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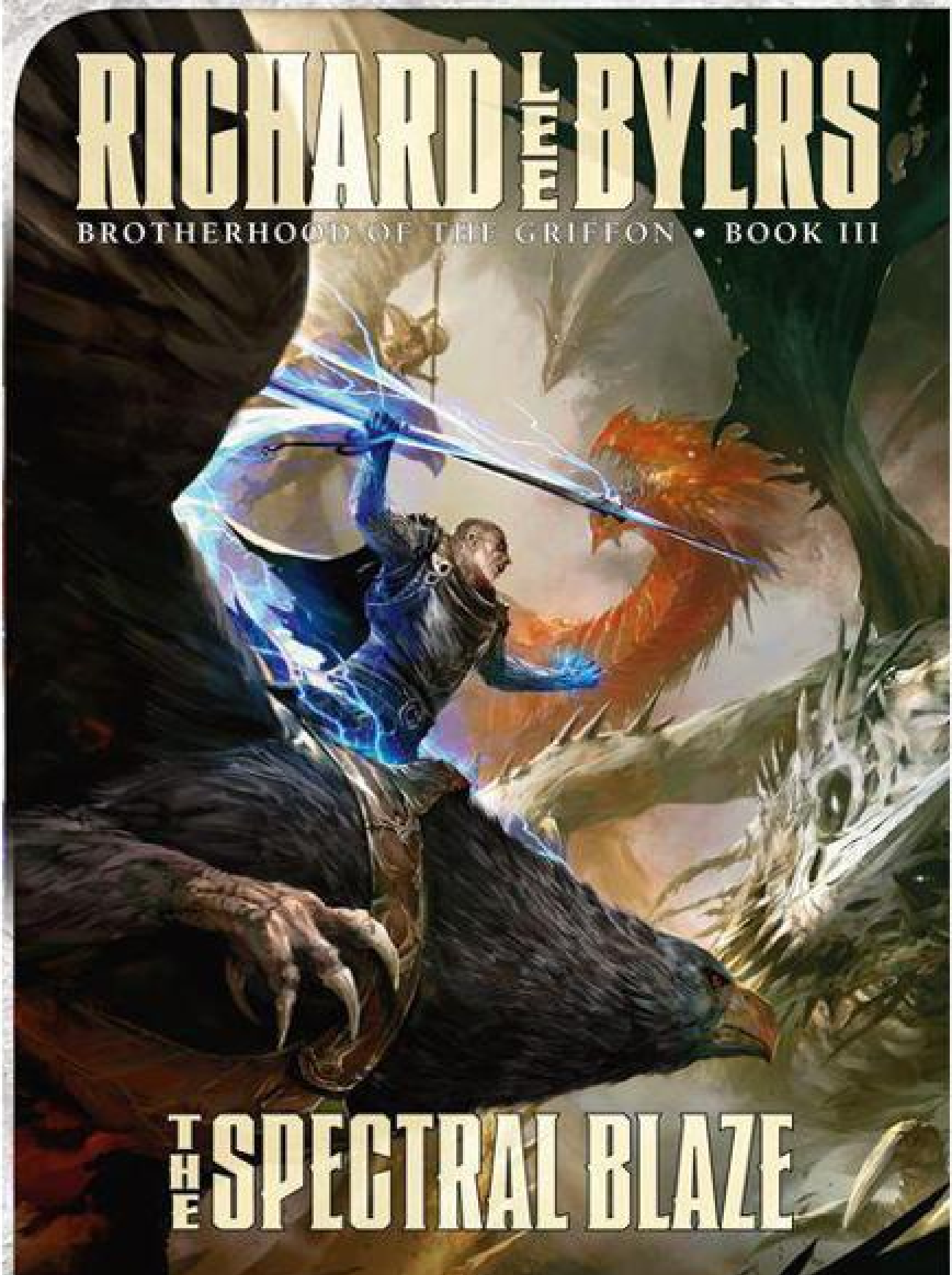
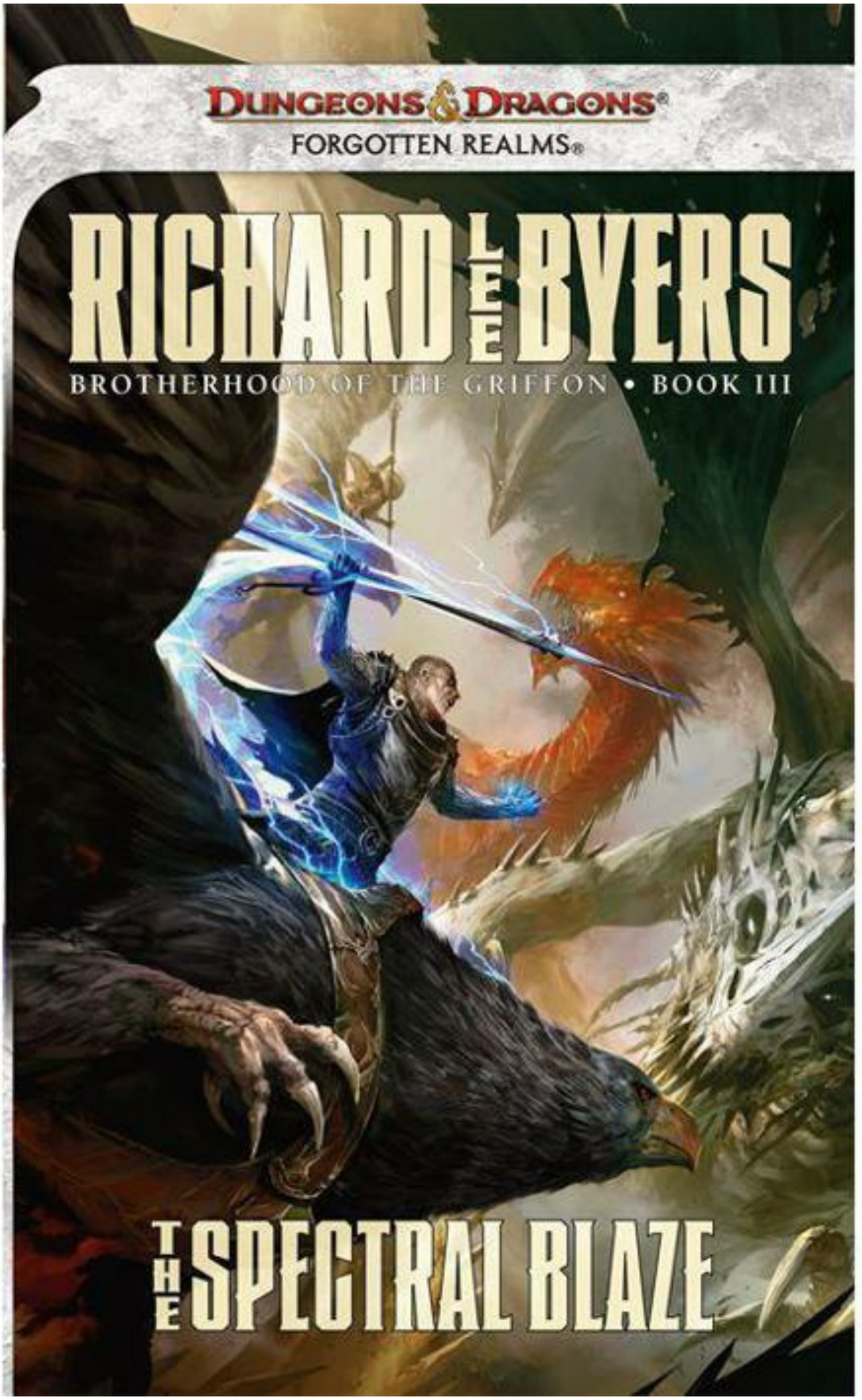


THE SPECTRAL BLAZE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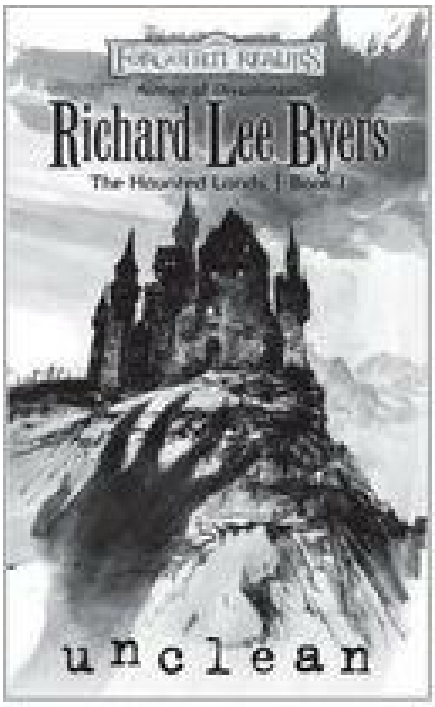
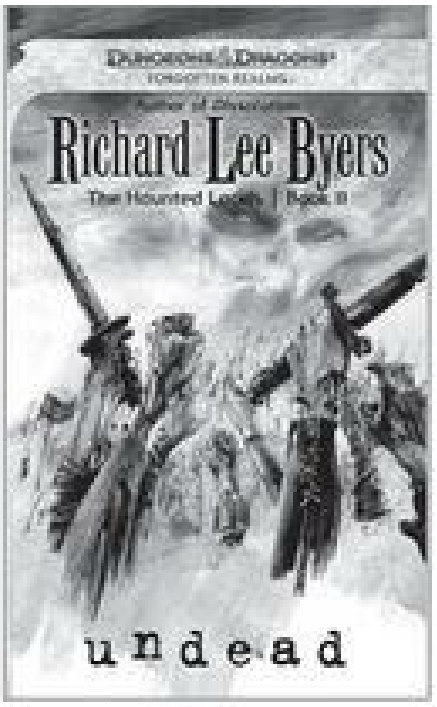
THE HAUNTED LANDS

The story of a vicious civil war fraught with fell magic and the most disturbing undead that acclaimed horror author Richard Lee Byers could dream up.



Unclean
BOOK I



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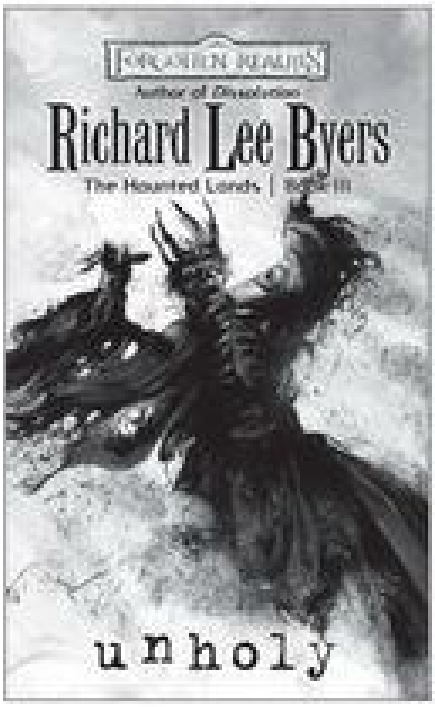

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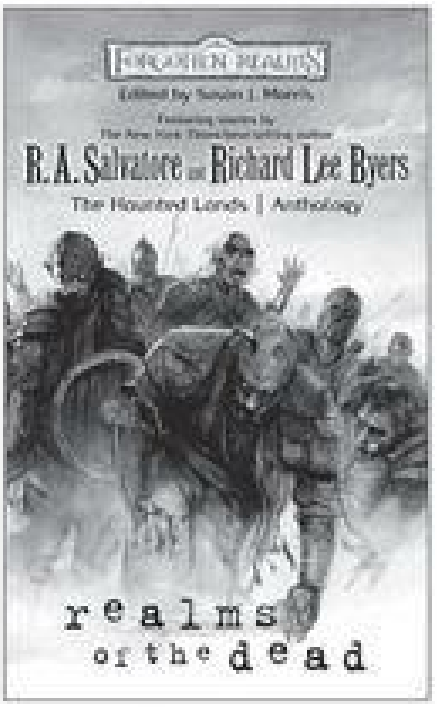
BOOK III



Realms of the Dead
ANTHOLOGY

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All right, human. I'll tell you what you want to know.

In primordial times dragons ruled Faerûn. The problem was that we were as contentious a people then as we are now. Yet if we had simply set about slaughtering our fellows whenever we felt so inclined, the resulting chaos might have brought us to the brink of extinction.

Fortunately our ancestors found a way to manage the struggle. They vied for dominance by manipulating lesser beings like pawns on a game board, and scored points when their agents eliminated the minions of a rival.

Mostly the players manipulate events from the shadows to achieve various goals and score points thereby. The general idea is to plunge the realms clustered around the Alamber Sea into war.

War to weaken a land until it can no longer withstand a dragon conqueror. Or until it finds itself in such desperate straits that it will embrace a dragon protector.

But I warn you. You won't like it very much.

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BROTHERHOOD OF THE GRIFFON • BOOK III

THE SPECTRAL BLAZE

Brotherhood of the Griffon
Book III
THE SPECTRAL BLAZE
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Wizards of the
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P.O. Box 707

Renton, WA
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About the Author

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

infested ruins in their wake.

A LAND OF MAGIC

When the goddess of magic was murdered, a magical plague of blue fire—the Spellplague—swept across the face of Faerûn, killing some, mutilating many, and imbuing a rare few with amazing supernatural abilities.

The Spellplague forever changed the nature of magic itself, and seeded the land with hidden wonders and bloodcurdling monstrosities.

A LAND OF DARKNESS

The threats Faerûn faces are legion. Armies of undead mass in Thay under the

brilliant but mad lich king Szass Tam. Treacherous dark elves plot in the Underdark in the service of their cruel and fickle goddess, Lolth. The Abolethic Sovereignty, a terrifying hive of inhuman slave masters, floats above the Sea of Fallen Stars, spreading chaos and destruction. And the Empire of Netheril, armed with magic of unimaginable power, prowls Faerûn in flying

fortresses, sowing discord to their own incalculable ends.

A LAND OF HEROES

But Faerûn is not without hope. Heroes have emerged to fight the growing tide of darkness. Battle-scarred rangers bring their notched blades to bear against marauding hordes of orcs.

Lowly street rats match wits with demons for the fate of cities. Inscrutable tiefling warlocks unite with fierce elf warriors to rain fire and steel upon monstrous enemies. And valiant servants of merciful gods forever struggle against the darkness.

A LAND OF UNTOLD ADVENTURE

PROLOGUE

15 Flamerule, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Cera Eurthos and her two companions

had locked the spirit of Alasklerbanbastos, the Great Bone Wyrm, in the charred, rotting corpse of Calabastasingavor, a younger, smaller blue dragon. Yet the undead horror at the bottom of the big, open grave seemed scarcely less menacing for that. He gave a rasping laugh, and despite herself, Cera flinched.

Alert for any hint that the dracolich was about to attack, Aoth Fezim had his glowing blue eyes locked on him. Yet somehow he sensed Cera's pang of fear, reached out, and gave her forearm a reassuring squeeze.

"All right, human," Alasklerbanbastos said. "I'll tell you what you want to know. But I warn you. You won't like it

very much."

A surge of excitement washed Cera's fear—although not her caution—away. Ever since Chessenta's troubles began, she, Aoth, and their allies had sensed hidden forces acting beneath the surface of events. Amaunator had tasked her, his priestess, with solving the puzzle. The mission had taken her through captivity, torture, and constant danger. But it appeared she'd groped her way to the truth at last.

"We dragons," Alasklerbanbastos continued, "are playing a game."

"Please," said Gaedynn Ulraes. He was as tall and lanky as Aoth was short and burly, and his impeccably brushed and combed hair gleamed even in the

pale moonlight, although night had dulled it from coppery red to gray. “We didn’t haul your scaly, decaying arse back into the mortal world so you could put us off with trite metaphors. Cera, give him another dose of your light.”

Cera focused her will on the black, egg-shaped gem in her hand. At certain moments it looked solid, and at others like a shadow with tiny blue lightning bolts flickering inside it. Mostly it was cold, although occasionally it gave her a sudden hot sting. But however it looked and felt, it was ever the source of the dracolich’s immortality and his tether to earthly existence. And she, Aoth, and the wizards in his service had altered it so she could infuse it with Amaunator’s

holy sunlight and wrack Alasklerbanbastos with pain.

"That's unnecessary!" Alasklerbanbastos snapped. Sparks, a petty manifestation of the lightning that was part of a blue dragon's essence, jumped and popped on his torn and slimy hide. "I'm speaking the truth as plainly as I can, whether or not you have the wit to understand it. We wyrms are *literally* playing a game."

Aoth pressed a fingertip to his mail-covered chest. Cera assumed he was activating the magic in one of the tattoos that covered his body and face. Then, spear held ready, he stepped closer to the pit. "Explain," he said.

"In primordial times,"

Alasklerbanbastos said, “dragons ruled Faerûn.”

Gaedynn snorted. “Maybe you should skip ahead a little.”

Aoth raised a hand to tell the archer not to interrupt.

“The problem,” the dracolich continued, “was that we were as contentious a people then as we are now. We often disputed among ourselves, largely because we wanted to dominate one another as we did the lower orders. Yet if we had simply set about slaughtering our fellows whenever we felt so inclined, the resulting chaos might have threatened our control of the lesser races. It might even have brought us to the brink of extinction.”

"And wouldn't that have been a pity," Gaedynn murmured. Perhaps that was unwise, because wyrms had notoriously sharp senses, and Alasklerbanbastos shot him a glare before pressing onward with his tale.

"Fortunately our ancestors found a way to manage the struggle. They vied for dominance by manipulating lesser beings like pawns on a game board, and scored points when their agents eliminated the minions of a rival."

Aoth frowned. "You say 'manipulating.' But if they ruled kingdoms, couldn't they just order their subjects to go out and fight for them?"

"They could," Alasklerbanbastos replied, "but the game was played on

multiple levels. Players scored points for guile and subtlety as well as simple success. For that reason, even a dragon's chief agents—his exarchs—often didn't understand the true purpose of their various missions."

"And this actually worked?" asked Aoth.

"So we are told," said the dracolich, and to Cera's surprise, there was a hint of amusement in his hiss of a voice. "You understand that, ancient as I must seem to mayflies like you, I wasn't there to witness it myself. The dragon kings still fought outright wars on occasion but not the endless, devastating wars that might otherwise have been.

"Then the madness of the Rage

changed the face of the world," Alasklerbanbastos continued. "Dragons lost their thrones and other things besides, including knowledge of *xorvintaal*, the Great Game."

"But now the Rage is over," said Aoth, "or at least that's what the stories say. A song dragon named Karasendrieth and her friends figured out how to cure it to keep you wyrms from tearing the world apart."

"Indeed," said Alasklerbanbastos, "and with that cloud lifted from our minds, we remembered that we are the rightful lords of all Faerûn. But we didn't know how to reclaim our thrones. A few of us possess armies but none powerful enough to overrun the

continent. And the possibility of conquest confronted us with the same problem as the dragons of old. Who among us would be an emperor, and who a mere duke or count? How could we decide such things except by the wholesale butchery of one another?"

"Let me guess," said Gaedynn, a crooked smile on his lips. "Just when you needed it most, somebody rediscovered your nasty little game."

"Yes," said Alasklerbanbastos. "Karasendrieth's song cycle says that her companion, the vampire drake Brimstone, perished in the final battle with Sammaster. But unbeknownst to her or any other, he actually survived, and stayed in the ruined citadel to search for

secrets. Ultimately Tiamat led him to the rules—the Precepts—of the Great Game. And now he's returned to share it with his kin."

"And this—everything that's been happening—is it?" asked Aoth. For a moment, the battle magic stored inside his spear made red light flow along the razor edges of the head. "It doesn't seem to have kept many dragons from getting killed. Including you."

Alasklerbanbastos shifted his leathery wings, and Cera caught a whiff of his rotten stench. Some of the dirt that had covered him smelled like the bottom of the grave. "The rules don't forbid dragon to fight dragon in all circumstances. Not if one issues a

challenge and the other accepts. And you surely know how Tchazzar and I hate one another."

"And once you agreed to come out and fight, your dragon underlings had no choice but to do it too." Gaedynn grinned. "Bad luck for them."

"Something like that," said the undead blue. "Don't imagine you can truly comprehend the Precepts. It takes a dragon's intellect and long years of study."

Gaedynn's grin widened. "I'm guessing that means you don't understand them, either. You have to take this Brimstone's word for it as to what they really mean. Interesting."

Without so much as a twitch to hint at

his intentions and fast as a striking viper despite his broken, tattered from, Alasklerbanbastos scrambled up the side of the pit. Lined with fangs the size of short swords, his jaws gaped as he lunged at Gaedynn.

The archer leaped backward, and the reptile's teeth clashed shut on empty air. Gaedynn nocked an arrow as he continued to retreat. But nimble as he was, the dracolich was faster and closed the distance before he could draw the fletchings back to his ear. The wyrm raised a forefoot to rake and stamp.

Aoth bellowed a word of power, and the point of his spear burst into flame. He rammed it into Alasklerbanbastos's neck, and the dragon froze.

It lasted for only a heartbeat, though. Then with a fast, sinuous motion bewildering to the eye, he whipped his neck free of the burning point and twisted his frilled, wedge-shaped head around to glare at Aoth. White light flickered in his mouth, and a smell like an oncoming storm suffused the air as he prepared to spit lightning.

Then Cera set herself aglow with golden radiance and stabbed a hot, dazzling shaft of it into the phylactery like a dagger. Unlike her companions, she didn't make her living from war and fighting, and she didn't react to threats as quickly as they did. But the trials of the past several tendays had sharpened her reflexes, and Aoth and Gaedynn had

bought her enough time to bring the Keeper's sacred power to bear.

Alasklerbanbastos burst into flame and convulsed. His agony shook the ground, and Aoth and Gaedynn retreated, staggering a little, lest a pounding wing or lashing tail pulp them without the reptile's even intending it.

A part of Cera wanted to let the fire burn until it reduced the dracolich to ash. Any sunlady or sunlord would have felt the same. But, mindful of her purpose, she took a steadying breath then brandished her gilded mace. The flames died.

Just as they did, two winged shapes came swooping down from the starry sky. They were Jet and Eider, Aoth and

Gaedynn's griffons, rushing to protect their masters.

Black as his name, Jet leveled off. He shared a psychic bond with Aoth, and Cera assumed that Aoth had used it to tell him not to attack. Jet screeched to Eider, and the other griffon pulled out of her dive as well.

Alasklerbanbastos lay sprawled on the ground, his body smoking, bits of it sizzling like bacon in a frying pan, filling the warm, summer air with a foul smell.

"We can go on like this all night," Aoth told him.

The dracolich dragged himself to his feet. Cera suspected his pride wouldn't allow him to stay down in front of his captors. "You have me at a

disadvantage," he said. "I acknowledge that. But I will not abide insolence. I will not be mocked."

"Gaedynn," said Aoth, "don't tease the dragon."

The archer heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I never get to have any fun."

Aoth lowered his spear but kept it pointed in Alasklerbanbastos's general direction. "You were explaining how this *xorvintaal* is the answer to all your problems."

"Yes," the dragon said. "The open duel between Tchazzar and me was something of an anomaly. Mostly the players manipulate events from the shadows to achieve various goals and score points thereby. The general idea is

to plunge the realms clustered around the Alamber Sea into war."

"War to weaken a land until it can no longer withstand a dragon conqueror," Gaedynn said.

"Or until it finds itself in such desperate straits that it will embrace a dragon protector," Cera said, "as Chessenta embraced Tchazzar."

"And a big part of the first phase of the game focuses on isolating and breaking Tymanther," said Aoth. "Because the dragonborn hate wyrms. They'll pose a constant threat to your plans until you kill them or bring them to heel."

The dracolich grunted. "You understand," he said, "insofar as you're

capable of understanding."

"Lucky us," said Gaedynn. "Now what in the Night Hunter's name are we supposed to do about it?"

* * * * *

Panting, Halonya looked at Khouryn Skulldark, lying unconscious on the tiled floor of the Green Hall, and realized exactly what she wanted *to* do.

The stars knew he had it coming, for all sorts of reasons. For starters, he was a dwarf, and her people had always mistrusted his stunted kind, burrowing in the ground like vermin. Worse, he'd just returned from Tymanther astride one of the giant bats the dragonborn's elite warriors rode. That proved he was

friendly to the very enemies Chessenta was preparing to attack. And as if all that weren't damning enough, he'd revealed his true loyalties by lunging at Halonya when she'd ordered his arrest.

Worst of all, he was a friend of both Aoth Fezim, the Thayan sellsword captain who'd threatened to kill her, and Jhesrhi Coldcreek, the filthy witch seeking to mislead and corrupt Tchazzar. It shouldn't have been possible for a mere mortal to do any such thing to the greatest of gods, but the powers of the Abyss had plainly wrapped their chosen seductress in a terrible glamour.

Yes, Khouryn deserved all the punishment anyone cared to give him. But Halonya wasn't just a beggar

anymore, or even a scorned and ragged prophetess preaching in the streets. She was high priestess of the Church of Tchazzar and had her dignity to consider.

For one more heartbeat, that reflection held her back, and the urge to express her loathing swept it away. She strode to the dwarf, hitched up the ruby-studded crimson skirts of her voluminous vestments, and kicked him repeatedly. She didn't stop till she ran out of breath and only then noticed that her own foot was smarting.

Garbed in a chasuble of shimmering scales, a heavy pick clasped in a hand adorned with rings of five colors, his mustache and beard waxed into the same

number of points, Pharic cleared his throat. He was a wyrmkeeper, a priest of Tiamat, but he and others of his order had come to swell the ranks of her newly constituted clergy. Because the Dark Lady was Tchazzar's consort. Or the two were somehow the same being. Or something like that. Halonya didn't really understand it, although she would sooner have died than admit that to anyone else.

"I recommend shackling him without further delay," Pharic said. "Dwarves have thick skulls. A knock on the head might not keep him out for long."

"Do it," Halonya said. She stepped back from Khouryn, and the guards hurried forward.

“May I ask what you intend to do with him?” Pharic inquired.

“I don’t kn—I mean, I’ll have to meditate about it,” Halonya said.

Chains clinked as a soldier snapped the leg irons on the dwarf.

“We could scarcely find a better sacrifice.” Pharic lowered his voice. “His death would give strength to Tchazzar and perhaps even to you personally if you yourself perform the ritual.”

Halonya eyed the wyrmkeeper. Did his words contain a gibe? Did he know that, unlike other clerics, she’d never figured out how to wield the divine magic that was hers by right? If so, she couldn’t tell it from his face.

In any case, his suggestion appealed to her but made her feel a little queasy too. She'd never killed a person with her own hands. She wasn't sure she had the stomach for it.

And maybe it would be a waste of an opportunity. Maybe Lady Luck had finally given her a way to out-trick Jhesrhi for a change.

"No," she said, "or at least not yet. We'll lock him away for now."

* * * * *

Alasklerbanbastos made a sort of ugly rumbling sound. It took Aoth a moment to realize it was a chuckle.

"Yes," the undead dragon said, "that's the question, isn't it? Now that you little

creatures know about the game, what can you possibly do about it? Especially considering that you sellswords yourselves are merely a few of the pawns and have been ever since Skuthosin laid claim to you back in Impiltur."

Wings furled, Jet set down on the ground. With his spellscarred eyes, which saw as well in the dark as they did in the light, Aoth observed that Eider was still circling high overhead, probably so she could dive at Alasklerbanbastos if he attacked again. Or just because she found the undead creature repulsive.

"Do we even *want* to stop the game?" asked Jet, stalking forward to stand

beside Aoth. He'd listened to the entire conversation through their psychic bond.

Gaedynn smiled crookedly. "That's an interesting question. After all, we're sellswords. The dragons want to plunge this part of the East into years, probably decades, of war. From our perspective, what could be better?"

"Not much," said Aoth. "But how do you feel about the way it's all supposed to work out?"

Gaedynn shrugged. "We're already fighting for one dragon king. They already have dragon princes ruling over in Murghôm. Still, the prospect of every monarch everywhere in this part of the East—and ultimately in all Faerûn, I assume—being a wyrm … well, I admit,

there's something a tad disturbing about it."

" 'A tad disturbing'?" Cera exploded. "It's horrible!"

Aoth sighed. "Maybe. But nobody's paying us to do anything about it. In fact, the Brotherhood's in service to Tchazzar. We're being paid to *further* his ambitions."

Cera scowled. It didn't make her round face any less pretty, or at least not in Aoth's opinion. But it revealed a fierceness that might have surprised the many folk who, despite her holy office, regarded her as a merry little flirt.

"You signed a contract to serve Nicos Corynian, Shala Karanok, and the Chessentan people," she said. "At that

point, Tchazzar was nowhere around."

"But he's the war hero now," Aoth replied. "Shala handed him the crown herself."

"Because she didn't realize he's insane!"

"Well, yes," Gaedynn said, and only one of his closest friends would have noticed the steeliness underlying his customary light, flippant tone. "There is that. And it's not as though we haven't done some poking around and conspiring behind his back already."

"To an extent," Aoth said, "because it endangered us not to understand what was truly going on."

Gaedynn grinned. "And because a certain stubborn little dumpling snapped

the whip." He winked at Cera.

Aoth sighed. "My point, jackanapes, is that through it all, my goal was to find a path through all the mystery and come out the other side. So we could go back to our proper roles: fighting wars for coin, without giving a mouse's fart about the reason for the quarrel."

"But you had to know it wouldn't be that easy," Cera said. "Not when Amaunator himself set us on this path. Why would he reveal the truth to us if he didn't want us to use it to help his children?"

Inwardly Aoth winced. At the end of the War of the Zulkirs, he'd blundered his way through a tense few moments when the fate of the entire East, perhaps

the entire world, had depended on him and him alone. To say the least, he hadn't enjoyed the experience, and he didn't want to believe that a higher power was pushing him into anything remotely comparable again. It seemed particularly unfair considering that Amaunator wasn't even his patron god.

Yet there came a moment when only a fool kept swimming against the current, and however much he might resent it, his gut told him that the time had come around again.

He glowered at Alasklerbanbastos. "Gaedynn guessed that only Brimstone completely understands the Great Game. Is he right?"

"Essentially," the dragon said.

“So what does that mean, exactly?” Aoth persisted. “Is he the scorekeeper? The referee?”

“All of that,” Alasklerbanbastos said.

Gaedynn grinned. “In that case, I know who I’d bet on to finish on top. Him.”

“Because you’re a fool,” said the undead blue. “The game is a sacrament. We play with all the cunning and ferocity in us, but no one—certainly not its anointed arbiter—would pervert its fundamental tenets for personal gain.”

“If you truly believe that,” the bowman said, “then I understand how Jaxanaedegor outsmarted you.”

“I don’t care whether Brimstone’s an impartial judge or not,” said Aoth.

“What I want to know is this: could the game continue without him?”

With so much flesh burned, torn, and rotted away from the skull beneath, it seemed impossible that Alasklerbanbastos could produce a spiteful grin. Still, Aoth could have sworn that he did.

“No,” said the dracolich, “it couldn’t. So there, clever humans, is your solution. Just go kill him.”

“I’ll bite,” said Jet. “Where is he?”

“Dracowyr,” Alasklerbanbastos replied.

Cera shook her head. One of her tousled yellow curls tumbled down over her forehead. “I assume that’s the place we visited in spirit. But I don’t

recognize the name."

"I do," said Aoth. "It's an earthmote floating miles above the Great Wild Wood. Which means that only griffon riders could assault it, not the Brotherhood as a whole."

"And let's not forget that the Great Wild Wood's on the far side of Murghôm," Gaedynn said. "I imagine the dragon princes are all playing the game. They wouldn't want us to spoil their fun, so they wouldn't just let us fly over their territories unopposed."

"Maybe we can't reach Brimstone in his lair," Cera said, "but can't we just tell all the peoples around the Alamber Sea that they mustn't let the dragons manipulate them?"

“Would people believe such a strange story?” Aoth replied. “Would they even understand it?”

“One thing’s for certain,” Gaedynn said. “The wyrms would exert themselves mightily to silence the tattletales.”

Cera scowled. “There must be *something* we can do!”

Aoth scratched Jet’s neck as he pondered the problem. The feathers rustled and tickled his nose with their scent. “Maybe we can’t shut down the whole game,” he said eventually. “But we might be able to spoil the dragons’ immediate plans. Convince Tchazzar that now’s not the right time to go to war with Tymanther.”

“I know he listens to Jhesrhi,” Cera said, “but even she doesn’t have that much influence over him.”

Aoth smiled. “I have an idea that ought to help.”

“And if we can get him to call off the war,” Gaedynn said, “then maybe he won’t mind us leaving his service. Not now that he has the army of Threskel calling him master. And once the Brotherhood is out of his reach, maybe we can find a way to end the game in its entirety.”

“Meanwhile,” Cera said, “my kingdom will have to go on enduring the rule of a mad creature who thinks of his subjects as tokens on a lanceboard.”

“You don’t have to endure it,” said

Aoth, with a flicker of surprise at how easily these particular words were slipping out. “If we make it out of here, you’re welcome to come with us.”

She smiled at him. “I like it that you said that. But I have responsibilities to my temple and my parishioners. I can’t just run away if times are bad.”

Aoth sighed. “I understand.” How could he not when he was a leader too? “Look, let’s find out if we can even prevent the war and then see where we are.”

“You’ll be in your graves,” said Alasklerbanbastos, “or Tchazzar’s torture chambers. He may be insane, but he’s clever too. You can’t go on deceiving him for long.”

“What about if we have your help?” Aoth replied. “Wouldn’t you like a little taste of revenge?”

ONE

26–30 Flamerule, the Year of the Ageless One

Oraxes rubbed his forearms through his leather armor. “It’s cold here,” he said. “The middle of summer and it’s cold.”

“Not really,” Meralaine answered. “You’re just feeling all the people who died here. And all the things that grew out of their deaths or came to feed on them. We woke them up, and now their essence is bleeding into the night.”

His long mouth grinned. “You know, you could have just put your arms around me and given me a hug.”

She laughed, did as he’d suggested, and threw in a kiss for good measure. Up close, his skinny body and gear had a sour, sweaty, unwashed smell, but it didn’t bother her. She was used to smelling considerably fouler things.

“Did that warm you up?” she asked.

“A lot,” he answered.

“You need to prepare yourself for your task,” rasped a deep voice. Startled, Oraxes jerked. “Not wallow in the petty, animal pleasures of living flesh.”

Oraxes freed himself from Meralaine’s embrace and turned to face

Alasklerbanbastos. She was sure he found the dracolich intimidating. She certainly did and she was used to the undead. But he sneered as he would have at any bigot or bully who accosted him in a Luthcheq tavern or alleyway.

"Mind your own business," he said.

"This ritual is my business," Alasklerbanbastos said, sparks crawling on the horn at the end of his snout, "or so I've been given to understand. You're the one who knows nothing of the forces involved and has nothing to contribute."

There was an element of truth in that. Oraxes was a wizard but not a necromancer. He was there because he'd refused to let her sneak off with Alasklerbanbastos with only Cera and

the phylactery to control him. Actually, Aoth, Jhesrhi, and Gaedynn hadn't liked it either. But Tchazzar would have missed them if they'd disappeared for days on end. And so far, no one else was in on the scheme.

Fortunately, aside from jeers and grumbles, the dragon hadn't shown any signs of rebellion. Perhaps he truly had learned to fear the blaze of Cera's power burning him through the shadow stone. Or maybe he was eager to make a fool of Tchazzar.

Oraxes drew breath, no doubt for an angry retort or, if his judgment had wholly deserted him, an incantation. Meralaine loved him partly for his truculent reluctance to back down from

anyone or anything, especially when he felt he was in some sense standing up for her. But it would be stupid to let the quarrel escalate. She took hold of her sweetheart's forearm and gave a warning squeeze.

Then, with a snap and a flutter of wings, Eider dropped neatly through the tangle of branches overhead without breaking so much as a single twig. The griffon set down lightly, and from the saddle on her back, short composite rider's bow in hand, Gaedynn surveyed the figures before him and smiled.

"Now, children," he said.

Dead leaves rustling beneath her feet, Cera scurried down the hillside. "Is it time?" she asked.

Gaedynn nodded. “It is indeed.”

* * * * *

Even when marching to war, Tchazzar had insisted on a certain amount of pomp and amenities. Now that he was making a victory procession through newly subjugated Threskel, pageantry and comfort mattered considerably more. The evening meal was a case in point. He and his companions took it in a spacious, red silk pavilion, where the steady glow of orbs of conjured light gleamed on golden dishes.

The Red Dragon’s doublet and jewels were equally splendid, and Hasos Thora, baron of Soolabax, and Kassur Jedea, king of Threskel, had likewise

done their best to dress like notables of the royal court. Only Aoth and Jhesrhi still looked like warriors in the field. In her case it was because while Tchazzar had given her a bewildering abundance of gorgeous robes and gowns, it had never occurred to her to drag them along on campaign.

Had Shala Karanok been present, she no doubt would have worn her customary simple, mannish garb as well. But Tchazzar hadn't invited his predecessor. He still remembered and resented the moment when she'd anchored the battle line while he hung back and the troops had chanted her name instead of his.

His long, golden-eyed face animated,

his goblet occasionally spilling wine as he swung his arms to emphasize his points, Tchazzar pontificated on the capabilities of his newly augmented forces, the logistics of taking them south and east to Tymanther, and the best way to lay siege to the great citadel-city of Djerad Thymar. Aoth and Hasos offered their own thoughts. Kassur was more diffident, as he generally was in the dragon's company. The skinny, graying mage-lord seemed to fear that if he called attention to himself, Tchazzar might decide to take his crown and his head after all.

No one mentioned what everyone at the table knew: The dragonborn of Tymanther hadn't actually committed the

outrages of which they'd been accused. But Tchazzar was still using their seeming guilt as a pretext for war.

When Jhesrhi judged that it had grown late enough, she pushed her chair back. "Majesty," she said, "I need some air. Will you excuse me, please?"

Tchazzar frowned. "Are you ill?"

"Perhaps," she said, "a little."

"In that case," he said, "I'll stroll along with you."

It was what she'd hoped for, but it wouldn't do to let him know that. "I'm all right," she said, "and I mustn't take you away from your other guests."

"I've talked their ears off already," Tchazzar said. "I'm sure they'll be grateful to make their escape."

Taking their cues, the other men rose and bade him good night. Meanwhile, she picked up her staff. Made of shadow-wood, banded with golden rings with runes engraved around them, it was a potent aid for working all sorts of wizardry, and fire magic most of all. It had given her pause to learn that Jaxanaedegor had *meant* for her to carry it away from Mount Thulbane, but it was too useful a tool to give up.

The pseudo-mind inside the staff woke at her touch. Whispering inside her head, it urged her to set something ablaze. She focused her will and told it to be quiet.

Then she and Tchazzar walked out into the night.

In theory, the procession was spending the night in a village. But the royal company so outnumbered the locals that it had essentially engulfed the huddle of wattle huts, and as a result, their camp didn't look much different than if they'd stopped on the trail. Tents stood in rows. The coals of cook fires glowed red and scented the air with their smoke. A griffon gave a rasping cry, and soldiers and functionaries strode around on various errands.

"Did supper disagree with you?" he asked. "I can have the cook flogged."

"Everything was fine," she said. "It's just … it bothers me to be around Aoth. I wonder if he thinks I'm betraying him."

"Has he said so?"

“No. Not at all.”

Tchazzar took hold of her arm to stop her walking. It startled her, but she managed not to flinch. He gently turned her and looked her in the eye.

“Then do *you* think you’re betraying him?” he asked.

“He saved me from slavery and torment,” she said.

“And you repaid him in full with years of valiant, faithful service. Now you have another calling. We repealed the laws that oppressed Chessenta’s arcanists, but that was only the first step. They still need someone to look after them and help them reach their full potential, and I intend that shepherd to be you. It will make you one of my chief

advisers and one of the greatest ladies in the realm."

The bitter thing was he really did mean what he was saying. And hearing it still twisted her up inside.

But she'd come to understand that he was mad and ultimately cared for no one but himself. That he meant to conquer an empire, no matter how many innocents suffered as a result. That she had to help stop him if she could, even if it made her hate herself.

"I know," she said, "and I want that. I want … everything we've talked about. I guess I'm just in a mood tonight. Can we stroll a little farther? I have some ideas on how to get inside Djerad Thymar."

They walked and talked, and she tried

to steer him in the right direction without his realizing. It worked. Gradually they made their way to the southern edge of camp.

Beyond lay the range of rugged hills called the Sky Riders. She couldn't see them in the dark. But after her experiences there, she almost felt she could sense them, as a weight of malice and malignancy, because they contained at least one gateway into the nightmare world called the Shadowfell.

She wasn't surprised when Tchazzar balked. He'd spent a hundred years as a tortured prisoner in the Shadowfell, and it had left him with a wariness of several things, darkness, wraiths, and the Sky Riders themselves included. That, she

suspected, was why he'd left this leg of the procession for last.

He looked out at the blackness, swallowed, then turned back toward the wavering light of the fires. "How about a little more wine?" he said.

"I'd rather have an apple," Jhesrhi said. "The village has a grove right over there." She pointed with the staff. Some of the runes shone with their own inner light.

"I can send someone to pick a basket."

Jhesrhi took a deep breath. "I also … you know that when we try, it's easier when there aren't other people around."

He smiled. "It's private in the pavilion."

“But people would see us go in alone. I’d hear them moving around outside. They might hear us too.”

He stood and thought for a moment. Then he said, “Whatever my lady wishes,” and they walked out among the trees.

She risked one quick but hard look in the direction of the hills, peering not just with her eyes but also with her wizard’s intuition. She couldn’t sense anything coming. That wasn’t surprising. There hadn’t been any way to arrange the trick on anything approximating a precise schedule.

So she allowed Tchazzar to take her hand in his. Then he used a fingertip to caress it. She assumed that was

supposed to be erotic, although it simply made her skin crawl.

"Is that all right?" he asked.

"It's nice," she said, straining to keep revulsion out of her voice.

She understood why he was so intent on bringing her to his bed. Partly it was because it had been she and Gaedynn who'd freed him from Sseelrigoth the blight wyrm. But he also saw her as a challenge. Abuses she'd suffered as a child had left her with a horror of being touched. To increase her sway over him, she'd led him to believe that out of all the males in the wide world, he alone could cure her affliction and teach her the joys of physical intimacy. Now she was paying the price for that deception.

After a while he left off fondling her hand and started caressing her face instead. His fingertip brushed her cheeks, her lips, her eyelids, the side of her neck and the whorls and lobe of her ear.

That was worse. It was like a centipede crawling on her. But she endured it and hoped that he mistook her twitches and shudders for signs of excitement.

Then he snapped around and looked to the south. Jhesrhi did too. She still couldn't sense anything, but she suspected he had. Even in human guise, he often seemed to possess a dragon's sharp senses and, always, a dragon's instincts.

“Perhaps we should go back,” he said.

She took a breath to steady her voice. “Why, Majesty? Did you hear something?”

He hesitated. “I … no, apparently not. But people will wonder what’s become of me.”

She sighed. “That’s a shame. I was enjoying this. Truly.”

He smiled. “So was I.”

“But I was enjoying it so much that I thought that perhaps this was the moment for the next step.”

He studied her. Then, moving slowly, still entirely gentle, he put his forefinger under her chin and tilted her face up. Then he pressed his lips to hers. Bile

burned in the back of her throat.

She imagined he was Gaedynn, but that didn't help. She'd never been able to bear the archer's touch either. All she could do was command herself not to throw up.

* * * * *

Once Gaedynn had delivered word that the procession had arrived within reach of Alasklerbanbastos and Meralaine's sorcery, he had no reason to linger, nor any desire to. Back in camp, Jhesrhi was trying to make a fool of Tchazzar, and her friends should be close in case the attempt went wrong.

He glanced down at the harness that secured him to the saddle, making sure

the buckles were still fastened, and drew breath to give Eider the command to fly. Then, evidently sensing his intent, Oraxes said, “Wait.”

“What’s wrong?” Gaedynn asked.

“Can you stay until we’re certain the magic is working as it should?” Oraxes asked.

Gaedynn raised an eyebrow. “Do you have some reason to think it won’t?”

The adolescent shrugged. “Not exactly.”

“And you understand that I’m no sorcerer. I wouldn’t know how to fix a spell if it did go awry.”

“I’d still appreciate it. I … have a feeling.”

Gaedynn sighed. He still wanted to

return to camp, but he also liked Oraxes. Maybe it was because neither of them knew when to hold his insolent tongue. And more importantly, he'd come to trust the boy. There was more to him than the slouching street tough he'd initially appeared to be.

"I'll stay a few more moments." He started unbuckling the straps. There was no reason to make Eider bear his weight while they were on the ground, even though it wouldn't actually trouble the sturdy beast.

As he swung himself out of the saddle, Alasklerbanbastos took up a position at the far end of a flat stair step of a space partway up a wooded hillside. According to Meralaine, somebody had

massacred somebody else on that very spot a long time ago. Even when he'd visited the place in the daylight, Gaedynn hadn't noticed any sign of it, but he assumed the necromancer knew what she was talking about.

Alasklerbanbastos growled rhythmic words of power. Gaedynn couldn't understand them, but each was like a prod that made him want to flinch. Eider screeched and started to unfurl her wings. He stroked her head and told her everything was all right.

Cera watched the dracolich with her golden mace dangling from the leather loop around her forearm and the phylactery cradled in her hands. Keeping an eye on Alasklerbanbastos was all that

she could contribute. She had her own magic, and it was powerful stuff. But the cleansing light of the Keeper of the Yellow Sun was antithetical to the tainted power of necromancy.

Meralaine drifted aimlessly, or so it seemed, across the level ground. She was a tiny, snub-nosed pixie of a girl, and even knowing her arcane specialty, Gaedynn rarely thought of her as sinister. But her expression, somehow intent and empty at the same time, made the small hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. And even though he could barely hear it, her murmuring made him feel bereft, like everyone he'd ever cared about had died.

He grinned and shoved the irrational

emotions out of his head. His friends were very much alive, and even if it had been otherwise, he'd learned early on to value those worth valuing but never to *need* anybody but himself.

Meralaine extended her arms and twirled back and forth as she moved, commencing a languorous dance in time to her and Alasklerbanbastos's interwoven incantations. Shadows shifted on the ground then boiled up into the air to glide with her for a moment, their murky fingers brushing hers. Some phantoms were simply near-formless silhouettes. Others showed a gleam of phosphorescent eyes or a glimmer of bare ribs or a naked skull.

Gradually the shapes became more

persistent, floating, seething, and flickering in the night air, even after Meralaine abandoned them for her next partner, until finally there were … dozens? It was hard to tell in the dark or to keep track of them all from one moment to the next.

Her eyes all black pupil, wide and unblinking, her face a white mask, Meralaine danced a last measure, reciting the remaining words of her spell in time with the final steps. But the deep, steady drumbeat of Alasklerbanbastos's incantation continued. Evidently it was his task to give the conjured spirits their marching orders.

Suddenly Meralaine gave her head a shake, and animation and dismay

flooded into her face. “That wasn’t the plan!” she said just as the phantoms raced away down the hill.

Gaedynn didn’t understand all that was happening, but it was plain that Oraxes’s premonition hadn’t misled him. Things were going wrong. He reached for an arrow; then fingers so cold they burned grabbed him by the wrist.

* * * * *

Jhesrhi recognized that Tchazzar was only pressing his lips lightly to her own. And, of course, nothing was covering her nostrils. Still, her heart pounding, her stomach churning, she felt as if she were choking.

In another heartbeat or two, she’d

absolutely have to push him away and pray he couldn't tell how sick and fouled she felt. She would pray, too, that she could somehow hold him there a little longer, even though it would be obvious the kissing and fondling were over for the time being.

Then she felt something cold and hungry gliding through the little orchard. Apples rotted and dropped as the dead passed underneath. With a crack that sounded strangely faint and dull, one tree split lengthwise, and the smaller part toppled to the ground.

Jhesrhi was an adept and had fought Szass Tam's legions. Still, she knew that under other circumstances, she would have felt a pang of dread at the advent of

the phantoms. Now, however, she was grateful.

Tchazzar let her go, pivoted, gasped, and froze. Thank Lady Luck for that. Jhesrhi had lured him away from his guards and into the dark to make it more likely that he'd succumb to panic, but she still hadn't been certain it would happen. His terrors were a sometime thing, erratic and unpredictable as the rest of him.

With a thought, she set the head of her staff ablaze, raised it high, and took a step toward the oncoming apparitions. She shouted three words in one of the languages of Elemental Chaos and swept her weapon down parallel to the ground.

A blast of yellow flame leaped out at

the phantoms. Or more accurately, in their general direction. They were no actual threat, and if she appeared to defeat them too easily, Tchazzar might not come away as alarmed as she and the other plotters wanted him to be.

So the blast simply set a tree trunk on fire and made the dead recoil, moan, and howl. The chorus was almost inaudibly faint, yet somehow loud and chilling as it echoed inside her head.

Then the phantoms charged, and startled, she was the one who froze.

* * * * *

Gaedynn twisted and found himself gazing into a leering face that was mold and decay one moment and just a blur of

shadow the next. The spirit's hold on his wrist leeched strength from his body. The entity cocked its other hand back to plunge it into his chest.

Gaedynn dropped his bow, snatched out one of his two short swords, and struck first. His gods, old Keen-Eye and the other powers the elf bow masters had taught him to venerate, favored him. It was sometimes difficult for even an enchanted blade to cut the immaterial body of a wraith, but his attacker convulsed and frayed to nothing.

Another apparition darted in on his flank. Screeching, Eider sprang to meet it, reared high on her leonine hind paws, and raked with a double sweep of her aquiline talons. The shadowy thing

shredded and melted into something resembling cobweb, and the griffon clawed in the carpet of old, fallen leaves to clean the stickiness off her feet.

Jabbering, but with the precise cadence and intonation wizardry required, Oraxes recited a spell. Gaedynn made sure nothing else was about to strike at him, then swung around in the direction of the sound.

Backing away from more of the undead, the young magus had evidently tripped over a tree root. He'd fallen on his rump, and the leather helmet he'd taken to wearing over his oily black hair had tumbled off his head. Two phantoms were rushing him, white eyes shining, long-fingered hands posed to snatch and

clutch.

But they were an instant too slow. As they reached for him, the boy snarled the final word of the incantation. His hands glowed green, and he plunged them into the torsos of his two intangible assailants. Emerald light pulsed outward and washed the phantoms from existence.

Gaedynn sheathed his sword, retrieved his bow, and hauled Oraxes to his feet. “Meralaine!” the wizard gasped.

The necromancer stood at the center of a whirl of shadows. Perhaps because he wasn’t frantic with young love, or maybe simply because he was by far the more experienced combatant, Gaedynn

immediately perceived what Oraxes apparently couldn't. The innermost phantoms were fighting to protect her from their fellows.

One murky form pounced through her circle of defenders. But, barking a cruel laugh quite unlike her usual girlish chortle, Meralaine simply tore the apparition in two like a piece of flimsy cloth. She wrapped what remained around her knuckles like a pugilist preparing for a bout.

"She's fine!" Gaedynn snapped. "Look past her!"

Oraxes did then spit an obscenity.

Like Meralaine, Cera was under attack, and also like the necromancer, she had her defenses. Her body glowed

with a golden radiance that seemed to sting and dazzle the undead. And whenever she flicked her gilded mace, miming a sharp tap, a flying mace, seemingly made of the same yellow light, flashed into solidity and struck at one of her foes.

Amaunator's sunlight was hurting Alasklerbanbastos as well. He was facing Cera, and bits of the remaining flesh on his head melted and dripped like candle wax. But unfazed by the punishment, he was snarling an incantation, and the priestess was apparently unable to use her magic to fend off the spirits and stab into the phylactery at the same time.

Oraxes swept his clenched fist over

his head, lashed it down, and screamed another, even viler epithet. Apparently at that moment, infused with all his force of will, it served as a word of power because a big, translucent fist made of blue shimmer appeared above Alasklerbanbastos and slammed down on his spine.

Meanwhile, Gaedynn plucked a stone arrow from his quiver. In an effort to win the loyalty of the Threskelans, Tchazzar had forbidden his troops to loot the possessions of their defeated foes. But Gaedynn had located a few enchanted shafts in the royal arsenal in Mordulkin and appropriated them when everyone's back was turned. He'd known he was likely to need them, and

Jhesrhi was too busy attending the war hero to make any more.

He drew and released, and the arrow punched into Alasklerbanbastos's face just below the eye. The dracolich stiffened, and waves of grayness rippled through charred, torn hide and exposed bone as the magic in the weapon sought to turn him to stone.

It didn't. But the combined harassment of the hammering disembodied fist and the arrow's power made him stumble over his chanting. Blackness pulsed in the air around him like flowers blooming and withering in an instant as the mystical power he'd been gathering discharged itself prematurely.

He spun around, knocked the arrow

out of his face with a swipe of his foreclaws, and glared at his attackers. His neck cocked back, his jaws opened, and white light shone inside his mouth.

Gaedynn lunged at Oraxes, caught hold of him, and shoved him to the side and down to the ground. Thunder boomed and glare erased the world. But the dragon's breath missed.

Instantly, though, the ground shook. Blinking, Gaedynn looked up to see Alasklerbanbastos bounding toward him and Oraxes. As he scrambled to his feet and grabbed another arrow, he judged that at most, he had time for one more shot. And just one more was unlikely to be enough.

Eider plunged down, caught hold of

one of Alasklerbanbastos's wings, and clung and slashed until the dracolich shook her off. The phantoms under Meralaine's control swarmed around him, and he took another moment to roar a word that popped them like inky bubbles.

Then bright yellow flame erupted down the length of his body. He bellowed, roared, and thrashed.

As he laid an arrow on his bow and backed away from Alasklerbanbastos's convulsions, Gaedynn took a look around. As far as he could tell, there were no phantoms left on the hillside. He and his companions had accounted for them all.

Giving the dracolich plenty of room,

Oraxes circled around toward Meralaine. “Burn him up!” he called to Cera.

“No!” Gaedynn said. “We still have use for him.”

“He just tried to kill us!” Oraxes said.

“Which is simply what you expected. So why complain?”

Cera gazed into the phylactery, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Her body stopped glowing, and the crackling flames leaping up from Alasklerbanbastos died. With all the light sources suddenly doused, the hillside seemed very dark.

“Everyone all right?” Gaedynn asked.

“Yes,” Cera panted.

“Good,” he said. “Meralaine, what

did you mean when you said, 'That wasn't the plan'?"

"In addition to telling some of the dead to attack us," the necromancer said, "the wyrm gave the wrong orders to the rest. They aren't just going to make a show of menacing Tchazzar. They're really going to try to kill him."

His body still smoking and reeking of combustion, Alasklerbanbastos struggled to his feet. "Is that so terrible?" he asked, a hint of mockery in his voice. "Tchazzar's the enemy, isn't he? That's why you want to trick him."

"It's more complicated than that," Gaedynn said. Aoth's professional ethics might allow him to trick and manipulate an employer, but he balked at

assassination. And far more importantly, if everything had gone as planned, Jhesrhi and Tchazzar were wandering around in the night together. “Call them back.”

“I can no more do that,” the dragon said, “than you can call back an arrow after you let go of the string.”

“It’s true,” said Meralaine. “But Jhesrhi is powerful. She’ll be all right.”

Gaedynn stared Alasklerbanbastos in the eye. “She’d better be,” he said.

* * * * *

Astonishment made Jhesrhi falter but only for a heartbeat; then the combat instincts honed on many a battlefield spurred her into motion once again.

Those and the staff, crowing with excitement inside her head.

Most of the phantoms were rushing Tchazzar. Of course, that was more or less what they were supposed to do. But they were closing the distance too quickly, and she could feel their malice like a frigid winter wind. They were really out to kill him.

He had only to transform to become an entity so mighty as to make their intentions laughable. Or perhaps—no one really knew—he need only call on powers he possessed even in his human guise. But he did neither. He simply stumbled backward.

Much as his attentions had repelled Jhesrhi mere moments before, his

manifest terror filled her with guilt and a need to protect him. She scrambled to interpose herself between him and the dead. Then, rattling off an incantation, she sketched a line on the ground with the still-burning head of her staff. Fire roared upward, making a barrier to hold the dead at bay. The staff exulted.

She didn't, because she suspected the wall of fire would only delay the undead for a few heartbeats at most. Without turning away from the foe, she called, "Majesty! Become the dragon! You'll be safe!"

"Yes," said Tchazzar in a thin voice unlike his usual exuberant tone. "I will."

But he didn't. Enormous wings didn't snap as they unfurled, and nothing

swelled up from the ground to rustle and break the branches overhead. Apparently he couldn't muster the willpower to initiate the change.

A murky thing with elongated limbs and a head that was all glimmering needle fangs and gaping mouth leaped over the wall of flame. Its feet caught fire, but it didn't seem to notice as it plunged down at Jhesrhi. She rammed her staff through its torso, and it burned away to nothing in an instant.

By then, though, other apparitions were leaping the blazing barrier or simply pouncing through. Those that attempted the latter perished within moments, but apparently their hatred of the living was so fierce that they were

willing to trade existence for the chance to strike a blow.

Jhesrhi whirled, blocking, clubbing, and jabbing with her weapon. It was scarcely her preferred mode of fighting. She liked to throw spells at her foes from far away. But in the first years of her training, Aoth had insisted that she master the quarterstaff. He'd assured her there would be moments like this, and he'd turned out to be correct.

And fortunately, even in a melee, it was possible to use some magic, especially when a wizard was as closely attuned to an arcane implement as she was to hers. With a thought, she released a bit of the power stored inside the staff, and the entire length of it burst into

flame. The blaze didn't pain or otherwise inconvenience her, but provided a searing, blinding shield to hinder the undead.

Finally the phantoms' attack flagged, as every assault must if the defender could only wait it out. That gave her time to rattle off a charm, and flame sheathed her entire body, affording her even more protection.

She sprang at three more phantoms, taking the fight to them. Shrieking war cries, she spun the staff and struck. Bursts of flame incinerated a dead thing every time she connected.

When the three were gone, she looked around, making sure no more were creeping up on her. Then she cast her

eye over a wider area and scowled in dismay.

She'd preserved only her own life, not Tchazzar's. While she'd fought her fight, other phantoms had simply dashed around the ends of the wall of the flame. Once again, they were rushing at Tchazzar, who still hadn't changed into a dragon or done anything else that might have saved his neck.

Then Aoth and Jet plunged down into the midst of the bounding, gliding shadows. The familiar's talons and momentum crushed one phantom to mist and smears of ectoplasmic jelly. A snap of his beak annihilated another.

Aoth pointed his spear to the right. A hedge of whirling blades made of green

light appeared on top of the phantoms on that side, slicing them to wisps and tatters of gloom.

At once he swung the spear to the left. Bright, crackling lightning sprang from the head, leaping to one dead thing, and from that murky, shriveling figure to another, then on to another after that.

It was potent battle magic, but even so, he didn't get them all. A dozen remained, still racing toward Tchazzar.

Then, however, the red dragon finally transformed. His clothing and jewels melted away, and his body expanded to prodigious size. A serpentine tail and batlike wings sprouted from his torso, and layered scales rippled into existence across his skin. The lower part of his

face jutted into a reptilian snout and jaws.

He opened those jaws, swept his head from right to left, and spewed fire. Jhesrhi saw that the flame was going to fall on Aoth as well as the phantoms. She sucked in a breath to shout a warning.

It would have come too late, but Aoth or Jet had already recognized the danger for himself. The griffon lashed his wings and sprang, and his leap carried him and his master out of harm's way.

The phantoms failed to do the same, and Tchazzar's breath obliterated them in an instant. Still, he spit fire three more times, scourging the ground before him with the blasts. When he finished, he

stayed in his crouch and kept staring in the same direction. The membranes of his leathery wings rattled softly.

Jhesrhi was reluctant to speak or move. She had the feeling that if she attracted his attention, he might lash out at her before he realized who she really was.

Aoth, however, was less diffident. "Majesty," he said. "Others are right behind me, rushing to defend you. Maybe you should go back to camp and show them you're all right. Jhesrhi and I can clean up here."

"Yes," the dragon said. "And I'll confer with my lieutenants at dawn." His tail sweeping through patches of flame, he turned and stalked away.

Aoth waited a while to speak, and even then, he kept his voice low. Wyrms had sharp ears. “The dead were more … enthusiastic than we expected.”

“Yes,” she said.

“And Gaedynn hasn’t come back. I’ll go check on him and the others. Cover for me if you have to.”

With the uneven gait of a creature whose front and hind legs were formed quite differently, Jet trotted to a spot where no branches would block his assent. Then he ran, sprang, lashed his wings, and soared upward.

Jhesrhi turned her attention to the fires that she and Tchazzar had kindled. Like any sellsword, she had little compunction about destroying other

people's property to achieve an objective. Still, there was no reason the village should lose *every* tree once the mock attack—except that it hadn't turned out to be mock, had it?—was over.

She puffed on her staff as she'd blow out a candle. Its corona of flame and her mantle of fire blinked out together. Then, her voice like a lullaby, she crooned to the fires consuming trees and fallen branches, calming them and coaxing them to dwindle. The staff helped but grumbled without words.

* * * * *

Aoth's stomach rumbled and Tchazzar shot him a glare.

"I'm sorry, Majesty," said Aoth. "I

haven't eaten since supper. I've been busy strengthening the camp's defenses."

It wasn't entirely a lie. On his flight into the Sky Riders, he'd met Gaedynn coming back and so hadn't needed to travel all the way to the spot where Meralaine and Alasklerbanbastos—curse him!—had summoned the dead.

"I'm glad someone is," Tchazzar said. "However belatedly." He shifted his glare to Shala.

Seated at the foot of the trestle table, the ridged scar on her square jaw just visible in the wan dawn light that penetrated the silk wall of the pavilion, Shala took a moment to answer. Maybe because she had to suppress the retort that first sprang to mind.

“With all respect, Majesty,” Shala said, “may I point out that the camp itself was not attacked, and its defenses did not prove inadequate? It was you, wandering beyond the perimeter with only a single wizard to guard you, who drew an attack.”

“Are you *scolding* me?” Tchazzar asked.

“Of course not, Majesty,” she replied. But her voice was cold, and Tchazzar didn’t look placated.

Aoth had come to respect Shala even if she did in some measure share the general Chessentan prejudice against mages, Jhesrhi and himself included. So he decided to intervene before the exchange grew any more acrimonious.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “clearly nobody is or should be blaming anyone else for anything because none of us expected trouble last night. Why would we? The war’s over. Chessenta and Threskel are truly one kingdom at last. Our focus now should be figuring out who attacked you.”

“I agree,” Jhesrhi said. Tchazzar had seated her at his right hand, in the place that properly belonged to Shala.

“So do I,” said Hasos. A tall, muscular man with a long-nosed, aristocratic face, he looked like the very personification of the Chessentan martial ideal and had in fact proved to be a competent commander within his limits. “And I say we start our search right here

in this tent." He turned a cold eye on Kassur Jedea.

The scrawny, grizzled wizard-king took a breath. "Majesty," he said, "you will recall that I was never absolute master of Threskel, with no overlord set above me, and so I took no harm from your victory. To the contrary. I was overjoyed to escape the rule of an undead *thing* and pledge my fealty to a god incarnate."

"Or perhaps," Tchazzar said, "you merely feigned happiness to convince me to lower my guard. Then you struck at me in the hope of becoming the supreme lord of this miserable kingdom at last."

"No," said Aoth. "I've had people

keeping an eye on him throughout the procession, yesterday and last night included. He was never out of view long enough to conjure up dozens of spirits."

"And how would they have moved unnoticed from his tent to the orchard if he had?" Jhesrhi said. "I think, Majesty, that if we're going to look for enemies who might plausibly attack you inside Threskel, and use the undead as their agents, we should begin with the obvious."

Tchazzar frowned. "Alasklerbanbastos is gone, and I made sure he can never return."

"I know," said Aoth, "but Jaxanaedegor is still with us. I understand that you and he made

common cause to destroy the dracolich. But now that you've succeeded, it's hard to see why the truce would hold. After all, the creature is what he is."

Which was to say, everything that Tchazzar had come to loathe and fear, as well as an opponent in the Great Game.

Still, the Red Dragon looked skeptical. "He seemed content with my promise to let him rule Mount Thulbane and its environs without interference."

"But lacking any trace of honor himself, would such a treacherous creature trust anyone else to keep such a pledge?" Aoth replied. "Especially when you gave it under what amounted to duress, and Mount Thulbane, like the rest of Threskel, is indisputably yours by

right."

"Possibly not," Tchazzar said. "Yet as best we could judge, the undead didn't come from the north. They came from the direction of the Sky Riders."

"And you and I know there are terrible things hiding in those hills," Jhesrhi said. "But they don't generally come out to trouble the lands beyond. I think it would take a powerful creature at one with darkness and undeath, a being like a vampire dragon, to call them forth."

"Perhaps," said Tchazzar, "perhaps."

"If Jaxanaedegor has turned against you," said Aoth, "then we need to consider the implications. The other dragons who betrayed

Alasklerbanbastos were following his lead, not yours. The raiders out of Murghôm left off harrying Chessenta because he arranged it, not any of us. It's possible that we're going to have to contend with all those foes again as well."

Tchazzar fingered the round medallion—gold set with the red gems called Tempus's tears—he wore around his neck. "What, then, do my advisers recommend?"

Hasos, who, bless him, always preferred defending to attacking, spoke up at once. "Majesty, we can't turn our backs on Threskel if the kingdom isn't truly pacified. I fear the invasion of Tymanther will have to wait."

"That's out of the question!" Tchazzar snapped.

Inwardly Aoth cursed.

You knew he wouldn't like it, said Jet. He'd been eavesdropping on the palaver through his psychic bond with his master, and he was using it to speak mind to mind. *Whoever humbles Medrash's people, or wipes them out altogether, will score a lot of points in the dragons' game.*

But everyone says Tchazzar was a great commander in his day, Aoth replied. *Like it or not, he should still see the sense in it.*

"Majesty," he said aloud, "as you've probably noticed, Lord Hasos and I almost never agree. We do now. It

would be unwise to march south while a threat remains within your own borders."

Tchazzar scowled at him. "Back in Luthcheq, you were friends with the dragonborn from the embassy. You advocated for them from the day you arrived."

Careful! said Jet. But Aoth had never allowed himself to flinch in the face of Tchazzar's displeasure, and he figured that if he backed down, it would only lend weight to the dragon's suspicions.

"It's true," he said, "I liked Sir Medrash and Sir Balasar. Why not? They're brave warriors. But it didn't influence the way I did my job, then or now. That job being to give you good

intelligence and good advice, and then to go kill whomever you tell me to."

"Then you'll go kill dragonborn!" Tchazzar said.

Jhesrhi put her hand on top of his.

The war hero looked at her in surprise. Aoth felt a pang of pity because he knew what that seemingly innocuous gesture cost her.

But she didn't let it show in her face or her voice either. "Isn't there a middle way?" she asked. "With Threskel now loyal, and Akanûl sending troops to help you, you now command a larger host than before. Can't *some* of your warriors stay in the north?"

"I volunteer the Brotherhood," said Aoth.

Tchazzar sneered. “Because you have no stomach for fighting Tymanther?”

“Because you need someone here with the knack for unmasking hidden foes, and I’m the man who caught the Green Hand killers. Also, to be honest, because the Brotherhood was in the forefront of every fight with Alasklerbanbastos. We could use some time to recover. So for the moment, hunting leftover rebels and watching out for pirates will suit us better than undertaking a long march and an entirely new campaign.”

“It makes sense,” Jhesrhi said to Tchazzar. “And you can always summon them later if you need them.”

“Fine!” The dragon sprang to his feet. “Let’s get the procession moving! Away

from these wretched hills!”

* * * * *

“She’s not coming,” Gaedynn said. “Tchazzar wants her company.”

Then a tall, slender figure stepped out of the darkness. The light of the campfire gleamed on her long, blonde hair and the gold rings on her staff.

“Although I could be wrong.”

“He did want me for quite a while,” Jhesrhi said. She gave a nod to the others sitting around the fire. “But I kept yawning, and he finally let me go.”

If only, Gaedynn thought.

It had taken three days to arrange the gathering. First, Oraxes, Meralaine, and Cera had to slip back into camp without

revealing that they'd ever been away. Then Aoth had to decide how to proceed and pass the word around.

He'd decided that an assembly outdoors, around a fire, ought to appear less suspicious than a palaver in a tent. He and his fellow plotters would just look like insomniacs keeping one another company, and if they kept their voices down, no one would hear what they had to say. Most of the camp was asleep, and Oraxes had cast subtle charms to deflect the attention of anyone who happened to be awake. He was good at spells of concealment and misdirection, as many a shopkeeper back in Luthcheq had discovered to his cost.

"Join us," said Aoth. He made room

for Jhesrhi to sit down and handed her a wineskin. It was a fresh one, not the one they'd been passing around, so she wouldn't have to put her mouth where someone else's had already been.

Right, Gaedynn thought, human beings aren't allowed to touch her even at one remove, but a mad wyrm—

He closed his eyes, took a breath, and tried to push the unfair, useless thoughts out of his head.

"Well, let's get on with it," said Aoth. "As you all know, our trick failed to convince Tchazzar that he shouldn't invade Tymanther."

"I think it may have made him even more eager to get away from Threskel and the Sky Riders and back to

someplace he feels 'lucky.' " Jhesrhi's habitual frown deepened. It made her look haggard. "I should have known."

"Well, you are supposed to be the expert," Gaedynn said.

Cera shot him a reproachful look.

"Tchazzar's crazy," said Aoth. He accepted the communal wineskin, took a swig, and passed it on. "We could only guess which way he'd jump. And we did accomplish something. After the procession splits up tomorrow, we—well, all of us except for you, Jhes—will be away from him. That will leave us free to act."

"And do what?" asked Meralaine. She looked subtly different than everyone else in the circle. The light of the

smoking, crackling fire didn't illuminate her quite as well as it did everyone else. But that hint of eeriness evidently didn't bother Oraxes, who was holding her hand.

Aoth smiled a crooked smile. "That's the question, isn't it? How to spoil the dragons' game, or at least slow it down. Well, they've been pushing the realms hereabouts toward war by applying certain pressures. And if we relieve one of the pressures, then maybe everybody won't be so eager to fight."

"So what's the plan, specifically?" Gaedynn asked. The wine made its way back to him, and he took a pull. The sour red stuff hadn't gotten any tastier. A poor province of scrubland and little,

hardscrabble farms, Threskel wasn't noted for its viticulture.

"According to Alasklerbanbastos," said Aoth, "it was a gray dragon named Vairshekellabex who made the Akanûlans believe the dragonborn were committing atrocities in their kingdom. His wyrmkeepers disguised abishais as dragonborn, just like the wyrmkeepers here in Chessenta and in Murghôm. If some of us go west and prove it, maybe the genasi will decide not to help Tchazzar invade Tymanther."

Gaedynn arched an eyebrow. "That's your strategy? Because I see two problems with it."

"If you only see two," said Aoth, "then I've got you beat. But go ahead."

“The genasi hate the dragonborn,” said Gaedynn. “So maybe they’re like Tchazzar. Maybe they’re happy for any excuse to go attack them, legitimate or not.”

“Maybe,” said Aoth, blue eyes glowing, “but they do have other enemies and other problems. Notably the aboleths. So they might change their minds.”

“Assuming they do,” said Gaedynn, “that still leaves Tchazzar to change his mind. And he could easily decide to go ahead even without Akanûl’s support. After all, if the ghost attack didn’t dissuade him …” He turned up his hands.

“If you have a better idea—and by

better, I mean one that doesn't involve trying to assassinate the powerful dragon king we supposedly serve, and then, assuming we survive, fighting our way out of Chessenta through all the folk who will take exception to our treachery—I'm eager to hear it."

Gaedynn sighed. "So who's going?"

"You, me, Alasklerbanbastos, and Cera, to control him."

"Because nothing says 'I'm trustworthy' like arriving with a dracolich in tow?"

"Because he claims to know the approximate location of Vairshekellabex's lair. And because I don't trust him out of my sight."

Oraxes smirked. "He's out of your

sight now."

"In a literal sense, yes," Cera said. "But I can always pull him in with this." She tapped the nondescript leather satchel in her lap. It was the bag in which she kept the shadow stone.

"What's it like," asked Meralaine, "to look into his mind? His soul?"

A hint of distress came into Cera's plump, pretty face. "I realize you're a necromancer. But still, trust me, you don't really want to know."

Aoth gave her shoulder a squeeze.

"Shouldn't we all go to Akanûl?" Oraxes asked.

"I don't want to leave the Brotherhood bereft of magic," Aoth replied. "For all we know,

Jaxanaedegor actually might make a move. He really is every bit as treacherous as I made him out to be. Even if he doesn't, if there's somebody here who can cast spells, it might help to hide the fact that I've gone away."

"So some fly west, some stay here, and I go south alone," Jhesrhi said. She held out her hand, and a bit of the fire jumped into it. She sent the flame dancing from one fingertip to the next like an ordinary person might play with a worry stone.

"I'm sorry about that," Aoth said.

Her mouth twisted. "Don't be. One way or another, it was probably inevitable. Tchazzar wants me cut off from my old life to encourage me to

embrace my new one."

Gaedynn forced a grin. "And won't he be disappointed when, in the end, you fly away over the horizon with the rest of us."

Jhesrhi glared. "I don't *like* deceiving him. None of us mages do."

"Well, I don't mind," said Oraxes, "but then, he mistreated Mera."

"He still freed you, her, and every arcanist in Chessenta," Jhesrhi said. "And as for the rest, he was tortured! He isn't always responsible for what he does."

"Is he responsible for wanting to play *xorvintaal?"* asked Aoth. "For thinking it's all right to exterminate the dragonborn on a pretext because only

wyrms truly matter and the rest of us are just pieces on a lanceboard?"

"I know," she said.

"Do you really?" Aoth asked. "Because there's no in between. You're either with us or you're not."

"I said, I know!" Jhesrhi snapped. Responding to her anger, the campfire roared and leaped higher. "I've been spying for you and pushing him in the right direction all along, haven't I? I'll just be glad when it's over; that's all. Gladder than you can imagine."

"Fair enough," said Aoth. "And it's good you're still with us because there's work for you too. I need you to keep Tchazzar in Luthcheq as long as possible, so Cera, Gaedynn, and I have

time to convince the Akanûlans to pull out of the alliance."

Jhesrhi flicked her bit of flame back into the campfire. "I can try stalling him with false auguries. But that's a dangerous game when I haven't really mastered such arts, and he has mystical abilities himself."

"Just do what you can," said Aoth, "and don't overlook the fact that three armies—Chessenta's, Threskel's, and Akanûl's—are going to be trying to combine into one. It'll be chaos. Such musters always are. Maybe you'll have a chance to heighten the confusion."

"I'd have a better chance," she said, "if I were in camp instead of the War College. If Tchazzar still thought of me

as primarily a soldier. As opposed to his minister of magic, or whatever it is I'm supposed to be."

Concubine in training, Gaedynn thought, but for once managed to keep the gibe to himself.

Instead, he said, "Shala's just about had her fill of Tchazzar."

Cera nodded. "And Daelric and the other high priests are sick to death of Halonya. Still, if Jhesrhi asks someone for help and that person, for whatever reason, turns around and informs on her —"

"That will be it for me," said Jhesrhi. "Don't worry. I'll be careful."

"Good," said Aoth. He looked around the circle. "Any other thoughts?"

Gaedynn snorted. “Just that it’s still hard to see how we come out of all this scheming and double-dealing any better off than when we started.”

TWO

3–6 Eleasis, the Year of the Ageless One

Khouryn couldn't remember a time when he hadn't wanted to be a warrior, or when his elders hadn't unanimously agreed that that was his proper path. Thus, his education had centered on the battle-axe and the warhammer, on the shield wall and the charge.

Still, he was a dwarf, and so, at least to some degree, stone-craft and

metalworking were in his blood, which made it all the more frustrating that he couldn't remove the heavy, ironbound door from its hinges or take it apart until there was a Khouryn-sized hole to squeeze through.

The darkness in the bare, little cell was no hindrance to a member of the race the Soul Forger had created to thrive underground. Nor had hunger yet stolen all his strength. But he needed tools, as his raw fingertips attested.

They gave him a twinge at the mere thought of picking at the bolts and screws again. He stood up from the cold, hard, concrete floor and moved to the door anyway then started humming a song he'd once heard a master smith

sing, as best he could recall the tune. There might be magic in it to bend iron and steel to the singer's will, although if so, he certainly hadn't seen any evidence of it so far.

At least it pushed back the silence. But then something else did too. Something clanked on the other side of the door. Someone was coming.

Probably to push another cup of water and maybe even a crust of moldy bread through the narrow slot at the bottom of the door. Up until that point, the guard entrusted with the chore had been careful to keep his hand beyond Khouryn's reach. But maybe he wouldn't be the next time. Then Khouryn could grab it, jerk the human's arm through the hole,

and twist and bend it viciously, threaten to cripple him for life unless he surrendered the key to the cell.

Even if it didn't get him out of there—and Khouryn was realist enough to recognize it probably wouldn't—a little taste of revenge would do him good.

He kneeled beside the slot and poised his hands to grab. Then, to his surprise, the lock clicked.

He stood back up, and the door creaked open. There were four guards clad in mail and crimson jupons outside, not just one, and three of them had their short swords leveled. Without a weapon of his own, Khouryn had no hope of taking them on.

The fourth carried a pair of manacles.

“Turn around, dwarf,” he said, “and put your hands behind your back.”

Khouryn obeyed. Heavy rings snapped shut on one wrist, then the other. The chain between them clinked.

“Now come on,” said the fourth guard, retrieving a lantern from a niche in the corridor wall. Its glow stretched all of their shadows out behind them as they climbed from the dungeons back into the palace above.

“Who are you taking me to see?” Khouryn asked. If it was someone besides the crazy woman who’d ordered him imprisoned, then maybe he could convince that person of his innocence.

“Shut up,” answered one of the guards, who then gave him a shove.

That suggested the sad likelihood that it was the madwoman who'd ordered Khouryn hauled forth. So he was pleasantly surprised when his escort ushered him into a hall decorated with tapestries and marble statues depicting the legendary Tchazzar's martial exploits. The crazy woman actually was there, looking as outlandish as before in layers of garish vestments. But so were Jhesrhi, Shala, Zan-akar Zeraez, and—

Khouryn faltered in astonishment when it registered that it wasn't Shala sitting on the war hero's raised, golden throne. It was a man, whose pointed ears and long face subtly suggested the shape of a dragon's head without detracting from a flawless masculine beauty, a man

who very much resembled the woven and sculpted portraits of Tchazzar on every side.

Recovering his wits, Khouryn started to bow. Then the madwoman shrilled, "Kneel before the living god!" And before he could even consider doing so, one of the guards grabbed him from behind and threw him down on his belly.

Khouryn floundered to his knees as best he could with his hands still shackled behind him. Meanwhile, her golden eyes ablaze with anger, Jhesrhi said, "There was no need for that! Nor any need to arrest him in the first place!"

"He's a friend to the dragonborn," the madwoman said, "and so an enemy to Chessenta and Your Majesty. Why else

did he go slinking off to Tymanther with Ambassador Perra and her household?"

Although Tchazzar—if that was really who he was—hadn't given him permission to rise, Khouryn decided he'd be damned if he'd stay down like a prisoner already judged guilty of some heinous offense. He clambered to his feet, and to his relief, nobody moved to shove him down again.

"Majesty," he said, "you and I haven't met. But if you know Jhesrhi, and Aoth Fezim, you know what you need to know about me. I'm loyal to the Brotherhood of the Griffon and to whoever's paying us to fight. I escorted Perra and her people home because Shala Karanok wanted them to have an escort."

Shala's mouth tightened as though she didn't especially appreciate being involved in his defense. But she spoke up without hesitation. "That's true, Your Majesty."

The scrawny woman rounded on her in a swirl of red. The voluminous folds of her garments kept swinging and flapping for another moment after her bony body had stopped moving. "And *why* was it true? Why would you let them escape Chessenta when it had just been proved that dragonborn were behind the Green Hand murders?"

Shala scowled. "Because, Lady Halonya, it hadn't been proved that *all* dragonborn, up to and including Tarhun's own emissaries, were guilty. I

hoped not, and wanted to preserve the alliance if, in fact, it was genuine."

"Even though I warned you what sort of treacherous, murdering scum the dragonborn are," said Zan-akar Zeraez. The Akanûlan ambassador was a stormsoul genasi. He had silvery spikes in place of hair, and a complex pattern of argent lines etching skin the same deep purple as a grape. Sparks often crawled and crackled along them, especially when he was agitated, but that wasn't the case at the moment. Apparently he was satisfied with the way events were unfolding.

"It was unquestionably a blunder," Tchazzar said. "But then, we already knew Shala wasn't up to the task of

ruling Chessenta. That's why I had to return from the realm of the gods."

"Majesty," Jhesrhi, "the point isn't whether or not Lady Shala made a good decision. It's whether Khouryn should be blamed for obeying an order from the person who was, at that time, the supreme authority in the land."

"That's not the whole point," Halonya said. "The sellswords who marched south with the dwarf came back as soon as their errand was done. But he stayed in Tymanther for months afterward. Why was that?"

"I had Captain Fezim's permission to take a leave of absence," Khouryn said. "I wanted to head on down to East Rift to see my wife and kin."

“And did you go?” Tchazzar asked.

“No,” Khouryn said. “The ash giants were on the attack and had closed the Dustroad. And my griffon had died on the way from here to Djerad Thymar, so I couldn’t just fly over them. I stuck around, hoping the dragonborn would beat the giants back and get the road open again, as they finally did. But by then, it was time for me to rejoin the Brotherhood.”

“Riding on a bat,” Zan-akar said. “The steed of the dragonborn’s Lance Defenders.”

“It was a gift,” Khouryn said. “I helped defeat the giants.”

Halonya whipped back around to address Tchazzar. “He *admits* to giving

aid to your enemies!”

“I didn’t know they were enemies,” Khouryn said. “I still don’t understand why it needs to be that way. I mean, I realize that a handful of dragonborn committed crimes here in Luthcheq. I helped catch them. But I’ve spent quite a bit of time talking to Tarhun and Perra, and I’m sure they want Chessenta and Tymanther to be friends.”

Tchazzar sneered. “Sadly, I know otherwise.”

“Majesty,” Jhesrhi said, “I say again that, while Tymanther may be the enemy, Khouryn hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“He gave aid to Tymanther,” Halonya said. “So much aid, apparently, that they honored him with one of their special

treasures. And he's still speaking well of them, right to Your Majesty's face. Don't let him go around saying the same sort of things to others. Don't let him weaken your warriors' resolve!"

"I wouldn't do that," Khouryn said.

"Would you tell us everything you've learned about Tymanther's defenses?" Zan-akar asked.

Khouryn took a breath. "Yes. If Captain Fezim or His Majesty ordered me to."

"I don't believe you," the genasi said.

"Neither do I," Halonya said. "Not unless we *force* him to give up what he knows."

"That's ridiculous!" Jhesrhi said. For a moment, yellow flame rippled up from

her hand to the head of her staff.

Zan-akar put on a sober, nuanced expression worthy of a diplomat, one that simultaneously sympathized with her distress and rejected her opinion. "With respect, Lady Jhesrhi, not from Akanûl's point of view. We've joined Chessenta in a difficult, dangerous undertaking, and we naturally expect our allies to make choices that maximize the chances of success. Here, the choice seems clear. His Majesty can let a fellow of uncertain loyalties go free to foment whatever mischief comes to mind. Or he can detain him and question him rigorously to extract the valuable information he undoubtedly possesses."

"Majesty," Jhesrhi said, "I beg you

not to abuse an innocent person."

"And I beg you to protect your children from spies and traitors," Halonya said.

Frowning, Tchazzar hesitated. Plainly he was looking for a way to placate both women, and just as plainly, even a "living god" wouldn't be able to find one.

Finally he said, "Lady Jhesrhi, it's understandable that you feel a … nostalgic attachment to someone from your sellsword days. But you're a royal counselor of Chessenta now, and like all of us charged with the protection of our people, you must put their welfare first."

"Yes!" Halonya crowed.

A trace of amusement in his face,

Tchazzar turned to look at her.

Halonya colored and made a visible effort to compose herself. “I mean … may I keep on overseeing the prisoner? You have priests in your church who are good at convincing people to talk.”

“She’s talking about the wyrmkeepers who tortured Sunlady Cera!” Jhesrhi said.

“I know that,” Tchazzar said.

“Majesty, I’m the one who found you chai—”

“You’re also the one who acknowledged that debt is paid!” Tchazzar snapped. “The one who promised to speak no more about it! I don’t want to hear any more about this either! The subject is closed!”

“Majesty!” Khouryn shouted. “I know what’s written in the Brotherhood’s contract! I know you’re not supposed to do this!” Even as he spoke the words, he knew they were useless.

And he was right. Tchazzar waved his hand, and the guards grabbed Khouryn to wrestle him around and drag him away. Halonya gave Jhesrhi a spiteful, triumphant smile.

* * * * *

Aoth liked the warm, summer sunlight, the feel of Cera nestled up behind him with her arms around his waist, and the forbidding but breathtaking vista that was eastern Akanûl. The landscape below was a jumble of cliffs, rocky

outcroppings, and ravines. Off to the north, the so-called Glass Mesa—which was more likely quartz—gleamed like an enormous gem. There were plenty of earthmotes too, floating islands in the sky, some of substantial size and covered in vegetation.

It was fun being off on a journey with no one but his familiar, one other griffon rider, and the woman he supposed he'd come to love for company. It reminded him of his youth, when he'd served, often as a scout and courier, in the Griffon Legion, in the old Thay that Szass Tam and the Spellplague had destroyed. It had mostly been a pleasant, carefree life, and it had never even occurred to him to aspire to anything

more.

But of course he wasn't that young soldier anymore. He'd acquired far heavier responsibilities, and despite the distractions of the day, at odd moments, worry gnawed at him. Especially since, for the first time ever, he'd left the Brotherhood with *none* of its senior officers to oversee it.

He could have left Gaedynn. He probably should have. But he also needed trustworthy companions to help him accomplish his mission. If—

Enough! said Jet.

Aoth smiled. *What?*

You already made your decision, the griffon said, *so why are you still fretting about it? I don't know how*

humans ever accomplish anything, second-guessing yourselves the way you do.

Somebody has to do the thinking, said Aoth.

The thinking, yes, said Jet. *The dithering, no.*

Aoth was still trying to frame a suitable retort when he spotted the minotaur. The hulking creature with the bull-like head was climbing up a steep trail to the top of a ridge. A line of similar creatures followed it.

Aoth pointed with his spear.

"What is it?" Cera asked.

Evidently she couldn't make out the minotaurs, even as antlike specks. He knew he shouldn't be surprised. Even Jet

might not have noticed them as yet, if not for the psychic bond they shared. But it was sometimes difficult to guess what ordinary people—folk without Blue Fire smoldering in their eyes—could see and what they couldn't.

After he told her what he'd noticed, she asked, "Do we care?"

"No," he said. "We won't go any closer than we need to in order to tell what they're doing."

"Why do even that?" she replied.

"Because," he said, "when you're traveling through wild country, it's always better to know what the savages and brigands are up to, even when you can whiz by high above their heads."

Responding to his unspoken desire,

Jet raised one wing, dipped the other, and wheeled left. Aoth glanced back to see if Gaedynn and Eider were following. They were. The archer's elegant rust-and-scarlet clothes and coppery hair shined in the sunlight. So did the griffon's bronze-colored plumage and tawny fur.

Another stroke of Jet's wings carried him, Cera, and Aoth far enough to see what lay beyond the ridge. Aoth took in the view, then cursed.

An earthmote hung high above the ground with a waterfall overflowing its edge and hissing downward. Sustained by a link to the realm of Elemental Chaos, the endless spillover had created a small lake at the bottom, with tilled

fields and pastureland around it.

Goats and sheep grazed on the grass with a brown-skinned earthsoul boy to tend them. But most of the genasi villagers had forsaken the livestock and crops to take care of or palaver with the red-coated warriors who'd paid them a visit.

The warriors slumped on the ground in the clear space at the center of the huts looking as if they barely had the energy to lift the food and drink the villagers had provided to their mouths. Some had bloody bandages. Presently contained in a pen the settlers had cleared for the purpose, their steeds, gray lizardlike drakes as big as horses, looked just as battered and exhausted.

Cleary the men-at-arms had recently fought a hard battle. Aoth wondered if it had been a battle with another contingent of the same foes who were sneaking up on them.

The warriors should have posted a sentry on the high ground overlooking the village but they hadn't, and if the settlers were in the habit of keeping watch, the excitement had evidently lured their sentry down from his perch.

"If the minotaurs attack by surprise," Cera said, "shooting bows from the high ground—"

"Don't worry," said Aoth. "We're going to help."

Discerning his intent, Jet wheeled, and Gaedynn and Eider followed suit.

Despite the impediment of being in the saddle, the archer strung his bow with quick facility.

So, said Jet, *Tchazzar's willing to pay us to fight dragonborn, but we don't want to. Nobody's paying us to kill minotaurs, but we do want that.*

It may help us convince the queen, Aoth replied, *if we've done some of her subjects a good turn.*

I think you're just showing off for the sunlady. But it's fine with me. A little skirmish should be fun.

"Should I call Alasklerbanbastos?" Cera asked. The dracolich was in a sense traveling with them, but at a distance and mostly after dark. That way they didn't have to worry every moment

about him suddenly lashing out in another attempt to reclaim the phylactery.

Aoth snorted. “For this? No. I doubt it’ll last more than a moment.”

He lifted his ram’s-horn bugle and blew a blast to attract the attention of the folk on the ground. Then, leaning out of the saddle, he used his spear to point to the top of the ridge.

Meanwhile, the first minotaur climbed onto the crest of the outcropping. Instantly Gaedynn drove an arrow into his chest and he toppled. Eider and Jet let out bloodcurdling screeches.

A second minotaur scrambled to the top of the rise. Aoth rattled off a short incantation and punctuated it with a jab

of his spear. A viscid glob flew from the point to splash in the bull-man's face. He fell down, thrashing and screaming, pawing at the smoking, corrosive paste.

And that, thought Aoth, was likely to be that. The horned barbarians had lost the advantage of surprise. Nor would the high ground do them much good when a hostile warmage and bowman were flying higher still. It would make sense to withdraw.

Instead, a minotaur with red-stained horns clambered onto the ridge. Gaedynn instantly shot at him, and the shaft flew true. But it burst into flame and burned to a puff of ash just short of the creature's body.

Maybe one of the demonic emblems

freshly cut into his arms and chest was responsible. Aoth cursed himself for not noticing them before. But even fire-kissed eyes couldn't take in everything at once.

The shaman brandished his club and bellowed a word—perhaps the name of his patron demon—in an Abyssal tongue. The sound jabbed a twinge of headache between Aoth's eyes.

Flowing into view from head to foot like a painter's brush stroke, a hulking, gray-and-black figure appeared. Horns jutted over its yellow eyes, and jagged tusks lined its oversized mouth. Its wings and pointed ears were like a bat's.

"That's a nabassu!" Cera said.

"I know," said Aoth. In other words,

it was a particularly nasty kind of demon. He spoke a word of command and released one of the spells stored in his spear. A rainbow of varied and destructive forces blazed from the point.

Unfortunately the nabassu vanished before the magic reached it. Prompted by instinct, Aoth looked up just as the demon reappeared overhead. It spread its leathery wings, turning what would have been a plummet into a swooping glide.

Jet gave a choked little cry as a mystical attack struck him, and Aoth felt a stab of pain and weakness across their psychic link. The steady beat of the griffon's wings turned into a useless, spastic flailing. Then Jet was the one

who fell, carrying his riders along with him. The nabassu dived at them all.

Cera rattled off the first words of a healing prayer, Aoth charged the point of the spear with power, thrust, and caught the demon in the belly. But the weapon didn't go in deep enough to stick. The creature twisted and tumbled free, and Aoth knew that while he'd inflicted a wound that would have stopped any human, it wasn't nearly enough to incapacitate a fiend from the netherworld.

Cera finished her prayer. Healing warmth poured from her hands into Jet's body. He spread his wings and arrested his descent.

Let me take him! the griffon said.

When you can get above him, Aoth replied. *Until then, let me wear him down with spells*.

So the two flyers maneuvered, each seeking the high air. Meanwhile, the puncture in the nabassu's stomach closed, and new hide and fur grew over it.

Swinging her golden mace over her head, Cera hurled flares of Amaunator's light at the demon, and Aoth conjured blasts of flame and frost. The nabassu dodged more often than not, sometimes by translating itself through space and sometimes by becoming an insubstantial phantom for a moment.

It also snarled a word that, even though Aoth didn't know the meaning,

somehow carried a weight of stomach-churning foulness. Cera jerked and grunted then said, “I’m all right.” She started another prayer, and the demon shrouded itself in fog.

Aoth conjured a wind that tore the cloud apart, then immediately followed up with darts of crimson light. All five hit the nabassu squarely, and although they penetrated its head and torso without opening visible wounds, he suspected that he’d finally hurt it enough for it to matter.

Then pain ripped through his own skull and body. No, not his, Jet’s. When the darts had pierced their target, the magic had somehow wounded the familiar as well. The griffon flailed his

wings, trying to keep flying and stay away from the demon despite the shock.

"What's wrong?" Cera cried.

"The demon forged a link between the two of them," said Aoth. "You have to break it."

Cera began a spell, but she was only a word into it when the bat-winged creature flickered through space once again. It reappeared right beside Jet, snatched hold of his neck with the talons of one hand, and raked at Aoth with those on the other.

Unbalanced by his attacker, Jet floundered through the air. He strained to strike at the demon with his own talons and beak but couldn't reach him.

Aoth could use neither the sharp end

of his spear nor the lethal spells that were a warmage's stock in trade for fear of killing Jet. Blocking claw strokes with his shield, the targe clanking, rasping, and jolting his arm, he reversed his weapon and used the butt to try to knock the nabassu away. He couldn't. He conjured another howl of wind to blast it loose. That didn't work either.

He struggled to think of a tactic to dislodge the demon and couldn't. Then a sparkling, hissing curtain appeared before him. He just had time to realize that, despite the injuries and the clinging foe hindering his flight, Jet had managed to aim himself at the waterfall streaming down from the floating island into the lake below. Then they all plunged into it.

The frigid water hammered, smothered, deafened, and blinded Aoth, all in the first instant. He thrust with the butt of the staff anyway and thought he felt it connect, although with what result, it was impossible to tell.

It might not matter anyway. The waterfall would likely tumble them down to their deaths no matter what. He certainly couldn't do anything about it. He couldn't even tell which way was up anymore.

But then, half flying, half swimming, exerting every iota of his flagging strength, Jet carried his riders clear of the raging water and out into the open air on the other side.

His riders, but not the nabassu. The

savage force of the torrent, possibly aided by that final jab from Aoth's spear, had finally broken them apart.

Unfortunately, thought Aoth, coughing, the demon was likely to escape a watery death too. All it had to do was recover from its surprise, disappear, and rematerialize outside the waterfall.

But Cera called out to Amaunator. And for an instant, the entire waterfall blazed with golden light. Spotting the nabassu with his spellscarred eyes, Aoth saw its body crumble away to nothing in the center of the torrent.

"Nice work," he panted. "Both of you."

It certainly was, answered Jet, flinging spray with every sweep of his

wings. *And remind me: who was it that you said does all the thinking?*

"Do you have power left?" said Aoth to Cera. "Can you heal Jet?"

She coughed. "I'll try." She started another prayer, and Aoth cast about to survey the rest of the battle.

At some point Gaedynn had evidently tired of trying to drive an arrow past the shaman's mystical defenses because he and Eider had set down on the ridge. But that hadn't worked either. A circle of minotaurs armed with spears and axes was keeping them busy while the shaman stood off to the side and worked on casting a spell. The magic was a shuffling dance as much or more than it was verbal. He repeatedly dipped his

head as though he were goring and tossing a victim with his bloodstained horns.

Aoth assumed that he had, at most, a heartbeat or two to interrupt the spell short of completion. He pointed his spear, then cursed when he recognized that the fight with the nabassu had carried him, Jet, and Cera too far from the ridge for his own magic to span the distance.

At that same moment, Gaedynn, who'd evidently managed to defend himself and unbuckle the straps securing him to the saddle at the same time, hurled himself off Eider's back. The reckless move caught the minotaurs by surprise, and he plunged through a gap in the circle. One

barbarian pivoted and leveled his spear for a thrust. Eider lunged and nipped his head off, and that deterred any of the others from turning his back on her.

When Gaedynn charged, the shaman abandoned his conjuring. Smoke swirled around him as the power he'd raised dissipated prematurely. But when he swung the club, sweeping it in a horizontal arc, that attack was magical as well. Almost invisible in the sunlight, misty horns appeared above, below, and around the weapon and whirled along with it in a stabbing cloud that threatened to pierce Gaedynn from head to toe. His two swords couldn't possibly parry every thrust.

But he didn't try. He put on a final

burst of speed and sprang inside the shaman's reach an instant before the horns could gore him. He thrust one sword up under the minotaur's chin and the other into his chest.

The club slipped from the minotaur's grasp, and the disembodied, semitransparent horns disappeared. The creature staggered backward off the ridge and disappeared down the slope on the other side. Unfortunately he took the short sword that had pierced his throat and head with him. Evidently it was stuck, and Gaedynn had to let go of the hilt to avoid being dragged along.

Two more minotaurs clambered onto the top of the ridge, and he wheeled to face them with the single blade he had

left. Then genasi warriors swarmed up the other side.

Riding bareback, some clung to the backs of the gray lizards that seemed to climb almost as well as their smallest cousins. Bald, green-skinned watersouls somehow dashed up the steep slope with equal ease. Silver-skinned windsouls simply flew.

However they reached the top of the ridge, the Akanûlans started killing minotaurs the instant they arrived. Spears stabbed and scimitars slashed. Little flames rippling along the pattern of lines crisscrossing his bronze-colored skin, a firesoul snapped his fingers and set a bull-man's hide tunic ablaze. A burly earthsoul with skin the color of

mud stood on the far side of the ridge and stamped his foot. Shocks ran through the slope below, presumably jolting any minotaurs who were still trying to climb up and join the fight. Aoth hoped that some reeled off the trail and fell, although, from his angle, he couldn't actually tell.

But it didn't really matter. Eider slashed with her talons and disemboweled the last living minotaur on the ridge, and she, Gaedynn, and the genasi all visibly relaxed. Obviously the surviving barbarians were fleeing.

* * * * *

Jhesrhi found Shala sitting at a desk heaped high with stacks of parchment.

Quills in hand, half a dozen clerks scratched away at smaller desks while several adolescent boys whispered, fidgeted, or dozed in chairs along the wall. The latter were messengers, waiting to run a note or document to wherever it needed to go.

"My lady," Shala said, frowning. "What can I do for you?"

"You can respond when I ask for something," Jhesrhi said. "I sent you lists of the improvements required to make the wizards' quarter livable and petitions detailing the reparations due arcanists wronged by the courts and the watch."

"You only sent them yesterday," Shala said. "And as you can see, with the army

preparing to march on Tymanther, I have many matters to attend to."

"I also sent you a letter that pertains to the coming campaign," Jhesrhi said. "I explained how you should integrate mages into His Majesty's forces and the ranks they ought to hold."

"I'll get to that too. If you let me go back to work, I'll get to it that much faster."

Jhesrhi took a firmer grip on her staff. "It appears," she said, "that you don't think the needs of Chessenta's arcanists are important."

Shala's mouth tightened. "You're a soldier of a sort. Surely you agree that they aren't the *most* important concern on the eve of war."

“I suppose it’s to be expected that you think that way, considering that the arcanists suffered persecution through all the years you held the throne.”

“Lady, I’ll justify the decisions I made to Tchazzar if he requires it, not to you.”

“Of course,” Jhesrhi said, “because you’re simply too busy to talk to me about anything, aren’t you? But perhaps I can lift the burden from your back.”

With a thought, she made the head of her staff burn like a torch, and the pseudo-mind inside it crowed. She lowered the flames over the tallest stack of papers, and one of the clerks yelped in dismay.

Shala jumped up out of her chair, and seemingly indifferent to the possibility

of burning herself, swatted the staff aside. “Are you crazy?” she snarled.

“No,” Jhesrhi said. “I merely wanted your full attention. If I finally have it, maybe we should continue this talk in private.”

Shala raked her assistants with her glare. “Go!” she said, and they all scurried out.

When the door closed, Jhesrhi ordered the staff to stop burning, and it sulked at being denied a conflagration. “I apologize for that,” she said to Shala. “Although I hope it was convincing.”

Shala blinked. “That was all a sham?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I’m no courtier, High Lady. But since

I joined the Brotherhood, I've wandered through enough royal and noble courts to know that Tchazzar probably has a spy among your aides. I didn't want him to slither off and report that we're plotting in secret. And since I swaggered in here like Queen Bitch, I don't think he will. He'll believe we're having a bitter row."

"Possibly," Shala said, "but what makes you think I'd conspire with *you?"* She smiled crookedly. "After all, you're a wizard, and as you pointed out, I cruelly mistreated your poor, innocent kind."

Jhesrhi shrugged. "You simply enforced laws that existed before you ever came to the throne, laws the

temples told you were just and good. And then, when the murders began, you still let Lord Nicos bring the Brotherhood to Luthcheq so the people wouldn't slaughter all the arcanists."

"So I was only half a tyrant?"

"After that," Jhesrhi persisted, "you rode to war with Oraxes, Meralaine, and me. Maybe you saw something there, something to persuade you that wizards are just people, not the devil-spawn that the priests have always made us out to be."

"Let's say I did." Shala sat back down in her chair and waved Jhesrhi to another. "In my life I haven't found normal people to be all that trustworthy either. If Tchazzar doubts my loyalty,

maybe he asked you to trick me into saying something treasonous. And why wouldn't you be eager to oblige when you've risen so high in his favor?"

"If he decides he wants to get rid of you, do you honestly think he'll require incontrovertible evidence of wrongdoing before ordering your arrest?"

Shala snorted. "There is that. Still, it doesn't explain what you're doing here."

"You know Halonya arrested Khouryn Skulldark."

"And you couldn't convince Tchazzar to let him go. The madwoman won that round."

Jhesrhi scowled and a line of flame oozed up the staff. "The point is that if Tchazzar won't free him, I have to. And

I need help."

"You'd risk everything the dragon's given you—and your own freedom and your own life—to accomplish this?"

"I only have a handful of friends, High Lady. Khouryn's one of them."

"He's also a dwarf, and Chessentans don't like them any better than sorcerers. So why should I risk everything that *I* have left to help him?"

"Because you know he's being punished just for following your orders. Because it will do you good to give Halonya a poke in the eye. And because you know that, even leaving the question of justification aside, it's rash and stupid for Chessenta to invade Tymanther right after fighting a war in the north."

“And freeing your friend will keep that from happening?”

“It might help,” Jhesrhi said, then explained how.

Shala grunted. “It sounds like a feeble hope to me.”

“It may be. But also consider that you won’t be running all that much of a risk. I’ll be the one taking the big chances.”

“I’m not a coward!” Shala snapped.

“I know that, High Lady. But you are the one who keeps asking why she should help me. I’m giving all the reasons I can think of.”

“What exactly do you want from me?”

“Halonya dangled Khouryn in front of me as bait,” Jhesrhi said. “She wants me to go after him so she can kill or capture

me and then convince Tchazzar I'm a traitor."

Shala fingered the scar on her square jaw. "That sounds about right."

"Still, I have to rescue Khouryn and do it without using my most potent magic because if I invoked the wizardry of the four elements to do the job, it would be like signing my name."

"I suppose so."

"If I'm going to manage anyway, I need to know about the dungeons under the War College. Where exactly is Halonya keeping Khouryn? Are there mechanical or magical snares along the way, and if so, how do I bypass them? Where are guards generally posted, and where are the wyrmkeepers likely to

wait in ambush? I know you can tell me. You're the type who makes it a point to learn everything about everything over which you hold authority."

Like Khouryn himself.

Shala sat and thought for a moment then stood up abruptly. "If you're lying to me, then I swear by the Foehammer that I'll see my blade in your heart before Tchazzar takes me into custody. Now come look at a book. It has diagrams of the tunnel system in it."

As he sipped the bitter beer the villagers had given him, Gaedynn reflected that it was odd to feel welcome and at ease among genasi. During his time in Luthcheq, he'd come to regard the Daardendriens and Perra as friends,

and the Akanûlans at court, who despised the dragonborn, as hostile to himself and all the Brotherhood as well.

But there was none of that here. These genasi were effusive in their gratitude. Even Aoth's appearance didn't faze them, although, once Gaedynn thought about it, perhaps that made sense. The tattoos that decorated Aoth's body, face included, somewhat resembled the patterns of lines that crisscrossed the Akanûlans' skins, and with his shaved scalp, exposed after he'd removed his helmet, he was as bald as the earth- and watersouls.

Cera slumped beside him with her hand resting on his. She looked as if she could barely keep her eyes open.

Gaedynn gathered that turning the waterfall to holy water—a trick he wished he'd witnessed—had taxed her mystical strength considerably. Then she'd expended what magic remained to cast healing charms on Jet and the more sorely wounded genasi warriors.

"I wish I knew how to repay you," said Yarel-karn. The leader of the war band was a surprisingly young firesoul with an earnest, studious cast to his ruddy features. Flame rippled along one of the golden lines on the top of his head. It reminded Gaedynn of the way fire would sometimes spring, seemingly of its own volition, from Jhesrhi's new staff. For a moment, he wished she were there, then, annoyed with himself,

pushed her out of his thoughts and refocused on what was happening around him.

Aoth smiled at Yarel-karn. "Well, now that you mention it, there actually might be a way."

"Anything!" the genasi said.

"We're on our way to Airspur to seek an audience with the queen," said Aoth. "If an officer in Her Majesty's forces passed the word along that we helped him out, it might help us get in."

"And lend weight to our words when we do," Gaedynn added.

To his surprise, the firesoul looked chagrinned. "It might. Except that, unfortunately, you've mistaken me—us—for something we're not."

Aoth frowned. “How so?”

“We’re not part of the army. We belong to the Firestorm Cabal.”

After a moment Aoth said, “Which is?”

Yarel-karn looked surprised and perhaps slightly crestfallen that they didn’t know. “Volunteers. You see, as ordered by the queen and the stewards, the army concentrates on protecting the capital and the lands closest to it. But the settlers on the northern and eastern borders need protection too. In fact, they need it more! This region is full of dangers.”

“So your cabal patrols it,” said Aoth.

Gaedynn grinned. “And no doubt the authorities are grateful to you for taking

up the slack."

Yarel-karn's eyes narrowed. Then he relaxed as he decided Gaedynn's sarcasm wasn't directed at him. "No. They tolerate us. But they also resent our existence for what it is: an implicit judgment that they're letting the people down."

Gaedynn looked at Aoth and said, "In other words, a testimonial from our friends here would be worse than useless."

Aoth rubbed a hunk of brown bread around inside his bowl, soaking up the last of the vegetable stew. "Well, at least the food is good."

* * * * *

Jhesrhi disliked the cool, oily feel of illusion on her skin. It wasn't unpleasant per se, but it was a reminder that she was relying on magic with which she was less than an expert.

She glanced around, making sure no one was watching, then started down the narrow, stone stairs. Dread welled up in her mind, a feeling that something awful would happen if she continued her descent. She whispered the password Shala had given her, and the enchantment released her from its grip.

At the bottom of the steps stood a more mundane barrier: a sturdy, ironbound door. She kneeled and whispered coaxing words into the keyhole as if it were a stubborn child's

ear. The pins clicked as they released, just as if a key were lifting them, and she pulled the door ajar.

Everything had been easy enough so far, but that was what she'd expected. The wyrmkeepers would let her get close to Khouryn before they sprang their trap. That way, there could be no doubt as to her intentions.

She crept past a guard station. Something—either the enchantment of stealth she'd cast or a smile from Lady Luck—kept the two men inside from looking up from their game of cards.

On the other side, a block of cells stretched away into the dark. Her mouth stretched tightly with disgust at the stench. Voices murmured. A child wept

and a woman begged her to be quiet so the "bad men" wouldn't come back.

Jhesrhi shook her head. She'd had some awareness that alleged traitors and scoffers at Tchazzar's divinity were being rounded up, occasionally on flimsy pretexts. Still, she hadn't realized just how many were caged there underground.

Surely, she thought, Tchazzar doesn't realize either. It's Halonya—

But that was a lie, and she rejected it with a twinge of self-contempt. Tchazzar, whose damaged mind saw threats and treachery everywhere, *was* to blame. Halonya's desire to avenge slights past and present, real and imagined, and to enrich her church with

confiscated coin and property, simply fed the fire.

But whoever was responsible for the Chessentan prisoners' plight, Jhesrhi hadn't come to do anything about it. She cast about and found another set of stairs, leading down to the part of the dungeons the wyrmkeepers had claimed for their own.

From that point forward, there could easily be mantraps that Shala hadn't been able to warn her about. Jhesrhi murmured an incantation and tapped out a cadence on the onyx in the steel ring on her middle finger. The ring was an arcane focus, taken as plunder when the Brotherhood sacked a town years before. Until then, she'd never actually

used it, and it felt like a feeble sort of tool compared to her staff.

It seemed to send a sort of flicker running down the stairwell, but what she was actually beholding was an alteration to her own eyesight. While the charm lasted, she could see without benefit of light and glimpse telltale emanations of mystical force. Not as well as Aoth could, but, she hoped, improved enough to get by.

She skulked onward, to the bottom of the steps. No torches or lamps burned in the immediate vicinity. But light glimmered at the end of the passage that ran away before her.

There was a fair chance that Khouryn actually was down there. But it was

even more likely that the light was a lure to draw Jhesrhi to where the wyrmkeepers wanted her to be. Fortunately she knew from Shala's diagrams that the corridor ahead wasn't the only way to reach the glow. A branching corridor snaked around to arrive at the same spot from behind.

So she headed in that direction and kept scanning the way ahead for dangers. The priests of the Dark Lady might want her to take the one path, but that didn't mean they'd ignored the other.

A vague, glimmering point appeared floating in the gloom. If she hadn't been a spellcaster herself, she wouldn't have recognized it for what it was: a disembodied eye created to watch for

intruders.

Whispering, she rattled off words of unmaking and squeezed the hand with the ring shut as though she were squashing something inside it. She actually expected the wyrmkeepers' magic to sound the alarm before she finished. But apparently her charm of stealth kept the eye from spotting her instantly, and as she spoke the final syllable of the countermagic, it collapsed in on itself and vanished with a tiny squishing sound. For a moment the inside of her fist felt slimy.

She crept onward. Ahead, light spilled from a doorway, surely the same glow she'd spotted from the foot of the stairs. She contemplated which attack

spell to hurl into the room and reminded herself that magic manipulating any of the four elements was out of bounds. For a moment it seemed particularly annoying that she couldn't cast fire, until she realized the risk of burning Khouryn along with his captors.

Then something hissed.

She cursed under her breath because she was sure she knew what it was. When Aoth had rescued Cera from the cellars of Halonya's interim temple, he'd found that the wyrmkeepers were using a drake as a guard dog. Apparently this bunch had one too, and the beast had caught her scent.

She doubted she had time to sprint the last few paces to the doorway before the

foes inside readied themselves for combat. They were expecting her, after all. It would be better to keep her distance and hurl spells as they came out.

Unfortunately they didn't really do that. An arm whipped out of the doorway, lobbed stones or marbles, and instantly jerked back out of sight. The missiles clattered on the floor.

Jhesrhi started to speak a word of shielding. The first stone exploded before she finished.

A dazzling, crackling flare of lightning burned her, made her whole body clench, and kept her from articulating the final syllable of the word of protection. An instant later a pulse of chill pierced

her to the core. Next came flame and finally two bursts of vapor that stung her exposed skin and eyes, seared her from her nostrils all the way down into her chest, and made her cough and retch.

She fell down and told herself she had to scramble back up again or get ready to fight somehow. But it was impossible when she couldn't catch her breath and her eyes were blind with tears and floating blobs, as if she'd looked straight at the sun.

Footsteps thumped and scale-armor chasubles made a metallic shivering noise as the wyrmkeepers came out into the corridor. The drake gave another rasping hiss. Then a rough bass voice said, "What in the name of the Five

Breaths is that?”

The wyrmkeepers had spotted Jhesrhi, as she’d expected they would. Her charm of concealment wasn’t powerful enough to deflect the attention of someone who already knew she was there. But from the one priest’s reaction, it seemed that her underlying spell of disguise was still working. As a result, they weren’t seeing the woman they’d hoped to trap, but rather bone-pale, black-eyed Bareris Anskuld, the undead bard who’d marched with the Brotherhood on the desperate expedition into Thay.

“It could be a diversion,” said a baritone voice in more cultured, aristocratic tones. “I need eyes looking

the other way."

"What about this thing?"

"Let's see if we can convince it to be on our side." The speaker—the wyrmkeepers' leader, Jhesrhi surmised—switched to the language of dragons with its sibilant, polysyllabic words and convoluted phrasing.

Like many priests, he evidently had the ability to command the undead and thought he could use it on Jhesrhi. That gave her a moment to act.

She turned her back on him as though cringing from the power he was bringing to bear. Then, hoping the darkness in the passage would help to hide what she was doing, she fumbled in the pouch on her belt for the small pewter bottle

inside. She'd intended to give all the healing elixir to Khouryn, but if she didn't use some to restore herself, he was never going to get any.

She pulled out the stopper and took a swig. Her pains subsided and once she blinked the tears away, her vision cleared. She finally managed to draw a proper breath.

The wyrmkeeper with the rough voice said, "Wait. If it's a vampire or something, why was it coughing?"

Jhesrhi hastily jammed the stopper back in, thrust the bottle into her bag, jerked around, and snarled an incantation. She clenched the fist wearing the ring, then flicked her fingers open on the final word. An enormous

spiderweb flickered into existence. Their ends adhering to the walls, floor, and ceiling, the sticky, white strands clung to the foes in the midst of them and only entangled them more as they floundered in surprise.

But either because she'd scarcely had time to aim or because they'd been nimble enough to spring clear before the web fully materialized, she hadn't netted all her foes. Jaws open wide, the drake, a green-scaled creature the size of a wolfhound, bounded at her on its hind legs.

She had just time to speak a thumb-sized, crystalline wasp into existence. Buzzing, it stung the surprised drake on the snout then whirled around its head.

The reptile spun too, snapping at it repeatedly.

When the drake halted, the wyrmkeeper, charging a stride behind, ran right into it. They fell in a heap together, and as the wasp blinked out of existence, the confused reptile bit a final time and plunged its fangs into the priest's neck. An instant later, Jhesrhi thrust out her hand and splashed the creature with a burst of freezing light. It convulsed, then stopped moving. The chill had evidently stopped its heart.

Jhesrhi felt a surge of satisfaction, but it lasted only until she pivoted, looking for new threats, and found one. A big man with long, drooping black mustachios had somehow freed himself

from the web. Judging from the quality and ornamentation of his gear, he was the leader. He wore a ring on every finger of his left hand and a helm whose contours suggested a dragon's head. The light spilling through the doorway sent multicolored streaks running through his chasuble, and glints of the same hues oozed inside the curved head of his fighting pick.

He charged out of the direct illumination spilling through the doorway and into the gloom, and power flared from the rings. Ghostly, crested, wedge-shaped heads at the ends of serpentine necks writhed up from the floor between him and Jhesrhi. The closest one struck at her.

She dodged it but the defensive action put her in range of a second head. She wrenched herself to one side, and its misty but no doubt murderous fangs snapped silently shut on empty air.

The heads withered into nothingness an instant later, but by then their creator himself had rushed into striking distance. Bellowing the name of his goddess, he swung the pick, the head glowing red hot and bursting into flame. Jhesrhi jumped back and the weapon missed. Hoping the darkness would hinder her foe, she kept retreating down the passage while she started another spell.

On the next stroke, the corona of fire surrounding the head of the pick became a crust of frost, then on the one after a

cloud of poisonous smoke. Jhesrhi kept dodging and the priest kept missing, although each swing came closer than the last.

Finally she reached the end of her incantation, and a prickling danced over her hands. She held them low to avoid drawing attention to them and murmured nonsense so the priest wouldn't realize she'd finished the spell.

Crackling and showering sparks, the pick whizzed past her nose. And as Aoth and Khouryn had taught her, if a weapon was long and heavy, particularly at the striking end, then after a swing, it took even a skillful warrior an instant to ready it for another. So she raised her hands, which, thanks to the spell, wore

gauntlets of articulated bone with talons on the fingertips, and lunged.

The attack surprised the wyrmkeeper. He managed a chop even so but only clipped her shoulder with the wooden shaft of the pick. The steel head with its charge of magic fell behind her.

She clawed the left side of his face to gory ribbons. He threw back his head, maybe to scream, and that exposed his throat. She ripped it open. He toppled with blood spurting from the second wound.

As her claws melted away, she turned toward the web. It still held two wyrmkeepers helpless, but a third stood unbound on the far side of it. Maybe he'd never been entangled in the first

place. Maybe he was the fellow the leader had told to watch for trouble coming from the other end of the hall.

Whoever he was, he bolted, abandoning his comrades. Jhesrhi rattled off another incantation and thrust out the hand with the ring. Putrid-smelling fog swirled into existence around him. He staggered and collapsed.

Jhesrhi then returned her attention to the pair in the web. Eyes wide, they struggled even more frantically but still ineffectually to break free.

Their panic filled her with contempt. Maybe it was because she was sure they'd mistreated Khouryn. Whatever the reason, she felt a sudden urge to burn them alive.

But she didn't. She picked up a fallen pick, and heedless of their pleas and cries and, careful not to get herself or the weapon stuck in the web, used the butt end to club them both unconscious.

Then she went through the doorway and cursed.

She'd been expecting a torture chamber, so the lamp-lit space, with its tiny cage, spiked chair, ducking tank, whipping post, and similar implements, held no surprises. Still, it was ghastly to see Khouryn's burly, hairy, naked form covered in welts and stretched utterly taut on the rack.

She knew he wouldn't want a show of pity any more than she would have in his place. So she swallowed the clog in her

throat, dissolved the illusion that made her resemble Bareris, and said, "Halonya's followers are stuck in a rut. They racked Cera too, as I recall."

Khouryn gave her a grin, although it appeared even that movement pained him. "In my case, it was Chessentan humor," he croaked. "They said they'd cure me of being a dwarf. How much time do we have?"

"I don't know," she said, hurrying closer, into the stink of his abused and unwashed flesh. "Some, I hope. We're in a separate section of the dungeons from any of Tchazzar's guards, and there are prisoners closer to them. Their noise may have masked the noise of the fight."

She spoke the words that had

unlocked the door to the dungeons, and the leather cuffs flopped open to release his wrists and ankles. The flesh inside was raw.

Khouryn sucked in a breath and struggled to sit up. She reached to help him then faltered as her aversion to touching others asserted itself. But curse it, if she could let Tchazzar fondle her and slobber on her, she could help a friend!

Her skin crawling, she supported Khouryn with one arm and dug out the healing elixir with the other. “Drink it slowly,” she said, holding it to his mouth. “We don’t want you coughing it back up.”

With every sip, his condition

improved. His body made popping sounds as dislocated joints snapped back together. Some of the whip marks disappeared, and bruises changed from black to yellow.

"How are you now?" she asked when the vial was empty.

"Good enough." Moving like an old, arthritic man, he slumped to the floor, hobbled to the corner where the wyrmkeepers had dropped his clothes, and started putting them on. "What's our next move?"

"I'll tell you as we go. But first I need to disguise us."

She rattled off the rhyme needed to shroud herself in Bareris's image again. Then she made Khouryn look like a

halfling, which was to say, a member of a demihuman race that her countrymen didn't regard with disdain. Though halflings were slimmer than the Stout Folk, they were of a comparable height, and that point of similarity might aid the deception.

After that, she wrapped them both in another don't-look-at-me spell, and they were ready. Since his weapons and armor hadn't been with his clothes, Khouryn paused to appropriate a corpse's pick and dagger, then glowered at the merely battered and unconscious men dangling in the web.

"I wouldn't ordinarily kill a fellow in this condition," he said. "But now I'm tempted."

“I’d like somebody left alive,” Jhesrhi cut in, “and the way I beat these two in the head and poisoned the one lying over there, a couple of them may not make it as it is.”

Khouryn spit. “It’s not worth it anyway. Just lead me out of here.”

She did. They slipped past the guard station, climbed the stairs, and magically locked the door behind them. Then they made their way upward through the passages honeycombing the enormous sandstone block that comprised the greater part of the War College. To her relief, Khouryn’s limp became less pronounced, and he stopped gasping and grunting so often as exercise worked more of the stiffness and soreness out of

his muscles.

Finally they reached the roof with its turrets, battlements, and catapults. She pointed and whispered, “The bat is over that way.” On Halonya’s orders, the guards had given the animal drugged food, then secured it. Eventually, Jhesrhi suspected, the newly minted high priestess meant to sacrifice it to Tchazzar, but she hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

“Thanks,” Khouryn said, rolling his massive shoulders. “For everything. I’ll take it from here.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course.” He gave her a nod, then, crouching low and keeping to the shadows, crept toward the spot she’d

indicated.

She judged that he would have made it all the way too, except that the bat somehow perceived its master coming. It gave a little squeak of a cry and strained upward, trying to break free of the netting that pressed it flat against the roof. The guard who stood watch over it cast about, spotted Khouryn, and raised a javelin. The dwarf rushed him.

The soldier threw the javelin, but Khouryn didn't bother to duck or dodge. His practiced eye could evidently tell it was going to fly wide of the mark. As he lunged into the distance, the guard snatched out his sword.

After all that Khouryn had endured, Jhesrhi wouldn't have blamed him if

he'd taken the easy path and simply killed the soldier. But apparently he'd absorbed enough of her hasty, tangled explanation of recent events to grasp that, despite everything, wyrmkeepers were the enemy but Chessenta wasn't. Not exactly, not yet. Because instead of striking with the point on the head of the pick, he rammed the blunt, curved part of it into the soldier's gut.

The guard doubled over, but his armor cushioned the blow. He could still fight and slashed at Khouryn's face. The dwarf leaned backward, and the blade flashed past him.

Then he hooked the Chessentan's lead leg with the pick and jerked it out from under him. The human fell and, still

using the blunt part of his weapon, Khouryn jabbed him in the head. His helmet clanked.

Khouryn kept his eyes on the guard for another heartbeat, making sure he was out, then peered around. Jhesrhi did the same. As far as she could tell, the brief scuffle hadn't attracted any other sentry's attention. Thank the Foehammer that it was a dark, overcast night and a spacious roof.

Khouryn yanked the net off from the cleats normally used to lash a catapult or ballista in position. He pulled the mesh off the bat, and it rose and shook out its wings. The snapping sound did attract attention and someone shouted.

Khouryn gave a command in what

Jhesrhi assumed to be the dragonborn language. The bat lowered itself, and he scrambled onto its back. Then it crawled to the edge of the roof, clambered onto a merlon, and sprang out into space.

Jhesrhi smiled and hurried back the way she'd come.

THREE

6–10 Eleasis, the Year of the Ageless One

Halonya trembled with rage and impatience, and the motion rattled and thumped the stiff, jewel-bedizened layers of her gaudy vestments. Enthroned behind her, Tchazzar looked more composed but no happier. Watching

them both, Hasos tensed his jaw muscles to hold in a yawn.

The yawn wanted out only because Tchazzar's summons had hauled him out of bed at sunrise. His feelings were an untidy jumble, but boredom wasn't any part of the mix.

He was curious to learn how the dwarf had escaped, but also a little apprehensive and resentful. He'd observed that it was dangerous for anyone to be around Tchazzar when he was angry, and in that instance, there was no real reason Hasos should be present. No one had tasked him with keeping Khouryn Skulldark locked away.

He supposed the war hero had called

for him simply because, after the successful defense of Soolabax and the subjugation of Threskel, he was accounted one of the champions of the realm. Fighting the thought every step of the way, he'd finally come to realize that the attendant honors and responsibilities didn't please him as much as he might have expected. He sometimes wished he were home, looking after the farmers and townsfolk, chasing sheep rustlers through the scrub, and jousting in the occasional tournament, not stuck in Luthcheq preparing for another war.

The functionary at the door announced, "Lady Jhesrhi Coldcreek." Then the wizard herself walked in, the butt of her staff bumping softly on the

floor.

Hasos studied her, striking and lovely as always in her clenched, frigid way. If she was guilty of anything, he couldn't see any sign of it.

"Your Majesty," she said, curtsying stiffly.

"Arrest her!" Halonya shrilled.

Tchazzar shot the prophetess a glance, and she caught her breath. She was one of his favorites, but she'd still overstepped by presuming to give a command in his presence, and she realized it.

He didn't make an issue of it, though. Instead, he turned his gaze on Jhesrhi.

Who met it without flinching. "Clearly," she said, "something has

agitated His Majesty's high priestess. May I ask what?"

"Sometime between midnight and dawn," the Red Dragon said, "someone, or something, helped Khouryn Skulldark escape from his cell, reclaim his bat, and flee."

Jhesrhi raised an eyebrow. The flicker of expression reminded Hasos of her annoying comrade Gaedynn Ulraes, and he wondered if she'd picked it up from the archer without even realizing it. " 'Something,' Majesty?" she asked.

Tchazzar gestured to one of the men standing by the wall, a wyrmkeeper with bloody bandages wrapped around his head. "He looked like a vampire," said the priest, stammering slightly. "Or some

kind of undead."

"The last time I checked," Jhesrhi said, "I was both female and alive."

"You didn't have to sneak down and free the dwarf yourself!" Halonya said. "You could have called something out of the night and sent it to do your bidding!"

"Has Your Majesty ever seen me practice necromancy?" Jhesrhi asked.

"That doesn't mean you can't do it," Halonya said.

"My lady," said Tchazzar to Jhesrhi, "you know how disinclined I am to think ill of you. But you were Skulldark's comrade, and you did plead for his release."

"True," Jhesrhi said, her voice still steady, "and in my private thoughts, I

still regretted his imprisonment. But if I'd meant to set my will against your own, I would have acted at once. I wouldn't have waited while he endured additional days of torture."

"You would have," Halonya said, "if it took you that long to make the preparations."

"I believe," Jhesrhi said, a line of flame flowing from her hand to the top of her staff, "that Lady Halonya is so intent on venting her dislike of me that she's overlooking the obvious. Your Majesty knows you still have enemies here in your own realm who command the dead. You also know I'm not one of them because when the spirits attacked in the orchard, they tried to kill both of us.

Surely if such a creature has now penetrated the War College, they're the ones to blame."

Zan-akar Zeraez raised his hand. With a tiny crackle, a spark jumped from one of his purple, silver-etched fingers to another. "Majesty, may I speak?"

"Please," Tchazzar said.

"For purposes of argument, let's grant Lady Coldcreek's hypothesis. It still follows that this secret cabal of traitors would have no reason to free Skulldark unless he, too, was one of your enemies." He looked to Jhesrhi. "Wouldn't you agree?"

For the first time, Jhesrhi hesitated. "I … suppose. I didn't want to believe Khouryn disloyal, but maybe His

Majesty and Lady Halonya saw deeper than I did."

"And if he is in league to the Tymantherans," the ambassador continued, "he may well have flown right to them and warned them of our plans."

"I suppose that, too, is possible," Jhesrhi said. "After all, he had to go somewhere."

"Curse it!" Tchazzar snarled.

Shala cleared her throat, and the war hero shot her a glare. Seemingly unfazed, she said, "Majesty, may I suggest that this is yet another reason to reevaluate your plans?"

"No, you may not! Get out before I strip you of all rank and honors and have

you hanged for cowardice!”

Her square face livid, Shala inclined her head. Then she turned and walked away, her pace measured and her back straight.

Once she was gone, Zan-akar said, “Majesty, I’m glad you still intend to proceed with the invasion because Akanûl still stands with you. The atrocities the dragonborn committed allow no other answer. Still, this development is troubling, and despite Lady Jhesrhi’s glib tongue”—Jhesrhi’s golden eyes blinked as though no one had ever spoken of her in such terms before—“many questions remain. I implore you to seek the answers as vigorously as possible.”

Tchazzar frowned. “Do you have a specific course of action to recommend?”

“I truly regret the necessity, but Lady Jhesrhi should be detained and interrogated in Khouryn Skulldark’s place.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Jhesrhi said. “Your Majesty *knows* I’m loyal.”

“Additionally,” Zan-akar continued, “the Thayan Aoth Fezim, the dwarf’s commander, should be recalled immediately and given the same treatment.”

“Aoth, too,” Jhesrhi said, “has served Your Majesty faithfully ever since the day of your return.”

“No!” Halonya said. “It isn’t so!

Majesty—greatest of gods—*I'm* your prophetess! *I* proclaimed your divinity and foretold your return! This one time, believe *me*! Trust *me* as I strive to protect you from those who mean you harm! Your humble servant begs you!" She flung herself down and prostrated herself before the throne.

Tchazzar looked at her, then at Jhesrhi, then back again. Hasos had seen him like that a dozen times before, torn between the only two people he truly trusted, the ones who, paradoxically, so often pulled him in opposite directions.

Then his long face set with the resolve of a man preparing to do something genuinely unpleasant. And Hasos surprised himself by stepping forward

and clearing his throat.

Tchazzar whipped around in his direction. “What?” the Red Dragon snapped.

“Majesty, I … I hope I’m a proper Chessentan gentleman. I fight for honor and to protect my vassals and homeland, not for riches. So I never had much use for sellswords. On top of that, I don’t trust Thayans. Who does? I’ll also admit that despite Your Majesty’s decrees, I still don’t like mages. I can’t help it. It’s the way that I was raised.”

“Is there a point to this babble?” Tchazzar asked.

Hasos took a breath. “I was leading up to saying that in spite of all of that, I ask you not to act on these allegations

against Lady Coldcreek and Captain Fezim because, so far as I can see, there's not a bit of evidence against them. And because they're our *comrades!* They proved their loyalty and their mettle when they fought beside us on the battlefield. That has to mean something, surely, to the greatest warlord in Chessentan history."

Tchazzar took a deep breath. Then he rose, stepped down from the dais that supported his seat, and raised Halonya to her feet. He kissed her on the forehead, and she all but melted in his embrace.

"My beloved daughter," he said. "You're the wisest mortal in all the world. But no one is all knowing, not

even I. And in regard to this one matter, you've always been mistaken. Jhesrhi loves me as much as you do, and the two of you should be like sisters."

Halonya's face twisted. "Majesty—"

Tchazzar smiled and pressed a finger against her lips. "Shush."

"Majesty," Zan-akar said, "will you at least recall Aoth Fezim—"

"Enough!" snarled Tchazzar. It seemed to Hasos that, suddenly, the Red Dragon simply wanted to put the whole vexing matter behind him. "If I don't want to hear it from her, do you think I'll listen to it coming from a half-man?"

Zan-akar's face went still, as he had, perhaps, trained it to do at such moments. A few sparks crawled and

sizzled on the envoy's skin, but when he spoke again, his voice was composed, and he allowed the racial epithet to pass without comment.

"I beg your pardon, Majesty."

Tchazzar grunted. "Let's finish this and get some breakfast." He looked to the folk standing along the wall. "You … no, I won't call you my guards or my men. You no longer deserve that honor. You who were supposed to keep watch in the dungeons. Step forward. *Now!*"

Two fellows in the scarlet jupons of the War College's household guards scurried to the center of the hall and dropped to their knees before him. Their faces were pale and sweaty.

"What do you have to say for

yourselves?" Tchazzar asked.

One, with a bald spot in the middle of his light brown hair, said, "Please, Majesty. We were told the dwarf was the priests' responsibility, not ours. We were told not to go anywhere near him."

"But he had to go near you to leave the dungeons, didn't he?" Tchazzar replied. "The undead creature had to pass by you twice."

The man with the bald spot swallowed. "I guess. I mean, maybe. But if he was magic—"

Tchazzar slapped him.

Except that it had to be more than a slap because it trailed spatters of blood in its wake. And as Tchazzar completed the swing, and the guard doubled over,

shrieking and clutching at the tattered remains of his face, Hasos saw that the war hero's hand had changed. It was too big for his arm. The skin had turned to dull red scales, and the nails, to long, curved claws.

The other guard tried to fling himself backward, but he was too slow. Tchazzar snatched and shredded his face too, and he collapsed to writhe and whine beside his comrade. His stomach churning, Hasos wondered if either of them had an eye left.

"Now," Hasos said, "let the surviving priests come forward."

The wyrmkeeper with the bandaged head hobbled away from the wall. So did another, who clutched a bloody

handkerchief. His upper body jerked repeatedly as he apparently tried to hold in a series of coughs.

"Your fault is as great as theirs," said Tchazzar, returning to his throne. "But fortunately for you, if I punished you as you deserve, it would upset your high priestess. So I'm willing to forgive you. I only ask that you sacrifice these two wretches to me."

The wyrmkeeper with the battered head grinned like a fool. The coughing man let out a sigh and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Majesty," said the bandaged priest, "it will be our very great honor. Perhaps some of the guards could hold the sacrifices and lend us daggers."

“No,” the war hero said. “Do it by yourselves, with your bare hands. That’s the form of sacrifice your god desires today.”

The wyrmkeepers hesitated. They looked as if they’d been hardy enough before fighting the vampire, but now they were wounded and weak.

“Go on,” Tchazzar said. “I softened them up for you.”

The wyrmkeepers kneeled down beside the guards and tried to seize hold of their throats. Up until then, the mutilated soldiers had seemed too lost to shock and agony to resist anything else that anyone might want to do to them, but then, floundering in their own blood, they flailed blindly, frantically, and

knocked the wyrmkeepers' hands away.

To Hasos's eyes, the struggle that followed was horribly reminiscent of farm boys fighting to catch greased pigs at a fair, and it seemed to last forever. So did Tchazzar's peals of laughter as they echoed from the ornately finished sandstone walls.

* * * * *

Khouryn looked around the chamber full of dragonborn, a hall decorated with the weapons and armor of famous wyrm slayers and the fangs, claws, and whole skulls they'd taken as trophies, and for a moment, he had the odd feeling he'd never left, that his return to Luthcheq had simply been a nightmare.

Still, it was easy to spot changes. Medrash carried the greatsword denoting high status and wore the batwing badge of the Lance Defenders. Along with the steel-gauntlet medallion signifying his devotion to Torm, god of justice, and the six ivory studs pierced into his rust-colored saurian left profile to denote his membership in Clan Daardendrien, they made for quite a collection of honors and adornments. Ocher-scaled, and small by dragonborn standards, his kinsman Balasar bore all but the Torm medallion too.

Each of Khouryn's friends had changed his demeanor as well. During most of the time the dwarf had known Medrash, the paladin had been careworn

and afflicted with self-doubt. But even after hearing why Khouryn had come back, he seemed more at ease in his own skin. In contrast, the notoriously jaunty, flippant Balasar looked nervous as Kanjentellequor Biri chattered to him. Accounted pretty by her own kind, the young mage had snow white scales, a rarity. Silver skewers pierced the edges of her face, with most of their lengths sticking out behind.

"It looks to me," Khouryn murmured, "like Balasar has yet to resign himself to marriage."

"He's just being perverse," Medrash replied. "He wants her as much as she wants him, and if she were willing to settle for being just another notch on his

tally stick, he'd pounce on her like a hungry cat on a mouse. But he's always resisted anything our elders wanted him to do. Fortunately, he's got me looking out for his best interests. If I keep pushing the two of them together, eventually nature will take its course."

"And meanwhile, you have the fun of watching him squirm."

Medrash bared his fangs in what Khouryn had learned to recognize as a dragonborn grin. "A holy warrior of Torm is above such pettiness. Although the stars know, over the years he's subjected me to more than my share of pranks and japes."

A servant struck a bronze gong three times, and the notes shivered through the

hall. Khouryn took a breath, forgot about friendly banter, and readied himself to repeat news that was just about as grim as it could be.

"All hail Tarhun!" a different functionary called. And they all did, bowing and sweeping their hands outward as the vanquisher strode through a doorway at the back of the chamber.

The ruler of Tymanther was also its greatest warrior, and he looked it. He was taller and had broader shoulders than any of his subjects. He carried square bits of gold pierced under his eyes like teardrops, and his green hide was mottled where a dragonspawn's fire had burned him. He was dressed in rugged leather.

"Rise," he rumbled. "I'm sorry I made you wait. I was out flying." He turned his gaze on Khouryn. "My good friend. Ordinarily I'd call your return a cause for celebration. But I understand it isn't so."

"No, Majesty," Khouryn said. "I'm afraid not."

"Then you'd better step forward and tell us all about it."

Khouryn did his best, although he didn't think his best was particularly good. He was neither a bard nor a schemer, and the tale was just too tangled. By the Finder-of-Trails, he wasn't even sure that he fully understood it himself. He'd heard it only once, from Jhesrhi as they fled Tchazzar's

dungeons, and then he'd had the urgency of escape and the leftover pains of torture to distract him.

Still, it seemed that his audience understood at least a part of it. Enough to make them exclaim in shock and grow visibly more dismayed with every word.

When he finished, Tarhun shook his head. "I knew we were in danger of losing Chessenta's friendship, but I never dreamed it would come to this."

"If Shala Karanok were still on the throne," Khouryn said, "it probably wouldn't. But somehow, Tchazzar's back, and he's apparently a real dragon. The dragons are all playing a game; it's worth a lot of points to conquer Tymanther—well, you heard it the first

time I explained it."

"Yes," Tarhun said, "and mad as it seems, I believe it. It explains why Skuthosin moved against us at this particular point in time. But he's yesterday's problem. How will we counter this new one?"

"Fight," rapped Fenkenkabradon Dokaan. The commander of the Lance Defenders was almost as hulking as Tarhun. He had bronze-colored scales and branching steel piercings sticking up from his temples like antlers. "Smash the Chessentans and Akanûlans just like we broke Skuthosin and the ash giants."

"Of course," Tarhun answered, "we'll prepare to the best of our ability and fight to the last warrior if need be.

That's our way. That's how our forefathers won their freedom from wyrms every bit as terrible as Skuthosin and this Tchazzar. Still, we have to be realistic. Defeating the giants cost us. It's hard to see how we can turn right around, fight Chessenta, Akanûl, and Threskel all at once, and come out on top."

Khouryn said, "There might be another way."

Tarhun cocked his head. "If so, I'm eager to hear it."

"Except for Medrash, Balasar, and Perra," Khouryn said, "none of you know Captain Fezim. But he's sharp. And as I understand it from Jhesrhi Coldcreek, when he found out about this

game, he more or less analyzed the play, looking for a way to relieve the pressures that are driving the lands around the Alamber Sea to do what the dragons want."

Tarhun nodded. "Go on."

"Akanûl is coming to attack you partly because its queen blames you for a series of raids and massacres. Thanks to Alasklerbanbastos, we now know that a gray dragon and his servants are really responsible. Aoth and others have slipped off to Airspur to prove it. If they do, maybe the genasi will pull out of the alliance with Chessenta."

"And maybe not," Dokaan said. "They hated us before this insanity ever began, before the Blue Fire ever scooped up

our two kingdoms and dropped them here in Faerûn. And even if they don't come, I suspect the Chessentans still will."

"And I suspect you'd be right," Khouryn said, "if that were all of the plan."

Balasar grinned. "It sounds like we're getting to the part where *we* get to have some fun."

Khouryn snorted. "That's one way of putting it. Majesty, I remember when you asked High Imaskar for help against the giants. They said they couldn't give it because creatures out of the Purple Dust were attacking their lands. According to Alasklerbanbastos, that, too, is a part of the game. A dragon named Gestanius

created the crisis to cut you off from help."

"The same Gestanius who was Skuthosin and Tchazzar's ally hundreds of years ago?" Biri asked.

Khouryn shrugged. "I'm no authority on dragons, but that would be my guess. The important thing is, Alasklerbanbastos told my friends where to find Gestanius, and Jhesrhi told me. If some of us go to High Imaskar, join forces with the locals, and kill her, the attacks will stop, freeing up the Imaskari to come to your aid in return."

"So if everything works," Medrash said, "Tchazzar loses an ally, and we gain one. And faced with such a radical shift in the balance of power, he ought to

call off the invasion."

"Even if he doesn't," Khouryn said, "you'll be in a much better position to fight him. By the Twin Axes, even if only half the plan works, you're still better off."

Dokaan shook his head. It made the little steel antlers glint. "Majesty, I don't like it."

"Why not?" Tarhun asked.

"Because it's all based on the presumption that Alasklerbanbastos, who isn't just a dragon but an infamous, undead one, told Captain Fezim and his companions the truth."

"They had the means to wring it out of him," Khouryn replied.

"Are you certain of that?" Dokaan

asked. “Do you truly understand the magic involved?”

Khouryn shook his head. “Not a bit of it. But Jhesrhi said she does, and that’s good enough for me.”

“And I trust your judgment,” Tarhun said. “It was sound during the campaign against the giants. Still, I understand why Dokaan is reluctant to see anyone dispatched on such a … speculative mission. We’re likely to need every warrior we have to stand against the invaders.”

“Maybe not every warrior,” Medrash said. “The soldiers of the Platinum Cadre fought well against the giants, but the rest of the army still doesn’t trust them very far. That could limit their

usefulness on this side of the sea. So why don't Khouryn and I take them to High Imaskar?"

"Dokaan," Tarhun said, "do you agree that's a reasonable plan?"

Dokaan shrugged. "Medrash is right. They fought pretty well. Still, if we have to excuse somebody from a fight with a dragon, it might as well be our company of dragon worshipers."

"I ask to be excused too," Balasar said. "Medrash, Khouryn, and I made a good team before." He grinned. "I supplied the brains and panache, and they, the … well, I'm sure there was something."

Tarhun snorted. "Fine, you can go too."

“And me?” Biri asked.

Balasar turned back around to face her. “My lady, don’t you think you’re needed here? There aren’t many dragonborn mages, whereas High Imaskar is a land of wizards. When we get there, we’ll have all we need.”

“Yes,” she said, “when you get there. But I’m under the impression that every moment counts. And I have some power over wind and weather. I can ensure a speedy voyage.”

“That sounds good to me,” Medrash said.

“And to me,” Tarhun said. “Fetch Nellis Saradexma,” who, Khouryn recalled, was the Imaskari ambassador. “He can go too to speed things along

when you reach your destination."

* * * * *

Selûne's silvery light seemed incapable of penetrating the depths of the gorge. It was as though the aura of death and despair emanating from the bottom held it at bay.

There was power in that feeling, and if he were still wearing his old body, Alasklerbanbastos would simply have plunged into the crevasse to claim it for his own. Now, however, he had to consider the possibility that something else, something capable of harming the diminished creature his enemies had made of him, had gotten there first. And so, hating it, he crawled warily down the

precipitous wall of the crevasse.

Like most undead, he could see in the dark, although not as far as a man could see by day, and he soon discerned that when the Spellplague raged and the earth convulsed, that crack had opened and swallowed a town. Most of the buildings lay broken and half buried at the bottom. Although, looking as if a breath would suffice to dislodge them, a few houses clung to the sides.

Something fluttered. Alasklerbanbastos looked around. Birds, or things like the shadows of the birds, were landing on the roof of the nearest house. They didn't seem to be flying in from somewhere else so much as taking shape from the ambient gloom, and it

was only the attitude of their bodies that told the dracolich they were looking back at him. He couldn't pick out a gleam of eyes or a hint of feathery texture anywhere on their vague, almost flat-looking forms.

He considered blasting them with his breath. But so far, they weren't doing anything hostile, and perhaps they wouldn't. He was still a dracolich, after all, a being most creatures feared to provoke. So he simply continued his descent, and the ghostly flock simply kept pace with him, flying from one broken rooftop to the next.

When he reached the bottom, he could feel a gradation in the palpable memory of anguish. It festered on every side but

was foulest in the direction of the fortresslike temple of Helm the Watcher, lying on its side. Alasklerbanbastos surmised that many of the townsfolk had fled there to pray for succor when the upheavals began, and there they'd perished when it never came.

Picking his way through rubble and bones, Alasklerbanbastos headed in that direction. The black birds divided. They still kept pace with him, but some flew and perched to the right, and the rest, to the left.

Then other creatures, similarly murky but somewhat manlike, came out of the dark. Those bearing scythes stalked from behind cover. Others simply flickered into view. All barred the path to the

temple.

Once again, Alasklerbanbastos felt the urge simply to smite the impudent mites, and once again he held it in check. “Who commands here?” he asked. “I assure you, it’s in your best interest to parley with me.”

Yet another dark figure emerged from behind the others. But this one had scalloped wings like Alasklerbanbastos’s own sprouting from his shoulder blades, spindly horns like the points of a jagged diadem jutting from his head, and round, luminous red eyes. The dragon could just make out a few of the runes engraved on the blade of the newcomer’s scythe.

That was enough to confirm that the

creatures were sorrowsworn, haunters of sites where mortals had perished in pain, in terror, and in quantity. Alasklerbanbastos had assumed as much, but the things resembled a number of other denizens of the netherworld, and it was always better to be sure.

"You're intruding on a sacred place," the deathlord said.

For an instant Alasklerbanbastos wondered what deity or quasi-deity the sorrowsworn served, then decided he didn't care. "A useful place," he replied. "I need to borrow it for a while."

"No," the deathlord said.

"I need to tap the kind of power a place like this provides. I promise to leave it as I found it."

“No,” the red-eyed creature repeated, then hesitated, as though deciding how much more he wanted to say. “Something seeks to be born in the house of the fallen god. It was conceived forty years ago and must gestate undisturbed for twenty more. Leave now while—”

Alasklerbanbastos spit a crackling flare of lightning. The deathlord floundered backward, jerking in a spastic dance.

But when the lightning flickered out of existence, he didn’t collapse. Instead, his seared flesh smoking, he screamed a command in a language that even Alasklerbanbastos didn’t recognize.

The shadowravens instantly hurtled at the dracolich from all sides. By itself,

each little peck of a beak or scratch of a talon would have been insignificant, but dozens every instant were a different matter. Worse, the birds flapping around his head all but blinded and deafened him, allowing the sorrowsworn to advance unopposed. Scythes sliced along his ribs, the blades bumping and catching on his bones.

He swept his head from side to side and burned shadowravens out of the air with an arc of lightning. Or rather, he tried. In his old body, he could have used his breath weapon several times before depleting it, but in his new one, he'd exhausted it with a single exhalation.

A shock ripped through the base of his

neck. One of his foes—the deathlord, he suspected—had driven a scythe in deep. Another stroke or two like that could cripple him.

He leaped into the air, lashed his wings, and soared upward.

That rid him of all the foes who didn't have wings to follow. He swiped with his claws, smashing birds by the dozen, and snarled an incantation. Meanwhile, he felt some sort of psychic magic pounding at his mind. But it wasn't divine power like the despicable sunlady wielded, and it couldn't pierce his defenses.

He bellowed the last word of his spell, and a cloud of acidic vapor seethed into existence around him. It

stung him, but it was worth it because it annihilated the shadowravens. Sizzling, they fell like stones and corroded away to nothing before they reached the ground.

A beat of his wings carried Alasklerbanbastos clear of the burning mist, and he looked around for the deathlord. He was reasonably sure the creature had followed him aloft, but at first glance, he couldn't spot him.

A weight thumped down on top of Alasklerbanbastos's head. Certain that he had only an instant before the deathlord's scythe would slash at one of his eyes, he lashed his neck as though he were cracking a whip. The sorrowsworn tumbled from his perch.

Alasklerbanbastos twisted his head and tried to snap him out of the air. His teeth clashed shut on nothing. The deathlord had shifted through space to dodge the attack. Another psychic attack beat at Alasklerbanbastos's consciousness. He snarled in annoyance as he tried to locate his opponent once again.

There! Even blurrier than before, probably turned intangible, the deathlord was swooping toward the ground to rejoin his underlings. Alasklerbanbastos's snarl turned into a laugh because abandoning the high air was the wrong play.

He furled his wings, plunged downward, and rattled off three words

that drew all the lightning that continually danced in a blue dragon's body down into his foreclaws. Crackling, they glowed white and should annihilate an insubstantial foe as readily as any other.

Just before Alasklerbanbastos plummeted into striking distance, the deathlord sensed the danger. He wrenched himself around, congealed into solidity, and swung the scythe. It gashed Alasklerbanbastos's leg, but that was all.

Then the dragon's claws stabbed into the sorrowsworn's body, piercing it, all but splitting and tearing it to pieces. It was a killing stroke even without the lightning that discharged itself with a

thunderous bang an instant later.

Alasklerbanbastos flicked the charred scraps that were all that remained of the deathlord off his talons and spread his wings for a softer descent.

The remaining sorrowsworn were brave, stupid, or compelled by some enchantment. Even with their chieftain and the shadowravens destroyed, they kept fighting, and pretty well at that. Still, it took Alasklerbanbastos only a few more moments to rip them apart.

He looked around and made sure he'd gotten them all. Then he stalked on to the dead god's temple.

Since the building was lying on its side, the entry was halfway up the wall. At some point, the doors had come loose

from the hinges, leaving just a hole. He stuck his head inside.

Somehow, the outer shell of the temple had survived its slide or tumble into the crevasse partially intact. But the disaster had shattered interior walls and shaken everything loose from its proper place. Broken pews, icons, and skeletons lay heaped and jumbled altogether.

Alasklerbanbastos felt a little disappointed. Whatever the sorrowsworn had believed was growing inside the ruinous womb, he couldn't detect any sign of it. But he could still feel the throbbing, malignant power of the place, and that was what was important.

He crawled through the doorway. The litter shifted under his weight, so, using his claws and tail, he scooped and swept it to the sides until he had a clear place to work. Then he chanted words of power and scratched a rune on the stone beneath him whenever the ritual called for it.

When he'd written all twenty-five, he slit the hide on his left foreleg and started to flay himself.

It wasn't easy. Even though the undead were less susceptible to pain than the living, the discomfort was considerable. And on top of that, the skin was damaged. Tchazzar had burned it, death had rotted it, and the fights Alasklerbanbastos had gotten into since

occupying the body hadn't done it any good either. Yet he needed to remove it in just a few pieces. Cutting or inadvertently tearing it into too many would spoil the magic.

Finally the painstaking task was through. He laid out the sheets of hide in the proper places, refocused his concentration, and whispered the final rhyme.

The darkness seemed to spin around him. Disembodied voices wailed, and a stench like vomit filled the air. Broken bones jerked and rattled.

Blue light danced where one sheet of scaly skin touched another, fusing them back together. Then the hollow, flapping but united thing they'd become heaved

itself up off the floor. It whipped around toward Alasklerbanbastos and opened its jaws, revealing the hard, serrated ridges that had formed to substitute for fangs.

But Alasklerbanbastos had expected resistance. He grabbed the dragon shell by the neck, slammed it to the floor, and held it there while it tried to wrap around him like a python. He bound it with words of command.

When it stopped struggling, he let it up and gave it a more leisurely inspection. Satisfied with his handiwork, he smiled.

* * * * *

A watersoul functionary had informed Aoth that he and his companions would

have to wait until Queen Arathane could find the time to receive them. He suspected the reality was somewhat different. Her Majesty was more likely conferring with Tradrem Kethrod, the Steward of the Earth and her spymaster, and anyone else who might have some idea why a sellsword captain in service to Chessenta had unexpectedly appeared to request a palaver with the ruler of Akanûl.

Waiting made Aoth edgy, and he tried to calm himself by taking in the view. The royal palace was a spire that, from the outside, resembled a narwhal's horn. It occupied the highest point in Airspur, and the outer wall of the waiting room was made entirely of glass. He could see

much of the capital spread out below.

Even in the Thay of his youth, where the Red Wizards had not infrequently turned their Art to spectacle and ostentation, he'd never seen another city like it. It incorporated dozens of small, low-floating earthmotes, linked to one another and adjacent towers by bridges. And everything reflected the genasi's kinship with, and mastery of, the elemental forces. Most structures had a flowing, rounded look to them, as if they'd been molded from clay, not hewn from stone. A few hung like mirages in midair. Sparkling in the sunlight, water cascaded from the higher levels of the city to the lower.

"You'd think," Gaedynn said, "that if

Jhesrhi wanted to settle down anywhere, it would be here, not Luthcheq."

"Our childhood homes keep a hold on us," Cera said. "And I suspect that if you were an unhappy child, the hold can be all the stronger."

Gaedynn grinned. "Speak for yourself. I'd sooner take another run at Szass Tam than return to my father's castle." He turned back to Aoth. "I'm still vague on our strategy. Exactly how much are we going to tell them?"

"You're vague because I'm vague," said Aoth. "This is potentially dangerous. I'll need to read Arathane's reactions and make decisions as we go."

"Thanks for clarifying. I feel so much more confident."

Cera frowned. “The Keeper of the Yellow Sun teaches us to cast the light of truth as widely and brightly as we can.”

“Is that why you’ve been doing things behind your high priest’s back ever since this craziness started?” Aoth replied.

She tried to look at him sternly, but humor tugged at the corners of her mouth, and after a moment, she gave it up. “Perhaps I am trying to put the milk back into the cow.”

The door behind them clicked open, and they turned to see the same green-skinned watersoul servant as before. Her tabard bore a pentagram emblem that symbolized the five subraces of the

genasi people, although after his experiences of late, Aoth found it unpleasantly reminiscent of the wyrmkeepers' sigils and regalia.

"Please follow me," the watersoul said.

They did and she soon led them up additional flights of stairs. Arathane's throne room was at the very top of the spindly tower. The arrangement probably wasn't convenient for anybody, but anyone reaching the round chamber would likely admit it provided an air of grandeur. With glass on every side, Aoth could see all of Airspur, as well as the brown, snow-capped Akanapeaks to the west, and the expanses of blue water to the north and east.

Supporting the small keeps that belonged to the individual stewards, the four “thronemotes” floated in a ring, almost but not quite as high above the city as the chamber. Bridges like the spokes of a wheel joined them to the central spire.

Arathane sat in a massive, silver chair resting on a dais floating two feet above the floor. The usual gaggle of courtiers and attendants clustered around it. The queen was young and slender, with delicate features and a pointed chin, and had only a couple of silvery lines running down her purple face from scalp to chin; unlike some genasi, she didn’t look as if she were wearing a filigree mask. One of her maids had affixed

dozens of tiny sapphires to the crystalline spikes that took the place of hair. The jewels matched the ones in her necklace and rings.

"Welcome, Captain Fezim," she said in a clear, soprano voice. "My mother told me stories about you."

Aoth sensed Gaedynn and Cera glancing at him in surprise. He hadn't bothered to tell them the tale because it hadn't seemed relevant. He hadn't thought it likely that the Akanûlans would remember something that had happened thirty years before.

"She was a great lady," he replied.

"Who would have lost her throne and probably her life if not for you and your company," Arathane said. "So I'm happy

to welcome you and your companions. Happy but also perplexed, for reasons I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, Majesty," said Aoth. "You wonder why I'm not in Chessenta helping Tchazzar prepare to invade Tymanther."

"Something like that," Arathane said.

"It's because my companions and I have learned something you ought to know. You're going to war over a misunderstanding. The dragonborn didn't raid your villages. The servants of a gray wyrm named Vairshekellabex, a creature native to your own kingdom, did it."

The queen turned her head. "Can this be true?"

A barrel-chested, square-jawed earthsoul—Tradrem Kethrod, Aoth surmised—looked back at her. His brown leather garments nearly matched the color of his skin, as their golden ornaments matched the pattern of parallel lines and right angles that ran through it. It made him look disconcertingly like a terra cotta statue come to life.

"No, Majesty," said the Steward of the Earth. "As you will recall, a handful of witnesses saw the raiders and lived to tell the tale. The perpetrators were unquestionably dragonborn."

"With respect, my lord," Cera said, "your witnesses were mistaken through no fault of their own. Vairshekellabex

has wyrmkeepers in his service. They know magic to summon fiends called abishais from the Hells, then disguise them to look like dragonborn. I swear by the Keeper's light that Captain Fezim and I have seen it for ourselves."

Tradrem frowned. "You've seen for yourselves that this Vairshekellabex has wyrmkeepers working for him and that they're playing this particular trick?"

Cera hesitated. "Well … no. Not that … exactly."

"Have you ever even seen Vairshekellabex?"

The priestess sighed. "Again, no."

"Then how can you be certain of any of this?"

Aoth considered then dismissed the

idea of admitting that he and his comrades had, on their own initiative, reanimated a creature who was both their employer's greatest enemy and one of the terrors of the East. Maybe the moment would come, but he wasn't there yet. "By mystical means," he said.

"Well, then," Tradrem said, "with respect to all of you, divination has its uses, but there are a number of ways it can mislead or yield the wrong intelligence entirely. That's why I put my trust in people reporting what they've observed with their own eyes."

"And yet," Arathane said, "there are rumors of a gray dragon lairing in the wasteland. You brought me the accounts yourself."

“True enough,” Tradrem said, “but that alone scarcely makes Captain Fezim’s case. Especially considering that, even if he’s right, it’s far from clear why he would rush here to give us the information.” He pivoted back to Aoth. “Or am I mistaken? Did you confer with Tchazzar first, and did he excuse you from your normal duties to pay us a call?”

“No,” said Aoth. “When we learned the truth, we were in Threskel, completing the pacification of the province. Tchazzar was already back in Luthcheq. I thought it would save time to fly straight here.”

“But why did you want to?” Tradrem persisted. “Why bring news to

Tchazzar's allies that could persuade us to forsake him?"

"For coin," Gaedynn said. "Aoth and I are sellswords, after all, and surely this information is worth a little something."

Arathane frowned. "Worth betraying the sovereign to whom you pledged your service?"

"The Brotherhood of the Griffon fought hard to conquer Threskel," the archer said, "and then Tchazzar forbade us to plunder the place. That curdled our loyalty a little."

"Majesty," said Aoth, "whatever you think of our motives, the fact remains that Vairshekellabex *is* slaughtering your subjects and casting the blame on the dragonborn so he can keep doing it with

impunity. And I'm not asking you to take my word for it. I'm asking for the chance to put an end to it."

Arathane cocked her head. "How?"

"I know where to look for Vairshekellabex's lair. Lend me some warriors. I'll go kill him and bring back proof of all we've told you."

Gaedynn smiled. "What do you have to lose?"

"Quite a bit," Tradrem said. "Most of the army has marched south. The portion that remains is already stretched thin to protect Airspur and the northern parts of the realm from the aboleths."

"Surely you can spare someone," Cera said.

"Even if we could," Tradrem said,

“we’d need more convincing because it makes perfect sense that the dragonborn would raid our lands. They’ve *always* been our enemies, for as far back as anyone can remember.”

“I picked up a little history when I lived with the elves,” Gaedynn said. “Mainly I learned that if you go back far enough, you find out that at one point or another, everybody’s ancestors pissed on everybody else’s. And that’s convenient if you enjoy holding a grudge, but you can’t let it blind you to what’s happening here and now.”

Tradrem’s mouth tightened. “Thank you, sellsword. I’m sure we’ll all cherish that nugget of moral instruction. But it doesn’t alter the fact that Her

Majesty's ambassador in Luthcheq reported that you and your comrades showed bias toward the dragonborn almost from the moment you arrived in the city."

Aoth sighed. "That's a … skewed interpretation of events. We simply kept the peace as we were charged to do and counseled Shala Karanok to the best of our ability."

Tradrem turned to the queen. "Majesty, I think it likely that these folk are in the pay of Tymanther and have come here to perpetrate a hoax, the object being to keep Akanûl from retaliating against its enemies as justice and prudence both demand."

Arathane frowned. Sparks crawled

and popped on the web of silvery lines on her throat and hands. “It’s hard to imagine the champion from my mother’s tales doing such a thing.”

“If I’m not mistaken,” the earthsoul said, “the man in the late queen’s reminiscences served her for coin, not out of nobility of spirit. And even if he did demonstrate some finer qualities, as Sir Gaedynn was just kind enough to remind us, the past doesn’t provide an infallible guide to the present. People change.”

“Majesty,” said Cera, “please, listen to your heart.”

“By all means,” Tradrem said, “but listen to your ministers as well. My lords, what do you say?”

The first to answer was a watersoul with a leaping dolphin emblem on his buttons and belt buckle and black smears on his gray velvet doublet. It appeared he was in the habit of absentmindedly wiping his inky fingers on it. Aoth assumed that he was Myxofin, the Steward of the Sea, also called the Lord of Coin.

"Meaning no offense to Captain Fezim, his lieutenant, nor certainly to a sunlady," he said, "I have to agree with Lord Tradrem. Your Majesty already made her decision. Your army is already on its way to Chessenta. We've already spent a great deal of treasure to equip and provision them. And this story is just too strange."

When he finished, everyone looked to a female windsoul with the silver skin and blue patterning of her kind. Despite the urging implicit in their regard, she still stood, frowned, and deliberated for a couple moments longer. She was evidently Lehaya, the Steward of the Sky and Akanûl's Lawgiver.

"Majesty," she said when she was ready, "you no doubt remember that from the start, I had misgivings over going to war." Aoth felt a pang of hope. "Still, I must agree with my fellow stewards."

Curse it! "Just give me fifty men," he said. "Fifty to rid your realm of a horror."

Now it was Arathane's turn to hesitate. She looked out over them all

with troubled eyes.

"Majesty," Tradrem said, "pardon me for bringing this up. But you know that, by your mother's decree, if the Four Stewards stand united in opposition to the queen, it's our will that prevails. And I believe we all know how Magnol would vote if he were here."

"But he isn't," Gaedynn said. "He's marching south at the head of Akanûl's army. So Your Majesty can do whatever you want. And where's the fun in wearing a crown if you don't make an unpopular decision once in a while and then make everybody eat it?"

Inwardly Aoth winced but Arathane surprised him by chuckling. "You're not shy about speaking your mind, are you?"

she said.

Gaedynn grinned. “It’s merely one of my many endearing qualities.”

“I’m sure. Still … gentlemen, sunlady, you’re welcome in Akanûl for as long as you care to stay. And you needn’t worry that anyone will inform Tchazzar of what you said to me. But I truly don’t know what to make of it, so I’ll abide by the advice of my counselors. Vairshekellabex, if indeed he exists, will have to wait until the war is over.”

FOUR

10–14 Eleasis, the Year of the Ageless One

An inn that specialized in catering to those who traveled on the backs of flying steeds, the Eagle's Idyll resembled a stone beehive floating in midair, with only three arcing bridges connecting it to other bits of Airspur. The open-air tavern on top was famous for its cuisine,

and Gaedynn was a man who appreciated fine food. Still, he looked down at the broiled spiced shrimp, wild rice, green beans, and roll on the octagonal plate before him and realized he wasn't hungry.

"Curse it," he said. "For a moment, I thought I had the queen on my hook."

"Why did you say we brought our information hoping for a reward?" Cera asked. With her blonde curls and gold-trimmed yellow vestments gleaming on the bright, summer day, she looked like a proper agent of the god she worshiped, except that there was nothing sunny about her scowl. "After you blurted it out, Aoth and I had no choice but to follow your lead."

“I didn’t ‘blurt,’ ” Gaedynn replied. “I weighed the options, then told the queen and her deputies we were behaving exactly as people expect knavish sellswords to behave. It was something they could understand. Did you really want to claim that we were here because Amaunator sent us? Reveal that we revived Alasklerbanbastos? Maybe call the gruesome brute into the royal presence to vouch for us?”

“Yes!” Cera said. “Because it’s the truth, and it might have worked. Your way didn’t.”

Gaedynn smiled crookedly. “I admit, you have me there.” He turned to Aoth. “What do you think?”

Aoth shook his head. “It’s possible

the genasi just hate the dragonborn too much and that plans for the war have progressed too far for our arguments to have prevailed no matter what we said. It's even possible that Tradrem—or Lehaya or Myxofin—opposed us because he's secretly in league with one of the dragons. After all, Nicos Corynian—our own original employer, may the Black Flame help us—took bribes to advance Skuthosin's schemes."

Gaedynn took a sip of chilled green tea. "I'm getting tired of feeling like somebody's always a move ahead of us. Or worse, that we still aren't really players at all, but merely pawns. It's injurious to my pride."

Aoth snorted. "I suspect it will

withstand the blow."

"We can only hope. So what's the plan now? I don't suppose it's simply to give up, fight in Tchazzar's new war and profit thereby like sensible sellswords, and then clear out of Chessenta as soon as it's practical?"

"Sorry," said Aoth.

"Then how about this? I'll fly back to Threskel and fetch a few dozen of our fellow griffon riders to accompany us on a dragon hunt."

"No," said Aoth. "Someone would likely notice the absence of so many and send word to Tchazzar or Halonya. We three are already taking a big risk just by being gone ourselves."

"Hunting Vairshekellabex and his

wyrmkeepers and whatnot all by ourselves strikes me as a fair-sized risk as well."

"We have Alasklerbanbastos," Cera said, chicken, mushrooms, and chucks of red pepper impaled on the skewer in her hand. "Our own wyrm to pit against the other."

"Right up until the instant he sees a chance to turn on us," Gaedynn said. "Excuse me. I meant, turn on us *again*. I realize that if we go ahead with this, we probably have no choice but to use him as a weapon, but—"

Aoth leaned sideways. Gaedynn realized it was so he could look past him. "Company," the warmage said.

Gaedynn turned. Well dressed in a

wine red taffeta jacket and cambric shirt, a firesoul was striding across the terrace with its scatter of round tables, mosaic floor, and low parapet. The pattern of golden lines on his face was asymmetrical, with more on the right than the left. Gaedynn wondered if it was the genasi equivalent of a birthmark. Whatever it was, the fellow was handsome enough otherwise, with an aristocratic self-assurance to his expression and a swagger in his walk.

Aoth rose and offered his hand. “I believe we met some comrades of yours on our journey to Airspur. The patrol led by Yarel-karn.”

For a moment, Gaedynn wondered how Aoth knew the genasi belonged to

the Firestorm Cabal. Then he noticed the rectangular gold ring on the middle finger, with its dusting of tiny garnets. Some of the riders in the red-coated patrol had worn similar ones, and even at a distance, Aoth's spellscarred eyes had spotted it.

The firesoul blinked. "Really? How are they faring?"

Gaedynn grinned. "Not so badly, thanks to us."

"Then you'll have to tell me the story. But first I'd like to discuss something else." He glanced at an empty chair. "May I?"

"Certainly." Aoth sat back down in his own chair. "Maybe you should start with your name."

“And how you knew to come looking for us,” Gaedynn added, “when we’ve only been in the city half a day.”

“Of course,” said the firesoul. “My name is Mardiz-sul. I’m a Bright Sword in the Cabal.” Gaedynn surmised that was a position of authority. “And I knew you were in Airspur because our fellowship has more friends that most people realize, including some close to the throne.”

In other words, Gaedynn thought, Arathane’s court was as rotten with intrigue as Tchazzar’s.

“Then I assume,” said Aoth, “that you know what was said in our ‘private’ audience with the queen.”

“I do,” said Mardiz-sul.

“And you believe us?” Cera asked.

“Well, sunlady,” the firesoul said, “I’m inclined to. We firestormers flatter ourselves that we know the lands where the attacks occurred better than the army does. And although our scouts and trackers have searched, we haven’t found the hidden trail the dragonborn allegedly used to sneak all the way north from Tymanther and then back home again. But we have heard rumors of a gray dragon. And if it’s really there, I imagine it’s powerful and malicious enough to get up to all sorts of tricks.”

Cera smiled at him. “If you’re leading up to telling us you’ll give us the help we need, then Amaunator bless you today and forevermore.”

Her warmth appeared to make Mardiz-sul uncomfortable. “Ah, thank you, sunlady, truly. But nothing’s decided yet. I believe that Captain Fezim asked for fifty men-at-arms, with the implication being that he would be in command.”

Aoth frowned. “That’s right.”

“I mean no insult, but that’s unacceptable. Firestormers expect to be led by one of their own. I can’t ask them to follow a Thayan with a dubious reputation.”

Gaedynn grinned at Aoth. “Imagine if he had meant to insult you.”

Aoth shot him an irritated glance then turned his luminous blue gaze back on the genasi. “I respect your honesty. I

trust you'll respect mine if I talk to you in the same way."

Mardiz-sul hesitated. "I suppose."

"Can I assume Yarel-karn is well regarded within the Cabal? The rest of you don't think of him as incompetent, a simpleton, or anything like that?"

"No!" said Mardiz-sul. "Of course not." Flame flowed along one of the golden lines on his hand, stopping just short of the ring.

"Well, as Gaedynn mentioned, we helped him and his men. They needed it because he made a mistake no competent professional soldier would make."

"Anyone can make an error," Mardiz-sul replied.

"Anyone who lacks training and

experience," said Aoth. "Does that describe you? I ask because I suspect you mean to command the expedition to kill Vairshekellabex, with the three of us tagging along as guides and advisers."

"I come from a noble family," the genasi said, glowering. "My forefathers were warriors remembered to this day. Naturally my education encompassed the martial arts."

"But I've got a hunch you've never had to apply what you studied," said Aoth. "Not until the army abandoned the settlers in the hinterlands, and that so bothered you that you felt called to join the firestormers."

"And as long as we're talking about training and experience," said Gaedynn,

“let’s not limit the conversation to you and Yarel-karn. I assume the fellows who would accompany us are the firestormers you can gather quickly, the ones here in Airspur as opposed to those already making themselves useful out in the borderlands. Who are they, new recruits? The rawest of the raw and the greenest of the green?”

“You have no right to jeer at us!” said Mardiz-sul. “The Cabal has saved hundreds of lives since it began!”

“I believe it,” said Aoth, his tone conciliatory. “Yarel-karn and his men fought bravely. I’m sure you and the warriors who follow you do the same. My point is simply that you’re not seasoned professionals, and we’re

talking about going after a dragon and its servants. To have a fighting chance, you need to let the two fellows who are professionals apply their skills to best advantage. That means letting me command with Gaedynn as my lieutenant."

"Please," Cera said. "You referred to Aoth's 'dubious reputation.' But if you've heard reports of the war in Threskel, then surely you realize that he and his company were instrumental in Tchazzar's triumph."

Mardiz-sul sighed. "I have heard, sunlady. Those reports, and your holy office, are why I take your story seriously. But still, to entrust my command …" He turned back to Aoth.

“If you’re so certain it would be suicide to follow me, will you simply tell me where to look for Vairshekellabex? Then we firestormers can go fight him by—”

Gaedynn heard a soft scratching sound. “Shut up,” he said.

Mardiz-sul gaped as if no one had ever spoken to him so rudely. His stunned silence enabled Gaedynn to be sure of what he was hearing.

Wishing he were wearing his brigandine, he sprang up from his chair, slung his quiver over his back, and restrung his bow. Instantly following his lead, Aoth jumped up and grabbed his spear. A greenish glimmer flowed along the razor edges of the head.

Cera took only a heartbeat longer to

stand up and grip her gilded mace. She was learning.

Meanwhile, Mardiz-sul gawked at them with all the other diners, tipplers, and servers on the terrace. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Something’s climbing up the outside of the building,” Gaedynn said. “Probably because it isn’t kindly disposed—”

A creature swarmed over the parapet.

Gaedynn had noticed various species of domesticated drakes since coming to Akanûl, but this reptile seemed different. Something about it reminded him of the beasts that had fought alongside Alasklerbanbastos’s troops, the diverse but always ferocious creatures called

dragonspawn.

Whatever it was, it was even bigger than a griffon, with gray scales that gleamed like metal in the sun. It also had a dragon's shape, including the batlike wings. Apparently it had flown in low, below its intended victims' lines of sight, then climbed up the wall in the hope of surprising them.

I'm afraid that didn't work, Gaedynn thought. He nocked, drew, and released, and the shaft plunged into the dragonspawn's serpentine neck.

As he'd expected, that first wound wasn't enough to stop it. Its chest swelled and it cocked its head back, revealing its intention to spit some sort of breath weapon. Gaedynn poised

himself to dodge, then noticed Mardiz-sul's situation. Slow with astonishment, the self-important firestormer was *still* getting up. Which meant that he almost certainly wouldn't be able to evade the incoming blast.

It occurred to Gaedynn that it might not be entirely bad if he didn't. Maybe the next firestormer to come along would be more amenable to reason. But even as the thought flickered through his head, he jumped up onto the table and scrambled across it. He sprang at Mardiz-sul and hurled both the genasi and his seat backward.

He and the firesoul slammed down in a heap, the chair shattering beneath them. At the same instant, the dragonspawn's

head shot forward, and its jaws snapped open.

Whatever streamed out was invisible. But it smashed the table to splinters and the crockery to bits and sent the wreckage flying the length of the terrace.

Gaedynn jumped up off Mardiz-sul, reached for another arrow, and pivoted to put the dragonspawn in front of his bow again. The rooftop was chaos as screaming genasi ran back and forth, either trying to reach the stairs that led down into the inn or simply to put distance between themselves and the beast. Windsouls leaped into the air and flew toward safety.

Gaedynn wished the cursed dragonspawn would fly too because he

was having trouble lining up a shot through the frantic crowd. But the beast stayed on its feet and plowed straight through the genasi, brushing them aside like a top knocking over pins on a game board. Maybe the creature was cunning enough to know they were providing it with cover.

Retreating, Gaedynn managed to drive one arrow into its chest despite the living obstacles in the way. Then he had his back against the parapet, and the dragonspawn was closing fast. Curse it, where was Aoth? Gaedynn snatched for one of his enchanted shafts—

Then he happened to look into the dragonspawn's dull blue, slit-pupil eyes. A shock ran through him, except that,

paradoxically, it was a jolt of dullness and lethargy. He still knew that his only chance was to shoot instantly, yet suddenly his thoughts were muddled, and his hands, numb and slow. He couldn't line up the nock with the string.

The dragonspawn opened its jaws, exposing double rows of jagged fangs. But as it started to reach for him it faltered, then spun around.

The motion revealed Mardiz-sul standing behind it. He'd just cut the dragonspawn's hindquarters with his sword, distracting it, and the blade was still stuck in the wound. As the creature whirled to retaliate, it yanked the hilt from his grip.

It was the genasi's turn to make a

frantic retreat. He thrust out his arms, and his hands burst into flame and burned like torches, but that didn't deter the dragonspawn. It lunged after him anyway.

Fortunately, once the creature had averted its gaze, Gaedynn's half-stupor fell away from him. He drew the arrow back and loosed.

The enchanted shaft hit the reptile at the base of its tail, just to the right of the spot where Mardiz-sul's lost sword was bouncing around. The arrow stabbed all the way into the gray creature's body and disappeared. According to Jhesrhi, who'd evaluated its properties, it should burrow relentlessly onward until it reached a vital spot.

And maybe it did, because after another instant the dragonspawn faltered, flailed, and screeched. But then it darted after Mardiz-sul again. Even if it was mortally wounded, it wasn't ready to flop down and die just yet.

Gaedynn drove another shaft into its rump and yelled in an effort to distract it. It spun around widdershins, and he scrambled in the same direction, keeping ahead of its fangs and claws. He nocked another arrow.

Then Eider plunged down on its back. Gaedynn surmised that Aoth had used his psychic link to call to Jet, and the familiar had brought the other griffon out of their rented roost along with him.

Eider's talons dug into the

dragonspawn's scales. Her beak snapped shut on its neck, and blood spurted around the edges of the bite. The reptile thrashed, trying to shake her off or at least get her into a position where it could bring its natural weapons to bear. Then it collapsed as one or another of its hurts finally caught up with it.

"Good girl!" Gaedynn called to Eider, meanwhile turning and looking for other threats. They weren't hard to find, even though the tunnel vision that often overtook a man fighting for his life had kept him from spotting them until that moment. Aoth, Cera, and Jet hadn't come to his aid because they were fighting two dragonspawn of their own.

One of the creatures was twice as big

as the one Gaedynn, Eider, and Mardizsul had just slain, and Aoth was battling that one by himself. Likely finding it difficult to throw proper spells at close quarters, he simply kept destructive power flowing through his spear, and it flared and crackled whenever he thrust it into his adversary's flesh. Yet despite the punishment he inflicted thereby, the reptile struck at him relentlessly, like a living storm of snapping jaws, raking claws, and hammering wings.

Then it spit its invisible breath weapon, and Aoth jumped aside, but not quite far enough. Gaedynn winced as the stream of power caught the edge of his commander's body and spun him staggering around.

The dragonspawn instantly raised a forefoot high to follow up. Aoth kept turning until he was facing his foe again then dropped to one knee and braced the spear. When the reptile lashed its extremity down, it impaled it on the weapon's point, which punched completely through. The steel triangle blazed. The blood on it bubbled and smoked, and the dragonspawn howled.

Probably because Aoth had told him to, Jet stood between Cera and the smaller of the dragonspawn. He lunged and bit, retreated and ducked, reared on his leonine hind legs and snatched with his talons, fighting savagely. But a griffon was less agile on the ground than in the air, and despite the flying mace the

priestess had conjured to battle alongside him, he had fresh blood on his head and wing where the enormous reptile had clawed him.

"Get your sword," Gaedynn snapped, "then help kill this one." He showed which one he meant by shooting the smaller dragonspawn in the flank. The wound made it falter, and Jet slashed it across the snout with his beak.

Mardiz-sul scurried to retrieve his blade. "The other one's bigger!" he called.

"Trust me!" Gaedynn loosed another shaft then, with a pang of reluctance, set down his bow, reached across his body with both arms, and drew his short swords because it would be too

dangerous to keep shooting at the dragonspawn with Jet, Cera, Mardiz-sul, and Eider all scurrying or flying around it. He was too likely to hit one of them instead.

He and Mardiz-sul charged the dragonspawn together while Eider swooped in overhead. Then Gaedynn fought as Khouryn taught squads of warriors to tackle a big opponent, attacking the reptile whenever its attention was elsewhere and defending whenever it oriented on him. That took focus, but he tried to keep an eye on the firesoul too.

Mardiz-sul had sense enough to evade when he realized the reptile was about to attack him. But he had trouble keeping

track of all its natural weapons. At one point Gaedynn had to bellow, “Left!” The firestormer looked in that direction, saw the tail whipping at him, and dropped low just in time to avoid a broken neck or skull.

Cera’s flying mace blinked out of existence. Chanting, she swept the similar but fully corporeal weapon in her hand over her head in an arc, then, on the final word of her prayer, thrust it at the dragonspawn. Even though Gaedynn wasn’t the target of the spell, he felt a fleeting twinge of fear. The reptile recoiled in sudden panic.

That meant it dropped its guard relative to its other foes, who seized the chance that afforded them. Gaedynn

thrust with one sword, then the other. Eider plunged down on top of the dragonspawn. Her momentum slammed it down on its belly, audibly snapped bones, and left its legs splayed out flat at unnatural angles. Jet pounced and bit away a big piece of its neck.

The reptile was clearly finished, so Gaedynn and Jet both pivoted immediately, orienting on the other fight. At some point, Aoth had evidently managed to cast an actual spell or two because his dragonspawn had burns down the length of its scaly body. It was also thrashing and straining in an effort to break free of the grip of a dozen black tentacles that grew from the mosaic flooring underneath it.

Aoth didn't give it a chance to get loose. He shouted words of power that made Gaedynn's ears ache and spun his spear over his head. The twirl looked like the sort of unnecessary flourish that got fools killed in melee, but since Aoth wasn't a fool—at least where combat was concerned—it was no doubt a part of the spell. He drove the spear in behind the dragonspawn's shoulder, and magic rotted its body to nothing in a heartbeat. The tentacles melted away along with it.

Aoth immediately lowered his left arm. Gaedynn realized it was the same one the dragonspawn's breath had caught. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I think it's out of the socket," Aoth

replied.

"I wish I'd realized. I thought you had things under control."

"I did. I used a tattoo to mask the pain." Aoth looked around. "How's everyone else?"

"How do I look?" Jet rasped. Mardiz-sul jumped. He might have seen griffons up close before, but he'd almost certainly never heard one talk. Jet was unique.

"Scratched," Aoth replied unsympathetically. "Cera, will you attend to the poor maimed chick? Since there's no else who needs it worse."

Gaedynn looked around and saw that it was true. There were no dead or grievously injured bystanders littering

the terrace. It was a final bit of proof that the dragonspawn had been targeting Aoth, Cera, and him, not that he'd had any doubt of it before.

"Well," he said, "now we know that Vairshekellabex has a spy at Arathane's court too."

"Apparently," said Aoth. He turned his gaze on a dragonspawn carcass. "I suppose I'd call those scales gray. But they're a shiny kind of gray."

"Whatever they are," Cera said, "won't this convince the queen that we're telling the truth?"

Gaedynn grinned. "Don't count on it. Remember, we just finished a war where we fought dragons, many of which might well be holding a grudge. If I

wanted to discredit us, I'd simply suggest that our recent troubles followed us to Akanûl."

Mardiz-sul shivered. He'd fought courageously once he got going, but since the threat was past, the fear that he hadn't allowed himself to feel before was nibbling at him. "This is what it's like to fight dragons," he murmured, more to himself than anyone else.

Jet answered anyway, with a screeching laugh. "This is what it's like to fight *dragonspawn*. True wyrms are far more dangerous."

The firestormer swallowed. "Captain, I … suppose we could talk further about how the expedition should be led."

* * * * *

Tchazzar claimed Jhesrhi's gift was a surprise, and so he chattered about everything but the gift as he led her through the War College. He rattled on about his plans to sculpt every remaining natural exterior surface of the fortress into a huge bas-relief celebrating his reign, the preparations for the invasion, salacious stories about Sune and other deities, and a dozen other subjects.

Perhaps he meant it to distract her. But she soon realized they were heading for the dungeons, and a chill crawled up her spine. Did he still suspect her of helping Khouryn to escape? Was he taking her back to the scene of the

offense in the hope that she'd do something incriminating? Or had he already made up his mind that she was guilty and decided to punish her in the same place where she'd betrayed him?

Her fingers tightened on her staff, and the presence inside it stirred at the prospect of a fight, idiotically so, for the fire in which it delighted would be useless against a red dragon, whose own nature partook of flame. Even if Tchazzar were a wyrm of a different breed, it would be insanely optimistic to think that she could prevail against such a creature by herself.

The war hero spoke the password that Shala had taught her, then led her down the stairs. The door swung open before

them, seemingly of its own accord, and the guards in their alcove leaped up and saluted when their sovereign came into view. In his haste, one overturned his chair, and it clattered on the floor.

Instead of conducting Jhesrhi down the next flight of stairs, to the level where she'd found Khouryn and fought the wyrmkeepers, Tchazzar ushered her into the stench and muddled noise of the cells crammed full of prisoners. She felt some of the tension quiver out of her muscles and tried not to let her relief show in her face.

The captives fell silent as they spotted Tchazzar and her. "Do you know who these wretches are?" he asked.

As was often the case when she

responded to him, she tried to frame an answer warily but quickly, so he wouldn't notice any hesitation. "Folk accused of crimes against either the Crown or your Church. Against you either way."

Tchazzar grinned. "Mostly right but not completely. One is accused of crimes against you."

She blinked. "What?"

"You'll see." He waved her down a branching corridor. The cells along the sides were dark and empty, except for one halfway down on the left.

The wavering yellow light of the torch burning in a wall sconce revealed a pale, flabby, white-haired man lying facedown in dirty straw. Someone had

torn away most of his clothing, the better to flog his back to scabby ribbons oozing pus.

"Show your face," Tchazzar said. "Quickly! Or I'll order the inquisitors to slice away something else."

Cringing, the old man lifted his head, and Jhesrhi understood what the dragon meant. Like his back, the prisoner's mouth and chin were filthy with dried blood, and his jaws and neck were swollen with infection. Someone had cut out his tongue. Despite all the wounds and brutality she'd seen on the battlefield, Jhesrhi felt a little queasy.

Tchazzar studied her face then, sounding slightly irritated, asked, "Don't you recognize him?"

“No,” Jhesrhi said. “Should I?”

“Most people would think so. He’s your father.”

She caught her breath. “What?”

“Your father,” the dragon repeated. “The coward who mistreated his own helpless child for years and then finally gave her to the elemental mages to save his worthless life.”

Back in Impiltur, Jhesrhi had dreaded the prospect of returning to Chessenta, but not because she’d expected to encounter her parents. For some reason, perhaps simply because it was easier to assume it, she’d imagined that they must be dead. She studied the prisoner’s bloody face and still couldn’t recognize the merchant who’d been ashamed of her

arcane gifts and beaten her whenever he caught her experimenting with them. But maybe she shouldn't expect to, not when she'd struggled for years to forget him, and age, dread, and suffering had altered him. He looked back at her with wide, bewildered eyes.

"What about my mother?" she asked.

"Dead," Tchazzar said. "But at least this one lived long enough to face retribution." He snapped his fingers, and the cell door unlocked itself and swung open. "Crawl out," he told her father. "Kiss the feet of the daughter you betrayed."

During her years of slavery, Jhesrhi had sometimes fantasized about subjecting that man to the same tortures

her hulking captors used on travelers who fell into her hands. But as she stood there, the thought of his groveling before her made her sick to her stomach. “That isn’t necessary,” she said.

“Of course,” Tchazzar said. He looked back to the old man. “She doesn’t want your filthy lips on her. But you will crawl.”

“Please, no,” she said. “Truly, none of it is necessary.”

Tchazzar frowned at her. “I thought this would delight you.”

She took a breath, trying to compose herself and respond in a way that would appease him. “I know you did, Majesty, and I’m grateful. It’s just that this is … well, a shock.”

“I suppose so,” Tchazzar said. “But we agreed that in some cases, giving justice to those with arcane abilities requires more than reparations. Those who raped, maimed, and murdered them must suffer in their turns. So why not start with the creature who wronged the foremost wizard in the realm?”

Jhesrhi shook her head. “I … envisioned it being done in the usual way. With courts and trials.”

“Flame and blood, woman, you told me the truth, didn’t you? And is the lord god of Chessenta obliged to seek permission from a magistrate or a jury before taking action?”

“No, Majesty. Of course not.”

“I’m glad to hear you say so. So deal

with this piece of dung. At the very least, you must want to berate him, spit on him, or give him a kick."

She supposed that maybe a part of her did, and even if not, some token abuse might placate Tchazzar and bring the dizzying, surreal moment to an end. She stepped into the cell doorway.

"How could you do it?" she asked. "Even if you were terrified that the giants would kill you, Mother, and everybody else in the caravan, even if you were certain I was tainted, I was your daughter and I loved you!"

He tried to answer, but she couldn't understand the gurgling, croaking sounds that came from his ruined mouth.

Then she realized how odd it was that

Tchazzar had deprived the old man of the power of speech and so denied her the chance to have a true conversation with him and understand his pleas for mercy. In fact, she could only think of one reason he would have done it. She scrutinized the prisoner's face again, and then she was certain.

She turned. "Majesty, this isn't my father." She knew even as she spoke that she shouldn't say it, but Tchazzar's ruse had so roiled her emotions that she couldn't hold back.

He frowned. "Of course it is. Do you think your god could be mistaken?"

Upset as she still was, she made more effort to choose her next words carefully. "No, but Your Majesty has

fallible mortal servants. I assume you gave one of them the task of finding my father."

"Well, yes," Tchazzar said. "Shala Karanok. Apparently I can't trust the ugly sow with even the simplest task." Jhesrhi felt sure that Shala had had nothing to do with it. "But I can correct her mistake."

With that, the Red Dragon narrowed his slanted, amber eyes and pressed his fingertips to his temples. Jhesrhi didn't know if he was actually attempting some sort of mystical feat or merely pretending to, but since she didn't sense any telltale stirring of magical energy, she suspected the latter.

Tchazzar held the pose for a few

heartbeats then let out a breath and smiled. “There,” he said and paused.

He was clearly waiting for Jhesrhi to ask, “ ‘There’ what?” So she did.

“Your father was dead. But I fished his soul out of the Nine Hells and placed it in this cringing carcass before us. Now you can deal with him as you see fit.”

Jhesrhi wondered if Tchazzar truly expected her to believe his bizarre assertion. She wondered if he truly believed it himself.

Whether he did or not, she couldn’t abuse the prisoner, whoever he was, any further. It just wasn’t in her. She took a breath and said, “In that case, Majesty, I pardon him.”

Tchazzar scowled. “What?”

“I agree that we with arcane gifts deserve justice. You’ve heard me assert it myself. But my father hurt me a long time ago. And you’re trying to create a Chessenta where everyone lives in harmony, not one where the persecuted and the persecutors merely switch roles. So let me set an example by forgiving.”

“If that’s what you truly want.” Tchazzar snapped his fingers, and the cell door clanged shut. “The turnkeys will release him in due course. Let’s get out of this dismal hole.”

They walked back past the cells stuffed full of prisoners. Hoping to repair whatever damage to their relationship she might have done,

Jhesrhi said, “I do appreciate what you did for me. Truly.”

“Show me,” Tchazzar growled. He pivoted, grabbed her by the forearm, jerked her into an embrace, and planted his mouth on hers. Although her staff gave her a measure of protection against flame, she could still feel that his lips and probing tongue were blistering hot.

He’d caught her by surprise, and once again, although she knew how she should respond, she couldn’t control her revulsion. As she strained to pull away from him, it was all she could do to curb the impulse to knee him in the groin or resort to one of the other wrestling tricks Aoth had taught her.

Tchazzar was stronger than she was,

and for a moment, it seemed that he wasn't going to let her escape. Then his arms opened all at once. She reeled backward and banged her shoulders against the iron bars at the front of one of the cells. One of the prisoners on the other side yelped as if it meant something terrible was going to happen to them.

"I'm sorry," Jhesrhi panted, fighting the urge to scour her lips with her sleeve. "You startled me."

"That night in the orchard," Tchazzar said, "I thought we were making progress. But now it seems like nothing's changed."

"It has," Jhesrhi said. "It is. It's just that, like I told you, I need time."

“And I gave it to you,” the dragon said. “But be careful it doesn’t run out.”

* * * * *

Medrash, Balasar, and Khouryn stood at the rail of the carrack and watched the three Chessentan warships sail out of the north. They were still tiny with distance but not as tiny as they’d been.

Unsteady on her feet—she hadn’t acquired her sea legs yet—Vishva approached. Brown-scaled, with puckered scars on her face where she’d worn her piercings before her clan cast her out for the disgrace of dragon worship, she was one of the Platinum Cadre’s officers and the person who’d begged Medrash to purge her and her

fellow cultists of Tiamat's influence.

"Are they going to catch us?" she asked.

"I doubt it," Medrash said, "and if they do, we'll make them wish they hadn't."

"Glad to hear it." Vishva bobbed her head and opened her arms slightly then moved off.

"I'd really rather the Chessentans not intercept us," said Khouryn, keeping his voice low. "They've got us outnumbered, and I never got around to training your fellows to fight on shipboard."

It still seemed strange to Medrash to hear the Cadre warriors referred to as his, in any sense. Adhering to the

common prejudice, his own clan elders had raised him to despise wyrms and those who revered them; thus he'd taken command of the cultists with reluctance. But a good deal had happened since then, and he didn't feel the same disdain anymore.

"I wonder if our weather witch can do any more," Khouryn continued, glancing in Biri's direction.

The white-scaled wizard stood near the stern, where both masts and sails were in front of her. She stared at them and chanted, mostly whispering, but sometimes raising her voice to a howl. At those moments, she accompanied her incantation with sweeps and jabs of a wand that was evidently solid to the

touch but looked like a spindly, gray wisp of cloud.

"She's doing as much as anyone could," Balasar said. "She explained to me that she's having to force the winds to blow contrary to their natural inclination."

"I don't doubt her ability," Khouryn said. "But I still wish Jhesrhi were here."

"I don't know that I can help her," Medrash said. "I've never done anything comparable before. But I'm going to give it a try. Excuse me."

He looked around for a clear section of deck. Clear, of course, was a relative term in the cramped confines of a troop ship, with the sheets running every

which way, mariners scrambling around to accomplish their various tasks, and everyone else gawking at the oncoming Chessentan vessels. But toward the bow and to starboard, on the opposite side from the enemy, there was a strip of space that should do.

He walked there, stood in the center, and took a breath, centering himself. Then he snatched his broadsword from its scabbard and stepped forward. He cut to the head, spun back around, parried an imaginary thrust to the heart, and riposted. It was a training dance, one intended to prepare a swordsman who might someday have to fight in a tight little alleyway or tunnel.

The final move of the dance was to

sheathe one's sword. Medrash did so and reviewed his performance. He assumed the ready position then grabbed for his blade again.

As he danced the brief dance—it was only twelve moves all together—repeatedly, he turned, struck, and parried faster and faster. His focus sharpened and narrowed until he was acutely aware of his own body and weapon, his phantom attackers, the equally hypothetical walls hemming him in on either side, and nothing else. A kind of exultation overtook him.

Many warriors and athletes knew that pure, primal feeling. Maybe other sorts of folk, musicians and craftsmen, perhaps, experienced something similar

when they practiced their particular skills. Medrash couldn't say. But he did know that for the god-touched, the exhilaration could serve as a gateway to something grander still.

He didn't perceive Torm's presence all at once. It wasn't that the god was being coy, but rather that Medrash's exertions were gradually heightening his awareness. And even when he became entirely cognizant and executed the last three actions of the dance for the final time, he didn't truly see the deity. But he had a sense of the Loyal Fury as a dragonborn warlord taller than the tallest giant and made of golden light, looming over the ship with a greatsword canted casually over his shoulder.

Even as he caught his breath, Medrash recognized another presence too. A silvery, wedge-shaped head at the top of a serpentine neck towered even higher than Torm, the better, perhaps, to see past him.

Medrash wasn't altogether surprised. The Loyal Fury, who'd rescued a weak, timid child from misery and humiliation, would always be his patron deity. But as poor Patrin had tried to teach him, Torm and Bahamut were comrades, and the latter, too, had occasionally helped Medrash in what he now understood to be his struggle against Tiamat, the Platinum Dragon's archenemy, and her minions.

And he evidently meant to help now.

It made sense, for one of Bahamut's titles was Lord of the North Wind.

Medrash raised his sword in a salute and opened himself to whatever gift the dragon god might choose to give. Nostrils flaring, Bahamut sucked in a breath. His jaws snapped open, and he spewed it forth again.

Intense cold and a sense of relentless pressure stabbed into the core of Medrash's body, or perhaps his soul. He cried out, staggered, and grabbed a sheet to keep from falling but not because the sensation was painful. Somehow it wasn't. It was simply overwhelming.

Balasar and Khouryn came scurrying. Medrash raised his hand to signal that he was all right. He looked up again, but as

his instincts had already told him, Torm and Bahamut had vanished as soon as they finished bestowing their blessing.

Since they were no longer present to receive his thanks, he strode to Biri. Though it still wasn't painful, the power pent up inside him turned, tumbled, pushed, swelled, and generally sought release. He felt as if he'd swallowed a tornado or a beehive.

Though intent on her magic, Biri spotted him coming from the corner of her eye. She recited a tercet, bobbed the wand of cloudstuff on the rhyming word at the end of each line as though she counting three of something, and that apparently brought her to a point where she could safely take a break. Breathing

heavily, she turned and gave him an inquiring look.

"I think I can make your magic stronger," he said. "I've received a gift of power to pass along."

"Divine power?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "but the gods know who you are and what you do. I think that when it transfers to you, it will come in a form you can use."

"I'm game," she said. "What do we do?"

"You face the sails just like before, and I'll rest my hands on your shoulders." He grinned. "Although it may make Balasar jealous."

"Really?" she asked, and for that moment she sounded like a hopeful,

love-struck maiden, not a battle-seasoned adept in the midst of an arduous task.

"Really," he said. He waved toward the masts. "Shall we?"

The hard part was letting the power flow a bit at a time. It wanted to blast and scream out like a winter gale, but Medrash suspected that Biri wouldn't be able to handle it if it came to her all at once. As it was, she cried out as he had, and her knees buckled. He shifted his grip to her forearms so he could hold her up.

Until she planted her feet underneath her and said, "It's all right. No, better than all right."

When she resumed her chant, her high,

melodious voice was the same as before, yet different. It had an undertone to it that at various moments reminded Medrash of the whistle of the wind or a dragon's roar. He suspected that he was hearing it less with the ears of the flesh than with those of the spirit.

The sails bellied as a stronger, steadier wind filled them. Sailors called out to one another and scrambled to make the most of it.

Lost in a sort of half trance, Medrash couldn't tell how long it took him to drain away Bahamut's gift completely. But when he had, he looked around. The Chessentan warships were so far to the northwest that he could barely even make them out.

Exhausted, he slumped down where he stood. Biri did the same and flopped back against him. Her head lolled and after a moment she snored a tiny gurgling snore.

* * * * *

Halonya's heart pounded as she and her escort—a quintet of warriors oath bound to the church—headed for the imposing, gilded double doors at the end of the corridor. Maybe that was foolish, for the god had summoned her many times before, and sometimes every bit as late. But on those occasions, it had always been to attend him in some throne room or counsel chamber, not his private apartments.

She would have liked to stop and make sure her miter, vestments, and necklaces were straight, maybe even pinch a dash of extra color into her cheeks. But of course, she couldn't. Not in front of her escort and the royal guards bracketing the golden doors. When in public, the high priestess of the god of gods had to comport herself with stately dignity. She couldn't primp like some empty-headed wench.

One of the two sentries opened the gilded doors for her. "The wyrmlady is here, Your Majesty," he said.

"Send her in," said Tchazzar's voice. The rich, deep tones sent a thrill singing through her, perhaps even more than usual.

“Stay here,” she told her guards. She entered the outermost chamber, a spacious room where she and five or ten other guests had sometimes shared a supper or a bard’s performance with their lord, then gasped. For an instant, she felt light-headed.

That was because it was apparent that Tchazzar was wearing a robe of crimson silk and nothing else. He hadn’t even bothered to close it well or knot the sash particularly tightly.

By Lady Firehair’s sweet, stinging lash, was it really happening? Halonya had told herself she didn’t even want it. That their sacred bond as god and priestess was more wonderful than any fleeting carnal connection could ever be.

That she in no way resented the endless parade of sluts he took to his bed. But still, was it?

"I apologize for calling for you so late," said Tchazzar, seemingly oblivious to her emotional agitation. "Would you care for some wine?"

She swallowed. "Yes, Majesty."

He moved to one of the tables and filled a pair of golden goblets from the carafe. "And would you like to talk on the terrace? It's nice on these summer nights."

She was sure it would be, in the dark, with the lights of the city below them and the moon and stars above. It would be the kind of place where a man took a woman when he wanted to court her—

not that Halonya had any experience with such matters. Looking back, she could see how even from her youngest days, destiny had set her steps on a higher path.

"That would be fine," she said.

Tchazzar smiled, handed her one of the cups, opened the casement, and led her out onto the balcony. He seated her across from him at a table, and they pledged one another. The wine was an Aglarondan red of which he was fond, tart at the instant it touched the tongue but then somehow flowering into sweetness.

"I want to talk to you about Jhesrhi," he said.

For a heartbeat Halonya could make

no sense of what he'd said, or perhaps, she imagined, she hadn't heard him correctly. Then a jolt of disappointment made her body clench.

She reminded herself again that she was the head of Tchazzar's clergy, and that was not only enough; it was more than any other mortal could ever possess. She took a breath, let it out, and said, "What about Lady Jhesrhi, Majesty? I've been trying to treat her like my friend and your loyal deputy, just as you told me to do."

Tchazzar smiled. "Even though it's contrary to your inclinations."

"Majesty, I swear to you—"

The Red Dragon raised his hand. "Please, Daughter. I wasn't doubting

you. Or scolding you. I was leading up to saying that I'm starting to wonder if perhaps you actually do see something in Jhesrhi Coldcreek that I haven't permitted myself to see."

Halonya's lingering feelings of bitterness and humiliation fell away. He had given her an opening, an opportunity! But she had to proceed carefully. She was sure that, even if he was finally experiencing a moment of clarity, Tchazzar's infatuation with the golden witch hadn't faded away entirely.

"Has something happened?" she asked.

Tchazzar snorted. "It's more what hasn't happened."

Halonya hesitated. "I don't

understand."

"Well, let's put it this way. I'm a god, am I not?"

"The greatest of gods," Halonya replied.

"And the monarch of a splendid realm. I raised Lady Coldcreek up to be one of the two most powerful personages at my court. I ended the persecution of the arcanists, and thus, she told me, granted her fondest wish. And yet …"

"What, Majesty?"

"There's still a … reserve in her. Something that makes her hold herself aloof. Mind you, she explained to me early on that she has a defect in her spirit, a flaw that makes her different

from others, and I believe it. But sometimes it doesn't feel like she's trying to climb over the wall. It feels like she's sheltering behind it."

Halonya still wasn't sure what Tchazzar was actually talking about. But whatever the source of his doubts, she wanted to encourage them. Her first impulse was to do so by pointing out that, like all wizards, Jhesrhi was demon touched. Unfortunately Tchazzar probably wouldn't agree. He hadn't *only* freed Chessenta's arcanists to please the wretched sellsword. He truly did believe they were basically the same as everybody else. Halonya might someday be able to persuade him away from that dangerously generous viewpoint, but it

would be shrewder to attack the immediate problem in another way.

"Majesty, even the humblest of your subjects owes you love, loyalty, and gratitude. And considering all that you've done for Jhesrhi Coldcreek, her debt is even greater. If she isn't willing to pay it … well, even I, your prophetess, find that hard to understand."

Tchazzar took a long drink from his cup. "It isn't just the one thing I knew from the start would be difficult. Does the bitch even know how to smile? I granted her a miracle tonight. I threw open the door between life and death, even though Cousin Kelemvor wept and begged me to forbear, just to give her a gift that no one else in all the worlds

could have given. And it meant nothing to her."

Halonya shook her head. "Again, I have to say I have no idea how any of your children could be so ungrateful."

Tchazzar eyed her. "Really? Aren't you the one who tried to convince me repeatedly that Jhesrhi is a traitor? That she helped Khouryn Skulldark escape and all the rest of it?"

Halonya drew breath to say yes, then thought again that it might be counterproductive to push too hard. "Your Majesty commanded me to put all such suspicions out of my head."

"Yes. Because, despite what I've just told you, Jhesrhi … well, she's done glorious things for me."

Halonya assumed she knew what one of the "glorious things" was. Jhesrhi had rushed to Tchazzar's aid when Alasklerbanbastos had him at a disadvantage. She would have liked to know what the others were too, but the living god didn't discuss them. It was a mark of his distress that he'd even alluded to them.

But whatever had happened in the interval between the moment when Jhesrhi and Gaedynn Ulraes first encountered Tchazzar and the day the Red Dragon returned to his people, Halonya could see his mood altering in its sudden, unpredictable way, his mind shying away from hurt feelings and suspicion. Fearful that her chance was

likewise slipping away, she said, “I’m grateful for any good thing the wizard has ever done for Your Majesty. But can we be sure that means she’s loyal *today?* She’s a sellsword. You’re a warlord and understand such folk better than I ever could, but isn’t it necessary to buy their loyalty again and again and again?”

Tchazzar frowned. “I hoped that Jhesrhi was shaped of purer clay.”

“I pray you’re right,” Halonya said. “But I fear what could happen if you’re not. Especially now, when some undead horror has sneaked into your palace itself and you’re about to start another war.”

“You have a point. There are so many

players, working on so many levels. Any of them—" He caught himself, as if he'd been on the brink of saying something he shouldn't. "The dragonborn, that is, and the remaining renegades in Threskel."

"I understand," Halonya said, although she wasn't sure it was true.

"But I can't move against Jhesrhi unless I have proof she's disloyal," Tchazzar continued. "And it's not just because I love her, although that's part of it, of course. I've always believed that you and she are the two halves of my luck, my sister Tymora's double gift to me. And anyone who spurns such a blessing without cause trades good fortune for bad."

"Your Majesty is wise as always. But

I beg you to consider that when you have doubts about Jhesrhi, that, too, is your wisdom coming out."

Tchazzar smiled a crooked smile. It was a cast of expression Halonya almost never saw on his long, amber-eyed face, seemingly reflective of a wry, self-aware amusement. "But if my instincts tug me in opposite directions, where does that leave me?"

"It leaves you with the need to test which feeling is the true one. I confess I've done my best to keep an eye on Jhesrhi. I didn't tell you because I was afraid it would anger you, and the need to go behind your back limited what I could do. But if you now agree that someone should watch her …" Halonya

spread her hands.

Tchazzar nodded. “Then we can watch her properly.”

“There’s something else,” Halonya said. “If Lady Jhesrhi is disloyal, then it stands to reason that Aoth Fezim and his company are too, and probably committing treason up in Threskel.” She remembered the Thayan gripping her forearm from behind, the threat of his spear and his magic, and she had to clamp down on a spasm of loathing to keep her voice steady. “I think you should check on them as well.”

FIVE

15–19 Eleasis, the Year of the Ageless One

Aoth studied the drake riders on the rocky ridge below. One outrider was too close to the column. The other had strayed too far away. He suppressed a sigh.

But he shouldn't have bothered because Jet still heard the sigh inside his

head. “It’ll be a marvel if they make it another day,” the griffon rasped.

“Some of them can handle a crossbow or a spear,” Aoth replied. He’d run his new command through a few tests and drills before departing Airspur, less in the hope of improving their skills at such a late date than to assess what he had to work with. “Some have elemental tricks that may prove useful. And some have been in these mountains before.”

“They’re still in over their heads,” said Jet. “Especially when you consider that, judging by what happened back in the city, Vairshekellabex knows we’re coming.”

“At least the company’s not likely to be ambushed.” Aoth felt a twinge of

humor at his own expense. He didn't think of himself as optimistic by nature, but Jet could be so relentlessly dour that it provoked a fellow into arguing the opposing point of view. "Not with you, me, Gaedynn, and Eider in the air."

Jet grunted. "The column's stopping."

And so it was. The riders at the head had reined in their mounts, the better, perhaps, to confer. After a moment, Cera looked up and waved her mace in the air. The gilded weapon gleamed in the sunlight.

Aoth looked around, found Gaedynn, and held up his hand to signal him to stay in the air. The Aglarondan acknowledged the order with a casual wave. Then Jet swooped toward the

firestormers.

Drakes hissed and shied as the griffon touched down. It pleased Aoth to see that Cera didn't have any more trouble controlling her mount than most of the genasi. She'd said she needed a break from being carried around like a sack of flour, and she was evidently getting the hang of managing a reptilian steed.

"So," said Yemere, "our august captain condescends to descend and mingle with his underlings."

Yemere was a skinny, slouching fellow with a petulant cast to his features, a silvery-skinned windsoul but, in Aoth's estimation, much like his friend Mardiz-sul nonetheless. Both were young aristocrats, drawn to the

Firestorm Cabal by idealism and a thirst for adventure—or what they imagined adventure would be—and granted a measure of authority despite their inexperience. No doubt it was hard to deny rank to a nobleman, especially if he offered to pay for rations, weapons, mounts, and other necessities.

The major difference between them was that Yemere hadn't fought a dragon or dragonspawn yet and hadn't had any of the arrogance kicked out of him. Aoth wouldn't have minded attending to that chore himself. But there were times when it was better for a captain to ignore insolence, lest he appear thin skinned or malicious. And now when he was still trying to win the trust and good

will of the firestormers might be one of them.

So he simply asked, “Why are we stopping?” His fire-kissed eyes notwithstanding, it wasn’t impossible that folk on the ground had noticed something he hadn’t spotted from the air. Although even now that he was down here with them, he still didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

It was Mardiz-sul who answered. “Son-liin thinks we should turn off onto another path.”

Like Zan-akar Zeraez and Arathane, Son-liin was essentially a stormsoul. Unlike them, she had some affinity with the elemental force of earth as well as lightning. Some of the lines that ran

through her purple skin were gold instead of silver, and so were the translucent crystalline spikes that took the place of hair.

That likely meant she knew an extra trick or two. But at the moment, it was her knowledge of the Akanapeaks that interested Aoth. Though still an adolescent and small—in her brigandine, with a lance in her hand and a quiver on her back, she looked like a little girl playing warrior—she was one of the few firestormers in the band who'd grown up in the mountains and, with her father, a trapper and prospector, wandered them extensively. It had been a stroke of good fortune that led her to Airspur at just the right

moment to join the expedition.

She smiled as though attention embarrassed her. Meanwhile, her drake, a breed with black- and green-pebbled skin, twisted its head, tracking a dragonfly as long as Aoth's hand. The reptile's long, pink tongue shot out, slapped the insect, stuck to it, and snatched it into its mouth. The drake slobbered as it crunched the morsel up, and Aoth felt Jet's flicker of amusement.

"Up ahead," Son-liin said, "there's a trail that leads down into a valley. If we take it, we can reach the Old Man's Head a day or two sooner."

The Old Man's Head was the mountain where Vairshekellabex probably laired. If not, his refuge was at

least in the vicinity. Or so Alasklerbanbastos had maintained.

"Why didn't you mention this route before?" asked Aoth.

"Because I didn't know what the weather would be like," Son-liin said. "It's not a path you want to be on if it storms. A flashflood can sweep you away. But now we're here, and it's not going to rain."

Aoth suspected she knew because she was a stormsoul. He wasn't, but like any commander worth his pay, he'd learned to read the weather, and he agreed with her assessment. The clear blue sky showed no signs of clouding up anytime soon.

"I'm against this," said Yemere. "We

made a plan. We should stick to it."

"Moving over these peaks and ridges," said Mardiz-sul, "we can be seen from a long way off."

"But if we're going through a valley," replied Yemere, "an enemy could easily get above us."

"Don't worry about that," rasped Jet, startling a fresh round of hisses out of the drakes. "Those of us in the air will spot any threat before it can come within a mile."

"Still," said Yemere.

Mardiz-sul turned to Aoth. "What do you think?"

Aoth thought that it would be nice to consult Alasklerbanbastos about the best way to approach the Old Man's Head,

but it wasn't feasible. He hadn't even told the genasi about the dracolich yet, and they needed a decision.

"We'll take Son-liin's path," he said. Why not? She was the one who knew the Akanapeaks, and Jet was right that the griffon riders should still be able to spot any potential problem from a long way off.

Yemere scowled as though the folly of his companions verged on the unbelievable.

"Let's get them moving again," said Mardiz-sul. He urged his drake into motion and rode down the column to give direction to the warriors who, when their leaders halted to palaver, had climbed down off their mounts to stretch

their legs.

Aoth smiled at Cera. “Want to fly for a while? Someone can lead your drake.”

“No, thanks. I’m enjoying myself down here, and I suspect Jet is enjoying not having to carry double.”

The familiar grunted. “As his females go, you’re more tolerable than some.”

Cera grinned. “High praise indeed.”

It took only a little longer to reach a narrow, branching trail that switchbacked down a mountainside into shadow. Aoth watched with a certain amount of trepidation as the drake riders headed down one at a time. But the reptiles were more surefooted than horses, and they reached the shallow, brown creek at the bottom of the gorge

without so much as a stumble.

Then they trekked on southward, plodding over sand and smooth, round stones, splashing through the rippling current, and bounding over the occasional tangle of driftwood or whole fallen tree deposited by one flood or another. Sometimes Aoth and Jet flew high enough to survey the tops of the cliffs that towered to either side of the brook. Sometimes they swooped to see what was lurking on the ledges and in the crannies lower down. Gaedynn and Eider did the same and surprised a goat. The skirmisher put an arrow in it, landed on the outcropping where it lay, and quickly dressed the carcass before returning to his proper task.

Aoth would have done the same, had he been the one to come across some game, because so far the way seemed safe enough.

But after another half mile of twisting canyon, that changed when, for a heartbeat or two, a smear of blue glimmer flowed across a barren scarp like a luminous fish swimming beneath a sheet of ice. Aoth raised two fingers to his mouth, used them to whistle, and pointed with his spear. Gaedynn looked, then turned to Aoth and shook his head to indicate that he couldn't see anything unusual.

Aoth pointed to the top of the cliff to the east. Jet furled his wings and swooped in that direction, and Eider

followed him down. Once they landed, their riders could talk without shouting over the distance that flying steeds needed to maintain between themselves.

Gaedynn swung himself out of the saddle and started slicing pieces of raw, bloody goat meat off the carcass he'd tied behind it. "What's going on?" he asked.

"For a moment I saw blue fire inside the mountainside," Aoth replied.

Gaedynn tossed a piece of goat to Eider, and the griffon snapped it out of the air. "How in the name of the Black Bow did I miss that?"

"You needed spellscarred eyes to see it," Aoth replied, stretching. His spine popped. "Maybe it was more like the

memory of blue fire."

Gaedynn tossed the other piece of meat to Jet. Perhaps thinking it beneath his dignity to catch it in his beak, the griffon reared and snatched it with his talons. "And what does that mean exactly?" the bowman asked.

"There was a time when this whole kingdom existed in another place. Then the Spellplague picked it up and dumped it in Faerûn. If the … disruptions were that strong here, it makes sense that there are traces of them left."

"I suppose," Gaedynn said, "but are we marching into genuine plagueland or not?"

Aoth peered as far down the canyon as he could, looking for any hint of blue

mist or earth and rock oozing like candle wax. Everything appeared all right. “It doesn’t look like it,” he said. “I’d guess the area’s no worse than the Umber Marshes.”

Gaedynn grinned. “Now that’s encouraging.”

Aoth smiled back. “Isn’t it? But Son-liin says that as long as it doesn’t rain, the gorge is safe. And the only alternative to moving ahead is miles of backtracking and a hard climb back up onto the ridge.”

The archer shrugged. “Son-liin strikes me as a reliable sort.”

“Forward it is, then.”

They strapped themselves back in their saddles, and the griffons sprang

into the air. In time, Aoth spotted another fleeting blue gleam in another cliff face, as if the brown, striated stone were a mirror reflecting a flash of azure light. But nothing else happened as a result.

Standing on a neighboring peak, long armed, round shouldered, and barrel chested, a lone hill giant watched the griffon riders pass overhead. Aoth considered making contact to ask the hulking savage about the region but then decided not to bother. The giant would probably start throwing stones the instant a human came within range and might not speak any language but his own.

Then the column stopped. Cera brandished her mace. As before, Aoth left Gaedynn in the air while he

swooped down to find out what was going on. “What is it?” he asked as, wings snapping, Jet settled on a tongue of granite protruding from the base of the eastern cliff.

“She doesn’t know,” said Mardiz-sul. He was trying not to sound impatient but not quite succeeding.

Aoth smiled at Cera. “I imagine you know *something,”* he said.

“Not really,” she replied. “But … you understand that Amaunator is the great timekeeper. Night follows day and spring passes into summer because he makes it so.”

“Right,” said Aoth. He had some firsthand experience with her god’s connection to time. But he had no idea

why she was bringing it up at that moment.

"As his priestess," Cera said, "I sometimes feel it as the wheels turn. As some natural cycle is reaching its culmination."

"What does that mean?" asked Mardiz-sul. For an instant blue light rippled through the water flowing around his drake's four-toed feet.

"In this situation?" she replied. "I don't know."

But suddenly Aoth thought he might. "I once traveled all the way to the Lake of Steam," he said, speaking quickly. "Heard of it?"

Mardiz-sul shrugged. "Vaguely."

"They have hot springs there … and

geysers. Boiling water that shoots up out of the ground. And with a few of them, it happens at very regular intervals." Aoth turned back to Cera. "Could you sense something like that?"

She frowned. "I've never seen a 'geyser,' but perhaps."

"I don't see the relevance," said Mardiz-sul, waving his lance at their surroundings. "This creek is cold."

"True," said Aoth, "but there's still spellplague festering in the ground. Mostly it's too weak to cause any trouble. But over time, the power builds up until there's too much. And then some of it sprays out like a geyser. I think that's about to happen now."

"How could you possibly know that?"

asked Mardiz-sul.

"You're a brother to fire," Aoth said. "And I've got a little spellplague burning inside of me." He pointed to his eyes.

"What will happen?" asked Son-liin.

Aoth shook his head. "There's no way to predict."

"Then what we do? Run?"

"No. It's too late to get clear. We just have to be ready for anything." Aoth raised his voice: "Everyone, ready your weapons! If you know any protective charms, cast them!"

Cera started praying and swinging her mace over her head. The sunlight grew warmer. After a moment's hesitation, some of the genasi muttered their own

incantations. Ruddy hands flicked up and down in a manner that suggested leaping flame and sketched trails of fire in the air. Breezes gusted and the stream gurgled louder than before.

Then everybody waited while blue light flickered through the creek and the granite walls, the pulses coming faster and faster. The sight of them made Aoth's mouth go dry and his guts queasy. He'd been caught in a storm of blue fire on the day the Spellplague began and watched his fellow legionnaires die by the score. And though he'd faced a thousand foes in the century since, he'd always avoided a second encounter with that particular danger. Until now.

"Well?" asked Mardiz-sul, still blind

to the power flaring all around him. “Is anything happening?”

Aoth opened his mouth to say yes, then saw he wouldn’t have to. Blue mist swirled into existence all along the canyon, or at least for as far as he could see. The genasi cried out and the drakes shrieked at its dank and somehow filthy touch. Aoth felt Jet’s spasm of revulsion and the way he had to clench himself not to take flight immediately and climb above the nasty stuff.

The touch of chaos made some of the stones in the creek bed catch fire. Others rattled together with a sound like chattering teeth. Water heaved itself high and crashed down like waves rolling in from a stormy sea.

Cera continued to pray. The air grew warmer again. The blue fog thinned as if the sun overhead were burning it away.

When the vapor was nearly gone, Mardiz-sul sighed and slumped forward. “Thank Kossuth. And Amaunator too.”

But as the last of the vapor dissipated, a kind of glare shot through it, and blue light flared in the eyes of the drakes. For an instant, Aoth had the crazy feeling that he was looking at his own deformed face in a cracked mirror, as though some mage had disfigured him with a curse and he hadn’t even known.

Some reptiles screeched, reared, or tried to bolt. Two others fell, convulsing. One of the riders, a windsoul, floated up out of the saddle,

but the other, a watersoul, couldn't slip his feet out of the stirrups and jump clear in time. As his thrashing steed rolled back and forth, it ground him beneath its bulk.

Meanwhile, Mardiz-sul's drake bucked and flipped him into the stream. Then it reared onto its hind legs and grew until cinches snapped, and its saddle, halter, and reins fell away. Its forelegs appeared to wither, although perhaps they simply weren't expanding like the rest of it. It held them tucked against its chest while a second head and neck wriggled up out of its shoulders like a worm squirming out of an apple.

Another reptile lost its earthsoul master when it, too, grew, and its back

bulged upward like a hill. Triangular plates sprouted down the length of its spine and tore its saddle to pieces, dumping the firestormer on the ground. A spike grew from the beast's snout, and long horns jutted from over the eyes. A bony ruff or collar swelled into being behind the head, and spikes erupted from the tip of the tail.

The two transformed saurians roared and snarled, seemingly communicating with one another. Then they attacked the creatures around them. The reptile standing on two legs leaped at Aoth and Jet like a cat. Its comrade's charge was a ponderous waddle by comparison. But the spiked tail lashed back and forth in a frenzied blur and actually drew first

blood, smashing the head of Son-liin's mount to gory scraps and spatters.

Aoth leveled his spear and hurled a blaze of force from the point. It stabbed into the onrushing saurian's torso but didn't stop it. At the same time, Jet leaped upward and lashed his wings. It seemed impossible that the griffon could rise high enough quickly enough. The reptile was just too tall and too close. But then they were soaring over the creature's upturned heads, just beyond the reach of the snapping fangs.

Don't wet yourself, said Jet, speaking mind to mind. *One of us knows what he's doing.*

And who gave you that strength? Aoth replied. *Stay low and close. I want*

to keep the beast's attention on us.

That takes away every advantage we have, said Jet. *Nice tactics!* Still, he wheeled as quickly as he could.

Then they danced with the saurian, teasing it with their proximity, dodging when it struck, and blasting it with flares of lightning and frost. It wasn't easy. Since Jet had never fought such a creature before, he didn't know how fast it could lunge and pivot or how high it could leap, and he was having to guess in adverse circumstances, with the narrow gorge limiting his mobility. A single misjudgment would either land him in the reptile's jaws or slam him into a cliff.

But as Aoth had intended, the dance

kept the two-headed drake from attacking anyone on the ground, and a few firestormers took advantage of its distraction by shooting it with their arbalests or jabbing it with their lances, albeit to little apparent effect. But most of them were too busy trying to contend with the beast that was attacking them, the massive thing with the horned head and flailing tail.

Intent on his own half of the battle, Aoth registered only an occasional glimpse of that other struggle. Gaedynn flew above the reptile, loosing one shaft after another. Eider screeched repeatedly, maybe in an effort to distract the creature as Aoth and Jet were diverting its fellow. Son-liin circled the

beast until she could aim a bowshot at its ribs. His sword, hand, and forearm wreathed in flame, Mardiz-sul slashed at the reptile's snout then blocked with his shield when the brute tried to spear him with one of its horns. Cera swung her mace in a horizontal arc, and brightness leaped from the head. It burned a black streak across the creature's belly.

Aoth's comrades were fighting well. But so far the horned saurian wasn't slowing down either.

Curse it! He had to end the battle while he still had a company to command. He stuck his spear in the sheath attached to his saddle, tore open the pouch on his belt, and grabbed the noxious-looking green berries he'd

picked on the way through the foothills of the mountains. *Get me close*, he said.

What do you think I've been doing? Jet replied. Discerning his master's intent, he swooped straight at their foe's two heads. Which both opened their jaws wide to catch him.

Aoth rattled off an incantation. Power tingled in the palm of his hand as it suffused the berries. He swung his arm back and threw them.

At least some flew into the jaws of the head on the right. So furious it likely didn't even notice them bouncing and rolling down its tongue, the saurian struck with both heads.

Jet lashed one wing, wrenched his body, and flung himself to the side. The

reptile's fangs missed him—barely—but the maneuver sent him tumbling like a stone flung from a catapult. Only Aoth's harness held him in the saddle when the motion spun him upside down, and the canyon wall loomed just ahead.

Wings beating, floundering, the griffon couldn't overcome his momentum in time to avoid a collision. But he did manage to twist far enough that it was his feet that slammed against the rock, not his head, wings, or the man on his back. He and Aoth grunted together at the resulting jolt. Still, it was only that. Jet's sturdy frame withstood the shock without injury, and he sprang away from the side of the cliff at once.

Meanwhile, their foe turned. Its hind

legs flexed as it prepared to pounce. Then the head on the right came apart in a blast of flame as, with a muffled boom, the berries in its mouth and gullet exploded. The detonation hurled broken teeth and scraps of charred flesh and bone in all directions.

The reptile screamed and staggered. Then, possibly mad with pain, it twisted the head that was burned on one side but still otherwise intact to bite the ruined lump that was the other. Bone cracked and blood spurted until nothing remained but a stump.

Then the reptile tottered, and its forelimbs pawed at the air. Certain it was about to drop, Aoth turned to survey the other side of the fight, and his

satisfaction curdled into dismay.

The rest of the company wasn't faring as well as he and Jet had. Many of the firestormers were shrinking back from the horned reptile. They had the look of warriors who were about to break. And when they did, the saurian would almost certainly slaughter those who hadn't lost their nerve.

Aoth wasn't sure that magic could turn the situation around in the moment he had left. But maybe something else could.

Perceiving what he wanted, Jet hurtled at the reptile that the two of them had been fighting. The familiar's talons stabled into the top of the creature's remaining head, but that wasn't the point.

Aoth wanted their momentum to topple the beast.

For a moment, he didn't think it would, but a final beat of Jet's wings carried the saurian past the tipping point. It fell and the griffon sprang clear.

The dying saurian smashed down on top of the horned creature, which let out a bellow. Aoth had hoped the great mass dropping from above would injure it badly. Since it kept moving, that didn't appear to be the case. But it moved slowly, barely able to support the added weight. It shifted this way and that, trying to shake it off, but it couldn't. The pointed plates on its spine had likely stabbed deep into the other beast's body.

"Now!" shouted Mardiz-sul. "Kill it

now!”

Heartened, the firestormers attacked the reptile from all sides. It defended as best it could, but its best was inadequate when it could hardly stand. It tried to whip its tail up and over its hindquarters, and the spikes caught in the other saurian’s body and stuck there. Thus deprived of its most formidable weapon, it fell a moment later, when Yemere charged and drove his lance into its eye.

* * * * *

Khouryn stood at the rail and gawked at the scene before him. The docks with their fishing nets drying in the sun were nothing remarkable, nor were the boxy,

unassuming buildings immediately behind them. But the sheds and shacks huddled in the shadow of a colossal granite tower, with countless windows, balconies, and secondary spires branching from the central mass, making it look a little like a tree.

"You see," said Nellis Saradexma, "the dragonborn aren't the only folk who can build a tower city." Both his tone and the smile on his narrow face with its high forehead, receding hairline, and gray-black marbling made it clear how proud he was of the metropolis called Skyclave and how happy it made him to return, even if only briefly. As a wanderer who sometimes went years without seeing his own home, Khouryn

empathized with the ambassador's feelings.

"Impressive," Balasar said, "but please tell me that the empress doesn't hold court at the very top of the pile."

Nellis chuckled. "Actually, she pretty much does. But don't worry. You won't have to climb thousands of stairs to reach her."

Khouryn found out why not after the ship docked and he, Nellis, Balasar, and Medrash hiked through the port to the gigantic structure beyond. An insect with scarlet fore- and hindwings and a spindly abdomen that made up more than half its length crouched at the base of the tower. For an instant it looked relatively small, as anything might look small in

contrast to the looming mass of stone behind it. Then Khouryn spotted the elderly Imaskari man sitting on a chair in front of the beast. He was a mite in contrast with the dragonfly, which meant that in actuality the creature was as huge as Skuthosin.

Despite himself, the dwarf stopped short. So did the dragonborn. Nellis laughed. “It’s all right. Redwings look menacing, but they’re completely docile, and none more than old Drummer there. She and Qari have been carrying me up and down since I was a little boy.”

And in fact, the giant dragonfly did behave herself. As the travelers approached, she turned her head to regard them with her globular eyes and

shook out her wings with a series of percussive snaps that, Khouryn suspected, might be responsible for her name, but that was all. Meanwhile, Qari rose stiffly from his chair to greet Nellis with the deference befitting a commoner greeting a grandee, but with genuine fondness as well.

"My companions and I need to see the empress," Nellis said.

"Of course," the old man said. "If you'll all please step into the gondola." He waved his hand at what amounted to an open wooden box. Ropes ran from the four corners to holes drilled in the chitin on Drummer's belly.

When everyone was inside, Qari called, "Up! North side." Wings a

droning blur, Drummer rose into the air. The lines went taut, and, with a jerk, the gondola rose with her.

Khouryn took a long, steadying breath. Whether he was riding a griffon or a bat, he had no fear of flying because he was in control. But he wasn't with this giant insect, and the knowledge gnawed at his nerves. He distracted himself by taking in the view.

With its countless ornately carved terraces, friezes, and windows, Skyclave certainly merited closer inspection, and so did the lands beyond. It was there that any resemblance to Djerad Thymar and the area around it broke down. The dragonborn's bastion-city rose from a fertile plain. Skyclave,

too, had a ring of farmland surrounding it, but east of that, crags stabbed upward, gorges split the ground, and earthmotes dotted the sky. The Imaskari likely *needed* flying beasts of burden to move travelers and goods across such difficult terrain.

Drummer set the gondola down on a projecting platform where a pair of sentries stood to either side of an entryway. The sentries recognized Nellis and saluted. He nodded in acknowledgment and sent one of them into the tower to announce his return and request an audience with his sovereign.

She didn't keep him waiting long. He scarcely had time to give a silver coin to Qari before the guard reappeared to

usher him and his companions inside.

The interior of the tower—or that part of it, anyway—turned out to consist of cool, spacious, high-ceilinged chambers lit with floating orbs of silvery magical glow. Those lamps were dimmer and less numerous than Khouryn might have expected. A moment earlier, he'd been standing high above the ground in bright, hot sunlight. But inside, for all that he was dwarf enough to tell the difference in a dozen different ways, he almost felt as if he'd somehow been whisked underground.

The illusion persisted when he entered the empress's throne room. With its vaulted ceiling and surprisingly austere lines, it was an echoing,

shadowy cavern of a hall. The courtiers who occupied it wore garments that, with their high collars, layers of shoulder cape, dangling sleeves, and trailing skirts, were flamboyant in cut but funereal in hue, which added to the general impression of gloom.

But Empress Ususi's manner was warmer than the superficial appearance of her court. Stooped and wizened enough to make Qari seem young by comparison, so frail looking that one almost wondered how her wattled neck could support the weight of her golden circlet, she gave Nellis a smile. Then, however, her wrinkled face turned serious, if not positively bleak with care. "My friend. It's an unexpected joy

t o see you. Although, since I didn't recall you, I suspect that your return means more bad news."

Nellis smiled. "Majesty, it's *my* great joy to explain that appearances are deceiving. Tarhun didn't expel me from his court or anything like that. Rather, I come with some of his most trusted lieutenants. Allow me to present Daardendrien Medrash and Daardendrien Balasar, officers of the Lance Defenders, Kanjentellequor Biri, a wizard attached to the same company, and Khouryn Skulldark, a sellsword who's distinguished himself in the service of Tymanther."

Ususi sighed and turned her gaze on the dragonborn and Khouryn. "And no

doubt you come to ask again for military aid. It grieves me more than I can say that I must continue to refuse."

Balasar grinned. "Don't grieve on our account, Majesty. It's true that Tymanther needs your help. But we mean to earn it by solving your problem first, so you won't need your whole army on this side of the Alamber to ward off the beasts from the east."

The empress hesitated. "And you truly believe you can accomplish this?"

"Yes," said Medrash, "we do. We've learned that a dragon called Gestanius is sending the creatures to plague you. We know—more or less—how they're making their way out of the desert and through the mountains. We believe that

with the information—and the troops we brought with us—we can stop the raids."

"Although," Balasar said, "if you care to commit some of your own soldiers and mages to the effort, we won't turn them down."

Ususi turned back to Nellis. "And *you* believe they can do this?" she asked.

"I do," Nellis said, "because I know what these very champions achieved in their recent war against the ash giants and the wyrms directing them. I also believe that with the empire under siege, you have little to lose and much to gain by giving them permission to undertake their expedition."

"Except," the ancient monarch said wryly, "that if we gain a stop to the

raids, we also gain a war with Chessenta. That's the bargain, is it not?"

"It is, Majesty," Khouryn said, "but we hope it won't come to that. We hope that once Tchazzar learns that High Imaskar stands with Tymanther, he'll decide it's too risky to invade."

"From what I've heard of the Red Dragon," Ususi said, "I wouldn't absolutely count on that."

"Well," Medrash said, "then it comes down to this. Lord Nellis here, speaking on your behalf, has repeatedly assured us dragonborn that High Imaskar is our faithful friend and ally and would rush to our aid if only it weren't fighting for its own survival. Was that the truth or hollow cant?"

The assembled courtiers seemed to catch their breath. Ususi regarded Medrash in silence for a moment. Then she said, "You have a … direct way of speaking, knight."

"I'm a paladin of the Loyal Fury," Medrash replied. "We say what we mean. And the knowledge that an army is even now mustering to attack my homeland makes me even less inclined to talk in circles."

The empress smiled thinly. "Fortunately I've learned to appreciate directness. Probably it's because I, too, feel I no longer have time to waste. But I need details. I need to hear how you learned what you claim to know. If your answers satisfy me, you can undertake

your expedition, and if it succeeds, Tymanther and High Imaskar will face down Chessenta together."

* * * * *

Cera was the only practitioner of healing magic in the company. But Sonliin had some rough-and-ready knowledge of how to clean and bandage wounds and splint broken bones. Perhaps her father had taught her so they could tend one another's hurts when far from any other help in the wild.

Working together, they first addressed the needs of wounded genasi, of whom, thank the Yellow Sun, there were relatively few, then moved on to the injured drakes. Through it all, though she

acted with brisk efficiency, the young stormsoul looked as if she might start crying.

Not because of the blood, Cera thought. She's seen that before. Because she thinks it's her fault.

They crouched down together beside the final wounded steed. It lay panting and trembling on its side, and bubbles swelled and popped into the blood flowing from the puncture wound in its chest.

Son-liin gave Cera a questioning look. Already knowing it was futile, she nevertheless took stock of herself and found only a hollow ache inside. For the time being, she'd exhausted her ability to channel Amaunator's power, and no

mundane remedy would suffice.

She shook her head. Son-liin murmured to the drake, stroked its head with one hand, and drew her hunting knife across its throat with the other.

As they were rising, Gaedynn sauntered over. Sidestepping a pool of blood, he said, “If you’re done, some of the fellows want to talk.”

“What about?” Cera asked.

“Oh, to congratulate this lass on her skill as a pathfinder, I imagine.”

Son-liin’s face twisted. Cera frowned at Gaedynn, and he gave her a shrug as a reply.

Then he led them toward a relatively broad patch of sand, where everyone could take his ease without having to sit

in water. And “everyone” was pretty much the way of it. Most of the firestormers were headed for the spot as well. Perhaps, given that they were all volunteers, they all felt entitled to participate in a council of war. Meanwhile, Jet kept watch, soaring high overhead.

When everybody had flopped down where it suited him, Aoth, who’d found a mossy piece of log to perch on, said, “First let’s take note of our victory. This was no easy fight, and we only lost four men winning it. I’ll be honest with you. When we set out from Airspur, I wasn’t sure you fellows had what it takes to kill dragons. Now I am.”

His words had the desired effect on

some of the firestormers. One earthsoul sat up straighter, another smiled and touched the stock of his crossbow, and a watersoul elbowed his firesoul friend in the side.

But not everyone basked in their new leader's words of commendation. Some still looked sick and shaky from the desperate action they'd just fought, while others scowled.

Yemere was one of the latter. Glimmers flowing along the blue lines etching his silvery skin, he stood up and said, "That's all very well, Captain, but we shouldn't have been exposed to that particular danger in the first place. We consulted the maps back in the Motherhouse. We weighed all factors

and chose the best route. We should have stuck to it, not deviated on a whim."

"It was one of your own who suggested the deviation," Gaedynn drawled. Perhaps to avoid dirtying his garments in the sand, he'd ordered Eider to lie down, then sprawled atop her as if she were a divan. His fingers scratched in the bronze-colored feathers at the base of her neck, and her eyes closed in bliss.

"But it was Captain Fezim who ordered it," Yemere replied.

"Yes," said Aoth, "it was. So if you think anyone can fairly be blamed for not knowing about something that only happens occasionally on a patch of earth

in the middle of the wilderness, blame me. But let me ask you this: Did you believe we could travel this region without running into anything dangerous? Isn't that why your Cabal formed in the first place? Because the outlying parts of Akanûl *are* dangerous?"

"Yes," said Mardiz-sul. "That's exactly why."

"But it isn't the point," Yemere said. "The point is whether this outlander is the right man to lead our expedition. People say he won some notable victories in his day. But not lately. Not in Thay and Impiltur."

Aoth took a long breath that, to Cera's eye, conveyed as eloquently as any words just how sick he was of having

his supposed failures in those two campaigns thrown in his face.

"I learned to fight in the legions of old Thay," he said, "one of the finest armies Faerûn has ever seen. I've spent the past hundred years sharpening my skills in wars throughout the East. What are *your* qualifications to lead, Sir Yemere?"

"I don't *want* to lead," the windsoul noble said. "But in light of what just happened, I do wonder why we aren't following Mardiz-sul."

Some of the assembly muttered in agreement.

Mardiz-sul held up his hand. "Please. I'm honored that my comrades trust me. But if you really do, then trust my judgment. I agreed that Captain Fezim

should command because I'm convinced it's the best way to accomplish our purpose."

Son-liin stood up. "If there's anybody here who's lost any claim on your trust, it's me."

"How true," Gaedynn said.

"So hate me if you want to," she continued, "for the sake of those who died. But don't let it turn you against our leaders or our mission. I came upon one of the slaughtered villages not long after the raiders struck. I saw all the bodies, even children and babies, hacked to pieces. If this Vairshekellabex is responsible, then the firestormers need to kill him."

"Like I said before," said Aoth, "if

there's any blame to assign, it belongs to me, who made the decision to ride through this gorge. But the rest of what Son-liin said is on the mark. We came out here to do a job, and it's just as important now as it was before."

Cera rose. "It's more than important," she said. "It's a holy quest, and Amaunator will support us as we fight to accomplish it. Surely you realize that it was his power that kept the blue mist from transforming *every* drake. Or us, for that matter."

"We believe you," said an earthsoul. "It's just … those things. I mean, if dragons are anything like that …"

"They are," said Aoth, "but I swear by the Black Flame that Gaedynn and I

have killed them before. And when we kill Vairshekellabex, you fellows will be heroes. The girls in Airspur will fight over you like magpies."

That made some of the firestormers grin, and Yemere, apparently recognizing that he'd failed to convince them, withdrew into sullen silence. By the time the assembly broke up, Cera judged that morale was about as high as anyone could reasonably expect. Yet the fact remained that most of the genasi weren't hard men like Aoth, accustomed to sudden mayhem and horror, and she wondered if their spirits would hold in the face of more ill fortune. She prayed they wouldn't have to find out.

Then the misery manifest in Son-liin's

expression recalled her to more immediate concerns. Wishing she could infuse her hand with some of the Keeper's comforting warmth, she put it on the genasi's shoulder. "Aoth was right," she said. "There was no way for you to know, and so you have no reason to feel guilty."

"Maybe I do," Son-liin said. "I … I *think* my father told me to beware of traveling the canyon in high summer. But I didn't remember! Not until after the blue fog rose!"

* * * * *

Oraxes raised the leather dice cup to his mouth and blew magic into it. But his intention was not to cheat, not anymore,

profitable though it might have been. He considered himself an officer of sorts, especially with Aoth currently in the west and Jhesrhi in the south, and petty swindles were beneath his newly acquired dignity.

As he threw the eight carved ivory cubes, he spoke a monosyllabic word of power and reached after them with his mind. For a moment he fumbled the contact—a little too much beer dulling his edge—but then his power locked on to them.

First, he made them jump like maddened crickets, clattering and bouncing. Then he forbade them to fall back onto the dice table. Instead, his will floated them higher and higher,

whirling them around one another all the while.

He raised them almost to the smoke-blackened oak beams supporting the ceiling before letting them drop, and even then, he kept control of them. They bounced around a little more then stacked themselves into a tower where they finally came to rest.

His audience, a mixture of hunters, sailors, soldiers, and whores, whooped and applauded. Someone slapped him on the back. He glanced around and gave Meralaine a wink, and she smiled back. He'd learned early on that she wasn't as fond of raucous taverns as he was, but she seemed to be enjoying herself. And why not? They'd come a long way from

the bad old days in Luthcheq, when just the green tattoos on their hands, let alone an actual demonstration of arcane power, could have earned them a beating or worse.

Another hand fell on his shoulder. He turned and looked into the beak-nosed, bushy-browed face of Ramed, a sellsword he'd first met during the siege of Soolabax. In fact, it was Ramed who'd saved him from falling off the top of the wall.

"My friend!" Oraxes said. "Have a drink on me!"

"You have to come with me," Ramed answered. "Meralaine too. Right away."

Oraxes started to ask why, then realized that might be indiscreet with so

many folk loitering close enough to overhear the answer. He smiled and gave a wave to his audience, then beckoned to Meralaine. She picked up her slim bone wand where it lay within easy reach of her dainty-looking hand, and rose. They followed Ramed out into the night.

Alasklerbanbastos's war had brought an influx of coin to Mourktar as the mercenaries the dracolich had hired passed through the port. Most of those warriors were gone, in many cases added to Tchazzar's army in the south, but the town still clung to a fading air of celebration. The windows of taverns and festhalls burned bright, and music lilted through. It was as if the proprietors

couldn't bring themselves to admit the boom was over.

But it mostly was, and once Oraxes and his companions had progressed a few paces down the rutted, muddy street, Oraxes judged that they had enough privacy to converse. "What's going on?" he asked.

"A wyrmkeeper showed up," Ramed said. "He's got a paper with Tchazzar's seal on it. Apparently it authorizes him to get a report from Captain Fezim about how the hunt for the rebels is going." Oraxes inferred that Ramed was as illiterate as most men who followed his trade and hadn't been able to read the document for himself.

"Did you tell him the captain is away

on patrol?"

"Yes," said Ramed. "He said he'll wait."

"Well," said Oraxes, "let him wait, then. Maybe Lady Luck will smile, and Captain Fezim and the others will get back soon."

The soldier shook his head. "That's a lot to hope for. It's a ways to Akanûl, even on griffons, and it wasn't an easy chore they had to tackle once they got there."

"And what if the wyrmkeeper starts asking questions," said Meralaine, "and some of the other sellswords say they haven't seen Aoth or Gaedynn in days? What if they say their officers have marched them this way and that, but they

haven't seen a trace of renegade necromancers or any other leftover enemies?"

"Right," Oraxes said. The tipsiness that had seemed so exhilarating in the tavern was like a blanket smothering his ability to think. He took a deep breath in an effort to clear it away. "We can't just let him hang around. We need to send him on his way, and that means we need either Captain Fezim or someone who can pass for him. Ramed, I'm going to shroud you in his appearance."

The sellsword goggled at him. "Me?"

"Yes. You're an officer of the Brotherhood, and the captain let you in on the secret of what's going on before he left. You're the perfect man for the

job."

Ramed shook his head. "Truly, lad, I don't think so. I'm a warrior, not a player. I'd botch it."

"He's right," said Meralaine. She was standing right beside Oraxes, but it was still oddly difficult to see her features clearly. It was as though the darkness had stained her with itself. "You're the illusionist, and if you conjure a mask, it will fit you better than it would anyone else."

"But I'm not a warrior," Oraxes said.

Meralaine smirked. "That's not what you think to yourself when you're swaggering around with that pot on your head."

Oraxes felt his face grow hot. "I'm

saying that I won't be able to answer questions the way a veteran soldier would."

"But we can hope," Ramed said, "that the dragon priest won't ask difficult questions. After all, he's not a soldier, either."

"And your magic," said Meralaine, "will lend an air of plausibility to anything you say."

Oraxes shook his head. "I still don't think—"

She raised her hand to cut him off. "This is why Captain Fezim left us here, so if it was needed, we'd do what only wizards can. And you *can* do this. Ramed and I will help you."

He took a breath. "You're right, curse

it." He looked around and found the mouth of a narrow, litter-choked alley even darker than the street. He waved at it. "Let's duck in there."

"You don't have to do it right now," said Meralaine.

He grinned. "Don't worry. The prospect of what's to come is sobering me up fast. And it's like you said. We want to send the wyrmkeeper back to Luthcheq before he talks to a bunch of other people."

He took off the steel and leather helmet Meralaine had mocked, then started the magic by writing runes on a clapboard wall. His fingertip trailed blue phosphorescence. Ramed kept watch and stood in such a way as to hide

the two wizards from anyone who might happen to pass in the street.

After he finished writing, Oraxes murmured rhymes in dactylic hexameter. Meralaine whispered contrapuntal responses. They hadn't practiced performing that particular ritual together, nor did he understand the language she was speaking. But he could feel how her efforts supported his own, and it made sense that they would. Darkness and deception were natural allies.

As his recitation progressed, he gradually raised his hands to his head. He ran them through his hair and imagined it falling away. He felt it just as if it were really happening. He shifted his hands to his face and molded it like

clay, reshaping his sharp features into Aoth Fezim's blunt ones and branding them with the Thayan's black tattoos.

As he reached the final line of the spell, he touched his eyes with his forefingers, and, as though lighting a pair of candles, commanded a blue glow to flower inside each one. For a moment he felt a double pulse of warmth.

He lowered his hands. "Well?"

Meralaine smiled. "It's good. You look like him and sound like him too."

Ramed turned and his eyes widened. "She's right! You truly do!"

Oraxes snorted. "You don't have to sound so surprised about it." He put his helmet back on, looked around for Aoth's spear, and found it leaning

against the wall. Naturally he knew it was just another piece of the illusion, but the deception would be stronger if there were a part of him that didn't know, and when he closed his fingers around it, the ash shaft felt solid and smooth. "Let's go see the wyrmkeeper before the magic starts to wear away."

Even if Ramed hadn't come to find him, he would have known something was different even before they reached the Brotherhood's camp on the outskirts of town. Griffons were screeching when they should have been asleep, and when he came within sight of Aoth's pavilion he saw the reason. Leathery wings folded, saddles cinched to their torsos, four drakkensteeds crouched on the

ground near the entrance. Created from the blood of wyrms, or so Oraxes understood, the reptiles looked like scrawny, runt dragons with unusually long necks and probably smelled like them as well. So it was no wonder their proximity agitated beasts that had just helped their masters fight a war against dragons.

It agitated Oraxes for a different reason. “You said there was one wyrmkeeper!”

“One main one,” Ramed said, “and three underlings. Convince the leader, and you’ll be fine.”

“Each of them surely has some skill with his own kind of magic,” Oraxes said. “Any one of them could see through

—” He heard the whine in his voice and made himself stop. “Forget it. You’re right. Let’s do this.”

One of the drakkensteeds growled as they approached. The sellsword sentry in front of the tent came to attention and saluted. Responding as he’d seen Aoth acknowledge such shows of respect, Oraxes gave the warrior a clap on the shoulder as he passed by.

The wyrmkeepers inside the tent had made themselves free with Aoth’s possessions. They were working on their second bottle of wine and, by the looks of it, rummaging through bundles of dispatches and the like. All four were unmistakably priests of Tiamat, their garments and jewelry marked with the

draconic imagery and pentad motifs emblematic of their faith. But the big man seated in Aoth's favorite camp chair had carried things further. He had a scaly pattern tattooed on his hands and neck, and when he smiled, he revealed teeth filed to points.

"Captain Fezim," he said, rising. "Good evening. I'm the wyrmlord Sphorrid Nyra."

"And this is Meralaine," Oraxes replied. "She's one of the wizards the war hero assigned to help the Brotherhood accomplish its tasks."

Sphorrid's eyes flicked to Meralaine then back again. "I hope you don't mind that my acolytes and I made ourselves comfortable. From what this fellow was

able to tell us”—he indicated Ramed with a vague gesture—“I was afraid you might not return for a tenday.”

“No one can predict exactly how long it will take to fly over half a province,” Oraxes said.

“I imagine that’s especially true when you wander off by yourself,” Sphorrid said. “Do the masters of sellsword armies typically behave that way?”

The question ratcheted Oraxes’s nerves a little tighter. But he told himself that Sphorrid hadn’t really seen through his disguise, nor did he know anything about Aoth’s plans. Otherwise, the whoreson wouldn’t bother with this particular line of conversation. He might be suspicious, but he was just fishing.

“When I was a young legionnaire,” Oraxes said, “I was often sent on scouting missions. I guess old habits die hard. And sometimes one man can catch foes who’d spot a whole company coming over the horizon and scurry for cover. You may have heard that I was searching alone when I found the cellar where Sunlady Eurthos was being held and tortured.”

Sphorrid’s eyes narrowed at the implication of hostility. But so be it. Oraxes was fairly sure that Aoth wouldn’t have tied himself in knots trying to be cordial. So he supposed he shouldn’t either.

“I understood,” said the priest, “that that incident had been resolved to

everyone's satisfaction."

"Yes," Oraxes said, "but you'll also understand if the sunlady doesn't feel inclined to partake of the pleasure of your company."

"No matter," said Sphorrid. "Our business is with you." He proffered a roll of parchment, no doubt the same one he'd waved in front of Ramed.

Oraxes looked it over without haste, as he imagined Aoth would have done. At the top, the listing of Tchazzar's titles went on for line after line, but once he waded through those, the sense of the rest was clear enough. He rolled it back up and tossed it on the trestle table beside the wine bottles.

"If His Majesty wants to know what

I'm doing," he said, "he could have just asked for a written report. I was planning to send one anyway."

"He thought I might be able to provide additional insight," Sphorrid said. "Why don't you start by telling me about the reconnaissance you just concluded? What *did* the lone man see that an entire company would have missed?"

Oraxes swallowed. "It will be easiest to show you on a map," he said, then realized he didn't remember where Aoth kept them. He looked around and felt a twinge of alarm when he failed to spot them. But, like a dutiful subordinate, Ramed hurried across the tent, opened a chest, lifted out a roll of lambskin, and spread it on the tabletop.

That left Oraxes to concoct a tale of flying and searching from place to place and to stuff it with enough detail to make it convincing. Sphorrid put up with the tedious story for a while, but finally said. “Excuse me, Captain, but let’s stab to the heart of the matter. Did you find some trace of rebel holdouts and traitor necromancers or not?”

Oraxes took a breath and pointed at a place on the map that was a little farther along his imaginary route. “Right here, on a hill overlooking the crossroads, there was a campsite where someone burned a carving of a red dragon in the fire. The scraps of wood that survived had symbols of hatred and murder cut into them.”

Sphorrid gave him a skeptical look. “I thought you were searching for cunning, dangerous wizards, not folk so dim they’d try to curse a red wyrm with a ritual involving flame.”

Inwardly Oraxes winced. If he weren’t so nervous, he wouldn’t have slipped up like that! “The intent is the important thing.”

“With respect, Captain, the important thing is whether you’re making any real progress. If not, Chessenta could use your sellswords in the campaign against the dragonborn. The Church can pursue the work of ferreting out rebels and blasphemers closer to home.”

Meralaine laughed. Both Oraxes and Sphorrid turned to her in surprise.

“I’m sorry, my lords,” she said. “Truly. But it’s comical to see you scowl and bluster when there’s nothing to quarrel about.”

The wyrmkeeper cocked his head. “Explain.”

“Captain Fezim has a methodical mind,” she said. “It’s probably what makes him a good commander. But it also makes him a dull storyteller, and tonight is a case in point. His inclination is to describe every step of his journey instead of skipping to the discovery in the end. But I’ve already suffered through the tale once, so I can tell you the trail eventually led him to a place where His Majesty’s enemies meet to scheme and work their sorcery. The site

of an ancient battle in the Sky Riders."

Oraxes assumed she meant the place where she and Alasklerbanbastos had summoned the dead to frighten Tchazzar. "Yes," he said, touching his finger to the map again, "right here."

Sphorrid smiled a wry, less arrogant smile that almost made him likable for a moment. "The wizard's right, Captain. We could have had a less contentious discussion if you'd told me this at the start. But never mind. Just tell me what you intend to do about it."

What indeed? "According to my information," Oraxes said, "the coven will gather tomorrow night. We'll attack them when they do. If we sneak up on them with a small force, maybe we can

take them alive and interrogate them. Then we can find out if they're agents of Jaxanaedegor, diehards loyal to the memory of Alasklerbanbastos, or maybe even in the pay of the dragonborn."

Sphorrid narrowed his eyes and considered. Then he said, "That does sound like a sensible way to proceed. My acolytes and I will accompany you, of course."

"Fine," Oraxes said. "But for now, I've had a long journey, and this is my tent. Ramed will find you suitable quarters and provide for your mounts as well."

After the wyrmkeepers left, he flopped down in a chair. Meralaine grinned at him. "You were wonderful,"

she said. She picked up the half-empty wine bottle, took a swig, then brought it to him.

"Did I say what you wanted me to say?" he asked. "When you started talking about a coven and the place in the hills, I had to guess."

"You read my mind exactly. It was clear that the only way to satisfy the bastards is to actually show them some rebels. So we will."

"Are there any ghosts left haunting that patch of ground? You and Alasklerbanbastos raised a bunch of them, and then those were all destroyed."

"I'll call some new ones somehow."

He smiled. "And then we use them to

put on another pantomime. Why not? If the trick fooled Tchazzar, it ought to fool his servants too."

* * * * *

Her silver-skewer piercings gleaming in the glow of the floating orbs of light, Biri walked toward Balasar, and he felt the usual contradictory pulls, the inclination to enjoy the undeniable pleasure of her company pitting itself against the urge to draw away. But at the moment, there was really no question of how he would behave. A warrior of Clan Daardendrien didn't spurn a comrade in a strange and dangerous place.

"I don't understand," she whispered.

“After Nellis Saradexma vouched for us, the empress accepted our offer. She even loaned us the big red dragonflies so we could get to the mountains faster. But these men act like they don’t want our help.”

She was referring to the Imaskari soldiers and war wizards who’d accompanied the dragonborn into the caverns. Uniformed in somber colors, their pale skins mottled with dark streaks and spots in a way that, so far as Balasar was aware, made them unique among humans, they were courteous enough. But when they thought no outlander was looking, their expressions betrayed varying degrees of skepticism, amusement, and impatience.

“I think it’s a matter of professional pride,” Balasar murmured back. “They already explored these particular tunnels. They couldn’t find a path that leads all the way under the Dragonswords to the desert beyond. So it will make them look inept if somebody else does.”

“But Khouryn is a dwarf.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean the same thing to them that it does to us. Not if they believe they’re just as at home underground as his people are.”

Biri gave him a puzzled look. “Is that what they believe?”

“I don’t know and don’t intend to ask. If it’s not already common knowledge, they may not want outsiders to know. But

have you ever wondered where they spent all those centuries between the fall of their old empire and the founding of the new one? Or why the new one is called *High* Imaskar?"

She smiled at him. "You think like a wizard."

He normally took compliments as his due, but for some reason, hers always disconcerted him, although he trusted it didn't show. "I doubt that. My poor tutors had to thrash me on a regular basis just to inspire me to learn my letters and numbers."

She chuckled then her face turned serious again. "Do you think the Imaskari could be right that there's nothing to find?"

He shrugged. “Alasklerbanbastos didn’t show Jhesrhi where to search. He just told her. Then she passed the information along to Khouryn when they were mainly worried about sneaking him out of the War College. So it could have gotten muddled along the way. But I doubt it. Jhesrhi and Khouryn are both sharp, and Gestanius’s creatures have to be slithering under the mountains somewhere. Why don’t we go inquire how things are going?”

They headed for the front of the column. Warriors of the Platinum Cadre greeted them or nodded as they passed. Like any sensible dragonborn, Balasar had no use for religion, and a wyrm-worshiping religion least of all. But he

was still glad the cultists had forgiven him for infiltrating their fellowship to spy.

Peering in all directions, Khouryn was prowling around at the point where the pale, steady shine of the floating orbs faded out. He'd explained that was intentional. There were things a dwarf could see in the dark but not in the light and vice versa. Operating at the leading edge of the illumination made it easy to switch back and forth between the two modes of sight.

"Anything?" Balasar asked.

"Not yet," Khouryn said. He turned toward Biri. "I noticed you and a couple of the Imaskari wizards casting a spell a while back."

She shrugged. “More divination. It didn’t reveal anything. But that could be because Gestanius has countermeasures in place.”

“I imagine it is,” Balasar said. “But saying so won’t keep our new friends from getting restless. They’re going to want to turn back pretty soon.”

“We have lanterns,” Biri replied, and Balasar liked the matter-of-fact way in which she said it.

“That we do,” he said. “Still—”

“Look at that,” Khouryn said.

Balasar turned. The dwarf was using his new battle-axe, a cherished heirloom and gift from the Daardendriens, to point at a spot where the high wall met the vaulted ceiling.

Balasar squinted then said, “I don’t see anything.”

Khouryn grinned, a flash of white teeth inside his bushy beard. “Good.” He waved for Medrash, Nellis, and Jemleh Bluerhine to come forward.

Predictably Medrash looked keen as a newly honed dagger to learn what was afoot. Clad in a black greatcoat with four layers of shoulder cape, the crystal globe that served as his arcane focus cradled against his chest, Nellis appeared almost as eager. The diplomat had been startled when Tarhun ordered him to join the expedition, but at some point on the sea voyage, his attitude had shifted, and he was enjoying himself.

It was Jemleh who advanced in a

more leisurely fashion. Tall for a human, the Imaskari commander wore the same sort of ink black greatcoat as Nellis. But his had an oval onyx clasp to hold the high collar shut, and he carried a cane with a crook carved from the same stone to help him cast his spells.

"What do you need?" he asked.

Khouryn pointed as he had before. "It looks to me like there's a rift at the very top of the wall, right before it bends out and turns into ceiling. It's hard to see because it's almost beyond the reach of the lights, and because of the way the stone humps out to either side. That makes it look like just an indentation, not the start of another tunnel."

Jemleh squinted at it for a couple of

heartbeats. “I think it is just an indentation.”

Biri smiled. “We don’t have to speculate.” She murmured a rhyme and pressed her hands together as though making a snowball. Between them appeared an orb of light like the ones the Imaskari had conjured except that the glow was golden, not silvery. She tossed it and it floated upward.

Its radiance spilled into a gap broad enough to allow the passage of even the biggest creatures assailing High Imaskar. It would be tight for the largest ones, but they could squirm through. Balasar felt a pang of excitement.

“You have good eyes,” Jemleh told Khouryn. “I admit we never noticed that.

But you don't know that it goes anywhere. There could be a back wall just beyond reach of the light."

Balasar grinned. "It's like the lady said. We don't have to speculate."

"Right," said Medrash. "We don't." He turned and beckoned for a couple of warriors of the Cadre to come forward. Jemleh achieved a similar result by pointing to a pair of Imaskari soldiers with his cane.

Nellis conjured another ball of light and floated it halfway up the wall. Gripping a first handhold, Medrash started to climb. Other men-at-arms followed. Meanwhile, the two Imaskari mages muttered incantations that Balasar realized were the same, perhaps a charm

to enhance their strength or agility. Biri didn't, though. Smiling, she simply awaited her turn to begin the ascent.

Balasar stuck close to her as they pulled themselves up. But there were plenty of places to grip or plant one's toes, and she didn't need any help. Above them, one of the Cadre warriors hauled himself up onto the floor of the gap and swore softly.

When Balasar reached the top, he saw what the excitement was about. Though it was impossible to know how far it extended, he and his companions had entered a cave every bit as spacious as the one below. He found it vaguely disquieting that such a prominent feature had gone undetected. It made him

imagine a whole world riddled with lightless, secret spaces whose existence no dragonborn ever suspected, even when they were right above his head, beneath his feet, or within arm's reach.

Mainly, though, it made him eager to press on. He looked around for Medrash and Khouryn; then everything went black.

He realized some countermagic had put out Biri's light. He snatched out his broadsword; he and Medrash had left their greatswords behind in Skyclave, the Imaskari capital. The larger weapons were fine for showing what important fellows they'd become, but they preferred the blades with which they'd practiced all their lives when it was

actually time to fight.

Khouryn bellowed, "Troglodytes!" Then came a *thunk* that was likely his axe cleaving flesh. An Imaskari yelled something in his own language. Perhaps trying to make a new light, Biri rattled off a spell in dactylic trimeter.

Balasar smelled a putrid odor. Instinct prompted him to pivot to the right and cut. His blade sliced something that gave a hissing screech. At the same time, he felt something sweep past his head as his foe's attack, whatever it had been, just missed him.

Then amber radiance flared through the cave, revealing that their foes did indeed appear to be troglodytes, cave-dwelling reptilian savages like stunted

parodies of dragonborn. But they had long necks like the creatures that had attacked Balasar and his companions beside the Methmere, skins that gleamed like quicksilver, and a quicksilver fluidity to their movements.

The cave started flickering from light to dark as Biri's magic fought the power that sought to snuff her conjured glow. It made everything appear to move in a series of sickening, disorienting jerks.

Balasar had gashed his particular foe across the snout. It was hardly a mortal wound, and he followed up with a lunge. But the creature melted into shapelessness as if it really were made of liquid metal, flowed and splashed out of reach of the attack, and reformed

itself. Its jaws opened.

Balasar abruptly remembered that the long-necked reptiles beside the Methmere had possessed breath weapons. He sidestepped, held his own breath, and lifted his buckler to cover his face.

A jet of vapor washed over him. His eyes burned and filled with tears. But in spite of them, and the flickering, he could just make out the troglodyte rushing him. He ducked a stroke of its flint-studded war club and thrust his point up under its ribs. It collapsed and Biri cried out behind him.

He turned. Two troglodytes had grabbed her by the arms, a tactic that deprived her of the use of any spell

requiring mystical gestures, and were wrestling her toward the edge of the drop. She started shouting words of power, but Balasar doubted she could finish the incantation in the moment she had left.

He jerked his sword out of the creature he'd just killed, rushed Biri's assailants, and slashed the throat of the one on the left. The other let go of her and pounced at him with raking claws and snapping fangs. He jumped out of the way, killed the thing with a cut to the spine, and only then recognized that he himself was teetering on the very lip of the drop. The wretched flickering was still playing tricks on his eyes. He heaved himself forward and banged

down on his knees. It hurt but it was preferable to plunging to his death.

The ambient light belatedly grew brighter and steadier. Several paces away, Medrash had set the blade of his sword shining with Torm's power. Peering around, Balasar was relieved to see that only a couple of his comrades were down. No doubt that was because there actually weren't all that many quicksilver troglodytes, and those there were had only primitive weapons. Apparently they'd counted on their breath attacks and the explorers' blindness to even the odds.

Well, you lose that wager, Balasar thought. He chose another foe, but before he could reach it, Khouryn stepped up

behind the creature and chopped its head half off. Balasar oriented on still another just in time to watch Medrash drive his sword into its torso.

And that was the end of that. As the last troglodyte's legs crumpled beneath it, Nellis and Jemleh clambered up into the chamber.

"Perfect timing," Balasar said.

Nellis, who'd gotten used to his sense of humor, smiled and made an obscene gesture in response. Jemleh glowered. Biri giggled.

Peering down the passage that stretched away before them, Khouryn flung some of the gore from his axe with a snap of his wrist. "I'm now reasonably sure this is the right path," he said.

“Does anyone disagree?”

“It remains to be seen,” Jemleh said. “But I admit, the troglodytes were sentries. And you don’t post sentries where there’s nothing to protect.”

“And if I’m not mistaken,” Medrash said, “these sentries were akin to some of the creatures that served Skuthosin. The ones the giant shamans summoned with their talismans.”

Khouryn took a rag from the pouch on his belt and wiped more blood from his weapon. “We should rig some ropes,” he said, “so the rest of the company can climb up here without it taking all—look!”

Balasar peered down the new tunnel and felt a stab of alarm when he saw the

dragon glaring back at him.

Crouching at the edge of the light, it gleamed like the quicksilver troglodytes. Its head had a pair of short horns curling forward under the jaws and two longer ones curving back behind the eyes. Its body was serpent-slim, and Balasar could just make out the lashing tail all but concealed behind its wings.

He and his fellow warriors came on guard. The wizards lifted their arcane implements and started chanting, at which point the wyrm fled—but not by turning and retreating up the tunnel. Instead, it dissolved and flowed sideways, pouring itself through a narrow crack in the granite. It took only a heartbeat, and then it was gone. The

mages' voices trailed off, leaving their incantations unfinished. The forces that had been accumulating around them dissipated in crackling showers of sparks.

"The *real* guardian of the way," Biri said.

"And we scared it off," said Nellis.

Balasar grinned. "Don't feel too smug. I imagine we'll see it again. It just means to fight us at a place and moment of its choosing."

Still, he shared the wizard's good humor because he and his comrades clearly *had* found Gestanius's secret path, and the dragonborn had contended with wyrms before.

But when everyone had made the

climb into the new cave and the expedition was arranging itself in the proper marching order, he noticed that not all of his comrades looked eager. Vishva had a clenched, dour set to her jaw.

That wouldn't do. She was one of the mainstays of the Cadre, and if she lost her nerve, it might well prove contagious.

Balasar sauntered over to her and murmured, "Buck up. We beat Skuthosin, didn't we?"

The cultist glowered. "I'm *not* afraid."

"Then what is wrong?"

"From the description, the creature you saw down the tunnel was a

quicksilver dragon. A metallic."

Balasar shrugged. "If you say so."

"Skuthosin and the dragons who served him were chromatics," Vishva said. "Children of Tiamat. It made perfect sense that they were doing evil. But metallics are the children of Bahamut. So why is this one helping Gestanius?"

"Did you ever listen to the old stories and songs?" Balasar replied. "Our ancestors had all sorts of wyrms eating and enslaving them in the world that was."

"I know that!" Vishva snapped. "I'm not an idiot. But those dragons didn't know the gods. The ones here do. It ought to make a difference."

Balasar didn't know what to say to that. "Just promise me that when the quicksilver drake comes back, you'll fight, whether you think it's *supposed* to be friendly or not."

"Of course." Vishva shook her head, and the ropelike scales dangling at the back rattled together. "But truly, I don't understand."

SIX

20–22 Eleasis, the Year of the Ageless One

Aoth leveled his spear and spoke a word of command. With a sharp crack, a thunderbolt leaped from the point and split a skull-sized stone on the slope above him.

"Impressive," said Jet dryly.

"Let's hope they think so," Aoth replied. Otherwise, orcs being orcs, they were likely to try to kill him, and he and

his comrades would have to slaughter them when all he really wanted to do was talk.

He waved the leafy branch that signified peaceful intentions over his head. Then he and Jet clambered on toward the ruined little fortress. Aoth's boots slipped in the scree. Flying would have been easier but maybe a little *too* impressive. People sometimes panicked when a huge, black griffon with blood red eyes swooped down at them.

"As well they should," said Jet, perceiving the tenor of his master's thoughts.

Aoth glanced back at Gaedynn, Cera, Mardiz-sul, Yemere, Son-liin, and the other folk assembled on the trail below.

Nobody was pointing or signaling, so apparently no one had spotted anything that had escaped his own attention. Of course, people rarely did, but it was still a good idea to have several pairs of eyes keeping track of a tense situation.

Eventually one of the half dozen gray-skinned, pig-faced archers on the crumbling battlements deigned to acknowledge him. Squinting despite the shade provided by the broad brim of a soft felt hat—orcs tended to be nocturnal—he yelled, "Who are you and what do you want?"

"My name is Aoth Fezim. I want to parley with your leader."

"Lay down your weapons and come in. Leave the beast outside."

Aoth grinned. “No. To all of that. It’s a nice day. If your leader feels like talking, he can come out.”

“Wait,” said the orc.

Aoth did. Judging that the branch had served its purpose, he set it down. Then three figures strode out of the shadowed arch where gates had once hung.

Two of them were orcs who’d each gouged out an eye in devotion to the war god Gruumsh, and were likely the most formidable in the group. But it was the third one who made Aoth wary and inspired him to activate a tattoo whose power shielded against poison.

That was because the creature was a medusa, and while the males of his kind were somewhat less terrible than the

females, whose stare could actually turn a man to stone, they were fearsome enough. Tall and bald with yellow, slit-pupil eyes, he had a bitter, intelligent face and wore black and purple brocade garments that, though stained and faded, had once been elegant. He looked as if he'd started out as an important fellow in some sophisticated place, and Aoth wondered what ill fortune had reduced him to leading a handful of barbarians in the middle of the wilderness.

"You and your friends are on my road," the medusa said.

"If it's yours," said Aoth, "you should maintain it better."

"You'll have to pay the toll," the medusa persisted. "Half of what you

have. My warriors will go through your possessions to make sure you don't cheat."

"Please," said Aoth. "Peering from those walls, someone must have noticed that the folk down below are just the vanguard of a larger force. And by larger, I mean a great deal larger than yours. Do you really think you can keep us from passing by? Why, just because this heap of rubble commands the trail? Maybe if you had catapults, but I flew over, and I know you don't."

The medusa scowled. "This one time, you have my permission to pass."

"Good," said Aoth. "Thank you. But don't give up on making some coin just yet. I am willing to pay for information

about the area around the Old Man's Head."

The bandit chieftain smiled a snide sort of smile. "Do you have business with the gray wyrm?"

"Well, I'm certainly interested in hearing all about him."

"Then it will be my pleasure to help you find him. Provided that the price is right."

"How does ten gold—"

Something overhead made a thumping sound. Aoth looked up. One of the orcs on the battlements had an arrow sticking out of his chest. He tottered and pitched backward out of sight.

At the same instant, Jet spoke mind to mind, not with language but rather a

wordless urging to look back down. As Aoth did, the medusa and his bodyguards finished snatching their scimitars from their scabbards.

Jet crouched, then, with a snap of his wings, sprang to tear the threatening creatures apart. The medusa hissed, hunched forward, and glared. The griffon jerked in mid-leap, and a vicarious spasm of pain and nausea knotted Aoth's insides.

Despite the assault, Jet slammed down on one orc and pierced him with his talons. But the other bodyguard jumped clear, then came on the attack. Shaking and seeing double, the familiar ducked an initial sword cut.

Aoth couldn't go to his aid. He had

his own adversary. The medusa lunged and slashed at his throat.

Gripping his spear with both hands—he'd left his targe behind so he could manage the cursed tree branch—Aoth parried, then riposted with a thrust to the guts. The medusa sidestepped and made it look easy.

Maybe for him it was. As they traded attacks, Aoth observed how economical and precise his adversary's actions were and how he always returned to a perfect guard after even the fiercest exchange. The creature was as adept with a scimitar as Khouryn was with an axe or Gaedynn, with a bow.

And the poisonous power of a medusa's gaze stabbed at Aoth

whenever the exigencies of the duel obliged him to look his foe in the face. So far it was producing only twinges of headache, but it was bound to break through his defenses eventually.

Judging that he needed to finish the confrontation fast, he retreated right off the relatively flat space where the old fort sat and back onto the slope. He slid again, and swayed as he struggled to keep his balance. But he'd gained the distance and time he needed to rattle off rhyming words of power.

The medusa rushed him and cut at his head. Aoth blocked and as the two weapons banged together, the power with which he'd infused the spear discharged itself with a shriek and a

flash. The scimitar snapped into several pieces.

Still glaring, the medusa retreated, dropped the hilt of his ruined sword, and snatched for a dagger. Aoth scrambled upward and thrust the spear between the creature's ribs.

Just as he jerked it out again, an arrow streaked down and stuck in the ground beside his foot. He looked up and saw that, since they no longer had to worry about hitting their fallen chieftain, all the orcs on the battlements were aiming at him.

Then Gaedynn swooped overhead on Eider and shot two of them. Flying behind him, borne aloft by the wind, Yemere discharged his crossbow and

killed another.

The rest of the vanguard was right behind them. A watersoul sprinted on his own two feet as easily as though he were traversing level ground, and everyone else clung to the backs of the scuttling, surefooted drakes.

By the time they reached the top, the wall was clear, and they streamed on into the ruin, past Jet where he lay and panted. Despite his sickness, he'd evidently killed the other one-eyed orc but then taken cover in the short tunnel that was the gate, where the archers on the battlements couldn't hit him. Cera halted beside him and scrambled off her mount.

Are you all right? asked Aoth.

Of course, Jet answered. *Especially if your female purges me. Go inside and finish it.*

Aoth did, not that his comrades actually needed him. There really hadn't been enough orcs to withstand even the vanguard, and Eider's beak and claws, Gaedynn's bow, and the genasi's blades and elemental tricks made short work of them.

The one-sided nature of the little clash didn't bother Aoth. Sellswords didn't go in for chivalry, nor was he inclined to wax sentimental over orcs. But right at the end, a brown dog, the barbarians' pet or mascot, presumably, sprang at him out of nowhere. He automatically whipped his spear into line, and the cur impaled

itself, shuddered, and died.

For some reason that did make him feel a pang of regret. Or maybe it just reminded him that the whole fight had been pointless—indeed, counterproductive—and purely the result of someone's blunder. He shook the dog's carcass off the end of his weapon and went to find out whose.

He assembled his comrades in the fort's dusty courtyard. "Who loosed that first arrow?" he asked. "The one that started everything."

Gaedynn smiled a nasty smile. "Who do you suppose?"

Son-liin winced at the contempt in his tone. "I shot but it was *not* the start of everything! The orc was drawing his

bow. He was going to shoot you, Captain."

"Did anyone else see that?" asked Aoth.

"I didn't," said Jet, "and I was right up there with you, watching for signs of treachery."

"I have to admit," said Mardiz-sul, "I didn't see it either."

"Because your imagination doesn't run away with you in a tense situation," Gaedynn said.

"Mine doesn't either!" Son-liin snapped. "I grew up in these mountains! I'm more accustomed to their dangers than any of you!"

"You are one of their dangers," Gaedynn said.

A moment earlier, Aoth had been more than ready to berate the person responsible for starting the fight. But Gaedynn was doing such a fine job of heaping scorn on her head that his own displeasure seemed superfluous.

"Well, we all came out of the scrape in one piece," he said. "And it was a nice shot, all the way from the trail up the hill to the top of the wall. You yourself couldn't have done too much better."

"Don't be ridiculous," Gaedynn said. "Of course I could. Partly because I'm not a panicky child."

One firestormer muttered to the comrade next to him. Aoth couldn't catch the words, but from their tone, he

surmised that the genasi agreed with Gaedynn's assessment.

"Son-liin," said Aoth, "you'll look more carefully next time. Now let's move on. We captured this miserable outpost, so we might as well search it. I want maps. Papers. I doubt that any of the orcs was much of a writer, but their chieftain may have been."

* * * * *

Lightning ripped through the black sky, and rain fell in torrents to hammer the rooftops of Luthcheq. Watching through the casement of her chamber, Jhesrhi thought that it was as if the true gods were rebuking Tchazzar's pretensions by demonstrating what

genuine divine power could do.

But even if that fancy had been true, the mad dragon was incapable of comprehending such a lesson. So it was up to Jhesrhi to address his ambitions in a more practical way.

Despite the danger, she was eager to do so. For a long while, she'd felt torn between Gaedynn, Aoth, and the Brotherhood on one hand, and Tchazzar on the other. Despite the war hero's vices and lies, a part of her had clung to the notion that he was the savior so many Chessentans believed him to be. That in time he'd recover from his ordeal in the Shadowfell and cast off cruelty and arrogance like a serpent shedding its skin.

But his actions had steadily chipped away at her faith. Maybe it had been the sight of Khouryn bound to the rack, or of the poor, bewildered old man with his tongue torn out, that finally shattered it altogether. Maybe it was the eerie moment when she saw something twist in the dragon's mind, and he started believing the wretch groveling before them truly was her father, for no other reason than that he wished it to be so.

Whatever it was, it had finally turned her against him for good and all because she believed that even if some miracle healed his reason, he'd remain just as vicious and devious as before. A creature who, even if he imagined himself capable of loving human beings,

ultimately regarded them as nothing more than pawns on a lanceboard.

It was time to show what one pawn could do when she moved herself.

Jhesrhi put on an old, gray, hooded cloak Aoth had given her shortly after rescuing her from the elemental mages. It had seen so much hard wear that Gaedynn said it made her look like a beggar. But she'd kept it anyway, and certainly, no one would mistake it for the sort of ornate, elegant garments she'd worn of late.

She took up her staff, and it urged her to set something ablaze. Not tonight, she thought, not in this downpour. That would be far too much work and too suspicious as well.

She opened the casement. The rain battered her. She spoke to the wind, and howling, it picked her up off the little balcony.

She wasn't worried that anyone would see. She was just a dark speck moving against the black sky.

Despite the weather, it was exhilarating to fly again, although not as exhilarating as it would have been on Scar's back. She felt a fresh pang of loss for the steed who'd given his life to save hers, and wondered if she'd ever ride a griffon again. Then she scowled as she recognized the thought for what it was: a tacit admission of the fear that she'd never escape her current situation.

The wind carried over the precinct

being demolished to clear a space for Tchazzar's temple, then to the encampment beyond. In some portions, the tents stood in orderly rows, while in others a person would have to weave his way through. Jhesrhi suspected that the lower sorts of sellsword, the undisciplined ruffians who gave them all a bad name, were responsible for the areas of disarray.

She landed in the shadow of one of the outlying houses the camp had grown up around. It was late enough that no light showed through the windows shuttered against the storm. She walked on, her feet sliding in mud and slopping through puddles. Sensing that she still had work for it, the wind that had borne

her aloft lingered close to her, gusting in one direction, then another. It made her cape swing back and forth like a bell and kept threatening to shove her cowl back off her head, not out of prankishness or resentment, but simply because it didn't know any better.

She spotted a sentry huddled under a tree and passed within a stone's throw of him. He didn't challenge her. With a flicker of a smile, she decided that she probably would have needed to brandish a severed head and scream "Death to Chessenta!" to draw him out from under the meager shelter of the dripping branches, especially since, in a patchwork army, strangers were constantly wandering around.

In time she stopped under a tree of her own, as anyone who needed a respite from the drenching sting of the rain might. She stared out at the supply tents and wagons a short distance away, shifted her grip on her staff, and spoke to the wind again.

What she said was an incantation of sorts, possessed of a precise cadence and punctuated with words of command. But she didn't feel like she was giving orders. Prior to the war with Threskel, she'd spent enough time in Luthcheq to get acquainted with the breezes and gales hereabouts, and it was more like asking help from friends.

It was help they proved eager to give. The wind roared and threw the wings of

her cloak out in front of her like flapping banners. She had to snatch at the tree to keep from falling. And she wasn't even the target of the blast. She was simply standing at the fringe of it.

It shoved the tents out of shape and sent ripples streaming through the canvas. A wagon rocked sideways, then settled back on all four wheels.

"More," Jhesrhi murmured, and the wind wailed louder. The raindrops caught in the surge almost seemed to be hurtling horizontally, not falling from the black clouds on high.

A piece of tent ripped loose from the rope and stake holding it in place and flapped wildly. Other sections did the same until one tent flipped over,

exposing its contents to the wind and rain. For a few heartbeats, the lines on the far side of the neatly stacked supplies anchored the canvas like a leash holding back a frantic dog. Then it tore loose and flew away.

One by one, the other tents pursued it into the night. Meanwhile, the piles of foodstuffs and other items essential to an army on campaign blew apart. Kegs tumbled over the ground until they ruptured and spilled the ale inside. Bags split and surrendered their contents to the gale. The flour looked like a band of ghosts put to rout, while the fletchings were too small for human eyes to make out in the rain and the dark. Had Jhesrhi not been attuned to the wind and

perceiving partly as it perceived, with a sort of touching at a distance, she wouldn't have noticed the bits of feather flying away.

With a crash, a first wagon overturned. Others followed. She couldn't tell how badly they were damaged, but at least their contents came tumbling out of the cargo beds for the elements to scatter, pilfer, and foul.

Eventually she decided she'd done all the harm she could at that particular site. She considered turning the wind on some of the other tents nearby, the ones that had soldiers inside them, but decided against it. She'd taken enough risks for one night.

She thanked the winds and told them

they could stop generating the magical gale. It started subsiding immediately, although the violence of the hammering rain, blazing lightning, and booming thunder remained impressive in its own right.

Jhesrhi glanced around, making sure no one was watching, then asked the particular wind that had carried her there to return her to Tchazzar's palace. As she floated upward, she wondered how much she'd actually accomplished.

She'd likely delayed the start of the Red Dragon's campaign but possibly not by more than a day or two. Was that enough to matter? It all depended on how Gaedynn, Aoth, Khouryn, and the others were faring, and she had no way

of knowing that.

She sighed. As much as she felt ill equipped to deal with all the subterfuge and intrigue, in one respect, the game she and her comrades were playing was like the sort of war to which she was accustomed. A soldier focused on his own particular task, often with no knowledge whatsoever of how a battle or campaign was progressing overall. He just had to hope that everybody's efforts would add up to victory in the end.

In her imagination, Gaedynn smiled crookedly and responded to her thought: Right you are, Buttercup. It's chaos and mass confusion every time. But don't tell anybody, or how will Aoth peddle our

alleged expertise?

You have my word, she thought, smiling, missing him. Then she felt a light tactile sensation like the brush of a hanging leaf, although it was almost lost amid the cold, wet drumming of the rain.

It startled her, and it took her a moment to figure out what had happened. Because of the magic she'd worked to destroy the supplies, she still had some residual connection to all the currents of air at play in her vicinity, some ability to sense what they were sensing. She hadn't been conscious of it while it was simply validating what she perceived with her natural senses, but it was alerting her to something she hadn't noticed.

She rattled off a rhyme to strengthen the bond, then reached out as if she had a hundred invisible hands attached to arms dozens of yards long. And so she found the creature.

It was flying some distance behind her, its leathery wings bouncing raindrops back up into the air with every beat. Like many creatures of the netherworld, it was somewhat manlike but possessed of an elongated, half-bestial head, clawed, four-fingered hands, and spines growing over most of its hide like a porcupine's, although not so thickly as to obscure the essential gauntness of its frame.

It was a spined devil. Jhesrhi had encountered them on the battlefield when

some enemy sorcerer or priest summoned them. But she'd never run into one that could make itself invisible, and she had no idea why one was shadowing her.

Maybe she could force it to explain, but probably not by mystically shackling its will. That wasn't her kind of wizardry. She'd likely have to beat the answer out of it.

She warned the wind that when she turned, the devil was likely to hurl some of its spines at her. It should be prepared to shield her with a vigorous gust. Her staff urged her to blast the spinagon with fire, and she told it to stop its nudging and do as she commanded. Then she spun in the air, raised the weapon over

her head, and spoke the first word of an incantation.

The spined devil lashed one arm at her, just as though it could strike her a backhanded blow from far away. And in a sense, it could, for a flare of crimson force exploded from the ring she belatedly noticed on its forefinger. The blaze spiked pain through her head and collapsed her thoughts into confusion. Perhaps it hurt and addled the wind that was carrying her too, because it dropped her and she plummeted toward the ground.

She wrenched her mind back into focus and cried a word of command that was exactly that. The wind scooped her up just a few feet shy of the top branches

of an elm tree.

Visible, the spinagon snarled, snatched quills from its shoulder, and threw them. They hurtled at Jhesrhi like arrows and, despite the rain, burst into flame in midflight.

She sensed that the wind was still recovering from the first attack. It couldn't hold her aloft and shield her from the missiles too. She gasped a word of warding and lifted one wing of her cloak in front of her.

For an instant the wool became as strong as mail. Two quills punched all the way through anyway. One pierced her sleeve too and pricked her arm. A wave of dizziness assailed her.

No, curse it! Surely only a tiny drop

of the devil's poison had entered her blood, and she refused to let it stop her. She snarled a word intended to produce a surge of vigor, and it steadied her to a degree, enough to take in the fact that her cape was on fire.

She snapped the garment to shake the spines out of it. Then she grasped the flames with her will. From her staff's perspective, controlling fire wasn't as good as making it. But it was something, and the pseudo-mind inside the weapon crowed in satisfaction.

Guided by instinct as much as arcane knowledge, she drew the fire out of the cloth, into herself, and streamed it on into the staff to add to the rod's store of power. As it passed through her, it

painlessly burned away the rest of her vertigo and weakness, a benefit she hadn't anticipated.

She peered around, using both her own eyes and the wind's tactile way of seeing. She found the spinagon hovering not far from where it had been a moment before. When it recognized that its first barrage of spines hadn't incapacitated her, it hurled a second.

But like her, the wind had recovered from that initial assault. Without even needing to be prompted, it howled and sent the quills tumbling off course.

The devil wheeled and fled in the direction of the heart of the city. Jhesrhi gave chase.

As she did, she asked another favor of

the winds. Bellowing, they whirled themselves into a spinning column, visible by virtue of the dust and litter caught in the spin.

The spined devil was caught in it too. The whirlpool of air sucked the nether creature down, or perhaps, tumbled and buffeted, the thing simply found it impossible to fly. Either way, it slammed down on the ground, and Jhesrhi allowed the vortex to disperse.

The spinagon glared up at her. It occurred to her that a winged predator probably wasn't used to crouching on the ground while an enemy hovered overhead.

"You see how it is," she called, raising her voice to make herself heard

over the hiss and rattle of the rain. “I can kill you if you force the issue. But I don’t especially want to. Tell me why you’re here.”

The spined devil snarled.

“Someone sent you after me, didn’t they?” Jhesrhi persisted. “Why? What were you supposed to do?”

“All right,” growled the spinagon. Its guttural voice sparked a disorienting sort of synesthesia. Jhesrhi heard the words, but they also filled her nose with a smell like hot metal. “I’ll tell. For all the good __”

The creature exploded into motion. It lashed its wings and threw double handfuls of quills.

Fortunately Jhesrhi and the wind were

ready. A blast of air tumbled the spines backward and smashed the devil back down onto the ground. Jhesrhi spoke to the earth and water that had blended to form mud, and the muck became even softer and sucked the spinagon down. The nether creature floundered, struggling to drag itself clear.

It likely could, too, but not for a few moments. Jhesrhi judged that she had time enough for a longer incantation.

Though her skill at binding devils and demons was rudimentary at best, she was somewhat more proficient at countermagic. She might be able to dissolve the constraints that the spinagon's summoner had imposed, the compulsions that forbade it to answer

her questions. And if she restored its free will, the fiend might see that it was in its best interests to do so.

She chanted percussive words full of hard consonants, and gripping her staff in both hands, swung it like a mallet she was using to break down a wall. The raindrops pouring down on the spinagon glowed white and steamed and sizzled on its hide.

That seemed promising, but it was still no guarantee that she'd overcome the other spellcaster's power. She supposed she'd know in a moment. "Now will you talk to me?" she asked.

Still wallowing in mud, the creature was appeared to be trying. Its mouth moved but no sound came out, or at

least, none she could hear through the clatter of the rain. Then it shrieked and snatched out two more handfuls of its quills.

Jhesrhi prepared to defend. But the spinagon stabbed the spines deep into its own torso and pitched forward onto its face.

Well, that settles that, she thought. Scowling in annoyance, she floated to the ground and kneeled down to inspect the iron ring that had enabled the spinagon to hurl its own burst of countermagic and probably to become invisible before that. Presumably the creature's master had given it the talisman, but there was nothing distinctive about the design to suggest

who that person was.

Not knowing made returning to the War College an even less appealing prospect than it would have been otherwise. But that was where Aoth's strategy dictated Jhesrhi should be. So she murmured to the mud, and it churned, sucked down the spinagon's body, and buried it completely. Then she flew back toward the fortress.

* * * * *

Like many mages, Oraxes had trained himself to be cognizant of his own internal states, and as a result, he often recognized a dream for what it was. Such was the case currently, and he was enjoying it. When he'd lived through the

“raid” in reality, he’d been dry mouthed with anxiety that the ruse wouldn’t work. No longer. He could bask in his own cleverness as the pantomime unfolded.

He’d masked himself in Aoth’s appearance and made a common griffon look like Jet. Occasionally he even made it talk. Maintaining the illusions was tricky, but as he and his companions flew through the night toward the proper hillside in the Sky Riders, he knew that Meralaine had an even more difficult task. She had to make it look as if she were attacking to some effect while simultaneously controlling her puppets on the ground, the zombies and skeletons masquerading as a coven of traitorous necromancers and their undead minions.

She managed it, though. Swooping on the back of her griffon, stabbing with her wand, she actually threw the first attack, and jagged shards of something blacker even than the night rained down on the figures below.

The sellsword archers started loosing an instant later. As befitted supposed wizards, the zombies struck back with flares of power from the miscellany of arcane weapons and talismans Oraxes had found among Aoth's belongings. And as instructed, the dead aimed the blasts at the drakkensteeds and the wyrmkeepers astride them. If anyone was going to get hurt, let it be them.

Throughout the action that followed, Meralaine managed to create the

appearance of such fierce, fanatical resistance that when the battle ended, it seemed credible that the attackers hadn't succeeded in taking any of the coven "alive." The wyrmkeepers weren't happy about it, but Oraxes mollified them by "discovering" folded papers in the pocket of a zombie's robe. The ambiguous but suggestive jottings looked like just the clues to lead the Brotherhood on to other enemies of the Crown. It would simply take a little study.

It was all Oraxes could do to keep from laughing as Sphorrid Nyra congratulated him on the success of the assault. He took a breath to steady himself and started to reply with the

same cordiality. Then, suddenly, something covered his mouth.

That jolted him awake, to find that he really did have a hand clamped over his lips and a dagger at his throat as well. It was dark in Aoth's tent, with just the first gray hint of dawn light seeping through the canvas, but he could still tell it was Sphorrid and the other wyrmkeepers standing over him and Meralaine. One of the priests was covering the necromancer's mouth and holding a big, curved knife with a single-edged blade to her neck as well.

"Don't struggle," Sphorrid said. "Don't raise your voice above a whisper. Don't say anything that even sounds like it might be the start of a

spell. Otherwise, I swear by the Five Breaths that we'll kill you both immediately."

He nodded to the priest restraining Oraxes, and the man uncovered his mouth.

"I never did meet the real Aoth Fezim, did I?" the wyrmlord continued. "It was you all along. That's why you're sleeping in his pavilion and his bed, to keep up the imposture until we leave camp."

Oraxes kept silent.

"Why was it necessary?" Sphorrid asked. "Where is Fezim?"

Oraxes groped for a credible, useful lie. He couldn't think of any.

Sphorrid shrugged. "Suit yourself. If

you won't talk here, I guarantee you will when we get you to Luthcheq. Let's get them up and dressed. Make sure they don't have any weapons or charms hidden in their clothes."

The wyrmkeeper with the dagger threw the sheets back and dragged Oraxes up off the cot, and the one with the knife did the same to Meralaine. Oraxes felt a flash of anger that the priests were seeing her naked, but there was nothing lewd in their demeanor. They were intent on their business, and that, he realized, was worse. Had she been able to distract them, perhaps it would given him a chance to … do something.

But since that hadn't happened, maybe

he could serve as a distraction for her. As the third acolyte started pawing through their discarded garments, he asked, “How did you know?”

Sphorrid sneered. The filed teeth made the expression jarringly ugly. “You aren’t nearly as clever as you imagine. Wyrmkeepers are priests. Did you think you could pass reanimated corpses off as living men and we wouldn’t be able to tell the difference?”

“We hoped,” Oraxes said. The acolyte tossed him his clothes. “We were high above them, and it was dark. Why didn’t you confront us on the spot?” He already knew the answer, but it was the only thing he could think of to say to keep the conversation going.

“Because I had to assume,” Sphorrid said, “that all the soldiers you brought on the raid were in on the deception. In other words, you and they had the four of us outnumbered.”

“We still do,” Oraxes said, pulling on his breeches. “The entire Brotherhood is camped around this tent.”

“And for the most part,” Sphorrid answered, “fast asleep. You’ll make sure that any who are awake don’t notice anything amiss as you walk us to our steeds because I’ve already indicated what will happen if they do. Now, both of you, hurry and finish dressing.”

Oraxes and Meralaine drew out the process as long as they could, but that wasn’t long at all, and Tchazzar’s agents

never relaxed their vigilance. When the captives were fully clad, the two priests sheathed their blades and picked up their fighting picks. All four wyrmkeepers held the weapons in a casual-looking way that would nonetheless allow them to swing in an instant. And they stayed close behind Oraxes and Meralaine as they all exited the pavilion.

As Sphorrid had said, the whole camp seemed asleep in the last precious, fading bit of the night before the bugles started blowing and griffons began screeching, horses neighing, and mules braying for their provender. Snores rumbled from the various tents, and from the men who, in the warm summer weather, had opted to sleep out under the

stars.

I have to do something, Oraxes thought. It will get me killed, but if all four of them are busy butchering me, that might give Meralaine a real chance.

But the right moment never came. Or else he hesitated whenever one of the wyrmkeepers glanced elsewhere or he got a quarter step farther ahead of them, and so lost his opportunities. They all rounded the big, patched tent containing the armorers' portable forge, and they were facing the paddock where the drakkensteeds were waiting.

The reptiles gave odd cries, harsh, yet low and tremulous, when they spied their masters. They already had their saddles cinched around their middles

and their saddlebags buckled in place, and they crouched down to make it easy to mount when the priests and their prisoners were still several paces away.

"Put them on the steeds one at a time," Sphorrid said. "The boy first."

Oraxes's particular captor shoved him forward then backhanded him across the ear when he tried to mount. "Not in the saddle, blasphemer," growled the priest. "In front of it."

That made for a precarious and uncomfortable perch, with the drakkensteed's vertebrae digging into Oraxes's tender parts. Still, as the priest looked down to clip his fighting pick to the saddle, he thought Lady Luck might finally have given him his chance. But

no, curse it, it wasn't so, not with two of the other wyrmkeepers still hovering right behind Meralaine.

Oraxes's keeper mounted behind him, buckled the straps that would hold him in his seat, and pulled his dagger from its sheath. Meralaine's special guard got her and himself situated in the same way. Sphorrid and the other acolyte swung themselves onto their drakkensteeds. Then the reptiles rose, scuttled, lashed their batlike wings, and climbed into the air. The camp and Mourktar fell away beneath them.

This is it, Oraxes thought, clinging to the beast beneath him as best he could. As soon as we're clear of the Brotherhood, they'll set down again, gag

us, and bind our hands. Then we *really* won't have a chance. If I'm going to make a move, it has to be now.

But what move could that be when it was a struggle just to keep from sliding off the drakkensteed and his captor's dagger was poised at his back? What would Gaedynn do?

Even in the midst of his desperation, he noticed that was a strange thought for him. He wasn't used to wondering what others might do, probably because, when he was growing up in squalor in Luthcheq's arcane quarter, who had there ever been worth emulating? Certainly not his teacher, an able wizard, but a bitter, drunken wreck of a man in every other way.

He shoved such useless reflections and memories aside. Think, curse it! Think, think, think!

Like a griffon, the drakkensteed had no reins. Was it possible that a rider controlled such a reptile in the same way, with voice commands and by touching it on the neck? Could the system of signals be the same for both sorts of creature?

Oraxes didn't know, but maybe he could find out. His hands were already on the drakkensteed's scaly, bony neck. Indeed, he could hardly have lifted them away without risking a tumble.

He surreptitiously pressed his right index finger into the reptile's neck. It turned a hair in that direction. Oraxes

held his breath while he waited for the man behind him to react but he didn't. The shift had been too minimal to capture his attention.

Oraxes slid his finger half an inch down the ridge that was the drakkensteed's spine. The beast lashed its wings and climbed a little. The wyrmkeeper still didn't react.

All right, then. Oraxes took a breath then, pressing harder, swept his whole hand toward the drakkensteed's head. The reptile furled its wings and plummeted.

The wyrmkeeper cried out in surprise. And at that instant, when he was presumably intent on asserting control, Oraxes heaved himself backward,

smashing the back of his head into the priest's face.

The man didn't instantly retaliate with a dagger thrust, so Oraxes assumed he must have stunned him. But he didn't think he'd hit the whoreson hard enough to knock him out. As the drakkensteed started to level off, he flung his head backward again.

But he failed to connect because something held him away. Dazed or not, the wyrmkeeper had evidently interposed an arm.

Oraxes was lucky it wasn't the arm with the blade. Otherwise, he would probably have impaled himself. That didn't make what he had to do any easier. Since he no longer had surprise

on his side, his only hope of contending with the priest was to let go of the drakkensteed, twist around, and fight the man more or less face-to-face.

As soon as he turned, he started to topple. When he grabbed the wyrmkeeper, it was as much to anchor himself as to fight him.

The priest's nose was flattened and streaming blood. He didn't have the dagger in his hand anymore—he must have dropped it when Oraxes butted him—so he hammered at his captive with both fists. At the same time, he shouted a command in what sounded like Draconic. The drakkensteed started veering back and forth, making it even more difficult for Oraxes to stay on top

of it.

Oraxes realized that the wyrmkeeper wasn't trying to subdue him. The bastard meant to throw him to his death and stood an excellent chance of succeeding. They both knew how to brawl, but the cleric was bigger and stronger and, seated as he was, possessed every other advantage.

Except wizardry. If Oraxes could bring his gift to bear even with the wyrmkeeper mauling him and without a talismanic device to focus his power, he might still have a chance.

Clinging with one hand, struggling to shield himself from his adversary's bludgeoning fists with the other, he gasped the opening words of an

incantation. The acolyte's eyes widened when he realized what his captive was doing. The man redoubled his efforts to fling or shake Oraxes off the drakkensteed's back or, failing that, to hurt him sufficiently to make him stumble in the midst of his recitation.

As Oraxes reached the final words of power, the wyrmkeeper grabbed him by the arm he'd been using to block. Oraxes had no way to make the necessary mystical gesture except with the hand he'd been employing to hold on to his foe. He let the cleric go, and now there was nothing except the cleric's grip keeping him in place.

He could see the realization of that fact dawn in the wyrmkeeper's face. The

man snarled and started to heave him sideways. Oraxes curled his free hand through the necessary pass, thrust it under the priest's scale-armor chasuble, and grabbed hold of the leather garment beneath.

Force stabbed from his hand just as if he'd cast darts of light, but it passed directly into the wyrmkeeper's body. The man convulsed, then went limp as a rag doll. Still zigzagging, the drakkensteed made him flop from side to side.

Oraxes was afraid to let go of the corpse, but he had to if he was going to turn back around and try to control the drakkensteed. He did it in one fast, frantic motion, then leaned down over

the serpentine neck, so he was lying on the reptile as much as sitting astride it.

He squeezed a fold of skin, giving the command that meant stop what you're doing. To his relief, the drakkensteed resumed flying in a straight line. Whether or not it understood that one of the humans on its back had just killed the other, it was evidently willing to obey the only rider left.

Oraxes looked around. The sky was somewhat lighter, light enough to reveal the fury and consternation in the faces of the remaining wyrmkeepers. He sneered and started to make a filthy gesture. Then Sphorrid bellowed, "Surrender or we'll kill Meralaine!"

A jolt of dread obliterated Oraxes's

momentary feeling of satisfaction. But he was sure that if he gave up, he and Meralaine were as good as dead anyway.

"I'm going to fight to the death no matter what!" he shouted back. "If you kill both of us, you won't have anyone left to question!" At the same time, he made his drakkensteed climb, seeking the advantage of the high air.

It was a sensible tactic to attempt, but he knew he couldn't afford to let the fight come down to who was the best flyer because it surely wasn't he. Still a novice when it came to riding griffons, he was bound to prove even clumsier on his current mount. He started another incantation.

Meanwhile, the wyrmkeepers were climbing too. Sphorrid chanted a spell of his own.

Oraxes finished first and shrouded himself and his mount in a haze that ought to make them particularly hard to target in the predawn gloom. It didn't blur his own vision, but he felt a sudden chill in the air around him as the enchantment sprang into being.

An instant later, one of his enemies' drakkensteeds spewed a flare of fire at him, while another spit a puff of what was surely poisonous or corrosive vapor. They evidently had no compunction about striking at one of their own kind if directed to do so. Sphorrid roared the last word of his

spell, thrust out his hand, and for an instant the luminous head of a ghostly blue dragon glimmered around the extremity. The illusory wyrm spit a crackling zigzag of lightning that Oraxes assumed to be entirely real.

The flames fell short, and the other two attacks missed, although not by much. So far, so good, but the cloak of blur wouldn't last much longer. Glaring at Sphorrid, Oraxes started another incantation. Then, on the final word, he wrenched himself around and thrust out his hand at the wyrmkeeper seated behind Meralaine.

He hated doing it. He was terrified of hitting her instead of her keeper or of killing the beast beneath her and making

her fall. But he needed her in the fight.

And because she was bending over the neck of her drakkensteed as he had, the shaft of blue-white light that leaped from his fingertips blazed over her and stabbed at her startled captor's neck. The priest jerked then went limp, his throat and upper torso covered in frost and his heart stopped by a shock of bitter cold.

Or at least Oraxes hoped he'd stopped it. Before he could be sure, his drakkensteed lashed its wings and flung itself sideways. The motion nearly dumped him off its back, and for an instant, he thought that was precisely what the beast had intended. Then, claws poised to catch and rend, another reptile

and its acolyte rider plunged through the space his own mount had just vacated.

"Get the girl!" Sphorrid bellowed. The acolyte pulled his drakkensteed out of its dive and wheeled in Meralaine's direction. Oraxes could tell that he had indeed killed her captor, leaving her in control of his mount. Unfortunately he could tell it primarily by the clumsy, floundering way the beast had begun to fly. When it came to riding a winged creature, Meralaine was even more of a beginner than he was, and she was plainly overcontrolling, confusing, and irritating the reptile.

Sphorrid kept on pursuing Oraxes. He thrust out his hand, and a glowing, transparent red dragon head appeared

around it to spew flame. Acting in advance of Oraxes's tardy prompt—and thank the Queen of Air for it!—his mount just managed to swoop beneath the blast. He replied with a bright, booming thunderbolt, and Sphorrid dodged with a veer to the left. The wretch made it look easy too.

They traded attack after attack, neither quite managing to score. Meanwhile, the other wyrmkeeper maneuvered to get both above and behind Meralaine, who was evidently still struggling to direct her own steed. Oraxes was frantic to go to her aid but knew Sphorrid would kill him if he tried.

Meralaine's adversary had nearly reached the perfect position from which

to attack when, suddenly flying more smoothly, the drakkensteed on which she was sitting wheeled to face it. The priest in the saddle sat up straighter. Oraxes realized Meralaine had reanimated the dead man so he could control their mount.

Their foe still had the advantage of the high air. But Meralaine shouted a word that made him cringe instead of doing anything useful, and at the same instant, the newly made zombie commanded their drakkensteed to use its breath weapon. The plume of poison mist reached just high enough to wash over the head of the living wyrmkeeper's mount. It flailed and plummeted, and the man on its back screamed as it carried

him down.

Perceiving that he had no allies left, Sphorrid turned his steed and fled. It was the wrong move. It kept him from dodging the thunderbolt that Oraxes threw after him. Charred and mangled, the wyrmlord and his mount also fell and broke into pieces when they smashed against the ground.

Oraxes and Meralaine followed them down and made absolutely certain both priests were dead. He took a deep breath and said, "Well. That was interesting."

Meralaine swiped strands of hair out of her pale, sweaty face. "What's the plan now?" she asked.

Oraxes tried to think. "We bury the

bodies, and act oh so surprised if someone else comes from Luthcheq to ask what happened to the first band of busybodies. We watched them leave for home and have no idea why they never arrived."

"That might work." She waved her hand at the two surviving drakkensteeds. "What about these brutes?"

He strained to figure out if they could afford to keep them or set them free or if they needed to kill and hide them too, even though the animals had just helped to save their lives. He couldn't sort it out.

"By the seven cold and broken stars," he said, half laughing and half annoyed, "give me a moment, will you? Just a

moment to catch my breath.”

SEVEN

23–24 Eleasis, the Year of the Ageless One

Praxasalandos oozed through a seam in the rock. It was a perfect way to stalk his prey. He could pace the Imaskari and dragonborn almost step for step, and they never even suspected he was near.

He found a spot where a crack

connected his secret path to the open cavern. It wasn't much of an opening, but it provided enough room for him to form an eye out of the liquid metal that was his body.

The intruders were still resting—in many cases, sleeping—and showed no signs of moving on in the immediate future. It made sense that they were tired. They'd marched a long way, sometimes taking the wrong tunnel and needing to double back despite the dwarf's skill as a pathfinder. They'd also fought a pack of cave drakes that Praxasalandos had sent to hinder them.

The difference between the scene from before and what Praxasalandos looked at was that the dragonborn called

Medrash was up and prowling around. Somewhat to his dismay, Praxasalandos had discovered that the explorers had a fair assortment of formidable individuals among them, but nonetheless, Medrash, his kinsman Balasar, and Khouryn, the dwarf, stood out from the rest. They were natural leaders in a way that transcended rank, although they possessed that too. Eliminate even one of them, and it would weaken the expedition significantly.

So that was what Praxasalandos intended to do.

He dissolved the eye before anyone noticed it then, guided by a kind of tactile instinct as reliable as sight, streamed back the way he'd come. He

seeped out of the granite in a tunnel that connected to the area he'd just surveyed but beyond a dogleg, where none of his prey could see him.

There he compressed his mass as he solidified it and simultaneously sculpted it into an unaccustomed shape. The process was more difficult than assuming his natural form, but not much, not for a dragon possessed of his breed's singular gifts.

When he was done, he peeked around the bend. There was an Imaskari sentry stationed there, but the human with his pale, mottled skin couldn't see him hiding in the dark.

Praxasalandos kept peering out at intervals until finally Medrash was in

view. Then he undertook the final and most difficult detail of his masquerade: putting a glowing lantern in his hand. Because obviously the real Balasar wouldn't have wandered away from his comrades without a source of light.

It took a couple of heartbeats, long enough for Praxasalandos to feel a pang of doubt.

What was he doing? Why was he setting snares for folk who'd never done him any harm, especially when, judging from their standards and insignia, some of them worshiped Bahamut? Why was he serving Gestanius, a despicable creature that, by rights, any self-respecting metallic should oppose?

But of course, the answer was

obvious: the game.

At certain moments, Praxasalandos regretted that he'd ever accepted the invitation to visit Brimstone on Dracowyr. But like most quicksilver dragons, he was curious; how could he pass up an opportunity to meet a creature who, though an undead horror, was also one of the saviors of their entire race?

And from the moment the vampire explained *xorvintaal* in all its intricate glory, there was no turning back. Praxasalandos had no interest in building a new Draconic Age, the alleged ultimate purpose for the contest. But the play itself was fascinating in its complexity, uniquely suited to divert a dragon's deep and subtle mind not just

for a month or a year, but down the long centuries of his near immortality. A wyrm could no more withstand its allure than he could resist the desire to amass precious objects into a hoard.

And once Praxasalandos opted in, he had to address the fact that, although powerful by ordinary standards, he lacked the resources to play in the same style as the most notorious wyrms of the East. If he wanted to fare well in the opening stages, his best chance was to ally himself with one of them. And Gestanius, who laired in the same mountains as he did, seemed a sensible albeit unsavory choice.

Medrash's voice sounded down the tunnel. "Is there light shining around the

corner?”

Praxasalandos decided that the lantern with its spot of phosphorescence had fully defined itself. He stepped around the turn, beckoned urgently for Medrash to come forward, then retreated out of sight.

“Balasar?” Medrash called.

Praxasalandos didn’t answer. He held his breath as he waited to see if the dragonborn would take the bait.

It was by no means a certainty. If Medrash doubted what his eyes had told him, he might retrace his own steps far enough to see that the real Balasar was still asleep. Or his voice might wake the real one, who would then presumably answer.

But when Praxasalandos heard the scuff of approaching footsteps and caught a whiff of Medrash's scent, he knew the trick had worked.

He melted and poured himself back inside the rock. Then he flowed to the arch that linked the passage with the chamber the dragonborn and Imaskari currently occupied. There, by the pressure of thought alone, he started activating the runes that Gestanius had long ago concealed inside the granite.

* * * * *

Khouryn woke to a shiver in the stone beneath him. Or at least, he thought he had. No one else had woken up, and no one who'd already been awake looked

alarmed. His surroundings were steady.

Steady but *wrong*. A dwarf could feel it in his bones, even if the Imaskari with their claims to knowledge of the subterranean world couldn't.

He looked around again. There were three corridors leading out of the cavern, and the sentry stationed at one of them was looking down it intently, apparently because there was something to see.

Khouryn considered pulling on the mail the Daardendriens' armorer had made for him and decided not to take the time. He grabbed his new axe and headed for the Imaskari warrior.

By the time he reached the soldier, he knew he'd been right to hurry. The granite beyond the arch looked solid. It

wasn't shaking in any visible or audible way. But if *felt* precarious, like a child's blocks piled in such an unstable fashion that the arrangement fairly screamed of imminent collapse. A couple of minute particles of rock dust drifted down from the ceiling.

That, however, was clearly not why the human was peering into the shadows and at the white light gleaming from around the bend. If he understood what was actually happening, he'd likely be yelling his head off, not that that was a good idea under the circumstances.

"What are you looking at?" Khouryn snapped. "What is that light?"

"I saw Balasar," the human said haltingly. Mistrusted by most of their

neighbors, the Imaskari were perforce a somewhat insular folk, and apparently the sentry wasn't entirely fluent in the Common tongue that enabled Faerûn's many races and cultures to communicate one with the next.

Impatience ratcheted Khouryn's nerves a notch tighter. "Balasar's down there?" Could that be right? Hadn't Khouryn just passed his friend on the way over?

"Medrash … followed," the soldier said. "Light is from lantern and sword."

"Herd everyone away from this passage," Khouryn said, "quickly. *But don't shout*. Understand me?"

The sentry's eyes opened wide. "Yes!"

Khouryn trotted down the passage, and a perceptible tremor ran through the rock beneath his feet. More grit fell. With a tiny crunching sound, a hairline crack snaked through the wall on his left.

He rounded the bend. Peering about in seeming perplexity, Medrash was a few paces farther along. As the sentry had indicated, he'd set the blade of his broadsword aglow with silvery light to serve as a lamp.

"Get back here!" Khouryn said. "Now!"

Startled, Medrash jerked around. "Balasar—"

"Was never here," Khouryn said. "This is a trap. Come on!"

Medrash ran toward him. Khouryn

wheeled and sprinted but stopped when he turned the corner again.

The tunnel in front of him was vibrating. Enough grit was drifting down that not even a human could miss it. The granite rumbled softly but continuously.

Medrash rounded the dogleg and bumped into him from behind. “Keep going!” the dragonborn said.

“No,” Khouryn said. “We won’t make it. Back the other way!”

Medrash looked as if he wanted to argue, to protest that their comrades were just a few strides and a few moments away, but then he scowled and did as he’d been told.

The ceiling fell with a deafening crash and raised a blinding, choking cloud of

dust. The jolt threw Khouryn off his feet. Coughing, eyes stinging, he looked around and could just make out the smudge of glow surrounding Medrash's blade.

He drew himself to his feet and headed in that direction. Medrash met him halfway.

"Are you all right?" the dragonborn asked.

"Fine." Noticing that the dust was settling, Khouryn turned, wiped his teary eyes, and inspected the mass of broken stone clogging the passage. For all their frantic haste, he and Medrash had just barely outdistanced the collapse, which meant the passage was blocked for twenty paces at least. "Well, we're not

going back that way." A spasm of irritation twisted his guts. "Curse it, you're not a dwarf. I don't care what you think you see. *Never* walk down one of these tunnels by yourself."

"I apologize," Medrash said.

Khouryn sighed. "Forget it. Anyone can fall victim to a trick, especially a magical one."

"And it seems that is what happened." Medrash took another look at the rock fall. "Which reminds me that Biri and several of the Imaskari have magic of their own. If they work together, perhaps they can reach us."

"Don't count on it," Khouryn said.

"Because the blockage is too big?"

"Partly. Also, remember that we don't

know how far the collapse extended, so we don't actually even know that our comrades are all right. As they don't know that we are."

Medrash smiled grimly. "You're saying we should plan on saving ourselves."

"Pretty much."

"Can we?"

"If this tunnel goes somewhere. I'm hoping it hooks back around and links up with the route our company is taking. It looks like it could, but there's only one way to find out."

"Then lead on," Medrash said.

Khouryn did, meanwhile peering for signs of danger ahead. But he nearly missed, or at least disregarded, the line

of silvery glimmer in the granite right beside him. Then, however, he realized what it was: the quicksilver dragon lurking behind another crack.

"Watch out!" Khouryn shouted. He stepped back and readied his axe. Two warriors against a dragon was rotten odds. But if he and Medrash both struck in the instant when the quicksilver wyrm became solid but before it could make an attack, they might have some kind of chance.

"I see it," Medrash said. He raised his sword, cried the name of his god, and the glow of the blade burned so brightly that Khouryn flinched away. Then the paladin thrust at the fissure. It was a fast, hard action, but even though the crack

was so narrow that Khouryn wasn't sure the blade would even fit, it stabbed in cleanly, with nary a scrape of steel on stone.

Quicksilver churned and separated into separate droplets around the burning sword. Then it streamed away from the weapon and out of sight.

Medrash slid the sword back out much more slowly than he'd driven it in. Without the god's power augmenting his skills, he was leery of dulling the blade. "I didn't kill it," he said.

"I figured," Khouryn said. "But you ran it off, and I really didn't want to fight it this very instant. So, well done."

Medrash kept peering at the crack. "Up this close, I thought I sensed

something."

"What?"

"I'm not sure. A vileness."

Khouryn snorted. "I didn't have to be a paladin to pick up on that."

* * * * *

As she entered the Green Hall, Jhesrhi looked around at the assembly and decided that a fair number of people had come to dread being summoned into the royal presence just about as much as she had.

Of course, not every face betrayed such feelings. Halonya was smirking like the half-demented thing she was. Lord Luthen and other peers who had thus far received only friendship and preferential

treatment from the Red Dragon looked smug and self-satisfied. Zan-akar Zeraez kept his purple, silver-etched features composed into a mask of wise and sober courtesy.

Still, some courtiers, men who'd been stripped of property or offices merely on Tchazzar's whim or been commanded to send their wives or daughters to his chambers, glowered and sulked. Daelric and some of the other high priests stood in a huddle, muttering together.

But only Shala kept scowling when the Red Dragon actually strode into the room, although some others couldn't resist the impulse to wince or gasp.

That was because Tchazzar had blood spattered all over the front of him, from

his long, handsome face all the way down to his pointed shoes, soaking his vermilion-and-black silk and velvet garments and dulling the glitter of his diamond buttons. Jhesrhi suspected that he'd been taking a personal hand in punishing supposed miscreants in the dungeons, although that was by no means a certainty. He'd proved himself capable of committing mayhem anywhere and anytime something angered him.

Everyone bowed or curtsied as, seemingly oblivious to his bizarre and disquieting dishevelment, Tchazzar mounted the dais and flopped down on the throne, immediately fouling the gold and sea green cushions with smears of blood. "Rise," he said, and Jhesrhi

noticed that he had significantly more gore on his mouth than the rest of his face. It even stained his teeth.

"Well," Tchazzar continued, surveying them all, "here we are again, facing the same annoying paradox. With a god to rule it, Chessenta is blessed beyond all other realms. Yet no monarch could find himself more beset by malcontents. Why is that?"

After a moment, Jhesrhi decided it wasn't just a rhetorical question. He was actually waiting for an answer. But no one knew what to say, or else those who did feared to draw the dragon's attention to themselves.

Finally, looking like an overfed canary in his yellow vestments, Daelric

cleared his throat and said, “Majesty, the brightest light casts the deepest shadows. When one studies the Keeper’s sacred texts—”

“Fire and blood!” Tchazzar screamed. “Did you think I was asking for *platitudes?* Not one word more! Or you can try studying the sacred texts without eyes and prattling about what you find there without a tongue!”

Daelric’s round, ruddy face turned a shade paler. He bowed and stepped back among his fellow clerics, who in some cases edged away from him as though Tchazzar’s displeasure were contagious.

Jhesrhi supposed that if anyone could calm the dragon, or at least encourage

him to get to the point, it would be either Halonya or herself. And for once, the prophetess didn't appear on the quivering verge of blurting something out. Although she did appear to be trying to maintain a grave expression to mask an underlying eagerness.

So Jhesrhi guessed it was up to her. "Majesty," she said, "I ask you to remember that others don't see as far or clearly as you." As usual, she felt awkward and a little dirty concocting the kind of fulsome, roundabout speech such moments required. "But if you tell us what's angered you, maybe we can help to find a remedy."

Tchazzar shocked her by baring his pinkish teeth in a sneer. "Do you truly

not know, my lady?"

Jhesrhi took a breath. She wanted to be sure her voice remained steady. "No, Majesty, I don't."

"Yet I'm sure you know how the storm damaged the supply cache."

"Of course. But I don't understand how that piece of bad luck connects to talk of treason."

"Liar!" Halonya shrieked, reverting to form.

Flame rippled up Jhesrhi's staff, and judging that it was better to look angry than scared, she let it burn as it would. "Majesty, I can't tell you how sick I am of having this harpy fly at me with one false accusation after another."

"I'm sure," Tchazzar said. "I was

tired of it myself because you convinced me she was mistaken. But you know how to command the spirits of the air, and it was a great wind that ruined the supplies."

"Great winds have been known to blow of their own accord in the middle of great storms," Jhesrhi said, doing her best to sound scornful. "Is that all there is to the charge against me? That, and Halonya's spite?" If so, then maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

But the Red Dragon said, "No, milady. Actually, there is a little more. You see, much as I resisted them, I'd already begun to have doubts about you. You'd … disappointed me in certain respects. And when I shared those

doubts, the wyrmlady convinced me to set a spirit to spy on you. If it reported you were behaving as you ought, as I profoundly hoped you were, that would ease my mind. And if it reported something else, well …" He shrugged.

Inwardly Jhesrhi cursed herself for not fleeing as soon as she killed the spined devil. "And what has your spy reported?" she asked.

"Nothing," Tchazzar said. "It didn't keep its rendezvous with the wyrmkeeper who called it out of the Hells."

"Then we're back where we started," Jhesrhi said. "There's not a particle of evidence against me, just a jealous snake dribbling venom in your ear."

“The fiend was invisible,” Halonya said. “It would take someone with knowledge of the wicked arts to detect and kill it.”

“Not if it simply slipped its leash and went home,” Jhesrhi said. “Those of us ‘with knowledge of the wicked arts’ understand that happens from time to time. Majesty, I’ll point out *again* that there isn’t a trace of proof to support these slanders, and then I’ll entrust myself to your sense of justice.”

“Actually,” Tchazzar said, “there might be a *smidge* of evidence. Hold up the item for everyone to see.”

One of the wyrmkeepers in Halonya’s entourage stepped forward, shook out a piece of gray cloth, and raised it high.

Jhesrhi felt a jolt of alarm as she recognized the cloak she'd worn the night she destroyed the spinagon. Someone had evidently searched her quarters and found the garment where she'd tucked it away in the bottom of a trunk.

"It is yours, isn't it?" Tchazzar asked. "I believe I saw you wear it shortly after we met."

Jhesrhi wouldn't deny it, then, not in so many words. "It does look like mine, Majesty. But so what?"

"The creature sent to watch you was a spinagon. If it threw its quills at someone wearing this garment, they would have left holes with burned edges in the wool." Tchazzar looked at the

dragon priest. “Stick your fingers through so people can see where they are.”

Jhesrhi forced a smile. “If there’s one thing Your Majesty knows about me, it’s that I often conjure fire.”

“But I’ve never seen it burn your clothes.”

“I wasn’t always as good at my craft as I am now.”

“That makes some sense. It would make more if I’d noticed the holes before. Or if the cape hadn’t still been damp when Halonya’s man found it, like you’d recently worn it out in the rain.”

Jhesrhi’s heart was pounding so hard that she feared Tchazzar’s keen draconic ears would hear and that the sound

would agitate him further. "Majesty, you're shrewd enough to understand that the appearance of guilt can be manufactured."

"That argument is starting to appear as threadbare as the cloak."

"Majesty, I'm the one who—" She remembered that he didn't want to be reminded, even obliquely, that he'd twice needed her to save him. "I mean … I know how I've 'disappointed' you. I've disappointed myself too. You can't imagine how much I wish we were … further along. But still, you know I've given you more than I could ever give to any other. You know that if you'll just be patient, our time will come."

"Slut!" Halonya shrilled. "When her

lying tongue fails, she dangles her body in front of you!"

"Yes," Tchazzar said, "I'm afraid that is what she's doing." Tears started from his slanted, golden eyes and cut channels in the gore on his face. To Jhesrhi, the sudden display of unabashed misery was even more frightening than his naked anger or the smug way in which he'd toyed with her and watched her squirm.

"And how can you deceive and torture me," Tchazzar continued, "when you know I love you? When I gave you everything! When you were one of the only two people I trusted! I should kill you!" He twisted to glare at Hasos. "And the false knight who vouched for you!" His gaze jumped to Nicos

Corynian. “And the treacherous counselor who brought you to Chessenta in the first place.”

Tchazzar sprang up from the throne. “I should clean out this whole corrupt, ungrateful court and start fresh!” he shouted. “Finish the liberation of Chessenta by wiping out the cruel, greedy dastards who oppress it from within! The people will sing me hymns of praise! They’ll laugh and pelt you with stones and dung as you crawl naked and bleeding to the gallows! They’ll—”

“Oh, for the love of all the gods,” Shala said.

Tchazzar gaped at her, for the moment at least, seemingly less furious than dumbfounded that anyone had dared to

interrupt.

"And lest there be any doubt," the former war hero continued, "I was referring to the *real* gods. I'm willing to stick up for them even if these cowards won't." She indicated the high priests with a contemptuous flick of her hand.

"You've gone mad," Tchazzar said.

Shala sneered. "Coming from you, that's comical. No, Majesty, I'm not insane. I'm just bored with your tantrums. Will it bring this one to an early end if I confess that I killed the spina-whatever-it-was?"

"You couldn't have!" Halonya said.

"Don't be stupid," Shala said. "I've killed far more dangerous creatures in my time. You were there for some of it.

On this occasion, I was inspecting the battlements. I noticed the fiend wandering around, and it attacked me. So I disposed of it."

"And then didn't bother telling anyone?" asked Zan-akar Zeraez.

"To be honest, my lord," Shala answered, "it didn't occur to me that the brute was lurking there to watch Lady Jhesrhi's apartments from above. I thought it was there to spy on me or maybe even kill me. I figured the wyrmkeepers had summoned it on His Majesty's or Lady Halonya's orders. So you can see why I didn't think I could do myself any good by reporting what had happened."

"But you're not a sorcerer or a

priest!" Halonya snarled. "You couldn't have seen an invisible devil."

Shala snorted. "I evidently know more about the supernatural than you do, prophetess, not that that comes as any great surprise. There are talismans that confer magical abilities even on thoroughly mundane people like me. Here, let me show you."

Moving without any particular haste, Shala opened the pouch on her belt and brought out a ball the size of her fist. The object was so black that it scarcely looked solid or even three dimensional. It was more like a hole punched in the substance of the world. She tossed it into the air, and, floating, it started circling her body in a lazy sort of way. People

exclaimed in surprise.

"The Crown Jewel of Chessenta," she said.

"Then it's mine," Tchazzar said.

Shala shrugged. "I admit I was surprised that you never asked me to hand it over. For after all, you're *supposed* to be a god. I figured that if that were true, you *must* know of it, even though it didn't come into existence until after you disappeared. I assumed you meant for me to keep it as my family always has."

"You were mistaken," the dragon said.

Meanwhile, Jhesrhi watched the confrontation in an agony of guilt and indecision.

She understood why Shala was claiming that she'd killed the spined devil. The warrior had decided it was only a matter of time before Tchazzar turned on her in any case, so she was willing to endanger herself to protect the one person at court who could sometimes persuade the dragon to behave sanely and humanely and who was secretly working to forestall the coming war.

Jhesrhi couldn't refute that bleak logic, but she was loath to let others risk themselves on her behalf. Hasos had gotten away with it, but he hadn't spoken defiantly or disrespectfully. Shala had, to say the least.

Jhesrhi didn't know how to intervene,

but she meant to try. She took a breath and drew herself up straight. Apparently glimpsing the change in her posture from the corner of her eye, Shala shot her a quick but ferocious glare that froze the half-formed words inside her.

"Well, I think I deserve to keep it," the warrior replied to Tchazzar. "You ousted me from the throne. You forced me to break Ishual Karanok's sword. The jewel can be my recompense."

"Give it to me now," Tchazzar groweled.

"If you insist," Shala said. And the black sphere hurtled straight at Tchazzar's head.

Halonya screamed. Tchazzar leaped aside, and the jewel missed. As it

started to turn, presumably to make a second pass at him, he leaped off the dais and charged Shala.

Retreating, she reached into her sleeve and snatched out the throwing knife she'd kept hidden there. Darkness rippled inside the steel, a telltale sign of the death magic that Jhesrhi also felt like a pang of headache. Shala lifted the flat, leaf-shaped blade for a cast.

Tchazzar spat fire. It was a puny flare compared to the mighty blasts he spewed in wyrm form, but it caught Shala in the face and she reeled. The dagger tumbled from her hand. The jewel slowed down, curved away from Tchazzar, and drifted back in her general direction.

The living god closed with Shala and

backhanded her across her square, blistered face. Her knees buckled and he caught her by the forearms with red-scaled fingers. His claws pierced her clothing and the flesh beneath. He opened a mouth full of fangs and cocked his head to rip the side of her neck.

"Are you sure?" Jhesrhi called.

Tchazzar looked around. "What?" he snapped.

"I just thought, what you're about to do would be very quick, wouldn't it?"

The dragon took a breath. "You have a point." He flung Shala to the floor, grabbed the black gem out of the air, and stared at it until it stopped trying to float back out of his grip. Then he glowered at the nearest guards. "You! You were

apparently asleep when the bitch tried to kill me. Have you awakened sufficiently to take her to the dungeons?"

As the soldiers dragged Shala away, Jhesrhi couldn't judge whether she'd done a good thing or a bad one. Maybe all she'd accomplished was to consign her rescuer to a long, excruciating death by torture, for surely Tchazzar had taken measures to ensure that no one would liberate a second prisoner from his cellars. Yet she couldn't have stood idly by and watched an ally be slaughtered.

For the moment, she decided, all she could do was make sure that Shala's act of self-sacrifice didn't go in vain. And deliberate self-sacrifice it had surely been. The soldier couldn't possibly have

believed that the gem and the knife, potent weapons though they were, would prove capable of slaying the Red Dragon.

Tchazzar started pacing around the chamber, peering into one face after another. Looking for signs of disloyalty, no doubt. Fearful of the potential consequences of cringing, people met his gaze as best they could.

Jhesrhi put on a mournful expression. "Majesty," she said.

Tchazzar turned. His teeth looked human again. His fingers showed only a hint of scales, and his nails were only a trifle long. Jhesrhi supposed that was something. "Yes?" he asked in a gentler tone than she'd previously heard from

him that day.

"May I have your permission to depart?" she asked. "I can be gone by sunset. It goes without saying that I won't carry away any of the gifts you gave me, so I won't need long to pack."

Tchazzar blinked. "What?"

"I assume Shala Karanok's actions have exonerated me. Still, I *have* disappointed you, and you don't trust me. So it would be wrong and selfish for me to stay. You need deputies you know to be dependable and true, especially on the eve of war."

He looked back at her in silence for a moment. Her heart sank as she decided that her instincts had failed her. She *shouldn't* have pushed and obliged him

to make a choice that very instant.

But then he strode to her. Up close, he smelled of the blood that covered him, and of smoke and burning too. "No," he said, "no, no, no. You *don't* have my permission to depart. What you have is my heartfelt apology. Obviously Shala was our traitor all along, not you, never you." He grinned. "Fortunately when a woman tries to assassinate you in open court, it pretty much answers any lingering questions concerning her true allegiance."

"No!" Halonya wailed.

Tchazzar sighed and turned in her direction. "My dear, stubborn daughter —"

"Think about it!" Halonya jabbered,

scurrying closer, her gaudy, voluminous vestments flapping and her amulets and necklaces swinging and clinking together. “The witch still had the wet cloak hidden in her quarters! It has to mean something!”

“Why?” Tchazzar asked.

Jhesrhi could have laid out that particular chain of reasoning for him. But although Halonya apparently had a sense of it, she seemed unable to articulate it. “Because!” she sputtered.

Stiff with reluctance, Jhesrhi lowered herself to her knees in front of Halonya. She bowed her head like a humble petitioner awaiting permission to kiss the bejeweled, curling toe of the other woman’s slipper.

“High Lady,” she said, “I beg your forgiveness. For whatever it was I did that first turned you against me, and for every unkind word I’ve spoken since. I know you’re wise and good, and that your person is sacred. I know our god wishes us to be friends. Yet it’s been hard for me to let go of my ill will. Maybe I’m the one who’s jealous.”

Halonya gaped down at her. Never in a dozen lifetimes would she have expected this, which was part of the point.

Tchazzar smiled at Halonya. “My lady?” he said.

Though still trembling with frustration, the priestess was prudent enough to give the living god what he

manifestly wanted. She drew a hissing breath and, in a half-strangled voice, said, “Of course I forgive you, Jhesrhi. Sister. All I ever wanted was to be sure you were loyal to our master.”

Tchazzar released the gem, and it started to float and circle him as it had Shala. Then, either forgetting or not caring that Jhesrhi found it difficult to be touched, he took hold of her with his bloody hand and lifted her to her feet.

Then he wrapped one arm around her, the other around Halonya, and drew them both against him. “At last!” he said. “At last.”

Jhesrhi’s stomach churned. She felt as if she had to shove him away or puke, and strained to keep from doing either.

Meanwhile, Halonya gave her a glare that promised their feud wasn't over.

Jhesrhi had already been sure of that, just as she knew there were a dozen other ways the conspiracy could unravel. And it almost certainly would if it had to continue much longer.

Gaedynn, she thought, Aoth, Khouryn, where are you?

* * * * *

Balasar watched Nellis set up a wooden tripod. The telescoping legs had runes carved into them and, at the point where they met, supported a leather bowl.

Slowly, with a sort of exaggerated, ceremonial care, the Imaskari

ambassador set his crystal orb in the socket. Then he paced around the tripod widdershins, shifting his hands into a new position then freezing and crooning one line of an incantation with every step.

Nearby, Jemleh used his cane to draw a curve of silvery glimmer in the air. He sketched an oval, and once it was complete, more shimmer flowed inward from the edges, until it looked like a hanging mirror.

Biri opened her waterskin and spilled a dash of water on the cavern floor. Whispering, she swept her wand of congealed cloudstuff through vertical strokes that made it appear she was encouraging the liquid to rise up.

Eventually it turned to mist and did precisely that. Vague shapes formed and dissolved within the swirls of vapor.

When their preparations were complete, each wizard peered and muttered at his or her own preferred mode of scrying until Balasar felt like he was going to explode with impatience. Finally Jemleh turned and said, "I'm sorry, dragonborn. Divination still isn't working. I'm almost certain Gestanius laid down enchantments to block it."

Nellis lifted the orb from its bowl. "I agree."

"Me too," Biri said. Her miniature cloud drifted apart and disappeared.

Balasar scowled. "All right. We can't see them, but that doesn't mean we can't

reach them. We know more or less where they were when the ceiling fell."

"Unfortunately," said Jemleh, " 'more or less' isn't good enough when a wizard is shifting himself through space. Either the magic won't work at all or it's likely to stick whoever attempts it inside solid rock."

"Then we'll have to tunnel," Balasar said. "I assume you have spells that can move a lot of stone quickly."

"To an extent," Jemleh said. "Again, it would be helpful if we knew exactly in which direction to dig. We would also need to proceed carefully enough to prevent another collapse. But that's what we'll do if you so direct. This is ultimately your expedition. The empress

ordered me and my people to assist Sir Medrash, Sir Khouryn, and you."

Balasar grunted. "Medrash is the leader. That's why we need to get him back."

"Can we talk alone for a moment?" Biri asked.

"If you want to," Balasar said.

They moved off several paces, in the general direction of Jemleh's floating mirror until the gleaming oval crumpled in on itself and flickered out of existence.

"I know you refuse to believe Medrash and Khouryn are dead," Biri murmured, "and I'm with you. I refuse to believe it too."

"Good."

“But we’re running a race,” she continued. “We’re trying to kill Gestanius in time to prevent a war Tymanther can’t win. You should ask yourself what Medrash would want us to do.”

“Curse it, he’s my clan brother and my best friend! I can’t just abandon him … or Khouryn either.”

“We just have to hope that the branching passage goes somewhere. If it does, Khouryn will find a way out.”

“You’re assuming he and Medrash can fend off the quicksilver dragon and its servant creatures all by themselves.”

“If any two warriors can do it, they can.”

“You’re also assuming that the rest of

us can keep to the right path without a dwarf to guide us."

"You said yourself that there's some reason to think these Imaskari know their way around underground. And I've seen signs of it myself. They're not Khouryn but they're not useless either."

Balasar closed his eyes and took a long breath. Then he turned back toward Jemleh and Nellis. "Change of plans," he said.

* * * * *

Peering from behind a gnarled little pine tree, Gaedynn watched the shadowy figure sitting atop a granite outcropping. He saw better at night than most humans —or else practice had made him better

at spotting and interpreting what could be seen—but still, it wasn't the first time he'd wished for eyes that defied the dark like Khouryn's or, better yet, Aoth's. Or on further consideration, maybe not. That weird, blue glow would mar his good looks.

He covered a yawn. Staying awake for his own watches and somebody else's too was starting to wear on him. But it had to be done, especially since he hadn't yet taken Aoth into his confidence. He wasn't sure why, except that the particular problem just felt like his conundrum to solve.

The shadow rose and disappeared down the other side of her perch.

A surge of excitement washed

Gaedynn's sleepiness away. He rounded the pine and scrambled up the outcropping. There was no path on that side of the rock, and under duress, he might have admitted that he wasn't quite as expert at creeping around in the mountains as he was at sneaking through a forest. Still, he fancied that he made it to the top of the stone with a minimum of noise.

He moved more quietly still when he set his feet on the path Son-liin had taken. He figured he needed to. He drew an arrow from his quiver and laid it on his bow.

The person awaiting Son-liin was doing so at a spot where the narrow, twisting trail widened out into a

relatively broad and level place. The mountain walled in the site on three sides and dropped away in a sheer cliff on the other.

The place was far enough from camp that no one there would see or hear the pair. Gaedynn was glad they wouldn't feel a need to whisper. He wouldn't have to sneak so close to eavesdrop.

The scrawny genasi slouching in the shadows had round, slumping shoulders. The pale blue glimmer playing along the lines on his face and hands indicated that he was a windsoul. Gaedynn was fairly sure the fellow was Yemere but wasn't certain until he heard his voice.

"Well," the noble said, "thanks to that wretched medusa and his map, we got

here faster and with fewer losses than I wanted."

Son-liin didn't answer. Gaedynn wasn't surprised. He was no sorcerer, but since the day his father handed him over to the elves, he'd seen more than enough magic to guess the young stormsoul might be sleepwalking or in some comparable state.

"But everything can still work out," Yemere continued. "I'm going to warn Vairshekellabex that we're coming. You're going to do your best to convince everyone to approach his lair via the north trail, and when the ambush begins, you'll start shooting firestormers. I won't score as many points as I would have if I'd destroyed the expedition all

by myself, but I'll still do all right."

Inwardly Gaedynn spit the foulest obscenity in his considerable repertoire because Yemere was obviously talking about playing *xorvintaal*. That meant he was a dragon wearing human form, like Tchazzar, and a challenging foe for Gaedynn to tackle alone, to say the least.

But he had to. If he slipped away to get help, Yemere might be gone by the time he came back.

He switched his arrow for one of the few remaining enchanted ones, stepped into the open, aimed, and loosed.

Evidently glimpsing his attacker from the corner of his eye, Yemere started to pivot. Then the shaft plunged into his chest. Gaedynn wasn't sure he'd hit the

heart, but if not, he'd at least pierced a lung.

Yemere fell back against the curved stone wall. At the same instant, black spikes that looked like thorns stabbed up through his skin. The effect started around the arrow and moved outward, down the wyrm's limbs and up into his head. It was as if brambles were growing and snaking their way through his flesh.

He thrashed for a moment, then sprawled motionless. Gaedynn stayed put and shot several more arrows into what he hoped was a corpse. Son-liin simply stood and looked down at Yemere as though awaiting further instructions.

Then Yemere began to grow.

In fact, it was a flailing explosion of growth, as hammering wings and a lashing tail burst into being and everything else thickened and lengthened. Gaedynn reached for another enchanted arrow, then registered how Son-liin was still standing motionless right next to the transformation. Yemere's convulsions were likely to smash her flat or swat her off the cliff without the wyrm's even intending it.

Gaedynn ran to the stormsoul, grabbed her, and dragged her backward. "Wake up!" he shouted. He didn't really expect it to do any good, and it didn't seem to.

As he hauled her to safety, Yemere completed his metamorphosis. In his

natural form, the dragon had phosphorescent blue eyes and gray scales that glinted in the moonlight. The spines that grew under the lower jaw and behind the head somewhat resembled a beard and hair. Gaedynn was relieved to see that at least the creature hadn't shed his wounds by altering his shape. The arrows still hung from his body, and the thorns still jabbed out of his skin, although they looked considerably smaller since Yemere was so much bigger.

"Kill him," the dragon snarled.

Son-liin wrenched herself out of Gaedynn's grip, snatched her knife from its sheath, and stabbed at his belly. Caught by surprise, he still managed to

twist. He didn't avoid the thrust entirely, but since it didn't catch him squarely, the blade skated along the reinforced leather of his brigandine.

He drove a punch into Son-liin's jaw. As she staggered and fell, Yemere opened his jaws.

Gaedynn leaped aside. The dragon's breath weapon pounded the spot his target had just vacated like a huge, invisible club, denting the hard-packed earth.

Then Yemere seemed to surge forward. Gaedynn knew—or a part of him did—that the wyrm hadn't actually changed position. But suddenly his long face—specifically, the slanted, glowing eyes—appeared so close that they were

all he could really see, or at least, all that he could focus on. The world seemed to tilt and turn as vertigo assailed him.

"Corellon!" he gasped.

He was no mystic, and no downpour of divine power answered his call. But perhaps the name of the Great Protector helped him focus his will. In any case, the ground settled beneath his feet, and he wrenched his eyes away from the dragon's stare.

Yemere roared and rushed forward. He came fast but hobbled nonetheless, his wounds clearly paining him. And scurrying backward, Gaedynn managed to keep ahead of him.

Perhaps deciding that, in his current

condition, he was no quicker or more agile than his foe, Yemere stopped where Son-liin still lay stunned. He poised a clawed forefoot over her body. "Surrender," he said, "or I'll crush her."

Gaedynn laughed. "I was game to try to help her. I'm not going to commit suicide for her." With a flourish, drawing attention to the motion, he reached to pull another enchanted arrow from his quiver.

Possibly fearing what that shaft might do, Yemere didn't bother following through on his threat. He simply charged again, and if he trampled Son-liin in the process—Gaedynn couldn't tell—it wasn't deliberate.

Gaedynn saw that he wouldn't have

time to nock, draw, and loose. As the dragon struck at him like a serpent, he sidestepped and thrust the arrow like a dagger at the side of his adversary's head. But his arm couldn't match the lethal power of a bow, and the shaft snapped on the reptile's scales. The magic inside discharged itself in a crackling flash that stung his fingers.

Recognizing that he had no hope of regaining the distance that archery required, he dropped his bow and snatched out his short swords. They didn't do him a lot of good. Yemere pressed him so relentlessly that it was all he could manage just to dodge and duck the creature's gnashing fangs, snatching talons, battering wings, and

whipping tail. Striking back was rarely possible, and when he could, his blades didn't bite deep enough for it to matter.

And though the space, like a small arena with one wall missing, had appeared roomy enough when he arrived, it now seemed completely full of dragon. He repeatedly found himself nearly pinned against the stone or about to be shoved off the drop. Then it took an even riskier, more desperate evasion to stave off death for another heartbeat or two.

He struggled to think of a stratagem that could save him. Nothing sprang to mind.

But then two beams of dazzling light stabbed down from the sky. They burned

into Yemere's back, and he roared and convulsed. The roar cut off abruptly when Eider dived out of the dark, thumped down on the dragon's neck just behind the head, and ripped out a big chunk of flesh with her beak. She spit it out immediately, possibly because it had thorns in it.

Yemere collapsed, and Eider sprang clear before the huge, spasmodic body hit the ground. Jet swooped down with Aoth and Cera on his back.

Gaedynn watched Yemere for another moment, satisfying himself that, jerks and twitches notwithstanding, the wyrm really was finished. Then he hurried over to Son-liin.

Somewhat miraculously, considering

all of Yemere's lunging and whirling around, she remained uncrushed. In fact, she shakily sat up as he approached, animation and bewilderment in her face. "What happened?" she groaned.

Gaedynn started to answer, realized he was so winded he was probably going to wheeze, and took a moment to catch his breath. "That's Yemere," he said, nodding in the direction of the carcass. "As you may notice, he was actually a dragon and using his talents to control you and make you do things to endanger the rest of us. But you'll be all right now."

Eider padded over to Gaedynn with a griffon's uneven gait. He ruffled the feathers on her neck. "Good girl," he

said, “good girl.”

“That she is,” said Aoth, dismounting. “And you’re lucky. Taking on a dragon all by yourself was cocky even by your standards.”

Gaedynn grinned. “Actually that aspect of the situation caught me by surprise. It would have been helpful if the fellow with the spellscarred eyes had noticed what the whoreson really was.”

Aoth shrugged. “They don’t ordinarily catch shapeshifters because shapeshifting’s not an illusion. Be glad we heard Yemere roar.”

“Oh, I am,” Gaedynn said, “although if necessary, I would have finished him off somehow.”

“I’m sure,” said Cera dryly.

Aoth took another look at Yemere’s body, whose final shudders were subsiding. “The hide looks just the same as the hide of the dragonspawn that attacked us in the Eagle’s Idyll.”

Cera murmured a word that set the head of her golden mace glowing, so she, too, could see the body clearly. “In other words, it gleams like steel,” she said in a somber tone.

“That makes sense,” said Aoth. “From what I’ve heard, steel dragons are one of the kinds that like to go around disguised as men or elves.”

“But they’re metallics,” Cera said. “I wouldn’t expect them to take any part in Tiamat’s filthy game.”

Gaedynn grinned. “Sunlady, forgive me if this is contrary to the dogma of your faith. But good is never as good as it’s supposed to be. Although evil is often every bit as bad.”

“If we can return to practical matters,” said Aoth, “the important thing is that if it was Yemere who tried to kill us in Airspur, then there’s reason for hope that Vairshekellabex doesn’t know we’re coming.”

“Yemere didn’t think he did,” Gaedynn replied. He left off scratching Eider, and the griffon twisted her head and gave him a reproachful look. He snorted and resumed petting her. “He was going to fly off tonight and tell him all about it. If I hadn’t stopped him.”

“Yes,” said Aoth, “you’re a hero. Understood. Remind me to buy you a mug of ale someday. Meanwhile, shall we head back to camp?”

“Let me fetch my bow,” Gaedynn said. He retrieved it and was glad to discover that Yemere hadn’t stepped on it either. He grinned at Son-liin. “How about if Eider and I give you a ride back? She doesn’t have her saddle, but I can keep you from falling off.”

Son-liin smiled. “I’d like that.”

He held one of their bows in either hand and guided Eider with his voice and knees alone, not that the griffon really needed guiding for the short flight back to camp. Getting the weapons out of the way made it easier for Son-liin to

sit behind him and wrap her arms around him.

"Ever flown before?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"There's nothing like it. You'll probably come away from this little jaunt craving a winged steed of your own."

After that, she was quiet for several heartbeats. Taking in the view, he assumed, or as much of the vague, black masses of the mountains and valleys as a person could make out in the dark. Then she said, "What made you think I was under a spell?"

"I grew up wandering and hunting in the wild too. Not exactly this kind of wild, but still. I figured you must have

learned to handle yourself better than you have been lately. Otherwise, you wouldn't have survived. I also overheard when you told Cera you'd mysteriously forgotten your father's warning about traveling the gorge with the blue mist at this time of year."

Son-liin grunted. "But you were so … scornful. I thought you blamed me for everything. That you hated me."

"I assumed that whoever was tampering with your mind, he was taking steps to make sure no one found out. I wanted him to believe that one person he *didn't* need to watch out for was me."

"Well, you're a good pretender."

Gaedynn grinned. "You should learn too. There's not a more useful skill in all

the world.”

EIGHT

25 Eleasis, The Year of the Ageless One

The glow of Medrash's blade dimmed. He grunted in annoyance. It took only a small exertion of his paladin abilities to make the steel shine. But the need to do so repeatedly was gradually depleting the mystical strength he might need in a

fight. And he and Khouryn did have to fight whenever pale, eyeless beasts sprang out of holes or dropped from the ceiling.

But the only alternative to making light was blindness, and that was no option at all. Medrash breathed slowly and deeply, blowing out frustration and worry and summoning fortitude and reverence to take their place. When he felt the Loyal Fury's regard turn in his direction, he slashed at the air. The blade flared brighter.

Unfortunately that didn't make the view in front of him any less ominous. Several paces ahead, the floor of the broad passage he and Khouryn were currently traversing rose like a steep

hillside.

"I'm not sure this is the right way," Khouryn said. "Let's take another look at what's behind us."

Peering around for potential threats, they retreated the way they'd come, to the carcass of the last beast to attack them. It had looked like a huge, furless, malformed bat, but had crawled instead of flown and had sucker rings all over the inner surfaces of its wings. Tiny chittering scavengers scurried away from the body as the dwarf and dragonborn approached. The torn flesh already smelled of decay.

"This is far enough," Khouryn said, keeping his voice low.

"You don't really think you missed a

branching tunnel, do you?" Medrash replied just as softly. "You just wanted to go back far enough so that if the quicksilver dragon's lurking at the top of that slope, it won't be able to overhear us."

"You're right," said the dwarf. "Although that won't help if it oozes after us through another seam in the rock. But I think that if it actually has set up at the top of the rise, it'll stay put for a while. Do you agree that it's probably up there?"

"Definitely," Medrash said. "The dragon's servant creatures haven't stopped us. Maybe it doesn't expect them to. Maybe they're just supposed to soften us up or give the wyrm a better

idea of what we can do. At any rate, the rise is the perfect place for the wyrm itself to ambush us. When we've clambered partway up, it'll stick its head over the edge and blast us with its breath."

"Which is unfortunate," Khouryn said, "because we *have* to climb the slope. If there is a way out, that's it. The question is can you do anything to keep us alive while we try?"

Medrash frowned and reviewed all the feats he'd learned to perform by channeling Torm's might. "Yes. Let's start with a blessing. If we're stronger, we'll get to the top of the slope that much faster."

He drew on his god's power once

again. It seemed to pour down from high above and well up inside him at the same time. A tingling surge of vitality washed the weariness and soreness out of his muscles. His thoughts focused into a sort of fearless clarity. Khouryn worked his massive shoulders and flashed his teeth in a grin as he felt the same effects.

"All right," the sellsword said. "Let's do it."

They hiked back to the foot of the rise. Inspecting it anew, Medrash decided that parts of it were so steep that he'd never make it up without using both hands. He'd never make it without light either, but fortunately his broadsword had a martingale to bind it to his wrist. He let

the weapon dangle from the leather loop, and he and Khouryn began their scrambling ascent.

It was more difficult than he expected. Some of the rock was soft. It crumbled when he clutched it or set his foot on it, then pattered down the slope. Hanging as it was, the sword kept bumping his leg in an irritating way.

But the chief problem was that in such an attitude the blade didn't light up nearly as much area as when he'd held it aloft like a torch. Yet it was important that he spot the quicksilver dragon as soon as it appeared; otherwise it stood an excellent chance of killing Khouryn and him before he could react. Keeping his eyes moving, moving, always

moving, as his clan elders and masters-of-arms had taught him, he watched the murk at the top of the rise.

Although he knew it was just an illusion of sorts, it seemed to take forever for Khouryn and him to clamber halfway up. Then they were perfectly positioned for an ambush, too high to retreat easily, yet still well below the top. If the dragon truly was up there, it was really going to make its move—

There! A stirring in the darkness! Medrash drew breath to bellow Torm's holy name then saw at the last possible moment that nothing solid, nothing real, had moved. A shadow had simply shifted as the sword-lamp swung and bounced with the motion of his body.

Easy, he thought, easy. Don't waste your magic. Don't let the foul creature know you're ready for it.

He hauled himself upward, through another stretch where it was essential to grip the rock with both hands to make any progress. The claws of his off hand made little scraping noises on the granite, and his armor clinked.

Then Khouryn shouted, "There!"

Medrash peered, still couldn't see anything in the darkness overhead, and looked at the dwarf instead. Khouryn was pointing at the left side of the ledge. Medrash looked there and still didn't really see the wyrm. But he *felt* it as a kind of festering malevolence.

That was good enough. He gathered

his god's righteous anger and his own and hurled them like a javelin.

White light flared at the top of the rise. Seared by the power, patches of its gleaming hide charring, the quicksilver wyrm thrashed and roared.

But it didn't drop, and after a moment, when the light faded, it arched its neck over the top of the slope in a way that reminded Medrash of an angler about to drop his hook in the water. And Khouryn was the fish directly underneath jaws that were spreading wide.

Medrash channeled more of Torm's power, clenched his fist, and jerked his arm backward. Made of silvery shimmer, a huge, ghostly gauntlet appeared in the air, grabbed hold of the

dragon just behind the head, and yanked.

Medrash knew he hadn't channeled enough of Torm's power to break such a huge creature's neck or tumble it from its perch. But the unexpected jerk at least pulled its head out of line just as the bright vapor of its breath weapon hissed out of its mouth.

Unfortunately, though, the smoke wasn't like an arrow that had to be aimed precisely. It would still wash over a substantial area, and for a moment it looked as if the thickest part of it would still stream over Khouryn. But, risking a fall, he swung himself to the side and avoided all but the edge of the misty blast. And though he cried out anyway, Medrash dared to hope that

he'd escaped mortal or crippling harm. In the gloom, he couldn't actually tell.

Nor could he take the time to find out. He'd been lucky, but he couldn't continue to contend with the dragon while clinging to the slope. He had to make it up onto the ledge quickly and simply hope Khouryn would join him in due course.

Luckily, since a foe had actually appeared, he could use another of his gifts to close the distance. As Khouryn retched, Medrash reached out to Torm, felt the power flow, then scrambled upward. His progress was twice as fast as before because he was flying as much as climbing, or at any rate, skittering like a bug. The Loyal Fury's power negated

his weight.

The effect lasted just long enough for him to heave himself onto the shelf. Instantly the quicksilver dragon snapped at him. He jumped back from the attack and almost fell back over the edge, and the huge fangs clashed shut short of his body.

He tried to riposte, but he hadn't quite found his balance, and he was too slow. The wyrm snatched its head out of the distance and raked with its claws. He dodged and managed to slice one of its toes. But the wound was only a shallow nick.

The fight continued in much the same way for a few more desperate moments. He ducked and dodged attacks that

otherwise would surely have torn him apart or mashed him flat. Occasionally he scored with a thrust or cut but never to any great effect. Even when he drew on Torm's power to lend force to a stroke or to glue his foe's feet to the ledge for an instant, his sword never reached a vital spot.

He doubted he could last much longer in that way. Either he'd make a mistake or he'd start to tire and slow, and the wyrm would destroy him. The realization didn't frighten him, not with his god's blessing clarifying his thoughts and bolstering his resolve. But it was maddening to know that Khouryn, Balasar, and his other comrades might die, that Tymanther itself might

ultimately fall to Tchazzar's army, if he didn't find a way to prevail.

Jaws open wide, the dragon's head hurtled at him. He dropped low, planting his off hand on the shelf. The wyrm's head shot over him, and bellowing, channeling Torm's might into the stroke, he cut at the underside of his adversary's neck.

The blade sheared deep but not deep enough. Blood showering from the new wound, the dragon still didn't falter. It instantly raised a forefoot to stamp. Medrash scurried, and his enemy pivoted, compensating. Realizing he wasn't going to get out from underneath, he raised his point to impale the extremity when it hammered down.

But it didn't. The quicksilver dragon jerked and snarled, and Medrash finally managed to scramble clear. He looked across the ledge. Khouryn had made it to the top and buried his battle-axe in the creature's haunch.

Together they started to work the dragon in much the same way that the dwarf had taught the vanquisher's troops to fight the giants and other enormous denizens of Black Ash Plain. When the wyrm's attention was on one warrior, he concentrated on defense. When its attention shifted to his comrade, he switched to offense.

The tactic by no means guaranteed victory when it was just the two of them fighting in what amounted to a maelstrom

of snapping fangs, slashing claws, pounding wings, and a whirling, battering tail. But it took enough of the pressure off Medrash that occasionally, just for an instant, he had room in his head for a flicker of something besides the need to strike the next blow or keep his adversary from scoring on him. And at those moments, he hated the filthy dragon.

That was no surprise. His clan elders had raised him to hate dragons, and Skuthosin and the lesser wyrms who'd served him had done nothing to soften that animosity. But the loathing he was feeling had a different edge to it, and eventually he realized why.

Though he despised dragons of flesh

and blood, he couldn't deny that Bahamut had aided him repeatedly. And by rights, the metallic dragon in front of him ought to worship the Lord of the North Wind and uphold the principles he embodied. It *offended* Medrash that the creature manifestly didn't.

As though in response to that realization, he felt another pulse of vileness throbbing from his foe like a demon's heartbeat. Then he saw a chance to drive his blade into its flank, and the urgency of that swept all other thoughts away.

He landed the cut, but it didn't slow the dragon down. Both spattered with the blood still streaming from the creature's neck wound, both panting, he and

Khouryn fought on until the tip of the wyrm's whipping tail swatted the dwarf and bounced him off the cavern wall like a ball.

Medrash caught his breath. But demonstrating the hardiness of his people, Khouryn rolled to his feet, sidestepped the tail when it pounded down in a follow-up attack, and chopped it with his axe.

Still, when he spoke, his voice grated with pain. "Whatever magic you've got. Now."

Medrash realized the sellsword was right. They couldn't win with steel alone. Maybe if he'd had his shield, and Khouryn his mail, but they didn't. It was a marvel they'd lasted as long as they

had.

But Medrash had *been* using his gifts. He'd struck with supernatural strength and floated runes of light, symbols to ward a paladin and his allies and hinder any enemy, in the air. What was left to try?

He felt another throb of nauseating wrongness, almost like a nudge. The nudge reminded him of the palpable taint that had clung to Skuthosin and, even more important, to the members of the Cadre.

"I have an idea!" he gasped. "Keep the wyrm busy!"

Khouryn instantly rushed in and attacked. Despite its hugeness and all its other advantages, the startled dragon

flinched back from the almost demented assault.

That gave Medrash a chance to back away from the fight. He hated leaving Khouryn to fight alone, but it was necessary.

He focused his resolve and drew down all the power he could hold. What he was about to attempt would exhaust his mystical gifts. If it didn't work, he and Khouryn would indeed be left to battle without so much as a glimmer of magic to help them.

He shifted his sword to his off hand, raised his gauntleted fist high, and whispered a prayer very much like the one he'd improvised on the drill field outside of Djerad Thymar, on the day the

warriors of the Cadre came to ask his help.

The cleansing power of the exorcism locked on to something inside the quicksilver dragon, enabling Medrash to perceive it more clearly. That made his muscles bunch with revulsion, but it also revealed beyond question that the quicksilver wyrm bore Tiamat's stain. It wasn't *exactly* like the possession that had corrupted the dragonborn cultists, but it was close enough to bolster his confidence that he could drag it out.

He willed it forth, and slowly, twisting this way and that, five columns of vapor, each a different color but all noxious and filthy looking, boiled up out of the dragon's body. The creature didn't

seem to notice. Perhaps Khouryn did, but if so, he was too busy fighting to comment.

The tops of the pillars of mist formed themselves into vague shapes like crested, wedge-shaped heads. As one, they swiveled in Medrash's direction. Two points of light flowered inside each.

Meanwhile, the quicksilver dragon struck like a snake. Khouryn tried to meet the attack with a chop, but the wyrm stopped short. Its action had been a feint intended to draw just such a response, and it stretched its neck again and seized the axe in its fangs. Khouryn bellowed and somehow managed to rip the weapon free, though the effort sent

him staggering off balance.

The smoky heads on their long necks arced over both their host body and Khouryn to strike at Medrash. He didn't know exactly what would happen if one of them succeeded in touching him, but he assumed it would spoil the exorcism at the very least. Refusing to allow the threat to disrupt his soft, measured recitation, he sidestepped a surge of blue vapor, ducked the green, and retreated from the white. The white head splashed to shapelessness when it struck the surface of the ledge but reformed as the misty neck raised itself once more.

The quicksilver dragon leaped backward, unfortunately without stretching the smoky extrusions past the

breaking point. Perhaps the move caught Khouryn by surprise, or maybe he was just too winded to chase the creature. He faltered for the first time, while the wyrm inhaled deeply and cocked its head back. Its breath weapon had renewed itself, and it was about to give the dwarf another blast.

"Torm says, get out!" Medrash bellowed. And one by one, writhing like parasites that a healer and his forceps were plucking from under a patient's skin, the roots of the misty columns floated free of the quicksilver dragon's scales.

The uprooting made the smoke-things attack more furiously than ever, and as Medrash ducked, dodged, and shifted his

sword back into his dominant hand, he suspected he might pay for his success with his life. But as he cut at the black head, it and its counterparts burst into formlessness, then vanished entirely.

Perhaps unable to swallow its venom back down, the quicksilver wyrm twisted its head and spat it over the drop. That left it vulnerable, or vulnerable for a dragon, anyway. Khouryn charged with his axe raised high.

Medrash detested wyrms, but he still yelled, “Stop!”

* * * * *

Aoth had found a spot where the stony ground rose before dropping away in

another cliff. If a fellow crawled up to the edge on his belly, as he, Mardiz-sul, and several other genasi had done, he had cover. He could look out and survey the Old Man's Head—which did indeed vaguely resemble a head with a smear of white and gray cloud at the top to represent the hair—without too much concern that a sentry would spot him spying.

Mardiz-sul took a long breath then said, "Well, it doesn't look too bad."

Aoth smiled. "That's the spirit. But actually, it's even worse than it looks. There's an earthmote floating near the summit. It has the clouds and some sort of enchantment to hide it, so you can't see it, but I can."

The resolution in the firesoul's face twisted into dismay. "And that's where Vairshekellabex has his lair?"

"There's some kind of bridge connecting the mote and the mountain, so I assume that at least some of the wyrmkeepers are over there too."

"But doesn't that make things … difficult?"

Aoth certainly thought so but knew he had to project confidence for the firestormers' benefit. "It's just a tactical problem we need to solve. Come on. Let's all go chew it over."

They crawled backward until it was safe to stand. Then, the more fastidious among them brushing themselves off, they rejoined the rest of the company on

the saddleback where they'd left them to rest, munch the tart, wild blueberries that were ripening there, and await developments. They all gave Aoth and his companions inquiring looks of one sort or another.

They're nervous, said Jet, speaking mind to mind. *Now that it's actually dragon time.*

I can fix that.

Or make it ten times worse, the griffon replied.

"All right," called Aoth, "listen up! Here's the nut we have to crack." He laid out the situation.

As he'd expected, it daunted a fair number of them. Eyes grew wide. People whispered to their neighbors. He

drew a flash and a whine from the head of his spear to startle them silent and keep them from feeding one another's fear.

"We can do this," he said. "Remember, the griffons can fly, and so can the windsouls among us."

"Captain Fezim is right!" Son-liin said, and Aoth didn't doubt her support was sincere. She was eager to accomplish the mission, both for its own sake and to prove she wasn't the liability she'd appeared to be on the first stage of the journey.

But he also suspected that, in a way, she was striking a pose for Gaedynn's benefit. She'd been spending a lot of time with him since he'd unmasked

Yemere, and Aoth fancied he could almost see her watching from the corner of her eye to see if she impressed him.

"I agree," Cera said through blue-stained lips. "The Keeper of the Yellow Sun wants us to do this, to save the innocents who would otherwise die when the dragon and his servants venture forth again. The god will watch over us every step of the way."

"And I revere the gods and their priestesses," an earthsoul said. "Don't think I don't. But …" He spread his brown, gold-etched hands.

"But you know dragons make terrible foes," Aoth said. "Fair enough. But remember, we're firestormers. We're pretty terrible ourselves. We beat the

horrors the blue mist birthed. We beat the medusa and the orcs. We killed one wyrm already, even though he was hiding in our midst. We can do this." He took a breath. "Especially since we have a weapon you don't know about."

Mardiz-sul frowned. Flame flowed along one of the golden lines above his right eye. "Why did you wait until now to tell us?"

"Because the creature doesn't make a comfortable traveling companion," Aoth replied, "and because I'm not proud of having such a being in my service even to achieve a worthy goal. But the time has come when we truly need him." He turned to Cera. "Is he nearby?"

She nodded. "When we drew near to

the Old Man's Head, I prompted him to follow closer."

"Then pull in the rest of the line."

Cera removed the shadow gem from the pouch on her belt. Genasi close enough to get a good look muttered at its uncanny appearance. *They haven't seen anything yet*, said Jet.

Cera gazed into the stone. Her jaw clenched when the inside of it flickered blue. The connection to an unnatural thing such as Alasklerbanbastos was still hurting her, even though she did her best to hide it. Feeling guilty, Aoth told himself that at least she shouldn't have to suffer it much longer.

For a while, nothing else happened. Among the genasi, tense expectation

began to give way to puzzlement and doubt. Then the dracolich crawled through the gap between two weathered granite outcrops, and several firestormers cried out in alarm.

Aoth wasn't alarmed, exactly, but he was surprised. The deterioration of Alasklerbanbastos's physical form had progressed remarkably since he'd seen the undead dragon last. It appeared every bit of hide had fallen or rotted away.

For a moment he wondered about that. But the growing fear among the firestormers pushed the thought out of his head. Genasi were shoving and stumbling back from Alasklerbanbastos and grabbing for their weapons. The

riding drakes were screeching and hissing. Aoth had to prove he was in control before outright panic erupted.

He walked toward the dragon with no more concern than a master would show before a well-trained dog, or at least that was how he hoped it looked. “Down on your belly,” he said.

Sparks sizzling and popping on his flayed, mangled, charred, and generally ravaged body, reeking of both corruption and the imminence of lightning, Alasklerbanbastos glared … and stayed as he was.

“The sunlady still has your phylactery,” said Aoth. “She’s proved repeatedly that she knows how to use it. Do we really have to punish you again?”

“I wish you would,” Gaedynn said. “I always enjoy seeing it.”

His raw, slimy countenance and glazed, sunken eyes a mask of hatred, the dracolich lowered himself to the ground.

* * * * *

Khouryn clung to Praxasalandos’s back. Every time the dragon took a stride, it jostled him and hurt him but not as much as if he were trying to hobble on his own two feet, assuming that was even possible. Slamming into the wall had bruised him from head to toe and possibly cracked some bones. He hadn’t felt the damage too badly when he was intent on fighting, but he felt it after.

The quicksilver wyrm stepped down

into a depression in the granite floor. That gave Khouryn's body a somewhat harder bump than usual, and despite himself, he hissed as pain stabbed up his back.

Praxasalandos twisted his head around to look at him. The slash in his neck had finally scabbed over, but it still looked like the nasty wound it was. "I am so sorry," the dragon said. Although he could have sung bass in any dwarf or human chorus, he had a relatively high voice for one of his kind, and the wretchedness suffusing it left no doubt that he truly did feel guilty.

"It's all right," Khouryn said. "If we had a true paladin, instead of this charlatan, he could heal us." To

emphasize his point, he manufactured a hacking cough, which then turned into a real one. His lungs, throat, and nose still ached from inhaling a bit of the dragon's breath, just as his eyes still stung and watered from the touch of the fumes.

Trudging along at Praxasalandos's side with his dimly glowing sword held aloft, the ropy scales at the back of his head bouncing a little with every step, Medrash snorted. "Torm's grace works best to comfort the virtuous. That means black-hearted sellswords are pretty much out of luck."

Khouryn chuckled, then wished he hadn't, because that hurt too.

As was often the case, Medrash's levity proved to be a fleeting thing. "You

know I'll help you as soon as my gifts renew themselves," he said. "Or if we reach our friends first, the healers there can do it." He turned his head and gave the dragon a scowl. "Assuming they're capable of it."

"I swear to you, they're fine," Praxasalandos said. "I couldn't harass them and stalk you at the same time. If they haven't wandered off the proper path, you'll be reunited with them soon."

Medrash grunted.

The wyrm sighed. "You still don't like me or trust me, do you, paladin?"

"To be fair," Khouryn said, "up until recently, you were trying to kill us."

"I know," said Praxasalandos. "I deserve your doubt and your scorn. But I

was under a spell. Sir Medrash, you know that better than anyone since you're the one who set me free."

"How did the magic get hold of you?" Khouryn asked.

"It must be woven into Brimstone's explication of the Great Game," the quicksilver dragon said, "because as soon as I heard it, I was lost."

"And without that trick, no one would care?" Medrash asked. The light inside his blade faded to the merest trace of pale phosphorescence.

Praxasalandos hesitated. "I didn't say that. In its cold and selfish way, *xorvintaal* is beautiful." His voice took on a dreamy, faraway quality. "Fascinating. The multiple levels of

play. The subtlety. There are many dragons who'd succumb to the allure without any need for coercion. But not me! I pray to Bahamut to blind my eyes and shear my wings if I'm lying."

"You can prove what you say," Medrash said. "But with deeds, not words."

"Just tell me how," Praxasalandos said.

"First," said the dragonborn, "guide us to Gestanius."

"Of course."

"Second, help us take her by surprise in the most advantageous circumstances possible. As far as she knows, you're still her faithful guardian. You can lure her to where we need her to be."

Praxasalandos hesitated again and Khouryn thought he knew why. Gestanius was likely cunning enough to see through many a deception, and stronger than the quicksilver dragon as well. If she realized her supposed helper was trying to betray her, Prax was unlikely to survive.

But after a heartbeat, he said, “Yes. I’ll do that too because I have to atone.”

They hiked on in silence for a while. Despite his pains, or maybe because of them, Khouryn dozed then jerked awake again just in time to see the light of Medrash’s blade go out entirely. Blind, the paladin faltered.

Prax crouched. “I can carry two as easily as one,” he said. “Climb onto my

back.”

“Otherwise,” said Khouryn, “it’ll take us forever to join back up with the others.”

Medrash sheathed his sword. “Very well,” he said.

NINE

27 Eleasis, the Year of the Ageless One

As Jet neared the earthmote, Cera tried not to imagine arrows streaking up out of the dark. She knew her companions were formidable. After all she'd experienced since the day she met the man to whose waist she was currently clinging, she was starting to feel reasonably

formidable herself. Still, it took only one lucky shot to kill any human being, windsoul, or even a griffon. Of everyone flying in the vanguard, only Alasklerbanbastos was all but certain to survive any initial attack, and he was a potential threat to the rest of them.

But he wouldn't be if she stopped fretting and attended to her job. She let go of Aoth with her right hand, slipped it into the pouch on her belt, and gripped the shadow stone.

The contact she so established wasn't psychic communication like Aoth shared with Jet. It was more raw and primitive than that. But as usual, she felt the dragon's arrogance, cruelty, and the filthy, unnatural force that sustained his

existence, and they grated on her like the rasp of fingernails on a slate. She also felt Alasklerbanbastos's stab of disgust at her touch and the slavery and indignity it represented.

Jet, Eider, and the dracolich set down on the stony floating island—more or less like a mountaintop with the rest of the mountain scooped out from underneath it—without either of the sentries loosing arrows at them or raising the alarm. Aoth had said he'd chosen a line of approach that neither wyrmkeeper could see well, and darkness and stealth had done the rest.

The six genasi set down too, and the winds that had carried them made Cera's vestments flap and tousled her curls

where they stuck out from under her helmet. She and Aoth swung themselves off Jet's back, and the familiar immediately lashed his wings and flew away to pick up two more riders. When Gaedynn and Son-liin dismounted, Eider followed.

Gaedynn laid an arrow on his bow then, keeping low, led Son-liin and the windsouls in the direction of the bridge. Their first task was to capture it and keep any wyrmkeepers on the far side from crossing.

Whereas Aoth and Alasklerbanbastos's job was to slaughter the priests on the near side. They hoped to divest Vairshekellabex of allies before he even realized he was

under attack.

The warmage and the undead dragon skulked toward the vague forms of the five standing stones the wyrmkeepers had raised and then magically twisted into serpentine shapes. No doubt it was a shrine of sorts, and the priests dwelling on the earthmote had built their huts and pitched their tents around it.

Aoth skulked into one hut, and Alasklerbanbastos slipped his head under a lean-to. Cera could picture the spear thrusts that followed and the piercing and shearing as the dragon's fangs nipped sleeping men to pieces.

Much as she'd come to detest wyrmkeepers—the wretches had tortured her, after all—Cera was still

happy to be excused from such merciless brutality. She was quite happy that it was her chore to hold Alasklerbanbastos's leash from far enough away that he couldn't suddenly spin around and strike at her.

A soft, brushing noise came from the left. Her heartbeat accelerating, she pivoted in that direction and poised her buckler in front of her. She remembered Aoth telling her that she tended to hold it too close to her body and shifted it out a little farther.

No matter how she peered, she couldn't see a threat, no stray wyrmkeeper creeping or wandering around in the night. She wished she could summon Amaunator's light, but of

course that would give away everything.

When no arrow flew at her and no magic flared, she decided her nerves were playing tricks or else she'd heard a night bird or some small nocturnal animal.

She turned back around and located Alasklerbanbastos slinking in the dark, and the sound came again, a bit louder and, therefore, surely, closer.

She jerked around and still couldn't see anything amiss. But instinct screamed that she was in danger.

She backed up a step, and the clouds that veiled the earthmote parted for a moment. Selûne's light gleamed and rippled on a flat *something* flowing over the ground. At first Cera thought it was

streaming liquid or a swarm of beetles scuttling as one. Then, perhaps comprehending that she'd spotted it, it heaved itself upward.

It was a hollow dragon. The billowing, sagging, flopping way it moved showed there was nothing inside the leathery hide. It reminded Cera of the costumes that a line of Tchazzar cultists sometimes wore to parade through the streets of Luthcheq. But those constructions were meant to look like red dragons. The sparks that started popping and sizzling and the smell like an approaching storm that mixed with the reek of corruption suggested that the empty wyrm was in some sense a blue.

It was a blue like Alasklerbanbastos,

whose flayed appearance she finally understood. Still retreating, she gripped the phylactery and focused her will to force him to call off his creation.

But before she could pour sunlight into the gem, pain stabbed out of it, up her arm and into her head. She staggered and the stone nearly slipped from her fingers.

I didn't know he could turn it around! she thought, feeling outraged as a child who'd caught a playmate cheating at a game. He never showed me that he could!

White light flickered inside the hollow dragon, at the back of the mouth and behind the empty eye sockets. Realizing what was coming, denying the

all-but-paralyzing pain, Cera flung herself to the side. Her attacker's breath, a dazzling bolt of lightning, blazed past her. Thunder boomed.

Now, Cera thought, now I'll get the lich. But the empty dragon lunged at her, and she had to focus on avoiding that attack … and the next one … and the next.

* * * * *

Aoth was creeping from a hut to the tent next to it when the thunder boomed. As he spun around, he assumed that some idiot stormsoul had seen a threat and, forgetting that everyone was supposed to keep quiet, exerted his elemental powers in response.

But in fact, it was worse than that. Alasklerbanbastos had turned away from his appointed task and was bounding back the way they'd come, toward the edge of the earthmote and Cera. For some reason, he evidently believed she couldn't hurt him with the phylactery anymore, and he no doubt had good reason for his confidence. For a heartbeat Aoth thought of Chathi, who'd died because he hadn't anticipated another clever creature's secret plan.

He started to run after Alasklerbanbastos then realized he'd never catch him. He pointed his spear and shouted a word of power.

A spark leaped from the point of the weapon, hurtled through the dark, struck

the top of the dracolich's tail, and exploded into a booming burst of flame. Alasklerbanbastos jerked and stumbled but then ran on.

Aoth spun his spear over his head and called floating, spinning blades of amber light into being, right in front of the undead wyrm. Alasklerbanbastos couldn't stop or turn in time to avoid them, and they sheared chunks of rotting flesh away.

"Turn and fight me!" Aoth shouted. "Otherwise I'll tear you apart!"

Alasklerbanbastos kept charging toward Cera. He was already close enough to attack her with his breath or a spell but apparently wanted to use fang and claw instead. Another bound or two

would close the distance.

* * * * *

The bridge linking the earthmote to the mountaintop was a slender, arching, granite span seemingly extruded from the bedrock. It had low, rudimentary parapets and, as far as Gaedynn could tell, no tangible understructure to keep it from collapsing under its own weight. Magic had made it and sustained it.

One of the earthmote's two sentries had stood watch on that end of the bridge. His corpse lay facedown with Son-liin's arrow sticking out of its spine. Gaedynn took another look around, making sure nothing was happening that required his attention,

then squatted and started rummaging through the wyrmkeeper's possessions.

One of the windsouls made a little spitting sound.

"What?" Gaedynn asked, whispering. "We have time and if I find anything, I'll share."

"We're not doing this for loot," the firestormer said.

"That doesn't mean you have to shrink from it in horror," Gaedynn replied.

Son-liin chuckled and a thunderclap split the night. Somewhere behind them, something flashed.

His eyes wide, blue gleams flowing rapidly through the lines that etched his skin, the windsoul who'd taken exception to Gaedynn's sellsword ways

looked as if he'd forgotten all about them. "It's too soon!" he said. "We aren't all on the earthmote yet. We can't be. There hasn't been time!"

"That's war for you," said Gaedynn, rising and reaching for an arrow. "Nothing—" A burst of fire flared in the dark. Specifically, the dark off to the left, near the edge of the floating island. He felt a jolt of alarm.

Vairshekellabex's cave was in the center of the earthmote. If he'd come out sooner than expected, but Aoth and Alasklerbanbastos had met him with blasts of battle magic and dragon breath, that wouldn't have been too bad. But the flashes and noise were coming from the wrong spot for that to be the case.

It was just a guess, but Gaedynn suspected Alasklerbanbastos had devised another ploy to steal back his freedom, and Aoth and Cera were trying to subdue him. If so, then there was no one in position to deal with Vairshekellabex when he emerged as, roused by all the commotion, he surely would.

"Hold the bridge," Gaedynn said. "Make sure no enemy sneaks up behind you. I have to go."

He stalked toward the heart of the earthmote. Spinning lengths of yellow light appeared on the left. Aoth's magic, most likely. Gaedynn had seen him use the spell before.

He heard a scuffing footstep and spun

around, drawing his bow as he did. Son-liin was trotting to catch up with him.

"I told you to defend the bridge," he said.

"There!" she said. She showed him where she meant by pivoting and loosing an arrow of her own.

He turned. Flaring into existence when he hadn't been ready, the various lights had robbed him of some of his night vision. But he could still see a wyrmkeeper folding up around the shaft Son-liin had driven into his guts. Plainly Aoth and Alasklerbanbastos hadn't disposed of all the wretches before the plan started falling apart.

Two more figures rushed out of the murk, one human, the other not. When

Gaedynn saw its leathery wings and lashing tail, he cursed. Aoth had scouted the earthmote from afar but hadn't noticed any abishais. Either the devil hadn't been out in the open then, or one of the dragon priests had just conjured it out of Tiamat's infernal domain.

Gaedynn shot an arrow into its chest. The attack would have dropped any man, but the creature kept coming. The tail lifted, ready to sting, and the abishai spit a misty spray that was all but invisible in the dark.

Gaedynn sprang to the side. At the same moment, red light flared at the edge of his vision, and white shone and crackled in answer. He surmised that the wyrmkeeper had struck at Son-liin with

a spell, and she'd retaliated with her stormsoul abilities. But he couldn't tell to what effect and didn't dare look away from his own opponent to find out.

The spray spattered down beside him, sizzling on stone and earth. Though it had missed, the fumes that suffused the air stung his exposed skin and, more seriously, his eyes. Tears welled up and blurred his vision.

Then he realized he didn't see the abishai anymore. Either he'd simply lost it in the haze and the dark or it was using a supernatural ability to befuddle him. He thought of the stinger reared to stab into his body and pump it full of vitriol.

Nocking another arrow, he backed up and looked for the creature. For a

moment, he still couldn't find the abishai. Then something, a footfall so soft or a scent so faint he wasn't even conscious of it, or maybe just pure instinct told him his foe was still in front of him and somewhat to the right.

He pivoted, drew, and seemed to be aiming straight at Son-liin. If the abishai wasn't really between them, or if he simply missed the creature, he stood an excellent chance of killing the genasi girl instead.

He told himself he neither jumped at shadows nor did he miss. He shot, the arrow thumped home, and the abishai became visible in mid-pounce. It convulsed and Gaedynn had little difficulty sidestepping it and avoiding

the scrabbling claws and whipping sting. For after all, they were no longer targeting him. The abishai was fighting the one truly invincible foe. Its spasms subsided and it lay motionless.

Gaedynn spun toward the other fight. Except it wasn't a fight anymore. The dragon priest was down. With a grunt of effort, one foot planted on the body, Son-liin pulled her long hunter's knife from between the wyrmkeeper's ribs.

"I was going to say," the genasi panted, "that I'm not under an enchantment this time. I can help you with Vairshekellabex."

Gaedynn grinned. "Not that I'm admitting I need help, but pick up your bow and hurry if you're coming."

They trotted onward, slowing down and skulking when they neared the cave. No one and nothing else accosted them, so maybe Aoth and Alasklerbanbastos had killed most of the wyrmkeepers. But they didn't encounter any other genasi either.

Are the other firestormers still coming, Gaedynn wondered, or did the lights and sounds on the earthmote spook them? By the Hells, just getting on a griffon's back was a daunting prospect all by itself if you'd never done it before. But if the firestormers were balking, maybe Jet could bully them into following through.

The black mouth of the cave yawned in the eastern face of a big, granite knob.

Peering around a smaller outcropping, Gaedynn barely had time to look at it before a deafening roar echoed from within. Then the same deep, sibilant voice chanted rhyming couplets in what he assumed to be the draconic tongue. Blue sparks fell from the air. For a moment the darkness was something he felt rather than saw, like cool silk sliding on his skin, and the cries and other muddled sounds of combat coming from behind him were a metallic taste in his tongue.

"Oh, good," he said as the synesthesia faded. "Vairshekellabex is a sorcerer."

A huge head at the end of a serpentine neck came twisting out of the cave to peer about. Its jaws seemed

disproportionately large in relation to the rest of the skull, and yet the rows of crooked, protruding fangs likewise appeared grotesquely oversized in relation to the mouth. Spiky growths dangled under the lower jaw to make a kind of beard.

"He's big too," Son-liin whispered. Despite her attempt at bravado, she wasn't quite able to keep a tremor out of her voice, and Gaedynn didn't blame her. Judging from the head, Vairshekellabex was twice as big as Yemere had been and likely twice as old and powerful too.

Gaedynn's first impulse was to try to sink an arrow into Vairshekellabex's eye. But that one attack probably

wouldn't kill him. No single wound ever seemed to stop a wyrm. Yet his first effort, whatever it was, would give away his location.

He drew one of the two remaining enchanted arrows from his quiver and laid it on his bow. Then he stepped into the open, drew, and loosed.

As he intended, the shaft flew over Vairshekellabex's head, then vanished in a flash and a howl. A section of the cavern ceiling cracked apart, and banging and rumbling, the pieces rained down on top of the wyrm.

In fact, they drove his head and neck —which were still the only parts Gaedynn could see—to the floor and buried them. But the granite shards

began to shift immediately. Plainly Vairshekellabex was still conscious and trying to drag himself free.

Gaedynn cursed and shot the last of the magic arrows. It, too, exploded into light and noise, and it brought more chunks of granite raining down to add to the pile. But afterward the mound continued to shift. Pieces spilled off the top and clattered down the sides.

Son-liin drew an arrow of her own. "Grumbar," she said, "please help me." She kissed the broad-head point of the shaft, and a glimmer flowed through the golden lines in her skin.

Then she shot the arrow into the pile, and golden light rippled through it as well. Grinding and crunching, the chunks

of stone bunched more tightly together. Some hissed as one fused to another.

"Nice work," Gaedynn said.

"It still won't hold him for long," Son-liin replied. "I'm much more of a stormsoul than an earthsoul. I did what I could, but …"

Her eyes rolled up in her head, and she pitched forward. Gaedynn caught her and laid her on the ground.

* * * * *

Up ahead, with Alasklerbanbastos rapidly closing on her, Cera jammed the shadow stone back into the purse on her belt. Her hand twitched toward the gilded mace hanging on her other hip, but then didn't grab it. She evidently

realized there wasn't time. Instead, she simply raised her arm high and swept it in an arc from east to west. "Keeper!" she cried.

Golden light blazed around her, and finally Alasklerbanbastos balked and recoiled from the sun god's holy power. So did a thing like an empty, flopping sack sewn in the shape of a dragon.

Aoth had been so intent on the dracolich that, his fire-kissed eyes notwithstanding, he hadn't noticed the other threat until that moment. It reminded him of the skin kites he'd fought in Thay and was certainly a product of necromancy, specifically of Alasklerbanbastos's necromancy. The undead creature had apparently flayed

his own rotting hide to make himself a servant.

Aoth ran around Alasklerbanbastos and put himself between the dracolich and Cera. The sheer drop at the edge of the earthmote was just a stone's throw behind him, limiting his ability to maneuver.

"Use the phylactery!" he yelled.

"He can use the link to hurt me too," Cera panted. "But if I concentrate—"

With a snap like a sail catching the wind, the empty dragon rushed into the light. Aoth started to pivot in that direction, but then Alasklerbanbastos surged forward too.

Aoth jerked back around and stepped to meet the dracolich. He thrust with his

spear and released much of the power stored within it, to infuse the thrust with destructive force and anchor himself to the ground, so his foe's momentum wouldn't fling him backward or bowl him over.

The spear stabbed deep into the wyrm's lower jaw. A white burst of power banged and flung scraps of decayed flesh, bone, and broken teeth through the air. Alasklerbanbastos stumbled to a halt but instantly raised a forefoot.

Aoth scrambled right to keep the undead dragon from clawing him, then sensed motion on his left. He glanced in that direction. Alasklerbanbastos's head had looped around toward him.

The dragon's gaze made his own head spin. Suddenly it was as though the floating island had flipped on its side, and he was falling into his adversary's eyes.

He focused his will on one of the tattoos on his chest and activated its magic. A surge of clarity and vigor washed his vertigo away, and he wrenched his eyes away from the wyrm's. It was only then that he could see his foe's jaws opening and the glow at the back of the mouth.

He dived forward. Lightning flared behind him, the flash illuminating the raw, reeking putridity of Alasklerbanbastos's body in all its ugliness.

Aoth landed on his knees. Alasklerbanbastos lifted a foot to stamp. His neck kept twisting to put Aoth in front of his jaws and eyes again.

Aoth scrambled underneath the dragon. At that moment it was the safest place. Bellowing, he thrust the spear up between the massive ribs. When he jerked the weapon out, black sludge spattered down from the puncture.

Alasklerbanbastos's legs flexed. Aoth realized his foe was about to take flight, and once that happened it would be impossible to keep the creature from turning his attention back on Cera. He rattled off words of power and swept the spear in an arc.

Tentacles of inky shadow burst out of

the ground. They wrapped around Alasklerbanbastos's hind feet and tail. While he had the creature immobilized, Aoth repeatedly drove the spear into his chest.

The dracolich snarled a rhyme in Draconic. Magic whined through the air and for a moment turned everything a sickly phosphorescent green. The black tentacles melted, and the steaming residue flowed down his limbs like oil.

Aoth ran toward one of Alasklerbanbastos's forefeet. Maybe he could nail the creature to the ground with his spear. But before he could reach the extremity, the dragon jumped away.

To Aoth's relief, though, Alasklerbanbastos didn't take to the air.

The wyrm just sprang away across the ground, uncovering him. Then he could see why. Jet and Eider had returned and were swooping and wheeling over the lich, crowding him, denying him the room he needed to take off.

Each griffon was carrying a pair of firestormers. The genasi were hanging on desperately, plainly too terrified to do anything more. One of them was screaming.

Aoth didn't blame the fellow. Alasklerbanbastos's wings were sweeping up and down. His tail swirled through the air. He struck like a serpent, his fangs clashing shut. It must have seemed impossible to their passengers that the griffons could dodge every

attack.

It was certainly impossible that they could do it for very long, not unless somebody gave Alasklerbanbastos something else to think about. Aoth called fire from his spear and slashed it down the dragon's flank like a sword.

Just die! he thought. I killed you before, when you were in a much stronger body than this. But then he'd had Tchazzar, Jaxanaedegor, and several other dragons fighting on his side.

As he dashed to interpose himself between the dracolich and Cera once more, it seemed to him that the phylactery was still the key. Cera could subdue their foe if she could only take the time to reassert her mastery of the

stone. But the hollow wyrm was still pressing her relentlessly, pushing her back parallel to the edge of the cliff. The unnatural thing lunged, then snapped and raked with fangs and claws of hardened hide, and she hit back with the mace of amber glow she'd floated in the air between them.

Aoth aimed his spear at the sack-wyrm and growled the first words of an incantation intended to tear it to shreds. Then he heard a thump, and the rocky ground jolted beneath him.

He looked around. Alasklerbanbastos had made another leap, away from the griffons and off the line that Aoth had closed with his body. Now there was nothing but clear space between the

dracolich and the priestess who had dared to chastise and control him.

Still chanting, Aoth resolved to turn his spell on Alasklerbanbastos. Then it came to him that there was a better tactic.

"Cera!" he bellowed. "Throw the stone! Over the side!"

Startled, she glanced over at him, then grinned and dropped the mace of metal and wood in her hand. She reached into her belt pouch, snatched out the shadow gem, and flung it into space.

Alasklerbanbastos froze. The empty wyrm did too, as though consternation had leaped from the mind of the creator to the creation.

"That's your soul falling into the

gorge," panted Aoth. "Your existence. Your liberty. You and your friend can stay up here and fight us, or you can go look for it."

Alasklerbanbastos roared. Then he ran at Cera. But when she scrambled out of the way, he didn't pivot with her. He simply pounded onward, leaped off the edge, and plunged out of sight. After a heartbeat, the empty dragon did the same, although, its loose folds catching the air, it fell more slowly.

That, said Jet, speaking mind to mind, *was actually a little bit clever*.

I thought so, Aoth replied.

Or at least it would have been if you'd come up with it sooner.

Aoth snorted. *You and Eider, stop*

loafing. Put your passengers on the ground and go back for the next four.

As the griffons did as instructed—and a watersoul dropped to his knees and puked—Aoth headed for Cera, who hurried to meet him. They hugged for a moment as best they could with weapons, shields, and armor in the way. Their gear clinked together.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine," she said, "except that I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "I'm the one—"

At their backs, toward the center of the earthmote, something roared.

"Curse it!" he said. "Come on!" He strode in the direction of the noise, and she followed.

Tiny flames rippling through the asymmetrical mask of lines on his face, Mardiz-sul scurried toward them. "That's Vairshekellabex!" he said.

"I imagine so," Aoth answered.

"But … we don't have our own dragon to pit against him anymore!"

"If we fight, we have a chance," said Aoth. "If we don't, we can be absolutely sure Vairshekellabex will kill us. So I recommend fighting. Collect those three"—he indicated the other new arrivals with a poke of his spear—"and come on."

He'd done his best to project toughness and determination, but inwardly he understood Mardiz-sul's dismay. Their situation was likely to turn

out bad. Vairshekellabex might already be on the wing, soaring overhead to blast the intruders with his breath. Aoth scanned the sky but didn't see the wyrm.

And when he and his companions reached the center of the floating island, he realized why. Vairshekellabex, or the front end of him, anyway, was evidently caught under the heap of fallen stone in the mouth of the cavern. Gaedynn stood watching with his customary air of insouciance, as if the gray's situation were faintly amusing but of no actual significance. Shielded behind an outcropping, Son-liin lay unconscious on the ground.

Cera crouched beside the girl.

"She's just napping," Gaedynn said.

“She strained herself. Some of us had to take up the slack when others weren’t where they were supposed to be. What was it, Alasklerbanbastos slipping the leash? Whoever could have predicted that?”

“Tell me what I need to know,” Aoth rapped.

Gaedynn’s flippant demeanor fell away. “You see we trapped the gray. But I can’t imagine it holding him for long. Right before the stone fell on top of him, he cast a spell. Something to make him stronger or faster, maybe, since it didn’t do anything else that I could see.”

“Right.” Aoth turned to Mardiz-sul and the other genasi. “Surround the cave entrance.” He pointed to the watersoul

who'd vomited, leaving stinking spatters of puke on the front of his brigandine. "Except you. You run to the bridge. Whatever happened there, our squad should have it under control by now. Leave one man to stand guard and fetch the rest. Everybody, move!"

The genasi burst into motion. The watersoul sprinted with the inhuman speed of his kind, as if an invisible current was sweeping him along.

Cera looked up from her examination of Son-liin. "She just fainted," the priestess said.

"Then leave her," said Aoth. "We have to get into position too and break whatever enchantment Vairshekellabex already cast, if we can."

He and Gaedynn positioned themselves squarely in front of the cave. The dragon was going to attack someone, and for the moment, it needed to be the warriors who had the best chance of surviving. Cera crouched behind a boulder off to the left. It would give her some protection without hindering her spellcasting.

His pulse beating in his neck, Aoth aimed his spear and chanted a spell whose purpose was to dissolve other enchantments. Cera murmured the start of a prayer.

Then the heap of stone fell in on itself. Vairshekellabex had finally succeeded in dragging his head and neck out the back end of it. A deep voice hissed a

word of command, and the whole mound shattered into bits of gravel, which instantly hurtled from the mouth of the cave like a thousand slung stones.

It was pure reflex that made Aoth raise his targe in time to cover his face and eyes. The barrage clattered on his armor, stung him all over, and sent him reeling backward.

He caught his balance and looked around. Grinning, Gaedynn was rolling to his feet with one bloody pock on his cheek and another on his chin. He'd plainly saved himself from worse by dropping flat, as Cera had by cowering behind her boulder. And everyone else had been standing to one side or the other of the barrage.

Aoth returned Gaedynn's smile. He surmised that they'd just experienced the result of the magic Vairshekellabex had conjured previously. It had been a spell of blasting prepared in advance, then triggered by a single word of command. Since it had been discharged, it was one less thing to worry about.

But when Vairshekellabex lunged out into the open, it became immediately apparent that there were plenty of other reasons for concern. One earthsoul yelped at the dragon's size and speed, or maybe at the sheer horrific grotesquerie of the jutting, tangled fangs.

Aoth took a step, shouted a word of power, and hurled crackling lightning from his spear. The dazzling flare

burned into Vairshekellabex's chest, and the gray threw back his head and howled.

Gaedynn loosed an arrow. The shaft stabbed into the underside of their foe's scaly neck.

Bobbing up from behind her stone, Cera stretched out her arm and said, "I pray for your holy light." A brilliant beam shot from her fingertips and stabbed a smoking, black-edged hole in one of the dragon's wings.

Mardiz-sul ran forward, shouted, and swung his sword at Vairshekellabex's flank. The blade burst into flame as it arced through the air.

And at that point, all the other genasi started fighting too, shooting crossbow

bolts and flinging javelins. Thank the Firelord, thought Aoth. Now we've got a chance anyway.

Vairshekellabex's tail whipped through the air. Mardiz-sul ducked barely in time to keep it from smashing his skull. But at the same moment, the wyrm lunged forward. He was coming at Aoth and Gaedynn, but one of the spines on the hock of his hind leg snagged the firesoul's sword arm, catching between two links of mail then popping free in a splash of blood.

Mardiz-sul froze in place like a statue. His red-bronze skin turned gray.

Meanwhile, Vairshekellabex cocked his head back, snapped it forward, and opened his jaws wide. Gray spew

blasted out, and Aoth and Gaedynn threw themselves out of the way.

The caustic spray hammered the ground but didn't splash like water. By the time it hit, it was already congealing, and it ended up as a freestanding web of interconnected globs, loops, and tendrils. Imagining the steaming, sizzling goo eating into his flesh and sticking to it at the same time, Aoth winced and roused the protective magic of another tattoo.

Then, spinning his spear through the necessary figure, he created a second such weapon made of rippling, multicolored light. It hefted itself as though an invisible warrior were holding it, threw itself at

Vairshekellabex's head, and guided by its creator's will, started jabbing.

Gaedynn shot a second arrow into the dragon's neck just as the first one fell out, the end of it charred away. If it meant the shaft had gone in deep enough to come into contact with Vairshekellabex's caustic spew, Aoth supposed that was a good thing. Although so far, it didn't seem to be slowing the gray down any.

Meanwhile, braving the lashing tail, stamping hind foot, and pounding wing that could have swatted him like a fly, an earthsoul scuttled forward to Mardiz-sul. He gripped the Bright Sword by the shoulder and jabbered something Aoth had no hope of hearing, not with

Vairshekellabex snarling, Firetormers screaming war cries and warnings, and all the rest of the cacophony. But maybe it was a charm or a prayer meant to help the earthsoul exploit his affinity with stone, because the red and gold washed back into Mardiz-sul's face, and freed from the bonds of petrifaction, he staggered backward with his comrade.

Vairshekellabex's forefoot snatched for Aoth. He sidestepped and tried to jab it but was too slow. The gray started to claw again, and another arrow appeared in his neck right beside the last one and the gory hole left by the one before that. He hissed and his talons fell short of the mark.

Aoth made the rainbow spear stab for

the throat as well. Vairshekellabex snarled a monosyllabic word of command in one of the Abyssal or Infernal tongues that filled a man with instinctive loathing even if he didn't understand them. The spear blinked out of existence.

Then the dragon's head jerked to the right. He opened his jaws and spewed his breath weapon. But the acidic slime arced high over the heads of any of the genasi on that flank and spattered the ground well behind him.

Aoth felt a vicarious surge of Jet's derision: *You missed us, wyrm!* Then the griffon focused his thoughts on his master. *We're back. Do you want us to keep ferrying genasi across or start*

fighting the dragon?

Get the firestormers off your backs and get Gaedynn and me on, Aoth replied. There was no point in sending the griffons for any more reinforcements. One way or another, the fight would be over before they could arrive.

The flying steeds swooped to land beside the same mass of granite that was protecting Son-liin. As Aoth created a shower of fist-sized hailstones to batter Vairshekellabex, Gaedynn turned and sprinted toward the outcropping. Aoth thought the archer was breaking away too soon, then noticed his quiver was empty. He couldn't have attacked again even if he'd stayed put.

Fortunately it was then that the

windsouls came flying in from the east, and if any of them hesitated before actually joining the fight, it was only for a moment. In a sense, their advent made up for Gaedynn's departure. They filled the gap in the rudimentary three-sided formation that was penning the dragon in.

But Aoth was still going to need someone on the same patch of ground that he was currently occupying, someone to brave the very worst Vairshekellabex could do and very possibly die as a result. And it was Mardiz-sul's bad luck to be the best hand-to-hand combatant among the firestormers.

"Bright Sword!" Aoth bellowed.

“Come here!”

Mardiz-sul sprinted toward him immediately, circling wide enough that Vairshekellabex was unlikely to kill him before he arrived. The same earthsoul who’d turned him from stone back into flesh and blood followed along a stride behind him. Eyes wide and body trembling, the watersoul in the vomit-spattered brigandine edged forward to join Aoth as well.

Maybe several warriors, standing together with Cera’s magic supporting them, had a chance of surviving. Aoth could only hope so because he needed them there whatever it cost them.

“Hold this ground!” he said, and Vairshekellabex’s head hurtled down at

them. Everyone tried to leap out of the way, but the earthsoul was too slow. The gray's crooked fangs snapped shut on him, and when the gigantic jaws lifted away, nothing remained but hands, feet, and blood.

Jet bounded into the open. The genasi that he and Eider had just carried to the earthmote followed him.

Aoth swung himself into the griffon's saddle. Responding to his will, his safety straps started buckling themselves to secure him in place. But Jet didn't wait on that. He lashed his wings and took to the air instantly.

On their way up, Aoth spotted Gaedynn and Eider above them. The skirmisher's mount carried additional

arrows, and he was shooting them at the dragon's neck as rapidly as he could, making it look like a pincushion. But he wasn't keeping his distance while he did it. Eider was diving and tearing at Vairshekellabex, flying on by, wheeling, and diving again.

That, Aoth decided, was the way to do it. He and Gaedynn needed to employ both their own best weapons and those of their steeds if they hoped to kill the seemingly unstoppable horror below them.

I like that plan, said Jet, sensing his intent. The familiar screeched, plunged at one of the gray's sweeping, leathery wings, and ripped gashes in it as he hurtled past.

As he wheeled, Aoth had time to cast darts of azure light. Then Jet furled his wings and swooped. Aoth charged his spear with chaotic force and struck when his mount did. A century of practice allowed him to thrust safely past Jet's body and pierce the dragon's back instead. Power flared and blasted the wound bigger.

Then Jet wrenched himself sideways. Vairshekellabex's gigantic teeth clashed shut just a finger's length beyond the tip of his left wing.

Aoth immediately sensed another threat, although he didn't know exactly what or where. *Watch out!* he said.

Prompted by either his rider's intuition or his own, Jet plunged lower.

Vairshekellabex's tail whipped over their heads.

Wings beating, the griffon climbed, seeking to regain the high air. He turned for another pass.

Vairshekellabex snarled words in the same grating, repulsive demonic language he'd used before. The griffon's black feathers and fur turned gray, and his body froze into immobility.

Jet spun end over end as he fell. Aoth closed his eyes to keep the whirling from impairing his concentration, rested his hand on the hard, ridged stone of his familiar's neck, and rattled off the words of a counterspell.

Countermagic wasn't a part of the comprehensive system of battle wizardry

he'd studied in his younger years in Thay. It was just an extra trick he'd picked up along the way, and at that moment, he was grimly aware that he wasn't nearly as good at it. But apparently he was good enough because Jet abruptly exploded into motion once again. Beating his wings, straining with every bit of his strength, the familiar pulled out of his fall.

Afterward his muscles shuddered and twitched. The residual pain of the two transformations and the extreme effort that followed bled across the psychic link and jabbed up and down Aoth's body. For a moment he felt as though he had wings growing out of his own back, cramping, throbbing wings.

We can retreat for a moment, he said. *Catch our breaths*.

A man might have answered with an obscenity, but even griffons endowed with an equivalent level of intelligence didn't grasp the concept. Still, Jet responded with a surge of disgust that conveyed the same message.

If we hold back, he said, *it just gives the wyrm a chance to try the same trick again*.

There is that, said Aoth. *Let's try this, then*. He visualized the sequence of moves, making sure the griffon understood it completely. Then Jet lashed his wings and hurled them forward, straight at Vairshekellabex's head.

When they were halfway to their target, Aoth hurled darts of crimson light. The dragon avoided them with a sideways curl of his neck. Then, jaws gaping, his head shot at his attackers. It was a move that would have surprised many an opponent. It seemed impossible that the creature could strike in such a blur of speed when he had to whip his head around in a horizontal arc.

But Aoth was ready. He pointed the spear, spoke a word of power, and a floating curtain of rippling rainbows burst into being. Vairshekellabex's head stabbed through it, and he roared and convulsed as the various magical effects—heat, cold, poison, madness—ripped at his body and mind.

As he jerked his head back out of the sheet of light, Jet beat his wings and flew over it. The familiar then extended his talons and plunged them into the side of Vairshekellabex's head just where it joined the neck. The sudden stop wrenched Aoth's body, nearly breaking his own neck, or at least it felt that way. He set the point of his spear ablaze with power and drove it into the gray's flesh. Jet clawed and bit.

Vairshekellabex raised a forefoot to swipe them to pieces as a man might brush away a mosquito. But he never completed the motion. Instead, he toppled forward, and Mardiz-sul and the other genasi in front of him scurried to get out from underneath. Jet sprang clear.

The dragon's collapse shook the ground, and he rolled and flailed for a while. The tail was especially energetic, at first whipping even more furiously than before.

But gradually all the spasmodic motion subsided. Wheeling over the gray, studying him, Aoth decided the creature truly was dead. As he let out a long breath, he wondered who had finally delivered the deathblow.

Me, of course, said Jet, furling his wings and swooping toward the ground.

Below them, the genasi started cheering. They, too, had concluded that Vairshekellabex was really finished, and for the moment, the exultation and sheer relief of victory possessed them.

There'd be time later to grieve for the several comrades who sprawled just as dead and mangled on the ground.

As Jet set down, Cera stood up from behind her rock. Aoth smiled to see her unharmed. Then Gaedynn and Eider landed.

"Why did you keep shooting for the neck?" asked Aoth.

"It was an experiment," Gaedynn replied.

Aoth shook his head. "An experiment?"

Gaedynn grinned. "A dragon's a big target, unworthy of my skills. I had to do something to keep from getting bored."

* * * * *

As he prowled back and forth and up and down, peering, always peering, Alasklerbanbastos reassured himself repeatedly that he couldn't possibly lose the phylactery, not in any ultimate sense. He was connected to it. He could feel it calling to him.

Still, it seemed to take forever to find it, and when he finally did, he saw why. Tumbling and bouncing down the steep wall of the gorge, the stone had landed in a drift of last year's fallen leaves, mostly burying itself in the process.

His forefoot shaking, he picked it up. Its folds billowing as the breeze caught it, the servant he'd fashioned out of his own hide and his own pain looked silently on like a priest assisting with

some esoteric rite.

And if it wasn't quite that, it was at least a moment of utter profundity. Aoth Fezim was a despicable maggot, but he'd also been right. The gem was Alasklerbanbastos's spirit. The key to existence and freedom for the most magnificent creature the world had ever seen. And finally that creature had it back.

High overhead, hoarse voices started cheering.

Nudged from his trance of near ecstasy, Alasklerbanbastos grunted. Vairshekellabex hadn't been as powerful as Tchazzar, Gestanius, Skuthosin, or himself, but he'd been old and crafty. It was almost inconceivable that Fezim,

the sunlady, and the firestormers had killed him without the help of their "tame" dracolich. Yet the cries of jubilation could signify nothing else.

Alasklerbanbastos decided it would be a short-lived celebration. While they were weary and their magic was depleted was the perfect time to strike at his enemies. He spread his wings, and they rustled instead of making the rattle of naked bone.

He'd had ample time to get used to that particular change since Fezim and his lieutenants had revived him in Calabastasingavor's body, but even so it made him pause and think.

He'd just regained so much that it would be easy to overlook the fact that

he had yet to recover *everything*. He still possessed only a fraction of the strength that was rightfully his.

In addition to which, the phylactery was vulnerable and would remain so whether he carried it with him or made some hasty attempt to conceal it. The only way to be truly safe was to hide it so well that no one would ever find it again.

So, he decided, retribution could wait for a little while. He'd seek out Fezim, Cera Eurthos, and their cronies soon enough.

He trotted a few steps, beat his wings, leaped into the air, and flew east. The skin wyrm tried to follow but couldn't keep up.

That was all right. The thing had served its purpose. As he left it behind, he laughed to imagine it mindlessly wandering the mountains and killing whomever it encountered, continuing, if only in a minor, random way, Vairshekellabex's campaign of terror against all who'd dared to encroach on his territory.

* * * * *

Gaedynn had heard of dragon caves that were vast mazes of tunnels twisting and forking through the ground for mile after mile. But Vairshekellabex's lair wasn't one of them. It couldn't be. The whole earthmote wasn't big enough to contain such a labyrinth, and in fact the

hollow within the central outcrop sloped down for only a little way before coming to a dead end.

The dragon's hoard, however, though it didn't take up as broad a section of the floor as greed might have led one to imagine, was still pretty much what all the tales, poems, and ballads said it ought to be. The explorers faltered and caught their breath when the light of their torches gleamed on silver, gold, and gems.

By sheer good fortune, Gaedynn happened to be standing next to the gawking windsoul who'd disdained him for searching the dead sentry's belongings. "It's actually sort of a shame," he said, "that you aren't in it for

the plunder."

For a heartbeat the genasi looked back at him as if he didn't understand the jape. Then he laughed a short, wild little laugh, scurried to an open chest, scooped up a double handful of coins, and let them fall back, clinking, through his fingers.

Across the chamber, other firestormers scrambled to get their hands on some of the treasure. Somewhat hesitantly, Son-liin moved to follow suit.

Gaedynn grinned. "I have a hunch you've never looted anything really valuable before."

The stormsoul smiled. "Not really."

"Stick with me, and I'll show you how it's done."

Peering this way and that, he led her around the other genasi to the back of the collection. He picked up a small, intricately carved ivory box, opened it, took out the ruby ring inside, and held it up to the light.

"Now this," he said, "is the kind of thing you want. Easy to carry and valuable enough to support you for the rest of your life if you live sensibly. Not that I'm advocating that. I recommend you sell it, squander the proceeds living like a princess, and then pillage something else." He put it back in the box and tossed it to her.

She nearly fumbled the catch. "You're giving it to me?"

He snorted. "Certainly not. Why in the

name of the Black Bow would I give away anything as valuable as that? You're claiming it as part of your rightful share. Don't let the box get banged up. That's valuable too."

She shook her head. "All right."

A cloak pin set with a big, black pearl and made of some strange, green metal —likely either a substance native to some other plane or the product of an alchemist's researches—caught Gaedynn's eye. He bent over to pick it up. "This one is mine, and I'll knife the son of a sow who tries to tell me different."

When he straightened back up, Aoth was standing before him, his blue eyes glowing in the gloom. He'd set aside his

shield and carried a wineskin in his off hand. Most likely he'd found it among the wyrmkeepers' belongings. He proffered it and Gaedynn took a swig of something red, lukewarm, and acidic. Awful, really, but at a moment like this, it would do.

"Thanks," he said, passing the wine to Son-liin. "It's about time you got in here. You'll miss out on all the best swag."

"It looks like there's enough to go around," Aoth replied. "Anyway, Cera and I found what we really need among the wyrmkeepers' sacred things: notes on how to disguise abishais as dragonborn. They should help us convince Arathane that Tymanther hasn't been raiding into Akanûl."

Gaedynn chuckled. “Ah, yes. In theory, that was the point, wasn’t it? In the midst of all this gold, I have trouble remembering.”

“Well, maybe it will come back to you on the flight back to Airspur,” Aoth replied. “We leave at first light, so get some rest.”

“ ‘The flight,’ ” Gaedynn repeated. “You make it sound like we’re parting company with the firestormers.”

“We are. We’re in a hurry, and I imagine they can make their way home without us.”

“I agree,” said Gaedynn, glancing around at the genasi. “They turned out to be tougher than I gave them credit for. Or maybe this little excursion toughened

them up. But don't you think Mardizsul's testimony might help us persuade the queen? He is a noble, after all."

"We'll sit him down and have him write it out."

"All right, then. If I need to make myself sleep, then give me some more of the swill." He turned to recover the wine from Son-liin, then hesitated.

He wasn't quite as perceptive at reading genasi expressions as human or elf ones. The patterns of glinting lines distracted him a little. But the stormsoul seemed to be working up the nerve to say something.

She swallowed. "You warned me that if I flew on a griffon, I'd want to do it again. Well, I do. I mean, I want to go

with you and be a sellsword too."

"It means leaving everybody and everything you know," Gaedynn said. "That's part of the reason to do it."

Gaedynn smiled. "It is, isn't it? I remember." He turned to Aoth. "We need new blood, and she showed she can handle herself tonight."

To his surprise, Aoth looked back at him with a certain sardonic cast to his expression. Since Gaedynn regarded himself as cleverer than most people, his captain included, it irked him a little that he didn't understand why.

And Aoth's next words didn't enlighten him. The Thayan simply turned to Son-liin and extended his hand. "Welcome to the Brotherhood of the

Griffon, archer. But don’t expect a griffon of your own right away. That could be years in the future, if you ever get one at all.”

TEN

28 Eleasis, the Year of the Ageless One

Jhesrhi surveyed the companies of warriors drawn up for review with a veteran's knowledgeable eye. Some men-at-arms stood at attention in straight lines with identical gear in their hands and on their backs. Others, including many of the sellswords, slouched, scratched their noses or their rumps, and were far more diverse with regard to

their weapons and armor. Peasant levies fresh from the fields carried axes made for chopping wood, or even sickles or hoes as often as not, and gawked at all that was happening with wonder and trepidation.

The disparities in equipment and deportment notwithstanding, in the aggregate, the various units of humans, genasi, and a sprinkling of other folk added up to a formidable army. And despite Jhesrhi's delaying tactics and the loss of Shala's organizational abilities, it was an army that looked ready to march. Jhesrhi assumed that Tchazzar was about to give the order until she noticed how his demeanor was changing.

At first, riding back and forth on a

white horse with red and gold trappings, the sunlight gleaming on his gilded armor, the war hero had been the expansive, enthusiastic monarch who'd initially charmed the realm. He'd chattered about dozens of topics, some relevant, some not, and joked with both officers and men-at-arms. Gradually, though, his mood darkened, for no particular reason that Jhesrhi could discern. He glowered at one or another of the units arrayed before him, then abruptly jerked the reins to turn his steed and rode on to the next without a word. Exchanging surreptitious looks of concern, his deputies and Queen Arathane's representatives rode along behind him.

Until eventually they all fetched up in front of the siege engineers and artillerymen, who stood before the long wagons bearing their towers and mangonels broken down for transport. A few men wore badges or amulets in the shape of scrolls to identify them as namers, priests of Oghma, god of knowledge and invention. Wizards newly added to that particular corps sported green tattooing on their hands; the old stigma had become a sign of royal favor. A couple of the arcanists smiled up at Jhesrhi, and she made herself smile back.

At the front of the group was an old, stooped earthsoul named Jarelamar, whose reputation was such that even the

Chessentans, with their high opinion of their own martial prowess, had agreed to put him in charge of that particular company. Bowing low, he said, “We’re ready to travel, Your Majesty.”

Tchazzar grunted. “Are you? Then tell me how you’re going to crack open Djerad Thymar.”

The elderly genasi cocked his head. “Your Majesty?”

“Am I speaking Aragrakh? I need to get into the dragonborn’s fortress quickly. Ideally before the end of summer. Tell me how you intend to accomplish it.”

Jarel-amar hesitated. “Majesty, I certainly recommend investing Djerad Thymar and prosecuting a siege as

diligently as we can. And who knows what opportunities we'll discover? But at the same time, we should be realistic. The place is a citadel like no other. It's more likely to fall to starvation than anything else."

"I agree," Magnol said. Akanûl's Steward of the Fire was a burly warrior with skin the color of brick. The lines running through it were duller than average, more copper than gold. Though of the highest quality, his arms and armor had a plain functionalism to them that reminded Jhesrhi of Aoth's and Khouryn's gear. "Surround the capital, lay waste to the rest of the kingdom, and eventually the dragonborn will have no choice but to surrender. But it's likely to

take a little time."

"I don't want their surrender!" Tchazzar snapped. "I want to exterminate them! Their crimes against our two peoples require nothing less! Or don't the genasi agree?"

Magnol and Zan-akar Zeraez exchanged glances. Then the ambassador said, "Majesty, that would certainly be the … optimal outcome. But the queen hasn't instructed us that we must inflict that ultimate degree of retribution. If we simply conquer the dragonborn, force them—"

"Shut up!" Tchazzar snarled. "The dragonborn have to *die, now*, by *my* hand, before another play—never mind! I'll hang the next man who tells me it

will take years or can't be done at all!"

Magnol was courageous or maybe just didn't understand how volatile Tchazzar truly was. Either way, he answered the war hero in a cool, matter-of-fact way that again reminded Jhesrhi of Aoth. "Majesty, my sovereign has placed my troops at your disposal, and you can count on our obedience. But I'll need you to explain what we must do to achieve the outcome you envision with the resources at our disposal." He waved his hand at the army drawn up on the field. A tiny ripple of flame ran along the top of his thumb. The pseudo-mind inside Jhesrhi's staff nudged her to start a fire of their own.

Tchazzar followed the gesture and

took another look at his assembled forces. From the sour cast of his expression, perhaps even he was finding himself forced to admit that his host, formidable as it was, was unlikely to reduce Djerad Thymar in a month, a season, or conceivably even a year.

Then, however, he laughed, wheeled his horse, and spurred the animal into a gallop. He raced away from the field as fast as his steed's legs could carry him. His companions gaped after him in astonishment.

After a heartbeat or two, one of Tchazzar's bodyguards remembered that he wasn't supposed to let his master wander around unescorted. Spurring his own mount, he yelled, "Come on!"

Whereupon everyone else, warriors and dignitaries alike, pounded after him.

Tchazzar led them all past the ongoing demolition that was clearing the site for the new temple and deeper into Luthcheq's crazily twisting streets. It occurred to Jhesrhi that Gaedynn would have grinned to see all the overly dignified aristocrats struggling to keep up. He would have particularly enjoyed watching Halonya bouncing along, white-faced and pop-eyed, her miter fallen away and left in the dust.

But Jhesrhi couldn't relish the prophetess's discomfiture. She was too worried about where Tchazzar's latest notion was taking them. And even Gaedynn would have stopped laughing

when the living god rode right over an old woman who was too slow getting out of his way and hurtled onward without a second glance. A pear from the woman's wicker grocery basket rolled into a muddy puddle.

Tchazzar halted in front of a gymnasium and bathhouse. What had led him to that particular establishment, as opposed to one of its many counterparts around the city, Jhesrhi had no idea. The monarch swung himself off his horse and, without bothering to tie the animal or secure it in any way, strode toward the main entrance.

By the time his entourage reined in their steeds, the war hero had disappeared inside the building.

Somebody, the doorkeeper, perhaps, gave an involuntary squawk when the lord of all Chessenta unexpectedly barged in.

"What's happening?" Hasos asked.

Jhesrhi replied with a shrug and a scowl. She liked the baron better than she used to, but at that moment, it felt unfair that she was the one expected to understand.

They all scurried after Tchazzar as soon as they could climb down from their saddles. They found him in a spacious, high-ceilinged room with straw mats on the floor. Apparently the athletes he'd interrupted had been tumbling or wrestling.

Those athletes were boys, none of

whom looked older than eight or nine. Dressed in breechclouts, they were kneeling in front of their sovereign. So were their teacher and the various mothers and servants who'd brought them to the lesson.

"Rise!" Tchazzar boomed. He spun around and gave Jhesrhi and her companions a wide, white-toothed grin. "There you are! It's about time! Here's our weapon! Here's the power that will burn Tymanther like a dry leaf in a bonfire!"

"Majesty, I don't understand," Jhesrhi said. She figured she had to. Everyone else looked too wary or bewildered.

"I've explained," Tchazzar said, "that I draw power from the faith of my

people. You must remember."

Jhesrhi remembered his claiming he drew power from blood sacrifice. It had been his justification for the slaughter of the prisoners at Soolabax. But she knew better than to point out the discrepancy.

"Yes, Majesty."

"Well, watch this." He spun back around, grabbed a child by the forearms, and hoisted him into the air. The little boy gasped. His pulse beat visibly in the side of his neck.

"Who am I?" Tchazzar asked.

The child just goggled at him.

"*Who am I*?" the dragon repeated, his tone harsher. A wisp of smoke fumed from his mouth. A hint of crimson scales rippled across the last joints of his

fingers.

A god, Jhesrhi thought. Tell him he's a god.

And perhaps one of true gods whispered that answer in the child's ear. For, stammering almost inaudibly, his voice rising at the end, that was what he said.

"Good!" Tchazzar cried. He dropped the child and gave him a slap on the back that knocked him to his hands and knees. He turned back to Jhesrhi and the assembled lords, clerics, warriors, and envoys. "You see? The pure, perfect faith of an innocent. The greatest power in all the world. Chessenta's children will march with us and stand in the vanguard. With their god on the field to

inspire them, they'll do deeds to put the paladins of myth to shame. And with them to bolster me, I'll finally be myself as I was before I went away. Invincible! Beyond the reach of anything that lurks and creeps in the dark!" He stared at Halonya. "Isn't that right?"

Please, Jhesrhi thought, this one time, don't feed his madness.

Halonya hesitated. Then she said, "Yes, Majesty, it is. You've found the answer."

Magnol shot Zan-akar Zeraez an inquiring glance. The diplomat responded with a tiny shake of his head, advising the Steward of Fire to say nothing. Maybe it was because the children of the genasi were safe in

Akanûl.

It occurred to Jhesrhi that conscripting the children might actually aid Aoth's strategy because it would inevitably slow the march south, thus buying more time for her friends to accomplish their missions. But it didn't matter. She couldn't allow any possibility that children would end up on a battlefield facing dragonborn warriors, not if she could possibly avert it.

"Majesty," she said.

Tchazzar turned his grin on her. "What?"

"I don't pretend to understand the mysteries of faith," she said, "but if you say the children will give you strength, then I know it must be so. Still, surely

it's their prayers that will do it, not a struggle to spill blood with their own hands. And can't they pray just as well in Luthcheq? I would think, better."

Halonya glowered at her. "His Majesty has explained how it's going to be."

Jhesrhi lowered her head. "Of course, sister. Forgive me if I spoke foolishly. I already confessed that I don't understand sacred matters. So let me just say how much I admire your courage, and then I'll hold my tongue."

"Yes, that would be—" Halonya blinked. "My courage?"

"Surely," Jhesrhi answered. "If the point is to channel the power of the children's belief, then I assume His

Majesty will want his high priestess standing right there among them in the front lines." She turned to Tchazzar. "Am I right?"

The Red Dragon nodded. "Yes. That does make sense."

Halonya hesitated and her eyes shifted from side to side. If she was looking for help, it was to no avail. Even enthusiastic supporters such as Lord Luthen opted to keep quiet.

So she swayed, staggered, and whirled around, arms outstretched, vestments flapping and jewelry swinging and clanking. Most of the young athletes goggled at her, although one tried to hide a smirk and whispered to his neighbor.

"Spirits have spoken to me!" Halonya

declared. “The dragon exarchs who love Your Majesty!”

Jhesrhi had never heard of the “dragon exarchs,” but Tchazzar simply asked, “What did they tell you?”

The priestess hesitated for a heartbeat. Jhesrhi assumed that she was working out exactly how to put what she had to say.

“That Your Majesty is completely right!” Halonya said. “Or would be! Ordinarily! But perhaps he’s overlooked his new temple. That would be natural since it’s not even built yet. The work has barely begun. But already the ground is the holiest in all Faerûn. And if I lead the children in prayer there, we’ll work bigger miracles than we could anywhere

else!”

Jhesrhi inclined her head again. “Sister, as always, I feel humble before your wisdom.”

But Tchazzar was frowning. “My servants, mortal and supernatural, *are* wise. But not as wise as me. And my own divine judgment tells me to take these youngsters and all the others like them to Tymanther.”

Jhesrhi took a breath. “Majesty, from all that I’ve heard you say today, I’m guessing you feel that way because Djerad Thymar is supposed to be impregnable. But I can guarantee you it isn’t. The Brotherhood of the Griffon took one of Szass Tam’s Dread Rings, and we—excuse me, they—can help you

take the dragonborn citadel too."

Tchazzar snorted. "That might be helpful if Captain Fezim and his men weren't busy chasing traitors and ghosts in Threskel."

"I believe they must have finished that work or nearly so," Jhesrhi said. "After all, we haven't had any more attempts on Your Majesty's life or any more undead sneaking into the War College. We haven't had any recent reports of unrest."

"We haven't had *any* news," Tchazzar said, "even from the wyrmkeepers Halonya sent to find out what the sellswords have accomplished."

Jhesrhi felt a pang of alarm. That was the first she'd heard of that particular

pack of spies. But apparently the folk charged with concealing Aoth's absence had handled the situation somehow.

And while Halonya would ordinarily have pounced on the opportunity to interpret the priests' silence to the Brotherhood's detriment, her priority now was to avoid the possibility of a dragon born's spear in her guts. "I believe," she said, "that we can take the quiet as a good sign. After all, I sent four men. If something were badly wrong, surely at least one would have rushed back to warn us."

"Hmm." Tchazzar studied the only two humans he truly trusted, united for once in their opinion. "All right, have it your way. The children will stay here,

and the Brotherhood of the Griffon will march south with us." He pivoted toward Hasos. "Send for them immediately, and tell them to come as fast as they can. Tell Aoth Fezim to fly on ahead and get to Luthcheq as fast as *he* can."

"Yes, Majesty," Hasos said.

And now I've done it, Jhesrhi thought. If we've been running a race, this is the final leg. She wished she knew how far Gaedynn, Aoth, and Khouryn had traveled along the course.

* * * * *

"It's been a long time," Balasar whispered.

Khouryn scowled. They were

supposed to be lying in wait *in silence*. But in fairness to his friend, Balasar was keeping his voice low, and using a dwarf's understanding of how sound carried and echoed underground, Khouryn had chosen their current hiding place partly because any noise they made *wouldn't* travel far. So he decided not to make an issue of the dragonborn's indiscretion.

"It seems like it," he whispered back, "but then, it always does when you're waiting."

Lying on his belly on the ledge, Balasar rolled his shoulders until they popped. "Especially when you're waiting on a dragon. Specifically the same dragon who's already tried to kill

the lot of us."

A few spaces farther down the line, Vishva frowned to hear Praxasalandos so disparaged. Medrash simply said, "Prax is a different creature now. We just have to hope Gestanius didn't sense that."

"Or else she'll have killed him," Khouryn said, "and won't come within a mile of our ambush."

"Quicksilver wyrms are supposed to be tricky," Biri said. She was lying beside Balasar—not, Khouryn assumed, by accident—and she smiled in the Daardendrien's direction. "If you give him a chance, you may find out you've got a lot in common."

Balasar snorted. "I may be friends

with a gaggle of dragon worshipers, but forgive me if I stick at the dragons themselves."

Across the cavern and near the mouth of the tunnel, an Imaskari in a nook in the wall waved both hands above his head. According to Jemleh, the fellow had the sharpest ears of any soldier in his command, sharp enough that his captain trusted him to hear Praxasalandos's wings rustle and snap when the dragon shook them out to signal his approach.

Only Khouryn and those wizards who'd chosen to enhance their eyesight could see the waving. Everyone else lay prone or crouched, blind in the darkness. Khouryn whispered that everyone should shut up and be ready. The message

traveled up and down the line in the form of a series of fumbling grips.

Then Praxasalandos strode into the chamber. Gestanius prowled right behind him. Khouryn winced.

It wasn't because of the enormous size and manifest strength of the ancient blue, although they were daunting enough. It was the indefinable but gut-wrenching ugliness she shared with her ally Skuthosin. Like the green, she'd been a Chosen of Tiamat in her time, before Tchazzar killed and ate them to add his power her own. Then the Dark Lady had given them back their lives, and all that commerce with one of the supreme powers of evil had left a taint.

But so what? thought Khouryn. We

killed Skuthosin and we're going to kill you too.

Bringing the scent of a coming storm with her, her movements quick and flowing despite her hugeness, Gestanius stalked several paces into the cavern. Then she stopped abruptly, as if she'd sensed something or wondered if she had.

"How much farther?" she asked. Buzzing sparks and tiny lightning bolts crawled and arced on the double-pointed horn on her snout and the hornlets on her brow ridges. For those who could see nothing else, beholding the flickering must be somewhat like looking at a dragon-shaped constellation in the night sky.

"We're nearly there," Praxasalandos replied. He'd told Gestanius that he'd killed intruders in the tunnels as he was supposed to but that one of them had turned out to be a gold dragon shapeshifted into Imaskari form. The blue was coming to see if she could see identify the body. "In fact, we *are* there."

"What do you mean?" Gestanius asked, looking around in vain for torn and mangled corpses.

Biri whispered words of power and flicked her wand back and forth as though leading a band of musicians. Medrash gripped his steel-gauntlet medallion and breathed a prayer to Torm. Elsewhere in the chamber,

Khouryn knew, other spellcasters were raising and shaping power in their own fashions.

And maybe Gestanius heard the whispering or simply felt magic smoldering in the air because she suddenly craned her neck and twisted her head one way then the other. "Something—" she began.

Prax whirled and blasted her with a silvery plume of his breath. The vapor washed across her eyes, and she roared in shock and pain.

At the same time, a golden shimmer abruptly filled the opening through which the dragons had entered, and crackling flames leaped up to fill the exit on the opposite wall. Floating orbs of

glowing power popped into existence to provide additional light.

Warriors howled battle cries. Crossbows clacked and quarrels thrummed through the air. Some glanced off Gestanius's scales but others stuck. Khouryn discharged his own arbalest then grabbed his axe, leaped to his feet, and charged down the steep slope that descended from the shelf to the cavern floor.

It was a reckless, sliding scramble, but Medrash, Balasar, and others rushed along right beside him. For the moment Gestanius was slow with amazement and dazzled and sick from the poisonous kiss of Prax's breath. Her enemies needed to press the advantage while they had it.

An Imaskari wizard splashed yellow fire across the tops of Gestanius's wings. A stray wisp of Praxasalandos's breath weapon stung Khouryn's nose and filled his mouth with a nasty, metallic taste. He twisted his head and spat without breaking stride.

Then the stone beneath him started shaking, knocking him off balance and making him stumble. For a moment he assumed that one of his wizard allies had cast a spell that was causing the quaking. Then he recognized the distinctive rhythm of the vibration.

He sucked in a breath to yell a warning. But before he could get it out, a purple worm burst up out of the floor, its emergence flinging bits of rock through

the air.

It was hard to be sure with the back end of it still in the burrow, but the creature looked as huge as Gestanius herself. Rearing like a serpent, it swiveled its head this way and that. That head, though bigger than a dwarf or man, was small in proportion to its possessor's thick, leechlike body, and it was all jaws, with protruding tusks above and below. But Khouryn knew the lack of eyes wouldn't keep the beast from orienting on its prey.

He had time to wonder if, mistrusting Praxasalandos, Gestanius had commanded the purple worm to shadow them or if it was just exceptionally rotten luck that had placed the creature within

easy reach of its mistress's psychic call. He wondered too if the magical barriers emplaced to hold the blue in the killing box might now ensure the slaughter of every last dragonborn, Imaskari, and stray dwarf instead. Then the worm decided on its target and, jaws gaping wide, plunged down at him like a mudslide.

* * * * *

Alasklerbanbastos stalked through the tunnels and lava tubes under Dragonback Mountain, and his anger intensified with every stride.

Zombies and other guardians lay charred and ripped where Tchazzar had destroyed them on his way to the deepest

vaults. Here and there, coins and even a gem or two lay amid the carnage, dropped when the red or his servants were hauling treasure out.

The latter warned Alasklerbanbastos what to expect at the heart of the mountain, so he considered not going there at all. But he wanted to see the empty chamber where, century after century, he'd amassed his hoard. He knew the sight would feed his hatred.

And so it did. In fact, it maddened him. Crackling, the flashes painting the walls, arcs of lightning danced across his flayed, decaying flesh. He raised his head and gave a roar that echoed away through the plundered lair.

He likewise felt compelled to look at

the smaller chamber that had held his phylactery, even though there was no practical reason for that either. Perhaps he hoped to find some indication of how Tchazzar had found and opened it despite the layered illusions and wards. But there was nothing to see except black stains of soot on the walls.

Well, the violation at least didn't matter. Alasklerbanbastos walked the earth and owned his own soul again despite the worst his enemies could do. True, he was a feeble thing compared to what he once had been, but he was about to remedy that because Tchazzar and any other scavengers who'd looted the vaults hadn't stolen everything.

He stalked back to one of the larger

chambers and fixed his eyes on the wall. Hissing an incantation, he used a talon to scratch runes on the floor. Sparks danced and sizzled on each of the runes as they did on his body.

Drawn by the accumulating power, petty spirits whispered to one another. White fungus grew across a section of the ceiling, and rudimentary faces took shape in the furry mass. The wall on which Alasklerbanbastos had focused his will grew soft as wax, and enormous bones slid out and dropped, clattering, to the floor.

The lair contained dozens of dragon bodies laid up against the day when he might need another. But before him was the best of them. Before

Alasklerbanbastos engineered his demise, Faarinnjaallafon had been a blue as ancient and huge as himself, the terror of a land so distant that few folk in Faerûn had ever even heard its name.

When the last bone had crawled forth, they all lay in a big mound on the floor. Alasklerbanbastos chanted different rhymes, and the sections of skeleton floated into the air one and two at a time. The truesilver and dark-iron hinges attached to the ends clinked and rang as they secured one bone to the next like the pieces of an enormous puzzle.

As the last bone locked itself to its neighbors, Alasklerbanbastos refocused his will. Up until then, the working had been easy enough for a necromancer of

his caliber. The last part would be harder.

Moving with ceremonial slowness and exactitude, he set the shadow stone on the floor between the skeleton and himself. Then he resumed his chanting. He wasn't trying to speak any louder than before, but the charge of dark magic in the words made them boom like thunder all by itself. The rock around him shook and cracked.

As the final word echoed, he spit his breath weapon.

But it wasn't just lightning. He spewed forth himself: mind, magic, and the pure, raging essence of a storm all mingled together. Calabastasingavor's husk collapsed behind him, and he hung,

blazing and crackling, in the air.

Untethered from coarse matter, he felt the void tugging at him. A door had opened in the unseen architecture of the world, and Nature wanted him to pass through in the common fashion of the dead.

But Nature was weak compared to his will and his wizardry. He thrust himself forward and hurtled into the core of the shadow gem like an arrow driving into a bull's-eye.

Once there, he was no longer conscious of having a ghostly, burning form or any form at all. He was simply consciousness suspended in emptiness. But that was all right. He was safe there and no longer felt death's pull. He was

free to catch his breath—metaphorically speaking—and prepare for the final stage of his transformation.

When he was ready, he reached out with a mode of perception that was neither squinting, blurry sight nor groping, fumbling touch but vaguely akin to both. He found Faarinnjaallafon's skeleton and launched himself in its direction.

He took possession of the skeleton with the brightest flash and the loudest thunderclap yet, both blasting forth from the core of him. Others followed, one after another, fast as the beats of a racing heart.

Finally the flares and the cacophony subsided. He tried to spread his wings,

and rattling a little, they responded exactly as they should. The meld of mind and physical form was perfect.

Perfect and intoxicating because he could feel that he was finally, truly the Great Bone Wyrm once more, every bit as strong as he had ever been. And how he would make his foes regret it!

The only problem, he thought with a twinge of humor, was deciding where to begin. For there were so many enemies whose deeds cried out for revenge.

Perhaps the way to choose was to assess how vengeance could best work in the service of his other goals. And when he considered his situation in those terms, he knew where to go next.

* * * * *

Khouryn leaped aside, and the purple worm's fangs clashed shut in the spot where he'd just been standing. He stepped in, swung his axe, and gashed one of bulges that ran down the length of the creature's body.

The riposte should have been safe. By rights, the worm shouldn't have been able to twist the neckless nub of a head at the end of its thick form far enough to threaten him anew. But somehow it did. The jaws opened wide, revealing the fanglike protrusions that lined the mouth all the way back and on down the throat. The spikes heaved and rippled with a kind of peristalsis, and a hot, rotten

stench poured forth.

The creature's head jumped at him. Khouryn tried to dodge, and his boot landed on something slippery. He lurched off balance and felt a jolt of terror at the likely consequences. Then a hand clutched his shoulder and jerked. It was just enough to drag him out of harm's way, and the enormous fangs grated as they once again snapped shut on empty air.

Medrash had let his sword dangle from its martingale to take hold of him. The paladin tossed his arm and caught the weapon by the hilt as it flipped upward. "Have you fought these before?" he asked.

"A couple times," Khouryn said. "It

takes a lot of cutting."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Balasar said, advancing on the creature with his buckler extended and his sword high. "Because there are two of them."

Khouryn snarled an obscenity. He wanted to glance around and determine where the other worm had popped up—and determine what Gestanius was doing, for that matter—but then the first worm resumed moving, and he realized it could easily mean his death to look away.

The creature finished writing out of its hole and struck at Medrash simultaneously. He blocked with his shield and must have channeled some of Torm's power to do it, or the impact

would have knocked him off his feet. Probably hoping to reach some vulnerable or tender part, he stepped in close and slashed at the inside of the worm's mouth. The beast recoiled, jerking its head back, up, and out of the dragonborn's reach.

But the creature immediately twisted and bit at one of the Platinum Cadre warriors. The fellow interposed his targe as Medrash had, and it saved his life. But the worm's teeth clanged shut on the edges of the shield and wrenched it away. The jerk had surely either broken or dislocated the dragonborn's arm, and he dropped his mace and reeled backward. The worm swallowed the targe.

“Squads!” Khouryn bellowed. “Flank it! Like fighting anything big! Like I taught you!”

Warriors scrambled to form up. Afterward they attacked the purple worm when its attention was elsewhere and fell back when the beast turned toward them. Meanwhile, wizards, including Biri, pierced it with darts of light and dropped nets of steaming, sizzling slime onto its back. The strands seared its flesh and left crosshatches of burns behind.

The accumulating wounds looked as if they ought to do some good eventually. But the worm wasn’t slowing down yet, and Khouryn wasn’t surprised. In his youth, he’d seen one of the behemoths

split open from end to end and knew it scarcely had any vital organs as such. It was just a length of gut sheathed in muscle with a brain that was only a bump at the top of the spinal cord and a dozen hearts to pump its blood around.

Standing at the center of a wheel of floating, glowing runes, Medrash cut deep into the worm's flank. Khouryn rushed in and did the same. As the beast twisted in their direction, Balasar darted forward to attack it from the other side.

The eyeless head jerked back in his direction, and caught by surprise, he couldn't stop in time. His own momentum flung him into the worm's mouth. The creature heaved its head high to swallow.

Medrash cried out and he and Khouryn both struck savagely. If Balasar was even still alive, his only hope was for his allies to slay the worm and cut him out of its body quickly.

Then Biri ran toward the struggle, which was wrong. She should have stayed on the ledge and cast her spells from a relatively safe distance. Khouryn drew breath to yell for her to go back. Then he noticed the five swords of crimson light hovering around her, the halo of coppery shimmer between the conjured blades and her body, and realized what she intended.

Medrash glimpsed her coming and opened his mouth. Most likely his first impulse, too, was to order her back.

“Let her come!” Khouryn snapped. He hoped that by so doing, he hadn’t assured the death of a second friend.

Medrash’s eyes narrowed. Then he pivoted, raised his bloody sword and his steel-gauntleted fist high, and shouted, “Torm, please, shield her!”

Points of silvery light started glinting amid the coppery shimmer. They might even have been shaped like hands, but they winked on and off too quickly for Khouryn to be sure.

Biri planted herself squarely in front of their colossal form. “Here, wormy, wormy, wormy!” she cried.

The great jaws swung in her direction. Then they hurtled down at her.

The white-scaled dragonborn gasped.

She flinched back an involuntary half step but no farther.

The worm snapped her up, raised its head, and swallowed. Then it gave a deafening roar as it felt the flying blades slicing it from the inside.

Khouryn hoped that would distract it from external dangers. “Everyone!” he shouted. “Hit it! Now!”

The Cadre warriors rushed in from all sides. And the worm *didn’t* attack them, although the twisting, heaving convulsions of its colossal body threatened to crush them even so.

Fire blazed out of the beast’s mouth as, apparently still alive and capable of action, Biri unleashed incendiary magic.

Medrash spun his sword over his

head with a flourish quite unlike his usual no-nonsense way of handling a weapon. The spin kindled a brilliant glow inside the blade, and when he attacked, the edge cut as though the worm's thick hide and dense muscle were soft as melting butter.

The beast's head toppled forward and thudded on the cavern floor. It convulsed for another few moments, then sprawled motionless.

"Get them out!" Medrash shouted.

Khouryn could guess Biri's location. She should be just below the part of the worm that gave steaming, blistered evidence of having cooked from the inside. Using his axe alternately like a saw and a butcher knife, he ripped at the

creature's hide. Guided either by his deity's prompting or simple inference, Medrash attacked a spot a few paces farther down. Cadre warriors scrambled to help them both. Khouryn was peripherally aware of the roaring cacophony and furious motion of the rest of the battle, of the fact that the ongoing violence could engulf the rescuers at any moment. But he still couldn't afford to worry about it.

Gripping the head of the axe with one hand and its haft with the other, he sawed the hole he was making a couple of strokes deeper then, grunting, pulled the edges apart. A booted foot appeared amid the muscle, blood, and slime. He yelled, "Here!" Together, he and the

dragonborn working beside him cut and tore the opening larger still then dragged Biri out into the open.

She came out, bleeding in a dozen places, but Khouryn judged that none of the cuts was serious. Torm's blessing and her own power had protected her. Slippery with ooze, retching and coughing, she wheezed, "Nothing … to breathe."

"You're all right now," Khouryn told her.

"Balasar," she said.

Voices babbled behind them. By the time Khouryn looked around, Medrash and the cultists were pulling Balasar out of the worm's body.

He *was* cut badly, indeed, covered in

blood from head to toe. Ordinary armor of steel and leather hadn't done enough to protect him as the purple worm's countless internal teeth pierced and ground him and peristalsis crushed him again and again. But he was alive. He must be because, whispering, Medrash was praying the silvery light of healing into his hands.

Khouryn shifted position to keep Biri from getting a good look. "He's fine," he said then turned to one of the Cadre warriors. "Get her back on the ledge."

Biri shook her head. "I can—"

"You can't do anything more until you at least catch your breath," Khouryn said. "Now, both of you, move!"

The warrior helped her to her feet.

Khouryn pivoted to find out—finally—what else was going on.

Though it was pretty much all raw, oozing burns and bloody wounds from end to end, the second purple worm was still alive and striving furiously to reach several Imaskari wizards perched on a ledge. One of them was Nellis Saradexma, who held his orb of dark crystal paled in one long-fingered hand and shifted it up and down and side to side. A ghostly, floating shield made of green phosphorescence shifted with it to block the worm's attacks. Meanwhile, Nellis's fellow wizards and the dragonborn and Imaskari warriors surrounding the lower portion of the beast assailed it furiously.

Unfortunately the diplomat's defense wasn't impenetrable. Khouryn gave a wordless little snarl when the green shield failed to jump quickly enough, and the worm snatched a mage off the shelf. Like Balasar and Biri before him, the Imaskari slid down the beast's gullet in an instant—golden staff, long, black greatcoat, and all.

But despite that loss, it looked to Khouryn as if the worm's foes were wearing it down. He couldn't say the same about Gestanius.

At the moment the green dragon was primarily concerned with killing Praxasalandos, a duel that, because of the difference in sizes, reminded Khouryn of a dog fighting a cat. And the

dog was winning. Prax had at least two serious wounds and several minor ones. The severed tip of his tail and a couple of the short horns from under his jaw lay on the cavern floor.

The wyrms were lunging, whirling, and striking so quickly that no human or dragonborn dared to venture close and risk a trampling or the bone-shattering flick of a lashing tail. Instead, warriors shot arrows and quarrels, missing as often as not despite Gestanius's hugeness. When they did hit the mark, the shafts frequently glanced off her scales.

Attacking with blasts of frost and howls of focused noise, Jemleh Bluerhine and a couple other arcanists—thank the Luckmaiden that the knack for

magic ran in the Imaskari blood—were inflicting somewhat greater harm. But it was not enough to make Gestanius falter.

Gestanius suddenly opened her jaws and, without any of the telltale preparatory movements that Khouryn had learned to watch for, spewed acid. The attack seemingly caught Praxasalandos by surprise as well, for the sizzling acid hit him straight on, and he shuddered, jerked, and burned helplessly.

Gestanius pounced the instant the acid dissolved, before even another dragon could shake off the punishment she'd just inflicted. She caught Praxasalandos's neck in her jaws and reared onto her hind legs, so the frills at the back of her head brushed the ceiling. She bit down

and clawed at her opponent's chest at the same time.

Blood gushed and Prax splashed apart into streams and globs, which rained down from Gestanius's fangs and talon to make a gleaming pool on the floor. The colossal green immediately dropped into the center of it and kept on clawing. Now she looked like a dog digging, and her efforts flung bits of the quicksilver dragon's substance far and wide. One spattered right at Khouryn's feet.

As it did, Gestanius wheeled to glare at Jemleh and his fellow mages. Without Prax—or someone—to keep her busy with close combat, she was likely to destroy the spellcasters in a couple of heartbeats.

Khouryn yelled as loudly as he could, raised his axe, and charged. He was keenly aware that if he was the only one who rushed in, he might well be living out the last few moments of his life.

For a heartbeat, as Gestanius spun in his direction, all the crossbowmen, archers, and slingers stayed right where they were. Then Vishva yelled, "Bahamut!" She dropped her arbalest, snatched her warhammer off the floor, and charged. Other members of the Cadre followed her example, and Imaskari soldiers did it too.

That didn't distract Gestanius from striking at the one mad dwarf on the field. Her huge jaws plunged down at him, and his own momentum nearly

consigned him to the same ignominious disaster that had overtaken Balasar. But somehow he managed to fling himself aside and even chop at the side of the dragon's head, although he only nicked it a little. Still charging, he dodged a raking forefoot.

He plunged into the shadow under the dragon's belly and started chopping at a foreleg. The ceiling was too low for Gestanius to fly. If he could cut a couple of legs out from under her, it would immobilize her.

He created a couple of nice, deep gashes, deep enough to recapture her attention, apparently, for then she started stamping. She likely hoped to catch him squarely under her foot and squash him

flat, but that might not be necessary. If she simply snagged him with a claw, she stood a fair chance of ripping him apart.

He dodged frantically and scrambled whenever Gestanius's lunging and turning threatened to separate them. He swung the axe when he could manage it and, though intent on his own small part of the struggle, occasionally caught glimpses of the rest:

A swat from a leathery wing smashed an Imaskari spearman.

An umber-scaled dragonborn axeman ran to join Khouryn underneath Gestanius until the green's jaws hurtled down and nipped away everything from the waist up. Gestanius spit out what she'd taken as she lifted her head again.

The warrior's eyes blinked once, seemingly at the sight of his severed legs toppling in front of him.

Cloudy with bits of dissolving flesh, steaming fluid poured down off Gestanius's flanks. Jemleh or one of his colleagues was attacking her with acid.

Khouryn bellowed "East Rift!" and swung, burying most of the axe's head in Gestanius's flesh. When he wrenched it free, blood spurted, spattering his chest, beard, and flesh and blinding him till he sidestepped and swiped the gore in his eyes away.

Gestanius howled and snatched her foot off the floor, and Khouryn was ecstatic when it didn't come stamping down again. She folded up her foreleg

against her chest where he couldn't reach it.

Khouryn barked a laugh and ran toward the rear of her body. If he could cripple a hind leg too, that would accomplish his purpose.

But before he could reach the limb, Gestanius roared a word that seemed to stab him through like a rapier. He fell on his face, and the sound hung in the air like the shivering note of a gong. It twisted and tore at him, and just as horribly, he somehow felt it twisting and tearing at the very structure of the world. It was magic so powerful and malign that it tortured reality itself.

Finally the sound faded. But Khouryn ached in every nerve and couldn't focus

his thoughts. When Gestanius sprang away from him, he almost didn't realize that was a problem.

Almost but not quite. Gritting his teeth against a pang of sharper pain, he forced himself to lift his head.

Nearly as fast as ever despite her laming, Gestanius whirled to face him. He supposed it was an accolade of sorts that out of all the foes who'd been assailing her, he was the one she particularly wanted to dispose of.

And she very likely would, because when he glanced around, there didn't seem to be anyone capable of distracting her from her purpose. The word of power had stunned everyone, warrior and wizard alike. Some folk lay entirely

unconscious. A couple shuddered and rolled their eyes in ungovernable terror if not outright insanity.

Khouryn heaved himself to his feet and hefted his axe. “Try,” he croaked.

Gestanius opened her jaws, and a pale cloud gathered at the back of her mouth. The smell of acid suffused the air. Khouryn’s eyes watered as the air filled with noxious fumes.

Then a silvery waterfall poured down from the ceiling.

Or rather, it poured halfway. It gathered itself into a coherent shape in mid drop, and by the time it slammed down on top of Gestanius, it was Prax.

His weight drove the green down on her belly. He seized her neck in his jaws

midway down and drove his foreclaws into her. She twisted her head and spit the acid she'd originally intended for Khouryn, but the angle was bad. Prax crouched low and the acid sizzled over his head. The talons on his hind feet raked deep, bloody furrows in Gestanius's back.

But then the green whipped her neck and broke Praxasalandos's grip on it, although his jaws came away full of flesh. She flipped over, crashed down on top of the quicksilver wyrm, and rolled. His claws ripped out of her back, and they tangled together, biting, tearing, each trying to coil around and immobilize the other.

And they continued to fight the same

way when they fetched up against the cavern wall, like wrestlers, not pugilists or axemen. And that, Khouryn realized, meant that other, smaller combatants could get close to them without *quite* as much danger of getting squashed.

Still weak and shaky from the effects of the word of smiting, he scarcely felt capable of running across the cavern another time. But he staggered one step, then another, and the debility fell away. Dragonborn and Imaskari followed him, stumbling and lurching at first, then picking up speed.

When they reached the wyrms, they had to seize their opportunities, rush in, strike, and be ready to retreat in an instant, because while the dragons

weren't whirling and lunging around as they had before, they weren't motionless either. They rolled and heaved, and any such shift could crush the smaller creatures stabbing and cutting in their shadow.

Khouryn struck, then ducked a stray swipe of Prax's foot that might otherwise have smashed his skull. Off to the right, a couple of warriors shouted in excitement, but he had no idea why until the next time he had to retreat. Then he saw how Prax had looped his bloody, truncated tail around Gestanius's neck like a garrote.

Frantic to break the chokehold, she tore at him, thrashing so madly that Khouryn didn't see how he or any of his

warriors could advance back into striking distance. But Medrash ran in as if he imagined the behemoths' raking, flailing limbs couldn't possibly touch him.

He shouted, "Torm!" and Praxasalandos snarled, "Bahamut!" Medrash thrust his sword deep into Gestanius's chest, and the quicksilver dragon pulled the noose that was his tail tighter still.

Gestanius went rigid. Then her struggles started to subside, although everyone kept strangling, cutting, or hammering her for a while longer, just to make sure she really was dead.

ELEVEN

29–30 Eleasis, the Year of the Ageless One

Aoth judged that the view from Arathane's throne room was as spectacular as on his previous visit, but in a more forbidding way. There were gray-black thunderheads to the north, out

over the sea. He hoped it wasn't an omen.

He'd given a condensed account of the expedition to kill Vairshekellabex, and the royal audience had ground to a halt while various genasi priests and clerks had examined the wyrmkeepers' papers and even authenticated the handwriting and wax seal on Mardiz-sul's testament. Though Cera was doing her best to keep her composure, Aoth could see impatience gnawing at her. Gaedynn somehow managed to lounge standing up with his customary air of insouciance. Son-liin, who'd never before visited such a regal setting, was taking advantage of the recess to gawk at the chamber's lavish appointments and

the courtiers' bejeweled attire.

Each expert whispered his opinion to Tradrem Kethrod. When he'd heard from them all, the square-built Steward of the Earth turned toward the raised, silver throne and the slender young stormsoul sitting on it.

"Well, milord?" Arathane asked. Today she was wearing gold rings set with amethysts on her hair spikes.

"There are no clear, incontrovertible signs of forgery," Tradrem said. "However—"

"However," Gaedynn said, "you might fall down foaming in a fit if you said straight out that we were right and you were wrong. Is that more or less the way of it?"

The earthsoul shot him a glare but continued to address the queen. "As I was saying: However, even if we assume that every word we've heard spoken or read from a piece of parchment today is true, it doesn't prove that the dragonborn *haven't* been raiding our villages. It simply provides some reason to suspect that this Vairshekellabex and his servants were doing it too."

"With all respect, milord," said Aoth, "that's a tortured interpretation of the facts. What are the odds that Tymanther would conduct clandestine raids, and in the same year, Vairshekellabex's wyrmkeepers would disguise fiends out of Banehold as dragonborn and dispatch

them to commit exactly the same kind of atrocities?"

"Not so bad," Tradrem said, "if Vairshekellabex noticed what the dragonborn were up to and decided to use their incursions as a smokescreen to hide his own outrages."

"Your Majesty," Cera said, "I will swear the most sacred oaths of my faith and my order that my companions and I are telling the truth. Vairshekellabex and his servants were solely responsible for the massacres. The gray wanted to see Akanûl's troops drawn beyond its borders to fight a pointless war. Surely you can see how that would make him more secure and able to slaughter and steal with impunity."

“Not that your army showed any actual signs of getting ready to go hunt him down and kill him,” Gaedynn said, “but I suppose a person can’t have too much impunity.”

Arathane’s lips tightened. Lightning flickered inside the clouds to the north, and some of the silvery lines in her purple skin gleamed in time with it. “Milord,” she said to Tradrem, “it does seem to me that at the very least, Captain Fezim, his friends, and the Firestorm Cabal have done Akanûl a service. Enough of one, surely, to merit a courteous, serious hearing.”

“Your Majesty,” Tradrem said, “if I’ve been anything less than courteous, it was because I have reservations about

notorious mercenaries and feckless thrill seekers undertaking desperate escapades inside our borders without authorization from the Crown. Still, I apologize. All honor to those who risked their own lives to rid the realm of a dangerous beast."

Aoth took a calming breath. "But?"

"But," said Tradrem, "does it really matter in relation to the coming war? The dragonborn are the genasi's ancient enemies. We need to move against them sooner or later."

"Then let it be later," said Aoth, "when the aboleths don't pose such a threat to Akanûl and Tymanther at least gives you a pretext that won't make you look like dupes or reavers when the truth

comes out."

Cera made a wry face. "Your Majesty, I wouldn't have put things in quite such … pragmatic terms. But in his way, Captain Fezim is getting at a fundamental truth. You shouldn't fight a war over an accusation you know to be a lie."

Tradrem gave her a sour look. "Sunlady, with all respect, didn't I just explain that the matter is more complicated than that? The dragonborn *have* provoked us. For generations. We must also consider the promises made to our ally Chessenta and the effort and expense required to send the army south. What if we pull back now and then decide we need to fight Tymanther next

year, with a depleted treasury, no friends to stand with us, and not even a clear, uncontested road to reach the enemy?"

Son-liin cleared her throat. Aoth looked at her in surprise. Others did the same.

The scrutiny of so many lordly folk all but made her squirm. It did make her stammer. "I … I …"

"Take a breath," Gaedynn whispered.

She did. "Majesty, my father taught me that the first thing to know about a bow is that once you loose an arrow, you can't call it back. I found out what he meant on the hunt for the gray dragon. I was under a spell, and I made a shot that could have gotten Captain Fezim killed."

“Forgive me,” Tradrem asked, “but is this relevant?”

The young firestormer scowled. “Yes, my lord, with respect, I think it is. I’m trying to tell the queen that she has the advantage over an archer. She *can* call her soldiers back short of doing some terrible wrong or harm. It may be awkward or embarrassing. It may cost a lot of coin. But she *can* do it!”

“We’ll even deliver the dispatches containing the new orders,” Gaedynn said. “As it happens, we’re going to Chessenta anyway.”

As she had during the previous audience, Arathane turned to the other two Stewards in attendance. “My lady? Milord?”

Lehaya lowered her head and gazed at her folded hands as if wisdom could be found in her silvery, interlaced fingers. Finally she said, “If I were a judge trying the dragonborn for the particular offense of which they stood accused, I would have to acquit. And if I acquitted, I obviously couldn’t punish.”

“But it’s not a trial!” Tradrem snapped. “It’s statecraft!”

“That may be,” Lehaya said, “but I ask you not to blame me for viewing the matter through the eyes of the law. It’s why I hold the office that I do.”

Aoth smiled. “As I suppose it’s safe to say that Lord Myxofin holds his office because he knows his way around an abacus and a counting house. He’s the

kind of fellow who'll wake up at night screaming if it turns out that Akanûl squandered a great sum to march its army south and then simply marched it home again."

The Steward of the Sea smiled a thin little smile, as though he were half amused and half offended by Aoth's characterization of him. "I admit, Captain, that I would find such waste regrettable on its own terms."

"Well, maybe you'll feel better if you know that Akanûl will at least come out even on the deal." Aoth turned to Gaedynn. "Bring out that cloak pin."

For once, the archer looked surprised. But he removed the green metal ornament from the pouch on his belt and

held it out for everyone to see. The genasi goggled at it, Myxofin most of all.

"I thought," said Aoth, "that I recognized the pin from stories I'd heard, and I see from everyone's reaction that I was right. It's the Brooch of the Tide Masters, isn't it, lost amid the upheavals of the Spellplague. One of the great treasures of Akanûl in general and of Lord Myxofin's family and office in particular, and just the kind of treasure a man hopes to find in a dragon hoard. Please, Sir Gaedynn, restore it to its rightful owner."

"With the greatest of pleasure," the archer said, and only someone who knew him as well as Aoth did would have caught the sarcasm. "This is out-

and-out bribery!" Tradrem said.

It took Myxofin a moment to tear his gaze away from the ornament of green metal and black pearl in his palm and answer. "I'm not susceptible to bribery, milord. But I do think Captain Fezim has a point. In a sense, this does go a considerable way toward balancing the books."

"For you personally!"

The clerkish Lord of Coin drew himself up straight and tall. And despite his more massive frame and truculent demeanor, Tradrem's eyes widened, and his upper body shifted slightly backward.

"My family has always regarded ownership of the Brooch of the Tide

Masters as a sacred trust," Myxofin said, "and my forefathers always used it for the benefit of all our people. If you claim otherwise, say so plainly, and you and I will proceed from there."

Tradrem's mouth tightened. "My lord, you know I meant no such thing. But I do say that the restoration of this treasure is like the destruction of the gray dragon. It's a good thing in and of itself, but it has no bearing on whether or not we ought to invade Tymanther."

"I'm not so sure of that," Arathane said. "The Lord of Water himself gave the Brooch of the Tide Masters to our people, or so the legend goes. Perhaps the fact that it came here on this day, borne by those who counsel peace, is

significant."

"And perhaps it isn't," Tradrem replied. "Whereas there's no ambiguity whatsoever about our history with Tymanther."

"That's true," said the queen, "and the day may indeed come when we march on the dragonborn. But not this season. Not while the aboleths pose such a threat, and not because a vicious dragon tried to trick us into it. We'll recall Lord Magnol and the troops."

Aoth let out a long breath and took malicious satisfaction in Tradrem's glower.

As he'd expected, the Steward of the Earth wasn't the only one who was disgruntled, or at least professing to be.

Gaedynn confronted him as soon as they exited the throne room.

"Am I correct in assuming," the redheaded bowman asked, "that you knew what the cloak pin was the moment you saw it back in Vairshekellabex's cave?"

"Pretty much," said Aoth. "It's crawling with magic, and as you know, I can see things like that."

"And yet you didn't warn me that I was claiming something as the greater part of my share that you fully intended to give away."

"For what it's worth, I was actually hoping we wouldn't have to."

Humor tugged at the corners of Gaedynn's mouth. "Well, we shouldn't

have, no matter what the need. Who gives away loot? Let's hope we get back to acting like proper sellswords before we forget how."

* * * * *

Balasar dozed for a while then woke to throbbing pain from head to foot. He considered trying to fall back asleep. It would surely be beneficial if he could manage it, but he doubted that he could.

And he didn't feel like simply lying awake on the hard, stone floor, staring up at the cavern ceiling, and aching. If he got up, there might at least be something to distract him from his discomfort. So he pushed away his blankets and dragged himself to his feet, even though

that made everything hurt worse.

Most of his comrades were sound asleep. Only a few of the floating orbs of glow remained, just enough to allow the healers and the sentries to do their jobs. Balasar considered applying to the former for relief. But he couldn't ask them to squander their spells, medicines, and other resources just to ease his pain when other wounded folk were barely clinging to life. He decided to divert himself by chatting with one of the guards and, feeling like a mummy in his tightly wrapped linen bandages and malodorous ointments, hobbled toward the nearest.

He made it a few steps before his back cramped. He let out a grunt through

gritted teeth.

Biri threw off her covers, jumped up, and hurried over to him. Her white scales and long, silver piercings were ghostly in the gloom. “What are you doing up?” she whispered.

“I just couldn’t sleep,” he replied, keeping his voice just as low and trying not to voice his distress.

Perhaps he failed at the latter because she put her arm around him and helped him to a spot where a bulge at the bottom of the cavern wall made a sort of bench. She helped him sit, then plopped down beside him.

“Better?” she asked.

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Truly? I can fetch someone—”

“Thank you, but yes, truly. Medrash hauled me back from the brink. As soon as he gets around to giving me another dose of healing magic, I’ll be good as new.” He grinned. “Although apparently that won’t be until after Praxasalandos is fit to travel. I never thought to see the day when a Daardendrien would put a stinking wyrm ahead of his own clan brother. Nor do I understand why a creature capable of splitting into dozens of drops of quicksilver and then putting himself back together needs any help recovering.”

Biri smiled. “That is a mystery. I guess it makes a difference whether he’s changing his own body on purpose or some outside force is doing it.”

“I defer to the wisdom of a magus.”

They sat quietly for a few heartbeats. Then she said, “It will feel strange to divide the company, especially in the middle of this warren.”

“I agree. But there’s no scheme so harebrained that Medrash won’t try it if he imagines Torm whispered it in his ear.”

She chuckled. “Back in Djerad Thymar, everybody says you’re the reckless, feckless one.”

“Only when it comes to sensible pursuits like winning bets and chasing … well, sensible pursuits. Anyway, I suppose the first part of the plan isn’t entirely idiotic because we might actually be running short on time.”

And such being the case, he, Medrash, Khouryn, Nellis, and Prax would exit the caverns to the east, where they let out on the Plains of Purple Dust. It was a shorter hike than backtracking, and then the quicksilver dragon would fly his companions over the mountains. If everything went accordingly to plan, they'd reach Skyclave and ultimately Tymanther quicker than they would have otherwise.

"What about the second part?" Biri asked.

"Oh, that's completely crazy, of course."

Medrash had worked it out that enlisting the active aid of High Imaskar was all very well, but to maximize the

chances of averting a war, somebody needed to make sure the news reached the Chessentans, then negotiate with them. He intended to make the trip with Ophinshtalajiir Perra—or whomever Tarhun sent—as he had before.

That was because it had occurred to him that Tchazzar, whom his people revered as their greatest champion, might be suffering from the same stain that had afflicted the Platinum Cadre and Prax. And if so, perhaps a paladin could resolve the conflict between Chessenta and Tymanther by using his gifts to scour it off.

Balasar was dubious. He still fundamentally subscribed to the traditional dragonborn belief that the

only good wyrm was one who'd donated his head to decorate your wall. But even so, he'd paid attention to Vishva's explanation of the difference between metallic and chromatic dragons and to Khouryn's account of his one meeting with the "living god."

"But you'll go with Medrash anyway," Biri said.

Balasar shrugged and regretted it because that hurt too. "Someone has to do the thinking. The rational kind, as opposed to demented ruminations about the will of the gods. And anyway, I've been stuck in the middle of this mess since the beginning. I might as well be there at the end."

Biri looked down at her hands with

their several rings, all of which had either an outré or a starkly utilitarian look that marked them as mystical tools rather than adornment. “Yes … well … I talked to Prax, and he says that carrying one more rider as far as the outpost where we left the redwings won’t slow him down.”

Balasar hesitated and thought how ridiculous it was that one maiden could so easily flummox a fellow glib and clever enough to infiltrate the Platinum Cadre and unmask Nala for the insidious traitor she had been. “You’ve done plenty already,” he said.

She sighed. “I hope you realize, it’s not every female who’d chase you down the gullet of a purple worm.”

“Thank you for that. I know I owe you my life.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want you to ‘owe’ me anything. I just want you to like me.”

“I do.”

“Then why does such a notorious lecher flinch whenever I smile at him?”

“Because it wouldn’t just be a dalliance with you. Not if our clan elders have their way. Not if you have yours.”

“So it’s the prospect of something permanent that’s unbearable?”

“Yes. No.” He groped for the words to express his feelings. “I’m proud to belong to Clan Daardendrien. But at the same time, for as long as I can

remember, I've felt like if I let it, it would smother me. All the duties, the traditions, the expectations … I mean, some of it is fine. I joke about not wanting to, but I'm happy to go fight any bandit, giant, or wyrm that comes sniffing around. The rest, however, is …"

"Stifling."

"Yes."

"Well, that's all fine, but I think you've been so busy defending your precious independence that you haven't noticed who's clicking her claws at you. Ever since I broke out of the egg, my own clan elders have striven to make me as 'marriageable' as possible, and like most of our folk, they regard mages as

‘eccentric.’ Do you think they encouraged me to study wizardry?”

“I suppose not.”

“Then you’re right! I had to fight for it! Which makes you and me kindred spirits. So you know there wouldn’t be anything staid and proper about our marriage. We’d have the most scandalous, outrageous union in all Tymanther. Our elders would rue the day we met.”

Balasar laughed, then struggled to hold it in so he wouldn’t wake the exhausted folk snoring just a few paces away. “Well,” he said, “when you put it that way.”

* * * * *

Brimstone had finally acquired what he considered to be a proper instrument for his scrying, a trapezoidal sheet of polished obsidian in a silver frame. When he stared into it and whispered words of power, the blackness flowed to the edges of the stone, and images appeared in the center.

At first, Ananta had hesitated to peer through the magical window. But eventually the smoke drake had noticed her hanging back and invited her to satisfy her curiosity as she saw fit. She wasn't sure if that reflected trust per se or the assumption that she wouldn't dare try to use whatever she learned against him.

Indeed, she wouldn't try but not

because of fear, for all that he'd once defeated her in battle. It was because Skalnaedyr, the blue wyrm to whom she owed everything, had given Dracowyr to Brimstone and commanded her to serve its new master as she had the old.

"Got it," the vampire said as the image cleared.

Her staff of office in hand, Ananta moved up beside his head for a better view. She was a dragonborn, with the tall, sturdy frame of her kind, but even so, for a moment, standing so close to Brimstone with his dark gray, red-speckled scales and luminous crimson eyes made her feel like a mouse who'd ventured too close to a cat.

She suppressed the feeling by

focusing on the humans in the mirror.

They were feasting in a lordly hall, and accompanying himself on a lute, a bard was just finishing a song. To Ananta's ears, the sound was a tiny, tinny thing, the lyrics indistinguishable, but she knew Brimstone could hear it clearly.

The bald, smiling man at the center of the head table rose and leaned over the goblets, plates, and trays to shake the minstrel's hand and give him a bulging purse. Then he looked around, possibly to summon the next entertainer, but a nobleman in a red jerkin spoke and distracted him.

They conversed for a moment; then the man in red called out. Slowly and

carefully, so as not to stir up the sediment, a servant carried a dusty bottle to the table.

He served the lord of the hall first. The bald man sniffed the red vintage, made some comment on the bouquet, then took a sip. He started to say something else, and his eyes opened wide. He tried to lift his hands to his throat or face, but they made it only partway. Then he pitched forward across the table.

A priestess of the Great Mother rushed forward and tried to heal him. But after three prayers, she shook her head to indicate that he was gone. And that was when the bald man's retainers fell on the gaping aristocrat in red and

the equally shocked-looking fellow who'd brought the wine.

Brimstone chuckled. "Neatly done," he said in his sly, sardonic whisper of a voice.

Like any dragonborn worthy of the name, Ananta disdained poison as a coward's weapon. But she felt disinclined to say so and elicit a jeer at her supposed naïveté. "How so, my lord?" she asked.

"The bald man was Quarenshodor's chief lieutenant. It was actually Eeringallagan who ordered his murder, but the assassin arranged for Lyntrinell's servant to serve the poison. Well, Lyntrinell's servant's servant, but you get my point. The wrong dragon prince

ends up taking the blame. It's good, solid *xorvintaal*, subtler than much of the play we've seen of late."

"How did you know to watch?" Ananta asked.

"Oh, Eeringallagan requested it," Brimstone said. "He wanted to make sure he'd receive the points for it."

Ananta grunted, Brimstone twisted his head to regard her straight on, and blackness washed over the scene in the human hall.

"You don't approve," the dragon said, his breath smelling of smoke. "You try to hide it—to avoid bruising my tender feelings, no doubt—but I can tell. Does it all seem somehow petty? Unworthy of the mightiest creatures in the world in

general, and your beloved Prince Skalnaedyr in particular?"

Ananta scowled. "Something like that."

"Believe it or not, I can see that side of it. But it's a pettiness that will remake Faerûn." He turned suddenly, lifting a wing so he wouldn't swat her with it. "I'll explain further another time, but for now we have a visitor."

After another heartbeat, she, too, smelled a scent like incipient lightning and heard buzzing and crackling. Then, dripping sparks, a dracolich crawled into the cave. Entirely skeletal, it dwarfed Brimstone as he dwarfed Ananta.

She wondered if that could possibly

be who she thought it must be: a player who, despite or maybe because of possessing every advantage, had been eliminated from the Great Game early, when a cabal of his rivals and underlings conspired against him.

Brimstone's greeting removed her uncertainty. "My lord Alasklerbanbastos," he said. "I rejoice to see you returned to the world of the living and cloaked in a form every bit as imposing as the last one."

"Did you know?" the dracolich growled.

"That Jaxanaedegor and your lesser vassals intended to betray you?" Brimstone replied. "By the end, I did."

"And yet you didn't warn me!" Pale

light flickered inside Alasklerbanbastos's ribs, through his fangs, and behind the orbits of his skull. The smell of an approaching storm thickened.

Ananta shifted her grip on her staff. It had formidable powers, but she doubted they were formidable enough to contend with the Great Bone Wyrm.

"Nor did I warn anyone else of any of *your* schemes," Brimstone said. If he felt threatened, Ananta couldn't tell if from his demeanor.

"But all against one?" Alasklerbanbastos said. Little lightning bolts sizzled from one bone to the next. "In the opening moves?"

"If I were speaking to anyone else,"

Brimstone replied, “I might suspect that individual was about to embarrass himself by whining about fairness. But I know Lord Alasklerbanbastos understands that’s a concept for weaklings, without applicability to *xorvintaal* or the deeds of dragons in general.”

Alasklerbanbastos glared back at him for several heartbeats. Then, to Ananta’s relief, the flickering light inside the skeletal dragon dimmed a little.

“I want to know my current standing,” he said.

“You’re in last place,” Brimstone said. “You started out reasonably well. You conspired with Skalnaedyr and his circle to good effect and mounted a

credible war of conquest. But then your enemies smashed your army, stole your kingdom and your hoard, and destroyed you, albeit temporarily. You can't deny that your ranking really *is* fair."

"Whatever it is," Alasklerbanbastos said, "we need to adjust it."

Brimstone shrugged, giving his leathery wings a little toss. "You said it yourself. The game has barely begun. Over the course of decades—"

"I want it adjusted *now,"* snarled the undead blue. His tone was so fierce that, despite her desire not to provoke him, Ananta lifted her staff. Fortunately that elicited a nasty little chuckle, not a thunderbolt. "Relax, guardian. I didn't mean that I intend to force this jumped-

up snake to help me. I meant that I'm about to make a new play. One that by rights should earn more points than anyone else has acquired for anything because its purpose is to ensure the survival and integrity of the game itself."

"That's … intriguing," Brimstone said.

"Use your black mirror to look in on Vairshekellabex and Gestanius too. Then I'll tell you what I have in mind."

* * * * *

Tchazzar generally conducted official business in the Green Hall or one of the comparable chambers inside the War College. But for reasons he hadn't confided to Jhesrhi, he'd decided to

assemble his court on the roof.

When she arrived, she found servants serving wine and a trio of minstrels playing the yarting, longhorn, and hand drum while the sunset bloodied the western sky. It made her wonder if the war hero had decided to turn the gathering into a purely social occasion, or as close to purely social as an assembly of Chessenta's rich and powerful could ever be.

Before she had a chance to work her way through the crowd to ask him, the servant at the top of the stairs thumped the butt of his staff on the floor and, raising his voice to make himself heard above the music, announced "Daelric Apathos, Sunlord of Chessenta." The

stout high priest clambered into view, looking red-faced and breathless from the climb to the top of the fortress.

Tchazzar clapped his hands, and the musicians stopped playing. Daelric bowed like those who'd arrived before him.

"Here's the man we've all been waiting for," Tchazzar said. "Thank you for coming so promptly."

"Of course, Majesty," Daelric said. "The messenger said it was urgent."

"As it is," the Red Dragon said. "Sunset waits for no one, as you surely know better than anybody. Come to the parapet, and we'll enjoy it together."

His round face a bland mask of agreeableness, the high priest did as

he'd been told. Meanwhile, Tchazzar spotted Jhesrhi, grinned, and beckoned her forward as well. Halonya, who was already hovering near the war hero, twisted her mouth into a sort of rictus of welcome. Hasos gave Jhesrhi a nod.

Once everyone had wine, they all stood and watched the sky in silence for a while. It should have been pleasant—or at least more restful than Tchazzar's usual garrulity and rushing about. But perhaps it was precisely the fact that the dragon was quiet that made Jhesrhi feel edgier and edgier as the moments crawled by.

Finally, even though it went against her better judgment, she felt impelled to try to find out what was really going on.

“This is very nice,” she said. “Just not what I expected.”

“We friends should cherish these moments together,” Tchazzar said, “now that there are only a few remaining.”

Jhesrhi glanced around at the other folk in the Red Dragon’s immediate vicinity. As far as she could tell, none of them knew what he meant either.

“Do you mean that these are the last few moments of peace before we go off to war?” she asked.

Tchazzar laughed. “Not at all! With the children’s prayers to bolster my power, the annihilation of Tymanther will be a trivial undertaking. I was referring to something else entirely.” He turned his wide, white grin on Daelric.

“Do you want to tell them, or should I?”

Though plainly startled, Daelric controlled himself well. His eyes only widened a little, and his body barely twitched. “I’m sure you can explain it better,” he said.

Tchazzar nodded. “Possibly so. Here it is, then: I’ve spoken with my little brother Amaunator. I told him what a curse the darkness is to Chessenta. I explained that we have specters committing atrocities, even within my own palace and against my own person, and I urged him to do something about it. Well, it took some convincing. He’s a traditionalist and, to be blunt, a little lazy too.” He winked at Daelric. “No offense. Anyway, in the end, he agreed

to my plan." He paused, perhaps to draw a question from his audience.

If so, Halonya obliged him. "What is your plan, Majesty?"

"Why, to put an end to night," Tchazzar said. "That's why we should enjoy the few sunsets we have left. Soon Daelric will lead all the sunlords and ladies of the realm in a great ritual. After that, the sun will hang perpetually at zenith, and it will be noon in Chessenta forevermore." He turned back to the stocky high priest in his yellow vestments. "Isn't that right, my friend?"

Daelric swallowed. "Majesty, this is … the first I've heard of this scheme."

Tchazzar's smile bent into a frown. "Don't you commune with your god

every day? What kind of priest are you?"

"I do indeed open myself to receive whatever the Keeper chooses to share with me," Daelric said. "But if he shared this, I … didn't comprehend it."

"Majesty," Jhesrhi said.

Tchazzar turned. "What is it, dear one?"

"You're speaking of matters that are certainly beyond *my* comprehension as well. But is it possible that Amaunator didn't tell Sunlord Apathos about this because he thought better of it? Think about it. If the sun shines on Chessenta every moment, won't that be too much heat? Won't it bake the land into a desert?"

"I'm sure Amaunator can adjust the

heat," Tchazzar said. "It's fine if the sun burns cooler, just as long as it provides the same illumination."

Halonya smiled. "Just think how the crops will grow with so much sunlight!"

Tchazzar smiled, threw his arm around her, and hugged her to his side. "Exactly! I knew *you'd* understand!"

Daelric took a long breath and stood up very straight, "Majesty, I beg you to hear me."

"I'm listening," Tchazzar said.

"I'm not capable of raising enough power to perform the miracle you seek. Nor would I know how to turn it to this particular purpose even if I could."

"Don't underestimate yourself! You have strengths you've yet to discover,

and Amaunator will guide and support you every step of the way."

"With all respect, Majesty … with all *reverence* for the god incarnate who blesses me by allowing me to talk with him in the flesh … I don't know how that can be so. Amaunator is a god of order. Of the orderly progression and marking of time. Night follows day, season follows season, and year follows year because he—"

Tchazzar whipped his hand from right to left. For an instant, as Daelric's voice caught, it looked to Jhesrhi like the war hero's fingertips had missed the priest's neck by a hair. Then three redder lines appeared on Daelric's ruddy skin.

"This is blasphemy!" Tchazzar

snarled. “You’re defying me and your own patron deity too! Admit it!”

But Daelric was beyond admitting anything. He could only make little choking, gurgling sounds as he tottered and fumbled at his throat in a feeble attempt to keep the blood from pouring out and dying his golden robes crimson.

Tchazzar made a disgusted spitting sound. Then he struck again with a vertical sweep like an uppercut. His scaly hand was too large, as much a wyrm’s forefoot as a human extremity, and the talons drove into the underside of Daelric’s jaw and deep into his head. He then pivoted and flung the priest over the parapet as easily as a man could throw a ball.

Or rather, he flung most of him. Daelric's head came apart and left the lower jaw stuck to his killer's claws.

When Tchazzar noticed, he laughed. He shook the piece of gory flesh and bone loose and caught it before it could fall. Then he grabbed Hasos, pulled him close, held it right in front of the warrior's own chin, and moved it up and down like a child making a puppet talk. "I'm Baron Hasos," he said in a falsetto. "I'm Baron Hasos."

Overcome with shock and revulsion, Hasos reflexively strained to pull free. Jhesrhi tensed, for that could have prompted the dragon to kill him too. But instead, Tchazzar simply let go. Hasos reeled backward with Daelric's blood

streaking his chin. He lost his balance and fell on his rump, and the war hero guffawed at his discomfiture.

Lord Luthen and some of the other more sycophantic courtiers joined in, but it sounded forced, and maybe Tchazzar noticed. Or maybe he noticed Nicos Corynian and the other folk who hadn't managed a laugh.

In any case, he raked the whole assembly with his glare. "Daelric Apathos was a false priest and a traitor!" he shouted. "Who claims otherwise?"

No one did. Not even Jhesrhi, although it made her feel a flush of shame.

But the silence didn't mollify

Tchazzar. “Leave me!” he screamed. “If you’re here in ten heartbeats, you’ll burn!”

People gaped, then scrambled away. Some crammed themselves onto the nearest stairway. Others scurried toward the east side of the roof and the staircases there.

Jhesrhi was one of the latter, but unlike many of the courtiers, she wasn’t panicked. She was simply exercising prudence. And when she’d put some distance between the dragon and herself, she stopped and looked back.

His back to the sunset that had faded to a mere gleam of deep blue and crimson on the horizon, Tchazzar was sitting on a merlon. He was little more

than a silhouette in the twilight, but Jhesrhi could tell he was slumped forward with his elbow on his knee and his hand covering his eyes.

It was a posture suggestive of weariness, regret, or even despair. It made her wonder if Lady Luck had given her one last chance to lead him away from cruelty and madness.

She knew she had every reason to doubt it. But she also remembered that he loved her, even if it was in a lustful, selfish way. He'd helped her and Gaedynn escape the Shadowfell. He'd made her a great noblewoman and freed the mages of Chessenta. And how had she repaid him? With lies and tricks. By dangling herself in front of him like a

nasty child teasing a dog with a morsel that she had no intention of ever giving.

She took a deep breath then walked toward him. One of the bodyguards hovering at a safe distance from the monarch moved to block her way. She gave him a scowl. He hesitated, then shrugged, as though conveying that if she insisted on approaching Tchazzar in his present mood, she could take the consequences.

The butt of her staff clicked on the roof as she walked. Tchazzar lifted his face from his hand to glower at her.

"I said I'd kill anyone who didn't leave me in peace," he said.

"You said you'd burn them," she answered. "I'm not too afraid of that."

He snorted. “No. I suppose not. Well, if you want to be here, sit.”

She perched on the merlon next to his.

“Do you think I was too hard on Daelric?” he asked. “Everyone else did, even the ones who laughed. I could see it in their lying faces.”

“I think,” Jhesrhi said, “that he may have been telling the truth when he said he simply didn’t know how to obey your command.”

“Then it’s just like I said. He was no true priest of Amaunator and deserved to die for passing himself off as one. His successor will do better.”

“Possibly. If a human being can. If you aren’t asking him to accomplish something that only a god could

conceivably do."

Tchazzar cocked his long, handsome head. "Is that what you believe?"

She shrugged. "I'm a wizard, not a cleric, so maybe my opinion is of little value. But it seems to me that arcane magic is about as powerful as the divine variety. And *I* certainly wouldn't know how to go about making the sun stay in the same place forever like a torch burning in a sconce."

Tchazzar grunted. "Then Amaunator misled me."

Jhesrhi hesitated. "I don't know, Majesty."

"He must have. I may have to discipline him. I may have to discipline all the gods. They're all jealous. All

sorry I came back."

"I … hope that isn't so."

"Sometimes they don't even appear when I call them." He lowered his voice. "That's … upsetting. Once or twice, it even made me wonder if I really *can* summon them."

"Majesty, at present, you're walking the mortal world cloaked in something like mortal flesh and blood. Maybe that comes with certain inconveniences."

Tchazzar sighed. "Maybe. It would be nice to believe the lesser deities don't hate me. That I won't have to cast them down just to be safe."

Steeling herself, Jhesrhi reached out and took his hand. Her skin crawled. "Majesty," she said, "you're safe *now*. I

know you don't feel it, and considering that you endured a hundred years of torture in the Shadowfell, who can blame you? But you are. You don't need to fight any more wars against gods or anyone. If you choose, you can simply enjoy being home."

Tchazzar sat quietly for a few heartbeats. Then he said, "But the game."

Apparently, distracted as he was, he'd once again forgotten that mere humans weren't allowed to know about *xorvintaal*. Jhesrhi tried to think of a way to talk about it without revealing that she did.

She was still trying when something fluttered overhead.

Tchazzar jerked, gripped her hand painfully tightly, and yelped. Maybe it was because, like her, he'd just noticed that dusk had given way to night.

She spoke to the wind, and it whispered that the creature fluttering over the roof was only a bat. She opened her mouth to share the reassuring knowledge with Tchazzar.

But she was too late. He sprang to his feet and grew as tall as a gnoll. Seams in his garments ripped. He tilted his head back, opened protruding jaws, and spit a jet of yellow fire. The pseudo-mind in Jhesrhi's staff exclaimed in excitement.

Tchazzar's breath caught the bat, and the burning carcass dropped onto the roof. Panting, trembling, the war hero

stared at it as if he suspected it might rise from the ashes like a phoenix. Guards came scurrying.

"It was just a bat," Jhesrhi said.

"Or another vampire!" Tchazzar snapped. "I understand that you only wanted to comfort me. But you'll serve me better with the truth. And the truth is I'm *not* safe. I can never be until I rule everything and everyone who wishes me ill is dead. And even then, there will always be the dark." He flashed a fierce, mad grin. "Unless …"

Inwardly Jhesrhi winced. "Unless what, Majesty?"

"You gave me the germ of the idea. If Amaunator won't or can't drive back the night, we'll use torches instead. Geysers

of perpetual fire drawn from the Undying Pyre. And if Kossuth doesn't like it, we'll make him like it. Think what an adventure *that* will be! An army of gods and men descending into Chaos to kill a primordial!"

The staff all but vibrated at the prospect of entering a world made wholly of fire. For half a heartbeat, its excitement infected Jhesrhi, but she crushed out the alien emotion as though grinding an ember under her boot.

Unfortunately the reassertion of her own natural perspective just made her feel sick to her stomach. I was right the first time, she thought. Tchazzar's sunk too deep into lunacy for me or anyone to reach him anymore.

That meant Shala had sacrificed herself for nothing.

TWELVE

5–6 Elein, the Year of the Ageless One

Oraxes couldn't see Luthcheq from the ground. But when he rode a griffon just a little way up, there it was. He could make out the great slab of sandstone that was the War College, the crazy tangle of

streets behind it, an ongoing demolition that must be the first stage in the erection of Tchazzar's temple, and the sprawl of the assembled forces of Chessenta, Threskel, and Akanûl.

It was over, then. He, Meralaine, Ramed, and the few others who shared the secret of Aoth's absence had kept the Brotherhood marching as slowly as it plausibly could. But there was no way to stop it from reaching its destination by the next day.

Oraxes stroked his steed's neck and sent it swooping back toward the ground. Meralaine followed him down. They gave the griffons into the custody of a groom and headed for Aoth's pavilion.

Once inside, Oraxes let the warmage's appearance dissolve. Meanwhile, the shadows around Meralaine deepened just a little. It reminded him of a cat rubbing against its owner's ankles.

He pulled the cork from a jug of some clear, biting Threskelan spirit—he'd never gotten around to finding out what the vile stuff was called or made from—and filled two pewter cups. His hand trembled. He hoped she hadn't noticed.

They each took a drink. Her face twisted, and he suspected his did too. Then he asked, "What do you think?"

"The masquerade's worked so far," she replied.

"Maybe on the sellswords. It didn't

fool Sphorrid Nyra, did it?"

"Well, it kind of did. At first."

"We're about to face *Tchazzar*, who's already going to be suspicious because Sphorrid and the other wyrmkeepers never came home. And because he sent orders for Captain Fezim to fly to Luthcheq ahead of the rest of the company and he didn't."

"So which way do you want to run?" Meralaine asked.

Oraxes shook his head. "I don't know. I figured we'd take the drakkensteeds. They actually belong to us, or at least more than any of the griffons do. But I don't know how far they can travel over open water. That means …"

Meralaine frowned. "Why did you

stop?"

"I guess because I *don't* want to go."

"You'd rather let Tchazzar kill you?"

He groped for the words to explain, for his own benefit as much as hers. "I said I'd do this. I'd rather take a risk—even a big risk—and follow through than not. I mean, it's not that bad here." He took a breath. "But you should probably leave. I'll feel better if you do."

She smiled a crooked smile. "You're an idiot *and* a liar."

He snorted. "Maybe."

"If not for the idiot part, you'd know I don't want to go either. Not away from the Brotherhood and especially not away from you."

"True love," said a voice from the

direction of the tent flap. “A debilitating affliction but fortunately nearly everyone recovers.”

Oraxes spun around toward the sound. Just as he’d imagined, it was Gaedynn who’d spoke, and Aoth was entering right behind him.

Oraxes almost started babbling about how glad he was to see them, but that would have looked soft. So he simply smirked and said, “I was just about to give up on you and become Aoth Fezim permanently.”

The Thayan smiled. The dimness inside the pavilion made the glow of his eyes more noticeable. “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” he said.

Cera entered behind him, and after her

came a young genasi, a stormsoul, apparently, although some of the lines in her purple skin were gold instead of silver. She wore a pentagonal badge that likely identified her as some sort of Akanûlan soldier or official.

"The camp already saw Captain Fezim enter this tent just a little while ago," Meralaine said.

"So they shouldn't see it again?" Aoth replied. "I doubt that anyone's been keeping such close track of 'my' movements that it will rouse suspicion, and even if it does, I'm too tired to care." He dropped into a camp chair. "Bring me that jug and report. You can talk in front of Son-liin. She knows pretty much everything."

Resisting the temptation to embellish the account into a celebration of his own cunning and prowess—and Meralaine's too, of course—Oraxes laid out recent events as clearly and succinctly as he could.

When he finished, Aoth grunted. "Could be better, could be worse."

"But mostly better," Gaedynn said.

* * * * *

As he and Aoth strode through the corridors of the War College with Nicos Corynian, the captain and the Brotherhood's original sponsor murmuring urgently back and forth, Gaedynn's nerves felt taut as bowstrings.

Partly it was because he and his companions were about to face Tchazzar, who was likely displeased with them anyway and whose mood would almost certainly sour further before the audience was over. But mainly, he realized, it was because he was about to see Jhesrhi.

He sneered at himself, reminding himself she was simply his friend. That was all she could ever be, and that was how he wanted it because friends were worth having, but frustrations and encumbrances were not.

Still, although making sure he wasn't obvious about it, he peered around for her as soon as he and his companions entered the Hall of Blades. For after all,

he had to make sure she was all right.

As the name suggested, the decor in the chamber celebrated swordplay. Sculpted bronze warriors brandished greatswords over their heads. Their counterparts in the tapestries assailed one another with broadswords and targes. The design in the floor tiles was made of stylized scimitars, and atop the high back of the throne on the dais, a fan-shaped arc of five blades projected to threaten the ceiling.

Along with Hasos, Halonya, Kassur Jedea, and some other dignitaries, Jhesrhi was standing near the dais in a robe of crimson damask. A ruby-studded tiara helped to hold her blonde tresses in the elaborate arrangement some

hairdresser had created. But despite her finery, she looked drawn and tired, perhaps even haggard in a subtle kind of way. Gaedynn could see it in her golden eyes and the set of her mouth, and it made him dislike Tchazzar all the more.

She smiled and started toward him and Aoth, but then the Red Dragon strode through a door at the back of the hall, and everyone had to fall silent and bow or curtsy.

"Rise," said Tchazzar, flopping down on the throne. "Captain Fezim, Lord Corynian, come forward."

Gaedynn supposed that meant him too, and even if it didn't, he had no intention of hanging back. He wanted to be close to his friends if things turned ugly.

When they were all standing before the dais, Aoth said, “Your Majesty, I have good news. It took some doing, but we eliminated the threat in Threskel.”

Frowning, Tchazzar stroked his chin. “And who were the traitors?” he asked.

“Once-human liches and other undead who formerly served Alasklerbanbastos,” Aoth replied, “and who had apparently been geased to avenge him in the event of his destruction.”

Gaedynn thought it was a good lie. When you fought the living, you generally ended up with fresh corpses, prisoners, and friends and kin lamenting the loss of the fallen. But slaughtering the undead didn’t necessarily produce

the same sort of evidence that a struggle had in fact taken place. It would be hard for a skeptic to prove that the Brotherhood *hadn't* destroyed a pack of phantoms somewhere out in the wilds.

"Are you sure the creatures didn't serve Jaxanaedegor?" Tchazzar asked. Gaedynn would have asked the same thing, considering that the green was a vampire and, as he and Jhesrhi knew firsthand, numbered other undead among his followers.

"Yes," said Aoth. "During the battle, some of the undead spoke of the Great Bone Wyrm."

"Fair enough, then," the war hero said. "Now tell me why you ignored my order to report to me as fast as possible

and let your company catch up with you."

"As we all know," Aoth said, "the undead are poisonous, and after we fought them, sickness broke out among the men. Fortunately the chaplains and other healers controlled it. But what kind of war leader would have left his command before he was sure the problem had been contained? Not your kind, Majesty, not if all the stories about you are true."

"But what about my priests?" Halonya demanded.

"I believe I already explained that in a dispatch," said Aoth. "They visited us, they left to return to Luthcheq, and that's the last I know about them." He returned

his gaze to Tchazzar. “Majesty, you’re my employer, and I’ll answer any question you put to me. But still, I wasn’t expecting quite this sort of interrogation. I expected you’d be glad to hear that I eliminated one nest of enemies, and then we’d discuss the next campaign.”

Tchazzar stared back at him for a few moments and, suddenly, he grinned. “Right you are, Captain, especially with regard to the planning! I delayed my departure until you and your company arrived because Lady Jhesrhi tells me you know how to take Djerad Thymar.”

Aoth smiled wryly. “Does she? All right, what do we know about the place?”

During the discussion that followed,

Jhesrhi caught Gaedynn's eye. They obviously couldn't speak freely in front of Tchazzar. But he could tell she was eager for some indication of whether there was any reason for hope that the invasion could be stopped. He gave her the tiniest of nods.

And a guard by the door announced Zan-akar Zeraez just a few moments later.

The ambassador had a grim, clenched look to him. Gaedynn was glad because it meant the stormsoul intended to act in accordance with the message Son-liin had given him.

As he should, for the badge she wore to identify herself as a royal herald and the parchment bearing Arathane's seal

were legitimate. But Zan-akar wouldn't have been the first officer serving abroad to ignore orders from home if he found them inconvenient or unpalatable.

Tchazzar beamed at him. "My lord! This is perfect … or would have been if you'd brought Lord Magnol with you! Now that Captain Fezim has *finally* seen fit to grace us with his presence"—he gave Aoth a wink—"we can make final plans for the campaign and march at dawn tomorrow."

Zan-akar took a breath. "Majesty, it is with the profoundest regret that I must ask you to excuse Akanûl from any such undertaking. Queen Arathane has ordered our soldiers home."

Tchazzar gaped at him. "Why?"

“Apparently,” the stormsoul said, “evidence has emerged to prove beyond doubt that dragonborn did *not* commit the atrocities inside Akanûl. Arathane suggests you evaluate the possibility that they weren’t responsible for the killings inside Chessenta either.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Tchazzar snapped, and smoke puffed out of his mouth.

As though in response, a spark or two crawled on the silver lines in Zan-akar’s skin. But Gaedynn had to give him credit. That was the only sign he was afraid.

“I can only repeat what my queen wrote to me,” Zan-akar said, “and assure you she isn’t someone who jumps to rash

conclusions."

"We have a pact!" Tchazzar said. "More than that, we have an *opportunity*. To destroy a hated enemy once and for all."

"I promise you," Zan-akar said, "you don't have to teach me or any genasi to detest the dragonborn. I pray for the day when our two peoples will unite to humble them once and for all. But it appears that day is yet to come. I beg Your Majesty to understand just how grave a threat the aboleths pose to Akanûl, and how vulnerable we are with the bulk of our army elsewhere."

"I should kill you," Tchazzar said. More smoke swirled from his mouth and nostrils, and a subtle patterning

suggestive of scales sketched itself on his neck.

"Clearly," the genasi said, "you can if you choose. I'm at your mercy. But I ask you to consider how such a breach of custom and diplomacy would reflect on the honor of a great king and the dignity of his court."

"Are you impugning my honor?" Tchazzar asked.

"No, Majesty, simply asking you to reflect."

"Go!" the war hero snarled. "I want you out of my kingdom! You, Magnol, and all your craven, unnatural kind!"

"As you command, Your Majesty." Zan-akar bowed and turned to go.

You lucky bastard, Gaedynn thought.

The gods only know what we're going to need to do to get Jhesrhi—and the whole Brotherhood, for that matter—out of Tchazzar's clutches, and you, he *orders* away.

But he didn't entirely begrudge the envoy his good fortune. Zan-akar had been an aggravation almost from the day Gaedynn and his comrades had arrived, but he'd acquitted himself bravely in the face of Tchazzar's wrath.

Tchazzar clasped his hands together, closed his eyes, and took several deep breaths. The smoke stopped fuming out of his nostrils, and the scales melted off his skin.

Then he leered out at the assembly. "This is actually excellent news," he

said. “Arathane’s timidity means more glory and plunder for the rest of us.” He looked at Aoth. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Possibly,” Aoth replied. He then launched into an analysis of how the loss of their genasi allies would likely affect the course of the coming war. He pointed out one difficulty after another but never said that the invasion had become too risky. He wanted Tchazzar to draw that conclusion for himself.

Any rational human monarch would have, but Tchazzar was neither the one nor the other, and as Gaedynn watched the Red Dragon’s jaw set with stubbornness, he wondered if killing Vairshekellabex had been pointless. Maybe it had simply ensured that the

war in the south would last longer and cost more sellswords their lives than would have been the case otherwise.

But then he noticed that Hasos had stepped to the side to whisper with a middle-aged woman possessed of a plain, pock-marked face, a shaved head, and two concentric circles painted on her brow. For a moment, the lack of hair made Gaedynn mistake her for a Thayan. Then he realized from the painted rings that she more likely hailed from Gheldaneth, the last surviving city of Mulhorand, which had been subsumed into the Imaskari empire.

When he'd heard what she had to say, Hasos approached the throne and all but stood at attention. His posture made it

clear that he wanted to be recognized.

"What is it?" Tchazzar asked.

"Goodwife Nanpret there was one of Your Majesty's spies in High Imaskar," Hasos said. "She's brought us news, and it isn't good. The incursions from the Plains of Purple Dust have stopped, or at least the empress believes so. If we attack the dragonborn, she'll send wizards and soldiers to help them."

I don't believe it, Gaedynn thought. Finally some luck we didn't have to make ourselves.

Or had they? He looked to Jhesrhi, and she gave him the same sort of nearly imperceptible nod he'd earlier given her. Evidently they all had their stories to trade if they made it out of Tchazzar's

presence alive.

The war hero glowered at the spy. “How can this be?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Majesty,” Goodwife Nanpret replied. “I didn’t linger to dig for all the details. I summoned a winged demon and made it carry me here to warn you as fast as it could fly.” She hesitated. “It cost me. It cost me dearly.”

If she expected a promise of reward or at least a word of thanks, Tchazzar disappointed her. He was intent on other matters. “Gestanius,” he whispered, “you treacherous piece of dung.”

Hasos peered up at him. “What, Your Majesty? I don’t understand.”

“Nothing!” the war hero snapped. “And this news changes nothing!”

“Majesty,” Aoth said, “I have to say that in my judgment the two pieces of news you’ve received today, taken together, change the strategic picture significantly.”

“If I were some puny mortal warlord, perhaps,” the Red Dragon said. “But I’m a god!”

“Fair enough,” said Aoth. “But you and I have already been to war together. And I’ve seen that even you can lose a battle when the odds are insurmountable.”

“And do you think they’re insurmountable now?”

“I think it might be prudent to let your forces fully recover from one war before leading them into another. I think it’s

already late in the year to start a new—”

“Because you dawdled in Threskel while I waited for you here!”

“Someone had to secure the north, or it would have been stupid to march south. But the fact remains, it’s already late to begin a new campaign. Your people will go hungry if no one harvests the crops. Cold and sickness will decimate your troops if we’re still in the field come winter. And without the genasi to support us, and with the Imaskari coming to oppose us, we will be.”

Aoth took a breath. “I’m not saying we can’t win. I am saying that some victories can be as ruinous as defeat.”

“I understand,” Tchazzar said, “that

you've giving your honest professional opinion. But you don't understand how High Lady Halonya will channel the power of the children's faith to make me invincible."

Gaedynn didn't really know what that meant either, but it suddenly came to him that he might know what to say about it. "It's not all bad, then," he murmured, softly enough that it might seem he was talking to himself but loudly enough for Halonya to overhear. "Because if you *don't* turn out to be invincible, at least you'll know exactly who to blame."

Halonya twitched as if he'd jabbed her with a pin. She hesitated for a heartbeat or two then said, "Majesty."

"What?" Tchazzar snapped.

“I … I’ll be honest,” the high priestess said. “The lesser clerics and I might benefit from having more time to practice. To meditate and study. I … don’t want to disappoint you like Daelric did.”

Tchazzar shook his head. “I don’t know whether to laugh or rain down fire on you all. Does no one believe in me?”

Jhesrhi stepped up onto the dais. That could be viewed as an affront to Tchazzar’s royal dignity, but if he saw it that way, perhaps she mitigated the offense by kneeling and taking his hands in hers. Gaedynn’s own guts twisted as he imagined how that contact must sicken her.

“Everyone believes in you,” she said.

"Especially Halonya and me. But it's like I told you before: you don't *have* to do this."

"But I *want* to," Tchazzar said, and for that moment, despite the menace he embodied, his manner reminded Gaedynn of a sulking child.

"Think of statecraft as a game," Jhesrhi said. "Right now, you're far ahead. You came back from a century of absence, reclaimed your throne, and conquered Threskel, all in the span of a few months. Is it time to make yet another big move and risk everything you've gained so far, or would it be shrewder to consolidate your position?"

Gaedynn tensed. She was trying to make Tchazzar think about *xorvintaal*

without letting on that she knew of its existence. But if he sensed she did know —

Fortunately the Red Dragon let out a long sigh that surely signaled resignation, not wrath. "All right," he growled. "You can all have it your way. The dragonborn can keep their miserable lives for a little longer."

Gaedynn had to struggle to keep his mouth from stretching into a grin. Who would have believed it? Aoth's mad scheme had actually worked. They'd prevented the war without openly defying Tchazzar or otherwise provoking him into a murderous rage.

Of course, that wasn't the end of it. But, confirmed pessimist though he was,

Gaedynn was willing to entertain the possibility that the worst might actually be over.

*****

A provincial lord had brought his daughters to court to witness the splendors of the Red Dragon's reign. Tchazzar hadn't bothered to retain the fellow's name or those of the girls either. But the latter were pretty, so he'd ordered them to his bed. Naked, trembling, their thighs bloody, they lay there and struggled not to flinch or cry out as he popped their blisters one by one with the fingernail he'd lengthened into a claw.

Like the deflorations that had

preceded it, the pricking was amusement of a sort. But ultimately it failed to brighten his mood.

Nor did it help to remind himself, as Jhesrhi had, that he was a god, a monarch, and a conqueror, safe once more in the heart of his dominions. It was still maddening that his plan to invade Tymanther had fallen apart so quickly and completely. He felt like a dullard bewildered by some mountebank's sleight of hand.

A white beeswax taper in one of the golden candelabra went out, and while twenty others still burned, that irked him too. Of late, he'd realized he preferred having his bed ringed with light and fire even when he slept, perhaps especially

when he slept.

He sat up, relit the candle with the slightest whisper of fiery breath, and turned back to his companions. But the trick failed to elicit the expressions of wonder and admiration he was expecting. It only made the girls shiver all the more.

That annoyed him but aroused him too, as did the memory of their father's helpless, stricken face. He bent down to kiss the younger daughter, the one with the chestnut hair and the freckles, and two more candles burned out.

That wasn't right. The candles had melted only a fraction of the way down, and Tchazzar hadn't felt a draft. He peered around.

More candles died in quick succession, and the shadows in the corners deepened even faster than the loss of the flames could explain. A chill and a rotten stink oozed through the air. The older, thinner, darker-haired daughter let out a whimper.

Tchazzar could only assume that Aoth Fezim and his company of incompetents hadn't really eliminated the threat from Threskel after all. Fine; he'd attend to the chore himself. Vowing he wouldn't freeze or falter—not in his own palace, curse it—heart pounding, he rolled out of bed. He grabbed the broadsword he'd left amid the torn and tangled garments on the floor, drew it, called flame into his throat, and armored himself in

scales. They itched for an instant as they erupted from quasi-human skin.

Then a portion of one wall flickered with a ghostly phosphorescence, like heat lightning, and the smell of a rising storm mingled with the stink of decay. One of the humans sobbed.

And Tchazzar faltered after all, albeit for only an instant, because his intuition told him what was about to happen.

Speaking Draconic, Alasklerbanbastos's voice whispered out of the inconstant glow. "I'm glad to see you getting over that childish fear of the dark."

Tchazzar took a breath then answered in the same sibilant, polysyllabic language. "I didn't realize you could

make contact with the outside world while imprisoned in the phylactery."

"I can't," said the undead blue. "But I'm out of the stone. I have been for a while. Your sellsword captain and his lieutenants released me."

Tchazzar snorted. "That lie doesn't even make sense. They risked their lives to put you in."

"But along the way," Alasklerbanbastos said, "they somehow guessed there was a dimension to our conflict hidden from human eyes. They resurrected me so I could reveal it to them."

"And did you tell them about *xorvintaal*?"

"Yes."

“Then you’ve betrayed all dragonkind!”

“Don’t talk like an imbecile. They had my phylactery. Fezim’s sunlady figured out how to use it to cause me unbearable pain. Anyone would have told. The important thing now is for us to deal with the situation.”

“ ‘Us’?”

“Just listen to me. After they learned about the Great Game, the humans decided we shouldn’t be allowed to manipulate our pawns into war. The idea offended them. The sun priestess claimed it offended her god. So in effect, Aoth Fezim started playing the game himself, with the ultimate goal of dismantling it. He and his allies delayed

your march south while they convinced Queen Arathane to withdraw her support and the Imaskari to come to the aid of the dragonborn. Along the way, they killed Vairshekellabex and Gestanius."

The younger daughter started scratching her breasts with her nails, breaking more of the blisters and drawing more blood. Alasklerbanbastos wasn't even physically present. He was using a spell to speak from a distance. But just his voice and the mere intimation of his malice and unnaturalness were enough to madden the girl into a sort of slow, deliberate, self-mutilating frenzy.

"I don't believe you," said Tchazzar to the lich.

“I realize you’re demented,” Alasklerbanbastos replied, “but try to think. Do you have one whit of actual evidence that any Threskelan wanted to avenge my downfall? Or that it was an undead who freed Khouryn Skulldark?”

Tchazzar hesitated. “Strange things have happened,” he said. “And Halonya kept warning me I was bestowing my trust where I shouldn’t. But no … I can’t believe—”

“At least believe that Gestanius and Vairshekellabex are dead! I’ve seen their corpses in Brimstone’s scrying mirror.”

“You’ve been to Brimstone?”

“Right after I recovered the phylactery and my freedom. And he agrees with me

that Aoth Fezim and every other human who knows about the game must die immediately, before they can disseminate the secret any further. That's why I'm on my way to Luthcheq. I figured I'd better warn you that I'm not coming to rekindle our feud."

"And what if I rekindle it?"

"Then that will prove you really are deranged, not just partly but through and through. Nothing is more important than preserving the game. If we don't, we're throwing away the key to mastery of Faerûn. And offending Tiamat, who gave it to us."

"I can protect the secret without allowing you in my realm."

"Are you sure? You have a court full

of traitors, and they've outwitted you at every turn. They've also destroyed other old, powerful dragons, including me in my previous incarnation."

"I destroyed you."

"Fine. I won't quibble. My point is simply that you can't underestimate Aoth Fezim, especially now that he has his mercenary band there in the city. Let me help you deal with him. I'm bringing several of the Murghôman dragons with me. Enough to be certain of killing the Thayan and all his allies too."

"How can I be sure they won't turn on me?"

"Because they fear the Father of Chessenta, onetime Chosen of the Dark Lady, a wyrm so mighty he's returned

from the dead repeatedly and might actually be a god. Because they're prudent enough to focus on one battle at a time. Because you have your own loyal troops in Luthcheq to fight them if necessary. And because I no longer want you dead."

Tchazzar laughed. "I almost believed you until you said that."

"But I *don't* want to kill you. Not tonight, anyway. The Spellplague swept the old world away. Why not let our conflict die along with it? Think how we can dominate the Great Game and the new world it will create if we join forces! And if we find we still despise one another after we establish our supremacy over lesser creatures, we can

fight our final duel a few centuries hence."

Tchazzar stood and thought about it for several heartbeats. Then he said, "All right. How do you want to proceed?"

"Where is Captain Fezim?"

"In a suite here in the War College. Cera Eurthos is with him."

"Excellent! Don't do anything to alert him until the other dragons and I are in the city. We'll surround the fortress and make it absolutely impossible for him to escape."

"I could kill or capture him right now, in his sleep."

"It's better to wait and come at him with every bit of our strength. My

companions and I will be there before he wakes. The only thing I want you to do now is deal with the humans I hear blubbering nearby."

"I'm sure neither of them speaks Draconic."

"They could still prattle about a strange occurrence in the war hero's bedchamber. Somehow, someway, the tale could find its way to Fezim or one of his allies. Let's not take the chance."

"I suppose you have a point."

"I'll see you before dawn, then." The flickering died, plunging the room into almost total darkness.

But the casement let in a little light. Enough, evidently, to reveal the motion when Tchazzar pivoted and raised his

sword. The daughters screamed but had time for nothing more.

* * * * *

Some of the time, Jhesrhi knew she was dreaming. The knowledge seemed to slide in and out of her mind like cargo shifting in the hold of a rocking ship.

Gaedynn was trying to kiss and caress her past repulsion into desire. Her reaction to that was inconstant too. At certain moments, his attentions were, if not pleasant, at least tolerable. She could appreciate how slowly and gently he was proceeding, and it made her want to want him.

But at other moments, loathing welled up inside her. Her guts churned and bile

burned in the back of her throat. She tried to focus on his face, tender and open for once, not armored in cockiness and mockery. But memories assaulted her. Huge and hideous, the elemental mages held her down. Tchazzar planted his eager mouth on hers.

Then, suddenly, she realized that the person who was embracing her really was Tchazzar. He drew his head back and leered at her then opened a mouth full of fangs. A long, forked tongue slid out to lick her lips. Its surface was rough and blistering hot.

It repulsed her beyond bearing, and she tried to push him away. But he was too strong and either indifferent to her unwillingness or too intent on his own

satisfaction to notice. She spoke a word of power.

Flame exploded between them, breaking his grip, flinging him backward, but incapable of actually harming a red dragon. That was why she'd chosen that particular magic.

But then he started screaming and thrashing on the floor, and it wasn't just clothing blazing but his hair. He was Gaedynn once again.

His agony was hers, yet it wasn't the only thing she was feeling. A part of her rejoiced simply because flames were leaping and crackling. Maybe that was the reason that no matter how she strained, she couldn't remember the words to put them out. Gaedynn's face

blackened, the fire gnawing it away—

With a gasp, Jhesrhi jerked awake, and her eyes flew open. Tchazzar was standing over her bed. Even in the gloom, she recognized his tall, muscular frame and the long head with the tapered chin and pointed ears.

She drew a ragged breath and let it out. "Majesty," she said. "No one told me you were here."

"That's because I sent your maids away."

Jhesrhi assumed that meant he'd grown impatient with waiting for her to overcome her dread of intimacy. Heart pounding, she told herself she could put him off as she had before.

"If Your Majesty will excuse me for a

moment," she said, "I can put on proper clothing."

"That won't be necessary," he said, and with the nightmare fading, she caught the strangeness in his voice. Maybe it wasn't lust that had brought him to her apartments, or at least, not lust alone.

"Well, then." Half expecting him to stop her but unwilling to keep lying supine, she tried to sit up. And when he permitted that, she rose and moved to pick up a robe to pull on over her nightdress. In so doing, she also positioned herself close to her staff. "Is there something urgent? Something wrong?"

"You could say that. I've learned that Aoth Fezim betrayed me. It was his

duplicity that made it impossible for Chessenta to march on Tymanther."

"Majesty, with all respect, that's absurd. Aoth's a sellsword. He earns his living—"

"Don't!" Tchazzar snapped. "I *know* he's guilty. I suggest you devote your energy to convincing me *you* weren't involved."

If there was no hope of persuading the Red Dragon of Aoth's innocence, that might indeed be the wiser course. For after all, Jhesrhi couldn't help her comrades if she was dead or locked up herself.

"I truly don't believe," she said, "that Aoth would ever do anything disloyal. But even if he has, I'm not a part of the

Brotherhood anymore, and I haven't been with them. I've been here with you."

"Yes, here in Luthcheq. Where some agency helped your friend Skulldark escape and a prodigious wind ruined the supplies. Where you looked me in the eye and urged me to consider my position in a game."

Trying not to be obvious about it, Jhesrhi swallowed. "Majesty, we've already talked about the escape and what happened to the supplies, and I don't understand why it was wrong for me to talk about war and statecraft in terms of a game. It's common for people to talk that way."

Tchazzar scowled. "I know that! And

I don't *want* you to be guilty. I want you to be my consort and my luck, like I imagined."

"Then allow me to be those things," Jhesrhi said. "Allow it by trusting me."

"It isn't that easy. You have to prove yourself, and do it before Alasklerbanbastos arrives. Otherwise __"

"Alasklerbanbastos?" She'd heard how the Great Bone Wyrm had escaped but, like her friends, had assumed the dracolich had simply gone to ground somewhere. Obviously not. "Now I understand! Majesty, that foul thing is your enemy! You can't believe anything he says!"

"Yet I do. I believe I've been mired in

lies since the day of my return, and now I'm free at last, which is bad luck for the liars. They're about to find out the punishment for trying to trick a god."

"Majesty, whatever you suspect, surely you'll at least give them a trial."

"When will you insects understand that I'm a god? I can judge and punish as I please, without the mortal rigmarole of courts and laws. In other words, your friends are already as good as dead. The only question left is whether you'll join them in the Hells."

"You said I could prove myself. How?" She assumed she knew and wondered if she could endure it any better in reality than she had in dream.

But Tchazzar surprised her by

laughing at whatever he'd seen come into her face or heard in her voice. "Do you think I'm *that* besotted? That it will be *that* easy?"

Bewildered and, crazily, a little hurt in spite of everything, she said, "Majesty, I believe I've explained that it wouldn't be easy for me."

"Or perhaps you've just tantalized me endlessly because you judged that would be the best way to keep me obsessed and distracted."

"I swear that isn't so."

"Well, you'll have to prove it as worshipers have always proved themselves to the gods. By sacrifice. Your friend Ulraes is in the fortress. Now, I told Alasklerbanbastos that I

wouldn't move against any of you until he arrived. But I had to figure *you* out, and the archer is no wizard, just an insolent man-at-arms. Surely you can dispose of him without making enough fuss to rouse Captain Fezim, and *then* you and I will make love beside the corpse. That will make our first time all the more special."

"Gaedynn helped rescue you. He had as much to do with it as I did."

The world exploded into senselessness. When her shattered thoughts came partly back together, her head was ringing, her mouth tasted of blood, and she had her back against the wall. She realized that the dragon had lashed her across the jaw with the back

of his hand, his arm whipping so fast that she hadn't had time to react.

"I told you not to mention that again!" Tchazzar snarled. "I'm a god! I was *never* a prisoner, *never* bound in the dark, and *never* needed any mortal's help! It's blasphemy to say otherwise! And blasphemy's the foulest treason of all!"

"Forgive me, Majesty," Jhesrhi said. "I … don't know why I said it. Some devil must have prompted me. Because I love and worship you and will do whatever I have to to prove it. Even kill my friend if that's what you require."

"I do."

"Then I'll get my staff."

As before, she thought he might stop

her, but he didn't. Probably he rightly assumed he had little to fear from the instrument. He was largely impervious to the fire that had become her greatest weapon, and no other single spell in her arsenal was likely to hit him so hard that he'd be unable to retaliate.

It was late. But the corridors of the War College were seldom entirely deserted, and startled sentries and servants hastily saluted or bowed to their ruler, then no doubt eyed him and his companion curiously once they passed by. Jhesrhi's nightclothes and bare feet probably made them think Tchazzar had whisked her out of her bed for some madcap escapade or tryst. Which, in a ghastly way, wasn't far from

the truth.

Tchazzar stopped in front of one carved, brassbound door in a row of them. He removed a silver key from the inside of his doublet, slid it into the keyhole, and twisted it. The lock yielded with a tiny click. He smirked, laid his finger across his lips, swung open the door, and ushered Jhesrhi into the dark room beyond.

At which point, she felt a pang of hope because Gaedynn wasn't there. But when Tchazzar eased open a second door, they found the Aglarondan sprawled, snoring softly, in his bed. Despite everything, Jhesrhi's mouth tightened when she made out the second shape all but hidden under the covers.

“See?” Tchazzar whispered, a hint of laughter in his tone. “He doesn’t care anything about you. So this shouldn’t be so difficult after all.”

“No.” Jhesrhi raised her staff, told it to be still when it begged for fire, and spoke to the wind instead.

Conjuring an actual gale wasn’t easy in a massive, enclosed structure such as the War College. But, like every wizard who’d ever cast a spell successfully, she made herself believe the magic would answer and it did. The air screamed, snatched her off her feet, and hurled her forward. Tchazzar grabbed for her, but at that moment, he was the one who was too slow.

Ahead of her, the wind rocked the bed

and ripped Gaedynn, his companion, and the covers off the feather mattress. In the dark, Jhesrhi couldn't tell if the blast of air smashed the cames and diamond-shaped panes out of the casement, or if the lovers' bodies did it as they hurtled through.

An instant later, she, too, shot through to see that she and the others had burst out of the east face of the War College, on the opposite side from most of Luthcheq. Only a few scattered buildings bumped up from the ground below.

Jhesrhi spoke to the wind once more and felt it respond with a hint of reluctance. Flinging people around like a cat batting a ball suited it better than carrying them in a more precise and less

violent manner. But it obeyed. It heaved her, Gaedynn, and his erstwhile bedmate upward.

And not a moment too soon. Flame blazed through the broken window but passed beneath them. Above, on the battlements atop the enormous sandstone edifice, a sentry cried out.

Certain Tchazzar would try again to burn them, Jhesrhi told the wind to bring her close to the wall and drew those she was carrying close to it also. That should give the dragon a difficult angle.

Although evidently not an impossible one, for a second streak of fiery breath shot up between Gaedynn and herself. Then, however, they were high enough to fly over the roof and use it for cover.

Jhesrhi dumped Gaedynn's wench beside one of the catapults, and she thumped down with a squeal.

Then, Jhesrhi judged, she could finally pause to catch her breath and think. The guards below looked astonished, not aggressive, although that could change at any moment. She made Gaedynn and herself float in the air.

To her relief, it didn't appear that the window glass had cut him. Using his fingers to comb his tousled hair, he grinned at her. "You really didn't have to go to all this trouble just to see me naked."

"Shut up!" she snapped. "The plan's come apart! Tchazzar wants us all dead!"

“I guessed that, actually. The gist, if not all the details. And I assume Aoth and Cera are still inside the fortress.”

“Yes. Do you know what quarters they were given?”

“Even if I did, I doubt I could spot it from the outside.”

“We can’t just leave them to be killed in their sleep.”

“No, but we can’t go back in and look for them either. That would only get us killed. You have to warn them from out here.”

“All right.” Growling harsh, percussive words derived from one of the languages of Elemental Chaos, she gripped her staff with both hands and jabbed it downward in time with the

steady beat of the incantation.

Her power jolted the structure beneath her. The shocks made the sentries stumble back and forth.

When she finished, Gaedynn asked, "Are you sure that was enough? I mean, it was impressive in its way, but you didn't break anything."

"I'm not done," she answered. She spun her staff over her head. The pseudo-mind inside cried out in joy when she willed the ends of the rod to burst into flame.

Fireballs shot from the ends of the staff and, arcing, fell down the four faces of the War College. Presumably the light they shed shined through all the windows.

Panting, she lowered the staff and willed out the fires at the ends. “That’s all I know to do.”

“Then it will have to be enough. Especially since the fellows below are finally readying their crossbows. We need to reach the Brotherhood.”

“I know.” She spoke to the wind, and it swept them onward.

* * * * *

Jet prowled the muddy field where his fellow griffons lay sleeping. Still not quite recovered from the race back to Chessenta, he wished he could join them in their slumber. But a nagging uneasiness was keeping him awake.

He turned east and reached across the

city with his thoughts. *Are you there*? *Is everything all right*?

But all that he sensed in response was a jumbled blur of a mind that sluggishly shifted away from his psychic touch. Aoth, too, was asleep. Happy that he'd outmaneuvered Tchazzar, he'd likely eaten too much, drunk too much, and spent himself mating with his female.

Idiot, Jet thought, although not without a certain amount of envy. Don't drop your guard while you're still in a dragon's lair.

And at that moment, fire erupted from a point above the War College. The blazing orbs arced outward and spilled down the sides of the fortress like spray from a fountain.

Jet didn't know exactly what that meant, but he very much doubted it was good. *Are you awake now*? he called.

No. Aoth wasn't. Although it was possible that his sleep wasn't quite as deep as before.

Jet trotted, unfurled his wings, lashed them, and rose into the air. "Danger!" he screeched. "Danger!" Then he drove on toward the War College.

Wake up! he cried, tearing at the barrier of Aoth's unconsciousness as he would rend a foe with his talons. *Wake up, wake up, wake up!*

* * * * *

Aoth dreamed that he was back on the mountaintop in Szass Tam's private little

hell, and somewhere amid all the undead giants and beholders, Jet was crying out in anguish. He fought madly to reach the griffon, but for every foe he destroyed or blasted aside, two more loomed before him, and he couldn't even catch a glimpse of his steed.

His eyes snapped open. But Jet's voice was still ringing inside his head. It made him feel addled.

What you are, the familiar rasped, *is drunk! Sober yourself up!*

Aoth touched one of the tattoos on his forearm. A surge of clarity and vitality washed his muddled daze away. *What's wrong*? he asked.

Something was floating above the War College tossing balls of fire. It's

stopped now, but you still needed to know.

Aoth grabbed Cera's shoulder and shook her. "Muh?" she murmured.

He shook her harder. "Wake up!"

She frowned up at him and knuckled her eye. "What's wrong?"

"If we're lucky, Tchazzar's just amusing himself. Or the citadel's under attack."

"And if we're not?"

"Then Jhesrhi just tried to warn us that the dragon's turned on us. Dress fast. We don't want to be in these rooms if somebody's on the way to kill or arrest us. Jet's coming to carry us to safety."

Cera rolled out of bed and grabbed

her shift. “What if Tchazzar does still trust us but then finds out we ran away?”

Aoth pulled on his breeches. “I’ll think of some excuse.”

Once they were dressed, he reached for his mail but then left it on the stand. It took time to put on armor, and he was afraid they didn’t have it. He thrust Cera’s mace and buckler into her hands, grabbed his spear, and led her into the sitting room.

He cracked the door open. No one was waiting right outside, but the War College had begun to echo with excited voices. He couldn’t tell if it was because people were simply reacting to the rain of fire or because Tchazzar and his officers were already giving orders.

He did know the closest staircase was to the left. Since it was a good idea to get off that level, he and Cera headed in that direction. *I'm nearly there*, said Jet.

Good, Aoth answered. *We'll get out on a balcony or someplace like that.*

I had to swing wide to avoid Tchazzar. He was in the air in dragon form.

Was he chasing Jhesrhi? Or on his way to attack our camp?

All I know is he was headed west.

Curse it! Get here as soon as you can!

What do you think I'm trying to do? Several moments passed before the griffon spoke again. *A couple of the buildings near the War College are on*

fire.

There may be a reason to care about that later. Right now, we have other problems.

Aoth reached the top of the stairs and led Cera to the left again. Every upper level of the fortress provided some sort of access to the open air. He just had to find one of the doors.

But before he could, a squad of Tchazzar's guards armored in gilded breastplates and helms with scarlet horsehair crests came around a corner. Spying Aoth and Cera, they reached to draw their swords. Their leader sucked in a breath to shout.

Aoth shouted first. He bellowed a word of power and jabbed at the

soldiers with his spear.

Magic amplified the shout in a boom like a thunderclap. Loud as it was, the noise didn't hurt him or Cera, but the guards reeled and fell.

Aoth strode forward and looked down at the officer. The Chessentan was bleeding from the nose and ears and looked dazed. But his eyes were open.

Aoth poised his spear at the fellow's throat. "My followers and I want out of Chessenta," he said.

The officer goggled back at him.

"I don't think he can hear you," Cera said. She murmured a prayer that set her fingertips aglow with golden light, stooped, and touched the fallen man on each ear. "Try it again."

“My men and I just want to leave,” Aoth said. “If Tchazzar allows it, there won’t be any trouble. But if he tries to stop us, I guarantee the battle will lay waste to Luthcheq.” He remembered the blazing aerial display and the burning buildings Jet had told him about. “In fact, I’ll burn the place to the ground. Tell him.” He waited for an answer, but the man just kept gawking. “Say you understand or I’ll kill you.”

“I … I understand,” the warrior stammered.

“Good,” Aoth took a look at the other battered soldiers. They were all still too groggy to cause any trouble. He and Cera picked their way through them then hurried on.

“You can’t burn Luthcheq,” she said. “There are tens of thousands of innocent people here.”

“I had to threaten them with something,” he said. Then, at last, he found what they were looking for.

The door opened on a walkway behind a row of merlons. He pulled it open, and wings beating, blacker than the night behind him, Jet lit on one of the sandstone blocks.

* * * * *

“Tchazzar’s chasing us,” said Jhesrhi, her golden hair streaming and nightclothes flapping in the gale that swept her and Gaedynn along.

He looked around. He could see the

War College, its walls stained by the wavering yellow light of the fires near its base, but nothing in the air.

"I assume the wind told you," he said.

"Yes. We're faster than he is, but …"

"But he'd catch us eventually. When you ran out of magic if not before."

"Yes."

"But it doesn't matter. As long as we reach the Brotherhood ahead of him, we'll be all right."

Inwardly he prayed to old Keen-Eye that that was true.

They soared over the site of Tchazzar's new temple. The shops and homes that had stood there were mostly rubble, waiting for someone to cart it away. Fires burned in the shadow of the

piles. Displaced paupers with nowhere else to go were surviving as best they could.

Gaedynn peered ahead, at the place where the city started to thin out and the army was encamped. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed a sigh when he spotted figures scurrying in the Brotherhood's part of the sprawl. Something had alerted them that there was trouble in the city, and that meant they all had a chance.

Jhesrhi's tame wind set them down in the center of their camp, then departed in a final howling swirl. People gawked at them. Her mouth hanging open, Son-liin in particular seemed unable to tear her gaze away from Gaedynn.

He grinned. “I know it’s magnificent, but now is not the time. Find me a bow and quiver. Go!”

The stormsoul scurried off, and Ramed strode out of the dark. “What’s happening?” he asked. “Jet cried that there was danger, then—”

“Tchazzar’s coming to attack us,” Gaedynn said, “but maybe we can make him reconsider. Get all the griffons in the air.”

“It’s only been a little while. Most of them aren’t saddled—”

“I don’t care. I don’t care if they have riders. They’re more intimidating on the wing than on the ground. I want every man showing he’s ready to fight too. Don’t worry about putting them in

formation. There's no time for that either. Just have them point their weapons at the sky."

"Right." Ramed hurried away, shouting orders.

"It isn't going to be enough," Jhesrhi said. "Tchazzar's a warlord. He'll see that we're not prepared to stop him." She looked around. "Oraxes! Meralaine!"

She kept shouting while Gaedynn scrutinized the sky above the city. His mouth was dry, and his hands ached with their emptiness. Finally, after what felt like a lifetime although he knew that it had really been only a few breaths, Son-liin came running back with a longbow and arrows. Then Oraxes and Meralaine

trotted out of the dark aisle that ran away between two rows of tents.

"Tchazzar's coming for us," Jhesrhi told them. "He'll be here in a matter of moments. You have to make us look more ready than we are. You have to fill the night with shadows and phantoms and play on his fears. Start now and I'll support you as best I can."

Meralaine clutched her wand of bone in both fists and whispered. Her body shriveled and dark patches appeared on her skin as she took on the appearance of one of the dead. Oraxes drew one of his daggers and gashed the tattooed palm of his hand. At first the cut bled normally, but when he started to chant, the blood swirled forth as phosphorescent vapor,

with vague shapes forming and dissolving inside the coils. Murmuring along with one incantation then the other, Jhesrhi stretched out her hand, and the air rippled between it and the younger mages to whom she was lending her strength.

The warm, summer night turned cold, and the stink of corruption tinged the air. Overhead, a griffon screeched, and even though he was in on the trick, Gaedynn felt a pang of reflexive dread because, somehow, it hadn't sounded like the cry of a living creature. There was a quality to it, a hollowness, perhaps, that bespoke the insatiable hunger and malice of the undead.

But it *was* just an illusion, and how

could anyone think that Tchazzar would fall for it again, when he understood that his supposed allies had been deceiving him all along? Scowling, Gaedynn laid an arrow on his bow.

"Aim for the eyes," he told Son-liin. "They'll be tough to hit, but if we do—"

The former firestormer gave a nod. "We might really hurt him," she said, her youthful, soprano voice steady. "I understand."

Then, suddenly, Tchazzar was there, a bat-winged shadow sweeping in from the east, still difficult to make out except for the glow of his eyes and the firelight flickering through his fangs. Gaedynn drew his arrow back to his ear—

And the Red Dragon veered off.

For a few moments, the camp was silent. Then people started cheering and Meralaine collapsed. Oraxes lunged, grabbed her, but couldn't hold her up. Instead, she dragged him to the ground.

Their companions hurried over to them. Gaedynn was glad to see that Meralaine was breathing, and the blotches and streaks of discoloration were dissolving from her skin. She was still thinner than before she'd worked her magic but plainly alive as well.

"I think she's all right," Oraxes wheezed. "Is she all right?"

"She just fainted," Jhesrhi said. "That weakened her like it did you."

Oraxes sneered at the suggestion that anything could weaken him, made some

effort to arrange Meralaine comfortably, then dragged himself to his feet.

"Nicely done," Gaedynn said. "Frankly I had my doubts that it would work."

"I suspect," Jhesrhi said, "it only did because Tchazzar has an army and Alasklerbanbastos coming to help him. So he thought, why should he run *any* risk by tackling us by himself?"

Gaedynn stared at her. "Wait. *Alasklerbanbastos* is on his way here? To *ally* with Tchazzar?"

"That's what he told me."

"The fun just never stops, does it? Any clever ideas on how to handle that?"

With a rustle of wings, Aoth, Cera,

and Jet settled on the ground. “Why don’t you start by putting on some clothes?” the warmage said.

THIRTEEN

7 Eleint, the Year of the Ageless One

As Tchazzar swooped toward the roof of the War College, he scrutinized the

various counselors and warriors assembled to meet him. There was no sign of Aoth Fezim and Cera Eurthos. Evidently they'd escaped too.

His body clenched with fury, and he thought how easy it would be *not* to light, but instead to stay in the air in dragon form and incinerate every last one of the traitors and incompetents who'd disappointed him yet again.

But he still had uses for them, so he plunged at the center of the roof, and people scurried to avoid being crushed. He poised himself to pull his substance in, to dwindle then decided not to. On a night of war and treachery, it was better to remain armored in the full panoply of his might. And if it frightened any of his

subjects to see him in that guise, well, good. They were wise to fear him in his current mood.

Everyone started to bow or curtsy. He snarled, spitting some fire without quite meaning to, and all the humans flinched. A couple of them yelped.

"I take it," he said, "that the royal garrison wasn't up to the task of arresting a sleeping man and woman."

"They did escape, Majesty," Nicos Corynian said, stepping forward. The counselor's house stood near the War College, and he'd likely rushed to the fortress in search of answers after the fire fell from the sky. "But they left a message for you." He motioned an officer forward.

The soldier stank of sweat and trembled. His armor clattered faintly. "Captain Fezim said that he and his company just want to leave. But if anyone tries to stop them, they'll make sure the battle destroys Luthcheq."

Tchazzar twisted his head to glare down at Nicos again. It would be so easy to smash him flat or flick him over the battlements. "This is the scoundrel *you* brought into our land."

Nicos inclined his head. "I beg forgiveness. I'll try to make amends by giving the best advice I can."

"I don't need advice. I need spears and crossbows."

"Then you do mean to detain the sellswords?"

“I mean to slaughter them to the last man! They’re on the edge of the city. How much damage can they do?”

“Are we sure we can keep the battle contained to that one area?” Nicos replied.

“With respect, Majesty,” Luthen said, “I’m worried about that too. There have already been fires tonight. We’re lucky they didn’t spread.”

The spectacle of the two perpetual rivals taking the same side ratcheted Tchazzar’s nerves even tighter. It made him feel even more like every one of his servants truly was a traitor or else so useless that he might as well be.

“Men can betray a king and get away with it,” he said, “but not a god. There

has to be a reckoning."

"I understand," Nicos said, "but does it have to be here and now? All the armies are camped together. If one tries to fight another, there'll be scant hope of directing the conflict. It will be chaos, pure and simple."

"Especially with the Akanûlans still camped there too," Luthen said.

Tchazzar lifted his tail and lashed it down on the rooftop. The shock sent the courtiers staggering. "I ordered them gone!"

Hasos came forward. "With respect, Majesty, they're an army. They can't just pick up and go in an instant."

"And it's conceivable they found … cause for concern in what Your Majesty

recently said to Zan-akar Zeraez," Nicos said. "If hostilities suddenly erupt, who knows which way they'll jump?"

"I hope they do fight us!" Tchazzar spit. "By the Hells, let's take the uncertainty out of the matter and attack them too! We can have our war after all, with Akanûl. We'll butcher Magnol and his army tonight, then march north unopposed. I'll be perched on Arathane's throne before Highharvestide."

Everyone just gaped at him. It would be so easy to burn away all their stupid faces. So easy.

"Do you think we don't have the strength to fight the mercenaries and the genasi at once?" he asked. "I'm the Red

Dragon of Chessenta! I have sufficient strength all by myself. But even if I didn't, help is on the way. Alasklerbanbastos and several lesser dragons are coming."

He expected the news to hearten the humans. Instead, they looked more dumbfounded than before.

Finally Kassur Jedea said, "Majesty, I served the Great Bone Wyrm my whole life until you cast him down. My father and grandfather served him. I *know* him and whatever he told you, you can't trust him."

"Even if you could," Nicos said, "the destruction that several dragons could cause fighting through the city, blasting away with their breath …" He spread

his hands.

"By all the stars," Tchazzar said, "is there no one who believes in me?"

"I do!" Halonya cried. Her vestments flapping, she stamped out of the crowd of courtiers then whirled around to face them in a clatter of amulets and beads. "And shame on all of you for doubting! Who cares who dies in the fighting or if the entire city falls? Our master will resurrect the fallen and build a new Luthcheq, a new empire, pure and holy, where those who serve the one true god will live in joy forever!"

"Exactly!" Tchazzar roared. "So no more quibbling! Go and ready my troops for battle!"

* * * * *

Hasos had hated it when Tchazzar loomed over them all in dragon form, flames licking from his jaws and his yellow eyes blazing almost as brightly. But he was glad that the war hero apparently meant to remain in that shape for the duration of the crisis. As a wyrm, he was too huge to follow his servants downstairs into the interior of the fortress.

Thus, Hasos felt free to stand still for a moment, even though he knew he should be scurrying off to prepare for battle like everyone else. Indeed, as one of highest-ranking officers in the red dragon's army, he should be scurrying

faster. But his thoughts were whirling, and he needed to sort them out.

The first one that came clear was the familiar wish to be back home in Soolabax attending to the mundane business of his baronial court. But wanting couldn't make it so, so he struggled to sort out his duty instead.

On the surface, it seemed clear enough. He'd sworn an oath of fealty to the sovereign who was both Chessenta's greatest hero and, according to many, a god. But he'd sworn a vow of knighthood too that obliged him to defend the realm and the people, not just the throne. What was he supposed to do when one pledge clashed with the other?

Wait, he thought. Do just enough to

satisfy Tchazzar's requirements and hope things sort themselves out.

But no, curse it, no. He'd been a cautious man his entire life, and it had served him pretty well. But it wouldn't anymore, not when he and the entire realm were running out of time.

He roused himself, then gave a start when he noticed Kassur Jedea loitering several paces away. Although perhaps it wasn't so surprising. Tchazzar had carried the skinny, graying king of Threskel away from his homeland as a trophy of sorts. Unlike Hasos, the monarch didn't have any urgent responsibilities.

"You look troubled," Kassur said, coming closer and fingering the round,

gold medallion he wore on a chain. A goldsmith had engraved little sigils around the rim. Hasos didn't recognize any of them, and their odd, vaguely disquieting shapes served to remind him that his companion wasn't just a king but some sort of sorcerer as well.

"Somewhat," Hasos said.

"I certainly am," Kassur said. "I kneeled to another overlord besides Alasklerbanbastos. The lich was gone, and I had no choice. But still, it's not something he'll forgive."

"And you believe Tchazzar won't protect you?"

"Does it seem to you that he's greatly concerned about any of his human vassals at present? If not, then perhaps

it's time for said vassals to consider protecting themselves."

"I'm not a traitor," Hasos said. Indeed, the mere thought of being called such a thing was sickening. To a true follower of the code of chivalry, there was no fouler insult.

Except, perhaps, for coward.

"If I thought you anything other than a brave and decent man," Kassur said, "I wouldn't confide in you in a time of need."

"I'm *not,"* Hasos insisted, and only belatedly realized that he was talking more to himself than to the king. He drew a long, steadying breath. "And I don't understand more than a fraction of what's going on here tonight or, really,

for the past few months. But I do think we Chessentans need to stop dancing to any dragon's tune before the creatures dance us right off a cliff. And I may know how to stop the music. Will you help me?"

The older man nodded. "If I can."

Next Hasos collected ten of his most loyal retainers. They were good men, but he would have hesitated to take them into a fight with spellcasters without a magus or priest of his own. Fortunately he didn't have to for this fight.

When they reached the narrows steps that descended to the dungeon, Kassur drew a bronze wand from his sleeve. It was as thin as a straw and scarcely gleamed in the gloom, yet paradoxically

it hurt the eye to look directly at it, as if it were reflecting the light of the noonday sun. The Threskelan flicked it back and forth then led his companions down to a door that proved to be unlocked, although that likely hadn't been the case a moment before.

The turnkeys jerked in surprise when the company stalked in. But they didn't snatch for their weapons because they recognized Hasos.

Still, that didn't mean it was safe to leave them behind. "We're freeing Shala Karanok," Hasos told them. "You can help, you can let us lock you in a cell, or you can resist and die."

The two men looked at each other. Then the heavier one, a fellow with a

drooping mustache and a round, stubbly chin, growled an obscenity. “We’ll help, my lord,” he said. “It’s not right down here. It hasn’t been for a while.”

Hasos could tell that from the stink and the echoing moans, and he felt a pang of shame to think just how many “traitors” and “blasphemers” were locked away in those vaults. Still, all but one would have to wait a while longer. He gestured for the turnkeys to lead the way.

They did, to another descending staircase. “I don’t know what’s down there, Lord,” the stout turnkey whispered. “I mean, I know the layout, but not anything the wyrmkeepers have done.”

“Tell me the layout,” Hasos replied.

“It’s a ring, basically.”

“Then we’ll split up at the bottom of the steps. Wherever they’re keeping Shala Karanok, we’ll come at it, and them, from two sides. Quietly now.”

Hasos took the lead, and they all descended. The passages above were poorly lit, but the darkness below was deeper still, although still less than absolute. A soft, sibilant chanting echoed, and the air smelled of bitter incense.

At the bottom of the stairs, a straight corridor ran to a place where light shined from half a dozen doorways. Another passage twisted away to the left. Hasos prowled onward with Kassur

whispering charms at his back. The men-at-arms started to divide into two groups as he'd directed.

Then a blast of vapor enveloped them all. Eyes burning, half blind with tears, Hasos doubled over, coughing. His comrades choked and retched behind him.

Its enchantment of concealment falling away, a drake the size of a donkey appeared immediately in front of Hasos. It instantly followed up on its breath attack with a lunge, its jaws agape to strike and tear.

Hasos could see it only as a blur amid the gloom, and he hadn't yet managed to inhale anything but stinging, strangling filth. Still, he sprang to meet the reptile,

and perhaps that tactic caught it by surprise. He cut and his sword bit deep into its skull.

The drake went down, thrashing. In its spasms, it nearly clawed Hasos's leg out from under him, but he jumped away just in time.

Someone screamed. Hasos pivoted. Somewhat smaller than the one he'd just dropped, a second drake had one of his men down and was tearing lengths of gut out of his midsection. Arterial spray spurted upward.

Hasos drove his sword into the second drake's flank. Another warrior stabbed it in the neck with a spear. It collapsed, although not in time to save the man it had eviscerated.

Hasos realized there were snarls and cries behind him too, which meant there'd been at least one drake in the branching corridor. But before he could even consider trying to do anything about it, a pair of shadowy figures stepped out of the lit doorways ahead of him. Alternately twirling and making chopping motions with their picks, they started chanting.

Kassur Jedea stepped up beside Hasos, jabbed with his wand, and rasped a word of power. The pool of light at the end of the passage seemed to swirl in a way that Hasos couldn't *quite* see but that made his eyes ache and his stomach turn over nonetheless. The wyrmkeepers vanished and reappeared

in slightly different places. The dislocations sent them staggering off balance.

Intent on closing the distance before the priests could attempt any more magic of their own, Hasos charged. Another warrior sprinted after him. And perhaps closing the distance kept the wyrmkeepers from using their most formidable powers. But they had time to come on guard and wake the enchantments bound in their weapons. The head of one pick burst into flame, while a coating of frost flowed across the other.

Hasos was on the same side of the corridor as the priest with the burning weapon. He sidestepped the

wyrmkeeper's chop at his head then lunged. His point drove into the priest's torso.

A voice said, "Here." Hasos turned in that direction, toward a wyrmkeeper standing behind a doorway. The dragon worshiper's gaze stabbed into him, and he froze in sudden fear. The priest sprang and swung a pick whose head dripped with steaming vitriol.

Hasos broke free of his paralysis just in time to parry. The weapons clanged together. The shock jolted his arm and nearly knocked his hilt out of his grip but not quite. He riposted with a slash to the throat, and his opponent fell backward.

Hasos rushed on into the room and looked around for the next foe. There

wasn't one. And when he rejoined his comrades in the hall, he couldn't find one there either. It appeared that he and his allies had killed all the priests and drakes, although they'd lost half their number in the process.

Hasos took a breath to steady himself. He'd known some of the men who'd just died since he was a child. But there'd be time to mourn later, or at least he hoped so.

"I see a barracks, a torture chamber, and a shrine," said Kassur, looking into the various lit doorways. "But no Shala Karanok."

"Keep looking," Hasos replied. "She has to be here."

And she was, locked in a bare cell not

much farther along. Her captors simply hadn't seen fit to give her a source of light, which meant Hasos couldn't estimate the full extent of her injuries until he hauled her semiconscious form out into the passage.

There, he felt a mix of anger and relief. Shala's face was bruised and swollen, and her back, crisscrossed with whip marks, but her condition could have been far worse than it was. Glad that he'd taken to carrying one around with him during the campaign against Threskel, he extracted a pewter vial of healing elixir from the pouch on his belt and held it to her lips. "Drink," he said.

She did, although some of the clear liquid ran down her chin. Full

awareness came back into her eyes, and her scarred face set in its customary scowl. She pushed Hasos's hands away, clambered to her feet, and arranged her filthy, ragged garments as best she could.

Hasos stood up and saluted. "Hail, Shala Karanok, war hero of Chessenta," he said. His companions did the same.

Shala grunted. "I didn't resent giving up that title, no matter what Tchazzar thought. I figured it was his by right. And I prayed his mind would heal, and then he'd be the leader the stories tell about. But I assume that if you're here, things are getting worse instead of better."

"Much worse," Hasos said. He explained as best he could.

"Then I won't mind taking the title

back either," Shala said, "assuming we can get it."

"The reason we came after you," Hasos said, "is that the army still respects you. I believe there are plenty of Chessentan soldiers who will follow you into battle against the dragons, and at least a few who will follow me. We just have to get out of the War College and rally them."

"And get word of our plans to Captain Fezim and Lord Magnol," Shala said.

"Do you really think the genasi will stand with us?" Hasos asked.

Shala snorted. "They will if Tchazzar actually is crazy enough to strike at them too. Let's hope he is."

Kassur Jedea cleared his throat.

Shala turned to him. “Yes, Majesty?”

The king smiled a crooked smile. “Contrary to popular opinion, I was never *entirely* a figurehead. There are portions of the Threskelan army that will follow me into rebellion the same way Chessentans will follow you.”

“I’d be grateful,” said Shala. “But don’t misunderstand. I’m not going to relinquish Chessenta’s claim to Threskel. They should always have been one kingdom, and that’s how they’re going to stay.”

“All I ask,” Kassur said, “is to retain my crown as your vassal, and that you impose no taxes or duties on my lands unless they apply everywhere in the realm.”

“Done,” Shala said. “And so it appears we have a plan.” She peered at Hasos. “What is it?”

“What’s what?” Hasos answered.

“You’re grinning.”

“Am I?” Hasos shrugged. “I guess I like recklessness more than I expected.”

* * * * *

Jet soared on the night wind, and although Aoth could feel the griffon’s soreness and fatigue through their psychic link, no one else should have been able to tell it from the occasional smooth, powerful beat of his wings. But apparently, somehow, Cera could, or else she was just sensible enough to guess. Riding behind Aoth, she

murmured a prayer that set her fingers aglow with golden light, then stroked the familiar's fur. Warmth tingled through the contact and washed the aches away.

Meanwhile, Aoth watched the Brotherhood prepare for battle. They were doing as well as could be expected. The western edge of Luthcheq wasn't the same demented tangle of streets one found farther in, and thank the Firelord for that. But it was still harder to set up a proper formation in the city than it would have been in open country, and as he so often had of late, he missed Khouryn's expertise.

Responding to his unspoken will, Jet flew in a spiral, carrying him farther out, and even for a veteran soldier with fire-

kissed eyes, the situation on the ground became harder to read. Some Chessentan, Threskelan, and sellsword companies were moving from their campsites to join forces with Aoth's men. Others were shifting farther away to form what would become the opposing army. Some bands were still debating what to do, sometimes with words, but sometimes with fists or even blades.

That was to say, it was chaos, or at least most of it was. In the midst of all the scrambling and squabbling, the Akanûlans stood like a rock in a surging tide, ready to fight but visibly removed from the Brotherhood and their allies. They were making it plain they wouldn't

fight if Tchazzar left them alone.

If Tchazzar himself attacked now, said Jet, *while everyone's still dithering and scurrying around, he could win*.

Maybe, Aoth answered, *but he won't. Not at night. Since he's got help coming, he'll wait for it*.

"I can't make out anything," Cera said.

"I warned you," Aoth replied.

"Well," she said, "to be honest, taking a look wasn't the only reason I wanted to come aloft."

Partly amused and partly apprehensive, he snorted. "What were you thinking?"

"That you and Jet can get me to the

Keeper's house faster and more safely than if I tried to make my way through the streets."

It was easy to guess what she had in mind. "Do you really think you can convince the other sun priests to fight?"

"As I understand it, Tchazzar butchered our high priest for no reason at all." Cera hadn't particularly liked Daelric Apathos, but even so, outrage put steel in her voice. "They *should* fight. It may just take someone giving the call to arms."

Aoth remembered Chathi burning and dying in an instant. "I can't stay with you."

She knows that, said Jet, *and we need all the help we can get*. He raised one

wing, dipped the other, and turned in the direction of Amaunator's temple.

* * * * *

Khouryn and his companions were doing most of their traveling by night. The bats liked it better, Praxasalandos didn't care one way or the other, and the darkness kept Chessentans from loosing arrows and quarrels at the supposed enemies flying overhead.

For his part, Khouryn was happy to escape baking in the late-summer sun and to enjoy the stately, glittering pageant of the moon and stars. It could be his last chance if Tchazzar reacted poorly when they reached Luthcheq.

He contemplated the constellation

dwarves knew as the Serpent, with its bright eye, long fangs, and twisting tail. Then someone blew a brassy, long note and a short one on a horn. It was the signal to descend, probably so they could all confer since that was all but impossible in the air. Winged steeds needed too much space between them.

Khouryn sent Iron fluttering down toward an open field. The bat gave a squeal of annoyance. He somehow sensed that his rider meant to set down, and he didn't like crawling awkwardly around with his head higher than his feet. But he still obeyed.

They touched down with a final flutter of leathery wings, then waited for everyone else to do the same. Prax was

the next to land, with Medrash and Biri on his back.

Khouryn didn't know why the paladin had chosen to ride the quicksilver dragon. Maybe he still feared treachery and wanted to be ideally placed to retaliate. The white-scaled wizard was perched behind him because she wasn't an experienced flyer. No doubt she would have preferred to ride behind Balasar, but it would exhaust a bat to carry two riders over long distances.

When everyone was on the ground, Perra looked to Medrash. "You gave the signal," she said.

"Yes," Medrash replied. "I sensed something up ahead. By which I mean, Torm enabled me to sense it."

“Here we go,” Balasar groaned.

To Khouryn’s surprise, Medrash smiled. “I could almost share your irritation because I *used* to hope for signs and portents, but they never turn out to be good news, do they?” His face and tone turned serious again. “Something bad is going to happen in Luthcheq very soon. If our goal is to avert a calamity, we need to get there as fast as possible.”

“Our goal is to avert the invasion of Tymanther,” Perra said, “and a disaster in Luthcheq might accomplish that. Still, I take your point.”

“We nearly are to Luthcheq,” Khouryn said. He’d paid attention when he and the dragonborn had marched in the

opposite direction.

"I know a spell or two to help us travel faster," Biri said.

"As do I," said Prax. He shifted his wings, and they gleamed in the moonlight. "But I can't cast mine on the entire company, and I imagine yours are the same."

Perra scowled for a moment, pondering. Then she said, "Sir Medrash, you'll go on ahead. It's your premonition, after all. Lady Biri and Sir Praxasalandos will accompany you to speed you on your way. And if the magic can manage so many, Khouryn and Balasar will ride with you as well. The rest of us will catch up as soon as we can."

Balasar gave Khouryn a look of mock disgust. “I knew we wouldn’t dodge this either,” he said.

* * * * *

Cera kissed Aoth, then stepped far enough away from Jet to give him room to unfurl his wings. The griffon trotted with the uneven gait of his kind and then leaped upward. He and his master vanished into the night sky.

Cera took a long breath and turned toward the Keeper’s temple with its enormous sundial and colonnaded facade. Banners emblazoned with stylized sunsets hung from the cornices. She took that for a promising sign. Her order had chosen to observe the passing

of its high priest whether Tchazzar liked it or not.

Then she stepped through the doorway and hands reached out to grab her from either side.

The assailant on her right had her arm gripped tightly, immobilizing her mace. But the one on her left didn't achieve quite as firm a hold. She screamed, tore free, spun, and hit the man on the right in the teeth with her buckler, putting all her weight behind the blow.

The steel shield clanged. The man let go and reeled backward, and she saw he wore a badge in the shape of a wheel with five **S**-shaped spokes. A wyrmkeeper, then, or a warrior in their service.

His partner threw his arms around her from behind. She sensed she wouldn't be able to break free again. But she did manage to shift sideways and jab the butt of the mace backward at groin level.

The man gasped and went rigid. She jabbed him again, and his arms jerked, loosening their hold. She yanked free, whirled, and smashed his nose with the mace. He fell back.

She glanced around, making sure neither man was about to come at her again, then looked to the interior of the temple. A fair number of men, women, and beasts were looking back at her.

It appeared that Tchazzar, Halonya, or someone else still loyal to the Red Dragon had also thought the sunlords

might come out and fight. But unlike Cera, that person had moved to prevent it by dispatching wyrmkeepers, ruffians, and a pair of mastiff-sized drakes to round up Amaunator's clergy and hold them prisoner in their own house of worship. It had likely been easy enough. The intruders had probably had surprise on their side, and while the sunlords all knew magic, including battle prayers, some had little experience in actual combat.

A wyrmkeeper snarled a sibilant word in what was almost certainly Draconic. The golden light of the lamps rippling across their olive green scales, the two drakes charged across the marble floor.

Cera called out to the Keeper, swept her mace over her head, and pointed it at the reptiles. A hedge of bright, whirling blades sprang into existence right in front of them. They were charging too rapidly to stop, and their own momentum flung them in. They tumbled out the other side, shredded and flopping in their death throes.

The blades of light blinked out of existence, and Cera advanced on the rest of her foes. “Surrender or die,” she said.

It was a bluff, of course, and a ridiculous one at that. She’d been lucky, but alone, she had no chance against so many. But if she could rivet all their attention on her, then maybe she wouldn’t be alone for long. If she

distracted their captors, her brothers and sisters might seize the opportunity to act.

"Kill her!" a wyrmkeeper spit. Judging from the rings of five colors he wore on each hand, his filed, pointed teeth, and the tattooed scales that covered every inch of exposed skin, he was far advanced in the mysteries of his own order.

Warriors spread out to flank Cera. The wyrmkeeper leader started chanting. She called out to Amaunator and cloaked herself in glare. The defensive measure didn't dazzle or hurt her own eyes, but if she was lucky, it ought to hinder every one of her foes.

The wyrmkeeper whipped his arm with a motion like a snake or dragon

biting. Crackling flame leaped from his long, pointed nails. But Cera jumped sideways, and it missed her by a hair.

Two warriors rushed her. The one on the right yelled, “Tiamat!” She lunged toward them. Maybe they weren’t expecting that because she bulled her way between them without either of them stabbing or slashing her, although one short sword skated along the reinforced leather protecting her side.

She whirled and clubbed madly at their heads while they still had their backs to her. First one then the other fell. She spun back around, and her limbs locked into rigidity.

She recognized the spell and knew it would paralyze her for only a few

heartbeats. But that was long enough for one of her remaining foes to drive a pick or a blade into her.

Except just then bright light flared from among the prisoners. Hands clapped to his smoking face, a wyrmkeeper fell down, screaming. Warriors made of golden shimmer appeared between captives and captors. The wyrmkeeper with the filed teeth started another prayer, and two sunlords jumped him and bore him to the ground. Their fists hammered him.

Another ruffian came at Cera, but the commotion had distracted him, and he didn't quite make it into striking distance before her paralysis fell away. She called the Keeper's name as she swung

her mace, and the god's power lent force to the blow. It caved in her attacker's chest.

After that, it was easy enough. In a few more heartbeats, all the wyrmkeepers and their servants were either dead or incapacitated.

"Is everyone all right?" Cera panted.

"Pretty much," a sunlord replied. His knuckles were raw, possibly from swinging at flesh and hitting armor instead. "I think they were working up to killing us, but they hadn't started yet. Why is this happening?"

"Haven't you heard?" said a priestess with black, plaited hair. "Chessenta doesn't need any gods except the Red Dragon."

“That’s part of it,” Cera said. She explained what was going on as concisely as she could. “I was going to try to convince you to fight Tchazzar. After what’s happened here, I hope I don’t have to.”

The other clerics exchanged glances. Then the one with the skinned, bloody fists said, “We’ll fight. Apparently we have to, to serve the Keeper, protect the people, and save our own lives. How do we begin?”

“Arm yourselves,” Cera said. “Then we’ll visit the temples of all the other true gods. If the wyrmkeepers are holding any other clerics prisoner, we’ll free them. Either way, we’ll ask our colleagues to fight alongside us. And

then … well, we'll figure it out as we go along."

* * * * *

Light flickered and thunder cracked in the northern sky. Tchazzar knew it wasn't a storm or at least not a natural one. Alasklerbanbastos was signaling his arrival.

Tchazzar hesitated and thought that no one could blame him for it. Alasklerbanbastos was his greatest enemy and the very embodiment of everything foul and unnatural. Under any other circumstances, only an idiot would go to meet him in the dark and lonely sky, especially knowing that he'd brought allies along.

But Tchazzar believed that, abominable as he was, the dracolich wanted to preserve the sanctity of Tiamat's game as much as every other player. And he might actually need the blue's help to preserve what was his and to punish those who sought to take it from him.

Especially Jhesrhi. He thought of the love and trust he'd given her and how she'd repaid him with treachery and lies, and he roared out his anguish and his rage. The absolute need for revenge pushed all other considerations aside.

He leaped from the roof of the War College, lashed his wings, soared upward, and flew toward the spot where the lightning had flared.

Alasklerbanbastos and his allies were still there, gliding on the night wind and awaiting his coming. The lesser dragons were a black, an emerald, two sapphires, and a gold.

"I expected more chromatics," Tchazzar said.

"I certainly wasn't going to share this victory with Jaxanaedegor," Alasklerbanbastos replied, sparks crawling and popping on his naked bones and pale light flickering inside the openings in his skull, "or anyone else who betrayed me. These particular wyrms happened to dwell within easy reach of Dracowyr, so I recruited them instead. Don't worry. They'll follow our lead."

“They’d better,” Tchazzar said. “My human soldiers will attack when we do.”

“You do understand,” said the lich, “the way the armies will jam and tangle together, the homes of noncombatants cluttering the battleground … this is going to be messy.”

Tchazzar spit a streak of flame. “I’m not as fond of humans as I used to be. Slaughter every one in the city if that’s what it takes to carry the day.”

FOURTEEN

7 Eleint, the Year of the Ageless One

If Jhesrhi survived the night, she'd choose a new griffon and teach it to

know and obey her. For the time being, though, she'd coaxed a wind into the form of a giant eagle to bear her aloft.

That was where she needed to be, along with every other member of the Brotherhood who could get into the air. If Lady Luck smiled, their earthbound comrades could fend off Tchazzar's human servants, but it would take flying cavalry to contend with dragons on the wing.

Having sharpened her eyes with a charm that enabled them to pierce the darkness, she looked around and found Aoth and Gaedynn soaring on their own steeds. For a moment at least, that sight lifted her heart.

Then the dragons hurtled into view.

Being wyrms, they unquestionably perceived the foes gliding and wheeling in front of them. But if Oraxes's enchantments were working as promised, the dragons didn't see as many griffon riders as were actually there. They registered only a handful and were experiencing a subtle psychic pressure to disregard those and look elsewhere for a more significant threat.

The illusion would hold for only a breath or two. But that was time enough for a first barrage of arrows and spells. Hurtling forward on Jet, his blue eyes glowing in the gloom, Aoth hurled a dazzling thunderbolt from his spear. Gaedynn nocked and loosed shafts fast as the eye could follow. Jhesrhi

brandished her staff, and fire leaped from the top to lash a sapphire dragon across the eye. The creature screamed and she and her weapon laughed together.

Even though fire magic was likely to prove useless against him, she'd wanted to engage Tchazzar. She felt he was her responsibility. But it had been impossible to predict exactly where he'd appear, and chance had put them on opposite sides of the fight for the moment.

Her eagle plunged past the sapphire wyrm's head and along its neck, and she seared it with another burst of flame. It swatted at her with an enormous wing, but her mount swooped safely under the

stroke and, with a sweep of its own pinions, bobbed up again.

Elsewhere, her comrades were likewise streaking by dragons before the creatures could turn and retaliate. The defense worked because the colossal reptiles weren't as nimble in flight as a griffon or a spirit of the wind.

From then on, the fight would be tougher. But as the eagle wheeled, Jhesrhi insisted to herself that it wouldn't be any worse than the worst of Thay. Then her steed vanished beneath her, and she plummeted toward the rooftops below.

She tried to speak a word to slow her fall, and darts of amber light stabbed into her body. The jolt of pain made her

botch the spell.

But fortunately the entity that had been the eagle shook off its own distress. Although it didn't resume the form she'd given it, it managed a screaming invisible updraft that arrested her fall just short of someone's chimney.

Bobbing like a cork in a brook, she looked around for her attacker or, as it turned out, attackers. A skinny, wrinkled, bent old woman and a bearded young man with a wart at the corner of his eye were perched on a rooftop a stone's throw away. Jhesrhi winced because she recognized them both. She'd met them the night Aoth had convened a meeting of Luthcheq's mages and on several occasions since.

“You’re fighting on the wrong side!” Jhesrhi called, voice grating with the lingering ache in her chest.

“No,” the elderly sorceress quavered. “Tchazzar set us free, and you’re betraying him.”

“It isn’t like that,” Jhesrhi said. “But if you won’t fight on the right side, just go away. Don’t make me hurt you.”

Instead of answering, the old woman gripped her staff with both hands and raised it over her head. Tears of blood slid from her eyes, and suddenly it made Jhesrhi feel dizzy and sick to her stomach to look at her. Meanwhile, the male wizard held a doll of jointed wood up to his face and whispered in its painted ear. Ghostly imps like deformed

fetuses flitted and flickered around him, half-visible one instant, gone the next.

Jhesrhi could tell both her foes were casting lethal magic. And they'd started first. But neither of them was a battle wizard. Pointing her staff, she rattled off words of power, twice as fast as their author had intended but still with the proper rhythm and intonation, and she was the one who finished first. The resulting blast of fire tore her foes apart, along with much of the roof beneath them.

She sighed and, tainting her own true emotions, the staff's excitement only made her sorrow worse. But she thrust regret aside and, whispering rhymes in one of the languages of Sky Home, set

about helping her mount return to avian form.

* * * * *

Pain ripped through Gaedynn's head, and parts of his visual field shattered into a distorted patchwork like stones in a mosaic. He cried out, then, focusing his will despite the pounding anguish, he pushed the psychic intrusion out of his skull as Aoth and Jhesrhi had taught him. The headache subsided, and his sight returned to normal.

"My turn," he gritted to the sapphire dragon sweeping along beneath him and Eider. He had little doubt that it was the foe who'd attacked him. Together with a number of other griffon riders, he'd been

doing his best to bring it down, and by all accounts, gem wyrms possessed exotic psychic abilities.

He loosed an arrow, and it plunged deep into the muscle at the base of the dragon's right wing. The creature convulsed and, with its wings no longer outstretched to catch the air, plummeted.

Gaedynn grinned as it smashed down on top of a house and plunged on through the roof. But satisfaction turned to disgust when it emerged from the newly ruined structure by shoving through a wall.

The fall had plainly hurt it. Its left wing was torn and crumpled, and one bull-like, forward-curving horn had broken off short. But it still looked able

and willing to fight.

Indeed, it had even found itself some allies. Gaedynn had been too busy shooting and dodging dragons to register much of what was happening on the ground. But he saw that by wretched luck, the creature had fallen right in front of a company of Tchazzar's soldiers circling to threaten the Brotherhood and its allies on their right flank. Like sensible folk, the common warriors balked at the violent and unexpected advent of such a huge, fearsome creature. But they had a couple of wyrmkeepers with them, and the priests hurried forward to palaver with the dragon. No doubt, since it could no longer fly, they were urging it to join the

fight on the ground.

If it did, the results could be devastating. Seeking a way for his earthbound comrades to withstand such an attack, Gaedynn looked around and found the genasi, fairly close at hand but standing idle. Despite Tchazzar's threats, no one had attacked them yet, so they hadn't abandoned hope of avoiding battle.

Guiding Eider with his knees, Gaedynn sent her streaking over his embattled allies, then plunged her down behind some of Brotherhood's own archers. Startled, the nearest bowmen recoiled. Then three sellswords started jabbering at him at once.

Ignoring them, he cast around and

found Son-liin. “Come here!” he called, shouting to make himself heard above the roaring, pounding clamor of battle. “Mount up behind me!” She scurried to obey. “Where are the mages?”

The stormsoul pointed. “That way.”

Gaedynn sent Eider bounding in that direction, and mercenaries scrambled out of the way. The young wizards gaped at him.

“Before,” Gaedynn said, “you made the riders in the air seem fewer than we were. Now Son-liin and I have to seem like more than we are.”

Oraxes frowned. “Well, if I—”

“Don’t explain it!” Gaedynn snapped. “Do it! Now!” Sweeping his left hand in a serpentine fashion, Oraxes murmured

too softly for Gaedynn to make out the words. But perhaps Meralaine could, somehow, because she joined in at the end.

As soon as they finished, Gaedynn sent Eider leaping back into the air. "Now," he said to the girl mounted behind him, "I need you to be the genasi-est genasi anybody ever saw, with sparks flying everywhere. The foe has to see what you are despite the dark."

"All right," she said. "But what are we doing?"

"Killing a dragon," he said. "Well, just hurting it, probably. But do your best."

He wheeled Eider over the Akanûlan formation. A few of the genasi sensed

them passing and looked up.

Then Eider was streaking across the stretch of ground that separated the genasi from the sapphire dragon and Tchazzar's men. Trusting his safety straps to keep him in the saddle, Gaedynn leaned far to the left. It made archery more difficult, but it was necessary to give the enemy a good look at Son-liin and open up a line for her to shoot.

The foes ahead looked as if they were just about ready to resume their advance with the sapphire wyrm in the forefront. In a just world, that would mean they'd miss Eider hurtling out of the dark on their own flank.

But they didn't, or at least not all of

them did. The dragon's head whipped around, then cocked back.

Gaedynn nudged Eider with his elbow, then realized he hadn't needed to. Over the course of the past several tendays, the griffon had learned what a dragon looked like when it was about to spew its breath weapon, and she was already dodging. Dangling sideways as he was, the sudden motion whipped Gaedynn's body, but the punishment was preferable to getting hit. And although he heard a shrill whine, nothing touched him.

He loosed arrows. One glanced off but the rest pierced the dragon's neck and chest. Behind him, the discharge from Son-liin's body popped and

crackled. Eider's muscles twitched when it stung her. The shafts the former firestormer shot flickered with lightning.

The sapphire dragon opened its jaws to spew another attack, and one such arrow streaked all the way to the back of its throat. The resulting flash made the creature flail its head and pound its tail on the ground in pain. The jolts sent its human allies staggering.

Gaedynn judged that that attack had likely accomplished their purpose if anything could. Besides, some of Tchazzar's soldiers were raising their crossbows. He turned Eider and the griffon carried him and Son-liin back the way they'd come.

He glanced around and grinned to see

the enraged dragon bound after them because that meant it was also charging the ranks of genasi. After a moment's hesitation, its allies did the same.

Ripples of motion ran through the Akanûlans' formation as they hastily prepared to defend. Flame and lightning flickered. Windsouls rose into the air.

"Welcome to the party," Gaedynn said.

* * * * *

Medrash stared in amazement. Maybe that was ironic, considering that it was his premonition that had persuaded him and his companions to make the final leg of their journey as fast as sorcery would allow. But his worries and imaginings

had fallen short of the reality.

Though distance and darkness obscured some of the details, he could tell humans, genasi, and wyrms were fighting in and above the western portion of the city up ahead, in a battle at least as big and chaotic as any the dragonborn had fought against the giants. Shouts, screams, roars, and crashes blended into one huge, throbbing drone. Buildings burned and columns of gray smoke striped the sky. Wyrms wheeled over the rooftops, the glow of their breath weapons and the blasts of magic that came in response momentarily revealing the griffon riders who whirled around them like gnats.

"What is it?" asked Biri, perched

behind him.

The question nudged him out of his astonishment, and he tried to order his thoughts. “War,” he said. “Though who exactly is fighting whom, I can’t yet tell.”

“So what do we do?” Praxasalandos asked.

“I came to free Tchazzar from the madness of the Great Game,” Medrash said. “That’s still worth doing, no matter what else is going on.”

“Then I’ll find him for you,” the quicksilver dragon said. Wings beating, he hurtled forward, and Khouryn and Balasar’s bats kept pace. Balasar shot his clan brother and the white-scaled wizard a grin.

As they reached the outskirts of the city and the fringe of the struggle, a dragon hurtled from the right. Medrash thought it was a black, although in the darkness he wasn't sure. He shifted his lance and shield and prepared to channel Torm's power. Biri took a deep breath and let it out again, centering herself to wield her own kind of magic.

But the dragon swooped right past Praxasalandos and Khouryn and Balasar as well. Either it had mistaken the quicksilver wyrm for one of its allies or, in the midst of the darting, wheeling struggle in the sky, hadn't noticed him at all. The griffon riders it was actually diving at scattered before it.

"If we hit it while its back is turned

—” said Prax.

“No,” Medrash answered. “Stick to the plan.”

They did and somehow avoided the hostile attentions of any other dragons or any of the archers and spellcasters on the ground. Then Khouryn made Iron dive. Medrash could only assume that, with his superior night vision, the dwarf had spotted something he thought needed his immediate attention.

Then fire exploded across the sky.

It was Tchazzar’s breath, and Aoth Fezim and his black griffon swooped beneath the flare. But instead of dying away for want of fuel, the streak of flame floated in the air, drew in on itself, and took on the shape of a dragon.

The bright horror turned and, wings lashing, shot after the Thayan captain.

That would likely keep him from threatening Tchazzar for a little while at least, and ignoring the flyers who were simply loosing arrows at him, the Red Dragon glared at the action of the ground. There, to all appearances, two masses of Chessentan soldiers were fighting one another. One company was pushing the other back, and despite the height at which he was flying and the general cacophony, Medrash could make out what the humans who had the upper hand were chanting:

"Shala! Shala! Shala!"

Medrash still didn't entirely understand what was happening in

Luthcheq. But it seemed that, like Aoth, Shala Karanok was fighting Tchazzar. And that meant someone should intervene before the wyrm dived and attacked her and the warriors under her command.

"Get me close!" Medrash said. In response, Praxasalandos's wings beat even faster.

Medrash raised his lance high and opened himself to the Loyal Fury's boundless, righteous power. As he did, he dimly sensed Bahamut, in some nonphysical sense, standing with the other deity and ready to lend his strength as well. Though it was possible that no one else could see it, cold, white fire poured down the lance, into his steel-

gauntleted hand, and on into his core.

Then he felt *vibrant* with strength, so full that he almost doubted his ability to contain it. Still, the sensation wasn't frightening but ecstatic. If his body burned away, then surely the soul that remained would burn in glory forever, like a star.

He strained to put such fancies aside and focus. Joyous as it might be simply to revel in his communion with the divine, it was his duty to *use* the gift and quickly. Tchazzar was already furling his wings to dive at the humans below.

Medrash pointed the lance, and silvery flame streamed out. He was certain everyone could see it, and Tchazzar jerked as the flare washed

over his body.

"Tchazzar!" Medrash called. "Let Torm help you! Let him purge you of Tiamat's stain and *xorvintaal* too!"

Tchazzar beat his wings and leveled out of his dive. He simply seemed to be gliding, as though dazed or oblivious to the furious struggle raging on all sides. Prax turned and pursued him.

Medrash kept the Loyal Fury's power playing over Tchazzar's form until he'd expended every bit of it. When the flare died, he slumped in fatigue.

"Did it work?" Biri asked.

Meanwhile, Prax's swooping trajectory carried them both lower and closer to the wyrm ahead of them.

"I think so," Medrash answered.

Then, yellow eyes burning, Tchazzar whipped his head around. Biri gasped. Medrash thought, we're too close. Then flame erupted from the Red Dragon's jaws.

* * * * *

Khouryn knew a warrior in an aerial battle, where danger could come from above, below, or any side, had to stay vigilant. He was also doing his best to look for Tchazzar, although he imagined that an ancient red dragon spitting flame would be hard to miss once he and his companions got reasonably close.

Still, whenever he deemed it relatively safe, he stole a moment to scrutinize the action on the ground. Since

the Brotherhood's griffon riders were in the air, his spearmen were surely down there somewhere, and he needed to see how they were faring.

There! There they were, anchoring the center of an allied battle formation—if one cared to dignify the jumbled masses of men below with that name—with a war band mustered around a Threskelan crown-and-wand standard on their left and a company flying red Chessentan banners on their right.

An entirely different horde of Chessentans was attacking all along the front of the formation, and as was inevitable, what had surely started out as straight, unbroken ranks were bent and ragged. But they were holding.

The problem was at the back of the formation. Some of the enemy had made their way all around the allies to attack there as well, and they looked to be on the brink of breaking through the rearguard, who were probably screaming for reinforcements, but no one was answering. Amid all the noise and confusion, it was possible that no one even realized.

But as Khouryn sent Iron plunging downward, he thought that *somebody* should know. He understood why, if there were dragons in the air, Aoth, Jhesrhi, and maybe even Gaedynn needed to be there too. But still, *someone* needed to oversee what was happening on the ground.

As he unbuckled his safety harness, he realized he was actually reproaching himself for being absent as long as he had.

Then Iron plunged down on top of one of the enemy soldiers, who collapsed under the impact and the bat's ripping claws. Khouryn thrust his lance into another foe, grabbed his battle-axe, and flung himself out of the saddle.

Iron lurched beneath him and robbed the dismount of any grace it might otherwise have had. Khouryn tumbled off the bat's body and slammed down on the ground. He grunted at the jolt, then jumped up and started swinging.

Startled, the enemy was slow to react. He chopped down two men before the

others started defending themselves, and even then they were more worried about Iron. To Khouryn's surprise, the bat stayed on the ground with him, and even though the animal was clumsy, flailing and flopping about, his hammering wings and ripping fangs were murderous. Heartened by the havoc he and his master were wreaking, the rearguard rallied and surged at the enemy.

Still, for a while, Khouryn thought the struggle could go either way. Then, just as he was killing his current opponent with a cut to the guts, men started screaming. He glanced around to find out why and took advantage of the moment to catch his breath. Iron looked fearsome, even to him, when he was

suddenly invested with a demonic aura of menace that even his size and bloodstained teeth and talons couldn't explain.

Then dead men lurched up from the ground and stabbed and struck at the Chessentans, and that was finally too much. The attackers turned and fled, some flinging away their weapons and shields to scurry faster.

The sellswords didn't run, but they, too, shrank back from the swaying, shuffling corpses. "It's all right!" called a high, breathless voice. "They're on our side!"

Khouryn pushed between two spearmen and saw a petite, snub-nosed girl astride a drakkensteed, of all things.

He dimly recalled her from Aoth's assembly of Luthcheq's mages.

She remembered him too. "Khouryn Skulldark! You came back!"

"Of course I did," he said, "and here on the ground, I'm in charge. In five breaths or less, tell me exactly what in the name of the Twin Axes is going on."

* * * * *

There was no hope of avoiding Tchazzar's fiery breath. Though it was a pitifully inadequate defense, Medrash raised his shield to protect Biri and himself.

Meanwhile, Praxasalandos had essentially the same idea. He couldn't dodge the flame but managed to flip

himself upward so it burned into his ventral surface and not the riders on his back.

Unfortunately, since his body was aligned vertically, Medrash started slipping from his back. Bellowing, trying to shout the weakness out of his muscles, he clutched at the dragon's hide with fingers and knees. He prayed Biri was holding on too. He certainly couldn't do anything to help her.

Prax continued his backward somersault until he was belly up. Then, his flesh still burning like dry wood, he plummeted.

Medrash looked down at the peaked roof rushing up from below.

He reached out to Torm, and a smaller

surge of the deity's power—all that he could gather and hold in his depleted state—shivered into him. He concentrated it in his clutching fingers, then passed it on to Prax.

Wings suddenly flailing, the dragon heaved underneath him. Prax couldn't arrest his fall, but perhaps he slowed it, just as he twisted to drop feet first.

He also liquefied as he smashed down onto the rooftop, and maybe, to some degree, that cushioned the shock for his riders. Still, the jolt shattered Medrash's thoughts into jangling confusion. By the time he snapped out of his daze, he'd nearly slid down the slope to the eaves, with rivulets of quicksilver streaming along beside him. He clutched at the

shingles and anchored himself.

He looked around. Biri was higher up on the roof. She didn't seem to be in any danger of rolling or sliding off, but he couldn't tell if she was breathing.

Horribly, not all of Prax had turned to liquid metal. Some still on fire, body parts lay amid the globs and spatter.

Alarming as all that was, Medrash could barely spare it a glance because, yellow eyes burning, flames leaping from between his fangs, Tchazzar was swooping toward the rooftop.

Still shaky from the fall, keenly aware of the treacherous slope beneath his boots and the drop-off at his back, Medrash heaved himself to his feet. Realizing that at some point he'd

dropped his lance, he snatched for his sword. He hoped he could at least land a cut before the red wyrm overwhelmed him.

Then Balasar and his bat hurtled at Tchazzar's head, and the Daardendrien threw his lance at the dragon's eye. He didn't hit it, but the missile did stick in the creases of hide underneath.

Tchazzar struck back but the bat dodged, and the blazing jaws clashed shut on nothing. Balasar kept on flitting around the wyrm's head. His arm cocked and snapped as he threw knives.

Leveling off, Tchazzar twisted his neck for another strike. Then the wind howled. Though Medrash felt only the fringe of the blast, that was enough to

send him tottering backward before he caught himself.

Tchazzar took the full force of the gale. It slammed him sideways into a tower to smash the facade. He and chunks of broken sandstone fell down into the street together. Meanwhile, Balasar and his bat tumbled through the air but fortunately didn't suffer a collision of their own.

Roaring, Tchazzar rose with a lash of his wings that threw banging, clattering rubble in all directions. Then Jhesrhi Coldcreek swooped over him. To Medrash's surprise, the sellsword wizard was riding a huge eagle, not a griffon.

He had little doubt that she'd conjured

the wind, and Tchazzar apparently thought so too. He spit flame but missed the eagle as it raced on by. And since the street in which he'd landed was too narrow for him to spread his wings, he couldn't immediately return to the air to chase it there. He snarled and bounded after it on foot.

Medrash had no way of following even had he wanted to, and he realized he still hadn't checked Biri. Just as he scrambled up to her, she groaned and shifted her arm.

Then Balasar set his bat down on the roof and swung himself out of the saddle. "Are you all right?" he said.

"I think I'm just bruised," said the mage. She tried to sit up, and Balasar

crouched to help her. “Thanks to Prax.” She looked around the rooftop, and sorrow entered her voice. “He’s not going to put himself back together this time, is he?”

“I don’t think so,” Medrash said.

“So,” Balasar said, “I gather the exorcism didn’t work.”

“No,” Medrash said, and a bewildered anger welled up inside him. “And I don’t understand! Why would the Loyal Fury urge me to rush here if I can’t affect the outcome of the battle?”

“I’ll be a son of a toad if I know,” Balasar said. “It’s your superstition and your magic. But maybe there’s a reason. Think it through.”

Medrash gripped his gauntlet-shaped

pendant as though he could squeeze inspiration out of it. “All right. I freed Prax but he was a metallic. Tchazzar’s a chromatic and it’s the chromatics who are really Tiamat’s people. Maybe I can’t channel enough power to break her grip on them.”

“But not all the dragons fighting on Tchazzar’s side are chromatics,” Biri said. “I spotted gem wyrms.”

“And if I can get them to turn on Tchazzar,” Medrash said, “or just go away, it will change the odds considerably. It might give Aoth and Shala Karanok a real chance to win.”

“Take the bat,” Balasar said. “You’ll need it to get close to your targets.”

“Thanks.” Medrash clambered toward

the crest of the roof and the animal perched atop it. “Will you two be all right?”

“Fine,” Biri said. “I just need a moment to catch my breath, and then we’ll find a way down to the ground. I imagine Khouryn and his infantry can use an extra swordsman and wizard.”

Medrash touched his heels to the bat’s flanks, and the animal lashed its wings and soared upward. Resenting the dark, the eye-stinging smoke, and the taller structures, all of which seemed engaged in a conspiracy to deny him a clear view of the air around him, he looked for dragons.

The first one he spotted was Alasklerbanbastos, unmistakable even to

someone who'd never seen him by virtue of his hugeness and the lightning flickering around his bare bones. According to Jhesrhi by way of Khouryn, Aoth had found a way to control the lich. But if so, the creature had slipped the leash, because he and his erstwhile master were fighting.

The Great Bone Wyrm spit a thunderbolt. Jet raised one wing and swept his rider safely to one side. Aoth hurled a rainbow of presumably destructive power from his spear. But Alasklerbanbastos didn't even bother dodging, and the magic played over his skeletal form without doing any discernible damage.

Medrash wanted to go to the Thayan's

aid. Everything about Alasklerbanbastos outraged his sensibilities as both a paladin and a dragonborn. He could barely look at the lich without clenching and shivering with hate.

And besides, Aoth seemed to need help because at the moment there weren't many other griffon riders fighting Alasklerbanbastos. Evidently the dragons were thinning them out, either by hurting them and their mounts or simply exhausting their supplies of arrows. It wouldn't be long before there weren't enough foes left in the air to keep the wyrms from turning their attention to the relatively helpless warriors on the ground.

And that, Medrash decided, was why

he had to stick to his original plan. It offered the only real hope of winning. Though his instincts cried out against it, he passed the dracolich and the beleaguered warmage by.

The smoke seemed to thicken. Then he realized it wasn't smoke anymore, not over that bit of the city, but rather something damper and cleaner: fog.

But though the mist was easier to breathe, it was an even greater hindrance to sight, and he soon realized that others had discovered the same thing to their cost. Below him, just visible in the cloud, battered sellswords tended their wounded mounts.

Then he heard crashing, and a squat, drum-shaped tower swam out of the

vapor and the gloom. Even if it hadn't originally been intended as a bastion, it resembled one, and troops on Aoth and Shala's side had taken refuge inside. They could probably have held off the warriors who'd surrounded the structure for a long time too, except for the thing that was smashing and tearing its way down to them from above.

Medrash couldn't see it even when he was nearly on top of it, although its existence was apparent from the long, deep tears appearing as it clawed the wood beneath it. Not content merely to blind its adversaries with fog, it had wrapped itself in true invisibility as well.

And that, Medrash realized, meant he

had no way of knowing when it was about to use its breath weapon. But fortunately the bat had its own ways of sensing and had probably fought dragons on Black Ash Plain. The animal flung itself sideways, and although the shriek that sounded an instant later was painfully loud, it didn't do Medrash any actual harm.

He resolved to let his mount fly as it saw fit. At the moment it understood how it ought to maneuver far better than he did. He reached out to Torm and Bahamut and, grateful that his mystical strength had returned, drew cold fire down.

Then pain ripped through his skull. He almost lost focus and let the gift the gods

had given him spill from his grasp, but not quite. Snarling, he pushed the clawing alien presence out of mind.

But by the time he accomplished that, new rips had stopped scarring the rooftop, and the rapidly disintegrating surface no longer bowed under an unseen weight. The dragon was on the wing.

The bat flung itself to the right then the left, swooping and whirling, dodging more attacks that Medrash couldn't see. But its agility wouldn't save it for long, not against a foe who could strike with fang and claw, a burst of sound, the hammering force of its will, and Torm only knew what other tricks.

Medrash had to end the fight quickly,

and—he hoped—he still held the means shivering and burning like ice inside him. But how could he cast the power at an invisible mark?

He needed to sense Tiamat's taint as he'd sensed it before. He reached out with his intuition or some faculty akin to it and thought he felt a sickening locus of vileness arcing through the air.

He stretched out his hand and shouted, "Torm!" A white blaze leaped from his fingers. The fog diffused some of its light, but the rest played across and half-revealed the serpentine form of a dragon.

The creature roared. Flailing its wings, it made a final furious effort to close with the bat and Medrash. Then, as

he scoured it with the last of the holy light, it gave up that effort and its invisibility too. The glow of a burning building gleamed on scales like plates of polished emerald.

You've ... restored me to myself, the dragon said, speaking mind to mind. The words were like a kettledrum throbbing and rumbling inside Medrash's head.

"Then here's how to thank me," he replied. "My comrades and I need your help against Tchazzar and Alasklerbanbastos."

I acknowledge a debt to you, dragonborn, and I'll repay you if I can. But I'm no match for the Red Dragon of Chessenta and the Great Bone Wyrm. I'd only be throwing my life away.

“Like the rest of us,” Medrash said, “you’re no match for them *by yourself*. But I’m going to purge the other dragons too. As many as I can, until I run out of strength.”

The emerald dragon pondered that for a breath or two as it and the bat glided over the rooftops. Then it said, *Don’t bother with the black. I doubt you can break the Great Game’s hold on him*.

“I already guessed that. Does this mean you’ll help?”

Until I judge my debt is paid. The wyrm lashed its wings and climbed.

* * * * *

Alasklerbanbastos hissed words of power, and a shape like a huge, black

sword appeared in the air. Someone else might have called it a shadow, but Aoth's fire-kissed eyes recognized it for what it truly was: a movable wound slashed in the fabric of the world, a hole through which a man could fall into nonexistence.

The sword cut at him and Jet. The griffon swooped under the attack. It was bad tactics to give up the high air to the dracolich. But Aoth could feel how tired Jet was and that the familiar had been unsure of his ability to dodge the cut in any other way.

The shadow sword leaped at them again. Aoth rattled off a counterspell and jabbed his spear at the blade. Nothing happened.

Jet kept dodging, though the cuts were forcing him lower and lower. Aoth hurled fire at the black sword, and the flare winked out of existence as the two magics collided. The sword kept coming.

Aoth rasped words of power, spun his spear over his head, and thrust it at the magical threat. A shadow sword of his own, smaller but identical in every other way, leaped from the point and shot at Alasklerbanbastos's creation.

The air, or a spherical portion of space itself, squirmed as the two manifestations of nothingness struggled to swallow one another. Bile burning in the back of his throat, Aoth averted his eyes. His instincts told him that if he

didn't, his truesight might discern something that would damage his mind.

Twisted and knotted together like fighting serpents, the blades vanished. But Jet's claws were nearly brushing the cobblestones, and looming overhead, lightning dancing over his naked bones, Alasklerbanbastos had nearly completed another incantation, one that would rain thunderbolts down on the narrow, crooked street. The air smelled of the coming storm.

Aoth hurled darts of azure light from his spear. It was something he could do virtually instantaneously, but it was also a relatively weak spell. He knew it likely wouldn't be enough to make the dracolich fumble his casting, and sure

enough, it didn't.

But something else did. A howl stabbed through the air and smashed Alasklerbanbastos's crested skull to the side. The lich whipped his head back around, seeking the new foe who'd dared to strike him.

Aoth judged that gave him and Jet one chance to get out of Tchazzar's view and catch their breaths. Perceiving what he wanted, the griffon touched down and charged at a door. Aoth pointed his spear and blasted the panel and much of the frame away with a pulse of pure force.

Jet leaped through and they found themselves in a chandler's shop. Aoth smashed away a section of wall, and

they raced on into a hatter's establishment.

* * * * *

Alasklerbanbastos couldn't see the impudent wretch who had struck him. But he heard leathery wings flapping as the coward beat a hasty retreat into the … smoke? It actually looked like it might be fog.

He spit a booming, blazing thunderbolt into the cloud. But nothing screamed or thudded to the ground afterward.

He hesitated, momentarily uncertain whether to go after the traitor or finish off Aoth Fezim, and the dithering cost him. When he looked back down into the

street, the sellsword and griffon were gone.

Alasklerbanbastos snarled, then strained to put frustration aside and think. And when he had, he lashed his clattering wings, climbed, and looked around the sky for flashes of fire.

They led him to Tchazzar, who was chasing Jhesrhi Coldcreek. Plainly the wizard's battle sense and the agility of her steed had thus far kept her alive in a confrontation with a vastly more powerful foe in much the same way that Fezim had survived his clash with Alasklerbanbastos.

But now Jhesrhi would have two ancient wyrms to contend with, and she was so busy fencing with Tchazzar that

she might not even have noticed Alasklerbanbastos's approach. He studied the eagle, discerned its true nature, and whispered words of unmaking.

The eagle vanished from underneath its rider. Jhesrhi plummeted between the tops of two buildings and vanished from view. Spewing flame, Tchazzar let out a roar of shock and anguish. He was afraid Alasklerbanbastos had cheated him out of his revenge by killing the wizard himself.

Alasklerbanbastos doubted that, and when they each settled atop one of the houses—the structures creaked as they took their weight—and looked down into the twisting alley dividing them, he

saw he was right. There was no corpse lying at the bottom.

"These humans are tricky," he said. "You have to give them that."

Tchazzar glared at him. "You piece of dung! I nearly had her! And then you … startled me!"

The red's petulance reminded Alasklerbanbastos of just how much he despised him, how much he wanted to lash out … but no. Not yet. Maybe not for many years to come. "I understand how you feel," he began.

"You don't!" Tchazzar snapped.

"I do. You hate the wizard for deceiving you. I hate Fezim for making a slave of me. And so we've both spent much of the battle chasing them around.

Meanwhile, the complexion of the fight is changing around us."

"What do you mean?"

"Llemgradac balked me just when I was about to finish off Fezim. Or at least I'm virtually certain it was him."

"Why would he do that? He must understand that he'll score more points helping us preserve the sanctity of the game than he could pursuing any other course."

Alasklerbanbastos snorted. "So I assumed. But perhaps I overlooked the fact that we're playing a game devised to last for decades or even centuries, and every worthy player employs a *long-term* strategy. Llemgradac may be willing to sacrifice points now in the

expectation that it will pay off later on."

Tchazzar's burning yellow eyes narrowed. "Whatever schemes he's scheming, he wouldn't dare cross us by himself."

"No, he wouldn't. We have to assume the other wyrms will turn on us too."

"Curse you! You're the one who brought them here!"

"And fortunately for you, I'm also the one who's figured out how to adapt to our changing circumstances."

"How?"

"We stop allowing ourselves to be distracted even by the enemies we particularly detest," Alasklerbanbastos said, "or any petty harassment from the air. We finish the fight on the ground

now, quickly, before the other dragons come at us together."

"How do we do that?" Tchazzar asked.

"We locate Shala Karanok and hit her with everything we have because she's Chessenta's one alternative to you, and if we kill her, your rebels will lay down their arms. And if any Threskelans or genasi are stupid enough to keep fighting afterward, your loyal troops will overwhelm them."

Tchazzar grunted. "It could work."

"It will! And net us Jhesrhi Coldcreek and Aoth Fezim in the bargain. They'll stand their ground to defend Shala. And afterward, when the other dragons see the city is ours, they'll turn tail. They

won't stick around to fight us *and* every bowman and artilleryman who can send a shaft or a stone into the air."

Tchazzar spread his wings. "Let's do it."

* * * * *

After punching through several walls, Aoth and Jet went to ground in a butcher shop and waited to see if Alasklerbanbastos would track them or if he'd raze the entire street to flush them out. Aoth used the time to swig water from his waterskin and ease his smoke-parched throat. Jet discovered that the butcher dealt in horseflesh and set about devouring that portion of the stock.

After a while, it became apparent that

Alasklerbanbastos had given up the pursuit. Aoth slumped, releasing tension he hadn't realized he was holding, even though he expected that he and Jet would be back fighting the dracolich soon enough.

You know that clever plan you had? the griffon asked, speaking mind to mind because his gnashing beak was busy tearing horsemeat. *The one where you and I would sneak off to Akanûl and kill a dragon and because of that there wouldn't be a war*?

"Yes," Aoth replied.

How do you think that's working out?

Aoth scowled then laughed. "Plainly it's working brilliantly. The actual goal

was to prevent the invasion of Tymanther and we did. We're fighting on Chessentan soil instead. Do you feel ready to go back aloft?"

Jet gulped a final chunk of horsemeat. "Just open the door."

Aoth did and peeked out. There was no dracolich glaring down at him, or any other foe in view. There was battle somewhere nearby—he could hear the muddled roar of it—but it hadn't yet spilled into that section of street.

When he and Jet took flight, he had the griffon climb high. It made him feel exposed, but it was his only hope of assessing the overall progress of the battle despite the billowing, eye-stinging smoke and the buildings breaking up the

view.

Even after Jet reached the apex of his ascent, no dragon, living or undead, attacked them. But when Aoth saw where Tchazzar and Alasklerbanbastos actually were, he cursed.

Troops loyal to the Red Dragon were plainly massing to assault a central part of the allied formation. Tchazzar himself towered in their midst, no doubt giving them orders and trying to inspire them to valor. Flickering with lightning, Alasklerbanbastos perched on a rooftop a little way back, probably so he wouldn't spook his new partner's warriors. He'd join the attack when it began.

"They're throwing everything into a

run at Shala," said Jet.

"Yes," Aoth answered. "Get us over there."

As they streaked toward Shala's troops, he blew calls on his bugle because, while the sellswords on the ground had little hope of reaching Shala, griffon riders could. And one by one and two by two, those who were still able flew out of the night to race along beside him.

They swung west to avoid a premature brush with the enemy, then looped in over Shala's formation. As they arrived, still more flyers came to join their wheeling, swooping company. Riding double on Eider, Gaedynn and Son-liin preceded a band of windsouls

with fluttering garments and blue lines glinting on their faces. Her staff rippling with fire, Jhesrhi floated like the genasi; something had evidently happened to her eagle. Oraxes and Meralaine rode their stolen drakkensteeds.

And others flew in as well, folk Aoth hadn't even dared to hope would appear just when he needed them most. Khouryn was riding a giant bat, of all things. Balasar and a white-scaled dragonborn arrived on horses made of congealed fog whose bodies dispersed as soon as the Tymantherans dismounted.

"We might actually live through this," murmured Aoth.

"Or at least have all our friends with us in the afterlife," Jet replied. "Either

way, it's starting."

He was right. Tchazzar spread his wings, and his warriors scurried or dropped low to avoid being swatted. The red dragon leaped into the air, and Alasklerbanbastos sprang from his rooftop. A flick of his fleshless tail tore half the shingles and several planks away. Beneath the dragons, warriors bellowed war cries and charged.

Aoth and Oraxes hurled bursts of flame at Alasklerbanbastos. Settling to the ground behind the sheltering ranks of Shala's warriors then swinging her staff overhand like a greatsword, Jhesrhi threw a howling wind full of hailstones in Tchazzar's face. Her hands moving ceaselessly like a juggler's, Meralaine

plucked bits of darkness from the fabric of the night and lobbed those at the red dragon too. Griffon riders, hovering windsouls, and the bowmen on the ground loosed whistling clouds of arrows at the oncoming wyrms.

And none of it even slowed them down. Alasklerbanbastos hissed words of power, and a huge, clawed hand made of shadow appeared in the air. It snatched and Jet dodged it by a hair. Tchazzar spewed a dazzling blast of fire. When the blaze died away, Jhesrhi was standing unharmed where it had fallen, but bodies lay black and twisted to either side.

Meanwhile, the masses of spearmen, axemen, and swordsmen crashed

together. But although Aoth actually knew better, it was hard not to feel that their struggle was meaningless compared to the violence and terror erupting over their heads.

Aoth cast a blast of focused sound at Alasklerbanbastos, and a tremor rattled down the length of the creature's skeletal form. But the bones didn't break apart, and the lich still didn't falter. He whipped his head from right to left, and the pale light in the empty eye sockets flared. Aoth felt his muscles try to clench into immobility. He growled a word of denial and released the power of a warding tattoo, and his limbs relaxed.

Several windsouls were less

fortunate. They couldn't move or, apparently, even command the air to shift them as the Great Bone Wyrm snarled an incantation, and acid exploded in their midst. Bubbling and sizzling, their flesh dissolved, and their steaming bones showered out of the sky.

The vitriol dropped too and splashed on the ground below. It reared up into a rippling, flowing dragon shape and swiped at a nearby crossbowman with its forefoot. He fell down, thrashing and screaming until the liquid eating into his face and chest stole his voice away.

Alasklerbanbastos was close. Jet dodged to the right, and the dracolich turned to keep the griffon and his rider in front of his jaws and paralyzing gaze.

Then like a bright, roaring waterfall, flame cascaded down on the wyrm from overhead.

* * * * *

Jhesrhi did her best to maintain the confidence and indomitable will that wizardry required. Still, as the dragons came driving in, it was hard to ignore the fear whispering that she and her friends were overmatched. And when the other wyrms came swooping into view, she felt a pang of near despair.

Then, its blue scales gleaming in the light of a fire, a swooping sapphire dragon punched a hole in Tchazzar's wing with the shriek that was its breath weapon. The red jerked and veered off

course, and before he could recover, an emerald wyrm plunged down on top of him and smashed him to the ground.

The emerald dragon leaped back into the air. Tchazzar lurched to his feet. His whipping tail killed men without his even intending it. He spewed flame at the green-colored wyrm, but the creature lashed its wings and dodged.

Jhesrhi had no idea why the lesser dragons had changed sides, but since they had, maybe she and her comrades had a real chance after all. She blasted Tchazzar with frost. Jabbing with a wand crafted from a wisp of cloud, a dragonborn with snowy scales and silver skewers for piercings did the same.

* * * * *

Cera led her gaggle of priests forward, toward the howl and clangor of battle. Then the mass of warriors in front of her parted for a moment, giving a woman of less-than-average height her first clear look at what was actually happening up ahead. She gasped and stopped short.

She and the rest of Amaunator's clerics had indeed found wyrmkeepers holding other priesthoods prisoner in their own temples. The dragon worshipers apparently hadn't possessed sufficient manpower to capture everyone, but they had neutralized every order known to be particularly unhappy

about the ascendancy of the Church of Tchazzar.

Surprising the captors as they'd likely surprised their captives, the sunlords found it fairly easy to overwhelm them, especially since every victory added fresh recruits to their band. Cera tried not to feel too much vicious satisfaction as the wyrmkeepers fell, although, when she remembered how they'd imprisoned and tortured her, it was hard not to feel that, if anything, a quick death by sword thrust or battle prayer was too good for them.

When every servant of a true god was free, she took her company west, toward the armies who, judging from the echoing racket, had begun to fight in

earnest. She and her comrades had to handle a couple of skirmishes, but they swung around the bulk of Tchazzar's forces and avoided a major confrontation. It seemed the wiser course. Rich in magic though she and the other priests were, a band of trained warriors would still stand a fair chance of slaughtering them until they united with the soldiers on Aoth and Shala's side.

Her success at reaching Shala's company safely left Cera feeling a little smug about her own emerging talents as a war leader, and she knew a fierce resolve to do whatever she could to aid the defense. But that feeling fell away when she saw the heart of the battle, and

awe welled up to take its place.

Dragons were fighting one another, and their struggle had all but become the entire conflict, at least on the part of the discontinuous, irregular battleground that she could see. Warriors had fallen back to keep a stray blast of breath weapon or the stamp of a huge foot from killing them. That limited their ability to engage one another, not that they seemed much inclined to do so anyway. No doubt experiencing the same amazement and dread as Cera, for the most part, they, too, were simply watching the dragons assail one another.

Which was to say, they were watching, not helping. Either they doubted the ability of mere human beings

and genasi to affect the outcome, or they were afraid of hitting the wrong dragon. Only mages such as Aoth and a few master archers such as Gaedynn sent flares of power blazing or shafts streaking into the swooping, wheeling, lunging blur of motion.

For a few heartbeats, Cera wondered if salvation was at hand, if the dragons who had inexplicably joined their cause would take down Alasklerbanbastos and Tchazzar. After all, they outnumbered the blue and the red and had forced them onto the ground. The gold and the earthbound sapphire with the broken wing had burned or ripped a horn, alar phalanges, ribs, and other pieces of the dracolich's skeletal form away. The

emerald and the other sapphire had torn bloody gashes in Tchazzar's hide. Their howls had hammered his left foreleg so the knee cocked inward, and he could no longer use the limb to slash or to bear his weight.

Then a dark liquid sprayed the gold from above, and it jerked in pain. An instant later, yet another wyrm, a black, plunged down on it like a hawk snatching a pigeon on the wing. The chromatic's momentum slammed them both through the wall of a house, and they started struggling inside. Cera could tell because their fury was smashing and shaking the building apart.

With the gold otherwise occupied, Alasklerbanbastos glared at the sapphire

and snarled an incantation. The living wyrm turned to run but not quickly enough. Tentacles of shadow erupted from the earth, whipped around it, and dragged it down onto its belly.

The dracolich whirled and spit a booming thunderbolt at the emerald dragon. The gem wyrm convulsed and crashed to earth. Tchazzar sprang, lashed his wings, and seized hold of the remaining sapphire's forefoot in his burning jaws. He whipped his neck, yanking his foe out of the air and biting down at the same time.

The foot ripped off as the sapphire slammed to the ground. Blood spurted from the stump, and the creature spasmed. Tchazzar gnashed the

extremity, bones and all, and gulped it down.

Then he and Alasklerbanbastos turned their gazes on the humans and genasi before them and, not even bothering to take flight again, lunged forward. Some warriors screamed and scattered. Others tried to fight, and the wyrms smashed them aside or trampled them flat.

Cera couldn't strike at both dragons at once. But she prayed she could do something to hinder Alasklerbanbastos. Why not? He was undead and she had all the best priests in the city at her back. Even without them, she'd hurt him before, and although she'd lost the shadow gem that had made it possible, perhaps some vestige of the link it had

forged remained.

She reached out to the Keeper, and he filled her with his light. She swung her mace over her head, and dazzling radiance leaped from it, passed harmlessly through any of the living who happened to be in the way, and burned into Alasklerbanbastos's skull face. The undead blue lurched to a halt, then backward, some irresistible pressure shoving him.

Other sunladies and lords started chanting. Their warm light poured into her and through her to add to the force she was exerting. Then the rest of the priests began to pray, and although their might derived from sources other than the nurturing and purifying sun, it, too,

lent a measure of strength to the forbiddance.

We've got him! Cera thought. We'll burn him away! Then, defying the pressure of the light, Alasklerbanbastos came straight at her, picking up speed with every stride.

* * * * *

Tchazzar coiled his hind legs and unfurled his wings for a spring. Jhesrhi could tell the leap would carry him over most of the warriors who still stood between him and Shala and bring him smashing down on top of the former sovereign and her personal guards.

Jhesrhi pointed her staff and splashed flame across the dragon's eyes. It

wouldn't hurt him, but it was something she could do instantly and, she hoped, would distract him before he pounced. The staff crowed in idiot glee at being used to conjure fire at last, and despite the exigencies of the moment, she felt a corresponding thrill.

Startled, Tchazzar whirled in her direction.

"Isn't it me you want most of all?" she shouted.

"I did," the red dragon gritted. Blood pattered from his wounds down onto the ground. "I loved you. I wanted to give you everything."

"I loved you too," she said. "And I wanted to believe you could be the hero from the legends. But you can't. You

were trapped in the dark too long, and it broke you. Now there's nothing to do but put you down."

"Try," Tchazzar said. He started toward her.

She hurled a screaming blast of ice and hail at him. The dragonborn wizard augmented the effect with a jab of her misty wand. Meralaine threw tatters of darkness.

Tchazzar kept coming, though not nearly as fast as he could have. He must want Jhesrhi to feel helpless before he killed her.

Shala and some of her soldiers charged him from behind. Without even glancing around, he held them back with potentially bone-shattering sweeps of his

tail.

Gaedynn and other griffon riders swooped and wheeled around him, driving arrows into his scaly hide. Tchazzar swatted a sellsword who came too close with a flick of his wing, sending man and steed tumbling helplessly through the air, but otherwise ignored the harassment as he took another limping stride.

Jhesrhi melted the earth to quicksand beneath his feet, then drew strands of muck streaming up his body to bury and smother him more quickly. But, wings lashing and snapping, he heaved himself clear of the effect, and in the process nearly closed the distance.

At most, Jhesrhi had time for one

more spell, but which, when they all seemed useless? For one ghastly instant, her mind was blank. Then a notion came to her.

Why was Tchazzar unstoppable? Because she'd given him strength and life in the Shadowfell and again on the battlefield where Alasklerbanbastos had nearly killed him. And maybe what she'd given she could take away.

She fused her will and perception with those of the staff, reached through the instrument, outward, and into the core of the colossal creature in front of her. She seized hold of the flame that suffused and sustained him and *pulled*.

Tchazzar threw back his head and screamed.

So far, so good. But it felt as if there were an ocean of flame to drain, the remnants of what she'd given him and the vast reserves he'd produced for himself in the days since his restoration. She wasn't sure she could handle the torrent rushing into the staff and her. But she had to. If it slipped from her control, it could explode across the battlefield and kill everyone *except* Tchazzar.

She cast some of the fire back into the Undying Pyre from which she and her weapon had drawn it in the first place. She sent part of it leaping up around her in a blue and gold pillar higher than the tallest spire in Luthcheq. Yet still there was more, shaking and drowning her at the same time.

She struggled against panic until something—a wizard's intuition, perhaps—told her there was something else she could do with the fire, some alchemy it might accomplish and expend or cage itself thereby. Without trying to understand further—there was no time—she willed that magic into being. Heat blazed along her nerves and through her veins.

The staff screamed with the ecstasy of manipulating so much flame. It was still caterwauling when it exploded, and the shock flung Jhesrhi from brightness into darkness.

* * * * *

Flying above all the foot soldiers and

horsemen, Aoth could see exactly what ailed Alasklerbanbastos. Clad in their vestments and regalia, a collection of the city's priests stood in the luminous haze of the power they were raising. The cloud grew brighter at the front, where it was transferring all that divine might to Cera. It burned from the head of the mace in her outstretched hand as a beam that was shoving Alasklerbanbastos backward, breaking away pieces of bone, and charring other bits to ash.

Unfortunately even that wasn't enough to stop him. Breasting the tide of light, he plunged forward.

Discerning Aoth's intent, Jet dived at the dracolich.

Aoth had already expended the greater

part of his magic, but he blasted Alasklerbanbastos with flame on the way down. Then Jet slammed onto the naked vertebrae of the undead dragon's neck.

The griffon instantly started clawing and biting. Thanks to their psychic link, Aoth felt both Jet's fury and his frustration as the massive bones proved difficult to crack or even scratch. Rider and mount jerked as the lightning sizzling around their foe's body jolted them.

Aoth flailed his arm and flung his shield away. He gripped his spear with both hands, charged it with destructive force, and began stabbing at the narrow gap between two vertebrae. He wanted to break whatever it was that held them

together.

Alasklerbanbastos lurched to a halt. He tried to twist his head around to get at his attackers but couldn't manage it. Jet had plunged down too close to the skull.

That didn't mean the blue was helpless. Aoth listened for the start of an incantation and watched for any little shift that might signal Alasklerbanbastos's intention to fling him and Jet loose with a snap of his neck or to crush them by rolling.

None of that happened. But suddenly Aoth realized that the little shocks that had stabbed into him and Jet had stopped. Yet the smell of an oncoming storm was stronger than ever.

“Fly!” he bellowed and Jet sprang into the air. An instant later, *big* lightning bolts flared down the length of Alasklerbanbastos’s skeleton, arcing and crackling from his skull to the end of his tail and back again.

Aoth and Jet had avoided that attack, but by returning to the air, they made it possible for the lich to reach them by other means. With more little pieces of his body crumbling and falling away as ash, Alasklerbanbastos whirled and struck.

Jet lashed his wings and dodged. The huge fangs snapped shut on empty air, showering sparks as they clashed together.

Jet tried to get out from in front of the

dragon's gnashing jaws and paralyzing stare. But Alasklerbanbastos matched him shift for shift, meanwhile snarling words of power.

Aoth stood up in the stirrups and drove the spear deep into Alasklerbanbastos's brow, between the empty, glowing orbits and the bony spikes above. The undead blue jerked his head back and so tore his attacker's weapon from his grip. Aoth cursed. But at least when the lich recoiled, he stumbled in the cadence of his conjuring, and it finally gave Jet the chance to swing out from in front of him.

As the griffon climbed, Aoth saw that they weren't the only ones who'd engaged Alasklerbanbastos in close

combat. Medrash, Balasar, and others were on the ground, hacking at the blue's legs like woodsmen felling trees. Somewhat to Aoth's surprise, neither the paladin nor his sword was glowing, nor were there any luminous runes floating around his body. Apparently he'd already expended every bit of mystical strength at his command.

But he must have been doing some damage even so because Alasklerbanbastos raised his foot high to stamp on him.

Aoth sent Jet diving back down onto the blue's neck. Alasklerbanbastos staggered and Medrash scrambled out from under the creature's talons.

Jet bit and tore at the dracolich. Aoth

willed his safety harness to unbuckle, grabbed the warhammer strapped to the saddle to serve as a backup weapon, and clambered over the griffon's rump. Without the reach his lost spear had provided, it was the only way to get at his foe.

A jerk of Alasklerbanbastos's neck almost flung him off, but he crouched low and grabbed a projecting knob of bone. He stayed in that attitude as he began to pound. The impacts woke the enchantments bound in the hammer. The glyphs graven into the steel glowed brighter and brighter, and each blow hit harder than the one before it.

Finally somebody's attack—Aoth had no idea whether it came from him, Jet,

one of the dragonborn, Oraxes, or Cera and the priests—proved lethal. Alasklerbanbastos roared, convulsed, and shattered like a piece of porcelain.

That left Aoth with nothing underneath him. But he released the magic bound in a tattoo quickly enough to turn a plummet into a slower descent. Bits of bone clattering beneath him, he drifted down into a cloud of dust and ash.

Caught in the midst of it, Balasar coughed and spat. "This is why I hate fighting the undead," he panted. "You always get filthy."

* * * * *

The twin strands of fire—the one streaming from Tchazzar to Jhesrhi and

the one leaping from the wizard up into the sky—winked out at the same moment.

The sudden loss of all that brightness muddled Gaedynn's sight. For a heartbeat, he imagined that the magic had stopped because Jhesrhi had killed or crippled the dragon. Then he saw that, although Tchazzar had shrunken into a wasted thing like the prisoner from the Shadowfell, with his gashed hide hanging loose on shriveled limbs, he was still on his feet. It was Jhesrhi who toppled with her body still wreathed in flame. Gaedynn couldn't tell if that was a last, harmless manifestation of the magic she'd just worked or if she was in imminent danger of burning to death.

But he did see Tchazzar resume hobbling toward her, and he knew that if the red dragon reached her, she was going to die no matter what.

He sent Eider plunging to the ground. He tore at his safety straps and leaped off the griffon's back. "Fly!" he shouted. Eider lashed her wings and sprang back into the air.

But Son-liin didn't go along. She, too, swung herself off Eider's back and snatched an arrow from her quiver.

His golden eyes burning as brightly as ever, Tchazzar glared down at the human and genasi who stood between him and the fallen wizard. "This is good," he rumbled. "You're another one I wanted to kill personally."

“Shut up and die,” Gaedynn answered. He shot at the wyrm’s right eye. Son-liin loosed her shaft too.

Tchazzar tossed his head, and neither arrow hit an eye or any other particularly vulnerable spot, although Gaedynn’s did stick in the creature’s face. He reached for another of the few shafts left in his quiver, and the dragon advanced. His legs were so long that, even limping, he would come within reach of his foes with another stride or two.

Then Khouryn charged in on the dragon’s right. He bellowed, “East Rift!” and chopped at Tchazzar’s good foreleg with his axe. Armed with lances, Hasos and other warriors jabbed at the

colossal creature's belly. Meralaine and a white-scaled dragonborn hurled jagged blades of shadow and bursts of pale frost respectively.

Tchazzar reeled. But then, striking like a snake, hammering his wings up and down, swinging his tail like a flail, he scattered his new assailants and kept coming.

Shooting as fast as she could, the argent lines in her purple skin shining like white-hot metal, Son-liin pierced the red with arrows charged with lightning. Each balked him for maybe an instant but no longer.

Meanwhile, Gaedynn did something he almost never did. He took his time aiming.

He no longer had much hope of piercing an eye and the brain behind it. Tchazzar reflexively protected his eyes. But confident in his armor of scales, he sometimes disregarded attacks that mere human warriors aimed at other parts of his body.

That, Gaedynn resolved, was going to turn out to be a mistake because his recent dragon fighting had taught him where an artery lay close to the surface in the underside of a wyrm's neck. He'd have to hit the spot exactly, and the loose, dangling skin would only make it more difficult. But if he did, even a living god should find the results unpleasant.

He loosed. The shaft hurtled from the

bow. And maybe Tchazzar somehow sensed it was a genuine threat because he started to twist his neck. But he was too slow, and the arrow plunged deep into the mark.

Tchazzar stumbled then swayed. He sat back on his haunches, lifted his good forefoot, and swiped the arrow out of his flesh, but that only made things worse. Gouts of blood spurted rhythmically from the wound, and the red dragon collapsed onto his side.

But then he rolled halfway onto his belly and somehow contrived to drag himself forward. And as Gaedynn and Son-liin drew their bows, he flailed with his claws and forced them to scatter. Had they stood their ground, the

stroke would have torn them apart.

Panting, Tchazzar visibly gathered his strength for one final heaving motion to drag himself within reach of Jhesrhi. Then Shala ran out of the darkness with a gory broadsword in her hand. She thrust it into the base of Tchazzar's neck. The red wyrm shuddered, a tremor so violent that Gaedynn could feel it through the earth, then slumped motionless.

As soon as Gaedynn was sure Tchazzar was no longer a threat, he whirled and dashed to Jhesrhi. When he reached her, he didn't know whether to feel horrified or relieved.

Fire still covered the unconscious woman from head to toe. It was hot

enough that it took an effort of will to stand within a pace of her, and it had burned every thread of clothing away. But it wasn't burning her. She didn't have even a blister.

* * * * *

Phicos scurried through the cellars, grabbing a scroll here, an onyx statuette of Tiamat there, a five-headed wand elsewhere, and stuffing them into his satchel. Thanks to an enchantment, the bag was bigger inside than out, but it still couldn't hold everything he and his fellow wyrmkeepers had used to equip and sanctify their shrine. Even if there were time to gather more, only the holiest and most powerful artifacts could

go.

A footstep scuffed on the floor behind him. Startled, he spun and snatched for the dagger on his hip. He relaxed when he saw that it was Esvele who'd come up behind him.

To venture into the streets, the priestess had traded her vestments for nondescript clothing, including a hood to shadow her thin, sallow face with its pentacle tattoo. On such a terrible day, it was no longer safe for Luthcheq's few surviving wyrmkeepers to look like what they were.

"Did you find out about Ferzath?" Phicos asked.

"Yes," Esvele said. "He's dead."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes. Chelnadatilar—the gold—killed him.”

Phicos cursed because it was an offense against the Dark Lady for any other being to kill a chromatic dragon but also because he and Esvele had hoped the black might help them escape the city.

“Well—” he began and, with a clinking and clattering of beads and pendants, someone else staggered into the multicolored candlelight. It was Halonya, with the layers of her grotesque, trailing costume muddy and askew.

The “high priestess” gaped at the satchel in Phicos’s hand. “What are you doing?” she shrilled.

“Running,” he answered. “Before Shala Karanok’s guards show up to arrest us.”

“No! I order you to stay and defend the temple!”

“Sorry,” Phicos said. “While Tchazzar lived, we deferred to you because he wanted us to. But now he’s gone.”

“He isn’t! He’ll rise again because he’s a god!”

“No,” Phicos said, “he wasn’t. We went along with his pretensions too since it was necessary to serve him and, through him, our true deity. But the time for that has passed as well.”

“Blasphemer!” Halonya screamed.

Phicos drew breath to deny the

change, but Esvele said, “You’re wasting time we don’t have debating with a lunatic.”

And plainly she was right. Phicos pulled his knife from its sheath, stepped, and thrust. Mouth and eyes gaping wide, Halonya toppled backward, the sharkskin hilt jutting from her chest.

“Dangerous as the city is,” Esvele said, “I’m glad we lingered long enough for that.”

EPILOGUE

7 Eleint–5 Marpenoth, the Year of the Ageless One

In Airspur, Son-liin had observed the pomp and ceremony with which a queen

conducted her affairs on a normal day. Now, she reflected, Shala Karanok was demonstrating the stark efficiency with which a ruler could manage a crisis.

The war hero hadn't returned to the War College. Instead, as soon as word spread that Tchazzar was dead and those who had fought for him started surrendering, she set up a command post right on the edge of the battlefield, with corpses sprawled and crumpled in plain view. And there she took the city in hand, hearing reports, giving orders, and dispatching messengers. She didn't even bother moving indoors when the rain Astanalan—the emerald wyrm—called to douse the fires began to fall. As a result, she and the human lords and

officers attending her had wet hair plastered to their heads.

Many of those folk were eager to speak, but Zan-akar Zeraez looked ready to burst. And finally Shala called on him, although, judging from her glower, she begrudged the time for that as well.

"Your Majesty," the ambassador cried, "that dastard deliberately provoked a dragon into charging genasi troops!" He pivoted and pointed at Gaedynn.

The bowman looked bewildered and spread his hands. "I can't imagine what you mean, my lord. I *fled* from a dragon, certainly. I fled from several before the night was through. But I was never trying to *lead* any of them anywhere."

“Liar!” Zan-akar spit. “Your intentions were plain!”

Magnol laid his hand on his fellow genasi’s arm. “I don’t know how you’d prove that,” the burly firesoul said. “And the truth is we were going to have to fight. I could tell it even if you couldn’t. And it was good that we joined the battle sooner rather than later.” He looked at Shala. “I understand Lord Zan-akar’s … concerns, Majesty, but Akanûl is willing to let the matter drop.”

“Thank you, High Lord,” Shala replied, “and thank you again for your help.”

At that point Hasos and a squad of warriors herded two dozen bedraggled, stumbling prisoners toward the throne.

Each captive had his green-tattooed hands bound behind him.

"The arcanists, Majesty," Hasos said. "Or at least all that we've rounded up so far."

The war hero scowled at them and they cringed. "Take them to the dungeons," she said. "Do whatever you have to do to keep them from using magic to escape."

Jhesrhi strode forward from the spot where she, Gaedynn, Aoth, Oraxes, Meralaine, Son-liin, and other sellswords stood in a group. Unlike everyone else, she was dry.

As Son-liin understood it, that was because the wizard had undergone a transformation. Jhesrhi had become a

creature of fire, like a red dragon or a salamander. Her magic somehow enabled her to contain the flame and heat, so she could wear clothing and other people could approach her without danger. But the raindrops dried as soon as they touched her.

"Majesty," she said, "this isn't fair. You declared amnesty for *everyone* who fought for Tchazzar."

"And the witches will share in it," Shala replied. "I'll release them when order is restored. Although I am reinstating the old laws that regulated their conduct."

"That's not just either," Jhesrhi said.

"We've just suffered through the harm they do when we *don't* control them,"

Shala snapped. “And I have too many urgent matters to address to argue the issue with you. The decision stands.”

As Hasos and the soldiers led the prisoners away, the mages glared at Oraxes and Meralaine. *Traitors!* their eyes screamed. *Traitors!*

The illusionist and the necromancer both flinched but looked dismayed for only a breath or two. It didn’t really matter that they no longer had a place in Luthcheq, even among the folk most Chessentans shunned. Like Son-liin, they’d found a new home among the Brotherhood.

It was Jhesrhi who, as she trudged back to her comrades, looked truly disconsolate. “So it really was all for

nothing," she sighed.

"The city just tore itself in two," Gaedynn answered. "Shala figures folk need someone to blame if they're to come together and be one people again. Since everyone already hates mages, they'll do nicely."

"It's wrong," Jhesrhi said.

"But nothing to do with you," he said. "Not now that you're back where you belong. What's important is to leech the fire out of you, and we'll figure out a way. Aoth can help. Meralaine and Oraxes, too, I expect."

She simply looked at him for a moment. Then she said, "No. That isn't what I want."

"What are you talking about?"

"This change is the one thing that *did* work out. I've lived my life in dread of people … touching me. Now they can't."

"But that's not ever how you *wanted* to be."

"No, and the dissatisfaction only added to my misery because while my deformity was *only* in my mind, I couldn't accept it. There were times when I all but drove myself crazy trying to overcome it." She smiled a sad, little smile. "And drove you crazy while I was about it. But that's over now. If I'm a freak inside and out, I have no choice but to learn to be content as I am. *We* finally have no choice but to be what we've always been and nothing more."

"I won't let you give up on yourself."

“Damn you, you will never understand! It isn’t your choice to make!” She turned and stalked away.

You don’t need her, Son-liin thought. You need someone who will make you happy.

* * * * *

As she peered at the ceiling, Cera had an abstracted frown on her face. Aoth reared up from the bed, twisted, dug his fingers into her ribs, and tickled. She tried to squirm away or to grip and immobilize his wrists but could manage neither. He didn’t relent until she ran out of wind, and her helpless chortles changed to little puffs.

“That was cruel,” she wheezed.

“How so?” he replied. “You never hesitate to attack me if we’ve made love and then I don’t look all dazed and stupid with bliss for the rest of the night.”

“That’s different,” she said and apparently considered that answer enough.

“So what were you brooding about?” he asked.

“Chessenta and High Imaskar,” she said. “Tymanther and Akanûl. They still hate each other. Even without dragons manipulating them, they’ll end up fighting eventually. So what was the point of what we did? Why did the Keeper even care?”

“Well,” said Aoth, “when they do

fight, at least they'll do it because they choose to and not because dragons tricked them into it. They won't wage war so often and savagely that they'll lay waste to the East and open the door for the wyrms to conquer it all. In addition to which, we united Chessenta and Threskel and weakened the Church of Tiamat hereabouts. All that's something, isn't it?"

She smiled. "Spoken like a true champion of the Yellow Sun."

He snorted. "I told you, I was never really working for Amaunator. I wanted to preserve the Brotherhood and restore our reputation and I did. Everybody knows about the victories we've won lately. I've got warriors from all the

other mercenary companies in Luthcheq asking to join. I've got the gratitude of the crowned heads of Chessenta, Tymanther, Akanûl, *and* High Imaskar. They'll all bid for my services when they're ready to go to war again."

Cera smiled and shook her head, and one of her tousled, yellow curls flopped down on her forehead. "I know that's not the only reason you did it."

He took a breath. "You're right, but it still wasn't to please a god, except maybe indirectly. I understand that you couldn't even think about giving up your responsibilities here when everything was turning to dung. But now that it's not, will you come away with me when it's time to move on?"

She just looked at him for a heartbeat. Then she said, “With Daelric dead, some people are saying I should be the sunlady of Chessenta.”

He sighed. “Oh.”

“But I haven’t said yes! I have to meditate and pray. Figure out what I want and what Amaunator wants.” She touched his cheek. “And whatever that turns out to be, we’re together here and now.”

He smiled. “We are at that.” He took hold of her hand and kissed her fingertips.

*****

Khouryn studied the crags of Dracowyr as he and his comrades

spiraled down from above. As far as he could see, no enemy was lying in ambush, but that didn't necessarily rule it out. According to Chelnadatilar and the gem wyrms, there was room for dozens of dragons and hundreds of their servants to lurk in the tunnels honeycombing the granite outcroppings around the central bowl, and he kept his eyes moving after Iron set him down on a ledge. He noticed Aoth, Jet, Gaedynn, Jhesrhi, Medrash, and Balasar doing the same.

But nothing lunged out and attacked them. Instead, a smell of smoke and combustion suffused the air, and a pair of luminous red eyes appeared in the mouth of one of the caves. "Some of you

don't belong here," whispered a sibilant voice.

"They're here because dragons invited them," replied Astanalan. Even in the fading twilight, his flesh gleamed as if he truly were made of emerald. "Come out, Brimstone. We have matters to discuss."

A wyrm with red flecks mottling his charcoal-colored scales stalked out onto a shelf of his own, where the stone behind him blocked the rays of the setting sun. A dragonborn walked beside him with a staff canted over her shoulder. Khouryn assumed she was Ananta, guardian of the earthmote.

Brimstone turned his head without haste, taking in the assortment of

dragons, warriors, wizards, griffons, and other winged steeds looking back at him from various points around the natural amphitheater. His gaze settled on Aoth and Cera. "You're the ones who trespassed on the conclave," he said.

"Yes," said Aoth.

"Then your deaths are worth a bonus," Brimstone said. He looked at the other dragons. "It was skillful play to betray Alasklerbanbastos and Tchazzar and get these folk to help you kill them. But there are still plenty of points to be earned for slaughtering them and so protecting the game."

Khouryn gripped his axe and looked around to see if any of the wyrms would take Brimstone up on his offer. None

did. They just stared back at him.

"No?" the vampire asked. "No one? I realize you imagine the paladin has freed you from some sort of enchantment. But surely you remember the beauty of the game, the fascination. How alive you felt as you crafted your strategies."

"We do," Domborcojh rumbled. The sapphire dragon held his truncated foreleg bent, with the stump well off the ground. "But a poison can taste sweet."

"We acknowledge you as one of the saviors of our kind," Chelnadatilar said. "That and the sanctity of Dracowyr are the reasons we didn't simply attack you."

Brimstone grinned and two of his upper fangs grew longer. "And here I

thought it was because you have no way of knowing what *other* secrets I brought back from the north."

"Don't posture," rapped the gold. "We recognize that we owe you a debt. But even the benefactor who freed us from one madness can't be allowed to afflict us with another."

"In other words," said Aoth, "end the game. Dissolve the spell you cast on the other players."

"You may find," Brimstone whispered, "that many of them will want to play regardless."

"Then what a pity," said Aoth, "that the contest can't continue without its judge and scorekeeper, a role you'll abandon and never take up again.

Otherwise we'll hunt you down and kill you."

Brimstone chuckled. "Well. When you put it that way. Give me a moment."

Hissing words of power, he scratched glyphs in the rock beneath his forefoot. Each flared red, white, blue, green, or somehow black, as he completed it. Khouryn watched the smoke drake even more intently than before because he had no idea what the creature was doing, although he took some reassurance from the fact that Jhesrhi, Aoth, and the other mages looked vigilant but not alarmed.

As Brimstone inscribed the final rune, power rushed outward like a ripple in a pond where someone had dropped a stone. Khouryn couldn't see it or feel it

in any normal way because, he supposed, it jolted his spirit and not his flesh. But it rocked him back even so.

"There," Brimstone said. "Are you satisfied?"

Balasar turned to Medrash and asked, "Are we?"

"Yes," the paladin said. "I felt Tiamat's power wither."

"Then I should think we're done," Brimstone said, "and I can feel that the sun has slipped below the horizon. So if you'll excuse me, I'll be off."

"Give us one more moment," said Aoth.

"Yes?"

"You don't seem all that upset that we wrecked the game."

“I rarely explain myself to lesser creatures,” Brimstone said. “But just for fun, let’s imagine that I wasn’t really the impartial arbiter of the tournament. Let’s suppose *I* was playing too, and my goal was to kill or at least weaken Tchazzar, Skuthosin, Gestanius, and Alasklerbanbastos.

“That would make sense, wouldn’t it? They were the most powerful wyrms in this part of the world. There wasn’t much chance that anyone else would achieve preeminence among dragons with them squatting on top of the heap.

“But now they’re not. And what if it’s because I manipulated my own chosen pawns into eliminating them without said pawns ever even suspecting they were

working for me? Then I wouldn't have any reason to feel disheartened, would I?"

"*Is* that what happened?" asked Aoth.

"Oh, no, of course not. As Chelnadatilar quite properly observed, I'm the savior of dragonkind, and how could a savior stoop to cheating? Watch out for Alasklerbanbastos, Captain. If you didn't destroy his phylactery, he might return one day." Brimstone leered. "Come to think of it, so might I, and perhaps on that night, you won't have such a formidable assembly of allies standing ready to assist you."

"Maybe I won't need them," Aoth replied.

Brimstone nodded to Ananta. "Good-

bye, my lady. I hope I wasn't too troublesome a guest." He turned, paced back into the tunnel, rounded a bend, and disappeared.

"Well," Gaedynn said, "that was interesting."

"Don't pay any heed to his insinuations or his threats either," Medrash said. "He just wanted to salvage his pride and leech the joy from our victory. And it *is* a victory. We accomplished everything we set out to do."

"Which means we can go home," Balasar said.

"Then I guess this time really is farewell," Khouryn said. He and the dragonborn climbed off their bats for a

round of handshakes. “If you see them, give my best to our comrades from the Platinum Cadre.”

“Oh, we’ll see them,” Balasar said. “Torm told Medrash to appoint himself their protector.”

Medrash scowled as if his clan brother had revealed something embarrassing. “No, he didn’t. And ‘protector’ is an exaggeration. But as time passes, those who scorned the Cadre before may forget how well they fought against the giants. They may need someone who’s not a dragon worshiper to speak up for them.”

“Whereas I,” Balasar said, “intend to sink into a life of idleness and debauchery.” Biri snorted and he

grinned. “I mean, in a married sort of way.”

There was a final round of good-byes. Then the dragonborn climbed back onto their bats, the one that had survived the battle against Tchazzar and the two they’d borrowed when Perra reached Luthcheq, and the animals fluttered up into the air.

Everyone else watched the Tymantherans vanish into the gloom. Then, her dark garments somehow all but invisible even to a dwarf’s eyes, her pale face floating disembodied like a ghost’s, Meralaine said, “It’s funny.”

“What is?” Oraxes asked.

“We never will know if Brimstone was really using us as his weapons. And

we don't know there aren't other games of *xorvintaal* going on across the world right now. Even if Brimstone believes he rediscovered a secret that everyone else had lost, that doesn't necessarily make it so. So ultimately, how can anybody ever know if he's making his own choices for his own reasons or if he's just a pawn on a lanceboard?"

Khouryn glowered at Oraxes. "For the Dancer's sake, give the girl a kiss. Or a drink. Anything to shut her up."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Lee Byers is the author of over thirty fantasy and horror novels, including ten set in the FORGOTTEN REALMS® world. His short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. A resident of the Tampa Bay area, he is a frequent guest at Florida science fiction conventions and spends much of his free time fencing and playing poker. Visit his website at richardleebyers.com.

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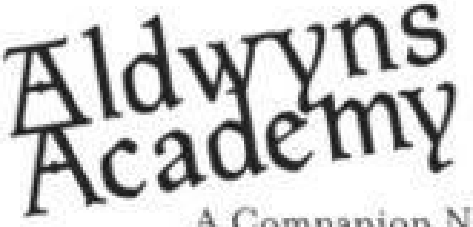

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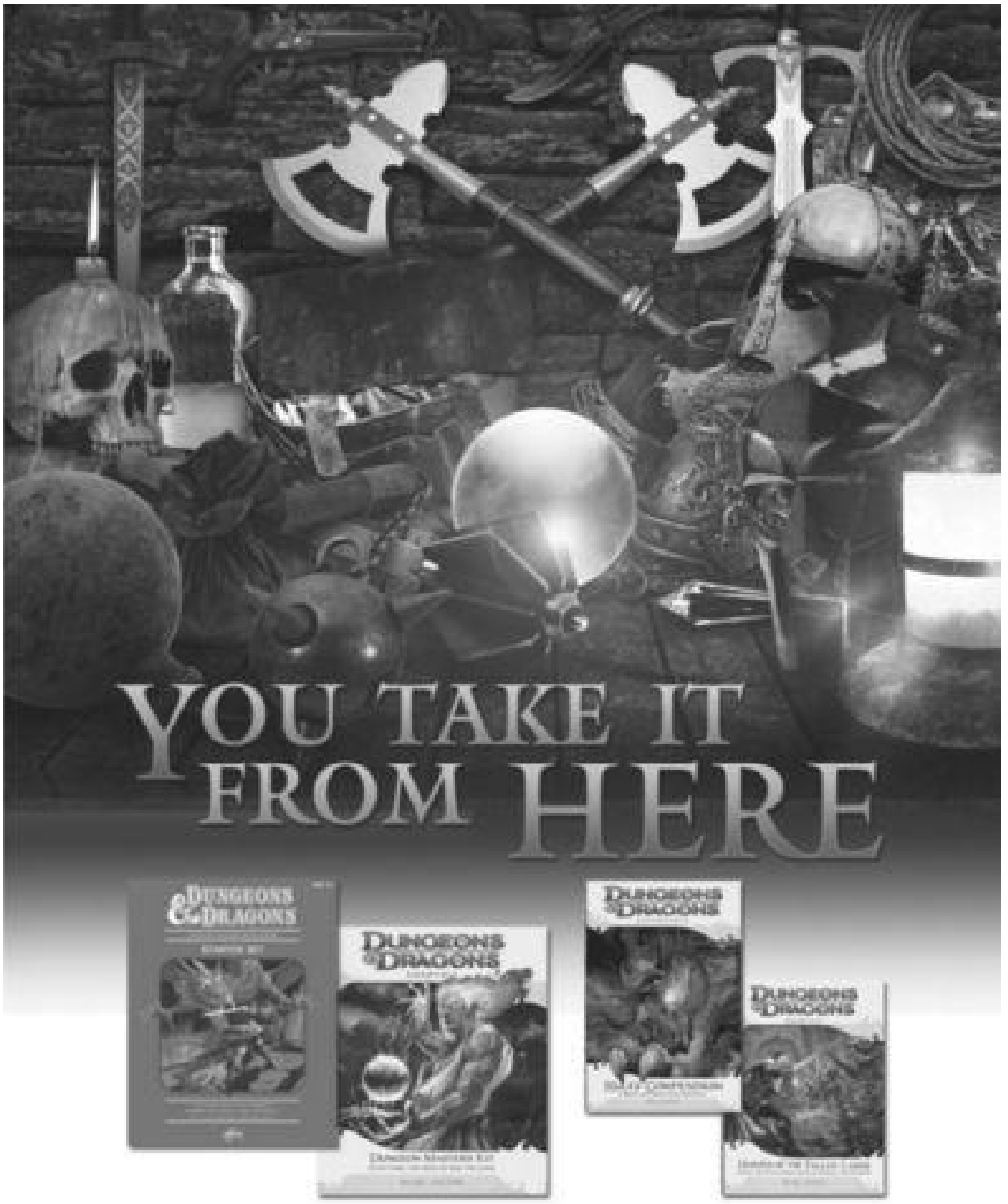

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