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FORGOTTEN REALMS

FANTASY ADVENTURE

Part 7

UNEASY ALLIANCES

*Will a leader's greed imperil the mission
of the paladins and mercenaries?*



David Cook
with Peter Archer

The Double Diamond Triangle Saga

Book Seven

Uneasy Alliances

David Cook & Peter Archer

Chapter 1

Exposed Wounds

The water rose waist-deep in the cell. A wave formed and broke against a dank stony wall. Silver drops fell like tears from the lichen-encrusted stones. Spray filled the fetid air. From dull metal wall brackets, torches sputtered and flared, their flickering light casting eerie shadows on the dungeon walls.

The waves rolled and washed against a pair of shackles bolted against the far

wall. The surface boiled and seethed, and then a struggling pair of figures erupted from its midst, limbs straining against each other.

A youth, his yellow curls dripping, wrestled with a golden paladin, the latter streaming water from every seam of his resplendent plate mail. "Calm down, Kastonoph," shouted the paladin angrily. "You're safe now."

Kastonoph stopped his struggling and went limp on his supporter's arm, rivulets of red coursing down his bare chest, spreading crimson stains on the water illuminated by the torches feeble light.

"By Tyr!" The elder man seized the youth and lifted him above the turbulent

waters onto a narrow wooden shelf that ran along one wall of the prison cell. Seizing a torch from its iron bracket, he brought it closer to the youth's body. "Gods!"

The golden knight staggered at the sight of the young man's chest. It was rent by claw and tooth, scored with deep gashes, pink tendrils of muscle protruding damply in the dim light.

"I'm going to bind your wounds, Noph. This will hurt a bit." The knight tore a strip of cloth from the lad's ragged shirt. Noph clutched at him. "Can't you heal me, Kern?"

"My power of healing is spent for today. The best I can do right now is to stop the bleeding." Impatiently Kern jerked free

another fragment of cloth, folding it into a soft pad to lay against the youth's lacerated chest. As his hands touched the wound, Noph screamed, a thin, ragged cry.

Dimly, from beyond the cell walls, the paladin, intent on his errand of mercy, could barely hear the distant din of battle. Steel clashed upon steel, someone—or something—wailed in agony, and above it all echoed the rumble of a drum. Kern stopped a moment to listen.

"The fiends are coming closer," he said. His fingers strained to work faster, flying furiously, pressing, binding, seeking to stanch the life's blood that oozed from seemingly endless wounds. With a crash, the door to the cell flew

open and a trio of fighters burst through. The first was an older man, his silvered hair pulled back over his shoulders in a slick ponytail bound with a leather thong. He bore a staff, its end shod in iron. Close behind him, a young man, sword drawn, groped the air before him blindly. His companion, who held the young man's arm in one hand, a blade in the other, was more worthy of notice than any of the others in the cell. Long black hair fell thickly over her finely wrought shoulders. Her soaked linen shirt clung to soft, appealing curves.

Barely noticing Kern ministering to his patient, she spoke first to the older man. "Come on, you—what's your name? Trandon?—help me wedge this door

shut."

Trandon shook his head. The blind youth pulled free from the female fighter's clutch and wandered into the interior of the cell, feeling his way along one wall.

"No. We can't shut ourselves in here."

Trandon pushed a strand of hair back from his eyes. "Face it, well have to try to fight our way back down the corridor. That's the only way out of this gods-cursed labyrinth."

The female warrior turned to Kern, seeming for the first time to notice the object of his labors. "Well, paladin. How's the patient?"

Kern barely glanced up. "Hell live if we get him out of here to someplace he can rest. The crocodile mauled him badly."

The female warrior turned again to Trandon. "See? We can't possibly get through those fiends carrying Noph. If we stay here and hold the door shut, they may pass us by."

Trandon looked admiringly at her shadow, its gentle curves wavering against the cell wall in the torchlight. "What's your name, pirate?"

The woman smiled easily at him. "Sharessa Stagwood. They call me the Shadow."

Well, then, Shadow, you're in serious danger of becoming no more than a shade. Do you want us to stay here until we drown or get torn apart by those ... things? We need to keep a way open, not seal ourselves inside." He glanced

swiftly around the cells. "Hey, where's Entreri?"

"I don't know, and not sure I care," growled Sharessa. "Last I saw of him was up above. He was fighting next to that big man—your friend," she said, turning to Kern. She spun back to face Trandon. "And don't you presume to dictate battle strategy to me. I've fought more men than you've white hairs on your head. I'm in charge of this party now."

Kern turned from his place near Noph and splashed over to the female pirate. Trandon moved next to the youth and took up the paladin's task of binding his wounds.

The golden knight spoke heatedly to

Sharessa. "Since when are you in charge of anything? I claim leadership by virtue of my righteous service to ??? Al—"

"To the seven hells with Tyr, and you, too, paladin! I led my comrades out of the jungles around this cursed city. I fought the fiend that was stalking—"

"How dare you blaspheme, woman? On your knees and beg pardon, or—"

"The water's going down," the blind man interrupted quietly from the corner. Paladin and pirate broke off their quarrel and looked about them.

The level of water had indeed begun to fall suddenly, as if the flood had found a draining passageway elsewhere in the dungeons of the mage-king. The wavelets now lapped about their knees.

Sharessa ignored the blind youth, turning her attention back to Kern.

"Come on, damn it. Artemis is gone. How do you think he'd do against a whole army of fiends?"

"Not badly, in fact," said a quiet voice behind her. An olive-skinned man stepped from the shadows near the door into the light. There were a series of scratches along one side of his face, and his doublet was scored in half a dozen places by claw and sword, but he appeared otherwise unhurt.

Shar spun about, throwing her arms about his neck. "Artemis! Thank the gods!"

The little man reached up, breaking her embrace. "You'd spend your time better

guarding the door."

Her face—dark, mobile, beautiful even in this setting—froze for a moment, then went sullen. She returned her attention to the cell door, while Artemis spoke to Kern and Trandon, who had turned back to Noph. "How is he?" Artemis asked.

Trandon shrugged. "He might make it if we can find someone to heal him. We've stopped most of the bleeding, but he's lost a lot of blood."

Noph gasped for breath and struggled. Trandon clamped an arm around him. "Easy, lad. You'll tear those bandages."

Noph closed his eyes. "Shar?"

Sharessa moved next to him, keeping one eye on the door while stroking the fine down that covered one of the lad's

cheeks. "Relax, Noph. You're safe now. I'm here."

"Shar, she wasn't. . . wasn't. . ." Noph's eyes opened wide and his breath came in short gasps. "I thought she was Eidola ... but she turned into ... teeth . . . claws . . ." Noph's voice began to shake, then faded into nothing. There was a moment of silence.

Sharessa turned to Kern. "What's he talking about? What's going on?"

She spun and glared at Artemis, the man who'd led the former crew members of the Kissing Shark from the Tavern of the Masques in Thar-kaar to this dank prison cell beneath the palace of Aetheric III, mage-king, insane ruler of Doegan.

"You hired us to kill a woman. That's

all. Not to fight fiends, not to battle paladins, and not to break Aetheric the squid king out of a fish tank. But so far we've done all those things, and we've never even caught a glimpse of this woman." She looked at Noph. "Eidola. You told us that was her name, Entreri. Now, what's the lad talking about?"

Artemis looked at Kern, who cleared his throat.

"Noph found Lady Eidola in this cell. Apparently she was chained. When he released her, however, he must have broken some sort of restraint, because she showed her true form as a greater doppleganger. The shapeshifter turned into a crocodile and attacked Noph. I suppose it must have thought he was

dead, because it swam out of the cell just as we were coming in."

He turned to Trandon for confirmation. The fighter nodded. "Obviously there's a lot more to this affair than any of us suspected. We probably won't know exactly what's going on until Miltiades and the others catch Eidola—that is, catch the doppelganger who looks like Eidola."

Sharessa grunted. "So now what?"

Artemis stepped nearer to the beautiful mercenary. It seemed to her that his voice took on a peculiar intensity, as if he wished her, and her alone, to understand some hidden meaning in his words. "This city is infested with an army of fiends bent on killing everything

human in it. We're caught between them and the mad king Aetheric, who has ruled this city from a fish tank and whose armies are in total disarray. If we're to survive, we need his source of power. We need the bloodforge."

He stopped. Sharessa felt a shiver run down her spine. Artemis had some plan for the bloodforge beyond saving Eldrinpar, of that she was sure. But she'd learned enough of this secretive man to know that he would keep his plans to himself.

The diminutive master assassin broke the silence himself, stepping nearer Noph and assessing the youth's condition with the practiced glance of one who has seen many wounded men. "He'll not last

long. We'd best leave while we can." He drew a dagger from his belt and moved closer.

Kern stepped in front of him. "What d'you think you're doing, Entreri?"

The slender man shrugged slim shoulders. "As I said. He's dead already. It's kinder to let his body know now."

Kern's eyes blazed. "You'll not murder him—not while I'm in charge of this party."

Entreri looked calmly at the golden paladin, whose armor sparkled in the flaring torchlight. "Be reasonable. I've seen what the fiends that inhabit this place can do. Ask them"—he waved at the mercenaries—"what happened to Brindra at the bridge. I'd rather spare the

lad that agony." His eyes glittered suddenly, hard and dry. "And by the way, who says it's you who's in charge? I led my employees here through the jungle. I pulled them out of a scrape in Tharkaar. And I understand exactly what we're after."

"We're after . . ." Kern started to reply, then clamped down on the words. Gaining control of his temper, he spoke slowly and distinctly. "We have to care for this lad, even if you've abandoned him. And while I'm here, I'll not let you harm him."

Trandon moved next to Kern, their bodies shielding Noph from Entreri. "Nor I, assassin."

Entreri glanced at them contemptuously.

"Shar, let's get this over with quickly." His sword was in his hand, the point toward the paladin. Shar also drew her sword, but its blade dipped to the floor. She stared hard at the little assassin, then shook her head and stepped away from him.

"No, Artemis." She sheathed her blade. "The lad might live if we can find a way out of these damned cellars. Until then I won't give him up." She gazed at the assassin steadily. "And I won't let you hurt him."

Entreri's usually impassive face showed no emotion, but his knuckles whitened on his sword. He looked at the golden paladin. "Ready?"

"More than ready," snapped Kern,

raising his blade.

Behind the little man, the door suddenly rattled. Through the barred window in the cell door shot an elongated three-jointed arm ending in a rounded claw. Quick as death, it seized Entreri round the neck, dragging him backward against the door, choking him. From the corridor came a maniacal shriek of laughter.

The little man tried to twist around, slashing at the arm with his sword, but before the blow could fall, a second jointed arm thrust through the window, effortlessly slapping his stroke and sword aside. He tugged in vain at the choking arm, his face now bright scarlet and shining with sweat. Kern started forward. His paladin's blade rose and

swept down in a mighty arc, shearing off the arm that clutched Entreri. A spray of ichor befouled the paladin's armor. From beyond the door came a scream that ended in sobs, rising into another crescendo of insane merriment. The other arm was withdrawn, but the door began to creak open. Trandon hurled himself against it. Sharessa added her strength to that of the fighter. Between them, they forced the door shut and wedged several flat stones beneath it. Entreri rose from where he'd fallen, breathing hard.

"That won't hold long. If there's another way out of here, we'd better find it." He glanced at Kern. "Any ideas, paladin?"

"Right now, no," snapped the knight. "I

did think we might go out that door, but you've managed to take care of that."

The little assassin gestured eloquently to the door, which was beginning to bulge ominously inward. "As a matter of fact, your friend here"—he waved at Trandon—"sealed it off. But if you'd like to go that way, unblock it and be my guest. You shouldn't have to fight more than twenty or thirty of those fiends. Perhaps if you pray hard enough to ???, they'll part before you."

"Blasphemy!" Kern started forward, furious.

A voice from the corner interrupted the disagreement. "Say," said the blind youth, "has anyone tried the passageway over here?"

The effect of Ingrar's query was similar to dropping a ten-foot stack of dishes in the middle of a quiet library. Shar gave a loud whoop, while Trandon lunged toward the blind pirate and Kern gasped in amazement. Only Entreri remained silent and watchful.

Ingrar stood in the darkest corner of the cell, his blind face to the wall, his hands outstretched, as if molding the air with his fingers. To Kern, it seemed almost as if he watched the delicate quivering of the antennae attached to some exotic insect.

"There's a draft coming from around this stone," said Ingrar, gesturing. "And the air here smells different from the air in the rest of the cell. Besides, I can hear

wind coming down a tunnel on the other side of the stone."

Entreri recovered his aplomb. "All right. Kern, let's get the stone loose. Shar, guard the door. Ingrar, keep your ears peeled for anything waiting for us at the other end of that passageway." He glanced at Trandon, still leaning on his staff before the recumbent Kastonoph. "Get the boy ready to be moved." He turned to help the paladin in the corner. "What are you staring at?" he snarled at Shar, who chose wisely not to reply.

Kern already had the point of his dagger wedged between two of the heavy stone blocks from which the dungeon was constructed. He chipped away at the mortar, which fell in a steady white

stream into the mud around his ankles. Entreri was similarly occupied on the other side of the stone. In a few minutes, Kern reached his fingers into the gap he'd created and pulled. The stone wobbled slightly. Now Entreri joined him, and between the two of them, they managed, with agonizing slowness, to pull back the stone, revealing a dark cavity behind it. The hole was about three feet high and equally broad. Ingrar immediately crouched and moved into it, holding a torch to illuminate the way for the others. Once in the hole, he straightened up.

"It's tall enough to stand, but narrow," he cautioned.

"Now the lad," ordered Entreri.

Together Kern and Trandon lifted Noph from his bed and laid him on the muddy floor. Then, with a sudden, startling show of strength, Trandon wrenched the broad plank bed from its fastenings. He and Kern moved Noph onto the temporary stretcher, aided by Shar. The female pirate had been standing by the door, sword drawn, listening with some trepidation to a continuous battering, accompanied by grunts, growls, and unsavory slithering from the corridor. In the cell window, not far from her, she could see a variety of vaguely moving shadows, and with a shudder, she knew she did not want to see the unnatural forms that cast them. At Entreri's summons, she seized one end of the

plank bed. Trandon took the other and crawled awkwardly into the hole, supporting Noph's head while Shar followed at the lad's feet.

Left in the dungeon, Kern and Entreri stared at one another with naked distrust. Kern was the first to speak.

"Very well, assassin," he observed coldly. I will accept your leadership only because I must—since you and your followers outnumber me. But when we're safely out of danger, your true peril will only have just begun. I'll challenge you in the sight of Holy ??? to fair com—"

"Yes, yes, yes," interrupted the other impatiently. "But for the time being, do what I say without making a speech

about it. Now, into the tunnel!"

The golden paladin seemed about to say something more, but thought better of it and followed the others. Entreri did likewise. As he left the room, holding the last remaining torch from the cell, he removed an object from his pocket and tossed it at the door, which was now rapidly splintering under the fiendish assault. There was a flash and a rumble of falling stone. In the narrow confines of the tunnel, the escapees halted a moment.

"What in the name of justice was that?" muttered Kern.

"Smokepowder," replied Entreri laconically. "I collapsed the ceiling of the cell. No one will be following us for

a while."

The thought that if the passage they were in had no outlet, that the assassin had just sealed them in a tomb, may have occurred to some in the party, but none gave voice to it. Instead, they struggled along what seemed an endless distance but was in reality probably no more than fifty yards.

Ingrar, in the lead, halted so abruptly that Trandon bumped into him. There was a muttered colloquy between the pirate and the fighter, while the others waited impatiently.

"Gives a whole new meaning to the blind leading the blind," muttered Shar wryly to Kern just behind her. In the enclosed space, the paladin was

uncomfortably aware of her closeness, her scent a mingling of sweat and a perfume he could not identify.

The party heard Trandon grunt with effort for a moment; then there was a sudden rending of wood. Trandon opened a pair of double doors, and pale light spilled down the passage. The others, grimy-faced and grim, emerged slowly from the cupboard into which the tunnel had emptied.

They found themselves in a vaulted stone hall, clearly outside the prison complex of the palace. The din of fiendish battle had vanished entirely, but there was a dull, low rumble that time and again shook the floor, as of some vast engine far underground. Their torches

illuminated only a small part of the hallway; on both sides of them, it stretched on into unknowable blackness.

The escapees clustered around Noph, who, lying on his board, coughed and spat a goblet of blood onto the floor of the corridor. Entreri glanced at Kern.

"Can't you heal him? I thought all paladins could lay hands on wounded."

Kern shook his head. "My magical abilities for the day are nearly exhausted. I'll have to rest before curing him. I can try it now, but I doubt it'll do him any good."

"Try," said Entreri.

Kern stretched out his hands, placing them on Noph's forehead, bending his own head in prayer to Tyr. A faint glow

came from his hands, and Noph's breathing eased somewhat, but nothing more occurred. Kern fell back, sweat dripping from his brow. "It's no good. I can't do anything more for now."

Entreri grunted grudging assent and turned to Trandon. "What about you?"

The older fighter looked up, startled. "What about me?"

"Can you heal him?"

Trandon shook his head. "I haven't the ability. I'm not yet a true paladin."

Artemis turned away abruptly. Shar moved to speak to him, but the little man turned his back on her, motioning for Kern to join him instead. Shar glared furiously at the assassin, then moved to join Trandon and Ingrar in cautiously

exploring their new surroundings. The hall was lined on both sides with dark wooden furniture. Some distance down the passage, on the opposite side from the cabinet, was a niche in which a bas-relief had been carved into the wall at about eye level. It depicted a man's face, startling in its beauty. Shar thought she recognized the features of the mage-king she had so briefly glimpsed before he'd shattered his glass tank to escape the impact of Entreri's magical pills.

Ingrar came back and sat down next to Noph. His hand sought the young man's.

"Ingrar," whispered Noph. "Am ... am I going to die?" Tears ran down his face, streaking the bloodstains on his cheeks. "I don't want to die here. I don't want to

die at all. There are so many things I've never done, so many things I've never seen..."

His voice faded.

Ingrar squeezed his hand. "You won't die. We won't let you. I won't let you." His blind eyes narrowed, and his brow furrowed. "There's something odd about that fellow."

"Who? Kern?" Noph's eyes opened. "He's really not so bad. Not as stuck up and pompous as Miltiades. In fact—"

"No, no," Ingrar interrupted. "The other one."

"Trandon? What's wrong with him?"

"I'm not sure. But he knows more than he tells. And he could have cured you. I heard it in his voice. He could have, but

he didn't want to."

Noph heard Ingrar's words through a haze of pain and nausea. The events of the past few days ran together in a confused stream: the fight by the fountain; his infatuation with Sharessa; Artemis's disastrous attack on the mage-king; and, above all, the horrifying revelation that Lady Eidola, whom he'd come to the Utter East to rescue from her kidnappers, was nothing less than a doppelganger, a shapeshifter whose crocodilian teeth and claws had so nearly cost him his life.

"Trandon," he whispered, more to himself than to Ingrar. "Can Trandon be a traitor? It's wrong . . . wrong . . ." His voice faded again, but the sharp-eared

Ingrar caught one last phrase:
"Something is wrong...."

Chapter 2

Love and Trust

Noph stirred and started suddenly awake. His mind poised, swooped, and remembered: the fight with the doppelganger, the struggle in the dark cell as the water rose higher around him, his rescue, and the journey through the dark tunnel to this place, wherever this place was. His heart was pounding as if it would beat its way through his chest. His chest. .. He glanced down, puzzled that he seemed to feel no pain from his wounds.

"Easy, lad. lie easy." Trandon pushed

him down gently. "You lost a lot of blood."

Noph looked up at the silver-haired warrior, trying to find the courage to formulate his suspicions. Then, with a sigh, he gave up and sank back against something soft, warm, gently rounded. Long silky hair tickled his ear, and moist, gentle lips brushed enticingly against his cheek.

"Sharessa!" Noph half-turned, meeting the dark, dancing eyes of the she-pirate.

"Well, Noph, how do you feel?"

Noph considered a moment. "The pain is gone." He looked down at his chest, his ragged shirt revealing the flesh beneath clean and unbroken. "I'm healed!"

"Aye. He did it." Shar gestured toward

the golden figure of Kern, who stood across the hallway deep in conversation with Entreri. Turning his head, Noph saw Ingrar, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor, gazing with unseeing eyes down the passage into the blackness beyond the torches.

Shar continued. "We rested here. You've been asleep half a day. That much rest was enough for the paladin to cure your wounds. But you must still be careful. Trandon's right; you're too weak to do much." Her eyes sparkled wickedly. "You'll have some lovely scars. I'm sure girls will want to examine them very closely."

Noph relaxed and let his head rest against Shar's ample bosom. Despite the

strangeness of their surroundings, he felt an odd sense of peace and fulfillment, as if some raging conflict within him had been stilled. Shar stroked his head, humming an old song of sailors and the sea in his ear. He could feel her heart softly beating.

"I see the patient is awake and comfortable." He looked up to see Entreri staring coldly at him. The assassin and the paladin had evidently reached some sort of conclusion, for they called the party to gather round. Noph sat up, feeling weak but alert.

Kern spoke. "Master Entreri and I have agreed that until we find the bloodforge, which is the source of all the madness around us, well cooperate." He spoke

without emotion, but it was clear to Noph what it had cost him to make this agreement with a man whom he despised.

"When we find the bloodforge, however —"

"Aye, when we find it," interrupted Entreri briskly. "Time enough to think of that when it happens. Right now we need to be moving; we've wasted enough time here." He glowered at Noph, who blushed and tried to sit up straight.

Entreri turned back to the group. "Now, then. Does anyone have any idea where we are?"

Trandon shrugged. "Probably some other part of the mage-king's palace." He gestured down the corridor. "Fifty feet

down that way, there's a fall of stone blocking the corridor. It probably came down when Aetheric broke out of his tank."

Entreri nodded. "Very well. That makes things simpler. There's only one way to go, so well go that way." He gestured in the direction opposite that indicated by the elder man. "Ingrar, you and I go first. Trandon and Kern form the rear guard."

"Hey!" cried Noph and Sharessa simultaneously. Entreri did not even spare them a glance. "In the middle." His mouth drew in a sour line. "Since you seem to have so much to talk about, keep yourselves entertained and stay out of trouble." He drew his blade and took Ingrar's arm to guide the blind pirate.

"Right. Come on."

Sharessa sucked in her breath with an angry hiss and scrambled to her feet. "What's he doing in front?" she asked irritably, gesturing toward Ingrar.

"Ingrar seems to see blind a good bit better than the rest of you do with eyes," returned Entreri calmly. "I don't know what's going on with his sight, but as long as he can sense danger, he might as well be where he's going to do us some good."

Ingrar turned to Sharessa. "It's true, Shar. I can feel things I couldn't before. I ... I don't know why." His voice faltered.

Shar was silent for a moment, then flung an arm around his shoulders and gave him a squeeze. She looked at the others.

"Come on, the rest of you. Follow the blind man."

Noph rose, his knees shaking. The others spread out their formation and, without a word, followed the assassin and the mercenaries.

The corridor ran forward for some way, then bent to the right and ended at a large double door. The party gathered before it, and Entreri pulled the handles in vain. "Locked." He shrugged. "Kern, you and Trandon have a go at it. This is a situation that seems to call for more strength than brains."

Kern snorted angrily, but he and the fighter pulled at the massive wrought-iron handles. The doors, however, remained obstinately closed. Shar and

Noph joined the effort but without success. Finally Entreri turned to Ingrar. "Can you do anything?"

The young man stepped forward, his fingers running delicately over the ironwork tracery that covered the doors. He touched the lock, tapped it once or twice, then bent, putting his ear next to the metal. "Shar, give me a hairpin."

Silently Sharessa drew a long, lethal-looking pin from a pouch at her belt. Ingrar accepted it and thrust it into the lock, probing carefully.

"Hurry," urged Entreri.

Ingrar gestured irritably. "The less noise you make, the more I can hear and the faster this will go."

Noph shivered. He felt a creeping sense

of unease. He strained his eyes, staring back along the corridor they'd come from. Beyond the bright circle cast by their torches, he could see nothing, but the sensation of dread increased. He noticed that Trandon was also staring into the darkness, a look of intense concentration on his face.

Sharessa had taken a torch from Artemis and stood near the door, holding it high. Entreri stood near her, his shadow streaming along the floor.

From the blackness of the corridor, a piece of the darkness detached itself and leaped upon Entreri's shadow. There was a deep gurgling sound, like a thirsty man taking a deep drink of ale. The assassin's shadow darkened, solidified,

and rose.

A second Artemis Entreri stood in the torchlight staring at them.

Noph couldn't tell if the startled cry had come from his own throat or from one of the others. The false Artemis matched it with a wild scream of battle fury and, drawing its sword, rushed upon its diminutive double. The master assassin barely had time to parry in a flash of skirling metal. The twin figures circled each other again and again, blades flickering in the torchlight in a deadly dance. The rest of the party stood silent, as if paralyzed.

The duo broke apart, one with a thin line of red trickling down one cheek. "Damn you, do something," he shrieked at his

companions.

Sharessa, standing closest to the battle, had already drawn her sword and brought it to the guard position. Now she stood hesitating, staring at the double image before her. Sweat trickled down her brow.

"Damn it!" she muttered. "Which one's real?"

One Artemis shouted, "Come on, Shar! Finish him!" Shar's sword came back in preparation for a sweeping stroke, then halted again. Now the other Artemis chuckled.

"Good judgment, Sharessa. Now take care of him and well finish this."

Again the female pirate's muscles tensed, then slackened. The others in the

party stood silently watching her. Noph marveled at the brilliance of the swordplay between the two Artemises. It was plain that the shadeling had imitated Entreri's prowess as well as his appearance. The two fighters closed in a tight circle, neither willing to give ground. The echoes of their blows resounded weirdly down the corridor into an unfathomable distance.

Now the two broke apart again, each searching for an opening. But this time, Sharessa hesitated no longer. With a deep breath that was almost a gasp, she brought her sword across in a deadly, graceful arc. The head of the Artemis on her right leapt from his shoulders. His body stood upright for a moment, a

fountain of blood spouting from the neck. Then, in a thin shriek, it dissolved into darkness. Noph thought he saw a dim patch of shade fleeing into the blackness beyond the torchlight.

The other Artemis sank to his knees. In addition to the cut on his cheek, his left sleeve was soaked in blood. He tore a strip of cloth from his shirt and bound the wound, using his teeth to pull the bandage tight. Then he glared at Shar, who hadn't moved since her victory.

"That was cutting it rather fine, don't you think?"

Sharessa started, as one coming out of a trance. "I couldn't tell which one was really you."

"How did you know which one to kill?"

The shapely pirate looked Entreri full in the face. "I didn't." She turned away to stand by Noph.

Ingrar had turned back to the door. There was a sudden snap as the lock gave way, and the young man stepped back, anticipating a possible trap. Nothing happened, however, and after a moment, the blind pirate gestured to Entreri.

The little man, still preoccupied with bandaging his arm, nodded to Kern. "Go ahead, paladin. Forward, in the name of Tyr!"

The golden knight straightened at the sound of his god's name, even in jest. "Forward, in the name of Tyr!" He drew his sword and pushed open the doors.

A warm current of damp air swirled

about them, stirring hair over damp brows. The breeze had a strange, musky scent, redolent of a room long unused, in which some unnameable thing had been left to rot. Kern stumbled over a piece of furniture and gave a low exclamation that, uttered by anyone else, might have been taken for a curse. Then Trandon came through the doors, a torch in his hand, followed by the rest of the party.

They were in a large room, though one clearly abandoned for some time. Its walls were hung with rich tapestries, but they had been left to the tender mercies of rats and worms. The furniture was sturdy-looking and comfortable, but when Noph, still feeling weak, leaned against a chair, it collapsed with a crash.

The room seemed to have been fitted out as a bedroom for someone of high estate, but clearly no one had slept there in a long time. Over everything was a cloying miasma of damp and decay.

On one wall, near the antique bed, was a portrait of a man in the flowing robes of a Doegan high official. Dark hair, tinged with streaks of white, was swept back over a high forehead. Deep, dark eyes looked out from the canvas and seemed to follow the intruders about the room.

Shar joined Noph before the portrait. "That's him again," she whispered.

"Who?"

"Aetheric. I saw a carving of his face in the corridor."

Noph shook his head. "No, Shar. I've

seen his face, too, but he's a monster, not a man."

Sharessa shook her head vigorously. "You don't understand, Noph. Aetheric wasn't always that way. The bloodforge made him into what he is. At least, that's the story." She shivered. "When I was a little girl, my father used to tell me stories about him. I think he liked to frighten me."

Noph stared at her. "Why would he want to do that?"

Sharessa shrugged, as if pushing away an unpleasant memory.

"I don't know. I didn't like my father very much. Anyway, he said that when Aetheric first began to rule, he was a man. But after a few years, he withdrew

into the palace and no one saw him anymore. Fiends attacked the kingdom, and Aetheric's armies fought them off. But still nobody saw him. Father said the emperor had gone mad from using the bloodforge. But when I got older, I heard other tales that he was deformed." Her eyes widened in horror. "I never dreamed he'd become what we saw behind that wall." She looked around uneasily. "I wonder if at one time this was his bedroom."

Noph sank onto the floor, which was covered by a finely woven rug whose designs swirled before his eyes, combining and recombining into a thousand different forms. He felt dizzy. "Noph?"

Shar laid a hand on his shoulder. He looked up gratefully, only to see her stiffen and look toward Entreri and Ingrar, busy against the far wall of the chamber.

Entreri turned back to the others. "There's a door here. Come on." Kern came to his side. Noph struggled to his feet as Ingrar pressed against a hidden spot in the paneling. A door swung silently back, and they found themselves staring into the face of a young guard dressed in the livery of Aetheric III.

The guard's eyes widened at the sight of a motley crew of pirates and paladins, some in ragged clothes and one—Artemis—streaming blood from a dozen small cuts about his face and body. He

opened his mouth to shout, and then Shares sword was slanting up at his throat.

"Not one word, not one syllable," the pirate woman purred. She backed the guard cautiously into the room, followed by the others. Trandon, the last to enter, shut the door behind them, and they heard a soft click, as of a hidden latch falling smoothly into place.

"What is this place, boy?" demanded Kern of the guard.

"A—An anteroom of the ch-chamber of Aetheric, Lord of E-Eldrinpar, ruler of Doegan, E-Emperor of the Five Kingdoms," recited the boy in a singsong voice. His teeth were chattering in fear. He stared at them and wet his lips.

"I was standing at my p-post, when there was a huge c-crash and shouting. The other guards ran, but I—I stayed behind. I've been here for ages now. . . . My captain h-hasn't come back. I don't know what to d-do."

"Why are you guarding this room?" asked Trandon.

"I don't know. We—we've always guarded it." The boy shook his head vigorously. "Our orders come from high up. Maybe from the m-mage-king himself."

Noph smiled at the boy, who was, he guessed, probably Noph's own age.

"What's your name?"

"Althgar." The boy managed a feeble half-smile in return.

"Well, look, Althgar. We were in the dungeons interviewing a prisoner when the fiends attacked."

"An attack from outside?" The boy's eyes went wide. "B-But that's impossible. The city is warded. The mage-king himself set those wards in place."

"That doesn't matter," said Noph impatiently. Besides, the mage-king was busy elsewhere." He glanced at the others. "The point is, we were trapped and only got out in the nick of time. We need to get out of the palace." He lowered his voice impressively. "We're on a mission from the mage-king himself. He wants us to bring him the bloodforge."

Althgar stared at him, lips trembling. "Th-the bloodforge? But why?"

Noph lifted a finger to his lips and winked. "Can't say. Top secret. Very hush-hush. But take it from me, the safety of the whole kingdom depends on our getting to the bloodforge as soon as possible. And I'm sure His Majesty would be very generous with rewards for those who help us." He paused for a moment to see the effect his words were having. The boy was thinking hard, something he was evidently unused to. "So. Do you know where it is?"

"Well, it's a secret, you know." Althgar suddenly grinned conspiratorially at Noph. "But I bet I've figured it out. See, I've watched where the priests go,

and I've listened to the stories that get told around the palace. The others don't pay any attention, but I do."

"So where is it?" demanded Entreri impatiently.

Althgar looked at him doubtfully. "It's all right," said Noph soothingly. "You can tell us."

"Okay. It's—" Suddenly he clutched his head with both hands and bent almost double.

"What's wrong with him? Is he sick?" asked Entreri coldly.

The guard moaned softly. "He's always there now. I can feel him behind my eyes. He wants to look. He wants to see. He wants to see everything." His voice rose to a shriek of despair. "No! No! Get

out of my head!" He shook violently and collapsed, groaning, to the floor.

Noph stared at the writhing figure in horror. "What's wrong with him?" he asked Trandon.

The fighter made no reply but bent closer to the guard. Suddenly he started and drew back with an oath. "By Holy Tempus! Look at his eyes!"

The boy's eyes, blue when they'd first seen them, had rolled up into his head. Now they came down again and slowly focused on the faces before him.

They were golden, with deep, dark pupils and no white showing round them at all. Noph stared into their depths, his breath coming in fast, thick pants.

The eyes of the mage-king.

The mad eyes of Aetheric III.

In a swift motion, Entreri drew a dagger from his belt and slashed it across the guard's throat. A spray of blood splashed his clothing in red, and the boy's eyes went blank and fluttered closed. Noph could have sworn that just before they did so, he saw the pupils turn a deep blue again and that Althgar looked at him with a questioning stare. Noph turned away from the group and was violently ill.

Entreri calmly wiped his dagger on the boy's sleeve. "The mage-king must be psychically linked to his guards, or at least to some of them. Probably makes it easier to keep track of what's going on in the palace. And now he knows for

certain that we're here, and he knows what we're after. We'll have to hurry."

"You bastard!" Noph stared at the little assassin. "You cold-blooded bastard!"

Trandon put an arm on the youth's shoulder. "Come on, Noph. It's—"

Noph shook him off furiously. "Don't do that! I'm the only one of you who cares!"

He glared at Entreri and raised his fists.

"Come on, you son of a—"

Entreri cuffed him across the mouth, knocking the youth to his knees. He looked calmly at Noph and spoke to him with no appearance of anger.

"We have no time for this. Behave yourself." He turned away.

Noph rose. His stomach ached and his breath smelled sour. He badly wanted a

drink of water. His face ached where Entreri had hit him, and he felt a trickle of blood down his chin. Trandon and Kern stared pointedly away from him.

Noph looked at the stiffening body of the guard, then at Sharessa, hoping for comfort and sympathy. She, too, was gazing at the body, but Noph saw, to his surprise and dismay, that she showed no emotion. She turned away and slapped Ingar's shoulder in a comradely gesture. Noph found Kern at his side. The paladin looked at him and then, catching Noph's eye, looked awkwardly away again.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Noph nodded. "I ... I guess so. It's just that when we killed before, it was us

against the fiends. The only humans I've seen die were Anvil and ... Harloon."

Kern nodded slowly. "I know. It's never easy to see men die, even those whom you don't know."

"He was so cold about it." Noph stared at Entreri. The little man was now exploring the far end of the room with Ingrar and Sharessa. "He didn't pause for a minute. He just..." He shut his eyes, as if trying to squeeze out the memory. Then he opened them wide. "And Shar. She could have killed Artemis back there when we were fighting that shadow-thing."

Trandon, coming up behind Kern, snorted and lowered his voice. "Not a bad job if she had. That'd be one less

problem in our way."

Noph turned on him hotly. "Don't say that! Haven't you seen enough death?" His eyes filled with tears. "I thought being an adventurer was supposed to be glorious and exciting, not dirty . . . and ..." His voice faded as he looked at the body of the guard.

Kern shrugged his broad shoulders. "Noph, adventuring is about duty—about doing your duty and keeping an eye on what needs to be done. It's about doing what's best in the eyes of your god." He looked contemptuously at Entreri and the pirates. "For a pack like that, the only thing that counts is profit. And if that means betraying your friends and companions, so be it. Master Entreri

would kill anyone or anything if he were paid for it."

He turned away from Noph and said over his shoulder in a voice that carried throughout the room, "And don't lose any sleep over trying to keep in the good graces of Master Entreri. When you were wounded, he was ready enough to slit your throat and leave your carcass to the fiends."

Noph started and stared at Artemis, who looked at him stolidly and said nothing. Shar moved toward the young man. "Noph—"

"No, Shar." Noph turned away from the beautiful mercenary. "I'm sorry. I guess I just don't have what it takes to be a real pirate. You see, I care about other

people."

He walked away from her. Shar stood motionless, her dark hair framing a face drained of blood.

Another low rumble came from beyond the room, and the floor shook. In the distance came the sound of faint screams and a shrill, ululating shriek. Trandon stepped to another door set in the chamber's west wall and listened intently.

"Fiends! Coming this way!" He drew his sword. Kern and Shar ranged themselves alongside him. Noph pulled a dagger from its sheath and stood behind them, feeling lost and very alone.

"Any suggestions?" Kern barked at Artemis over his shoulder.

Entreri, busy with Ingrar probing the eastern wall of the room, half turned. "You could go shout the name of Tyr at them. Or perhaps read them one of his holy books. It might bore them to death." Kern's face turned red, and his mouth opened to make a powerful reply when Ingrar said quietly, "Here." He stood next to a tapestry on the north wall, his blind face laid against it.

"What?" Entreri joined him, moving swiftly and as silently as a cat.

"It's this way. The bloodforge." Ingrar gestured to the tapestry.

Kern quickly stepped to the wall and pulled back a corner of the hanging.

"How do you know? I can't see a thing." Ingrar shook his head. "I—I'm not sure. I

just ... know! " ?? pressed his fingers against the wall, tapping and listening.

"Are you—" Kern started to ask.

Ingrar gestured imperiously. "Quiet!" Such was the force of his confidence that the paladin lapsed into silence.

There was a sudden snap, a click, and a grinding sound, and the outlines of a hidden door were revealed. Kern pushed it open and cautiously stepped through.

"There's been a partial cave-in," he called back to the others. "We'll have to go carefully."

The rest of the party left their posts near the far door and crowded after Kern. Noph lingered, looking back at the body of Althgar.

"Are you just going to leave him for the

fiends?" he asked Artemis bitterly. The little man stared at him a moment, as if surprised at his depth of feeling. "Yes. If I could give him a decent burial, I would. But sentiment and survival have nothing to do with each other. Now go on." He thrust Noph through the hidden door, then stepped through himself, pulling the panel shut behind him.

Chapter 3

Forged in Fire

The passage was sufficiently large that under ordinary circumstances no one would have felt trapped. However, as Kern had warned them, large blocks of stone had fallen from the ceiling, making their way cramped and difficult. Noph

had to assist Entreri in several places, since the little man's arm was still injured from the attack of the shadeling.

The way ran straight for perhaps twenty yards, then bent left and began to descend in a series of sweeping curves. The humid air grew stifling.

Noph could see the glow of Kern's torch flickering on the moldy walls as he descended endlessly down a flight of circular stone steps. Here the effects of Aetheric's rage were much less, but the explorers were disturbed to see several large cracks in the walls, whose ragged edges showed them to be of very recent origins.

"There's a room of some kind ahead," called Kern in a muted voice. The

echoes reverberated tantalizingly up the stairway.

The companions reached the bottom of the stairs and stood looking at a black, empty space before them.

No, not quite black, for somewhere ahead of him, Noph thought he could see a faint pulsing glow. The ceiling stretched to an unknowable height and was supported by a forest of stone pillars, intricately carved, that marched into the blackness in ordered rows. The path between them was an elaborate tiled mosaic, scuffed with the tread of many feet.

"Listen," whispered Ingrar. Somewhere out in the darkness, water lapped against stone.

They went forward toward the glow in the dark. Kern led the way now, with Entreri at the rear. Noph thought he detected a faint keening sound above the shuffle of their footsteps and the wash of the waves, which sounded louder now. He also noticed that Ingrar, walking next to Kern, apparently no longer needed the paladin's touch to guide him through the dark.

As if to confirm Noph's thoughts, Shar whispered in his ear. "Ingrar hears the bloodforge." Her voice quavered unexpectedly, and Noph realized with a shock that she was afraid.

Ingrar came to a sudden halt. They were still too far from the glow to see clearly what was causing it. The water and the

sound Noph had detected earlier were the only noises in the darkness.

"Can you feel it?" whispered the blind pirate.

Although Noph could see very little, there was an odd tangible quality to the air, almost as if it had grown thicker and was distorting what little vision he had. His skin felt dry to the touch, although sweat dribbled down his brow.

"Hang on!"

Kern's voice spoke behind Noph, the echoes resounding off hidden walls. The paladin was turning from side to side, peering into the darkness.

"Where's Entreri?"

The others gathered in a circle, cautiously exploring by the light of the

torches. The little man was nowhere to be seen.

"Curse him in the name of Tyr!" Kern's sword was out and at guard as he stared into the concealing blackness that surrounded them. "Could he have gone back?"

Shar shook her head. "Never. If you think he'd retreat this close to the bloodforge, you don't know him."

Kern stood uneasily for a moment, shifting from one foot to the other while the others waited.

"Well," he said finally, "we'll go on. If something got him, we can't help him, and if he left on his own, I don't want him." He took up a position beside Ingrar and pointed with his sword.

"Let's go."

Ingrar stretched out his hands before him and gestured, almost as if pushing the heavy atmosphere aside, then started forward. Noph could hear Kern, beside the young man, softly chanting a prayer to Tyr beneath his breath.

The rows of pillars suddenly parted and stretched in a great semicircle round a high stone altar. Where the pillars ended, light revealed the wavelets of an underground lake that stretched up to the very foot of the altar. The torches that Kern and Entreri carried flared brightly, then flickered and went out. But they needed no light to see clearly what lay before them.

It lay atop a carved stone pillar before

the altar, pulsing with its own internal glow that spread dancing shadows about the pillars and across the water. From it came the high-pitched humming that Noph had detected earlier.

In form, it was a round stone, no more than a foot in diameter. The colors that came from within it mirrored the entire spectrum, a luminous display that shone brightly but without warmth.

Round the altar were carved bas-reliefs. Noph recognized with a shock the same squidlike figure he'd seen in the fountain where he first met the mercenaries, a figure he now knew to be the mage-king. As the party stared in silence at the bloodforge, a slender shadow slipped from behind the altar. In the unnatural

light cast by the forge, they could see the cold, composed countenance of the master assassin, their erstwhile leader. Entreri's thin face was lit by the glowing bloodforge, its shifting colors casting sharp shadows along the contours of his visage. His eyes matched the glow of the stone as he moved toward it, hand delicately outstretched.

"No you don't." Trandon stepped cautiously to the stone pillar supporting the bloodforge. At the same time, Entreri carefully circled behind the artifact. Trandon stared in fascination at the changing hues and patterns on the surface of the stone.

"How does it work?" he muttered.

"Never mind that." Kern had taken his

warhammer from his belt and raised it over his head. "In the name of the true god, I destroy this engine of evil—"

"Kern, no!" Trandon stepped between the paladin and the bloodforge. "We don't know what this thing is. We don't know how to destroy it, or if we should destroy it."

A dry chuckle turned both men about. Entreri stood unmoving, an angry sneer on his lips. "Your concern is unimportant," he snapped. He moved suddenly, and there was a silver flash as a dagger sped from his hand at Kern.

Trandon's staff came up to block it. The dagger struck the wood and stuck there, quivering. "Stop, you idiot! This thing isn't a toy. We must find out how it

works!"

Entreri laughed aloud and drew his sword. The stone turned a deep red, and the little assassin's lips seemed to drip blood as he spoke. "It creates armies. Out of thin air." He gestured to the carvings on the altar. "If you're looking for an instruction manual, old man, you've got one right behind you. But I found it first, while you were all groping about in the dark back there. Now you won't last long enough to use it."

Trandon matched Entreri's maneuvering, his eyes flickering in the direction of the carvings that ringed the altar. He paused suddenly, his gaze narrowing. "So that's it. That's what shows you how to use it." Entreri lifted his sword, the blade

gleaming scarlet. He reached up and suddenly grasped the naked blade with his free hand, jerking the sword across it in a hard, sharp motion. He extended his hand, fist clenched tightly, over the stone.

"It's called the bloodforge. It needs blood. It feeds on blood."

There was a hiss as the assassin's blood, squeezed from his slashed hand, dropped onto the stone's surface. To Noph's eyes, aching from the glow, the blood seemed to spread across the entire surface of the forge, shimmering, separating, and recombining in a series of ever more complex patterns. The humming that filled the cavern increased in volume, and from the forge stepped a

man.

Yet only half a man. His limbs were twisted and hideously distorted, his neck bent as if broken. One leg was shorter than the other, one arm a tiny withered appendage, while the other ended in a massive knotted fist.

The creature moaned in pain and lunged at Trandon, lifting its good arm against the paladin. Trandon's staff countered the blow, but he was driven back, and the forged creature followed after him, hacking furiously at his opponent with fist and feet.

Kern's warhammer rose again, only to be turned aside, this time by Sharessa's blade. "No, paladin. A fair fight. Let them continue." She grinned impishly at

him. "Unless you think you can go through me—in a fight or in a bed. You're welcome to try either."

Noph had drawn a dagger at the first sign of trouble, but now he stood silently looking at the developing conflict, unable to choose a side. Ingrar stood near the bloodforge, his arms dangling. His voice rose in an urgent shout. "Stop this! Stop it at once! There's danger coming! Terrible danger!"

The combatants ignored him. Trandon and the golem were hard at one another; the fighter tried to maneuver his opponent back toward the water, evidently hoping to push him in. Kern and Sharessa were still sparring with one another, only half-seriously but

prepared to escalate the fight if need be.

"In Tyr's name!" shouted Kern.

"In Tyr's name," came a mocking echo from the blackness, but not in Kern's voice. There was the sound of running feet along the pillared way they'd come. Kern and Sharessa lowered their weapons and turned to face the noise. Trandon, with a vicious thrust of his iron-shod staff, laid low the forge golem and kicked its body into the underground lake. He joined Noph, who slowly backed up to put himself next to Sharessa.

The glow of the forge showed a group of hooded figures, perhaps a dozen of them. They held swords in their hands, but their faces were in shadow. The

foremost one, evidently the leader, stepped forward and addressed the company.

"In the name of the temple of Tyr, I claim the bloodforge. Stand aside."

"Now, wait just a minute..." began Sharessa.

At her side, Kern suddenly lifted his warhammer. "There is no temple of Holy Tyr in this land," he said sternly. "You must be false worshipers to claim his name."

The hooded figure hesitated, then spoke. "We are the true temple of Tyr. The bloodforge is ours by right, with the fall of the despicable Aetheric, who suppressed our temple. We claim it, and we shall take it by force if necessary."

Kern's voice grew in power. "You are false worshipers," he repeated. "You are the Fallen Temple, whose foundations I have sworn to destroy. Begone, or suffer the consequences."

The hooded figures circled slowly around the party, who stood with their backs to the bloodforge, save Artemis, who stared intently at the carvings on the altar. The leader of the cultists raised his blade, tinted red in the glow from the forge. "Let all perish who—"

Artemis stepped forward. His outstretched hand, stained with blood, came down squarely on top of the forge. The keening of the bloodforge rose in pitch until it was almost deafening. Its light waxed brilliant, blinding,

surrounding the figure of the assassin in a halo. In the sudden blaze of light, Noph could see beneath the cowls of the cultists. He could see their tattooed faces, their slavering mouths, their bloodshot eyes, desperate for a new sacrifice to their false god.

A bolt of pure light surged from the stone, wrapping around Artemis's arm. His mouth opened as if to command the energy, then turned into a wordless scream of agony. The flesh of his arm seemed to melt and dissolve. He pulled back from the forge and stared at white bones that still, horrifyingly, flexed and scraped in a parody of human action. Entreri stared at the arm for a moment, as if his brain refused the evidence of

his eyes. Then his body went limp, and he collapsed by the forge in a heap.

From within the forge came a deep-throated roar. A man emerged—or seemingly a man, though larger than any man could possibly be.

Noph started back from the figure in horror. Like Artemis's first creation, the forge-made man was only half finished. Veins and blood vessels twisted together with muscle uncloaked by flesh. Bones appeared in some places but were hidden in others. The figure screamed, a high-pitched yell of pain and horror, then lunged forward at one of the hooded figures and bore it to the floor. His massive hands, flesh and muscle shredding from them, locked around the

false worshiper's throat.

The forge's unholy light continued to blaze and flare. More creatures emerged, horrid mockeries of men and animals, their bodies twisted and crushed. Some could barely move, but crawled forward on knees or stumps of legs not fully grown. One, a mere head and torso, wriggled helplessly backward and fell into the lake with a splash. Another, a skeleton from the waist up but with the lower limbs of a man, seized a worshiper and bit cleanly through his neck before collapsing in a shapeless heap of bones. The cultists hacked and slashed at the deformed warriors, shouting encouragement to each other. The companions shrank back against the

altar in horror at the force Entreri had unwittingly released. Shar knelt over the assassin's body and wrapped his maimed arm in a scarf. She put her mouth against Kern's ear and shouted, "Come on! We've got to get out of here!" "Where?" The paladin looked about, desperately seeking a means of exit. The forge was no longer spewing forth its mutated creatures, and most of those it had created were either cut to pieces or had lurched off into the darkness, wailing in inhuman voices. A number of the cultists were still on their feet and bearing down upon the company.

"Now! Cut a way past them to the stairs." Shar led the assault with a whoop, followed closely by Kern and

Trandon. Noph bent and lifted the unconscious figure of Entreri, surprised at how light the body of the assassin was. Ingrar followed him, one hand on his shoulder, and together they made their way slowly back whence they had approached the forge, shielded by the sword of Shar, the warhammer of Kern, and Trandon's whirling staff.

It was clear that escape was hopeless. Burdened with Entreri's body, the party moved too slowly, and the devotees of the Fallen Temple were too many.

"I can't . . . keep this . . . up," panted Shar to Kern.

The paladin continued to wield his hammer, but his arm was growing weary. The bloodstained weapon rose

and fell more slowly.

Trandon's hair had escaped from its leather thong and fell freely about his shoulders. The fighter suddenly stepped in front of the others, facing the entire onslaught of the cultists himself. "Get back!" he yelled.

As the others staggered between the columns of pillars, Trandon raised his hands and whispered a word. A great gout of flame spouted forth, catching the leading Fallen Temple worshipers in its blast. Their screams were lost in the roar of the fire as it spread to either side and rose, forming a wall of flame. Trandon turned to the rest of the company.

"Now! Run!" he cried. Recovering from

their astonishment, the others turned to flee.

As he ran, Noph looked back. From beyond the flames he could see a brilliant glow where the forge lay. Bolts of magical energy shot from it toward the fire. The wall bulged ominously.

"Look out!" shouted the youth. He tried to run faster, but it was too late. With a terrific explosion, Trandon's wall of fire erupted. Noph saw dimly before him the pillars toppling against one another, like so many ninepins. Stones tumbled from the ceiling; he saw one strike Sharessa, knocking the beautiful pirate to the pavement. In a daze, he realized there was no longer solid ground beneath his feet. He and Entreri were falling. There

was a dull roaring in his ears. And then silence.

Chapter 4

Where Duty Lies

Thunder rolled distantly, and Noph shaded his eyes against the lightning flashing across a stormy sky. A dark rain lashed his cheeks, and he felt warm blood running down his face. Some of it trickled into his mouth, and he tasted its salty tang.

"Noph!"

Harloon was calling him, struggling in the grasp of a club-swinging ettin.

"I'm coming, Harloon!"

The youth bent to push the tall bushes and grass of the lonely moor away from

his legs.

They wouldn't move.

"Noph!"

Noph pushed again at the grassy covering over his legs. He opened his eyes, not to the wind and rain of his dream-inspired moor, but to another darkness, one filled with pain. Someone was whispering urgently in his ear.

"Noph, are you all right?"

"Yes ... no ... I... I can't move my legs."

"Damn! Wait a minute."

Noph heard the scrape of a tinderbox, and a faint, flickering light illuminated his surroundings. He was lying on top of a pile of rubble. Blackness stretched around him as far as he could see. Before him knelt Shar, an ugly gash

across her forehead. She had torn a strip of cloth from her shirt and, winding it around a piece of wood, was busy fashioning a makeshift torch.

Noph looked down at his legs. They were pinned beneath a large block of stone, but oddly enough, he felt no pain, only a curious sense of dissociation, as if everything were happening to someone else and he was an impartial observer. He lifted a hand to push back hair from his face and felt dried blood crusted on his scalp.

Next to him, he could see a shapeless pile, as if someone had carelessly thrown down a bundle of washing. The bundle stirred and moaned, and he saw it was Entreri. His skeletal arm had come

partially out of its wrappings, and the assassin stared at it, moaning and rocking back and forth.

The sight of Entreri, usually so cool and detached from those around him, in such a state jarred Noph back to full consciousness. He reached down and tried to push the stone from his legs, but it was too much for him. Shar stuck her torch in a crevice and came to his aid, but after a moment, she, too, admitted defeat.

"Wait here," she said in a low voice. "I'm going to see if I can find the others." She took the torch and climbed away over the rubble, leaving Noph and Entreri in the dark. They saw her light bobbing in the distance, and then it

disappeared. For an endless space, Noph lay still, listening to water dripping somewhere and to soft moans of pain and horror from Entreri. Then, just as hope was at its lowest ebb, Shar's light reappeared. In a moment, the female pirate was at his side, accompanied by Kern and Trandon.

"Where's Ingrar?" asked Noph.

Shar shook her head. "I don't know. We couldn't find him."

Trandon and Kern pulled at the stone block pinning Noph's legs; with a grinding sound, it moved and rolled away. But though the obstacle was gone, Noph found he still could not stand or even shift positions. Kern knelt by him, examining his limbs.

"Your legs are broken, Noph. I'm going to heal you." He placed a hand on the injured legs, murmuring a prayer. Noph felt a power run through him and sensed strength returning. He flexed his legs and stood cautiously, with Trandon's help.

"What about him?" He turned to the assassin, still lying semiconscious on the ground.

Trandon looked thoughtfully at the little man's body. "Are you sure you want to heal him?" he asked Kern.

The paladin sighed and nodded. "We must succor the fallen, even if they're enemies."

Trandon shrugged and bent over the dark figure. His fingers spread out on Entreri's forehead, stroking it while he

muttered words of arcane power. The little man stirred and sat up suddenly. His dark eyes sparkled in the torchlight. He looked at his arm, and with a shudder that ran through his entire body, rewrapped it, holding it close to his body.

"Can't you fix ... that?" Noph asked the fighter, gesturing to Entreri's arm.

Trandon shook his head. "There's something about it that defeats me. My magic won't take. It's part of him—what the forge has made of him." He looked at Entreri with something akin to pity and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm afraid that's going to be permanent."

Artemis shrugged off the gesture with an air of irritation. "Where's Ingrar?"

"We don't know," said Shar quietly. While Trandon had attended to Entreri, Kern had healed the cut on her brow, and she now looked as normal as it was possible to look in such surroundings. Entreri picked up the torch in his good hand. "Let's go look for him." He started off down the mound of stones and dirt. Kern stared after him, then looked at the other three, shrugged, and followed after. Shar and Noph followed. They seemed to be in a cavern, the dimensions of which were not entirely clear. Stones from above had crashed through the roof and blocked access to some areas. The company searched where they could, but without success. Then, out of the dark, Shar gave a

sudden exclamation. Before them, dim in the torchlight, was the figure of the blind mercenary.

He was standing, facing away from them, apparently uninjured but not responding to their calls. Only when they came up to him did he reply.

"Are you all right?" asked Trandon while Kern ran a hasty eye over the young man's form, searching for injuries.

"I'm fine." Ingrar seemed no more disconcerted by their present surroundings than he'd been by anything since they first entered the labyrinth of the bloodforge. He gestured forward. "This way out, I think. I can smell fresh air through there."

The others saw he was pointing to a dark

tunnel at one side of the cave.

"How does he do that?" Noph muttered uneasily to Sharessa. "This is getting very strange."

The pirate nodded thoughtfully. "I know. I don't understand. Ever since we started looking for the bloodforge, he's acted like he's possessed." She shrugged her shapely shoulders. "Well, not much choice now but to follow him."

With Entreri and his torch leading the way, they entered the dark opening followed a tunnel that slanted steadily upward. After walking for several hundred yards, they came to a broad flight of steps leading farther up.

"Wait a minute." Noph sank down to rest at the foot of the stairs. "I'm sorry, but

I've got to rest a minute. I don't think I'm over what happened back there."

The others sank down beside him. Entreri bit his lip and stared impatiently at them but finally sat on the lowest step, from time to time glancing up the staircase.

Kern turned to Trandon. "Now that we're all here," he said, his voice cold, "perhaps you can explain what you've been playing at."

"Yes," added Shar. "I thought we had only one magic-user in this group." She jerked a thumb at Kern. "So what were all those fireworks back at the altar?"

Trandon drummed his fingers for a moment in thought. His staff, which he'd evidently clutched when he fell, lay

beside him.

"All right," he sighed. "I was sent on this expedition by the Council of War Wizards of Cormyr."

"What?" exploded Kern. "What in the name of Tyr did the War Wizards want with this business? And furthermore," he growled before the fighter could answer, "since when have you been working for the War Wizards? You told us you worked with the Hammers of Tyr recruiting paladins."

Trandon rubbed his chin in evident embarrassment. "To answer your second question first, I don't work for the War Wizards; I'm a member of the Council of War Wizards and have been for a number of years. Given the

circumstances of Lady Eidola's kidnapping, that wasn't information I was anxious to spread about. I was at Piergeiron's wedding purely as a social courtesy, but as soon as his bride was stolen, I contacted other members of the council, and they agreed I should join the expedition to find her.

"The council became concerned when Khelben determined that the kidnappers came from the Utter East and that a bloodforge was somehow involved. We had heard of these artifacts and their tremendous power, though no one on the council had ever seen one. Vangerdahast didn't want someone wielding that kind of power about Faerun without anyone keeping track of it." He paused and

glared at Artemis, who looked back coolly without speaking.

"Just a minute," interrupted Sharessa.

"What are you both talking about? Where's Cormyr, and what's this council? And who's Peergarion?"

"Cormyr's a kingdom in Faerun," supplied Noph. "Piergeiron is the ruler of the city of Waterdeep, where I come from. My father's a lumber merchant there," he added, rather unnecessarily.

"Don't your rulers have bloodforges?" asked Sharessa.

"Of course not," replied Trandon. "As I understand it, they're peculiar to the Utter East—the Five Kingdoms, if you prefer that term. But if a ruler in Faerun were to acquire one, or to form an

alliance with a realm that possessed one
..."

"... the donkey dung would be in the fire," finished Noph.

"Exactly. No one could stop a power that could create armies out of thin air."

Shar shook her head impatiently. "What about the cost? The cost of using the bloodforge, I mean. You may have heard how these things affect the rulers who use them. I've heard stories about the mage-kings of Doegan since I was a baby, but I never believed them until now."

Trandon shrugged. "Take my word for it, there are plenty of rulers, or would-be rulers, in Faerun who'd gladly pay such a price."

"Okay, but who are the War Wizards?"

Kern made a noise between a grunt and a hiccup. "The War Wizards are a lot of busybodies who think that because they're wizards, they have the right to poke their snouts into everything that passes under the sun."

"Well," observed Trandon pacifically, "let's just say we felt we had a legitimate interest in the outcome of this affair."

"We might be a lot better off if you'd told us you were a wizard," Noph half shouted. "Couldn't you have used wizardry back in Undermountain? Maybe you could have saved Harloon..." His voice choked as he remembered his dead friend.

Trandon sighed and placed a hand on

Noph's shoulder. "Believe me, Kastonoph, I did everything I thought I could. Maybe I could have done more. Harloon and Abie's deaths are something I have to live with now. But I didn't want to tip my hand. And you must agree that when I did use my powers, it was at a time we really needed it."

"And the result," observed Entreri, speaking for the first time in the debate, "is that we're here." He stood and stepped a pace nearer the now-revealed wizard. "I don't like surprises. And I don't much like wizards," he said flatly. "Is there anything else that anybody's keeping secret?" His eyes swept the party. When no one spoke, his lips creased in what might have been taken

as a smile. "All right. The Fallen Temple has the bloodforge. But if we hurry, we may be able to get it back."

"Get it back? Are you insane?" Shar was on her feet, pointing to Artemis's injured arm. "Have you forgotten what that thing did to you?"

Entreri turned his back on her and went up the stairs. In a moment, the rest of the party followed.

The stairway rose in a steady line for perhaps a hundred feet, then leveled off in a broad landing. Three doors opened onto it, and Ingar, without the slightest hesitation, entered the right-hand one. Entreri, apparently equally confident, followed him, with the rest of the

adventurers trailing behind him.

This tunnel rose in a steady spiral, the slope gentle but wearing on pirate and paladin alike, suffering as they still were from the stiffness and aches from their fall. Nonetheless, their spirits rose as they sensed they were coming closer to the surface.

"We must be almost there," gasped Shar. As she spoke, a flicker of red light flared against the side of the tunnel before them, and a wind blew down the passage, carrying with it the smell of something burning.

A moment later, the companions found themselves standing in a doorway whose great wooden doors had been wrenched asunder. Trandon and Kern stepped

forward and pushed the wreckage aside, and the group stepped through. They were in the interior of a temple; that much was clear from the great altar with its now-familiar image of the mage-king. The doors on the opposite side of the building stood open, and Noph, longing for a glimpse of the sky, ran to them. His strangled cry brought the others behind him. In awe, they stared out upon the scene.

Eldrinpar was burning. From the temple doors, standing atop a vast pyramid, they gazed out at the doomed city. Flames lit the dawn and flickered against the horizon. Spirals of smoke wafted upward, tendrils of black that seemed to reach into the greater darkness of the

early morning sky. From time to time, a new building, ignited by the great heat of the fires, burst spontaneously into flame. The companions could hear a confused din of cries, screams, and shouts borne on the hot breeze.

From their vantage point above the city, they could see crowds of citizens fleeing through the streets. Pursuing them were bands of fiends, who ensnared them with paw and claw, sometimes slaying, sometimes capturing the unfortunate Doeganners and bearing them off to an unthinkable destination.

Not a word was spoken among the companions for some time as they stared, horrified, at this orgy of death and destruction. Then Sharessa pulled

her eyes from the scene and faced the others.

"Come on! With a lot of luck and some fighting and wizardry, we can probably get to the harbor. Once we're out to sea, I doubt any of those things will follow us. They're too busy making meals out of these people."

Entreri turned toward her. The rising sun showed the dark circles beneath his eyes. Raising his injured arm, he pulled the cloth from it. The others shuddered at the sight of the bones that clicked and moved without sinew or muscle.

"I don't plan to go anywhere," the assassin observed, "until I have that forge." His voice rose in power and ambition. "Imagine what would be mine

if I could learn to control the power that did this to me!"

Shar stared at him. "You're mad! Even if you could control that thing, there's no way you'd get within a mile of it. Gods, we don't even know where it is now." She turned away from him to the others. "If he wants to stay and get killed, so be it. Come on!"

Kern took his warhammer from his belt. "I agree that we must go. But Master Entreri is right in one respect. As long as that forge remains in the hands of the Fallen Temple, no one on all Toril is safe. I cannot allow this." He looked at Entreri. "I'll go with you, but I won't allow you, of all people, to claim the bloodforge."

Sharessa bit her lip in frustration, and Noph saw the red blood spread across the rosy promise of her mouth. "Ingrar?" The young pirate, his face lit by the fires of Eldrinpar, shook his head. "I can't, Shar. My destiny is bound up with the bloodforge." His voice grew in strength as he spoke. "I am linked to the forge and to the destiny of the Five Kingdoms. It is beyond your power to change my course. It is my destiny."

"Your destiny!" spat Shar angrily. "Your death, you mean! Haven't you seen enough death already? Remember Kurthe? And Brindra? And Anvil? Gods, how many more deaths is it going to take?" She whirled furiously on Entreri. "You brought nothing but death

to us. We were the best of Kissing Shark's crew, and now look at us. Three dead, and Rings and Belgin gone off on some expedition to the ends of the earth, all because you say so, you tell us what to do. But you don't say when we die! Do you hear me? You don't say when we die!" She slammed her blade at the temple wall. The steel struck a shower of sparks from the stone, and the sword sprang back, a notch in its gleaming edge.

"Shar?" Noph's voice was shaking with weariness and emotion. "Shar, listen to me." He looked around at the others: Entreri scanning the chaotic scene below them; Kern, the flames shining on his golden armor; Trandon, his silver hair

blowing free in the wind; and Ingrar, a strange radiance shining from his face. "Shar, we've been through too much to run away. All those deaths—they're not the only ones. I've seen our friends Able and Harloon die in Undermountain before we even got here. There's been too much death." He gestured toward the city. "There's more down there. But it all has to mean something. It can't just have been for nothing. And the only way I can see that any of this is going to mean anything is for us to try to do what we set out to accomplish."

He flushed and turned away. Trandon looked at him with something very like affection. The others did not move.

Shar looked at Noph. "Is that what you

think?" she asked. Her voice, honey-sweet, dripped sarcasm, and in her eyes the youth saw only contempt.

Contempt for weakness, for sentiment that had no place in survival. Artemis had said that, Noph remembered. But it was the pirate code as well.

Shar turned away from him. Her long dark hair blew free in the wind, fanning into a great cloud that seemed to cast a shadow over the dreary sun of this dreary land.

On one side of the door was a bas-relief of the mage-king's face, gazing sadly out at the capital of his empire. Shar walked over to it and stared at the stone eyes for a long moment. Then, drawing her sword, she reversed it and, pommel

first, struck at the image as hard as she could. The visage shattered, the pieces clattering around her feet. The female pirate looked at her companions. "All right. I'm ready now."

Entreri nodded almost imperceptibly and turned to Ingar. "Can you feel anything? Anything about where the Fallen Temple might be holding the forge?"

Ingar hesitated for a moment, then pointed out over the roofs below. "There." He gestured toward another, smaller pyramid, perhaps a mile or two away.

Shar, standing beside him, looked coolly at the scene below.

"The fiends are taking their captives that way." She gestured toward the city's

walls that held back the encroaching jungle. "If we're careful, we ought to have a clear path to the harbor."

"And do we leave the population to the tender mercies of those monsters?" Kern asked angrily. "I am a soldier of Tyr. I fight evil wherever I find it."

"Yes, all right," interrupted Shar. After we get the forge, we'll put you in a room with all the fiends in the Abyss and you can slaughter them all in the name of ???, or Tempus, or whoever you damn well please. For right now, let's concentrate on getting the forge."

She stared coldly into the paladin's blue eyes. He looked stoically back into her brown orbs. Trandon cleared his throat.

"She's right, Kern," the fighter observed.

"One thing at a time. We can't save the population without a weapon that's a lot more powerful than anything we've got. The bloodforge is the key to retaking the city."

Kern nodded reluctantly, persuaded in spite of himself. "Very well. Let's go."

The party began to descend the steps cautiously. The street below them had begun to empty as the fiends herded their captors toward the city's center. The companions picked their way carefully over many of the stone steps that had been broken or cracked. The heat from the fires grew greater as they descended the slope.

At the foot of the pyramid, they halted. Kern pointed down a narrow street of

adobe houses crowded together, some sagging uneasily. "That's the most direct route."

Entreri nodded wordlessly, and the company moved on. Within a few of the darkened doorways of the street, they could hear wailing and moaning. Noph paused before one such door, but Shar pushed him on. "We don't have time, Noph." Her face seemed to mirror that of Entreri in its cold decisiveness.

Noph realized the wisdom of her words. Even now he thought he could hear soft footsteps behind them. He turned and glanced back at the winding way they had come. Nothing. No one. He took a few steps, then turned again. There! Surely there had been a dark shadow

flitting along one side of the street. Noph grabbed Trandon's arm.

"Look! Do you see anyone? Anything?"

Trandon stopped and gazed back, shading his eyes. "No. You sure you're not imagining things?"

Noph shook his head. "I don't think so. Someone's following us."

Trandon called softly to Entreri, and the little man halted impatiently.

"Well?"

"Noph thinks we're being followed."

The assassin looked irritably at Noph, who stared back, unblinking. Entreri sighed. "Ingrar?"

The blind pirate listened. "Yes. There's someone back there. Several someones. They've got weapons, too."

Entreri turned abruptly and walked back the way they'd come, Kern at his side. From out of the shadows on either side of the street, dark figures emerged and blocked them. One of the shadows stepped forward. "Greetings to you, Master Entreri. Sir Paladin."

"Lord Garkim!" Kern's voice was relieved but not friendly. "What do you want with us?"

"A word." The chancellor of Aetheric III was soot-streaked and weary-looking. His once fine robes were singed and tattered. In one hand he bore a curving sword. His followers, members of the palace guard, looking equally bedraggled, carried similar weapons. "I know what you are seeking."

Entreri looked at him without expression. "How do you know?"

"I can hear your thoughts. My telepathic abilities are exceptional, but all this"—he gestured broadly around them—"has made it difficult to sense much. However, your desire for the bloodforge is so strong that I could feel it when you descended from the temple."

"What of it?" asked Kern. "We are seeking the bloodforge, it's true. We had it once, but—"

"I know. It was stolen from you by members of the Fallen Temple." A ghost of a smile wafted across Lord Garkim's face. "I suppose there is something appropriate about a theft by the Fallen Temple from a paladin of ?yr."

"What do you want?" repeated Kern. His hand was on his sword, his face stern. Trandon stood behind him, both hands resting on his staff, watching the scene closely. "I tell you frankly, my lord, I feel no great friendliness toward you. As far as I can tell, you have lied to us since we came into this land. You used us, you and your master. What can you offer us now?"

"An alliance, though perhaps a temporary one. The bloodforge in the hands of the Fallen Temple is an artifact that represents an extraordinary danger to the Five Kingdoms."

"It's also a grave danger to Faerun," said Trandon quietly.

Garkim shrugged. "Possibly. I cannot

concern myself with matters in your corner of the world. What is of importance to me is safeguarding my land and performing the bidding of my master. In this I have failed. But if we can retrieve the bloodforge from the Fallen Temple, we can turn back the fiendish invasion."

"You know the secret of the bloodforge?" Entreri's voice trembled slightly, and his hand reached up to stroke his skeletal arm, now concealed again by wrappings.

"I do."

Entreri stood silent for a moment in thought. The others waited, Sharessa shifting impatiently from foot to foot, casting worried glances at the shadows

in the street.

"I agree," observed Entreri finally. "But you will obey me in this affair."

Garkim looked at him, eyes gleaming. "You'll forgive me, Master Entreri, but I have some little experience with the false adherents of ???. Moreover, I know where they have taken the forge. It hardly seems to me that you have anything with which to bargain."

"Then why propose an alliance?" snapped the little assassin.

Kern cleared his throat. "Come. We're wasting time. Lord Garkim, lead us to the bloodforge. Our pact can last at least that far. As to what happens when we recover the forge from these blasphemers—" He shrugged. "Well

see."

"Oh, yes," said Garkim softly. "We shall see."

Chapter 5

The Glory of Tyr

"How can we get through the streets without being attacked by the fiends?"

Noph's question, directed to Garkim, echoed the unspoken sentiments of his companions. However, the chancellor appeared unfazed by it.

"I know a secret way. Come." He gestured to the paladins and pirates and walked quickly down one of the dark, crooked streets that led away from the base of the pyramid. The companions followed him, and the four palace guards

brought up the rear.

Near the temple, the houses were large, some with enclosed courtyards in which Noph could see fountains playing and gardens with bright blooming flowers. However, as Garkim led them on, the way became more twisted and foul, the smells more pronounced, the dwellings smaller. Everywhere they found signs of the assault of the fiends: bodies lying across doorways where they had fallen defending their homes, shattered walls and windows, doors scored with claw marks and acid burns.

Garkim entered one of the courtyards, cautiously peering about. In the center of the atrium was an iron grille set into the paving stones. The chancellor gestured

to two of the guards, who swiftly pried up the grille, revealing a gaping well beneath it. A few feet below the rim was a narrow ladder.

"The city drains," said Garkim in a low voice. "They reach into every part of Eldrinpar. The fiends may not yet have entered them."

"May not," began Kern, but stopped as the chancellor, gathering his robes about him, climbed down the ladder.

Entreri gave a swift glance at his companions, then followed. The others entered the well, gasping at the stench that rose from below. Noph, clinging to the slimy metal ladder, heard a clank above him as the last guard pulled the iron grille back in place.

Descending some fifteen feet, the party came to the bottom of the shaft and found themselves at the entrance to a brick-lined tunnel that snaked off into the darkness. Garkim hastily lit a torch and led the way, splashing through puddles and streams of water that gleamed in the torchlight. From time to time, the party passed other conjoining passages, but Garkim never hesitated in choosing which way to turn.

Noph caught up to Garkim and Entreri. "Lord Garkim, how do you know your way about here?"

Garkim's mouth was tight, but his eyes brimmed with tears. "My people sometimes use these tunnels."

"Your people?"

"The Mar. In Eldrinpar, it is the Ffolk who live near the temples and palaces, and the Mar who remain apart from power and faith. To escape the scrutiny of the Ffolk, the Mar long ago learned to use the drains. Like maggots, they burrow beneath the city, and the Ffolk are none the wiser." He sighed. "The gods have so decreed it, but it still seems hard to me."

"But you're a Mar."

"I was plucked from my home when I was a boy by the mage-king himself. It's true that I've risen to high station under his rule, but even so, there are—were—those in high councils who whispered against me when my back was turned because I was Mar." He shrugged and

quicken his pace. "None of this will matter, though, if the followers of the Fallen Temple install the bloodforge."

"Why do they want it?" asked Entreri. His voice echoed strangely against the tunnel walls. "What do they want to accomplish?"

"They wish to summon Ysdar, a being of great power who comes from beyond this plane of existence. Some say he is no more than a name, a shadow to frighten children. But I believe he is real and is plotting to conquer all the Five Kingdoms."

"And he can do that if he gets a bloodforge?" Noph asked.

"According to most accounts of him, Ysdar already has a bloodforge. But a

second would give him decisive power to command armies far greater than any that other kingdoms might bring against him. So we stand upon the sword's edge. The next few hours may decide whether my world stands or falls." Garkim fell silent and strode on.

At last the party entered a small room, into which a number of passages converged. To one side was another ladder leading upward. Garkim, the hem of his robes dripping with foul water, climbed up the ladder. The others followed and, in a few moments, emerged, blinking, into the light of day.

The sun was now high in the sky and blazed down upon the close quarters of the city. The air smelled of rot and

decay, of soot and ashes from the burning city. And over everything was the acrid tang of fresh blood.

They were in a deserted street lined with empty houses. To Noph, it looked no different than the area where they had entered the drains. Yet something felt different, and after a moment he realized what it was. The fiendish clamor had died away, and high in the morning sky, he could hear the cry of gulls and smell a stiff salt breeze.

They were near the sea.

The group formed a narrow line, and Garkim led them along the street, gesturing to them to stay in the shadows cast by the overhanging houses. They saw no living thing.

One of the guardsmen in the rear screamed.

From a dark doorway, tentacles reached forth, their edges as sharp as razors. One whipped around the man's neck and tightened abruptly. His head fell and went spinning down the dusty street, eyes staring and mouth still open in a silent cry of death and despair. His body was yanked back into the doorway; there was a horrid crunching sound.

"Run!" cried Garkim.

Noph raced forward, then stopped, hearing a cry from Shar. She was clutching the hand of another guard, who had fallen in the street. A tentacle held him by the ankle, trying to draw him back to the same shadowy door where

his companion had met death. The man was moaning, his face contorted in pain. Noph grasped the man's other hand and pulled. There was a dreadful moment of straining, and then suddenly resistance ceased, and Noph and Shar fell backward in the street. They saw the tentacle retreating, the guard's foot from the ankle down still clutched in its grasp. The guard looked down at his footless leg and promptly fainted.

"Come on!" Shar yelled to Noph. Between the two of them, they got the man up and half carried, half dragged him a hundred yards up the street. Trandon knelt by the guard, whose leg was spouting blood. He pressed his hands gently about the wound and

murmured a few words. The flesh around the stump knit together, and the bleeding stopped.

"That's the best I can do," Trandon told Shar. "You'll have to help him along."

"No!" snapped Entreri. "He can't fight, and he'll impede two others. He's useless to us now. Leave him."

Garkim drew himself up. "You will not leave one of my men behind, Master Entreri."

The assassin glared at him. "I give the orders."

"And I know the location of the bloodforge."

Entreri turned and with bad grace stalked along the way they were following. Garkim followed without

another word. Shar put her arm around the guard, who had now recovered consciousness, and helped him limp along, while Noph rejoined Trandon and Kern.

The smell of the sea grew stronger in Noph's nostrils. He realized they must be drawing near the dock area. All at once, the party reached the end of the narrow street they had been traversing and beheld before them the Great Sea and, glimmering in the sun, a temple.

Before them was a broad plaza, along which were drawn several fishing boats. From the dock, a narrow causeway led across the water, perhaps fifty yards, to a building, constructed of black basalt, that sat amid the waves like a brooding

spider.

Garkim gestured toward it. "The Temple of Umberlee."

Ingrar, standing beside him, nodded. "Yes. That's where they've taken the bloodforge."

The others crowded around them, standing in a shadow cast by one of the buildings that ringed the plaza. They could see various hooded figures moving along the docks and the causeway. Garkim gazed at them thoughtfully.

"Those are not the robes of the True Believers of Umberlee," he observed.

Kern snorted. "I didn't know the word 'true' could be mentioned in the same breath with the bitch goddess," he

remarked to Trandon.

"Silence!" said Garkim sternly. "Umberlee is a deity widely worshiped in Doegan, as well as in other parts of the Five Kingdoms. It is not for outsiders such as yourself to denigrate her."

Kern shrugged. "All right, fine. The bloodforge is in the Temple of Umberlee. Let's go get it."

He was two steps onto the plaza before Trandon's hand on his arm yanked him back. "Wait," urged the fighter. "This isn't a situation for a frontal assault." He looked at Garkim. "You said those people"—he motioned toward the hooded figures—"don't look like Umberlee's worshipers. To me, they look like disciples of the Fallen

Temple."

Garkim nodded grimly. "Precisely. The adherents of the Fallen Temple have evidently used the confusion to install themselves and the bloodforge in Umberlee's sanctuary."

Entreri had been carefully taking a visual survey of the plaza and dock area. Now he stepped back and tapped Trandon and Shar. "You two come with me. The rest of you wait here." Without another word, he was gone, stealing back along the way they'd come. Garkim looked after him, puzzled.

"What's he doing?" the chancellor asked Kern.

The paladin spread his hands in a gesture that indicated dissociation. "I've

no idea, and I don't want to know. Right now, let's get out of sight." He examined the open door of a nearby house carefully, and beckoned the others inside. Noph helped the footless guard whom Sharessa had been aiding. Once inside, the man sank to the ground and rested against the wall.

"That woman . . . who is she?" the guard asked Kern.

"Shar? She's a pirate."

"She's the most beautiful pirate I ever saw." The guard managed a grin.

"Something to make a man wish he'd chosen to follow the sea."

Noph settled himself beside the guard.

"Don't expect too much from her. If there's one thing I've learned in my life,

it's that you can't trust women. Love 'em and leave 'em, that's what I say."

The guard looked at Noph's hairless face and slender wrists. Along the youth's upper lip was a dark line of fuzzy down, where he'd been trying to grow a mustache. "Right. I'll remember that. Coming from a man of your experience." He sighed and stretched a hand down to scratch at his stump of a leg. "Damn thing itches."

The company was silent until Kern, who had been watching from the door, gave a low whistle. A moment later, Entreri, Shar, and Trandon entered, bearing a pile of shapeless rags.

"What are those?" asked Kern.

Shar held up a robe, identical to the ones

they'd seen on the members of the Fallen Temple. "Here's one just your size, paladin."

The big knight drew back as if the garment were riddled with disease. "I can't wear that."

"Why not?"

"It's dishonorable to go into battle in disguise. And especially to disguise myself as a member of that disgusting bunch of—"

"Fine. Then you don't go," Entreri said briskly. "The rest of you get these on quickly. There's some sort of ceremony about to start, and we may be able to take advantage of it."

Garkim's dusky face paled. "Ceremony?"

"Yes. We heard chanting and drums, and

there was a long line going to the temple."

Garkim hastily drew a robe over his head. "It must be the Rite of Investiture. We cannot allow this to happen!" He turned to the paladin. "Do you not see the terrible danger? Imagine those monsters of the Fallen Temple—the temple of your god Tyr—with the power of the bloodforge at their command! Do you think for a moment they would stop at the shores of the Five Kingdoms? This plague will spread across all realms. It will drive out all other gods. We must stop it!"

Kern stood, holding a robe loosely in one hand, indecision written upon his forehead. "It's . . . dishonorable to go

into battle disguised in this way."

"Oh, come on, Kern," said Noph sharply. "Think about what he said." He struggled into a robe that was somewhat too long for him. "What does honor mean, if by your actions you endanger everybody and everything worth fighting for? It's a question of weighing profit and loss. Whatever loss there is to your honor, the profit we gain by saving Faerun is greater."

Kern looked at him in astonishment and then burst out laughing. "By Tyr himself, Freeman Kastonoph, you're a true son of Waterdeep. Always counting coins in the back of your mind. Your father's a lumber merchant, isn't he?"

Noph flushed a deep red. "That's not the

point. I'm not like my father."

"Never mind, never mind." Still rumbling with suppressed laughter, the paladin slipped the robe over his head. The others were already attired, except for the wounded guardsman. Entreri turned to him. "Stay here, out of sight." He nodded to the others, and the party stepped into the street and crossed the plaza toward the temple.

Other hooded figures were still making their way to the ceremony. Considering what Garkim had told them of the conspiratorial nature of the Fallen Temple, Noph was astonished to see so many of them. There must be nearly a hundred worshipers, he thought. Crossing the causeway, over which

waves splashed, spraying the devotees with spume, the company, taking care to stay close to one another, entered the temple.

"Here," murmured Garkim softly, drawing them into a small alcove in which they were partially shielded from the sight of the crowd within. Ingrar, whom Noph had guided across the causeway, now turned away from the youth and began to examine the walls of the temple, stroking the stone gently with his fingers. The others looked cautiously around the corner and into the main room.

The interior was a domed circle. In the center was an altar surrounded by candles. As in the underground room, a

pedestal stood behind the altar. Several niches around the edges of the room had formerly held images of Umberlee, but these had been wrenched from their positions by the Fallen Temple priests and lay shattered on the floor. To one side were the bodies of two men who, from their clothing, Garkim recognized as a priest of Umberlee and his acolyte. They had been slashed and stabbed many times, their corpses kicked aside in blood-soaked clothes.

At present, the attention of everyone in the temple was focused on the altar. From an antechamber came a chanting and a whiff of incense. The crowd parted, and three robed priests bore into view the bloodforge. It was held by an

iron tripod and carried on a wooden frame. It glowed and flickered with power.

The canting worshipers placed it carefully on the altar. Now, from the opposite corner of the room, came a loud wailing scream. The crowd again drew back, this time to allow passage of three burly men, stripped to the waist, their faces concealed by hoods. Between them, they dragged a portly man, totally naked, his chins wobbling in fear. His stomach swayed obscenely from side to side. The chanting picked up rhythm, and the crowd began to sway in time to it.

"What are they doing?" whispered Noph to Shar, who stood next to him. She hushed him with a gesture.

The servants placed the man on the altar, face to the ceiling. Two held his arms, the other his legs, even as he struggled and screamed.

A figure stepped forward, red-robed, a silver circlet round his neck. From it dangled a medallion inscribed with designs that Noph could not clearly make out. The priest lifted his hands and face in appeal.

"? Mighty Ysdar, hear this day our prayer. Feel the power of our sacrifice. Join with us as we feast."

In a circle of motion, he whirled, drawing a long, curved, cruel knife from beneath his robes. He slashed in one quick motion, lengthwise down the body of the victim, who gave a ringing scream

of agony. The worshipers closest to the altar rushed forward, their bodies hiding the victim, whose screams grew fainter and finally died away.

In a few moments, the crowd at the altar had cleared. The victim's body was no more than a shredded mass of flesh and bone. Some in the crowd were still wiping their mouths.

Noph swayed on his feet. In his travels thus far, he'd never seen anything this horrible. Next to him, he sensed rather than heard Kern reaching beneath his robe for his sword.

"Wait!" Trandon put a hand out to stay the paladin.

Kern shook his head angrily. "I cannot watch this any longer, Trandon. It must

be stopped." He looked around at the rest of the party. "Are you ready?"

Artemis stepped back a pace. "Not yet. Not while there are ten times as many of them as there are of us."

"Coward!" Kern hissed at him. "I always knew you were a coward!"

Shar joined Entreri. "He's right, Kern. There's no point in just going out there and getting slaughtered."

Kern ignored her words. "Noph?"

Noph stood for a moment. Then, with a sigh, he stepped forward. "You're right. This can't go on. We have to do something. We have to fight for something right, even if we're going to get killed trying." He looked at Kern. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it's not just

profit and loss."

Kern clapped his shoulder. "Lord Garkim? What say you and your men?"

Garkim smiled tightly. "As I told you earlier, Sir Knight, I recognize the danger to my homeland. And I can see what will happen to all the kingdoms of the world if these people are not stopped. I do not choose to fight. I must fight."

From the back of the alcove, a quiet voice said, "Yes. We must fight." Ingrar came forward. His face was glowing, and, astonishingly, he was smiling, as if he had become privy to an enormous secret and was bursting to tell it.

"Ingrar! What is it?" cried Noph.

"Go now and fight! Don't ask more! You

must go now!" The young pirate's urgency infected even Artemis and Shar. Kern lifted his sword. "Ready?"

"No." Trandon again lifted a hand. "Kern, you, I, Sharessa, and the guards must create as much of a circle around us as possible. Lord Garkim, Entreri, and Noph, move with us, and when we come near the altar, seize the bloodforge."

"What then?" asked Noph.

Trandon looked at him, a corner of his mouth quirking cynically. "Then we try to get to the door. Ingrar, stay here, and when you sense the forge is near, start for the outside. I don't think you'll need anyone to guide you; you seem to feel the forge in some other way." He lifted his

hands. "First let's see if we can get their attention."

He spoke an arcane word, and from his fingertips a blazing ball of light leapt forward and streaked across the crowd, exploding against the far wall. Shrieks came from worshipers, who became sudden torches, their robes igniting in a fiery display of arcane power.

"Now!" yelled Kern. The company surged forward. Kern's hammer glowed in the light of the bloodforge as the heavy blunt weapon rose and fell, driving the devotees of the Fallen Temple before him. Trandon had time for a blast of lightning that reduced two worshipers to smoking cinders; then he caught up his staff to defend himself

against an onslaught of squealing Doeganners. Sharessa's sword flashed in and out, parrying and thrusting as she tried by the sheer skill of her swordplay to keep the howling mob at bay. By her side, one, then another of Lord Garkim's guards was overborne and dragged away.

Noph, his dagger out, defended himself as best he could against the clutching, bloodstained fingers of the crowd. They fought their way to the altar and surrounded it. Noph, Entreri, and Garkim grabbed the tripod holding the bloodforge and lifted—and stopped in frustration.

"It's too heavy," Noph yelled to Kern above the din. "We can't lift it." The

forge glowed malevolently, and Noph realized something with a shock. "It doesn't want us to lift it. It knows what it wants."

He looked around him. In Sharessa's face and in that of the remaining palace guards, he saw only despair. Kern was fighting like a madman, his face streaked with blood, his eyes shining with something very like happiness. Trandon's face reflected only cold, calculating concentration as he batted away flashing blades with his staff. Garkim and Entreri had drawn their swords and were helping to hold back the crowd so intent on tearing them apart. The Doeganners fought without skill, but their sheer numbers told in

their favor. The fight couldn't last long now.

From the side of the temple came a thunderclap. With a loud crack, a portion of the dome fell, crushing screaming worshipers beneath it. A light shone through from the sky, a more than natural light that bathed the interior of the hellish temple in ethereal radiance. Noph could see the bones in his hand shining red through the skin.

From the side of the temple, Ingrar advanced from the alcove. The light shone directly on him, almost lifted him, so that he seemed to glide rather than to walk. His blind eyes, deep and dark, were opened wide and seemed to be filled with an inner fire.

Around him, as he advanced through the ranks of the cultists, silence fell, and the struggling mass around the altar parted to let Him through. Noph seemed to hear from far off a kind of chanting in a language at once unknown and yet hauntingly familiar.

Ingrar stood beside the bloodforge, its surface now flaring with sparks and flashes of magical energy. He lifted his hands toward the gaping ceiling and to the light that fell upon him. The rays increased until they were blinding in intensity, yet even if the viewers shut their eyes, they could still see Ingrar standing in an attitude of total supplication.

The chanting rose in volume until it

filled the temple. Now Noph could see that Ingrar was no longer alone. Next to him—impossibly, within him—stood another figure, that of a tall warrior, a flowing beard touching his chest. In one hand he held a great warhammer; his other arm ended in a stump where the hand should have been. From his mouth and from Ingrar's lips came thunderous words that seemed to shake all the temple and the city beyond.

"I am come," cried Ingrar. "I am come to purge the land of those who blaspheme in my name. Let all ye who pretend to speak in the name of Tyr beware, for my wrath is righteous and my judgment is harsh."

Kern was on his knees, shielding his

eyes with one hand, the other stretched out in prayer. Ingrar—or was he now the embodiment of mighty Tyr himself?—looked at him, and it seemed to Noph that a smile touched the bearded lips of the man-god.

"Rise, Kern, paladin of Phlan. You have been a hammer in the cause of right. But you—his gaze swept over the worshipers of the Fallen Temple— you have dragged down my name and made it a curse in this land. For you, I have no mercy."

The figure and Ingrar lifted their hands together. They blazed forth fire that seemed to burn without heat. It swept across the temple; dimly, above its roar, Noph heard screams and saw the

adherents of the Fallen Temple claw at their bodies. Some pulled their robes off, and Noph saw that beneath their robes their flesh was melting away from their bones.

Those nearest the door struggled to get out of the building, but many were trampled by their companions. Some few saved themselves, and their laments could be heard slowly dying away along the causeway as they struggled back to the docks.

Before the altar, the god stepped away from Ingrar and faced the blind youth. His hand rested on the young man's forehead.

"You were chosen by me to be the vessel of my avenging might. You, who

see so clearly, must now be the renewer of my strength. You must once more make my name beloved in this land. This is the task I lay upon you."

The god's eyes blackened and became empty eye sockets that seemed to fill his entire face. The figure faded away, and the light that had illuminated the temple went out. Ingrar, blind once more, stood silently facing his companions. Beside him, the bloodforge's surface was dull and silent. But Kern, Trandon, and Noph could see that around Ingrar's face, there still lingered some of the radiance of one touched by the gods.

Chapter 6

Emperor of Doegan

A sudden movement to Noph's left made him start from his daze. Artemis and Sharessa were moving cautiously around behind Ingrar toward the bloodforge. Kern, still stunned by what he had just seen, paid them no mind; Trandon and Garkim also were staring at Ingrar, who himself seemed unaware that danger was at his back.

"Hey!" Noph shouted, lunging forward. His cry roused the others, and Kern and Trandon charged Entreri just as the thief reached the pedestal holding the bloodforge.

Quick as death, Sharessa, her long hair flying, scooped up a spear from a fallen cultist and, wielding it like a staff,

swung it in a wide arc at the paladin's knees. Kern leaped to avoid it, but in doing so, he stumbled on the altar steps, slippery with blood, and fell heavily against Trandon. The two crashed to the ground in a mass of flailing arms and legs. Noph circled to the right, hoping to take the pirates by surprise, but Sharessa was too quick for him. The spear came up, now with the point guttering at his throat.

Garkim stood unmoving, as did Ingrar. Kern and Trandon disentangled themselves and rose to find Sharessa tickling Noph's throat with the spearpoint. She shook her head at them. "No, don't. I've come too far not to get something out of all this, and it looks

like this bloodforge is the only thing worth taking." She spoke to Entreri without turning her head. "Come on, take it and let's go."

Carefully Entreri placed both hands around the stone. Kern laughed, a strange sound in the tense silence.

"Three of us couldn't carry that. What makes you think you can?"

Entreri answered without removing his eyes from the forge.

"Because the forge wants me to have it. I can hear it calling me, telling me to take it."

He cupped both hands about the stone, and to the astonishment of the others, lifted it as easily as if it were a child's toy ball. Clutching it to his chest, his

skeleton hand gleaming, he stepped behind the protection of Sharessa's spear.

The two circled cautiously until their backs were to the temple doorway. The other members of the party followed cautiously, their eyes on the stone that Entreri carried. Shar kept her spear touching Noph's throat. "Sharessa!" the young man pleaded.

She looked at him with a touch of pity. "Sorry, lad. Pirating means nothing if you don't make a profit. Aren't you the one who said everything comes down to gain and loss?"

"Do you know what you're loosing on the world?" shouted Trandon angrily. He turned to Ingrar, still standing at the

altar. "Can't you do something?"

Ingrar shook his head. "What will happen must happen, Trandon. Entreri is right. The stone has called to him, and I cannot interfere. There is a greater purpose here than any of ours. You must have faith and trust in the judgment of Tyr."

"Faith? Faith that little bastard will take the bloodforge back to Faerun and auction it off to the highest bidder? That hell sell it to the Zhentarim or the Red Wizards of Thay if he gets a chance and the price is right? I've got faith in that, all right!" Trandon snorted and swung his staff in frustration.

Sharessa and Entreri were almost at the temple entrance. Suddenly reversing her

spear, Shar struck Noph sharply on the brow with the butt. The youth dropped, stunned, and the two thieves turned to flee across the causeway. From the altar, Garkim cried out in sudden pain and clutched his head.

The water on both sides of the causeway roiled; then the roadway nearest the temple exploded with the force of a hundred thunderclaps. Entreri and Sharessa were hurled forward against Kern and Trandon on top of the still body of Noph. The bloodforge bounced from Entreri's hands and rolled back into the hall.

From the foaming water surged yellow-gray tentacles and a great bulbous head. Sharessa, half stunned, saw on it the

countenance she had glimpsed before, carven in stone and engraved in marble.

The mage-king, Aetheric III.

Again Sharessa heard the voice she'd heard before in the palace chambers when they were first attempting to steal the bloodforge. That seemed a lifetime ago. Then the voice had been beautiful, like a great organ playing on a thousand pipes.

Now the voice had lost none of its timbre. It still resounded through the great hall of the Temple of Umberlee, and Shar could hear echoes of it floating across the water from the ruined city. But now the words it spoke were gibberish, the ravings of a mind released from sanity. With growing horror, she

realized that the words she heard were not only in her ears but also in her mind, that Aetheric no longer distinguished between speech and telepathy. And as he spoke, she felt the madness and terror of that vast mind.

We rise from the deep... We are the god of the deep and of the overworld... Blood is power; power is life; the bloodforge is life... Our beloved Doegan... why are you doing this?... Why are you doing this?

There was a burst of insane laughter. Aetheric swung a great tentacled arm inside the temple. Artemis and Sharessa rolled one way, Kern and Trandon the other, the latter pulling with him the groggy Noph. The voice rose to a

scream.

We will have the forge . . . forged in blood, the blood of the people. We are the people; they serve us with their blood . . . the blood of the gods. . . . Doegan, behold your god!

Garkim screamed again, his face contorted. White spittle dribbled from the corners of his mouth. He staggered against Ingrar, who wrapped both arms around the former chancellor, his face reflecting the horror that he felt. Aetheric clawed frantically at the temple floor. The watchers could see now that one of his eyes was swollen and blind, the other dim and rheumy. His skin was mottled. Gray blood gushed from half a dozen wounds.

Now the mage-king seemed to sense the presence of the bloodforge. His tentacles shot out again, but fell just short of the stone. He strained to lift his vast, unseen bulk into the temple. Stones around the entrance cracked and gave way as he thundered against the walls.

Give it to us! he howled. Give it to us! It is ours! It knows us! It wants us!

Entreri flung himself on top of the bloodforge, shielding it with his body. The mage-king's eye focused on him. You! Entreri the assassin ... We give you blood for blood.

Tendrils of magical energy writhed from the mage-king's tentacles and surrounded the little assassin, dragging at his body. Entreri twisted, shouting in agony as

gashes split the skin of his face. Blood washed down over his neck in streams, and his body wracked in agony. Then, resting his skeleton hand on the now-glowing forge, his screams turned to a cry of triumph as a mighty warrior, far taller than any mortal, stepped from the air, swinging a warhammer at the thrashing figure of Aetheric.

The hammer rose and fell above the mage-king's head. Aetheric's face vanished in a mass of blood and shredded flesh, and an agonizing telepathic shriek rang through the temple with such force that windows high in the dome shattered and Noph rolled on the floor, covering his ears with his cloak. The mage-king's tentacles wrapped

around the forge warrior and, with a last dying effort, tore the creature in two. The companions heard a heartrending moan of My forge, and then the body of Aetheric sank slowly back out of the temple entrance into the waters of the bay.

Cautiously they picked themselves up. Artemis still sat, one hand on the bloodforge, eyes closed, unmoving. Noph approached him slowly, joined by Trandon.

"Is he... ?" Noph asked tremulously.

Trandon examined the little man swiftly. "No. He's unconscious, though. He must have channeled tremendous energy through the forge to create that warrior. In any case, we'll make sure he's not a

threat anymore." The fighter took off his belt and bound the assassin's hands tightly behind him, then turned. "Now, Mistress Sharessa . . ."

Shar was standing by Garkim, helping the Doeganer to his feet. "What?" She glared at Trandon. "Do you want to tie me up, too? Where d'you think I'd get to now?"

Trandon looked at Kern, who shrugged, then at Noph, who looked pointedly away. The fighter lifted his shoulders in resignation, then turned his attention back to the bloodforge. "Everyone stand back," he cautioned, lifting his hands preparatory to casting a spell.

"Wait!" The cry came from Garkim. He raised his own hand. "What are you

doing? You have no right to destroy this thing!"

"It is far too dangerous a device to be simply left alone," replied Trandon.

"Especially now. The emperor is dead, the land overrun by fiends. Anarchy reigns in those streets." He gestured toward the town. "You've seen to what lengths an unscrupulous man such as this—he stirred Entreri with his foot—will go to get his hands on such an artifact. How much easier to do it now that it is no longer hidden away in the palace. The only way to guarantee the safety of Faerun and of all Toril is to destroy all these things. I can't get at the others, but I'd like to make a start with this one."

Garkim shook his head and hurried

down the steps. "Not so, my lord wizard." His voice shook slightly. "Before Emperor Aetheric died, he mind-linked with me. I can use the forge. I know something of the power it possesses. So far, we've only just scratched the surface of that power. I think Emperor Aetheric was on the verge of discovering some far greater strength that lies within it, just before your arrival in the city. Now, with his knowledge implanted in my brain, perhaps I can discover that secret."

Trandon considered a moment, then shook his head. "The risk is still too great. Forgive me, Lord Garkim, but I have seen much evil in this land, and I don't like the idea at all of this forge

becoming even more powerful."

"Garkim is right, Trandon." The voice was Ingrar's. The blind youth stepped from the altar and approached the wizard. "He needs the power of the forge to drive the fiends from this land and to rebuild the kingdom of Doegan as a bulwark against their attacks. The Fallen Temple is greatly weakened by this day's events, but they aren't destroyed. The forge is needed."

"Trandon has a point, though," argued Kern. "What's to prevent the bloodforge from being used for evil as well as for good?"

Ingrar smiled. "I will be the guarantor of that, Kern. I am the Voice of Tyr; he speaks through me in this land. I will be

the guardian of justice in the Utter East." He laid his hand on Garkim's shoulder. "You and I, Lord Garkim, have both been maimed. As a boy, you suffered from the taunts of your fellows because of your special powers. I have lost the sight of my eyes. Yet together, the gods intend us to heal this wounded land. Shall we undertake their will?"

Garkim looked at him for a long moment. Then his hand came up to clasp Ingrar's forearm firmly.

Trandon looked at them closely. "If I am reading Tyr's will aright, I leave the bloodforge in your care. But beware." His voice hardened. "I don't think any of us fully understands what this artifact is capable of. Such strong magic is a

dangerous thing if you take it lightly."

Ingrar smiled. "Don't worry. Such matters are now in the hands of the gods." He turned to Garkim. "But now Eldrinpar has need of us."

He gestured toward shore. The others, gazing through the shattered doorway of the temple, saw the skyline of the city, dark against the morning sky. Across the rooftops and from the streets crawled, hopped, and walked fiends, converging on the plaza of Umberlee.

Garkim nodded. "Yes. The time for cleansing has come. Let us begin."

The two men, pirate and politician, stood behind the bloodforge. From within his robes, Garkim drew a small bejeweled knife. Swiftly he slashed his

palm, and then held out the blade to Ingrar. The youth accepted the knife and made a cut in his own hand. The two maimed hands clasped each other, their blood mingling. Then Garkim and Ingrar slowly lowered their palms to the bloodforge. A brilliant flash lit the sky and water. From empty air stepped figure after figure. With sudden shock, Noph realized that each was a duplicate of the strange man he and the paladins had fought in their rooms in the palace. The bloodforge army surged forth, a seemingly endless stream of warriors, to assemble in serried ranks upon the causeway. Now Garkim lifted his hand from the forge. His eyes were shut and his lips unmoving, but all present felt the

mighty psychic cry from his mind.

Warriors! Go forth! Cleanse this city of the fiends who infest it! We, Lord Garkim and Lord Ingrar of the bloodforge, command it of you!

From the throats of the forge army came a single ululating cry. They rushed forth, bearing down upon the fiends. From the creatures of the Abyss came a hellish shrieking. They gave way before the forge warriors, and in moments the plaza was emptied. Bands of warriors pursued the tanar'ri down the narrow streets. Their screams and wails echoed dimly into silence as the light from the bloodforge faded. Ingrar and Garkim stepped back, opening their eyes.

Trandon broke the silence that followed.

He looked at Kern and Noph. "Shall we return to Waterdeep? I'm anxious to see Entreri stand before the judgment of Piergeiron. And when the Paladinson is done with him, I know some people in Cormyr who'd like to speak with him."

Kern nodded. "That's assuming, of course, that the others fulfilled their part of the quest. If they haven't succeeded in capturing the doppleganger, who knows what we'll find when we return?" He looked at Sharessa. "What do you think we should do about her?"

"Why don't you ask her?" Before Trandon could speak, Shar stepped forward. The sun shone through the broken roof on her face and caught the highlights in her raven hair. Her clothes

were torn and tattered, but she still wore them with a kind of careless energy and panache. She looked at Noph and smiled. "How's your head? I tried not to hit you too hard."

"Okay," mumbled Noph. Shar suddenly made him feel uneasy, and he didn't know why.

The female pirate turned to Trandon. "I'm staying here. I suppose you could drag me hack to your part of the world, but what would be the point? You've got him," she said, pointing to Entreri, "and I daresay I could do far more good here. These two"—she gestured to Ingrar and Garkim—"are going to need a good sword to knock some law and order back into this place. Isn't that right,

boys?"

Ingrar smiled shyly. He suddenly looked much more like the young pirate Noph had first met at the fountain. "That's right, Shar. I guess we do."

Shar blew a kiss in Noph's direction but didn't wait to see if he responded. She was already looking appraisingly at Garkim, as if wondering what sort of women he liked.

Noph turned to Kern and Trandon. "All right," he agreed. "I'm ready to go home."