her arms, Thorn dived into the light. She heard the door shattering, the storm flowing into the room. Then it all fell away. For a moment she was tumbling through space, vertigo surrounding her, then gravity and reality seized her and forced her back to the world. Her mind reeled, senses rebelling at the sudden change in her surroundings. The disorientation passed in a moment, as her new surroundings became clear. There were maps on the walls around them, a gleaming circle carved into the floor. But walls and floor were stone instead of wood, brilliant white marble that seemed to harness the light from the cold-fire lanterns. The chamber was smaller. And there was a woman standing right in front of them . . . with a wand leveled at Thorn’s head.

“You’ve got exactly five words to save your life,” she said.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Pit
Barrakas 25, 999 YK

House Orien was in the business of transportation. The challenge had been getting the abandoned gate to function without a guide. Once they were through, they should have been welcomed as customers who had just contributed a great deal of gold to the house coffers, not threatened.

It seemed someone had forgotten to tell the woman.

Burdened by Drix, there was no way Thorn could bring Steel to bear before the stranger could unleash the power bound in her wand. “I’ve no time for this,” she snapped. “My companion is a Cannith heir in need of immediate medical assistance. Either help me or get out of my way, unless you’d like to explain things to his parents.”

There was a flicker of doubt in the woman’s eyes. She played a dangerous game, but every moment Thorn was drawing new cards. They were standing on an Orien circle, there could be no doubt about that—a circle that could be used by only a dragonmarked heir. The woman with the wand was dressed in a uniform; while Thorn didn’t recognize it, the matching studs on her wrists and the silver unicorn on her collar suggested rank and hierarchy. Whether she ran an Orien operation or something else, if this woman had a rank, there was surely someone above her, someone she wouldn’t want to upset.

Bluff it might be, but Drix was covered with drying blood and broken glass. Letting a prayer to Olladra pass through her thoughts, Thorn took a step forward. The sentry took a step back, tensing up, and let her wand fall out of line.

That one moment was all Thorn needed. Summoning all her strength, she tossed Drix directly into the other woman. Whatever the sentry might have expected, she wasn’t prepared for a flying tinker. She fell to the ground, Drix on top of her. Thorn was there before the other woman had caught her breath. She kicked the wand from the guardian’s hand and placed Steel against her throat.

Another interesting situation, Steel said.

“I want information,” Thorn snapped. Drix shifted to better pin the sentry to the ground. The action drove shards of glass deeper into his skin, blood smearing across the guard’s uniform, but he didn’t cry out. “Tell me what I want to know, and you’ll survive this. Struggle or lie—and I’ll know if you lie—and this blade goes through your throat. Do you understand?”

“I understand—” she began.

Then she was gone.

Drix struck the floor, and Thorn stumbled forward as her target simply disappeared. First eladrin, now Orien! Thorn cursed. The heirs of House Orien carried the Dragonmark of Passage. Channeled through a focus like the circle, the mark could transport its bearer across a continent, but an unaided heir could still use her mark to leap through space.

Fortunately, she couldn’t go far, and Thorn had a partner who could track teleportation.

The hallway! Steel told her. Just outside this chamber!

There was no time to explain to Drix. Thorn leaped over the tinker and bolted to the door, snatching the wand from the floor as she went. Luck was with her; the sentry was still catching her breath, drawing in air to raise the alarm. Thorn raised the woman’s wand and let her anger flow through it, unleashing the power bound within. The sentry stiffened but didn’t cry out; she didn’t make a sound as she tumbled to the floor.

How did you know it would paralyze her? Steel asked as Thorn sprinted down the hall. You might have unleashed a fireball in here.

“I didn’t know what it would do,” Thorn said. “But she was prepared to use it on me and in a small room. And it only seemed fair to let her suffer whatever she had planned for me.”
The Orien sentry had struck the floor hard, and she had cut open her scalp, but she was still conscious and completely limp, unable to move a muscle. There was no telling how long the effect would last, and Thorn smashed Steel into the side of her head. It wasn’t easy to tell if the blow had any effect, but her eyes seemed to lose focus. Good enough, Thorn thought. She dragged the woman back to the circle chamber. Drix was sitting on the floor, pulling pieces of bloodstained glass from his legs.

“Good catch,” he said.

“Aureon’s name! You’re lucky I don’t have time to slap you right now,” Thorn said. She reached into her pouch, calling a length of silk rope from the extradimensional space within. “I need answers, and she’s not about to give them. Where have you brought us, and why do they have guards ready to strike on sight?”

“You know as much as I do,” Drix said, plucking a long blade of glass from his forearm. “The gate … it was buried. Hidden, even from most Orien heirs who might use the podium. All I knew was that it was in the Whitepine Forest.”

“Lovely. A hidden gate, and far from civilization.” Thorn plucked the silver unicorn, the symbol of House Orien, from the sentry’s uniform. “This is a house operation. So what are they working on that they don’t want the world to see?”

“Do you think it’s important?” Drix said. He stood up gingerly, testing the strength of his legs.

“Everything’s important to someone. I’d love to know more about what’s going on. But this isn’t the mission. We need to get out of here and on our way as quickly as possible, preferably without dying in the process. What can you tell me?”

“Nothing?” Drix said, puzzled.

Steel’s answer was the one Thorn was waiting for.

The unicorn pin has a faint aura. It’s likely protection against whatever wards are in this place.

“Define ‘likely,’ ” Thorn said. “Are we safe or aren’t we?”

I can’t be certain, but I can’t see any other explanation for the aura. If I had anything to bet on it, I would.

“And you’d also bet on the minotaur instead of the ogre,” Thorn muttered.

“You’re talking to your dagger, aren’t you?” Drix said. “What’s his name? Can you introduce us?”

“Not now,” Thorn said. “Guards could be here at any moment. We’ve got to figure out a way out of here, and we just don’t have enough information. And—” she stopped short. “How did you know he was a ‘he’?”

“He’s a dagger,” Drix said as if that explained everything.

Thorn shook her head and looked around the chamber: no windows, only the one door, the podium, the map studded with dragonshards. “See what you can do with that,” she said to Drix. “If I don’t come back soon, you may want to get that gate working and get back home.”

“I never had a home,” Drix said, more thoughtful than sad.

“That’s fascinating,” Thorn said. “Now see what you can find out.”

Thorn pinned the unicorn amulet to her collar. Closing her eyes, she pictured still water. She imagined her body settling into the pool, surrounded by water, becoming the water. Clear as glass. Invisible. “Shalassa,” she whispered, and the word was a lever, a bucket she lowered into the well of magical energy. She pulled, sinking her thoughts into the well of energy and pulling it over her, making her vision real.

The whole process took only seconds. She opened her eyes, raised a hand before herself, and saw nothing. She was invisible.

She moved quietly into the hall. The spell would last for only a few minutes, so she had to be as quick as possible. The corridor was fashioned from bare, white stone, lit with cold-fire globes. There were no windows, no other doors nearby, but the hallway merged with another corridor, and she could hear voices moving toward her—people in that corridor.

“I’m telling you, we should be working on the blood. The director is wasting time. Mark my words, a month from now, we’ll be working on the blood.” It was a woman’s voice, colored with annoyance. There was something else … a creak, the sound of metal on stone—a cart, perhaps.

“I’m just the axeman, Lady.” The voice was male, cheerful. “Such matters are beyond my simple understanding.”

Thorn peered around the corner. There were one woman and five men, two of whom were indeed wheeling a cart between them. She saw the glint of steel in the cold light, armor and the blade of a weapon, and slipped back around the corner. They shouldn’t be able to see her, but there was no point in taking chances. They were almost on top of her; better to let them pass and continue to observe.

A moment later they passed by her. Fortunately they kept going; whatever their destination, they weren’t going to
the teleportation chamber.

“And you’re dulling your axe to no good purpose, I tell you.” The woman was quite striking; she had smooth skin; silky, black hair; brown eyes with flecks of gold that caught the light of the cold fire as Thorn studied her. She could have been an artist’s model or an actress, but she wore a leather harness loaded with vials, short wands, and thin blades—the tools of an alchemist or medical savant. She wore a brown robe with green trim, and the gold pin over her left breast was carved in the shape of a griffon. They were the colors of House Vadalis, and the griffon was its sigil; the three men accompanying her were dressed in the uniform armor of House Deneith mercenaries. And we’ve already seen Orien, Thorn thought. A house operation, it seems, but doing what?

House Vadalis worked with animals, breeding and training all manner of creatures. They were best known for magebreeding—rituals that used the power of the house dragonmark to twist the flesh and blood of an unborn creature, weaving specific strengths into the child. Through the techniques they had produced horses with remarkable speed and strength, hunting dogs that could track the merest trace of a scent, beasts of burden and battle. The house had produced the mighty warbears that Breland had used in the Last War, the Breland coat of arms brought to fierce life. They’d created the “dark eyes,” ravens with an exceptional vocabulary and the ability to recognize and report on enemy activities; they weren’t truly intelligent, but sometimes it was hard to tell. The Korth Edicts prohibited the house from experimenting on humans or other sentient species, but there were always rumors that they were trying to magebreed a better human. With her angelic appearance, the Vadalis savant was exactly the sort to add fuel to that fire. Her appearance wasn’t truly unnatural but still remarkable for a healer.

The five with her were soldiers; that was plain to see. Whatever that place was, they took security seriously. Even at a glance, Thorn could see scars on their skin and nicks on their chain mail; they’d been through battles and come out alive. Four were common Blademarks, with crossbows slung across their backs and swords sheathed on their belts. The one walking next to the woman was an officer, with a golden chimera pinned to his collar; beyond that, Thorn could see the lines of a dragonmark running along his neck and up to his ear. He was resting a two-handed axe across one shoulder, an ugly weapon with a long blade. He was a muscular man, and if not for the web of scars on almost every inch of his exposed skin, he would have been quite handsome. More to the point, Thorn had no doubt he’d be able to wield the brutal axe with ease.

“Perhaps I am. I still enjoy the dulling of it,” he said with a grin.

Thorn followed them quietly as they continued down the hallway. She traced a cross on Steel’s hilt.

Well equipped for common sentries, he told her, though nothing so impressive as our friends in the Mournland. Still, even the two pushing the cart have mystically reinforced armor and enchantments woven into blade and bow alike. Low-grade Cannith work, I’d say. The axe is on par with that of the royal executioner; enchanted to sever a head or a limb, but drawing on its full might would take time—the sort of thing one would use on a stationary target. And the woman … nothing powerful, no weapons, but a great many minor auras. The tools of a chirurgeon as opposed to an alchemist.

Thorn moved the blade in a circle, suggesting a study of the hallway.

Quite an impressive array of spells at work. No aggressive defenses, but the two doors ahead are sealed and set with warning enchantments that will be triggered should the wards be broken; I’m sensing a spell of silence as well. Kundarak work, I believe. Aside from that … The walls themselves are reinforced using Cannith hardening techniques, and there’s a broader enchantment maintaining the temperature. It has the flavor of House Ghallanda to it.

Kundarak, Ghallanda, Orien, Cannith, Vadalis, Deneith … Quite an operation, Thorn thought. Whatever the place was, it had nothing to do with her current assignment. Still, it troubled her. She could still hear the words of the Son of Khyber and the Tarkanan halfling Fileon, warnings about the growing power of the dragonmarked houses.

And with this much magic invested in the place, I imagine there are more than five guards.

Thorn still had no sense of the size of the place, and she hadn’t seen so much as an arrow slit in the walls. And she had only a minute or two of invisibility left. Still, she needed more information; she wanted to see where they were going.

Luckily for her, the team had reached its destination. There was no handle on the door; the Kundarak seal held it closed. The Vadalis savant placed one hand on her hippogriff brooch and her other palm on the door and pushed it open. It immediately became clear why there would be a spell of silence on the room. The instant the door was opened, the air was filled with growls and snarls, bestial cries of rage and pain.

The guards wheeled the cart into the room, and Thorn slipped in after them. The door clicked shut behind her. Keeping her back against the wall, she stepped to the side and surveyed the situation. Her first impression was that someone had taken one of the healing houses of House Jorasco and merged it with her brother’s ramshackle clinic in
Wroat. Shelves were piled high with stacks of bandages and other supplies. Surgical blades gleamed in baths of sterilizing fluids, and the walls were covered with anatomical charts and pages of parchment covered with scrawled notes and diagrams. Then there were things she’d never seen in a Jorasco ward. Alchemical equipment whose purpose she could only guess at—strange contraptions of glass and metal, dark fluid bubbling over low flames and chunks of rubbery, green flesh suspended in clear liquid.

Then there were the prisoners.

There were four beds on one side of the room, though bed was a kind word. They were clearly designed for restraint, not comfort; each was a virtual cocoon covered with leather straps and iron chains. At a quick glance, one might think there were four men bound in the beds. But they weren’t men. Each was over ten feet in height and massively muscled. Their hides were rubbery and green, covered with warts and boils. Long, hooked noses hung over mouths filled with needle-sharp teeth. They were trolls. Distant relatives to orcs and ogres, trolls were savage carnivores infamous for eating anything they could tear apart, and the talons of a troll could rend steel. They’d been driven from civilized lands long in the past, but they still lingered in deep caverns and dark woods, in the most desolate peaks of Mror Holds and in the wilds to the west. The last time Thorn had seen a troll in the flesh had been on her mission to Droaam. The leaders of that land had brought ogres, gnolls, shapeshifters, minotaurs, medusas and more together to build their nation, and Thorn had seen quite a few trolls among the guardians of the Great Crag.

There were handful of halflings and humans scattered around the room, savants wearing the colors of House Vadalis and the healing house, Jorasco. A thin halfling with wispy, white hair nodded to the newcomers. “Take table three. You can have your choice of left or right, and I’d like to see that one taken down a notch. I cut his tongue out yesterday, but you know how they are.”

One of the trolls roared again, a howl of sheer rage. Its fury was no match for its bonds. The guards surrounded it, and three of them worked with its arm. The restraints worked in series; they were able to separate the arm from the main cocoon, and working together, the four soldiers were able to force the creature’s arm down onto the stretcher they’d brought with them, lashing it onto the new restraints.

“Shadow hears me!” The troll’s voice was a guttural roar, as loud as thunder. Thorn vaguely recognized it as the language of the goblins, shaped with a mangled tongue. To her ears, it sounded like the meaningless snarls of a savage beast. But Thorn was wearing the gift she’d received from the Lord of Pylas Pyrial, and she knew the meaning even though she couldn’t understand the words. “Vengeance on he who wields the blade!”

Perhaps the guards didn’t understand the Goblin language; perhaps they’d heard the threat before. Either way, they ignored the beast completely and remained focused on their work.

“They’re a mixed lot!” it roared. “Vengeful daughters! Punish the one who spills my blood!”

“I thought you said you cut out his tongue,” the Deneith captain said, a mixture of boredom and annoyance in his voice. He took a practice swing with the great axe.

“Yesterday,” the halfling said. “You know how they are.”

“That I do,” the axeman said. His soldiers had finished binding the troll’s arm to the stretcher, and they drew it back, pulling it taut. The captain raised the axe, and the runes carved into the blade glowed as the power within it grew. He took two steps forward then brought the cruel weapon down with all his strength, magic and muscle combining in a deadly arc of steel. The blade cleaved straight through flesh and bone, and the troll howled in pain as his arm was severed from his shoulder.

The troll moaned and muttered foul curses as the captain cleaned thick, green blood off the blade of his axe. The severed arm twitched and struggled in its bonds, but the soldiers had bound it well. The Vadalis woman studied the wound with a critical eye.


“This is hardly my first time, Lalanan,” the old halfling snapped. “Now take your arm and leave us to our work.”

The captain grinned as his men began wheeling the severed limb away. “Where’s your vengeance now?” he said. He chuckled. Then a great, green hand wrapped around his head. For a moment, his laughter turned into a scream; then the crushing fingers ended that along with his life. By that time, there were many other screams filling the air.
Thorn hadn’t stood idly by while the Deneith captain and his crew prepared the amputation. She knew an opportunity when she saw one, and with her invisibility about to expire, she had to act quickly. She traced a circle on Steel’s hilt.

*You are not being observed by magical means,* Steel told her. *Although I fail to see what difference that makes at the moment.*

All the difference in the world, she thought. Returning Steel to his sheath, Thorn quickly wove a second spell, one that fortunately required no words of power to invoke. She could feel the tingle across her skin as the mystical disguise took hold. She couldn’t see the results while she was still invisible, but there was nothing for it but to trust to the Sovereigns. As the troll bellowed its rage, she made her way next to one of the other imprisoned brutes.

“Say nothing,” Thorn whispered, trusting the Pyrial amulet to work its magic and translate her words. As she spoke, she worked on its bindings, using her tools to weaken both physical and magical restraints. “The Daughters of Sora Kell have sent me to end your suffering and grant you your revenge. On my command, you may deal with those here. Free your companions. Then we shall speak further.”

She was finishing her work on the last bond as the captain’s axe fell. The troll’s cry of pain echoed across the room. As the Vadalis savant studied the wound, Thorn felt the familiar tingle of magic fading away—her cloak of invisibility finally running its course. She’d done her best to position herself so the others wouldn’t see her, but there were too many people in the room, and they were moving around; she saw a halfling nurse’s eyes widen as he caught sight of her. There was no more time.

“Now!” she whispered into the troll’s ear.

The troll burst from its bonds before the halfling had a chance to cry out. It moved with astonishing speed for a creature that seemed so large and ungainly, and its hand was wrapped around the captain’s head in the blink of an eye. A moment later and it had torn the man’s head from his shoulders.

*What are you—?$ was all Steel managed to say as she drew him and threw him, one smooth motion burying him in the back of a mercenary’s knee. If the man was smart, he’d stay down; the trolls might ignore a fallen foe. The savants fled for the door, but the troll was more cunning than Thorn could have hoped; it grabbed a heavy table and flung it across the room as if it were a toy. Thorn wasn’t worried about a few healers, but she didn’t want anyone to get out of the room. The remnants of the table blocked the door, and the spell of silence intended to mute the sounds of torture would mask the noise of the battle.

The three surviving soldiers had surrounded the troll and were harrying it from all sides. It was an impressive display of skill; as soon as the beast turned its attention to one of the three, the other two would redouble their efforts, causing enough pain to let their companion back out of the troll’s reach. Impressive, yes, but futile; the troll’s power of regeneration healed the minor wounds mere seconds after they were made. And sooner or later, the troll would catch one of the men and crush him. Thorn was watching the savants.

Two broke from the panicked mob. The Vadalis woman drew a wand, leveling it at the raging troll. Unfortunately for her, Thorn also had a wand—the weapon she’d taken from the Orien guard. A thought sent the savant tumbling to the ground, every muscle frozen. Still, that gave an opening for an unlikely champion to dart forward—the old Jorasco healer. The gray-haired halfling laid his hand on the troll’s leg, and blue light burned along his palm, the radiance of a dragonmark. The Jorasco bloodlines carried the Mark of Healing, but his touch did anything but help. The effect on the troll was immediate and shocking. The beast dropped to the ground, its howls of rage fading to pitiful whimpers. It tried to push itself up, but it seemed to have lost all strength. Emboldened, the soldiers darted forward, thrusting with their blades. Before, the wounds from their weapons healed mere seconds after they were made, but black pus oozed from the new injuries, which seemed to spread instead of sealing, as if the troll’s
regenerative powers were being turned against it.

If not for Thorn, the fight would have surely ended there. Thorn almost felt guilty; the halfling was barely the size of the troll’s head, and she had to admire the courage of an old man willing to grapple with the beast. But she had a mission to accomplish and no time for mercy. Steel flashed through the air, tearing through the little man’s flesh. Thorn had pierced a lung—not instantly lethal but certainly enough to take the fight out of an old halfling. Or so she thought. The little healer staggered, but he kept his grip tight on the troll’s leg. When Thorn pulled Steel back to her, the halfling reached back with his free hand and laid his palm across the bloody wound. There was another pulse of blue light.

He’s healing himself, she thought.

Thorn was amazed. A normal man would have been in shock within seconds, but the little healer wouldn’t fall. The troll still writhed beneath his grasp, barely able to move. One of the soldiers snatched the captain’s axe and raised it above his head. The runes began to glow, power building for a decapitating strike.

Axes it is, then. Replacing Steel in her glove, Thorn charged forward, calling out the long myrnaxe. She swung the axe as she ran, smashing the flat of the blade into the side of the halfling’s head. She wasn’t sure if it would kill him, but the sheer force of the blow knocked him away from the troll and left him crumpled on the floor. Reversing the weapon, she leaped over the troll, jabbing at the axeman with the silver spearhead. He jerked back but not fast enough; the point of her spear sank into his arm, and he dropped his weapon. Before he could recover, Thorn drove the haft of the spear into his throat, and he collapsed to the floor.

The troll rose to its feet, mottled flesh already healing. The surviving guards turned to flee, but the door was blocked, and the troll was upon them before they could shift the blocking rubble. Thorn looked away, walking to the next troll and working on its bonds. She did her best to ignore the brief screams, but it wasn’t easy. Her experience with the Son of Khyber might have left her with a deep distrust of the dragonmarked, especially those with secret facilities hidden far from the eyes of the Thronehold monarchs. And it seemed that she was in a place where torture was an everyday occurrence. Nonetheless, it was difficult to hear a halfling being torn apart by a hungry troll, knowing as little as she did.

She drew Steel back to her hand. He was silent.

“Don’t think at me that way,” she muttered. “We’re trying to stop the Mourning, aren’t we?”

I just hope you know what you’re doing.

“So do I,” she murmured. “So do I.” She tucked Steel into his sheath and gathered her thoughts. She’d seen a number of changelings at the court of the Daughters of Sora Kell in Droaam, and when the troll invoked the “vengeful daughters” the idea had come to her. She wore the face of a changeling, with pale skin and snow white hair. The triune symbol of the Daughters was traced over her breast in gray thread.

“Children of the Shadow!” she called to the trolls. The two that were free turned to look at her. “The glorious Daughters have heard your cries echoing across the land to the Great Crag itself, and they sent me to release you from this bondage. Transport awaits you beyond the walls of this place, and you will feast for a dozen days on your return!”

She knew nothing about troll customs, but she’d never heard a story that spoke of the great intelligence of a troll, and those four seemed to be no exception. They roared their approval, praising the Daughters of Sora Kell.

“Yet no gift comes without a price!” she roared. “Sora Maenya respects only strength. If you would prove yourselves worthy of her trust, you must show that strength still remains in your limbs!”

“Tell us, changer,” the first troll snarled. He held the body of the old halfling in his hand; the healer was missing an arm, and he would not be rising again. “What must we do?”

She glanced at the others. “You must make your way out yourselves. Earn your release with tooth and claw.” She drew them close with a gesture. “I have a mission of my own on behalf of Sora Katra, and I will need you to leave me be as I do what must be done. This is the face I will be wearing. Study it well.” She released the spell of disguise, restoring her natural appearance as if she were a changeling shifting faces.

The trolls grunted, sniffing at her. “We remember, changer.”

“You two. Release your brothers. Gather your strength. Once I leave this room, remain here for the time it takes to shatter every piece of furniture here, to break every bottle and chain. Then emerge and show your captors what fear truly is.”

The trolls roared their approval. Thorn felt another pang of guilt about unleashing the creatures against an unsuspecting populace. Then again, if they hadn’t dissected trolls in the first place, it wouldn’t be a problem.

She glanced around the room, searching until she found a man who was still alive. He was one of the soldiers, the
guard she’d crippled with Steel. As she’d hoped, he’d dropped to the ground and was simply watching, remaining as still as possible. She knelt next to him.

“With one word, I can have you strapped to one of these tables with these beasts seeing if your guts grow back when they pull them out,” she murmured. “Do as I say and you might live through this. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

“How many more of you in this place?”

The man hesitated for a moment. Then one of the trolls bellowed in triumph as it was released from its bonds. Whatever courage the soldier had broke. “Eight more in my unit. About as many again in support and research.”

_Prepared to handle a single troll, certainly. Against four at once, with some element of surprise … it should suffice._ “What’s the quickest way out?”

“The teleportation circle, of course.”

Thorn drew Steel. “I can hurt you myself before I give you to the trolls. What’s the quickest way out _aside_ from the circle?”

“That is the only way out,” he said. There was a flutter in his voice, and the spreading stain on his breeches suggested that the fear was real. “I mean, there’s the Pit shaft, but that’s for airships and there’s none here at the moment.”

“Can it be climbed?” she said. Surely even the Twelve wouldn’t build a base that only members of House Lyrandar and Orien could leave. Would they?

“I guess,” he said. “I don’t know. How did you get in—?”

She silenced him, pressing Steel to his throat. “No questions. Just tell me where to find this shaft and where to find the barracks.”

It took the sounds of a hungry troll eating one of the dead savants to completely loosen the man’s resolve, but he gave her the directions she wanted. She knocked him out with a blow from Steel’s pommel; she didn’t want the trolls to kill him, but she couldn’t have him raising the alarm the moment they were gone, especially if he’d lied to her about anything.

_I don’t know if I approve_, Steel said. _But I have to admire the improvisation._

“I try,” Thorn murmured. She turned back to the trolls and raised her voice. “Children of the Shadow! Are you prepared for your vengeance?”

Their roar of hungry approval would haunt her for years to come.
CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Pit
Barrakas 25, 999 YK

I hope you’re prepared for a long climb,” Thorn said as she entered the gate chamber.

“I love climbing,” Drix responded. He appeared to be disassembling the dragonshard mosaic. “When I was younger, my father would take me to the cliffs of Seaside, and we’d climb for hours. I always wanted to design an extra pair of hands, something that could hold a book and turn the pages so I could read while I was—”

“Wonderful,” Thorn said. “Any moment now, a group of trolls are going to turn this place into Shavarath. I want to give them enough time to draw all the guards, and then we’ll be making our run. I don’t know who’s going to be left standing when this is all done, and we’re not going to wait to find out.”

“Trolls?”

“Yes, trolls,” Thorn said. “I found savants from Vadalis and Jorasco carving bits off of them. Arms, actually. Any idea why they might do that?”

Drix contemplated that as he stuffed dragonshards into his pouches. “Vadalis is always interested in studying the unnatural abilities of wild beasts,” he said thoughtfully. “I’d imagine they were trying to replicate the troll’s powers of regeneration.”

Thorn nodded. “So Vadalis and Deneith could make their own immortal soldiers? That’s just what we’d need. Perhaps we should show them your stone—”

A roar interrupted her. The trolls were in the hall. Thorn hoped they’d remember the directions she’d given them and that the guard hadn’t lied to her; as long as he’d told the truth, the beasts were on their way to the barracks. She’d left the wards of silence active; they might have been designed to muffle the sounds of torture, but they’d done an admirable job covering the noise of the battle. The trolls were in the hallway, however, and they could likely be heard throughout the rest of the workshop, which served her purposes just fine.

She waited until the snarls and roars had faded slightly and until she heard the first human voice raised in terror.

“Now. Follow me!”

Previous missions had taken Thorn to subterranean cities with miles of tunnels stretching beneath the earth. Fortunately, the place they found themselves in wasn’t nearly so complex: a storeroom, a barracks for the guards and a dormitory for the savants, a simple dining facility—not much to see. The only question was if there would be guards stationed in the tunnel shaft leading to the surface. Thorn was certain there would be more bloodshed before the night was through, but she was just as happy to leave it to the trolls; at least they had a right to their revenge.

There was blood on the white tiles when they reached the intersection of two halls. “This way,” Thorn hissed. Drix paused, listening to the roars and the whine of some of magical weapon, and Thorn grabbed his arm and pulled him along. A ramp brought them to the pit itself.

“That’s higher than Seaside,” Drix remarked. “I wish I had my arms. And a book.”

“And a ladder,” Thorn said. They were standing at the base of a tunnel that rose up out of sight. Crates were scattered around them, and she noticed posts and hooks she recognized as the mooring and charging facilities for a small airship. A set of stairs rose up about forty feet off the ground, up to where someone would need to be to board the airship. But as for stairs or rungs rising to the top of the shaft itself, there was nothing.

She heard a sharp howl—the sound of a troll in agony. “If those guards can subdue four trolls, we don’t want to be here when they’re done,” Thorn said. “Any ideas?”

“I could probably weave a levitation charm into one of these crates,” Drix said thoughtfully, studying the boxes and pulling a few dragonshards out of a pouch.

“How long will that take?” Thorn said.

“I’m not entirely sure. I haven’t tried it before. Ten minutes? An hour?”
“I don’t think we have that sort of time,” she said, listening to the sounds of battle. While she could still hear the
snarls of trolls in battle, she guessed that a few of them had already fallen, and it was possible the guards had
another savant capable of stopping their regeneration. “Wait … what about that hole of yours?”
“What about it?” Drix said.
“If you were to climb inside, could I fold it up and carry you?”
Drix shook his head. “You can’t fold it up all the way when someone’s inside it. And if you spread it out, it’s got
to be on some sort of surface.”
Thorn tried to remember that moment in the Mournland, Drix closing up the opening. She pulled the lid off of a
crate and set it on the ground. “What about this? If you put the hole on it and climbed inside … would I be able to
lift it?”
Drix looked at the lid dubiously. “I suppose so,” he said. “But how are you going to climb while you’re carrying
me? Do you have an extra pair of arms?”
“Let me worry about that,” Thorn said. “You just get inside. Quickly.”
Drix spread the black cloth over the lid and lowered himself inside, disappearing into the dark opening. A
moment later he drew it tighter until the black spot was merely the size of Thorn’s fist.
Thorn picked up the lid. It was heavier that it should have been, but she could manage it, and more important, the
hole stayed fixed in one place. The last thing she needed was for it to slide off while she was climbing. Balancing
the lid against a crate, she sorted through her pouches, finally finding a small vial. Flipping the cork off of it, she
quickly swallowed the spider inside.
“Shalitar,” she whispered.
Thorn had already drawn on a considerable amount of magical energy, between invisibility and the changeling
disguise. Grasping the power for the spider charm was like trying to hold water in her hands while she made a fist.
She struggled with it, refusing to let it go, and at last she felt the energy flow into her. Grabbing the wooden lid and
tucking it under an arm, she began to sprint up the shaft.
The spider charm had served her well over the years, saving her life in Sharn and Droaam. As long as the
enchantment lasted, she could walk a sheer cliff as easily as cross the floor. It took only a few minutes before she
could see the top of the shaft. Elation came with an entirely new challenge.
Of course, she thought. A door.
There was a massive double gate sealing the shaft, and it was closed. With time and tools, she likely could have
opened it, but working one-handed, she’d never succeed before the spider charm failed.
She drew Steel. “What do you think? Can you carve a way through it?”
I see precious little to joke about, Steel said. Kundarak locking mechanisms and enchantments. Not a simple piece
of work by any means.
Thorn sighed. “Some days I’d like to drown all dwarves on general principle.” The dwarves of House Kundarak
bore the Mark of Warding, and she’d had to face their tricks and traps far too often.
“What’s wrong?” It was Drix’s voice, drifting from the hole in the board.
“Can you hear me?” Thorn said. “We’ve got a locked gate. I’m not sure we can get out.”
“For a shaft that size … a gate would need to have levitation charms. Something that would trigger when it was
activated, to shift the weight.”
Yes, Steel said. To your left, there’s a circle carved into the stone. There’s a concentration of energies there.
“What about it?” Thorn said.
“Get over there. Hold me up next to it.”
“That’s me,” Thorn muttered. “Defeating all challenges with dagger and board.” Sheathing Steel, she made her
way over to the carved disk. Holding the board in both hands, she positioned the hole by the circle. “Can you see
it?”
“Yes, just hold it there.”
It was a strange experience. Thorn could feel Drix shifting around. It wasn’t the same as the motion of a body, but
it was motion nonetheless. And she could feel the pressure of each moment, knowing that the spider charm would
soon fade.
“Drix, I don’t want to rush you—”
“There!” he cried.
Thorn felt the rumble through the wall of the tunnel. The gate shifted up and out, moonlight breaking through as a
crack formed between the two halves. Thorn darted up and through as soon as there was room, collapsing onto the
soft earth and grass outside.

“Arawai be praised,” she murmured. “I’ve never been so happy to see a tree.”

She was in a field with moons above and a starry sky overhead. A few trees were scattered around, and she could hear the distant song of night birds. After the gloom of the Mournland and the stone of the pit, the color was a blessing.

“Thorn?” Drix’s voice was muffled. “You need to turn me over.”

“Oh.” When she’d dropped the board, she’d set the hole against the ground. She lifted it up and flipped it over, and as she did so, she caught sight of the beast that was watching them both, licking the blood from its claws.

“Hello, little one,” it said. “I have come to settle our debt.”
The face staring down at Thorn looked oddly like the face of King Boranel. But where the king had a regal mane of gray hair, the creature standing over Thorn simply had a regal mane. And Boranel didn’t have a double row of bloodstained teeth. It seemed the manticore had fed recently … fortunate for her, she hoped.

Crimson wings sprouted from the muscular body of an enormous lion. The tail of a scorpion rose up over his head, a drop of venom gleaming on its barbed tip. His tawny paws were still soaked in blood.

“You’re a long way from home,” Thorn said. She’d met the beast before, in the back streets of the Calabas.

“I could say the same of you,” the manticore said, shaking the blood from its mane.

A pair of hands emerged from the hole in the board, and Drix pushed himself up through the opening. He caught sight of the manticore, paused for a moment, and dropped back down and out of sight.

“You’ll have to pardon my companion,” Thorn said. “So … just passing through?”

“Perhaps I came on behalf of the Daughters of Sora Kell, in search of a few wayward trolls.”

Thorn shrugged. “That would be a good reason, though a long way to come for it.”

“Too long,” the manticore replied. “Perhaps I just wished to see an old friend, to see if she was ready to repay her debt to me.”

“And are we friends?” Thorn asked.

“Friendlier than most,” it told her with a gruesome grin. “You remember that night we shared in Gray-wall, yes? The night you clung to my back as I soared through the air, carrying you from the scene of your sordid crime?”

“It’s not the sort of thing you forget,” Thorn said. Next to her, she could see Drix peering up out of his portable hole.

“You’d think not,” the beast replied. “And yet you’ve forgotten so many things, haven’t you?”

In that moment, that night in the Calabas came back to her, and she remembered the strange things the manticore had said to her. Are we strangers? it had asked her. And Have you no fear of my venom? My spite has laid dragons low.

“Sarmondelaryx,” she breathed. “You weren’t looking for me at all.”

“I told you,” the manticore rumbled. “I just wished to see an old friend.”

“I’m not Sarmondelaryx,” she said. “I’m Nyrielle Tam. I’m Thorn.”

“So you say,” the beast said, showing its bloody smile. “I can follow a scent across the length of the world, and I know dragon well. I heard the cry of triumph when you devoured Drulkalatar Atesh. Have you remembered the story I want to hear?”

“Try me.”

“No.” The manticore shook its massive head. “If you remembered, I would not have to ask. It is not our time yet. But we are close, yes. I smell the future on the wind, little one. And I will have my story soon enough.”

“I wish I could sit around and wait with you,” Thorn said. “Unfortunately I’ve got other things to do here.”

The beast raised its head, drawing a deep breath through its nose. “Yes. You’ve come searching for the fortress that lies in the woods.”

“As a matter of fact—”

“The woods are haunted,” it told her. “Filled with the dreams of those who came too close to the hidden citadel. Their bodies were burned, leaving only a last spark of hope, now turned ugly and sour, the one hope remaining to steal the life of another who might pass through.”

“Lovely,” Thorn said.
“In its way,” it said, eyes gleaming in the moonlight. “I had a friend once who loved these woods. She’d come here from time to time, hunting these ghosts and swallowing them whole, savoring that last fading hope.”

“I’ve never had much of a taste for dashed hopes myself,” Thorn said. “We’ll manage somehow, I’m sure.”

“If only you had wings, you could cross the haunted wood on the night winds and glide over the walls themselves.”

“Why stop at wings?” Thorn said. “Perhaps I could have fiery breath that can melt stone and bring the citadel itself tumbling down.”

The manticore laughed, the sound a low rumble. “Were the walls made of stone, it would surely be that simple. But how long must we play this little game? How long until you ask for the strength of my wings again?”

“And what will I pay this time?” Thorn said. When she’d first met the creature, she’d thought its price of a story to be a gift; seeing it again, she was beginning to wonder what she had given up.

“You’ll only know if you ask.”

“Then tell me, my dear, old friend: Will you carry me through the air and to my destination?”

The manticore nodded. “That I shall. You may even bring your companion, if he has the courage to look me in the eye.”

“And the price?” Thorn said.

“I asked no price,” the beast replied. “Not this time. I will have what I seek soon enough.”

Thorn didn’t like the sound of that, but the offer of a swift flight across haunted woods was difficult to resist.

“You can come out now, Drix.”

The tinker slowly crept out of his hole. When the manticore made no hostile move, he carefully lifted the black cloth from the board and folded it up.

“So gliding over the walls,” Thorn said. “That’s what you’d suggest if I had wings?”

The manticore scratched out a rough map in the soil, traces of blood rubbing off on the grass. “I do not know what it is you seek within,” it said. “There is a courtyard, yes. And many towers, each one dedicated to a different terror.”

“And since you know so much about it, I imagine you’d know if it’s filled with guards, people watching the skies, and such.”

“Yes,” it said. “And of course it is. They are preparing for battle.”

Thorn looked to Drix. “Bad enough that we’re likely to be seen going in. We haven’t even discussed what happens once we get there. This is a fortress girded for war. How do we find the stones once we’re inside?”

Drix seemed honestly surprised. “You can’t feel them?”

“No,” Thorn said. “All right. So we can find the stones. All we need is a plan to survive after we fly over the walls and into certain doom.”

“Not merely doom,” the manticore said. “Dream. The fortress you seek exists in two worlds. Your enemies have become living nightmares. When we cross that wall, we leave the reality you know behind.”

“Good, good,” Thorn said. “Because it was starting to sound a little too easy.” She rubbed her hand against her forehead, feeling the smooth leather against her skin. She stopped and rubbed a finger across her palm.

“What is it?” Drix said.

“An idea,” she replied.

Thorn could feel the wind in her hair and hear the steady beat of the manticore’s wings, but all things considered, it was far more pleasant than the last time she’d flown with the beast.

“So this is it,” she said to Drix. “Heading into the fortress of nightmares. You’re sure that you’re ready for this?”

“It may seem strange,” he said, “but I think I am.”

They were sitting in the portable hole. Outside, the manticore was carrying the board in its mouth. Inside, Drix was testing the string on his little crossbow. Satisfied, he produced four small bolts. Instead of metal, the heads were dragonshards; he’d used the shards he’d taken from the Pit.

“Just be careful,” she said, sorting through her tools. “Try to be quiet. Hopefully our friend will prove a sufficient distraction. You focus on finding the stones. If there’s fighting to be done, leave it to me.”

“Of course,” Drix told her. He handed her the wand she’d taken from the Orien guard. “I did the best I could; I
think you’ll get one more use from it.”

The manticore snarled, the deep growl shaking their sanctuary.

“That’s our signal,” Thorn said, taking the wand and tucking it into her belt. “Get ready.”

A moment later, a bloodcurdling howl filled the air. Thorn had never heard its like; there was a touch of the wolf to it, but if it was a wolf, the life was being torn from it slowly. It was a cry of pain and a warning of pain to come. A flash of brilliant light illuminated the hole, and they caught a glimpse of a tall, spindly tower as the manticore banked sharply. Thorn saw it for only a moment, silhouetted against one of the moons, but the image was fixed in her mind. It was no turret of stone, no crenellated rampart. It was tall and curving, and she knew it was a tower only because of the flickering lights of the windows scattered across it. Otherwise, she would have guessed that it was the curved talon of a fierce beast, reaching up for the sky.

The howl came again. And they were falling. They could see the sky spinning through the opening of the portable hole, walls and moons and lights whirling around.

“Face me, Children of the Fading Dream!” The voice of the manticore was louder than thunder, surely shaking the walls of the fortress. “LOOK WITHIN MY SOUL, IF YOU DARE TO SEEK MY FEARS!”

The whirling landscape was suddenly still.

“Now!” Thorn said. They grabbed the edges of the hole and pulled, as Drix had shown her, widening the opening. Another moment and she was outside. The manticore had dropped them on a narrow ledge; there was a window just next to her.

“Good thing we didn’t end up with the hole pressed up against the wall,” Drix said, looking out.

Thorn froze for a moment as she took in the scene around her. The towers rising up were indeed like talons; she could think only of the claws of a dragon buried in the soil, reaching up to tear out the stars. Down below she saw a wide wall, and even from that height, she could see that it was made of bones—human, dragon, and every creature she could imagine.

_The moat that lies beyond is filled with the tears of the fallen, extracted in the moment before they die._

The thought came to her mind without warning. The manticore had told her that the fortress stood in dreams, and she understood, for that’s what that feeling was—the crystal clarity that sometimes came in a dream, when she remembered a life that she’d never lived.

The manticore was swooping around another tower, and there was something pursuing it, a creature shrouded in smoke. As she looked, the shadow began to gain substance. It howled again and the howl shifted, becoming more familiar.

She forced her eyes away. _All things in this place thrive on fear_, the manticore had told them. _Do not let them reach into your thoughts._

“Don’t look,” she told Drix. She took his hand, and they slipped inside the tower.
The floor was slick with blood, and the scent of it filled Thorn’s sensitive nose, drowning out all other sensations. It was worse than the slaughterhouses of Droaam. Yet she somehow knew that the blood had yet to be spilled, that it was the carnage from murders only dreamt of, as of yet uncommitted.

It didn’t help with the smell.

She drew Steel, tracing a cross on his hilt.

_The energies in this place are almost as strong as those of the Mournland itself_, he told her. _No specific wards that I can sense. As for divination … I feel as if the tower itself is watching you. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. Illusion, conjuration … I’m not sure anything is real._

The bloody hallway descended in a tight spiral turret; Thorn had to fight to keep her footing on the slick stone. At last the floor leveled out, a dim, flickering light flowing through a large archway. The only sound Thorn heard was a low and steady rustling, the sound of paper blown in the wind. She glanced at Drix, tapping the stone in her neck then gesturing at the chamber, a questioning look on her face. The tinker’s crystal heart pulsed with a flash of light and he nodded.

Thorn raised a hand, palm out, hoping Drix would understand the order to wait. She paused at the entrance, studying the chamber ahead. It was a library, and a very disorganized one at that. There were no shelves; it was a collection of leather-bound journals and sheets of loose parchment with the occasional odd item thrown in. Strange symbols glittered on one of the many facets of a carved dragonshard. A giant’s notebook was leaning up against a wall, the volume only slightly shorter than Thorn herself. Some of the loose pages were yellowed and cracking with age; others were fresh, with words written in ink and blood still drying upon them. Crumbling cold-fire torches were fixed to the walls, and their flickering light cast long shadows across the unsteady towers of literature.

The eladrin soldier struck the moment she stepped into the room, thrusting with a short, curved blade. Whether it was Sarmondelaryx’s draconian senses or natural paranoia working to her advantage, Thorn threw herself out of the way just in time, sending a tower of journals tumbling to the floor as she staggered into it. She wasn’t quite fast enough to evade all harm, and the spear traced a narrow gash across her ribs.

Her enemy was still an indistinct figure wrapped in a black cloak, but Thorn flung Steel before she even rose to her feet. Steel tore through cloth without touching flesh.

The eladrin soldier charged. She was an eladrin, wearing the armor Thorn had seen in her dream of the ancient battle with the giants. Her face was smooth and lovely, and her eyes were empty pits. She held a sword in each hand, and both flashed toward Thorn.

Thorn swept aside the first blow with a mithral bracer, but as she tried to catch the other blade, she found herself staring into the woman’s hollow gaze, and for a moment, she felt lost in that emptiness. Then the point of a steel blade stuck bone, the pain breaking the spell. In an uncharacteristic moment of panic, Thorn just pushed the woman away from her. The dragon’s strength wasn’t with her, though, and while the eladrin stumbled back, it gave her room to ready both her blades. Thorn took a step back, trying to gather her thoughts; instead she slipped on a loose scrap of paper and fell into the pile of books. The soldier raised her blades, leaping forward—

There was a flash of light, and a warm feeling flowed over her. Even the pain of her wound faded, though a dull ache remained. Where the soldier had been, there was only a piece of a broken blade and a crossbow bolt, shattered against the ground.

“It worked!” Drix sounded so happy, so pleased with himself, that Thorn almost forgot her pain. He was holding his tiny crossbow in both hands, looking down at it with an expression of absolute glee.

“What was that?” she said.

“When we were on our way here, I tried to fill the shards with energy from this stone in my heart,” he said.
“Honestly, I wasn’t sure what it would do. But I always knew this little one would save me some day.”

“And I’m certainly glad it did,” Thorn said, calling Steel back to her hand.

“She,” Drix said. “She’s a crossbow, you know.”

“Of course she is,” Thorn said. She was still shaken by the fight. It was troubling enough that the woman had surprised her … How had Thorn missed that first blow? She traced a cross on Steel’s hilt.

There’s nothing I can tell you, Steel said. There’s too much ambient magical energy. I’m afraid you’re on your own.

Drix suddenly paused, looking up from his crossbow. “Did you hear that?” he whispered.

Thorn froze. “What?”

“Are there insects in here?”

Thorn saw it before he did. “No,” she said. “Words.”

Letters were crawling between the pages of the unfinished books, ideas searching for homes.

“That’s wonderful,” Drix said. He knelt down by the Elven symbols for love. “Perhaps we should take some of them with us.”

“I don’t think so,” Thorn murmured, pulling him back to his feet. “In my line of work, you learn pretty fast that the wrong word can be deadly. And the last thing we need right now is for you to find some explosive runes creeping around. Which way to the stones?”

Drix pointed.

“Follow behind me and keep quiet,” she whispered.

The hallway leading out of the scriptorium was dry and dusty, with cobwebs stretched across loose cobblestones. There was light around the corner and a wealth of sound after the silent vault: crackling fires, all manner of bubbling liquids, a clatter of metal against metal. She smelled rich spices, seared meats … a kitchen. But no sounds of chattering cooks, no feet against the floor or ladles stirring. Indicating that Drix should wait, Thorn slipped into the room.

It was the largest kitchen she’d ever been in, certainly equipped to serve a king or an army. Meats sizzled in fire pits and on long grills. There were rows of cauldrons filled with bubbling liquids. Vegetables were heaped alongside an impressive array of carving knives. There were no signs of either cooks or guards. Yet something about the kitchen troubled her more than the bloody stairs. It was the same sensation she’d felt in the Mournland, of doubt creeping in around her. She found herself wondering what was actually in those giant copper cauldrons. That was certainly a bone that just bumped against the edge, but what sort of bone was it? What about the herbs she could smell in the air? Was it possible they might be—

Her train of thought was interrupted by Drix coming into the room. “Candied sardarooots!” he cried happily, grabbing a handful from a brass bowl. He managed to get one into his mouth before she slapped them out of his hand.

“What are you doing?” she hissed. That damned stone, she thought. He’s got no sense of caution anymore.

“Eating,” he said, surprised. “I don’t do it often, but I it’s been so long since I’ve seen a sardarooot, and the smell was so wonderful, and—”

His eyes widened. She looked down, following his gaze, and took an involuntary step back. The sardarooots she’d knocked to the floor were squirming, writhing around on the floor, like plump, candied lampreys. One shifted, and Thorn saw a tiny, toothy maw working at one end.

Drix cried out and dropped to his knees, hands clutching his stomach. His eyes widened and he looked up at Thorn.

It may save his life, but it doesn’t stop the pain, she thought.

She pushed him down to the ground, ripping open his doublet. The crystal heart was pulsing with light, and Drix was moaning in agony. He reached out, clawing at his stomach, and Thorn only hesitated for a moment before driving Steel into his flesh. He screamed but Thorn could hear Steel’s mental voice over the tinker’s cries.

To the left. And deeper.

With Steel’s guidance, it was quickly done. She tore the grub-root out of his gut and crushed it. Drix lay on the ground moaning as his flesh knit itself back together. Thorn didn’t wait. She leaped to her feet, racing over to the great door and readying herself at the side of it. She stood, Steel at the ready, Drix’s blood still dripping off the blade, waiting to see who would answer the cries.

No one came—no guards, no nightmare beasts. All Thorn heard were distant cries of terror and the howls of the things in the skies above.
“Is it safe?” Drix was still pale, crawling out from around the long table.

“Miraculously,” Thorn said. “Can you stand?”

He nodded and she helped him to his feet. “Sorry,” he said. His voice was still a little rough.

“So. Be quiet when I say to be quiet. Don’t follow me until it’s safe. And whatever you do, don’t eat anything. Is that clear?”

He nodded again and for just a moment, he looked crestfallen. Then his hand found his crossbow, and his smile spread again. “Can we keep moving?” he said. “There’s more testing to do.”

Thorn sighed. “Far be it from me to stand in the way of progress. Which way to the stones, master fletcher?”
For all the doubts Thorn was finding in her heart, it seemed that luck was finally with them. The hallway that lay ahead of them was vast and cold, and there was no sign of life within it. If there had been troops in there, they might have gone to face the manticore when it attacked, or it could simply be that the eladrin never expected anyone to slip by their defenses so easily and thought the scattered patrols would be sufficient.

The chamber reminded Thorn of the Mournland, the beach with the bones cracking beneath her feet. There were no corpses save the hallway itself. It was set up to be a grand feasting hall, long, wooden tables set for dozens of guests. Behind them the kitchen was full to bursting, but in the hall the food was rotting on the platters. The fireplace held only ashes. There was no glass in the arched windows, and the curtains were rotting tatters. The terrible howl echoed through the open windows.

“At least it’s empty,” Thorn murmured. Still, she kept her eyes fixed on the air, watching for the slightest ripple that could warn of a mystical ward. Somehow she couldn’t believe that such a vast area would be left unguarded.

“Not much farther,” Drix whispered. “Straight ahead. Two hundred feet, if that.”

Thorn wished she had some magic left in her. The chance to scout invisibly would have been a blessing. Still, she had to take the risk. “Hold back,” she whispered to Drix.

Pale, flickering light poured through a massive double doorway ahead of them. The doors stood partially open, hanging, half rotted, off rusty hinges. Thorn crept to the arch, peering around the crumbling wood.

It wasn’t hard to guess where they needed to go. The hallway ahead bore no resemblance to the crumbling chamber they were in. There was a thick smell in the air, rot and spices mixed together, and the hall itself seemed to be carved from ivory. It split in a great junction, and at the far end, two sentinels stood by a door of ivory and gold. Their bodies were hidden by long, dark cloaks; their faces covered with masks of tarnished silver.

They haven’t noticed us, Thorn thought. She studied the distance, considering the best way to close the gap before the alarm could be raised. She wanted to do her task quickly and closely; she didn’t want to miss with another throw, and it was already hard to guess where the body lay beneath the swathing cloaks. She held up a hand, ordering Drix to stay back. They had time. As long as something didn’t alert the guards …

Something such as the rotting doorway crumbling as her elbow brushed against it.

In a moment she stood revealed. The guardians charged, pikes lowered, and a sound like a wailing wind filled the hall. One vanished in a burst of light as Drix’s bolt struck him in the shoulder. The other was upon her.

Thorn dodged the first blow of the spear easily enough. She lunged forward, sweeping up and under the haft to gut her foe; her blade slashed through dark robes and empty air.

What is wrong with me? she thought. She couldn’t seem to focus her thoughts. She knew what she needed to do. The guardian wasn’t that fast, and she knew how to deal with a spearman; keep close, press him, don’t let him get to his reach. Yet somehow she found herself stumbling as she moved. The sentinel slammed the haft of his spear into her, knocking her back. And the rusty point was leveled at her heart.

Drix finished him before the blow ever landed. The light faded, leaving only the broken bolt and scraps of black cloth.

“This isn’t going to help my reputation,” Thorn said. She wanted to sit down. Her leg ached, the stone in her neck was throbbing, and all of a sudden, she felt the weight of it all pressing down on her.

“You can do this,” Drix said as he reloaded the crossbow. “You’ve got to. This is the last of the bolts that I charged. And that’s it. Behind that doorway.”

Thorn forced her doubts down, concentrating on the gilded portal. “I don’t sense any wards. Together, then, if you’re ready?”
Drix nodded, smiling.
With her stolen wand in one hand and Steel in the other, Thorn planted a kick in the center of the door. It flew open and as it did, the room around them changed. Walls sprang up and they weren’t in a hallway any longer. They were in a dining hall. The same feasting hall they’d just walked through, only it was filled with life. Logs crackled in the fireplace, and a bard was singing in the distance, a piece of the “Song of the Stormblade.”

Thorn glanced at Drix. There were revelers all around them, yet they appeared to be ignoring them completely. Thorn tried to watch them all, but there were simply too many. Still, she didn’t see any weapons beyond the knives people had for their meat. She truly didn’t see anyone paying any unusual attention to them.

“Are we still not eating?” Drix whispered.

“Oh, I insist,” a voice boomed. “Please, make yourself comfortable. I assure you, I mean you no harm.”

People moved out of the way as Shan Doresh stepped into the firelight. His crescent brooch gleamed against his black cloak, and he held a long scepter in one hand topped with the same eye-and-moon symbol. He appeared just as he had at the Silver Tree, with a warm smile and gleaming eyes.

“Please,” he said. “You have broken in like common thieves. You have assaulted my guards. And all that I have done in return is to prepare a feast in your honor.”

“Is that so?” Thorn said. “We’ve come for the treasures you stole from the Silver Tree.”

“‘No,’” Doresh said, and his voice grew cold. “You are here because I wished it. And you will stay until our business is concluded.”

Drix hesitated but Thorn did not. When Drix paused, she pulled the crossbow from his hand and loosed the bolt at Doresh’s throat. Her aim was true, and there was a blinding flash of light as the shard-tip shattered against him and the energy engulfed the eladrin lord.

It can’t be that simple, Thorn thought.

It wasn’t. Shan Doresh was still standing when the light faded. He was revealed for what he truly was. A moment earlier he’d worn the guise Thorn knew from her dream. That might have been the man Shan Doresh wanted to be, but it wasn’t the man he was anymore. He still wore his silvered armor, but scales were missing from his jerkin. His handsome face was covered by a mask of mithral, battered and worn, and the eyes of the mask were empty sockets filled with shadow. His cloak was tattered and torn.

“Arrogant fools,” he said, and his voice was a cold ghost of what it had been. “You think to face me in the seat of my power? While I hold the sigils of my enemies?”

“We’re certainly going to try,” Thorn said. She charged as she spoke, Steel in her hand.

She didn’t even see the blow coming. She was lucky he struck with his open hand; he had all the power of an ogre. She hit the floor hard, vision blurring, Steel sliding from her grasp.

“I fought the lords of Xen’drik before your kind walked the world,” Doresh snarled. “You’re lucky I have no wish to sully my blade with your blood. But there are others willing to do the deed. Don’t you recognize this place, Marudrix? The hall of Making? Your father was here on the Day of Mourning. Here when you killed him, along with all these others. With everyone in Cyre on that day, save you.”

Thorn shook the cobwebs from her head and forced herself to her feet. Tendrils of fog were all around her. No, not fog … mist.

The dead-gray mists of the Mourning.

People were screaming all around them, thrashing in the sudden gloom. Thorn concentrated, and Steel flew back to her hand. “Drix!”

He didn’t answer.

He hasn’t moved, Steel told her.

“Are those windows still there?” she said.

Yes.
“Good.” She ran toward where she’d last seen Drix.

It was a simple plan: grab Drix, smash the window, regroup, and start again. There was only one problem with it: the people in the way. She’d thought the people trapped in the mists were dying. They were simply changing. She’d gone a matter of steps before the warped ones were upon her. She caught a glimpse of a face that seemed to be sliding off the skull, of limbs stretched like warm wax, and they were all around her. She had only one thing in her favor: her enhanced senses were with her again. She could feel the creatures moving in the mists around her, feel the twisted revelers clawing and swinging. It was enough to dodge the worst of it but not nearly enough for all. There were simply too many of them, and they seemed utterly immune to pain; they didn’t even react when she slashed with Steel. She felt a few of her ribs crack under a mighty blow, and another nearly sent her to her knees.

I’ve lost track of Drix, Steel told her. You’ve got to get out now. Just go.

It was easier said than done. Another barrage of blows left Thorn reeling. For a moment she wanted to just let go, to fall and forget it all. Then, for a moment, she saw Drix’s face … and Nandon’s. And she thought about the locket among the bones.

“It’s not going to end this way!” she cried. Reaching inside, she called on the strength of the dragon. As the next twisted reveler swung at her, she grabbed his wrist and spun him around, battering the others away with his body. She could feel the broken ribs tearing at her as she moved, and in her rage, she tried to draw the life from the man in her grasp … and felt nothing. There was no spark of life in the thing.

There was no time to hesitate. Holding on to the fury and the strength, she threw the man in front of her, scattering the brutes that lay between her and the window. She broke the arm of the one man who grabbed her as she ran. Then she was at the window. She struck the glass with Steel’s pommel, felt it shatter, and threw herself through.

It was a longer fall than she’d expected and far from a graceful landing. The world disappeared in a flash of pain as she struck hard stone, and she heard the crack of bone. It was hard for her to tell what was broken; her world was a mass of agony. Steel was talking but his voice was like wind; she couldn’t hang on to the words. She knew only one thing: she couldn’t stop, not yet. She couldn’t seem to stand, but Steel was still in her hand. She forced herself onto her arms, drove Steel down into the ground, and dragged herself forward.

There were voices in her mind, shouting along with Steel. She heard Daine, the Son of Khyber, but his words were as incomprehensible as the voice of the dagger.

She pulled herself forward again. She could feel an alcove up ahead—shelter.

Drulkalatar railed in her mind, mocking cries and howls lost in the torment.

Time lost its meaning as she dragged herself forward—another foot … another. Finally she was hidden from view.

Her destination reached, she fell back against the ground. All she could feel was pain. She wanted to let go of it, wanted to stop struggling, but something made her hang on.

She felt movement behind her. She tried to find the strength she needed to rise, to throw Steel.

“Relax, beloved,” Drego said. “You’ll need that fire soon enough.”
Blinded by agony, all Thorn could see was the outline of the man. But she knew his voice, and his scent.

“Come … to mock?” she said.
“Never, beloved,” he replied. “Yet surely you know that you could end all this. You’ve drawn on her strength but nothing more. If you release the dragon, she will survive this. She will make your enemies suffer for what they have done to you.”
“No …” she said. Drawing in breath was a challenge. “If I die … I die … as Thorn.”
“Mortals,” he said. “Stubborn to the last. I suppose that’s what you get for having a last to be stubborn to. If you’re so certain, then I suppose I’ll have to help.”
“Help?” she murmured.
“Just remember one thing, beloved,” he said, kneeling beside her. “It’s only a dream.”
He disappeared then and she wasn’t sure if he’d walked out of the alcove or simply vanished. The voices were still clamoring beneath the pain. Daine … Drulkalatar … dozens more.
The world faded away, and when it came back, someone was coming toward her hiding place.
Drego? No. She could hear hard boots scraping the ground, the hem of a long robe dragging.
The stranger drew ever closer. Thorn gathered her strength, and she realized what she had to do. She stopped struggling, dropped Steel, and let the tension flow from her body.

The sentry paused at the edge of the alcove. He’d heard a sound, and he’d seen the bloodstains along the stone. But sight and sound weren’t his primary senses. He perceived the living by feeling their fears, and there was nothing up ahead. Still, spear at the ready, he turned the corner.
The woman was stretched out on the stone. The sentry could see her broken leg and the blood around her, the dagger fallen to the side. And he felt nothing from her. Already dead. Something gleamed on the back of her neck, and he took a step forward to see what it was.
She moved in an instant, her hand wrapped around his leg. Surprised as he was, the sentry raised his spear to finish her. Or he tried to. Something was wrong. There was no strength in his arms. No arms. She was crushing all that he was and pulling it down, pulling it into her, pulling it …
Into the stone.
He could hear the other voices clamoring around him, the dragon, the demons, the angels. And that was his last thought for a long time.

Thorn gasped, still clutching the ankle of the guardian. The pain was gone, flushed away as the strength of the sentry flowed through her. She flexed her leg and found the bone intact. Once again, draining the life of another had saved her own.
Sarmondelaryx’s power, she thought. I used it again.
It was only then that the events of the past few moments fully came back to her. She sat up and looked around.
“Drego?”
He was nowhere to be seen. More than that, she couldn’t smell him anymore. With all the other voices, she wasn’t sure if he’d really been there at all.
Voices. She picked up Steel.
You’re alive, he said.
“You sound so surprised,” she told him.
You weren’t watching you for the last few moments. Quite a remarkable recovery.
“Isn’t it? It might make you think of Toli or a certain Deneith bastard.”
Yes … Steel said. I felt the surge of power again. It seems you’re learning more control.
“So it seems,” she said. “If you were watching the last few minutes … Was anyone here before the guard? Did anyone talk to me?”
I was trying. You didn’t seem to hear. You were too busy using me as a chisel.
“No one else?”
No. If you’re thinking of Marudrix, he must have been captured. Or killed, if that’s possible. I suggest you start thinking about escape.

“Escape?” Thorn looked around herself. She could see the wall of bones far away. The towers stretched up toward the night sky, but they had changed while she was inside; they seemed to be formed from raw muscle, glistening wetly in the light of the moons. “Without Drix?”
Yes, well, I suppose you could try to find Drix and rescue him. On your own. Given your spectacular success rate to this point, I think the Citadel would prefer that you admit defeat while you’re still alive and get safely back. If you can even manage that.

“Such confidence,” Thorn said.
Then it all fell into place.
“Of course.” She cursed.
What?
“Don’t you see? It’s only a dream.”
I’m afraid I don’t see at all. And dreams aren’t exactly my area of expertise.

Thorn stood up. Her thoughts were racing, and she felt a renewed surge of energy. “The manticore told us this place was both dream and reality, right?”
Correct. If that’s literally true, it means that we are in some way on the plane of Dal Quor at this moment, that we are physically walking through dreams.
These things play on fear. When I faced them, every time I doubted myself, every time I thought I might fail, I did. While Drix—”
Succeeded against all odds despite having little more than a sunny disposition and the most unlikely magical weapon I’ve seen.

“Exactly. Aureon’s word, I felt better when he smiled at me. When he finally fell, it was when Shan Doresh confronted him with his fears. Stole that confidence away.”
Do you truly think you can do anything you can imagine in this place?
“I don’t know.” She looked up at the sky. “I’m not flying now, so the answer appears to be no. I think it’s smaller than that. Luck. Not thinking about the ways that I’ll fail.”
This begins to sound like a kalashtar sermon.
“I suppose it does. But it’s worth a try. I believe I can find Drix.”
And how will you do that, exactly?
Thorn sighed. “Always the practical one, aren’t you? Still …” She reached back and ran two fingers over the stone in her neck then shifted to feel the shard in the base of her spine. “Drix could sense the other stones with his crystal heart. He was surprised I couldn’t.”

Which could be because your shards are not, in fact, ancient eladrin relics.

“Yes,” she said. “Or it could be because I don’t believe that they are. I’ve spent this entire mission questioning everything. Perhaps it’s time that I try believing the story and seeing where it takes me.”
If you think that will work, I’d like to see you try.
Fin,” Thorn said. She slid the dagger back into his sheath and closed her eyes.
It wasn’t so easy for Thorn to concentrate. All of her other senses had returned to their full sensitivity. Even with her eyes closed, she could hear the feet against the stones below, feel the beasts in the air moving overhead, smell the salty tang of tears and blood. She did her best to push it away, to focus on a single sensation: the stone in her neck.

For a long time after Far Passage, the stone had been a source of constant pain. She’d relied on dreamlily and alcohol to dull the agony, weaning herself only when the addiction nearly brought down a mission. She realized that
the pain was still there, that she’d just learned to hold it at bay. It wasn’t physical pain at all. It was anger, hatred. She could feel hundreds of voices in the stone, clamoring for release, raging at her. She could faintly sense Daine, doing his best to hold the others at bay and bring her what peace he could. Drulkalatar, filled with feral hatred, was there too. And she sensed another, vast and dark, filled with hunger ... Sarmondelaryx herself.

There were more, dozens more, hundreds. She remembered the vision that had come to her in Fallen, walking through the chamber of whispering skulls, and Tira’s words at the Silver Tree. *The Preserving Shard holds the spirits of our greatest leaders.* She could feel them, faint, for they were not struggling for release, ancient spirits buried deep within the shard.

Intriguing as that was, at the moment it was more inconvenient than useful. She couldn’t reach any further within the stone. The rage that burned within it was too great. She let the image of the stone drift away and brought her focus down, to the shard in the base of her spine.

That stone had never brought her pain, though it occasionally grew cold. The Quiet Stone, Tira had called it. And compared to the raging shard above, it certainly was silent. Thorn tried to explore it with her thoughts and found nothing. If not for the voices she’d heard just seconds earlier, she might have given up, dismissed it as madness. This time …

This time I learn your secrets.

That one thought—that moment of determination—was all it took. It was as though she’d been pressed against a wall of glass only to have it turn into air. She felt her consciousness slip inside the stone, and she knew it for what it was, for what it could do. The Quiet Stone had been made to conceal and to warn. Thorn knew that she’d only touched a fraction of its power, and then only by instinct. She had no idea yet how to unlock its greater functions, but she could feel the depth of it, a deep pool of still energy. And as she studied it, she could sense the echo of others nearby. She knew then that there was a time when the stones had all been together. Words flashed through her mind —*Ourelon’s Gift*—and the dragons at the Silver Tree, a pact made in an age past. The vision faded in an instant, but she could still feel the echo of the others, feel them calling to be rejoined.

She opened her eyes and drew Steel.

So, he said. *Have you found Marudrix?*

Thorn spun the dagger in the air and caught him. “As a matter of fact,” she said, “I believe I have.”
Chapter Twenty-Four

Taer Lian Doresh
Barrakas 25, 999 YK

Thorn strode through the halls of the Fortress of Fading Dreams, following the call of the crystal heart. She walked through streams of blood and chambers of writhing eyes, through halls where shrouded eladrin were harvesting fears from imprisoned dreamers and the kennels where those phobias were bound and trained for battle. No guardian gave her a second glance, nor did the strange and terrible beasts challenge her approach. Perhaps it was the Quiet Stone, responding to her touch. Perhaps the world of dreams was responding to her belief in herself. And perhaps it was simple arrogance on the part of the ancient fey. Thorn wore the long cloak of the guardian who’d walked the halls, and she hid her face behind his silver mask. Perhaps the disguise and the confidence with which she walked was all it took to remove all obstacles to her path.

There were many moments when something could have gone wrong, many times when a casual twist of fate could have revealed her deception and brought the full force of the citadel to bear. Yet at every turn, Olladra smiled, and fortune favored the Lantern.

The call of the heart led her to the highest tower in the central keep, to a chamber that looked out over the fortress and the haunted woods around it. In the courtyard the forces of the Fading Dream were preparing for battle. Sages in bronze masks assembled weird weapons of war, things torn from the most horrible dreams of mortal artificers. Nightmares writhed and twisted in the skies, howling in a multitude of voices.

And high in the chamber above, Thorn found Marudrix Juran Cannith bound in the center of a circle of fey symbols. She’d seen its like before, at the heart of the Silver Tree. She’d also seen the other artifacts in the room: the Sword of Winter, the Stone of Joy, and the sigils of all the mighty ghaele.

And there her luck finally ran out.

Thorn set the silver mask on the floor next to the spear and drew Steel. “What can you tell me?”

That you should never have made it this far unchallenged.

Thorn rapped the blade against her knuckles. “Kalashtar sermon, remember? Be positive. What can you tell me about this seal?”

The power is immense—enough that it shows up clearly, even against the background energies of the fortress. Binding, abjuration, what you’d expect from defensive wards. There is something else. The power … Marudrix is the focal point. All the others … the energy feeds to him.

“To what end?”

That is unknown.

“What do you think? Can I cross it safely?”

By my analysis, the wards are purely defensive in nature—powerful, yes, but merely holding the artifacts in place.

Thorn nodded. “That’s what it looks like to me.” Avoiding the nexus points of the wards where the air rippled around the artifacts, she strode over to Drix and knelt by his side. “Well, he’s still warm,” she said.

It’s a start, I suppose.

“Yes. Still …” she took a pinch of silver dust from a pouch and blew it toward Marudrix. When it vaporized, she tested the ward with a thin probe. “Whatever this is, my confidence isn’t enough to get through.”

Unfortunate. It seems confidence isn’t everything.

“I guess not,” Thorn said. “Strange, though. Look at the shape of this ward.”

I see, Steel said. There are gaps in it. Not wide enough to pull him out, I’m afraid.

“No,” Thorn said. “But why have them at all?”

There’s far too much we don’t know about any of the eladrin, and it would seem these are stranger than most.
Thorn crouched down next to Drix, rocking back and forth. “So let’s concentrate on what we do know.”

Which is?

“It’s all about stories. One kiss puts the princess to sleep for a thousand years. Kill the ogre and his spine becomes a ladder.”

Do we need a ladder?

“No that I know of. But if you believe what they said in the Silver Tree, I’m sitting next to a sleeping prince.”

Which means?

Thorn looked down at Drix. She thought about her brother Nandon, the memories of childhood, the stories he’d told her in the dark, and the distance that had come between them over the years. She thought about how much she missed him. And leaning down through the gaps in the shielding ward, she gently kissed Drix.

At first nothing happened. Then there was a pulse of light at his chest … and another. Then he opened his eyes.

He glanced at her, moving only his eyes.

This is insane, Steel said.

“Kalashtar sermons,” Thorn said quietly. She looked down at Drix. “Can you talk?”

“Thorn?” he said. His jaw didn’t move, and she had to struggle to hear him.

“I’m here,” she said. “We don’t know how to get you out or what this is all about.”

“G-g-g …” he said, struggling.

“Slowly,” Thorn said. “Calm.”

“Go,” he said. “Go now.”

A new voice filled the room. “Oh, it’s far too late for that.”

There was only one door to the highest chamber in the Fortress of Fading Dreams. Shan Doresh stood in it, a curved blade gleaming in one outstretched hand.

Thorn rose to her feet, but she wasn’t fast enough. The Lord of Dreams raised his darkwood scepter, and a wave of force closed around her, pushing her back and pinning her arms to her sides.

“By now you should know the futility of battle, Lady Thorn.” Shan Doresh had not bothered to restore his glamour. His armor was battle worn and tarnished, and he studied her with pools of shadow held behind his battered mithral mask. His voice was a chill wind, echoing through an empty helm. “There is to be no dramatic duel between us. You have a role to play, but it is not the part of the champion.”

Thorn struggled and the dragon’s fury flowed through her. She’d broken an ogre with that strength, but physical power alone could not break the bonds that held her. “I’ll never help you,” she snarled.

“I need nothing from you but your presence,” Doresh replied, striding into the circle. The wards had been restored, and Drix could no longer speak. “And yet there is no need for such anger. Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you see?” Doresh said. “The stones. The boy. I’m going to finish this and save your friend.”

Though Thorn couldn’t move her arms, she could still rub a finger across Steel’s hilt. “You’re going to perform the ritual Lady Tira had prepared?”

It’s possible, Steel told her. The stones are here. Drix is at the center of it. There’s something troubling me, though. Let me continue to analyze the energies.

Shan Doresh’s face was hidden behind his battered mask, but that mask shifted as if it were made of soft flesh. He smiled. “Yes. I will remove the heart from this boy’s chest. I am afraid that it will take some time for the stones to come into alignment; you will have to endure my company for some time before I can bring this to a close. But there is no need for hatred here. You have played your part. Now let your burdens fall. And soon I will remove the heart and bring this story to an end.”

“It’s easier to relax when I can move my arms,” Thorn said. The bands of mystical force still held her tightly. “You know, since it’s just us friends here.”

Doresh shook his head. He walked slowly around the circle, running his fingers over each of the artifacts he’d stolen from the Silver Tree. “There is no need for us to be enemies, but I’m not such a fool to think that we are friends. You still do not understand this tale you are in. You believe that I am the villain.”

“Well, let’s see,” Thorn said. “Theft … manipulating me and my nation in an effort to shift the blame for that theft … arranging for poor Drix here to be stabbed … and if I can bring myself to believe the story, you might even be responsible for the Mourning. How is it that you’re not the villain?”

Doresh looked at her, his mithral eyes narrowing. “You don’t know how this all began. You don’t know why I’ve
done any of this.”

“So tell me,” Thorn said. “It seems as though we have a little time on our hands. Tell me a story, Shan Doresh. Tell me how you’re not the bastard you seem to be.”

“I have other things to occupy my thoughts right now. You would do well to simply spend this time in silence. It will be over soon.”

“I’ve never been one for silence. The easiest way to get your peace is to answer the questions.”

Doresh turned to face her fully. “Understand this: The people of this world mean nothing to me—your kind, even less. It is the people of the Silver Tree who must listen to this tale and who will know how it ends soon enough.”

Thorn would have shrugged if she could have moved. “So consider me the rehearsal. Tira was all set to remove the heart. You betrayed her trust, stole these treasures, and tried to blame ‘my kind’ for it. And now you’re doing it yourself. I suppose you want me to believe that it’s all a matter of pride, that you need to be the one who gets to be the savior, and you couldn’t let Tira take the credit for it. That if not for me, you would have blamed the Cyrans for the theft, and you could have taken credit both for recovering the treasures and for removing the heart.”

Doresh smiled, the edges of the mithral mouth turning up. “You’re surprisingly clever for a creature made of dirt and ash. Perhaps that drop of my blood in you is worth something after all.”

“So all of this was so you could play the part of the wounded hero. The man who made the noble sacrifice. You wanted to cast Tira in the role of hotheaded fool, the one who brought doom on her people.”

“And she did,” Doresh said. “I may have placed the knife before her, but she struck the blow.”

“True enough,” Thorn said. “For all of your power, you all seem like children to me.”

Doresh ran the edge of his curved blade along the darkwood rod. “Mind your words, girl. I need you for this ritual. What happens to you after that is far from certain.”

“And now you can see why this whole situation is so relaxing for me. You’re suggesting that you’re doing the same thing as Tira. That you’re going to restore Drix and the Silver Tree. And this is all just about who gets to take the credit for this amazing victory.”

Doresh turned away, not even bothering to respond.

“It’s a good story. Exactly the kind of thing a human king might do—set up an enemy to fail so he could take credit for the victory. Make it all about propaganda. I just don’t believe it.”

Neither do I, Steel said. The ritual is certainly similar to what Tira was developing, but there’s a piece missing. I don’t see anything that’s going to actually heal Drix’s injury once the stone is removed.

Doresh looked back at her. “Arrogant child. You think you understand me?”

“I have no idea what you want. I just know what you don’t want, and that’s to restore the Silver Tree. I’ve seen the army of terrors you’re building in this place, and I know you didn’t show this face to the Council of the Silver Tree. Cadrel—or whoever he really was—said that you’ve suffered. He said that you’ve been dragged through nightmares and now you want to drag the others with you.”

Doresh said nothing.

“Which means that what you’re doing now isn’t for their benefit. I just don’t know what it is.” She glanced at Drix.

Then she saw it.

“You never expected Tira to make the sacrifice in the first place. You knew she’d stab Drix. You never expected her to save him.”

Doresh watched her silently, his shadowy eyes unreadable.

“You and the others—you think that Drix somehow stopped the Mourning from spreading. You weren’t expecting that. You thought it was going to spread across the entire nation, that it would reach all of the fey cities, not just the Silver Tree.”

“Yes,” Doresh hissed. “We wanted them all to suffer as we have. Let every living thing feel our pain. And yes, I will remove the stone from this boy’s chest, and once he is dead, the blight will spread again. And my armies will be ready. We will move through that darkness, a force of nightmare ready to bring this tale to its proper conclusion. To end in glorious battle, as it began.”

Try as she might, Thorn still couldn’t bring herself to believe that Drix had anything to do with the Mourning, either causing it or holding it in check. Nonetheless, she’d seen the horrors Shan Doresh was readying below; that was enough cause for concern. When he killed Drix and the Mourning didn’t spread, the forces assembled there could still cause carnage. Then there was Cadrel.

“Wait,” she said. “You needed Drix and me to come here.”
He nodded, smiling again.

“In the end, you didn’t even expect the blame to fall on the Cyrans. You wanted Cadrel to get caught so they’d know you had the stones and, knowing that you would sense them coming, that they’d send us to get them.”

“Yes,” Doresh said. “That was Kalas’s part, to let them know that we had defeated them, beginning to end. That we’d placed the blade in the queen’s hand and that she had driven it into the heart of the Silver Tree. That they would have to rely on creatures of dirt to win back their greatest treasures.”

“So Cadrel, the Cyran scheme—you expected me to see through it. You had a spy in place for years so that, when the time came, he could fail.”

“You cannot understand us. One of your years is as nothing to us. The people of my citadel—we have spent thousands of your lifetimes wandering nightmares.”

“And that’s the strangest part of this,” Thorn said. “You set up this impossibly complicated scheme, all to show your cousins how clever you are before watching them suffer and die. You’re doing nothing but gloat. And yet, moments ago, you lied to me about what you’re about to do. I’m nothing, dirt, a mere piece in your puzzle. So why lie now?”

Doresh ignored her, examining the relics in the circle.

“Why lead me to believe that this is all for Drix’s benefit, that I should just relax and let it happen, when I can’t possibly escape and battle is futile?”

Doresh looked at her again. “Perhaps cruelty isn’t in my nature. I need you alive for this piece of things. I thought to let you die with peace in your soul.”

“I’ve seen things in these towers that redefine cruelty for me. You’re not doing this for me. Which means there’s only one reason for you to lie. You’re afraid.” A warm glow was spreading up Thorn’s back as she spoke and she smiled.

A sneer spread across Doresh’s mithral mask. “And what could I possibly be afraid of?”

“Me.” Thorn took a step forward, feeling only the slightest tingle as she passed through the ward. “The Quiet Stone is the stone of stealth, and there’s more to that than concealment, isn’t there?”

“You won’t escape again,” Doresh said. “You know you can’t defeat me. I am a champion of my people. I was fighting giants before your kind existed. I am a master of steel and spell.”

“You keep saying that,” Thorn said. “But you know what?”

Doresh stared at her, the empty sockets of his mask cold and hollow.

She shifted Steel into a fighting grip. “I don’t believe you.”
Y ou know nothing, mortal,” Doresh growled, and the stone in his brooch pulsed with light. “And I will not demean myself by fighting you. I am the Lord of Dreams made real, and to face me is to face your fears.”

They weren’t alone any longer. Cazalan Dal was between them, along with his companions in the Covenant of the Gray Mist. Shadowy blades were raised, and arcane energy crackled along the lengths of half a dozen wands.

Thorn could see the move in her mind, and she executed it flawlessly, an acrobat’s dream. She rolled forward, passing beneath the blast from Dal’s wand and driving Steel into his chest with the full strength of the dragon within her. Even as he grunted in pain, she lifted him up and threw him into the swordsman darting toward her.

“You can’t stop me with these dreams,” Thorn snarled. “They’re not real. They’re not my fears.”

It was true. The first time she’d fought Cazalan Dal, she had been afraid. She’d been concerned about the safety of the people in her charge. She’d wanted to take the assassin alive. Knowing that those things were just specters, images of people she’d never known—there was no fear in her, no reason to hold back. Thorn knew she would defeat them. She was a whirlwind of steel and fury. No blade could touch her, and every blow she struck was true. Within seconds her enemies had fallen, and she faced Doresh again.

“Are you ready to demean yourself now?”

Doresh hissed, his mask twisting in fury. His curved knife warped, the fluid metal stretching into a long, crescent blade suffused with a pale light. Then he was upon her.

Fighting the dreams had made Thorn overconfident. With his tattered cloak and threadbare armor, it was all too easy to think of Shan Doresh as a faded soldier, a spirit whose time had passed. Yet he struck with lightning speed and deadly precision. A thrust of the gleaming blade was an instant away from piercing her heart. She parried just in time, but he was already swinging the heavy scepter in his left hand; she felt a burst of pain as the rod struck her temple. It was only a momentary distraction, but in such a struggle, one moment could make all the difference.

Abandoning all thought of offense, Thorn threw herself backward. The lunar blade slashed open her thigh as she rolled away.

If Doresh had followed her, that might have been the end, but once his blade was bloodied, the fallen eladrin wished to savor the battle. He smiled. “In truth, it has been decades since I have relied on my sword to finish a fight.”

As Thorn rose to her feet, she could practically see him remembering past victories.

“Come,” he said. The opalescent radiance of his sword pulsed, the flashing beat one more distraction. “Show me what little skill you possess.”

“I can do that from here,” Thorn said, flinging Steel at his throat.

The Stone of Dreams flashed as Doresh raised his scepter. He struck Steel out of the air with a casual disdain, and the dagger clattered across the floor. Thorn reached out with her thoughts … and nothing happened. Steel should have flown back to her hand; instead he remained still, a lump of cold metal on the floor.

Her moment of concern nearly cost her her life. Shan Doresh struck the moment her attention faltered. The light faded from his crescent blade, and it was almost invisible as he lunged. It was sheer instinct that saved her. She leaped back the moment she saw movement, and the distance gave her just enough room to catch the blade against a bracer. Doresh maintained the attack. Steel wasn’t in her hand, and Doresh unleashed a flurry of blows, moving forward as Thorn fell back. Her arms ached as she caught blow after blow against her vambraces.

“You’re unarmed,” he said as Thorn swept aside a stroke that would have torn open her throat. “Tiring. One mistake will end it all. Just one mistake.”

He was trying to plant doubts in her mind because in that place those doubts would become truth. She’d already learned the trick, and despite the danger, she hadn’t given up hope. Drix needed her. Breland needed her. Walking
the halls, she’d imagined those beasts she’d seen in the kennels unleashed on Sharn, imagined her brother, Nandon, fighting for his life against the terrors she’d seen. No. She’d walked strange paths to get there, and if she fell, it wasn’t going to be because of doubt.

The thought gave her renewed vigor. She was learning the rhythms of Doresh’s attacks and letting his confidence grow. But he was wrong. She wasn’t unarmed.

For a moment, she let her guard falter, leaving the barest opening. Doresh struck. The edge of his blade cut across her, but Thorn was already moving. She twisted her left arm around the eladrin’s sword arm, sliding forward to trap his blade. Then, summoning all the strength of the dragon, she slammed her knee up against him.

The warlord’s sword flew from his grasp, and he staggered back across the room. But it was Thorn’s turn to press the attack. She charged forward, a thought bringing the myrnaxe from her glove. He blocked her first stroke with his scepter, the darkwood holding against the blow, but the force of it kept him off balance. She switched her grip, thrusting with the silver spearhead, and he fell back, staying just ahead of her. Just as she was about to sink the blade into his heart, he gestured with his scepter. She felt the ward wrapping around her, but she knew what to do. She drew on the power of the Quiet Stone, letting the warmth flow up and around her, and walked through the mystic bonds.

While he couldn’t hold her, the spell had bought Doresh a moment to recover. He raised his scepter again. At his throat, the Stone of Dreams burned with a brilliant light.

“Enough!” he roared and Thorn could feel the power building in the air. “I am Shan Lian Doresh, the lord of nightmares! To face me is to face your deepest terrors! Let us see what you fear!”

She sent him crashing to the floor with a single blow of the flat of the axe. A moment later she was pinning him down, her knee on his chest and the haft of the axe pressed against his throat. “Nice speech,” she said. “But I think this Quiet Stone keeps my fears concealed. Just in case—” She reached down and tore the silver brooch from around his neck. “I think I’d better hold on to this.”

Doresh screamed, and as he did, the room around them faded. There was a crack as fractures snaked down the grand windows. The nightmares in the sky outside the tower fell suddenly silent, and the hammers of the smiths stopped ringing. Patches of rot spread across a tapestry on the wall, and Shan Doresh himself seemed to shrivel within his armor. He went limp beneath her, his tortured cry coming to an abrupt end. His scepter crumbled away, and Thorn heard his sword shatter.

Thorn stared down at the fallen warlord. Even with his threadbare cloak, he’d held a sense of majesty and might. After she removed the Stone of Dreams, he was just an ancient scarecrow clad in tarnished armor.

“Finish me, then,” he said. “Claim your prize. Let there be an end to it.”

“I don’t think so,” Thorn told him. “I was given a job. I’m taking my friend. I’m taking these stones and yours with them. I’ll let the Council of the Silver Tree decide your fate.”

Doresh didn’t move as Thorn slowly stood. She wasn’t certain if he had the strength to stand on his own. She turned to Drix. Around her, the trappings of the chamber continued to decay. Yet it seemed the ward holding Drix was still in place.

Then Doresh was upon her.

He’d lost none of his speed, and there was no time to escape. One bony hand wrapped tightly around her own, trying to wrest the Stone of Dreams from her grasp. The other pressed against the back of her neck, and agony flowed through her. Thorn couldn’t concentrate on the Quiet Stone; she focused every ounce of willpower on holding on to the Stone of Dreams.

Doresh was howling, his voice a wild shriek. “One dream!” he cried. “One terror. Give that to me, and I will see you fall!”

And fall she did, pain driving her to her knees. She still had the silver brooch clutched tightly in her fist, but something had changed. There was a terrible heat in the room. Thorn had walked in lava without feeling it, yet she felt as though she were leaning over a smith’s forge. Sweat beaded on her skin. She could feel a shift in the air pressure, a hot breeze flowing over her, a stench of sulfur and ash.

Even as she rolled onto her back, she knew what she was going to see. Shan Doresh was staring down at her, still little more than an emaciated wight in blackened robes. A glorious beast towered over him, filling the tower hall with her bulk. Her crimson scales were the color of fresh blood, and if the legends were true, mundane steel would shatter against them. Long horns curled back over her head, and her horns and teeth had the color and gleam of polished obsidian. Her eyes gleamed with inner fire, the heat that filled the room, and Thorn knew that one breath could incinerate everything there. For she knew that glorious monster. She’d seen her in her worst nightmares, struggled with her in her mind.
The dragon Sarmondelaryx.
The Angel of Flame.
Shan Doresh hadn’t even looked up to see what he had summoned. He had eyes for only Thorn. “Crush the life from her,” he cried. “Crush her. Retrieve my stone, so that I can begin to rebuild from this humiliation.”

“I think not.” The dragon’s cruel voice was filled with mirth, and the force of it shook the room. Fragments of glass fell from the cracked windows. Shan Doresh finally turned to see what he had brought into being—to late. He disappeared beneath Sarmondelaryx’s claws, a crunch of snapping bones emerging as she settled her weight upon him. The mithral mask rolled across the floor, bent double. When the dragon lifted her foot, all that was left was a mass of torn, black rags, chunks of bone barely visible beneath the cloth.

The dragon reared back and spread her wings, shattering the tower as she did. Thorn covered her head with her arms as chunks of masonry rained down around her. Sarmondelaryx was roaring with laughter, and at last both laughter and the onslaught of stone came to an end. When Thorn looked up, the dragon was staring at her, fire burning in her eyes.

“Little Thorn,” Sarmondelaryx said. “You and I have unfinished business.”
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Taer Lian Doresh
Barrakas 25, 999 YK

It was one thing to hear stories of the awesome presence of dragons, of the raw terror they instilled in lesser creatures, and quite another to experience the effect herself. It was as if she were a sheep staring into the eyes of an enormous wolf. Thousands of generations of instinct were screaming in her mind, urging her to fall to the floor and cover her eyes, to hope that the glorious beast might simply pass her by.

She knew that wasn’t going to happen. So she forced those fearful voices down and rose to her feet. She didn’t bother to pick up the myrnaxe; no silver spear would bring down the Angel of Flame.

“What do you want?” she said, fighting to keep her voice steady.

A rumble shook the room as the dragon chuckled. “What do I want? The same things I’ve always wanted. Freedom. Glory. Revenge!” She reared again as she roared the last word, flames licking around her coal black teeth and shards of stone falling from the crumbling words.

Thorn could have run in that moment, darted down into the tower. But Drix was still bound—mercifully so, as the wards that held him pinned were also protecting him from the falling rubble. If she fled, she’d be abandoning Drix and leaving the stones behind. If Sarmondelaryx wanted to kill her, Thorn knew she could shatter the walls of the tower.

“Revenge on all those who have wronged me!” the dragon roared. “Let the Light of Siberys know fear. Let every last dragon of the Chamber quake, knowing that I will come for them. I will drink the souls of those who tried to bind me to their purposes and shatter every fragment of my father. And you . . .” Sarmondelaryx looked down at Thorn, the fire burning in her eyes, and Thorn took pride in meeting that gaze. “Or perhaps you’ve suffered enough.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Thorn cried. “Just kill me if you’re going to.”

Sarmondelaryx was never one to be kind. Thorn had learned that in her dreams. The Angel of Flame would always twist the knife if given the chance, and their situation was no exception.

“Kill you?” she said. “And what would I kill? You’re not Nyrielle Tam. You never were. You were always Sarmondelaryx.”

“Of course I am,” Thorn said. “I have a brother; I saw him a week ago. I’m a Dark Lantern of the King’s Citadel.”

“Nyrielle Tam had a brother. She served your Citadel. And she died a year ago. Where do you suppose those stones in your spine came from?”

“Far Passage . . .” Thorn said.

“I took the Preserving Shard when I slew the Keepers of the Grove,” the dragon growled. “I slew an army of giants to claim the Quiet Stone. Your Far Passage was a story to serve one purpose: a single Lantern returns with shards in her back, the rest of her team lost.”

Tears were stinging Thorn’s eyes. “So I never went to Far Passage?”

“You went,” Sarmondelaryx said, her chuckle shaking the room. “You and your lover, proud to serve your king. And both of you died. It was my body that returned, with only your memories.”

“And Nandon didn’t notice the difference?” Thorn said.

“What difference?” Sarmondelaryx said. “We dragons are creatures of fire and magic, and our flesh is a mutable thing. I learned to transform myself long ago, and I have worn a hundred shapes in my lifetime. Our enemies trapped me in your form; the only difference anyone would see would be the shards in your spine, and the story of Far Passage was enough to hide that. But you’ve seen the world through my eyes, eyes that can pierce the deepest shadows. You’ve walked through fire in my skin, unscathed. You may see Nyrielle when you look in the mirror, but your flesh is mine.”
“Why?” Thorn said. “Why would the Citadel do such a thing?”

“Because your Citadel is just one more toy in the hands of my enemies,” Sarmondelaryx told her. “The Chamber had plans for me, but I knew far too much. They knew I’d never be their pawn. And yet they needed me to serve them. The Angel of Flame. The Devourer of Souls. I’ve fought dragons and demons alike. I’ve laid waste to nations and scattered armies. I didn’t realize just how organized they’d become or guessed that they could hold me even for a moment. Far less that they could push my thoughts into my own Preserving Shard and bind your soul to my body.”

“I’m not Nyrielle … ?” Thorn said, her voice breaking.

“No. You’re just a ghost who doesn’t even know where her bones are buried.”

“Who?” Thorn said. “In the Citadel? Who did this to me?”

“I’d tell you if I knew, just to watch you suffer,” the dragon replied. “Just know that your Citadel is one more pawn in the games of the Chamber. There are dragons walking your halls, and it is they who decide the fate of your nations, not your kings or your soldiers.”

“All right …” Thorn said. And slowly she let the stammer fall from her voice. “All right. I think you’ve told me enough. You can go now.”

“What?” the dragon roared. “You think you can dismiss me?”

Thorn looked right in her eyes. “I think I just did. Go. I’m done with you.”

Sarmondelaryx laughed and her laughter shook the tower. “You? You are done with me? You are nothing. Less than nothing. And I am Sarmondelaryx. The Bane of Thrane. The Angel of—”

“No,” Thorn said. “You’re not.”

The laughter stopped.

“You’re just a dream,” Thorn said. “Plucked from both of our minds. You may have her memories but you’re nothing. Fly away. See what happens when you pass over the fortress walls. Who knows? Perhaps you’ll continue to exist, drifting through the dreams of others. Or perhaps you’ll simply fade away.”

“No …” Sarmondelaryx said. “I won’t let you do this to me.”

“And what are you going to do about it? You said it yourself. I am you. This is your body, and you’re just a dream waiting for the dreamer to wake. Even if you could kill me in this place, you’d only be killing yourself.”

“No!” the dragon roared.

“Enough!” Thorn said. “Go! Just get out of my sight.”

Sarmondelaryx looked back at her, and there was a gleam of desperation in the dragon’s burning gaze. “We can bargain, you and I.”

“Oh? And what do you possibly have to offer me?”

“Power,” the dragon said. “Vengeance. Those who bound me killed you to do it. They murdered the man you loved just to make the story real. You can’t possibly fight them on your own. With my power, you can strike terror into their hearts. You can make them pay for all that they’ve done to you.”

“And what would I have to do?”

“Release me. Give me my body again. Join with me. Let us become something new, Thorn and Sarmondelaryx together.”

Thorn knew the idea was madness, that she had no way of knowing if anything Sarmondelaryx had told her was the truth. And yet … she thought of Lharen, the man who’d given her his heart and who’d been ready to give his life for Breland. She thought about Nyrielle Tam, the dreams a young girl once had. And in that moment, there was a part of her that wanted that vengeance for both of them.

“Drego told me I wouldn’t last if I merged with you. That you’d dissolve my personality.”

“In time, surely. But how long did you ever expect to live, Thorn? You’re mortal. You could last a decade before you fade completely. And in that time, you will see your enemies fall.”

Thorn thought about it, about how glorious it had felt when she’d battled Drulkalatar. How wonderful it would be to see those responsible fall. Thought they might share a thirst for vengeance, but there was little else she had in common with the fiend before her. Just a moment past, the dragon had spoken of slaughtering armies and devastating nations. As long as Thorn held her contained, that could never happen again.

She remembered the words of Drego Sarhain when she kissed Cadrel at the Silver Tree: *You may be doomed, but do not go easily, Nyrielle. And don’t fall to the likes of this one.* She didn’t know if there was truly anything of Drego in those words. But she was going to stand by them.

“Go,” she told the dragon. “You can’t fight me. You have nothing I want. Go now and maybe you’ll find a home in someone’s nightmares.”
Sarmondelaryx hissed. Yet she’d had time to think as well, and she’d come up with a new weapon.

“You’re clever, little one. I can’t kill you without killing myself. And yet …” she moved her foreclaw, placing a talon against Drix’s stomach. “I can certainly kill the boy.”

Surprised as she was, Thorn almost laughed. “Perhaps you missed the last week of my life,” she said. “But I think you’ll find it’s not that easy.”

“Perhaps,” Sarmondelaryx rumbled. “And yet here we are, standing in a circle designed just for that purpose. The eight shards of Ourelon’s Gift around us. If the fallen fey was right, I might even spread the Mourning in the process. I can’t kill you. But him? I’d kill him just to make you suffer.”

Her talon shifted and Thorn moved. Reaching out, she set her palm against the dragon’s claw and pulled. She called on all her anger, all her strength, and sought to drag the spirit down into the prison of the Preserving Shard. It was like nothing she’d ever experienced before. When she’d swallowed Toli, Daine, even the eladrin guard, it was instinct and desperation. When she’d forced Sarmondelaryx back into her chains down beneath the streets of Sharn, the dragon was weak, barely released. The nightmare was something else, a Sarmondelaryx who’d had time to savor the sensations of life again.

Thorn felt wings sprouting from her back. Her neck stretching as her tail thrashed against the floor. She grappled with Sarmondelaryx as an equal, two dragons struggling on the top of the tower of nightmares.

“You can’t defeat me,” Sarmondelaryx snarled. “Tonight you finally go to your rest, little ghost.”

Thorn couldn’t spare a moment to answer; the battle took every thought. She was the real one. She had the body. She’d thought that would give her the edge. And she did have a fierce strength that her enemy couldn’t match. Yet Sarmondelaryx was drawn from Thorn’s nightmares, from her very fears of falling to the dragon. And Sarmondelaryx had fought dragons before. She used her tail and wings in ways that had never occurred to Thorn.

Within moments, she had caught Thorn’s throat between her jaws, pinning her head and increasing the pressure with each moment.

The battle was all in her mind, in her soul. Thorn was still standing with her hand pressed against the dragon’s claw. And in her other hand, she was clutching a piece of jewelry, a silver brooch shaped like a crescent moon with an opalescent crystal resting between the horns.

The Stone of Dreams.

With her last surge of strength, Thorn slammed the brooch against her chest. There was a burst of pain. She could feel flesh and bone part, feel her blood merging with the stone. She could feel the stone itself studying her … and accepting the bond.

New energy flowed through her. In her mind, a burst of force pilled out around her, sending Sarmondelaryx sprawling. Thorn opened her jaws, and a cone of light shone from within. Sarmondelaryx froze in that light, howling in frustration as her form became soft and indistinct. Her time was done. Her strength was gone. She was a fading dream caught in the morning light.

And in a moment, she was gone.

The light went with her, and suddenly Thorn was falling again, falling into the welcoming dark …

“Thorn?”

There was blue sky above when she opened her eyes, and the golden ring of Siberys glittered in the sunlight. For a moment Thorn wondered just how much she’d dreamed; then she saw the shattered walls around her, the chunks of rubble from the dragon’s wrath.

“Thorn? Can you hear me?” Drix was kneeling next to her.

“Yes,” she said. Her throat was rough and dry, and there was a terrible pain in her chest. “What happened?”

“The dragon was about to crush me. I couldn’t see all that you did, but there was a flash of light and then … the dragon vanished. Everything else … it changed. You’ll see when you look over the edge. The things in the courtyard —they’re gone.”

“You mean … I did this?”

“It’s difficult to analyze energies of such magnitude,” Drix said. “But I don’t think you were responsible. For a time we were on two separate planes of existence simultaneously. Your defeat of Sarmondelaryx coincided with a disruption of that planar juncture. The fey we were fighting, the forces that were assembling, even the bulk of the buildings have likely shifted back to Dal Quor. All that’s left is a shell.”

“That sounds like something Steel would say,” she said. It hurt to breathe too deeply.

“It is,” Drix said, holding up the dagger. “I found him on the floor. He’s told me all sorts of interesting things.”
“Really?” Thorn said. “Well … it’s good to have friends.”

She forced herself up on one arm, feeling a sharp pain as she did. She looked down and saw the sun gleaming off the silver brooch that lay between her breasts. Despite the pain, her skin was smooth around the crescent moon. The stone gleamed with an inner light, and she thought she heard a whispering voice, too faint for even her keen ears to catch the words. Then light and voice faded.

“Lovely,” she murmured, brushing one finger across the cold stone. “I’m sure that’s just what I needed.”

“We can go now,” Drix said. “I’ve packed everything, and I made all the preparations while you were sleeping. It should work just fine. Probably. Well, maybe.”

“Leave how?” She sat up and saw a circle traced in chalk among the rubble with tiny dragonshards scattered around the edges.

“It’s a temporary teleportation circle,” Drix said. “It should get us back to Ascalin. I was able to send a message to Lady Tira. By now there should be people there waiting to take us back to the Silver Tree.”

“You sent a message to Tira?” Thorn said. “And you’re just going to connect to the Orien network with … chalk?”

Drix smiled. “I know, it sounds crazy. It helps when you’ve got some stolen dragonshards from a gate anchor point to work with. And it’s even better to have a half dozen fey artifacts to play around with.” He pulled down his collar, and Thorn could see Lord Joridal’s emerald amulet hanging around his neck. “If I had a little more time to experiment with them, I think I could do all sorts of interesting things.”

“At least you’ve managed to keep from getting them stuck in your skin,” Thorn said.

“Yes, it’s strange, how that happened for you. Steel thought it might have had something to do with us still being merged with dreams at the time.”

“It’s nothing I haven’t dealt with before,” Thorn said. She sighed, feeling the pain grow as she took a deep breath. She rose to her feet. “Let’s go. Somehow I’m thinking the Silver Tree is the quickest path to a strong drink.”

Drix grinned. “I should warn you: this may be a little bumpier than your usual Orien ride.”

A few moments later, the tower was empty. A light wind blew plaster dust down toward the barren courtyard below.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

\*

The Mournland

Rhaan 3, 999 YK

Not quite what I’d hoped for,” Thorn said. She was standing at the gate of the Silver Tree, looking out over the pale landscape. At a glance, nothing had changed from the moment they had first arrived.

Drix grinned. “I thought you were the one who didn’t believe the story.”

“I didn’t. I still don’t. Still, after everything we saw … I was beginning to hope that prying that stone out of your heart might just change everything.”

“And it did,” Drix said. He let his fingers drift across his chest, passing over the place where the crystal shard had been. “It’s going to take more time.”

That was what Tira had told them after the ceremony was completed and Drix was able to stand. Initially the tinker had been heartbroken when the green fields of Cyre weren’t restored. Then Tira told them that the results were all that she’d hoped for. That she knew that the decay of the Silver Tree had stopped; it might take time for it to return to full health, but it was on the right path. And as for the Mournland, she was confident that all would be well in just a century or two. With Tira casually dismissing a century, Thorn could see why Shan Doresh had thought a few years a paltry amount of time to devote to his scheme.

“So it’s going to be a hundred years before we know if there’s any truth to the story,” Thorn said. “I guess it’s something to look forward to.”

“There’s lots of things to look forward to,” Drix said. “Why are you leaving so soon? And why like this?”

Thorn looked out over the Mournland, and her thoughts drifted back to her last conversation with Lady Tira, deep in the roots of the Silver Tree.

“So everything she said was true.” Thorn had been standing at the gates of the Silver Tree, staring out across the pale landscape.

“True enough.” The Stone of Life had glowed on Tira’s golden crown, but her face was still hidden beneath the long veil. “You are the soul of Nyrielle Tam, bound to the body of Sarmondelaryx. An old spell, and a powerful one. Certainly the work of dragons.”

“The Chamber—”

“I can only tell the truth of you, so I cannot tell you who among your Citadel might have been involved. But I have heard of this Chamber. For tens of thousands of your years—even before Shan Doresh challenged the giants of Xen’drik—the dragons have remained in isolation on Argonnessen. There they study a matrix of truths, a map of possibilities that can foretell the future—or create it. For generation after generation, they were content simply watch it unfold. Now there are those who seek to use it. To choose the paths the future takes. The dragons of this Chamber walk among your kind, hidden in human form. And they are not the only ones.”

“No?”

“You have met demons before. I can feel it. The most ancient among them have long sought to control the Draconic Prophecy. More of your history than you can imagine—your Last War, Galifar, even the birth of the Khoravar race—has been shaped by this struggle between the Argonnessen and these Lords of Dust. You are a pawn in that war. There are certain things the Chamber wants the Angel of Flame to do. Your battle with Drulkalatar Atesh was surely in their schemes. They knew they couldn’t control Sarmondelaryx, and so they bound your soul and your memories to her. To create an Angel of Flame they could more easily control.”

Thorn nodded. Drego’s words beneath Sharn made all too much sense. As a Lantern, she’d done her best to serve Breland, but what other powers had she truly been serving?

“I can tell you this,” Tira said. “You have changed the balance of things by bonding with the Stone of Dreams. It may give you the power to contain Sarmondelaryx indefinitely. But I fear this gift comes with a heavy price.”
“Oh?”

“Shan Doresh could not be so easily defeated,” Tira told her. “He—”

“You weren’t there,” Thorn said. “There was nothing easy about it.”

“It doesn’t matter. He was in his place of power. Stripped of his stone, he could be laid low for a time, yes. But no simple dream could destroy him completely nor could that defeat alone return his citadel to the realm of dreams. I fear that it was his choice to flee once the stone bonded to your flesh. Even I don’t understand how you’ve bonded with it so easily and what it will do to the stone if it is removed by force. Weakened, confused, and knowing that we had found him, I believe Shan Lian Doresh chose to flee, to remove his people and his citadel to a place we could not follow. I am certain he will return when he is ready. He will find a new home for his citadel in this world and reconnect with those agents he has scattered throughout your kingdoms. And when he is ready, he will return for his stone.”

“Well, that’s something to look forward to,” Thorn said.

“There’s still more,” Tira said. “Even I know little of the Draconic Prophecy, but I know both you and Sarmondelaryx are a part of it and that this is why the Chamber has used you in this way. And I am certain that your finding the stone was another part of their plans for you.”

“It’s never easy, is it?”

“No,” Tira said. “And for you, it never will be.”

Then she was standing at the gate of the Silver Tree. She had a portable hole, filled with all the supplies she’d need to cross the wasteland. Every one of the ghaele had offered to carry her back to her homeland, even the frosty Lord Syraen, but she wanted to walk.

She’d found that the ease with which she’d tapped into the Quiet Stone had been one more aspect of walking in dreams. She knew what powers lay within the stones she carried, but she still had a long way to go to master them. She knew what she was. She knew what she could be, if she chose. Could she return to her work for the Citadel? Or was there a greater battle in her future, one that could, ultimately, do more for Breland than her work as a spy?

“I need time alone,” she said to Drix at last. “I’ve got much to think about before I reach Breland.”

“What will you do when you get there?” Drix said.

Thorn thought about the life of Nyrielle Tam, about the mother who abandoned her, the father who died in the war, the brother who’d told her stories when she couldn’t sleep. She remembered her conversation with Drego Sarhain just before she cut his throat and the dream she’d had when she kissed Essyn Cadrel.

“I need to find my family,” she told Drix. “And then I think I’ll go looking for a demon.”
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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 also the author of the Dreaming Dark trilogy.
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