

FIRE AND DUST



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*From the memoirs of the Right Honorable
Britlin Cavendish,
Esquire, Artist and Gentleman*

CHAPTER ONE



THREE BLAZING FIRES

Rotunda of the City Courts Building, in Sigil, the City of Doors:

“Ah,” said the centaur, looking over my shoulder “I see that you’re painting.”

“Yes,” I replied from behind my easel.

“The hustle and bustle of what this city calls justice,” the centaur continued. “Prisoners hobbling by in chains. Litigants glaring at each other as they await trial. Judges in ermine passing sentence on ragged

MID-AFTERNOON

beggars. Certainly, this is fertile ground for an artist with an eye for irony... or tragedy... or simply the paradoxes of life. What is your theme, young man?”

“My theme?” I asked.

“What artistic statement are you making? How the law oppresses the powerless? Or perhaps, if you are an optimist, how the law, despite its flaws, is a majestic abstraction that reflects the best within us. Is that your statement?”

“My statement is I wish there weren’t so many curlicues carved over the entranceway. My hand is falling asleep trying to copy them all.”

The centaur stared at me wordlessly.

“This painting,” I explained, “was commissioned by Guvner Hashkar, Chief Justice of the Courts and Factol for the Fraternity of Order. He said to me, Cavendish, dear fellow, the wife’s got a cousin getting married next week. He’s a right berk of a boy, but family is family, don’t you know. Need to give a present and the wife says a painting would be just the thing. Just the thing, yes. Three feet by five should do admirably, and go easy on the reds, there’s a good chap—the boy tends to faint if he gets too excited. Why not take a bash at a picture of the court rotunda? Could be inspiring. Just the thing for the breakfast nook. Just the thing, yes.”

“And you took this commission?” The centaur looked aghast. “You didn’t spit in this man’s face? You didn’t lecture him about artistic integrity?”

“You don’t lecture factols,” I replied. “If they ask you to do something annoying, you simply charge more. That’s why I have a longer list of wealthy clients than any other painter in Sigil; I talk their language.”

The centaur gaped at me for another few seconds, then stomped away in disgust. I have to admit, if there’s one thing centaurs are good at, it’s stomping away.

Shrugging, I continued to copy the curlicues, trying to ignore the distractions around me; and let me tell you, the City Courts are full of distractions. For example, lined up in front of a door beside me stood a

cornugon—one of those reptilian horrors from the Lower Planes, nine feet tall, insect wings, a prehensile tail like three yards of razorvine... well, you must have seen them around. This one was waiting stoically, reading a scroll that had almost no words but dozens of bright orange ink drawings of humans and demihumans being grilled over pillars of flame. To a cornugon, such a scroll might be anything from a bedtime story to a menu-planner.

In line behind the hell-monster, waiting just as patiently, was a deva from the Upper Planes: a handsome amber-skinned man, two feet taller than me and equipped with wings as big as the cornugon's. The deva's wings, however, were made from feathers of the purest gold. A single one of the feathers could have bought someone a nice night on the town... but as soon as my thoughts drifted to leaving work for the day, I botched one of the curlicues and had to dab away the error with turpentine.

Unlike the cornugon, the deva hadn't brought anything to read, but that didn't leave him bored. He simply fixed his eyes on the sky outside the door of the rotunda, and soon his face settled into an expression of rapturous contemplation of the heavens... which, if you ask me, was a waste of good rapture since Sigil is shaped like a ring a few miles in diameter, and the only thing you can see in the sky above the court building are the grimy slums of the Hive district. Still, gazing up on those filthy streets didn't bother the deva; and he even managed to maintain his serene expression when the cornugon in front shifted its weight and flicked its scaly wings across the deva's nose.

For a brief moment, something inside me wanted to toss away my bland painting of the architecture and instead, work on capturing this little moment: creatures of heaven and hell, standing side by side and ignoring each other... or perhaps only pretending to. This little scene said something. I wasn't sure what it said, but you can't show an angelic being and a demonic one in the same picture without it being some kind of comment, right?

On the other hand... I hadn't been commissioned to paint a deva and a cornugon. If I suddenly decided to paint something that interested me, who knew where it would all end? Muttering something about gold handcuffs, I went back to work.

"Painting a picture, huh?" said a nasal voice by my elbow. "Do you really have to draw all those curlicues? Couldn't you kind of suggest them?"

I turned to see a gangly boy in his late teens squatting and squinting at my canvas. His skin was caramel brown, but his hair yellow blonde, hanging haphazardly around distinctly pointed ears. One of his parents must have been human, the other an elf; and neither side of the family could take much pride in the result. "Do I know you?" I asked, trying to sound forbidding.

"Hezekiah Virtue," he replied, holding out a hand that was overly blessed with knuckles. Looking down at my paintbox, he read my name printed there. "Britlin Cavendish... well it's an honor to meet you."

"You've heard of me?"

"Nope. But it's an honor to meet anyone in Sigil; I've only been here two days. Do you belong to a faction?"

I sighed. My jacket clearly displayed the "five senses" symbol of the Society of Sensation, and the symbol was repeated on my signet ring and the top of my paintbox. However, that obviously didn't mean anything to this Clueless child. "I have the

privilege of being a Sensate,” I told him. “Our society is dedicated to savoring all the abundance the multiverse can offer.”

“Oh, my Uncle Toby told me about you guys,” he answered, his eyes growing wide. “You must have a lot of wild parties, right?”

“Wrong. One wild party in a lifetime usually exhausts that field of experience. Then we move on to more refined pursuits.”

“Oh.” Clearly, the boy had no idea what a refined pursuit might be. Then his face brightened, and he reached into a cloth bag he carried in one hand. “Have you ever tried swineberries?”

The name made me wrinkle my nose. “Swineberries?”

He pulled out a handful of greasy brown berries, each about the size of my thumb. They were flat and wrinkled, as if someone had stepped on them with spike-heeled boots. “I brought them with me from home,” the boy said. “My home plane. I’m not from around here. The berries aren’t as fresh as they used to be, but they’re still pretty good.” He popped one in his mouth and chewed vigorously. “You should try one.”

“Yes,” I admitted, “I should.” A Sensate never says no to a new experience, even if it turns out to be some boring new prune from the Prime Material Plane. I told myself if the taste proved to be as lackluster as I expected—swineberries!—at least I’d have something to joke about the next time I had dinner with my fellow Sensates.

Of course, I couldn’t just pop the berry in my mouth and chew, like the boy did. You don’t rush such things. You have to hold the berry lightly in your fingertips, testing the weight and texture in the fruit. Then you lift it to your nose and smell its bouquet—a light, sugary fragrance, with a teasing hint of musk. Then, and only then, do you slip it between your teeth and bite down gently... whereupon, you discover the sodding berry tastes like pure rock salt.

I’d eaten pure rock salt before—it was part of the Sensate initiation ceremony. As any Sensate can tell you, once is enough.

Reluctantly, I swallowed.

“What did you think of the berry?” Hezekiah asked.

“I hated it.”

“Oh. But I guess that’s all right, isn’t it? Because Uncle Toby says Sensates want to experience everything, good and bad.”

“Your Uncle Toby is a font of information,” I replied through clenched teeth.

“Hey,” the boy said, “do you think these berries would go over big with the Sensates? Because I’d like to talk to one of your high-up men, to see what I have to do to join your group.”

I nearly choked. “You want to join the Sensates?”

“Uncle Toby says I should join some faction. A man has to have friends in the Cage, that’s what Uncle Toby says. He calls Sigil the Cage, I don’t know why. So I’m going around, talking to all the factions, to find out more about them. That’s why I’m here in the courts, to talk to a Guvner. I love how Sigil people say Guvner, instead of Governor the way they’d say it back home. I love how people talk here: Stop rattling your bone-box, you Clueless berk, or I’ll do you a slice-job. I hear that all the time. By the way, what’s a slice-job?”

“You’re going to find out any minute,” I muttered.

“On the other hand,” Hezekiah continued unstopably, “I haven’t heard you use any quaint local expressions yet. Are you from out of town too?”

I looked down at the fine-tipped paintbrush in my hand and idly wondered if it would be ruined by plunging it into the boy’s eye. Control, Britlin, control. My mother was the daughter of a duke and cozzled me all through childhood not to talk like the leatherheads in the street—to sound cultured and refined so that city aristocrats would admit me to their drawing rooms. She had never been heavy-handed about it (“Yes Britlin, little Oswald next door is a berk; now how would we say that in real words?”) but it was a matter of family loyalty for me to stay true to her ideals, and I did not need some Prime-world pippin insulting me on that score. I racked my brains, trying to produce some scathing remark that would send this Clueless boy packing; but before I could think of a devastating response, I noticed a trio of Harmonium guards enter in lock-step through the front doors of the rotunda.

Of course, there’s nothing unusual about Harmonium members in the courts building—as Sigil’s police force, their duties often bring them to the halls of justice. However, this particular group stood out for several disturbing reasons.

First, all three had made a mess of folding their gray neckerchiefs. Harmonium officers are fastidious about their neckerchiefs—when I painted the portrait of Harmonium Factor Sarin, he demanded that I reproduce every little tuck and fold precisely.

Second, the three men in front of me didn’t walk like Harmonium guards. Guards spend most of their time patrolling a beat through the city; even raw recruits soon acquire a measured gait that lets them walk all day while keeping alert to possible mischief. The men entering the rotunda had a more military edge to their pace—they didn’t stroll, they marched.

Finally, my keen Sensate’s eye picked up one more out-of-place detail. In addition to swords, normal Harmonium guards always carry stout black truncheons, reserved for those rare occasions when their commander is struck by the whim to take a wrongdoer alive. The three men in front of me, however, had quite different weapons hanging from their belts; sleek white batons carved from ivory or bone, their surfaces speckled with a red glitter that might be chips of ruby.

“What are you looking at?” Hezekiah asked.

“I was just thinking, maybe I’ll pack up now and take another crack at those curlicues tomorrow.”

“Are you trying to avoid those guards?” the boy whispered, as he noticed me eyeing the newcomers. “Maybe you have some dark secret in your past, and those guys are a special elite team who might recognize you from former days?”

“Why do you think those guards are elite?” I asked.

“Because they’re the first I’ve seen carrying firewands instead of truncheons.”

“Those are firewands?”

The boy shrugged. “Uncle Toby taught me all about wands and stuff.”

I groaned.

A rational man might have taken to his heels that very second—three impostor guards walking into the Courts with high-powered magical weapons meant big, big trouble. On the other hand, I had never seen a firewand in action; and if I could find a safe place to hide before anyone started shooting, I might witness something well worth

remembering. If this turned into a major incident, maybe I could even paint the scene afterward. Those piking art critics couldn't accuse me of sterility if I made a perfect reproduction of some horrible disaster.

Unfortunately, my first glance around the rotunda didn't reveal any good places to dive for cover. Factol Hashkar may have hired me to do a painting, but his most beloved artform was tapestry; as soon as he became leader of the Guvners, he had covered every inch of City Court wallspace with dusty old banners depicting the many planes of the multiverse. Those acres of cloth would blaze like tinder if the wands started blasting fireballs... and that could happen any minute.

The three guards reached the center of the rotunda floor, and turned inward to face each other in a huddle. They wanted us to believe they were discussing private guard business; but I knew they were concealing their motions as they pulled the wands from their belts. Would they simply start shooting? Or was this a more complicated plan, "Lie down and give us your money!" or a scheme to grab hostages in protest of the latest tax hike? It didn't matter. I was at the rear of the hall, too far from the door to get outside before the pyrotechnics began, so I had to take the only cover available.

"Come on, Hezekiah," I commanded, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck. Then, crossing my fingers that this would work, I jammed the two of us directly behind the cornugon.

"What are you playing at, berk?" growled the monster, as it whipped around to look at us.

"Sorry," I said, "but you're from the Nine Hells. You're flameproof."

Which was the precise moment when the first fireball struck the cornugon's back.



Even with the cornugon taking the brunt of the blast, huge tongues of flame splashed over me for a second, buffeting my face with broiling air. A few paces away, my paints and canvas blossomed with fire, followed a moment later by the turpentine can exploding into a fierce yellow blaze. Smoke was everywhere, people screamed throughout the great hall, and who knew how many other throats were too scorched to make more than a croak?

In front of us, the cornugon hadn't suffered a single blister; after all, the creature came from a plane noted for its flaming infernos, so a paltry fireball was no more annoying than a mosquito bite. Still, the fireblast was an attack, and a completely unexpected one, since the cornugon had been glaring at Hezekiah and me when the false guards let fly. Angrily, the reptile-fiend raised a sharp-taloned hand as if it intended to claw off a strip of my flesh... but then second thoughts flashed through its beady black eyes and it swung around to slash the deva instead.

I have no idea if the cornugon actually believed the deva was responsible for the attack, or if the monster simply seized the excuse to swipe at a species he hated. Either way, the cornugon's claws ripped two handfuls of feathers from the deva's wings, and a moment later, the monster's hellishly barbed tail lashed the deva across the chest like a whip. Beads of shining gold blood trickled out where the thorny tail broke the deva's skin.

Until that moment, the deva had scarcely budged from his serene contemplation of

the sky. Certainly, the fireball had singed off some wingfeathers, since a life of celestial bliss doesn't flameproof you like crawling through the bowels of hell; but the deva didn't react until the cornugon's attack had drawn blood. Then, with the speed of a whizzing arrow, the deva flashed out his fists, one, two—a jab to the cornugon's snout, and a beautiful palm-heel strike to its scale-covered gut.

The cornugon wheezed once and buckled to its knees.

"Wow," said Hezekiah. "I always thought angels fought with magic swords."

"First," I replied, "he's not an angel, he's a deva. Second, devas don't fight with swords, they use maces. Third, he's not going to whack a cornugon with his mace in the middle of Sigil unless he wants an all-out war that will get both sides ejected from the city. Finally, in case you haven't noticed, the one thing that was shielding us from the flames is now sprawled gasping on the ground."

Indeed, we were completely exposed to the rest of the rotunda, and a hideous sight it was. The three false guards must have stood back-to-back and loosed their fireballs simultaneously, launching bright orange flames in all directions. I could immediately identify the three points of impact from the bursts: those three areas were littered with dead bodies, the corpses' flesh roasted and split into hard red cracks. Farther out, some people had survived the initial flash... or maybe they were just taking longer to die. Their skin was puckered and oozing out fluid, their eye sockets empty pits running with melted jelly. A few made shrill whistling cries, the only kind of scream possible through a throat ravaged by fire. Most simply lay silent, squeezing themselves into balls of agony and shuddering with misery.

The explosions had focused on the three interior walls of the rotunda. The fourth side of the room, the arch opening into the street, was still untouched, and people who remained on their feet had begun to mob the exit, crushing together in a panic. Shorter beings, gnomes and halflings, would surely be trampled in the stampede down the front steps... not to mention children and the elderly. After the first casualties fell, some of those jamming in behind would trip over the broken bodies, and they too would be battered by the feet of the crowd.

At the center of the rotunda, impassive in the heart of chaos, stood the three false guards—even the most fear-crazed members of the mob gave the guards a wide berth. The impostor facing our direction was a heavily-bearded man with bleached white hair, his eye carefully watching the deva; and when the deva turned away from the cornugon to confront the creators of this destruction, the false guard calmly lifted his wand to shoot again.

The cornugon was on its hands and knees, providing no cover at all. Any fireball aimed at the deva would easily catch Hezekiah and me in the blast radius. I had time to scream, "No!"...

...and then I was standing in a paper-stacked office, facing a young halfling woman in judicial robes. She looked as surprised to see me as I was to see her. "Who are you?" she snapped.

Before I could answer, Hezekiah stepped forward from my side. "Hezekiah Virtue," he said, holding out his knuckly hand for her to shake. "Sorry to pop in on you, ma'am, but we were in a nasty situation and I had to teleport us out of there."

I stared at him in disbelief. "You can teleport?"

“Sure,” he answered. “Learned it from Uncle Toby.”
“Of course you did,” I sighed.



As soon as we began to explain about the fire attack, the halfling hurried us down the hall to the office of Her Honor, Judge Emeritus Oonah DeVail. I had never met DeVail personally, but all of Sigil knew her by reputation—an old bone-rattler, a basher, a woman of action. Unlike the majority of Guvners who prefer the academic approach to knowledge, Oonah DeVail had spent much of her life exploring the planes in person, leading expedition after expedition into the far corners of the multiverse and bringing back a wealth of arcane curiosities. It didn’t surprise me that the halfling went running to DeVail when looking for someone to cope with an emergency situation.

“Firewands?” DeVail roared. “In the rotunda?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” I said. “Three men just walked in...”

That was as far as I got. DeVail was a woman in her sixties, but with darting speed, she snatched up a staff bound with gleaming silver wire and used its support to hike herself to her feet.

Hezekiah scampered to open the door for her. “It’d be a mighty big honor to help you to safety, ma’am,” he said.

“Help yourself to safety,” she snapped. With one hand, she swept her staff off the floor and swung it high over her head. An arc of sparkling ice crystals spattered out of its swinging tip. “No flamethrowing berks will give our courts the laugh while I’m around.” With that, she dashed out the door, suddenly as spry as a twelve-year-old. The halfling woman waved at us to stay where we were, then hurried along behind DeVail to a wide-open waiting area some dozen paces down the corridor.

Pausing just a second for the halfling to catch up, DeVail slammed the butt of her staff onto the floor with an echoing whump. Beneath her feet, carpet and floorboards faded to an inky blackness, like a hole filled with deepest midnight. The halfling woman looked at the hole, looked at DeVail, then leaped, grabbing Her Honor around the waist. Together the two of them sank into that hole: the halfling wearing a grim expression, DeVail’s lips moving in some kind of silent incantation. The moment their heads disappeared into the hole, the blackness sealed itself shut again with a muffled rumble.

Hezekiah let the door close slowly, his face filled with wonderment. The feeling was mutual—I had no idea what else DeVail’s staff could do, but the short ivory firewands used by the false guards now seemed a lot less formidable. The Sensate in me sighed with regret that I’d miss the coming battle in the rotunda. Then I remembered the charred skin of the dead, the horrid moans of the living... and I decided there were some things even a Sensate didn’t need to see.

“Shall we try to find a way out?” I said to Hezekiah. “We may be safe from the fire for the moment, but if the whole building starts to burn...”

“In a minute,” he replied. “I want a chance to look at this great stuff.”

And indeed, Guvner DeVail’s office was cluttered to the rafters with “great stuff”: delicately painted porcelain, brassbound chests, mummified animals hanging from ropes attached to the ceiling... dozens upon dozens of outlandish curios, and most no doubt reeking of magic.

“Don’t touch anything!” I snapped at Hezekiah, who was about to pick up a copper-framed handmirror. “For that matter, don’t even look at anything! If you stare into that mirror, you have no idea what might stare back.”

“I wasn’t hurting anything,” he answered defensively. He closed his eyes, furrowed his brow for a moment, then opened his eyes again to look at the mirror in his hand. “It doesn’t matter anyway,” he said. “The mirror’s okay. It’s not magic.”

“How do you know?”

“If I concentrate, I can sense a kind of radiation coming off magical things. Uncle Toby taught me that whenever I’m in a strange place, I should—” Hezekiah stopped abruptly and snapped his head around toward the door. In a low whisper, he said, “Something with a lot of magic is coming straight at us.”

“Probably Judge DeVail and that staff of hers.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.” Once more his brow furrowed in concentration, then he whispered, “Hide!”

Much as I hated taking orders from a Clueless, the worry on Hezekiah’s face suggested this was not the time for argument. Beside me stood a coat-tree with several bulky cloaks hanging from its hooks; I nipped behind it and quickly fanned out the cloaks so they’d conceal me without looking too unnatural. Given a little luck, none of the cloaks would turn me into a frog. Given a lot of luck, maybe one of the cloaks would make me invisible.

I left a tiny gap in the arrangement of clothing, just enough to let me peek out with one eye. Hezekiah was nowhere to be seen, but I could hear him shuffling around outside my line of sight, no doubt burrowing into the jumble of souvenirs Guvner DeVail kept from her trips across the planes. After a few seconds, his scurrying stopped... and a good thing too, because half a second later, the door eased open with a creak.

Two shadowed figures stood in the entranceway, both carrying cocked crossbows. They relaxed slowly as they scanned the room. “I told you,” whispered one of them, “I saw the old basher light out with some halfling. Right through the floor, she went.”

The other only grunted. “Where do you think she keeps it?”

“Try the desk first.”

The one who just spoke stepped farther into the room, crossbow still at the ready. In the light from the oil lamp on the Guvner’s desk, the intruder was tall and thin, with raggedly pointed ears and cat-like yellow eyes—a githzerai, and one that looked fiercer than usual, if that was possible. Sigil has a sizable population of githzerai, but I didn’t know any personally. Their race prides itself on severity, and never spends its gold on indulgences like art; therefore, githzerai and I don’t move in the same circles.

As the githzerai moved toward DeVail’s desk, the other intruder entered the spill of light from the lamp. I gulped hard to stop myself from gasping. This one had a face much like his githzerai companion, but his skin was as yellow as corn and his eyes like black marbles. Unless I was hallucinating, this was a githyanki: closely related to the githzerai race, but its bitter blood enemy.

A githzerai and githyanki working together? That was like a fire sprite inviting a water elemental to dance the minuet. The two gith races hated each other with the purest of passions, killing one another on sight whenever they happened to meet. The only time the githzerai and githyanki had ever agreed on anything was when they declared

genocidal war on each other.

This had to be an illusion—a shapeshifting disguise. For all I knew these two might be gnome sorcerer-thieves, wearing an enchantment so they couldn't be identified as they looted this office. At least that made sense.

The two laid their crossbows on the Guvner's desk and began rummaging through the drawers. From my angle I could only see the githzerai, and his body blocked my view of most of the desk. Still, I caught the occasional glimpse of him lifting up one scroll after another, unrolling a length to skim the contents, then discarding the parchment into a growing pile on the floor. The nonchalance of his actions made me wince—not just because of his disdain for scrolls that might carry priceless ancient knowledge, but at his lack of concern for magical consequences. Some scrolls don't allow themselves to be read and tossed away. They can have curses or booby-traps, even imprisoned monsters who leap forth to shred unwary pilferers. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't care if two thieves got themselves eaten; but I didn't want to be nabbed for dessert.

Finally, the githyanki said, "This looks like it."

The githzerai dropped the scroll he was holding. "Dust?" he asked.

"Yeah. She's even drawn a map."

"How convenient. Let's go."

The githyanki refolded the scroll he had found and tucked it inside his vest. Meanwhile, the githzerai picked up the oil lamp from DeVail's desk and held it above the mound of scrolls they had thrown on the floor. "By the time the old basher returns," he said, "this place'll be burning as bright as downstairs. They'll think it's all part of the same blaze."

"Maybe," his partner replied. "But Her Nibs told me to torch a few more offices so the Guvs aren't suspicious about this one. I've got a list of rooms that're empty."

The githzerai sniffed the air. "Once people smell smoke, they'll empty the whole building."

He picked up his crossbow and headed for the exit. In his hand, he still carried the lighted oil lamp. At the door, he waited while his partner peered out to check that the hall was clear. After a moment, the githyanki nodded. "Let's go."

The one with the lamp turned around in the doorway for one last look at the room. Then, curling his lip with disdain, he threw the lamp onto the stack of scrolls and slammed the door behind him.

Both Hezekiah and I dove instantly from our hiding places to snuff out the flames. It was a close call—the parchments were old and dry, and paraffin oil had splashed about liberally as the lamp struck the floor. Fortunately, the glass lamp cracked but didn't break; and with the help of the cloaks from the coat-tree, we smothered the blaze before it got out of hand.

"Who were those guys?" Hezekiah panted as we eased back from the mound of crispy-edged scrolls.

"How should I know?" I replied. "Do you think I recognize every thug in Sigil?"

"Just asking," he shrugged. "What do we do now?"

"Well, we could cool our heels chatting and see if the building burns down around us; or we could pike it out of here before we singe off our eyebrows. Do you have a preference?"

Clueless though he was, Hezekiah opted for the sensible choice; and soon, we were blundering our way through the corridors of the court building, trying to find a way out.

This wing was taken up with private offices for high-level Guvners, all of whom appeared to be elsewhere. While I had visited the public areas of the courts a few times, I had never come to this part of the building; and Hezekiah was no help in figuring out where we were, because he admitted he had teleported out of the rotunda, completely blind. It was sheer luck we hadn't materialized inside a solid wall.

In time, we rounded a corner and saw a doorway down the hall, pouring out roils of black smoke. We approached cautiously, worried about bumping into our arsonist thieves, but reluctant to turn tail if someone inside needed our help. The door opened into a large room filled with row upon row of bookracks; and one shelf of the rack closest to us had been pierced by a flaming crossbow bolt.

"Our friends from the office have been here," I muttered, pointing at the arrow.

"They're setting fire to a library?" Hezekiah cried in outrage. "That's criminal!"

Despite the smoke, he charged forward, shouting, "We can still save most of the books!" Never mind that the rack where the fire-arrow had landed was almost completely ablaze. Never mind the stupidity of running into a room full of paper just before flames make it impossible to get back out the door. Hezekiah ran straight into the library like some duty-brained knight.

"What do you think you're doing?" I yelled at him.

"Only one set of shelves are burning," he called, stepping into the gap between the blazing rack and the one behind it. "If we can separate these from the rest of the books..." His voice broke off as he inhaled a lungful of smoke and buckled over coughing.

"Damn it, Hezekiah!" I took a step into the room, then stopped to ask myself what I was doing. If a Clueless nobody wanted to die playing hero, why should I risk my own hide to save him? I'd only known him for ten minutes, and they had been ten solid minutes of annoyance and terror. Granted, Hezekiah hadn't been responsible for the terror part; in fact, his teleport spell had saved my life...

"Damn it," I said again, and ran in after him, keeping low to stay out of the smoke.

When I reached his side, he had struggled to his feet and was pushing weakly against the blazing bookrack. "Shove this rack forward against the wall," he choked out, "then we shove the other racks back as far away as we can, so they don't catch fire."

"You're barny!" I told him. "These shelves are loaded with books. They must weigh tons." I hiked my hands under his armpits to steady him on his feet—the lungful of smoke had hit him hard. "The only thing we can do," I said, "is run."

"No, we can save the books." He squirmed away from me and planted his palms on one shelf of the bookrack—a strip of wood that had yet to catch fire. "I'm not going till we save the books."

He shoved the rack feebly, with no discernible effect. "Come on," he gasped at me. "Help!"

"Sure," I replied. "Help. Well, I've never set myself on fire before. The other Sensates will be green with envy."

I could have chosen finesse. I could have chosen to treat the books with delicate reverence. But there was smoke everywhere, the rack and half its books were on fire, and

I was past the point of subtlety. Our goal was to separate the blazing rack from the others. Trusting my boots to protect me for a few seconds, I stepped up onto a shelf of the rack that was on fire, planted my hands against the adjacent rack, and thrust with all my strength.

The burning rack yielded first, tipping away under my heels to slam against the front wall of the room. A moment later, the other rack tipped backwards, boom into the rack behind it. That rack tipped too, and a third, and a fourth, boom, boom, boom, like dominoes, a ripple of one crash after another as the whole library toppled gracefully backward. The motion didn't even stop at the rear wall—when the final rack struck the plaster it kept on going, smashing a hole through the wall as big as a haycart.

“We did it!” shouted Hezekiah.

“You piking well did it, all right,” said a new voice. I looked up to see a burly Harmonium guard towering above me. He had his truncheon drawn and seemed aching to use it. “You two berks are under arrest,” he bellowed, grabbing me by the arm and hauling me to my feet. “And I truly hope you resist, because I'm in the mood to break some skulls. Got me?”

“Oh good,” Hezekiah piped up. “I wanted to meet someone in the Harmonium so I could ask about your membership requirements.”

I buried my face in my hands.

CHAPTER TWO ⊕



THREE CONCERNED FACT⊕LS

(or are dragged) into the main Harmonium guard barracks, the first thing you'll see is a ten-foot tall portrait of their leader, Factol Sarin... and wasn't I glad that I'd gotten on his good side by copying the folds on his neckerchief exactly. Of course, the Harmonium were such a bunch of hardcases, they wouldn't let me go just because I'd painted Factol Sarin from his best profile; but at least when they learned who I was, they stopped swinging their truncheons so recklessly near my skull.

IF YOU WALK

Half a battalion of guards escorted Hezekiah and me to separate interrogation rooms, and that was the last I saw of the boy for many hours. A sharp-eyed sergeant took my statement, seldom letting me say more than a sentence before interrupting with nitpicky questions. Of course, I told the exact truth, holding nothing back—I had no reason to hide anything I'd seen or done. I dearly hoped Hezekiah was doing the same in his interrogation... not that he was likely to lie, but the idiotic Clueless might skip over important details in his hurry to start quizzing the guards about Harmonium philosophy. If he annoyed them too much, they might bash out his brains before he had a chance to corroborate my story.

Even though the interrogation room had thick marble walls, they weren't thick enough to block out all the noise in the barracks that evening. Every minute or so, footsteps would race past the door outside; and several times an hour, I heard distant yelling, not clear enough for me to make out words, but with the tone of someone bellowing orders to subordinates. The sergeant interrogating me refused to share any news about how things had turned out at the courts, but judging by the barracks clamor, I guessed the attackers had escaped. Now the guards were scouring the city in search of the killers.

After several hours, the sergeant exhausted his questions and left me locked in the room with a couple of watchful-eyed corporals. Clearly, the sergeant was not happy with my story—"A githyanki and githzerai working together... how addle-coved do you think I am?"—but he knew the time had come to find his commander and discuss what to do next. It wasn't every day that Sigil suffered a massacre in the Courts, and the investigation would surely fall under scrutiny from high places. The sergeant and everyone else in the Harmonium would move with the utmost caution to avoid legal slip-ups.

Another hour passed... or at least what felt like an hour, cooped up with two Harmonium guards who were built like mountains and just about as talkative. They stood on either side of the door, arms folded across their chests and eyes glued on me, instantly ready to gut me with their swords if

“Enough gab,” said Captain Sarin, briskly. From what I’d seen, Sarin did everything briskly—rather alarming when he came to my studio to pose for his portrait, because the way he barreled around, I was sure he’d step in a pot of paint. He didn’t. Sarin might be equipped with shoulders as wide as a buffalo and muscles to match, but it wasn’t strength alone that won him leadership of the Harmonium. “Now,” he went on, “we have a few questions to ask you, Mister Cavendish.”

“Of course, sir.” I bowed once more, because that’s what you do when a factol calls you “mister”.

“In the statement you gave to my sergeant, you simply stated the facts. Now we’d like your opinions. Hunches, suspicions, impressions... you’re a blood with a keen eye and your work gives you contact with plenty of folks here in the Cage. What do you make of this all? If you had to guess, would you say the attackers were Anarchists? Or maybe Chaosmen?”

“Neither, sir.”

Captain Sarin raised an eyebrow. I hurried to explain. “The Anarchists have a lot of experience pretending to be Harmonium guards—disguise is part of their basic training. I’d guess there are half a dozen Anarchists in this building right now, eavesdropping on the way you’re handling the present situation.”

The captain made a face. “You’re probably right.”

“So,” I said, “they aren’t going to make an elementary mistake like folding their neckerchiefs wrong. Anarchists are just too good at infiltration to slip up like that.

“As for the Chaosmen,” I continued, “they don’t have the discipline for what I saw. The false guards marched like soldiers and fired in unison—Chaosmen simply wouldn’t allow themselves to be regimented like that. They might dash wildly into the building, fire about at random, then run away again; but they’d despise the very idea of planning the attack with military precision, and they certainly wouldn’t carry it off.”

The captain cast a glance at Guvner Hashkar and Lady Erin. They both nodded. Sarin sighed. “That’s pretty much what we concluded too,” he told me. “We hoped you might have noticed something to indicate otherwise. Life would be less complicated if we could blame this mess on the usual pus-kickers.”

“I take it you didn’t capture any of the attackers?”

“All three escaped,” Lady Erin answered with a keen edge of anger. “As you say, the massacre was planned with military precision. The moment Judge DeVail showed up with that staff of hers, one of the fireballin’ berks shouted, ‘Hop it!’ and activated some magical boojum. They disappeared in a shimmer of light, and no one knows where. DeVail fired into the shimmer anyway on the off chance they’d just turned invisible; but it didn’t do any good.”

“Does Judge DeVail know what the thieves stole from her office?”

“Haven’t been able to talk to her yet,” Guvner Hashkar replied. “Soon as the attackers vanished, Oonah started helping the poor sods who got caught in the middle. Tried to calm the mob, bandage the injured... even stopped the deva and cornugon who were still brawling in the middle of the flames. Eventually, the old girl pushed her luck too far—inhaled more smoke than she could handle. Healers got to her in time and she’ll be right as rain in the morning; but for now she’s sleeping, and they don’t want us to wake her.”

"Pity," I said. "If we knew what those two had stolen, maybe we'd have a clue what was really going on."

Captain Sarin grunted. "You're certain the theft was connected with the fire attack?"

"Absolutely," I told him. "First of all, the thieves had been waiting in a position to see Judge DeVail dash to the rescue. Then they went straight to her office and rummaged through her desk for one specific scroll, ignoring dozens of valuable curios in the rest of the room. Once they had the scroll, they systematically torched her office and other rooms to cover their tracks, intending the secondary fires to be dismissed as offshoots of the fire downstairs. They must have known about the fire attack ahead of time, and were poised to move on DeVail's office once the coast was clear. My guess is the fireballs were simply a diversion to make it easier for the thieves to get in and out without being noticed."

"But a githyanki and githzerai working together," Sarin shook his head. "That's almost impossible to believe."

"Their appearance could have been an illusion, or some temporary shapeshift. Remember, Hezekiah knew they were coming because they radiated magic."

"Maybe," Lady Erin said, pursing her lips. "Still, if they had the magic to disguise themselves, why become a githyanki and githzerai? It'd make more sense to look like Guvners or Harmonium guards. That way they wouldn't stand out if someone noticed them in the hall."

"A good point," Sarin admitted. "But I still think—"

There was a sharp knock on the door, and a lieutenant of the guard hurried in without waiting to be invited. She handed the captain a slip of paper which he read in silence. I could tell that Lady Erin and Guvner Hashkar were both aching to read over Sarin's shoulder, but they managed to restrain themselves until the captain looked up grimly.

"Bad news?" Lady Erin asked.

"Not exactly news," Sarin muttered. Glancing in my direction he hesitated a moment, clearly debating whether to say more in front of me. Before I could offer to leave, however, Sarin simply shrugged and continued. "I asked some of the bright bloods in our backroom to propose theories about what in The Lady's name is happening here. They've dug up some troubling connections."

"What connections?" Hashkar asked.

"Ten days ago, there was an ugly little riot in the Gatehouse asylum—the part of the building used as headquarters for the Bleak Cabal. Everyone knows a fair number of barmies in the asylum used to be wizards, till they learned one too many secrets mortals weren't meant to know. Anyway, one of those wizards escaped, got his hands on the ingredients he needed for some fireballs, and freed a whole block of other violent inmates. The wizard vanished and the others demolished a good chunk of Bleaker HQ before they could be stopped."

"And what does this have to do with the courts?" Lady Erin asked with some impatience.

"Keep listening," Sarin replied. "Six days ago, a furnace in the Great Foundry blew out one of its walls. Flames and molten metal sprayed all over the place—dozens of poor sods killed, heavy property damage, and surprise, surprise: most of the damage was centered in the part of the foundry the Godsmen use as their headquarters."

"I read the reports on that," Lady Erin said. "Everyone agreed it was an accident, pure and simple."

"If you like accidents, try this on for size," Sarin told her. "Two nights ago, we had a serious fire in the Hive... not unusual for slums, but my bloods tell me it took out several buildings the Xaositects used as headquarters."

Lady Erin's eyes narrowed. "So you're sayin' there've been three disasters in three faction headquarters..."

"Four disasters," Guvner Hashkar corrected. "The City Courts are headquarters to my faction."

"And all four involved fire," the captain added. "How's that for coincidence?"

"All right," Lady Erin said. "I'm callin' an emergency session in the Hall of Speakers. One hour from now. Every factol of every faction, if they can make it. Can you send out runners, Captain?"

"I'll pass the word," Sarin nodded.

"And are you finished with Mr. Cavendish?"

The captain nodded again.

"Then," she said, turning to me, "I'd appreciate you waitin' for me at the Festhall. It may be some time before I get back there, but my steward'll see to your needs—food, a place to sleep, don't hesitate to ask. Of course, you realize none of what you've just heard can leave this room?"

"Of course, my lady." I bowed very low.

"Very well then," she smiled grimly, "let's all get to work. It's promisin' to be a long night."



The three factols hurried out immediately. The rest of us, lieutenant, corporals and I, all kept bowing until the door closed behind them. Who knows if factols really care whether people bow to them or not? But I, for one, didn't want to be the first person to defy the custom to their faces.

The lieutenant waited for a good count of twenty before opening the door to leave. I suppose she wanted to make sure the factols were well gone before she ventured into the hall—like me, she must have had enough bowing for one day. Trying not to be obvious about it, she looked both ways to check that the corridor was empty; then she instructed the corporals to handle my release, and sped away to other duties.

Releasing me was simply a matter of returning my money pouch and the other things I'd been carrying when arrested. None of my possessions were particularly ominous: my keys, some peanuts in a small cloth bag, and a chip of quartz which gave off a permanent lantern-like glow, thanks to a fellow Sensate who was now loafing as the Witch-Queen of some scruffy Prime world. Still, the Harmonium had impounded everything in my pockets, just on general principle. If I were some kind of mage (which I'm not), a harmless piece of lint might have been all I needed to turn everyone in the barracks into fruitbats.

While I was reattaching my money pouch to my belt, the sergeant who interrogated me strode in. His face hardened when he saw me; I assumed he wasn't happy about my being released, perhaps on the theory that everyone must be guilty of something. That's

the Harmonium for you.

“So they’re letting you walk,” he said after a long glare in my direction. “Don’t get cocky about it, Cavendish. You and that Clueless friend of yours better stay out of trouble—I’m keeping an eye on you both.”

“I don’t suppose you could keep your eye on Hezekiah in the barracks here... just long enough to give me a ten minute headstart?”

“Trying to give him the slip, eh?” The sergeant stroked his beard thoughtfully. “If you were a crook, Cavendish—and of course I know you’re not, you’re a gentleman with friends in high places who can spring you from choky even when it makes more sense to keep you locked up—but if you were a crook, I’d think you might be trying to beat your partner-in-crime to something. Maybe race off to a case where you’ve stashed some jink, and clear it out before the boy can stop you.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “Sergeant, you’ve missed your calling. Say the word and I’ll put you in touch with some friends of mine in the publishing trade; they’re always looking for bloods with a flair for fiction. In the meantime, good night to you.”

My words were wasted. I intended to turn my back on him with a lofty air and make my way out of the barracks, surrounded by an air of wounded dignity. Unfortunately, the sergeant had scuttled off before I finished speaking, so I was left addressing the end of my speech to an empty doorway.

I finished arranging my money pouch and started toward the main doors of the building. As I’ve mentioned, it was a busy night in the barracks, with guards running to and fro, alone or in packs that completely blocked the corridor. They were in a hurry and I was in a hurry; but they had truncheons and swords, so I was the one who flattened against the wall to let them pass.

Still, I eventually made it to the door and out into the stale midnight air of Sigil. I stopped on the front steps to take a breath, free once more... and at that moment, the sergeant bustled out of the building with Hezekiah in tow.

“There you are, Cavendish!” the sergeant called. “Aren’t you forgetting your friend?”

“Hi!” the boy chirped, holding out his knuckly hand for me to shake. “Good thing we managed to catch you before you got away.”

“Oh yes,” I said glumly. “Such a good thing.”



At the bottom of the steps, Hezekiah waved a cheery farewell to the sergeant. The sergeant waved back, but his beady little eyes gleamed in my direction, like a whist player who’s just produced an unexpected trump.

“Nice people, these guards,” Hezekiah said, oblivious to the exchange of glances between me and the sergeant. “I offered to buy them a round of drinks at their favorite tavern, but they must be too busy investigating the fire.”

“If you’re interested in nightlife,” the sergeant put in, “stick with Cavendish. I overheard Lady Erin tell him to meet her at the Civic Festhall.”

“The Civic Festhall?” Hezekiah asked, perky with interest.

“Thank you very much, sergeant,” I growled. “Isn’t it time you served and protected someone else?”

He bowed smirkingly to me. “Good night, Cavendish. I’m sure you two will enjoy

yourselves.” Chuckling to himself, he sauntered back into the barracks.

“The Civic Festhall?” Hezekiah repeated, grabbing my arm. “Is that some rundown ginmill frequented by rogues and vermin? Because while I’m in Sigil, I’d love to visit a den of iniquity.”

“The Civic Festhall is not a den of iniquity,” I snapped. “Just because it’s run by Sensates, people make up the most ridiculous rumors. Look, I’ll show you.”

I pulled him into the middle of the street where we had a good clear view of the sky. As I’ve mentioned before, Sigil doesn’t have the kind of sky you get in mundane worlds. Sigil is round like a wheel: the inside rim of a wheel roughly twenty miles around. When you look up, you peer through the sooty air to see the opposite side of the city five miles overhead; and from where we stood outside the City Barracks, the brightest light in the night sky was the Civic Festhall. It shone with a welcoming yellow glow, and all around it were hundreds of other lights, beaming from music halls, cafes and, yes, the occasional bordello, all to entertain citizens with more varied tastes than getting bubbled up in some grimy alehouse that waters the beer.

“That,” I said, pointing, “is the Civic Festhall. That is where you go for opera, or symphony concerts, or performing bears. It has three art galleries, the finest museum of antiquities in the multiverse, and an arena where you can go every night for a year and never see the same sport twice. If you want to drink, the central bistro can sell you a wine so delicate it evaporates before it even touches your tongue; it can also sell you rotgut so potent, not only will you stay drunk for the rest of your life, but so will your children and their children. Does that give you some idea of what the place has to offer?”

“The Civic Festhall,” Hezekiah murmured in a thoughtful tone of voice. “Uncle Toby says there’s a place where women...” He leaned over and whispered in my ear.

“Oh,” I said, “that’s the half-time show in the arena. Why do you think people sit and watch all those sports they’ve never seen before?”

“Then let’s get a move on!” the boy whooped; and he started off down the street, with the lights of the Festhall sparkling in his eye.



On a normal night, I never would have walked the streets of Sigil without my father’s rapier hanging at my hip—even the best-lit boulevards have footpads and worse hiding in the side alleys. However, only the Guvners and Harmonium could wear swords into the City Courts, so I had reluctantly left my weapon at home when I headed out to my painting assignment. Now, crossing the city at midnight, I could feel eyes watching me from every shadow.

Fortunately, the Harmonium was out in force that night: guards standing at every major corner, and others scurrying hither, thither, and yon on unknown errands. Speaking of guards, I noticed a burly dwarf woman (at least I think it was a woman; it’s hard to tell with dwarves) dogging our heels about five lampposts back. She wasn’t wearing the official neckerchief, but she had the unmistakable trudging walk that marked her as a Harmonium patroller. No doubt this dwarf was a plainclothes gift from my friend, the sergeant—someone to watch in case I gave Hezekiah the slip and ran off on an unbridled crime spree.

The more I thought about it, however, the wiser it seemed to keep Hezekiah close at

hand. He and I had witnessed a theft that might be part of a city-wide conspiracy. If I left him to his own devices, he'd soon find himself one of those "dens of iniquity" where he'd spill everything he knew to the assembled company of cross-traders and bawds. Word would travel through the seedy parts of Sigil, eventually reaching the ears of the thieves we'd seen that afternoon. Maybe they wouldn't care that they'd been spotted; but maybe they'd decide it was prudent to silence those who could identify them.

Hezekiah would get his throat cut first. Then they'd come for me.

When I looked at the situation in that light, Hezekiah had to be kept under wraps—for his own safety, as well as mine—and that meant I had to play his minder until I could shuck off the responsibility on someone else. Maybe when I spoke with Lady Erin later in the evening, I could persuade her to find a more willing babysitter.



With so many guards roaming the streets, we made it to the Festhall without incident... barring the half dozen times I had to pull Hezekiah away from draggle-tail ladies of the evening. Of course, the little Clueless didn't understand what they meant by,

"Hey bloods, want a bit of lather?"; he grew more and more convinced that Sigil was filled with 24-hour public baths.

Pulling Hezekiah through the outer approaches to the Festhall was even harder. Admittedly, I couldn't hold that against him; from conjurors to lutists to acrobats, the walkways of the Festhall are crammed with charming and talented performers, highly skilled in capturing a newcomer's attention. I noticed my companion dipping frequently into his purse to find coins to drop in the buskers' bowls—so frequently and with so many coins, I began to wonder how much money Hezekiah had. For that matter, I wondered how so much silver managed to come from such a slim little purse. Perhaps that was another bit of magic from the famed Uncle Toby.

As we continued to pass singers and jugglers and contortionists, I began to feel guilty about hurrying the boy off to Lady Erin's office. This was Hezekiah's first visit to the Festhall; he should have a chance to experience everything he could... provided I found some way to keep him out of real trouble.

Casting about for a solution to my quandary, I caught sight of a familiar face and waved her over to us. Lillian fa Liranill was thirty-two like me; but since she was an elf, she was still an adolescent and she gloried in it. The two of us had joined the Society of Sensation in the same group ceremony, and we had enjoyed a brother/sister relationship ever since.

Lillian was more than just lively and delightful; she was infinitely delightful, taking bubbly pleasure even in the plainest, most humdrum aspects of existence. I once watched her write a letter to a friend, pausing every three seconds to ponder what color of ink to use for the next word... and no matter what color she chose, she always giggled at the effect. For a cherubically cheerful guide to the enticements of the Festhall, you couldn't do better than Lillian.

She wasn't half bad as an artist's model either.

"Lil," I said, raising my voice to be heard above a pair of nearby drummers, "this is Hezekiah Virtue. He's just new to Sigil."

“Really!” Her eyes opened wide. “You’re just new to Sigil?”

“Yes ma’am,” the boy gulped, “I’m just new.”

“Glad we’ve got that clear,” I said. “I was wondering, Lil, if you’d like to show Hezekiah some of the sights of the Festhall.”

Her eyes opened even wider. “He’d like to see some of the sights?”

“Yes ma’am,” Hezekiah assured her, “I’ve been really looking forward to seeing the sights.”

“Perhaps you could show him around,” I suggested to Lillian.

Her eyes opened wider still; Lillian’s eyes had the gift of being infinitely expandable. “Would you like me to show you around?” she asked Hezekiah.

“I’d love for you to show me around,” he answered.

“Then it’s settled,” I said. Drawing Lillian aside, I whispered, “Hezekiah went through a terrible ordeal this afternoon, and it would do him good to forget about the experience for a while. Can you make sure he doesn’t dwell on what happened? Don’t let him start talking about it, to you or anyone else. Keep his mind on other things.”

“I can keep his mind on other things,” she promised with those wide open eyes of hers. Turning back to Hezekiah, she slipped her arm around his waist and snuggled in close to him. “What do you want to see first?” she asked. “There’s so much we can do.”

Trying not to chuckle, I headed off to Lady Erin’s offices. Hezekiah would never know what hit him.



The factol’s suite was tucked into the most inaccessible part of the Festhall, guarded by one of those irascible old men who never goes anywhere, yet seems to know everything. You know the type: think of that local tavern owner who never strays farther than the wine cellar... but if you witness some duel in the streets and race around to tell the news, he already knows the details, he can explain what started the quarrel in the first place, and he even tells you the prognosis from the surgeon attending the wounded.

Lady Erin’s steward, TeeMorgan, was like that. He was a bariaur—much like a centaur, but from the chest down he looked more like a ram than a horse, and he had curled ram’s horns sprouting from his forehead. “So,” he said the moment he caught sight of me, “you were in the middle of that fiasco in the Courts today. You and that Clueless boy. Have you thrown him down a privy or what?”

“Lillian has taken him under her wing,” I answered. “Do you have any food handy? I haven’t eaten since lunch.”

“Hmph,” he grumped. “Seems to me if a Sensate wants to experience everything in life, starvation is one of the first things on the list.”

“I fasted for a month and a half the year I turned twenty-five,” I told him.

“And the paintings you did then were your only ones worth looking at,” he retorted. “All these portraits and landscapes and still-lifes of yours... whatever happened to good old abstraction? Painting what you feel instead of what you see—that’s what I call art. Where’s the point of painting a bowl of grapes that just looks like a bowl of grapes? But put little screaming faces on each grape, and that’s a statement.”

“I wouldn’t mind some grapes right about now,” I said.

“Yeah, try to change the subject. But take your portrait of Factol Sarin hanging in the

City Barracks... my four-year-old could understand it. You call that art?"

"I call it my job. People pay me to paint pictures that look like pictures, TeeMorgan. They don't come to me for statements, they come for grapes you can recognize as grapes. Judging by the amount of gold they're willing to pay, they're happy with what they get."

"Oh yes, gold," TeeMorgan growled. "You're a Sensate, Cavendish—you should acquire a taste for more than one mineral. What would your father think of a son who was content to be a mediocrity?"

I caught my breath and bit back true anger. TeeMorgan and I frequently had these jousting matches about art, but mentioning my father was going too far. The look on my face must have told the bariaur he'd entered forbidden territory, because he turned away and made a gruff noise in his throat. "Pike all this arguing," he said. "I'll check what we've got in the pantry."

His hoofs clacked loudly as he cantered into a back room; and I was left alone with thoughts of my father.

My father, Niles Cavendish, was a hero: a champion swordsman, a dashing adventurer, a savior of the downtrodden. A city like Sigil never lacks for heroes, of course—every night in every tavern, you'll hear some berk boasting how he slew the Five-Headed Monster of Whatsit or retrieved the Gold Talisman of Who-Cares. But Niles Cavendish was a real hero, a hero known for his exploits throughout the multiverse... ready to rush into the Abyss to rescue a kidnapped princess, or dive into the River Styx to save a drowning puppy.

Twelve years had passed since he disappeared, and I still couldn't think about him without clenching my hands into fists.

TeeMorgan stuck his head in from the pantry doorway. "We got some cold beef left over from dinner, and a new delicacy called swineberries. I assume you want some?"

"Beef yes, berries no."

"And you call yourself a Sensate," TeeMorgan muttered. He stomped off to get me a plate.



Lady Erin arrived just as a nearby clock chimed six in the morning. I had been dozing lightly on a couch in her office, an exotic piece of furniture upholstered with a hide I suspected had once been attached to a basilisk.

"Don't be gettin' up," she said as she bustled in and threw a stack of papers onto her desk. "I've only a few words to say, then I'll let you get back to sleep. You'll need all the rest you can get."

"May I ask why, my lady?"

"Special duty in the service of our faction," she replied. "I've convinced the other factols someone's systematically attacking all our faction headquarters. Naturally, it's too much to expect that we band together against a common foe..." She threw a rueful glance over her shoulder in the general direction of the Hall of Speakers. "But we've worked out a tiny cooperative effort.

"Each faction," she went on, "will protect its headquarters however it sees fit. Here at the Festhall, we'll have to hire mercenaries, and won't that add to the cheery atmosphere? But that's not your problem. The council also agreed to assemble cross-factional

teams of observers outside each headquarters—not helpin’ with protection but watchin’ for suspicious activities. If an attack or disaster takes place, the teams are forbidden to involve themselves; we don’t want them gettin’ distracted by a showy diversion. Observer teams’ll hold back and look smaller things... like a githyanki and githzerai runnin’ out the back door of the building.”

“I assume you want me on one of these teams?” I said.

“Exactly,” she nodded. “You have a keen eye, and you’ve seen the thieves. That’s an advantage I don’t want to waste. Also, I understand you can take care of yourself if it comes to a fight... right?”

She smiled at me as if that were a joke—as if we both knew that the son of Niles Cavendish had to be a formidable warrior. Surely my father taught me all his fighting tricks.

No. He taught me nothing.

For months, sometimes years at a time, the legendary adventurer simply wasn’t home: off swashbuckling through the multiverse, leaving my mother and me to struggle through on our own. When he came home his pockets were full of gold; but after a brief splurge of gift-giving, he would spend the rest of his purse on equipment for his next foray, leaving us alone again with nothing. Yes, I did learn to use the rapier, but not from my father. I learned my skills, such as they are, from dearly hired swordmasters—in my youth, because I thought learning the sword would impress my father if he ever took the time to notice, then later because so many brash young bashers believed they could make their reputations by challenging a Cavendish.

On the eve of my twentieth birthday, the survivors of my father’s last expedition brought his rapier back and told us he was “lost”... not killed for certain, just lost. Vanished without a trace, one night in the Outlands. And even though we knew he had to be dead, my mother and I still couldn’t shake off the slim hope he might one day show up on the doorstep, smiling, charming, full of stories. Year after year we hoped; until now, after twelve years, hope had become a tired thing that only occasionally returned to torment us, when a stranger’s voice or walk suddenly brought to mind the great flamboyant Niles.

Lost is worse than dead. But I had my father’s rapier, and yes, I did know how to fight.

“I can protect myself,” I told Lady Erin. “If it comes to that.”

“We hope it doesn’t,” she nodded. “If you catch sight of those thieves again, don’t go tryin’ anything brave; just follow them back to their base of operations. Once we know where they are... well, this group has killed people from four different factions, so we’ll have no problem findin’ volunteers to rip the berks to pieces.”

“How much do the other factions know?” I asked. “Did you tell them the attack at the court building was just a diversion for the theft?”

Lady Erin shook her head. “I didn’t want to give away the dark in an open meeting. Not that I think any factol is behind this, but some of those berks have notoriously loose lips. They’ve agreed the observation teams should track suspicious persons, and that’s enough. We’ll make sure each team has a Sensate, Guvner, or Harmonium guard who knows the chant and is watchin’ for the right things.”

“So there won’t be someone from each faction on every team?”

“Heaven forbid!” she laughed grimly. “I’m aimin’ for five or six people per team. With so much distrust between factions, it’ll be hard enough to get a half dozen sods to work together without comin’ to blows; representin’ all fifteen factions would make the job impossible. I have firsthand experience—I’ve just come from a meetin’ of all fifteen factions.” She gave a rueful grin.

“So these teams...” I said. “You’ll want us watching twenty-four hours a day?”

She nodded. “Each faction’ll set up an observation post for you, somewhere with a good close view of the headquarters building. Runners’ll bring you regular meals—on the sly, of course, so the enemy doesn’t notice. It’ll be up to the teams to decide who sleeps when, but there should be at least two people peelin’ an eye for trouble at all times.”

“And we keep watching until something happens.”

“You keep watchin’ until you have to stop.” Lady Erin walked around to the well-padded chair behind her desk, and slumped into it wearily. “Joint efforts between factions never last long, Britlin. Minor differences become major squabbles, arguments become brawls, and eventually you get duels, fights, puttin’ each other in the dead-book... the factols all promise to pick their most ‘tolerant’ people, but still I’d guess we have three days tops before the operation falls apart. If even one team gets out of hand, it’ll spike our try at secrecy and the enemy’ll know what we’re up to. So,” she said, “you keep watching till you or some other team blows the dark. After that, there’s no point.”

Three days. Three days out of my schedule, with the deadline for Guvner Hashkar’s commission coming up. Since the first painting had burned in the fire, I’d have to start again from scratch... but then, if Guvner Hashkar wanted a picture of the rotunda as it looked now, I could just smear black paint all over the canvas. There was a statement for you.

Anyway, I had no choice—a man doesn’t refuse a special assignment from his factol. In the morning, I’d ask Lady Erin to send a note to Hashkar, regretfully stating he’d have to find some other wedding present for his wife’s cousin.

There was, however, one more matter that had to be handled tonight. “What about Hezekiah?” I asked. “We can’t let him rattle his bone-box all around the city if we’re trying to keep this business dark.”

“I’ve been thinkin’ about that,” Lady Erin answered, “and it strikes me it’s high time Outsiders were allowed to play a more active role in city politics. At the last census, they outnumbered every established faction in Sigil... includin’ the Chaosmen who all filled out five census forms apiece. Such a hefty number of folks deserve representation in some way; and postin’ Hezekiah to an observation team strikes me as the perfect first step.”

I winced. “Whose team did you have in mind?”

The factol just smiled.

CHAPTER THREE



THREE DAYS WITH THE DEAD

begun to brighten when I let myself into Cavendish Case—a two-storey flagstone house only a few blocks from the Festhall. My father had bought this place the day I was born, as he never tired of telling me: one of the few topics of conversation between us that didn't dwindle into awkward silence.

I had intended to slip inside quietly, pick up some things I would need for the next few days, then slip out again. Of course, I'd leave my mother

THE SKY HAD

a note explaining that I'd be gone for a while... and of course, I wouldn't tell her the truth. Something like, "Urgent commission for the Modron Ambassador—must stay at Mechanus embassy till finished." That would please her and avoid the unpleasantness of lying to her face...

...except that she was standing in the front hall as I slunk inside.

"And did we make a special friend last night?" she asked sweetly.

"No, Mother."

"Britlin," she said, "a gentleman's only civilized excuse for staying out till dawn is if he spent the night with a lady. All other alternatives are d..."

"Yes, Mother."

She gave me a winsome smile—Mother had somehow convinced herself I was accumulating a long string of romantic conquests. The truth was much more restrained: yes, there had been a handful of women (and one or two of those had been quite a handful!) but I was no dashing rake with my head on a different pillow every night. Some Sensates strive for quantity and others for quality; I preferred the second approach.

"And what is the news on the street today?" she asked, a question that came up every morning. I rattled off juicy tidbits of rumor about the high and mighty—who was sleeping with whom, who had gone bankrupt in the latest financial scandal, whose souls had been collected overnight by baatezu calling in contractual obligations—a grab-bag of gossip related to me by TeeMorgan when he brought me breakfast at the Festhall. Mother had never met any of the people I talked about, but she nodded knowingly at each blunder and impropriety. The names were unimportant; she simply loved to hear about folly.

She loved to sing about it too. My mother Anne wasn't exactly a bard—she never played for anyone outside the family—but she wrote witty little songs that were then bought by practicing bards from every ward of Sigil. Although Mother didn't know it, the performers always presented the songs as "classical tunes, written in days long past"... mostly to explain why the verses were written in such courtly language.

My mother, in songs as in life, genteelly avoided the slang of the street.

It was a strange occupation for a woman born the daughter of a duke; but then, she had long ago abandoned her heritage, and good riddance to it. Her father Urbin, Duke of Aquilune on some petty Prime world, had been a brutal man, a bully who beat his wife to death and then moved on to his daughter. Anne suffered untold agonies at his hands—untold to me, anyway—but tiny hints over the years suggested Urbin had raped her on numerous occasions, loaned her to his friends for sport, and degraded her in every conceivable way... all of this beginning when she was about eight years old and continuing till the time she turned sixteen.

On the very day of Anne's sixteenth birthday, a young swordsman named Niles Cavendish arrived at Duke Urbin's castle. Bitter though I was at my father for never being home, I could never truly hate him: in the first heroic act of his excessively heroic career, Niles Cavendish had proved himself a saint by saving Anne from her misery. As a child, I believed he had actually killed my wicked grandfather... but the Niles of that day was not such a legendary warrior that he could single-handedly slay a well-guarded duke in the heart of his castle. Niles saved Anne by marrying her, then bringing her back to his hometown of Sigil; and if he won Urbin's permission to wed by holding a rapier to the old berk's throat, neither of my parents would say.

So how does a woman leave behind such a hellish childhood to become a writer of comic songs? One day at a time. It helped that I was born shortly after she arrived in Sigil—taking care of a baby occupied so much of her attention, she had no time for ugly memories. It helped that my father was constantly away adventuring: she could concentrate entirely on her child, without having to coddle a husband too. Sometimes to quiet me, she played the harpsichord my father gave her as a wedding gift; and in time, she began to write little songs to greet him when he finally came home... songs that my father encouraged her to write down, songs that he showed to his bard friends who said they were worth money...

A happy ending, some would say. Some who had never seen the scar down my mother's cheek, made by a drunken uncle who wanted to test a new dagger. Some who had never seen the empty eyesocket that she refused to explain. Some who didn't know that in the thirty-two years she'd lived in Sigil, Anne Cavendish had never stepped outside the house or seen another face besides my father and me. Before I was old enough to do the shopping, delivery boys dropped food into a chute out front and Mother shoved their payment through a slot in the door. Even when she began to sell her songs, she couldn't bear to meet customers—one of Father's friends acted as her agent, picking up sheet music left on the front stoop and sliding the proceeds under the door.

In short, Mother laughed, she told jokes, she was utterly charming... but even I couldn't venture too close without making her flinch.

We blew each other a lot of kisses.

"I should tell you," I said when I finally ran out of gossip, "I won't be around for a few days. Maybe as long as a week."

"Good for you, Britlin!" she beamed. "Whoever you met last night must be ravenous for more."

"It's not a woman, Mother..."

"A man then? I'm broadminded. Is he cute?"

“It’s... an assignment. A painting assignment.”

“I see: painting.” She said it with a sly wink, as if she knew that couldn’t possibly be the truth.

Sometimes, I had to reflect how lucky I was my mother never got out of the house. Otherwise, she’d bring home a different woman to meet me every night, desperately wanting her son to be showered with constant, all-consuming adoration. I was her substitute, a stand-in who might find the kind of passion she dreamed of: not Duke Urbin’s bestial lust; not my own father’s heroic pity; “a soul-completing love, a mutual cherishment to make weak hearts brave.”

That last bit was from one of her songs.

“I have to pack some things,” I told her.

“By all means,” she replied. “A gentleman always takes appropriate precautions.”

I laughed and shook my head. Some days, my mother had an unshakably one-track mind. As I began to climb the stairs, she called after me, “Wear the brown jacket, dear, and those nice black pants. They make you look so handsome, your lady will peel off your clothes with her teeth.”



When I returned to the Festhall, I was wearing my father’s best rapier, and carrying a sketchbook to while away my off-hours for the next few days. Just inside the door, a factotum gave me a note from Lillian (every word a different color), saying I could find Hezekiah in an inn called She Who Sings the Sky. The place was just down Crystal Dew Lane and it had a good reputation—more expensive than most but the price bought you a good night’s sleep without interruption by cracksmen or body-baggers. The next time I saw Lillian I’d have to congratulate her for ensuring the boy’s safety.

By the time I got to the inn, Hezekiah was awake and seated at the breakfast table, munching through a stack of Outland pancakes as tall as the Great Foundry’s chimney. For a moment I worried he might have spilled some secrets to the other patrons eating there; but the long-suffering woman cooking the pancakes said he had talked about nothing but Lillian and the Festhall.

Indeed, that’s all he spoke of the whole time he was finishing his meal. Lillian did this, Lillian said that; and had I ever gone dancing along the Walk of Worlds? (Hezekiah, I designed one of the chambers along the walk—the room depicting Pelion, a layer of Arborea. To prepare for the commission, I spent three months in Pelion, slogging my way through an infinite expanse of white sand, all the time muttering to myself, “How in The Lady’s name can I create a romantic little bower based on nothing but desert?” Still, a sphinx here, a pyramid there, and a few ruins crumbling by candlelight did the trick... not to mention the clever touch of posting signs that said PLEASE REMOVE ALL FOOTWEAR. Few couples can dance barefoot through soft warm sand without longing to disappear together behind the nearest dune.)

Thus I listened to Hezekiah enthuse about my work as we left the inn and walked out into the street. It was a drizzly day in Sigil, with raindrops so dainty you could ignore them until you were soaked to the bone. On the streets around us, most people carried umbrellas and wore irritable expressions that grew more sullen as the rain continued; but I and the other Sensates we passed had our faces open to the wet, grinning as water

streamed down our cheeks. There's an especially delightful moment when a big droplet trickles down the back of your neck, so cold it makes you squirm... yet it seems that Sensates are the only ones who appreciate the experience.

Although our destination was almost diametrically across the hub from the Festhall, we made the trip in well under an hour thanks to Hezekiah's never-ending supply of gold: he simply hired a hippogriff hansom to fly us straight across the ring. For once, the boy showed some common sense—we both spent the entire trip with our heads stuck out the windows of the cab, lapping at the brownish rainwater and enthusing over how far down it was to the ground. Whenever one of us shouted, "Look at that!" the hippogriffs all gave fierce eagle-like screeches... which either meant, "Yes, isn't it interesting?" or "Pipe down, you sodding berks."

You never can tell with hippogriffs.



In time, the cab set us down beside Ragpickers Square, in the looming shadow of our destination—Sigil's Mortuary, headquarters to the Dustmen. Historians claim that five hundred years ago, the Mortuary was nothing more than a massive granite dome, shaped like a beehive; but since that time the Dustmen have expanded and embellished, adding side towers and outbuildings, plus a frenzy of ornamentation around the dome itself. Now there are bat-winged gargoyles mounted in a circle around the peak, and trellises of razorvine growing up the walls; now, the front entrance is flanked by giant frescoes depicting all the Death Deities of the multiverse; and now the crowning glory above the entrance is a stained glass window, two storeys tall, fifty feet wide. Every pane of glass in that window is a subtly different shade of black.

"Wow!" said Hezekiah. "What a great-looking place! I bet it's spooky at night. Do they give tours?"

"No," I answered, "they give funerals."

Although it was still before peak, several mourning parties stood queued outside the main door, suggesting that the dozen ceremony rooms inside were already occupied. I wondered how many of the corpses lined up for the final send-off were victims of the massacre at the Courts yesterday. No way to tell. Each corpse would be taken inside, prepared according to whatever rituals were desired by the next of kin, and finally launched through portals into other planes of the multiverse—to a heaven or a hell if the deceased had shown a preference during life, or maybe just to the Elemental Plane of Fire for instant cremation.

"Excuse me, honored sir," said a voice by my side. "Would you have the privilege to be Britlin Cavendish?"

I turned to see a sallow-faced gnome kowtowing in the vicinity of my ankles. He wore a shapeless gray robe that was much too long for him; probably, it had been tailored for a short human, which meant that fully half of it piled up in folds around his three-foot-tall frame. The collar of his robe bore a tiny embroidered skull in the faded yellow and orange colors of the Dustmen.

"Yes," I replied, "I'm Britlin Cavendish. And this is my... this is Hezekiah Virtue."

"An honor, an honor," the gnome said, taking Hezekiah's hand in both of his own and squeezing repeatedly. "You may call me Wheezle—everybody does. If I ever had

another name, I've forgotten it by now."

He gave a little laugh as if we should take this as a joke. For politeness' sake I smiled, but his attitude didn't fool me. Gnomes in Sigil place great stock on their names, and most of them take pride in introducing themselves at length, complete with genealogies and incomprehensible honorifics: "I have the privilege to be Quando-Master Spurrit Vellosheen Legrunner, eldest son of Jance-Leader Vellosheen Spurrit Legrunner, late of the Order of the Vole, but recently advanced to the House of Frequent Bubbles, twice enwreathed." If you meet a gnome who only gives a nickname, he's either a criminal concealing his identity or a wizard whose magic would be jeopardized by speaking his name aloud.

"What can we do for you, Wheezzle?" I asked.

"No, honored Cavendish, it is what I can do for you," he replied. "My superiors instructed me to watch for you and escort you to... a place nearby."

"A place we can keep an eye on the entrance to the Mortuary?"

"Indeed. If you would walk this way?"

He gestured toward a tenement building across the street... although calling it a building perhaps too generous. It looked more like a rickety piece of wooden sculpture, constructed by an untalented art student who needed lessons in carpentry. The only things propping it up were a line of equally seedy tenements on either side, leaning inward so the building in the middle had nowhere to fall. Further structural reinforcement was added by ample quantities of razorvine that twined up the front face of the building in a solid sheet of thorns.

"You want us to go in there?" I asked.

"It is an excellent location," Wheezzle answered. "As you can see, its height gives it a superlative view; from the seventh floor, you can observe the front entrance of the Mortuary and much of the back. Even better, the building has no tenants right now."

"That's because it's going to collapse any second!"

"Factol Skall guarantees its structure is fundamentally sound," Wheezzle said. "At least for a few days."

"It looks fine to me," Hezekiah chipped in. "Come on, Britlin, this will be fun."

Reluctantly, I followed the two of them toward the tenement. Whether or not it was structurally sound, the building was made from very old wood—the kind that would blaze like straw if our flame-happy enemies pluffed it with a fireball. Silently, I whispered a prayer to The Lady of Pain that the drizzle would keep falling until the wood became too wet to burn.



The design of the tenement was simple: two single-room apartments on each floor, and a wobbly staircase up the middle. Judging by the smell of the lobby, every apartment had once housed a minimum of five weak-bladdered cats.

The doors of both ground-floor apartments were missing. So were the windows. Rain pattered in from the outside, and ran across the badly slanted floors to pool up in the corners. In spite of myself, I began to look forward to a few days in the place—I had never stayed in such a decrepit building before. If I was lucky, it would even have rats.

The stairs creaked loudly as we started up to the higher floors. Wheezzle tried to put

this in a positive light. “As you can tell, your honors, we need not fear enemies creeping silently up from below.”

“We?” I asked. “You’ll be watching with us?”

“Factol Skall deemed it helpful for one of our faction to join you,” the gnome answered. “In case you had any questions about our ways.” Which meant that Factol Skall wanted his own man planted in our party, to spy on us and report any undesirable activities. No doubt every other faction in the city was doing the same thing.

We climbed all the way to the top, constantly brushing away the filmy cling of spider webs. The stairs teetered under our weight and I made a point of staggering my footsteps not to match Hezekiah and Wheeze—if we all walked in pace, we might give the staircase a timed wobble that would bring the whole thing crashing down. It didn’t help that the top flight of steps was slick with water, dribbling in through dozens of holes in the roof. Much as the seventh floor afforded the best view of the Mortuary, I suspected the team would prefer to set lookouts on the sixth or even fifth floor... somewhere the rain couldn’t penetrate so easily.

Then again, when we reached the seventh floor, another member of our party was already there, enduring the leaky roof with no noticeable discomfort: Guvner Oonah DeVail, our brief acquaintance from the Courts. She had brought a folding canvas chair with her, and now sat a short distance back from the window, peering out into the street. Her silver-wired staff leaned up against the wall within easy grabbing distance.

“Fine morning, isn’t it?” she asked. She had managed to place her chair out of the direct line of any of the leaks, but her olive green bush-hat was still sodden with rain. “How are you two feeling?”

“Quite well, your honor,” I bowed.

“Bar that nonsense!” she snapped. “I’m on official leave from the court bench, so you can skip the flowery titles. My name is Oonah, got it? Oonah.”

“Hezekiah Virtue,” my companion said, scuttling forward and holding out his hand. Whatever Prime backwater the boy came from, they were certainly big on handshakes. But DeVail was happy to reciprocate, grabbing Hezekiah’s hand and pumping it heartily.

“Heard you two saved a library yesterday,” she said. “Bully for you. Top marks.”

I tried to look suitably modest; Hezekiah just blushed.

“A thousand pardons, honored ones,” Wheeze interjected, “but I must return below to meet the other guests. Good deaths to you all.” He kowtowed and slipped away.

Since this might be our only moment alone with Judge DeVail, I had to ask the vital question. “Guvner,” I said, then corrected myself, “Oonah... have you figured out what the thieves took from your office?”

“Yes and no,” she replied in a low voice. “I believe they took a scroll written by my mother some forty years ago. People sometimes call me an explorer, but my mother Felice... she was ten times the traveler I ever hoped to be. In her lifetime she touched on all the Outer Planes—all the heavens, all the hells—as well as the Elemental Planes and more than a dozen Prime Material worlds. No one else ever rambled around the multiverse like Felice did.”

I might have countered that my father had easily matched Felice DeVail’s achievements; but I refused to play the pathetic cast-off son, boasting on his dad’s behalf. Sometime, I would have to find out if Niles had ever gone a’rambling with Oonah’s

mother.

“When she died last year,” DeVail continued, “Felice left me her diaries: a treasure trove of stories and multiverse lore. I was slowly working my way through each scroll, indexing, annotating, getting them ready for more extensive scholarly research... and the sad truth is, I hadn’t gotten around to the scroll the thieves took. I have no idea what was in it.”

“The thieves said something about dust,” Hezekiah said.

DeVail shrugged. “If you know the right portal, you can get to an entire universe of the stuff—the Quasielemental Plane of Dust. It’s a flat sea of grit stretching infinitely in all directions: no water, no truly solid ground... and no air in the atmosphere, so no wind to disturb the dusty surface. On top of that, the dust is hungry; leave your armor unattended for a day, and it’ll disintegrate to dust too. I’ve never been there, but my mother visited once. She hated it.”

“And she didn’t mention anything special about the plane?” I asked. “The thieves said she’d drawn a map. Maybe a treasure map?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Oonah answered. “She was always reluctant to talk about her travels... to talk about anything, really. My mother would much rather ferry down the River Styx than make after-dinner conversation, even with close friends. Self-effacing to a fault when she wasn’t roving around the wilds.”

Maybe Felice DeVail didn’t talk to her daughter, I thought, but she must have talked to someone; otherwise, how did the thieves know there’d be something interesting in the scroll? Or perhaps Oonah herself had talked about her mother where the wrong ears could overhear. However, before I could ask Oonah who knew she had the diaries, the stairway shuddered with a flurry of rattles and creaks.

“More company,” the Guvner said.

Like a puppy, Hezekiah rushed to see who was coming. A moment later, he ran back to us. “There are two of them with Wheezle,” he whispered. “And one is a tiefling.”

I looked at Oonah. She gave a noncommittal shrug and turned her eyes toward the stairs. No doubt, both of us knew a few tieflings who weren’t antisocial ruffians; but the vast majority of their kind went through life in a state of ill-controlled hostility, believing the world despised them and doing their best to despise it back.

Why? Just because they looked a bit different from normal humans. Nothing very obvious—maybe slightly feline eyes or a curling prehensile tail, maybe dark greenish hair or a small set of horns. Some blamed these deviations on demon blood in the family tree, but others said it was simply the price of life in the wide open multiverse; once humans left the placid safety of the Prime Material plane, their children occasionally developed unusual traits. I could see no shame in being a plane-touched child... but the tieflings turned their tiny slivers of difference into massive chips on their shoulders.

The tiefling coming up the stairs, for example—a young woman, and a strikingly attractive one, even if she did have spiky reptilian crests running up the flat of each forearm. They were nothing more than white bony ridges against the taffy brown of her skin, easily mistaken for ornamental bracers if your eyes weren’t as sharp as mine; I’d happily hire a woman this lean and lithe to pose in my studio. However, the look on the tiefling’s face clearly stated she would never consent to be my model. In fact, she’d probably run me through with her longsword just for suggesting it. She wore a

tight-fitting black sheath of genuine dragon skin, and her hand rested lightly on the pommel of her sword, as if she were just waiting for one of us to disparage her race.

Embossed on the breast of the dragon skin was the horned skull symbol of the Doomguard—just the sort of faction that attracted tieflings. The Doomguard held a “leave things alone” attitude toward life; or more precisely, they had a dizzying passion for entropy and would love nothing more than watching the multiverse slowly grind to a halt. They took offense at any interference with the gradual dissolution of existence, whether you tried to slow the disintegration through gratuitous creativity or speed it up through aggressive destruction. With the Doomguard’s “keep your hands off the world” philosophy, was it any wonder tieflings found the faction in tune with their own feelings?

“Greetings again, honored ones,” said Wheezy as he led the newcomers toward us. “May I introduce Yasmin Asparm of the Doomguard, and Initiate Brother Kiripao of the Transcendent Order?”

If tiefling Yasmin was a fireball waiting to explode, Brother Kiripao was an icy mountain quivering on the verge of avalanche. He was an elf, his age impossible to guess; and he moved with a graceful serenity unusual even for one of his race. With vibrant green eyes, hair shaved clean off, a composed smile on his face as he bowed to greet us... well, he intimidated me ten times more than Yasmin. There’s something about a certain type of monk that promises he can pummel you to pudding with his bare hands, all the while discussing the delicate art of flower arrangement. Not that Brother Kiripao was completely unarmed—I noticed a shiny black set of nunchakus tucked into his belt sash, and that didn’t put me at ease either.

Worst of all was his faction. The Transcendent Order, also called the Ciphers, subscribed to the belief that people thought too much. If we just stopped filling our heads with ideas, the Order preached, we would become attuned to the harmony of the multiverse.

In the abstract, I could sympathize with such a philosophy; but in the real world, it meant that Ciphers always leaped before they looked. Their training taught that if they could just act without thinking, they’d always do the right thing. It gave them chillingly fast reflexes, which made people like Brother Kiripao invaluable in sudden emergencies when there was no time to debate tactics. However, it also meant they had no faith in measured discussion or advance tactical planning—they believed exclusively in the spur of the moment.

A hotheaded tiefling and a placid elf monk who could change in a split-second to a fighting dervish... it was going to be a long three days.



Throughout the afternoon, funeral processions continued to arrive at the Mortuary. Wheezy and I posted ourselves at a window on the fourth floor to watch them—high enough to give us a good view of the street, low enough that we could still make out faces in the crowd. Brother Kiripao and Hezekiah volunteered for the drizzly watch up on the seventh floor; they were supposed to concentrate their observations on the rear entrance and leave the front to us.

Our final pair of companions, Yasmin and Oonah, had retired to rest elsewhere in the building... probably in separate rooms. Guvners and the Doomguard tend to view each

other with suspicion: Guvners spend their lives discovering new laws of the multiverse, gauging their success in life by the number of laws they can unearth; the Doomguard, on the other hand, only recognize the Law of Entropy, and are quick to label the Guvners misguided fools for believing anything else is important. One law versus an ocean of laws—a dispute that has come to blows on many occasions. It was just one example of the inter-faction tensions that continually plague the city.

However, inter-faction relations don't always need to be strained, even when the faction philosophies are diametrically opposed. Wheezle and I, Dustman and Sensate, had a splendid time watching funerals pass beneath us. As a Dustman, the little gnome had an encyclopaedic knowledge of burial customs throughout the multiverse, and he happily explained the actions of each group who filed up to the Mortuary. For example...

"What luck, honored Cavendish! The next group of mourners always brings special delight when one of their fellows dies. They are orcs hailing from a Prime world whose name I am regrettably unable to pronounce, and they have the charming tradition of building their coffins in shapes that have special meaning to the deceased. You will observe that these particular pallbearers carry a casket carved to look like a giant pink trout. Such a mischievous smile on its face... it must be quite a happy fish."

"Do the orcs worship trout?" I asked.

"No," Wheezle answered, "they simply like bright, eye-catching coffins. Existence is hard for orcs, even in Sigil where The Lady's law of live-and-let-live gives them a degree of protection. Even here, orcs seldom enjoy the smallest luxury during their lifetimes. Therefore they build their own coffins long before death approaches, choosing to make those coffins silly or wanton or extravagant—the embodiment of some personal fantasy that can soothe all grievance when their world is harsh. Perhaps this particular orc once saw a rich man eating trout and dreamed of being able to do the same; or perhaps the orc just longed for the freedom to sit quietly on a river bank and catch fish. Who can say? He chose a trout for his own reasons... and throughout his difficult life, he often must have sat beside his pink fish coffin and taken comfort that his death would wear a cheerful face."

Talk like that gave me a greater appreciation of Wheezle, and Dustmen in general. Usually, one only thinks of them as a morbid crew who preach that death is a state of ultimate purity, something we should all work toward. Indeed, they claim that everyone in this world is dead already, that the entire multiverse is the afterlife of some joyous existence elsewhere; all of us must now undergo the agonizing transition from exuberant life to peaceful death, and rejection of death in any form simply makes our path more painful.

Needless to say, the Dustman philosophy doesn't sit well with Sensates. After all, we pride ourselves on being in love with life, the painful parts as well as the pleasurable ones. Most Sensates kill themselves once or twice just to see what death feels like... but we make piking sure we have a top-rate priest standing by to raise us again once we've reaped all we can from the experience.

Still, it was educational to hear Wheezle speak of death so affectionately. Much as I couldn't understand the attraction myself, I always think fondly of people who've found their true loves.



The rain tapered off toward nightfall. The last of the mourners vanished into the building, then hurried out again a few minutes later—the Mortuary stands just inside the Hive slum district, and it's not a safe place to tarry after dark. When night comes, thieves emerge from the shadows to work the old cross-trade; and things blacker still stalk the thieves, for Sigil is a city with many shades of darkness.

A figure emerged from the front doors of the Mortuary: humanoid, but with eyes that burned like dull red embers. It carried a heavy burlap sack in one hand, but let its other hand swing free, displaying a set of razor-sharp claws. Even at this distance, I could smell the stench of decaying flesh.

"Looks like a barrow wight," I whispered to Wheezle, as I quietly drew my rapier. "Nasty things—they can drain the life right out of you. How much do you want to bet the bad guys carried the wight in earlier, pretending it was a corpse? Then the wight got out of its coffin when no one was looking and filled that sack with treasures from your faction."

"It would be unethical to take your bet, honored Cavendish." Wheezle gently laid his hand on my sword and lowering the blade. "The wight's bag does not hold stolen treasure; it holds our supper." He went to the window and waved. "Over here, Eustace," he called softly to the wight. "I trust it is still hot?"

Eustace the Wight curled his lip and uttered a bone-chilling hiss. Wheezle went down to meet him at the door.



The six of us ate our dinner in darkness—lighting the smallest candle might give away our position. Hezekiah and I sat by the window, keeping an eye on the Mortuary throughout the meal.

"Brother Kiripao has been teaching me how to fight," Hezekiah whispered to me. He demonstrated a few jerky punches that came perilously close to my nose. "See?"

"Keep your wrists straight," I murmured. A friend of my father's had believed every well-bred gentleman needed skill in the "manly" arts, so he'd spent several months training me in sportsman-like boxing... not that Brother Kiripao was apt to fight like a sportsman.

"And he's also been telling me about the Transcendent Order," Hezekiah went on. "It's all about emptying your mind."

"You must have great potential," I said.

"Naw," the boy replied. "I got all kinds of stuff in my head. Special tricks and all. From Uncle Toby."

"Good old Uncle Toby."

"You know," Hezekiah whispered, "until I came to Sigil, I thought maybe Uncle Toby and I were the only people in the world who could do special things. Everybody back home was so boring. But here... well, look at us all. Oonah has her staff, Wheezle's an illusionist, Yasmin and Brother Kiripao both have priestly magic..."

"How do you know all that?" I interrupted.

He stared at me as if he didn't understand the question. "I just asked them," he said.

Disquieted, I glanced back at the other four in the room, silently eating their suppers.

All four had magic at their fingertips? But then, they'd been hand-picked by their factols for an important assignment; of course, they'd be the best their factions had to offer. And why had Lady Erin chosen me? I wasn't a wizard or a priest. Yes, I could use a rapier, but mostly I happened to be a witness, assigned to this team solely because I might recognize the thieves.

Maybe I should just sketch the faces of the thieves, give the pictures to my fellow team members, then head for home. They didn't need me; even Hezekiah had more tricks up his sleeve than I did. Mind you, I had one advantage the rest of them lacked: I was completely sane. Scowling Yasmin, placid Kiripao, clueless Hezekiah, death-loving little Wheezele... even Guvner Oonah had her barmy side, the way she rushed off for that showdown with three homicidal fireballers. If I left them all alone, who knew what kind of catastrophes they'd cause without my moderating influence?

Still, the idea of poor mundane Britlin surrounded by five magic-wielding addle-coves... it rattled me. Stepping away from the window, I announced, "It's my turn to sleep. Wake me at the next shift change." Without waiting for objections, I went down the creaky stairs, laid my bedroll in the back of a fifth floor room, and hoped I wouldn't lie awake too long.



Yasmin woke me as first light was dawning. She loomed above me, prodding my ribs repeatedly with her toe, and she didn't stop until I snapped, "All right, all right. I'm conscious."

"You're watching with me on the top floor," she said. "I'll see you up there." As she went out the door, she paused and turned back to me. "You look innocent in your sleep. And you make little sounds."

Without another word she dashed away, and when she hit the staircase, it clattered into a furor of squeaking. I think she was running up the stairs two at a time.



Needless to say, I wondered what I was getting into as I stepped through the doorway of the upstairs room. Yasmin's face was slightly flushed, but whether that was exertion or a blush, I couldn't tell. She glanced at me only for a second, then turned her eyes to the street outside the window.

"Anything happening out there?" I asked.

She shook her head, without shifting her gaze; for a street with nothing going on, it certainly seemed to rivet her attention.

Shrugging, I went to the corner of the room that held the biggest puddle of rainwater... at least an inch deep in some places, thanks to exaggerated warps in the wood of the floor. Carefully, I wet my hands and patted them on my face for a morning wash. The water smelled of dirt and dust; little fibers floated in it, either threads left behind by some carpet that had once lain on this floor or hairs from rats nesting in the building.

I crouched down and lapped up a bit of the puddle, just to see if it tasted like rats, carpet, or something else. The flavor was mostly bland dust, with a slightly smoky tang to it. Did that come from Sigil's normal smog of chimney soot? Or was I tasting the

residue of the fire that had burned through the Hive earlier in the week?

“Did you just put your tongue on this filthy floor?” Yasmin asked from her place by the window.

“Actually I just slurped up some rainwater,” I replied. “However, I’ll happily lick the floor if you think the flavor’s worth it.”

“Sensates!” she growled, and went back to looking out the window.

Since she’d mentioned it, I did try licking the floor but it didn’t impress me. Ordinary varnished cedar—I’d tasted much better in my time.



As the day brightened, traffic picked up on the streets below us. Since Yasmin and I were on the top floor, our job was to look beyond the dome of the Mortuary (four storeys shorter than our tenement perch) and scan the rear entrance for signs of mischief. Not that we could actually see the rear entrance—the dome blocked our view—but we had a clear line of sight to the street passing the backdoor. Down there, members of the unclean underclass called the Collectors were bringing in corpses who got themselves put in the dead-book overnight: old bubbers who’d choked on their own vomit, young ones who liked to pick tavern fights, Clueless newcomers who wandered down the wrong alley. Welcome to Sigil, you leatherheads.

Idly, I picked up my sketchbook, made a few sweeps with my stick of charcoal, then put it down again.

“What’s that you just drew?” Yasmin asked.

“Nothing,” I answered, holding up the page so she could see. “For a moment I considered drawing a stark little streetscape—the Mortuary, with wretched bands of Collectors sneaking in corpses at the backdoor. But I decided against it.”

“Why?”

“Because people don’t like depressing pictures.”

“I do,” Yasmin said.

“Yes, you probably do,” I admitted. “You and the whole Doomguard. And the Dustmen, and the Bleak Cabal, and maybe some other factions too. But my regular customers don’t like depressing pictures. They’d hate seeing such pictures in my studio, and they’d hate hearing that I’d sold such pictures to... people who weren’t like themselves.”

“In other words,” she sneered, “you’re not going to draw something that interests you, because some jink-jigging nobs would disapprove.”

“Disapproval’s not the point,” I replied. “It’s just that whenever I pick up charcoal or paintbrush, I have two choices: create something that earns money or waste my time on something that doesn’t. A man has to be practical.” For my mother’s sake, I might have added—keeping up Cavendish Case was not cheap, but it would kill her if we ever had to move out of the house. Of course, I wasn’t prepared to talk about family with a complete stranger like Yasmin; why should I care if she thought I was a greedy self-centered berk?

Yasmin turned away to glare out the window, then reached into a pocket of her dragon skin leotard and tossed me a worn gold coin. “There,” she said. “Special commission. Draw what you want, any way you want. And I promise I won’t tell your

precious customers you worked for a Doomguard tiefling.”

I held the coin in my hand for several seconds, feeling the warmth of the gold—a warmth that had come from Yasmin’s body. Then I lifted my sketchbook, flipped to a blank page, and started sketching the clean lines of her face. High forehead, strong jaw, good cheekbones... an excellent artist’s model, just as I thought.

It was about the time I started trying to capture her eyes that she finally recognized the picture on the paper.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she snapped.

“Drawing something I want. Now stop jerking your head like that, so I can get on with the work. I take commissions seriously.”

Like many first-time models, she started out self-conscious and artificial, went through an irritable stage when she threatened to quit every other minute, progressed to a state of sullen resignation, and finally came to ignore me when she became tired of forcing her face into “artistic” expressions. That’s when I turned to a new page and began the real drawing.

And so the day passed.



Early on the third morning, an army of Collectors paraded down the street with the stiffening corpse of a giant.

At the time, Oonah and Wheezle had the fourth floor watch, while Yasmin and Hezekiah took the seventh floor. It was just as well Yasmin and I weren’t together again—when she saw my final drawing the day before, it had taken her aback, possibly because it showed how strikingly lovely she was. I had drawn her with her chin resting thoughtfully on her fist, and the bony ridge of her forearm was an integral part of the picture’s composition. She had never posed in that position, certainly not during the day we’d been together, and possibly never in her life; but even I was surprised how strongly it captured who she was. For several long minutes after I had finished it, I didn’t want to let it out of my hands. I wanted to hold it, memorize what I had done... or maybe throw it in the faces of critics who derided my portraits as shallow.

Still, a commission was a commission, and Britlin Cavendish never peeled his clients. Carefully, bashfully, I handed it to Yasmin. She never said a word; she simply stared at it a long long time.

After that, we both shied away from each other’s company for a while—it felt too awkward. I decided to ask Hezekiah to take the next day’s watch with Yasmin; his Clueless questions would irritate her, but she might be more at ease being annoyed than handling whatever emotions she felt the day before.

With the other four team members on watch, Brother Kiripao and I had little to do. After two days in the tenement, I had endured enough of its quaking stairs and musty smell; so I found myself on the ground floor, staring out at the street and wondering how risky it would be to go for a walk in Sigil’s version of fresh air. Brother Kiripao may have been thinking the same thing, for he wandered down to join me, gazing out the glassless window.

We could hear the giant’s approach several minutes before the corpse actually came into view: the sound of overloaded carts groaning along the cobblestones, mingled with

the grunts of people lugging a heavy burden. Then, around the corner came a haycart supporting the giant's head and shoulders, his long wild hair tumbling over the sides of the cart and trailing along the street. The hair was green, and his skin sulphur yellow—a jungle giant, if I correctly remembered *Kreepatch's Guide to the Multiverse*. Sigil didn't have a large population of giants, but a few happened into the city from time to time, and they naturally stood out in the crowd. Jungle giants were one of the more civilized species, smart and self-disciplined enough to stay out of trouble.

The giant in front of us, however, had not been quite smart enough. His throat sported a long red gash, still dribbling blood onto the pavement... enough blood to satisfy a string of dogs who trotted along beside the corpse to lick up the spillage. For a moment, I thought the deceased must have been killed by one of his fellow giants—who else is tall enough to slit a giant's throat? But then, a random breeze blew in through the window and filled my nostrils with an overpowering stink of cheap whiskey.

Whiskey had soaked into the giant's hair... whiskey clung to his beard and his meagre clothing... whiskey formed a visibly sticky coat on his bare skin. The giant must have bathed in the stuff, or poured a dozen bottles over his head. The obvious conclusion was that he'd been celebrating something; a marriage perhaps, or one of his people's religious festivals. I could picture him drenching himself liberally with whiskey, externally and internally, then stumbling off into the city and passing out in some alley. If a robber wandered by, the thief might well do a slice-job on the giant's throat before picking his pockets—you wouldn't want a drunken giant to wake up while you were bobbing his money pouch.

The breeze blew in at me again. Stale rotgut whiskey: I knew the aroma well, just as I knew the bouquets of the finest wines. And yet, there was something slightly odd...

"Warn the others to stay on their toes," I told Brother Kiripao. "I have to check something out."

Tossing off my jacket, I rumbled my hair and pulled out my shirt tails to bring my appearance more into line with street fashion in the Hive. Then with a drunken swagger, I stumbled out the door and up to the passing giant. "Sure is a big piking basher!" I called out to the nearest Collector.

"He's a heavy sod, all right," the Collector replied. Sweat poured down her face as she helped push her cart, but the woman seemed cheerful enough. "I like the heavy ones," she went on. "When the Dustmen hand out jink for collecting stiffes, they pay by the pound."

"You'll be rich, you rotten berk!" She and I both laughed loudly. I let the laugh break into a cough and staggered up against the corpse to steady myself. With a little squirming, I managed to change position so my nose was flush against the giant's skin. One good whiff, and I backed away a few paces.

"Where'd you find this big old jumbo?" I asked the Collector.

"Lying in an alley," she said. "Where else? He got drunk, he got sliced... simple as that."

Yes, someone wants us to believe that story, I thought to myself—someone who hadn't taken into account a Sensate's sensitive nose. On the giant's skin, beneath the stink of cheap whiskey, lurked the more subtle fragrance of Phlegistol: an ultrahigh-grade fuel oil, said to be mined by gray dwarves in the caverns of Carceri. Nobles in The

Lady's Ward liked to burn Phlegistol to heat water for baths; they claimed it burned cleaner than coal and very very hot.

"Sure is a big basher," I said again and whacked the corpse's side heartily. A load of liquid in the giant's gut sloshed loudly in response to my blow; and I had no doubts what that liquid was. Our fire-loving enemies had somehow killed this giant and used the slit in his throat to top him full of flammable oil. Afterward, they had soaked him in a few gallons of whiskey to hide the Phlegistol smell. Now the corpse was an eighteen-foot-long bomb, left in an alley for unsuspecting Collectors who'd deliver it straight to the Mortuary.

I wondered how the arsonists intended to set this off. A single fire-arrow would do the trick. You'd want to shoot from a long distance away, but the giant was a huge target. A hit anywhere should be good enough to touch off the payload—whiskey fumes were flammable enough, but the Phlegistol was positively explosive. For maximum effect, the enemy would probably wait till most of the body was inside the doors of the Mortuary; then boom.

As quickly as I could while maintaining my drunken act, I waved cheery-bye to the Collectors and wobbled my way back to the tenement. Brother Kiripao was waiting inside the door. "The corpse is a bomb," I said in a low voice, as I slipped back into my jacket.

"A large bomb?" he asked.

"I'd guess more than a ton of Phlegistol."

He glanced at the giant, now being heaved off the carts and hauled slowly up the Mortuary's front steps. "We must leave this building," he said. "It cannot withstand a sizable explosion at such close range."

"Then you get around to the rear of the dome," I told him, "and keep an eye on people escaping that way. I'll warn the others."

He nodded in agreement and dashed out at once. Three seconds later, it occurred to me that he really didn't know what to look for—only a few of us had the proper dark about the githyanki and githzerai thieves. I should have been the one to watch the back, and let Brother Kiripao clear the building; but something inside of me wanted to save Yasmin personally.

The moment I finished putting on my jacket, I ran for the stairs. They squealed and wavered under my feet, but I kept my balance and made my way upward as fast as possible. Oonah was looking over the stair railing at the fourth floor level, and called down to me, "What's going on? I saw you in the street."

"The giant's filled with Phlegistol," I gasped, panting from running up the steps. "If it goes boom, this building will too."

"Damned right it will," she nodded. "I've seen Phlegistol explosions before. Gray dwarves love the stuff—they fill up wine bottles, jam in cloth fuses, and toss them at people they don't like. Good way to burn a whole sodding village."

"You and Wheezle clear out of here," I told her. "I'll get the others."

"Just shout," she said. "They'll hear you."

"So will the enemy," I replied. "Best not give ourselves away." And I hurried up the stairs again before she could argue.

My heart was pounding loudly in my ears when I finally reached the top. Of course,

Hezekiah had heard the racket of the creaking stairs and come to investigate. “We have...” I wheezed, “...we have... to get out. Bomb.”

“What’s a bomb?” he asked, perky as ever.

Piking stupid Prime-worlders! To them, the height of military ingenuity was sharpening both edges of your sword.

“What’s this about a bomb?” Yasmin said, coming out of the surveillance room.

“The giant...” I told her. “Phlegistol... we have to...”

“All right, hold on.”

She ran back into the room, while I leaned against the bannister and tried to catch my breath. Hezekiah gave my arm a genial pat, then said, “I’d better collect our gear.” He too ran off, his boots hitting the floor heavily enough to send tremors through the staircase. I lowered myself to the steps and sat for a moment, listening to my heart thud. Winded as I was, perhaps I should start downstairs immediately; the others were in better shape, and would easily catch up. However, my pride wouldn’t let me run off—I had to wait for Yasmin.

And Hezekiah too, of course.

Yasmin hurried out of the room, her knapsack on her back and the portrait I’d drawn rolled up in one hand. “Be careful when you roll up a charcoal sketch,” I told her. “They smudge easily.”

“Pike it, berk,” she snapped, but her face wore the ghost of a smile. “They’ve already got the giant halfway through the doorway. Perfect time to hit it with a burning—”

A brilliant burst of light flashed through the window, followed a split-second later by a thunderous roar. The tenement rocked back sharply, sections of its roof blowing away like loose paper; then the full force of the explosion struck home, smashing the front wall of the building with fists of naked fire. Yasmin was thrown off her feet by the blast of hot air, and tossed sprawling across my lap where I sat on the stairs.

As for the stairs... with a single shriek of rusty nails, the staircase supports ripped out of the surrounding wood. Then we were falling free.

CHAPTER FOUR



THREE DUSTY KILLERS

with two flights of stairs per storey—once we started falling, we didn't stop. Bam, our steps smashed down on the steps beneath and banged them free of their supports; then both flights were falling together, down to the next floor, and so on. One floor after another, every jarring crash followed by another one-storey drop, like a house of cards collapsing in on itself. Bam, bam, bam, with flaming boards falling around us and sparks sputtering through the air. During the split-second we stopped at each

SEVEN STOREYS

floor, plaster from that floor's ceiling smacked down on us in brittle sheets. Then the next flight of stairs would give way, and another fall, another jolt, another shower of plaster breaking over my head and Yasmin's back.

Each time we landed, Yasmin gave a painful whoof of breath. She had fallen with her stomach across my lap, and each impact drove my knees into her diaphragm. Halfway down, her body slumped limply, stunned by having the wind knocked out of her over and over again. Desperately, I held onto her with all my strength so she wouldn't tumble away—riding the stairs like a bucking bronco might bruise us black and blue, but getting thrown off into a burning building would put us in the dead-book for sure.

At long last we stopped, perched high atop a stack of piled-up stairflights. That put us almost even with the first floor above ground level; so with scant seconds before the tenement came thundering down around our ears, I heaved up Yasmin's body and ran straight for the front of the building. There was a hole in the wall there, a ragged breach where the explosion had punched out a sweep of rotten boards. The boards now littered the floor, too punky to burn, even in the Phlegistol heat; but the sides of the hole had caught and now blazed hungrily with bright fire, sucking in a gale of fresh air from outside. I didn't stop. I simply cradled Yasmin to my chest, and jumped straight through the opening.

The distance to the ground was only ten feet—a painful drop but scarcely a killer, provided you land properly. Once in the air, however, I realized there was no way to land properly with a full-grown woman in my arms. Protecting her head from the cobblestones was the best I could do... and then we struck down on something much softer than expected, softer than pavement, softer than burning wood.

It was a hand: the giant's left hand, blown clean off at the wrist. We landed as gently as nestling birds, snuggling down into the palm. Now, however, the giant's skin was not its original sulfur yellow, but an ugly charred black; and the whiskey smell had been replaced by the odor of roast pork.

Dappling the pavement around us were other hunks of smoking flesh: some from the giant, some from the Collectors who had been carrying the corpse into the Mortuary. Surprisingly, this carnage was easier for me to stomach than the massacre at the City Courts—except for the giant’s hand, nothing was intact enough to recognize as fleshly remains.

Yasmin drew in a ragged breath and rolled back against the giant’s scorched thumb. Somehow she had managed to keep hold of my charcoal sketch through everything, though the paper had crumpled where it was squeezed in her fist. She looked down at it and blearily tried to straighten the creases.

“Never mind that,” I said. “How are you?”

“Alive, by the grace of Entropy,” she groaned. “Did the others...”

I turned to look at the tenement. It chose that moment to cave in on itself, the whole structure slumping neatly downward into a smoking pile. The buildings on either side, also battered by the explosion, leaned inward to fill the gap left by the collapse. One by one, they all toppled onto the smoldering heap.

The whole process took less than five seconds.

“Britlin...” Yasmin whispered.

“Oonah and Wheezele had time to get out,” I answered, without looking at her. “But poor Hezekiah was still on the seventh—”

“Hi,” said Hezekiah, from behind our backs. “What are you doing in that hand?”

Grimacing, I turned to face him. “You teleported out?”

“Sure. If you two had just waited, I would have brought you with me.”

“Too easy,” I muttered. “We preferred taking the more exciting way down.”

“You Sensates!” He laughed and punched me playfully in the shoulder. “Come on and I’ll take you to the others.”

Yasmin tried to knife him in the back, but I stopped her in time.



Oonah and Wheezele had taken refuge behind one of the Mortuary’s most solid outbuildings: the marble sanctuary that housed Sigil’s Monument of the Ages. Factol Skall of the Dustmen had created this monument to peel a little more gold from the pockets of rich leatherheads, letting them pay for the privilege of inscribing their names on a great stone obelisk that would “preserve their fame for all time”. Looking through an archway into the monument building, I saw that the obelisk had been toppled by the shockwave of the explosion; it now lay on the ground, broken into three pieces.

“My condolences on all this mess,” I said to Wheezele.

“Why?” he asked, his small gnome eyes blinking in surprise. “To a Dustman, this is a day of high celebration. So many souls ushered into the Ultimate Peace.”

“It’s a thrill for the Doomguard too,” Yasmin assured him. “Too noisy and presumptuous, of course—we’d rather let things fall down on their own. Still...” She looked around at the fractured monument, the collapsed row of tenements, the scattered gobbets of baked flesh. “It was a really good boom.”

I too scanned the destruction and devastation. A tragic waste of life... but as a Sensate, I rather enjoyed the boom myself. Who says opposing factions have nothing in common?

"If we've finished applauding this wholesale slaughter," Oonah said angrily, "can we remember we have a job to do?"

"Of course, honored Guvner," Wheeple replied, kowtowing politely. "What would you like to do?"

"Did anyone see how the sodding berks set off the bomb?" Oonah asked.

"The easiest method would be a flame arrow shot from a distance," I told her, "although these people like fireballs so much, maybe they used one of those wands from the court rotunda."

"Some of us should search for the shooter," Oonah said. "Look anyplace that had a clear line of fire on the Mortuary's front door. Wheeple? Hezekiah?"

Wheeple kowtowed. Hezekiah tried to kowtow too, but just looked ridiculous. Together, the two of them trotted off toward the front of the building. I was glad to see that even Hezekiah had the sense to stay close to cover and keep his eyes open.

"The rest of us should head for the back door," Oonah continued, "and hope the enemy hasn't already escaped."

"I sent Brother Kiripao to watch the back before the explosion," I said.

"Good," she nodded. "Let's find him."

We set a quick pace around the perimeter of the Mortuary, keeping to the protection of the outbuildings as much as possible. Yasmin matched stride beside me; she still held the crumpled sketch in her hand. After a while, she asked in a low voice, "Why are we so interested in the rear entrance? I thought we just had to watch for an attack, then trail the culprits."

"The attack on the courts was actually a diversion to cover a theft," I told her. "The factols suspect that all the attacks were diversions; so we're going to check the rear entrance to see if thieves come running out."

"How will you tell the thieves from everyone else?" she asked. "At least three funerals have gone into the building already this morning. If those people hear a big sodding explosion at the front door, they're all going to run out the back."

"We'll just have to keep our eyes open and hope for the best," Oonah answered, throwing a pointed glance at me. She obviously wanted to keep the githyanki and githzerai a secret, though I couldn't see why. Maybe Guvners just liked knowing things other people didn't.



Kiripao had positioned himself at the corner of the last outbuilding. He bowed to us as we came up beside him, and whispered, "A great many people have run from the door, but no one out of the ordinary. I have taken the liberty of casting a spell to detect the presence of magic; the escapees possess nothing notable."

I wondered what kind of magical radiations he perceived from the rest of us. Oonah's staff must put out a powerful shine, and Yasmin's dragon leotard would give off its own healthy glow. As for me, I had the lantern-stone in my pocket, not to mention my father's rapier; considering the amount of money he paid to have it enchanted, the sword must blaze as bright as a phoenix's fundament.

"Cavendish!" Oonah growled in my ear. "Stop wool-gathering. Check for familiar faces in the crowd."

I looked around the corner of the building, and saw about twenty people milling in the street. Most had been attending funerals inside the Mortuary, so they wore clothes of whatever color their cultures associated with grief: black and white predominated, with the occasional dash of blood red. In among the mourners, a handful of gray-robed Dustmen tried to calm the crowd. “There’s no cause for alarm,” I heard one call, as smoke from burning tenements drifted over the Mortuary dome.

The people in the street were the usual mix of races you find in Sigil: humans, bariaur, tieflings, even one githzerai. The githzerai was a woman, and short for her species—nothing like the male I had seen in the Courts.

“Ahh,” Brother Kiripao murmured. “This is more interesting.” He pointed to a group of five figures, just emerging from the Mortuary. All of them wore Dustman robes, with the hoods pulled down over their faces.

“Magic?” I whispered. Kiripao nodded.

“Five of them, four of us,” Oonah muttered beside my shoulder. “If they split up, we’re in trouble. Still... I’ll follow the first to leave, Kiripao the second, and Yasmin the third. If the last two go in different directions, Cavendish, use your best judgment.”

The front two paused just before they reached the bottom of the Mortuary steps; warily, they looked both directions along the street. In that moment, I could see their faces clearly, despite the shadows cast by their hoods—they were the same githyanki and githzerai who peeled Oonah’s office.

“That’s them,” I murmured. As I spoke, the two thieves descended the last step into the street and hurried off in the opposite direction from us.

“Come along, Brother Cipher,” Oonah said to Kiripao. Without waiting, she slipped around the edge of the building and into the street, quickly crossing to the closest clump of mourners and blending in with them. Kiripao trailed behind Oonah, while Yasmin and I kept our eyes on the three figures still on the steps.

The shrouded trio stood where they were for several seconds, watching the githyanki and githzerai head up the street; then they descended to ground level, straight into the crowd. There was something odd about the way they walked, the way they stayed inside the shadows of the Mortuary dome, the aggressive way they swung their arms—like apes, or like...

“Eustace,” I murmured.

“What?” Yasmin asked.

“Never mind,” I said. “You’re a priestess, right?”

“My official title is Handmaid of Entropy.”

“You can explain what that means another time,” I told her. “Do you have any power over the undead?”

“Entropy isn’t some god who protects you from ghoulies and ghosties,” she replied indignantly. “It’s the supreme force of nature. We like to say we’re the opposite side of the coin from druids—they hug trees, we chop the sodding things down as a sacrament.”

“Both no doubt annoy the trees,” I told her, “but at the moment, I’m more interested in a cleric who can command wights to... pike it, there they go.”

The three hooded figures had already entered the crowd. Now they threw off their robes, and hissed pure hatred at the mourners around them. As I suspected, the three were barrow wights like our delivery boy Eustace, animated corpses with razor-sharp

claws in place of fingernails; and their job must be to cover the escape of the other two thieves.

People screamed at the sight of the undead monsters, then stumbled backward in a rush. One woman tripped over someone behind her, and fell shrieking to the cobblestones. Immediately, the closest wight leapt to the attack, grabbing her wrist with one hand and raking the claws of its other hand down her arm. Where the creature's claws made contact, the woman's flesh withered away, her muscles dissolving to threads as the skin shrank tight to the bone. The wight hissed once in triumph, then let her wrist go; the arm clattered useless to the pavement, reduced to a skeletal husk.

"What are you doing?" shouted a nearby Dustman to the wight. The man was in his forties, with red tattoo spirals inscribed on both cheeks. He walked straight up to the creature and stood in front of it, hands on his hips... like an outraged schoolmaster who's caught a student cheating. "Get back inside at once," the Dustman said. "This behavior is intolerable."

The wight cocked its head to one side, and regarded the Dustman with intense interest. Then its hand shot forward, claws outstretched; the nails stabbed through the Dustman's clothes like gauze and buried themselves deep in his chest, five soul-stealing daggers. The Dustman gasped softly. Something creaked inside of him, a long agonized noise like someone bending a stick slowly to the breaking point. One rib cracked, then another, then another, snapping so fiercely the ends of the bones pierced outward through the man's chest and protruded whitely from his robes.

Blood gushed in fountains, splattering the wight's face. It simply licked its lips and waited, waited till its life-draining grip had shriveled the man's chest to a pulp bristling with broken bones. Then it tossed the Dustman's corpse against the Mortuary wall, where it fell to the ground, rattling.

"That's impossible!" Yasmin whispered.

"How long have you lived in Sigil?" I whispered back. "Everything's possible here."

"But the Dustmen have a pact with the undead—the Dead Truce. Undead creatures like that wight simply won't attack a Dustman unless the Dustman attacks first."

"I know all about the Dead Truce," I told her, "but those wights don't."

"Someone is playing hob with the natural order," she said, and this time she wasn't whispering. "Someone is trying to disrupt..."

The rest of the sentence was drowned out by the noise of Yasmin shucking off her backpack and drawing her sword.

"I hope that sword is either magic or silver," I said to her. "You can't hurt wights with just a normal..."

But I didn't finish my sentence either, because Yasmin had already charged into the fray.



For half a second, I hesitated—after all, our instructions had been to watch the enemy and refrain from direct involvement. However, I couldn't let Yasmin face three wights on her own; and even if Yasmin hadn't been there, it was high time for me to start saving lives. Much as I tried to put it out of my mind, I had allowed the Collectors to carry the exploding giant to their doom, because my orders told me to hold back. My father would

have roared, "Pike the orders, people are dying!"

Whipping my rapier out of its sheath, I raced after Yasmin. A few mourners were already running in our direction, but they had enough sense to get out of our way; the rest of the crowd was shocked frozen with terror, unable to move as each of the wights chose a new victim to drain. All three victims were Dustmen, and all three Dustmen simply stared in disbelief as their hearts were ripped from their chests.

Yasmin took the nearest wight in the back, a furious thrust that pierced straight through the monster's spine, out the front of its ribcage, and halfway into the Dustman it held in its claws. The wight turned its head to look at Yasmin and hissed, its breath reeking of humid decay. I was close enough to smell the stench; I was also close enough to jam the tip of my rapier into that open mouth, up through the palate, and into its brain. Thanks to the sword's enchantments, the blade punched straight through the wight's skull, scattering gray matter and bone fragments onto the hapless Dustman in the monster's grip.

The Dustman didn't care. If he hadn't been dead already, getting impaled on Yasmin's sword had finished the job.

Our arrival snapped the remaining mourners out of their stupors. Howling with fear, they scattered; one little halfling even ran back into the Mortuary, certainly not the place I'd run for protection. By the time Yasmin and I dislodged our blades from the now-dead wight, we were alone in the street with the two remaining monsters.

"One on one?" I asked her. "Or shall we gang up on the closest of these berks?"

"I'll take the closest," she replied. "You keep the other off my back."

"Your wish is my command."

Giving Yasmin's wight a wide berth, I sped around to face the other one. Once upon a time, this particular wight had been a woman, but that had been years ago. Now her face was ravaged with tomb rot, her skin flaking away to reveal the ligaments beneath.

"Hello," I said to the monster. "Would you be available to model the next time I teach a figure drawing class? Students always have such a hard time with the anatomy of the face, and here you are, already dissected. You're a walking anatomy text book, my dear."

The monster hissed and took a tentative swipe at me. I flicked my sword at her hand, just enough to make a small cut on her wrist. No blood dribbled out: nothing but a trickle of reddish dust.

"Some people think the rapier is an ineffectual little weapon," I told the wight, "but they're only familiar with the blades used in competition fencing." I stepped in just long enough for a slash that cut several exposed ligaments on her left cheek, then backed quickly away. "A competition rapier is only a thrusting weapon," I explained, "but as you can see, a real rapier has two perfectly good cutting edges. Are you following all this?"

By the look of it, the wight was only interested in finding a way past my guard. She kept lunging, hissing and missing, as I swirled the blade in a continuously circling parry. The little nicks I gave her did no serious damage, but they kept her at bay; and second by second, her rage grew.

"I don't suppose you'd like to tell me why you broke the Dead Truce," I asked the wight. "Whom you work for, what their plan is, that sort of thing?"

She hissed.

“So the truth is, you can’t talk, right?”

She hissed again.

“That would be a yes,” I said to myself. Not being an expert on the undead, I had no idea whether your average wight was capable of speech; then again, these were obviously not average wights. These were creatures who should be examined by knowledgeable authorities.

Without taking my eyes off the wight in front of me, I called to Yasmin, “Keep dancing with your playmate out here. I need to consult a professional.” Then, with a flurry of sword strokes, I drove my wight back toward the Mortuary steps. (The monster really was a ham-handed fighter... but then, when you can wither opponents with one swipe of your claws, you don’t have much incentive to acquire finesse.)

Up the stairs we went, wight hissing, my blade slashing. The huge iron-plated door gaped wide open, and we went inside, the wight still backing away from my attack and spitting with fury.

I had attended my share of funerals in the Mortuary, but had always used the main entrance. This back area was unfamiliar to me, a curving stone corridor with numerous doors—some open, some closed, and a big one leading to the front of the building, blown off its hinges by the exploding Phlegistol. With the exception of the wight’s continuing hisses, the place was as quiet as a tomb. Admittedly, that shouldn’t have been a surprise.

“Hello!” I shouted. “Anybody home?”

My voice echoed off the stone walls; the sound seemed to last forever. The wight made a half-hearted charge toward me, but backed away as the edge of my rapier sliced a gash across her collarbone. Accepting the inevitable, she began to back down the corridor that led to the front of the building. I could smell things burning ahead of us, and slowed my pace... not from fear of the fire, but from concern about the smoke. Wights are dead, so they don’t have to breathe; if I started to get dizzy from smoke inhalation, the monster in front of me would gain a distinct advantage.

“I’d really love to talk to a Dustman,” I yelled, the Mortuary dome echoing dustman, dustman, dustman. “I have a renegade wight here that a Dustman should examine. It broke the Dead Truce. Someone should have a look at it.”

“A renegade wight, you say?”

At the far end of the corridor a gaunt figure appeared, backlit by the flicker of fires ravaging the front part of the Mortuary. For a moment the figure looked like some kind of undead thing itself, a corpse dressed in gray robes; but then my eyes adjusted to the light and recognized the reclusive Factol Skall of the Dustmen.

The wight was sandwiched between Skall and myself. She turned at the sound of his voice, and studied him.

“Be careful, your honor,” I said to Skall. “She killed several Dustmen out in the street. I saw her.”

“She attacked first?”

“Yes, your honor. Without provocation.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

The wight was looking back and forth between Skall and me, hissing more violently than ever. Her eyes burned as bright as the flames at the factol’s back. Suddenly, she feigned a lunge at me, then hurtled toward Skall, claws poised for the kill. I raced after

her, sprinting as fast as I could while preparing to slash off her head. Much as I had hoped the Dustmen could interrogate her, saving the factol's life had higher priority.

The wight sped toward Skall. I sped after her. Skall stood calmly as the two of us descended upon him; and at the last moment, he simply held up his hands and said, "Stop."

My legs froze, my brain froze... even my arm, swinging down with the decapitating stroke, simply stopped dead in the air as if trapped in ice. The wight, however, seemed immune to whatever magic Skall used to paralyze me. She closed the remaining gap and seized Skall's arms with the ferocity of a rabid dog that has finally found someone to attack. Hissing gleefully, she dug her claws into his wrists and squeezed.

For several seconds, Skall didn't move a muscle. Then, slowly, he twisted his arms in the wight's grasp, so that he could grasp her wrists as tightly as she held his. The two stood there clutching each other, the crimson light of the wight's eyes flaring brighter and brighter in the dark corridor.

The embrace lasted almost a full minute, while I stood by helpless, unable to move. Slowly, the hatred on the wight's face changed to puzzlement, and she tried to pull away; but Skall held on easily, without a hint of strain. The fire in the wight's eyes continued to grow, casting two blurs of scarlet on the gray stone wall. At the last moment, she turned over her shoulder to look at me, her rotten face grimacing with fear and confusion. Then her entire body burst like a soap bubble, showering the corridor with a spray of cloying red dust.

"Remarkable," said Skall. His robes were crimson with the dust, his face powdered to the color of blood. With a sudden surge, strength returned to my limbs and I could lower my sword arm. "Remarkable," Skall said again. Turning his back on me, he walked off into the burning Mortuary, completely ignoring the flames.



"Where have you been?" Yasmin asked. She had just retrieved her backpack, and was once more holding my charcoal sketch in her hand. The wight she'd been fighting lay chopped into pieces on the pavement.

"I've just had a chat with Factol Skall," I told her.

"Did you learn anything?"

"That I never want another chat with Factol Skall." I poked the pieces of Yasmin's wight with my toe. Red dust spilled from the sword wounds. "Is that dust typical when you kill wights?"

"I don't know," Yasmin answered. "I've never fought a wight before."

"Maybe one of our colleagues has." I looked down the street in the direction Oonah and Kiripao had pursued the thieves.

Yasmin followed my gaze. "Should we go after them?" she asked.

"You go ahead," I told her. "If our friends chase the enemy into the Hive, you'll have a hard time picking up their trail... but then, Oonah's the sort to leave marks as she goes. Deliberate scuffs in the dirt, arrows drawn on the pavement, that kind of thing."

"What are you going to do?"

"I want to examine these wights more closely. They've piqued my curiosity."

"All right." She looked at me keenly for a few moments, as if trying to put some

emotion into words. Finally, she simply said, “Watch your back, Cavendish.”

Before I could reply, she was running down the street, a lean figure in tight black dragon-skin. I tried to burn the image into my memory; it was something I’d want to sketch later on, and who cared if it didn’t earn money.



Dust.

Red dust pouring out of the wounds instead of blood. And underneath the robes that the wights wore as disguise, their ragged clothes were clogged thick with another kind of dust, a fine silt that reminded me of sculptor’s clay.

I stroked the silt, then licked a bit off my finger. It had a soft nippy taste, like weak curry powder. Maybe these wights had a hide-out in a spice warehouse. However, the dust wasn’t yellow like curry—on first glimpse, it had a light tan color, but on closer inspection I saw it was actually a mix of white and dark brown particles.

Red dust, white dust, brown dust... what I needed was a dwarf, a dwarf of a fanatical dwarvish bent: the kind who studies soil the way a lecher studies women. We had a few such dwarves in the Sensates, forever bringing in new minerals for everyone to sniff, lick, and eventually chew. It was only by the grace of healing spells that I still had a full set of teeth; at that moment, however, I would have welcomed one of those rock-kisser dwarves with open arms, if he could identify all these different types of dust.

Without such knowledge, I could only take samples of the dust and hope to get them identified later. For the brown and white dust, I ripped away a scrap of wight’s clothing that was heavily imbued with the stuff; for the red dust, I tore off a page from my sketchbook and held it under one of the wight’s wounds, catching the sifting dribble that took the place of blood. Carefully, I folded both samples and tucked them into my pocket.

As I straightened from examining the last wight, Hezekiah galloped around the corner of the Mortuary. “Britlin,” he shouted, “come on, hurry!”

“What is it?”

“Wheeze and me,” he gasped. “We’ve cornered the shooter.”

CHAPTER FIVE



THREE SWINGS OF THE GATE

Hezekiah, and as we jogged he explained what had happened. He and Wheezy had scoured the area around the front of the Mortuary in search of whoever set off the explosion—not an easy task, given that most of the buildings had burst into flames. The boy and the gnome found several hiding places where someone might have shot a fireball or flame arrow to ignite the oil-soaked giant; but all those spots had been empty. With each passing moment the search for other such locations became more difficult,

I FOLLOWED

as people from nearby houses began to fill the streets, screaming at the fires and trying to organize bucket brigades from the closest wells.

In the middle of this growing confusion, Hezekiah had spotted a familiar face in the crowd. Leaning casually against a half-demolished stone wall stood one of the three men who participated in the fireball attack on the City Courts—the heavily-bearded basher with his hair bleached white. Tucked into his belt was a wand Hezekiah immediately recognized: bone-white ivory, speckled with glitters of red.

The man (whom Hezekiah dubbed Bleach-Hair) had stayed for a few minutes to watch the mob's frantic response to the fire, then walked away into the Hive. Hezekiah and Wheezy had followed at a distance, hampered by the growing crowds who had come to gawk at the fires. Once, my teammates actually lost their quarry; but they tracked him down again by running toward the noise of a fight in the next street.

By lucky chance (lucky for us, anyway), Bleach-Hair had turned a corner and run smack into the Parade of Dancing Ecstatics, as it wound its never-ending way through the byways of Sigil. Hezekiah only knew about them thanks to a brief explanation from Wheezy; but I was thoroughly familiar with the Ecstatics, having danced with them for three solid days several years earlier.

The Ecstatic Parade has continued without stop for more than four centuries, a drunkenly riotous assemblage of anyone who wants to join, prancing through the city streets according to the whims of whoever happens to be at the head of the line. A short distance behind the leader is a group of ten people called The Carriers of the Cow. They do not actually carry a cow; all they have is an empty wooden platform which is, I might add from experience, bristling with sodding splinters. Perhaps when the parade started so many years ago, the platform actually sported a cow, whether a living animal or a statue. Sometime over the centuries, however, the cow disappeared, and now only the platform remains.

Not even the Guvners remember what the parade is intended to celebrate, nor how it all started. The people who join it are simply people

“How odd.” Tattooing is fashionable with parts of the populace, inside Sigil and all through the Outer Planes; but I’d never seen people display tattooed pictures of themselves. Most folks preferred arcane symbols, or clan markings, or images celebrating things they had killed. Never their own faces. For that matter, I seldom saw any kind of face, since it took an expert tattoo artist to make anything more than a cartoonish likeness.

“Tell me exactly what went on in there,” I said to the invisible Wheezele.

“The man, Mr. Bleach-Hair, entered and spoke some words to the proprietor of the shop. The proprietor is a drow woman, sir—a dark elf. She is probably very good at her trade; elves always excel at crafts.”

“I’m aware of that, Wheezele. Just get on with the story.”

“Of course, honored Cavendish.” This time, I really did catch the faint swishing sound as Wheezele kowtowed. “Alas, I could not get close enough to hear what Mr. Bleach-Hair said to the woman, since I had not yet cast my invisibility spell. However, there seemed to be a great deal of negotiations before the tattooist got down to business.”

“That’s because we’ve got his money,” Hezekiah put in, holding up a bundle of clothing with dusty footprints all over it.

“In the end,” Wheezele continued, “he had to give the woman a gold ring from his finger, a ring the Ecstatics had overlooked while stripping him down. The woman accepted that as payment and has been working on his arm ever since. When it became apparent this would be a lengthy process, Master Hezekiah volunteered to go back to the Mortuary to find whoever was still there.”

Since we had the time, I gave the two of them my own report, telling about Oonah and Kiripao shadowing the two thieves while Yasmin and I dealt with the wights. Wheezele became very silent when I spoke of the undead creatures attacking his fellow Dustmen; I couldn’t tell if he was shocked at wights breaking the Dead Truce, or grieving over the deaths of his fellows. Possibly he was rejoicing that his colleagues had finally reached the ultimate purity of death—I’ve never understood the thought processes of Dustmen.

While Wheezele mourned or celebrated, I looked through Bleach-Hair’s discarded belongings. The clothes were plain yet durable, of a cut that would attract no special notice in the Hive. It didn’t surprise me they were coated with dust, the same brown and white mixture I’d seen on the wights. Did that mean anything? Probably, but I couldn’t guess what.

The objects he carried were of greater interest. First, of course, was the firewand. I decided not to touch it with my bare hand, on the chance that it was booby-trapped. In fact, it seemed easiest to let Hezekiah keep it—perhaps his exalted Uncle Toby had taught him the care and handling of magic wands. Meanwhile, I went back to sorting through the rest of Bleach-Hair’s possessions: a dagger with its blade coated in sticky green resin, no doubt some kind of poison; a platinum chain necklace that had been broken in the fight with the Ecstatics; and a stiff piece of card inside his money pouch, showing an ink drawing of Bleach-Hair himself.

“Hmm,” I muttered, “this fellow must love his own face.” Seriously so—as soon as he lost the ink drawing, he went to the tattoo parlor to get a replacement. He was even willing to part with his gold ring to pay for the new picture. To me, this went beyond any

conceivable narcissism; if I'd just lost most of my jink, I wouldn't immediately barter away my one remaining chunk of gold on mere vanity. Bleach-Hair must desperately need his own portrait for some reason... and that smacked of magic.

"All right, you two mages," I said to Hezekiah and Wheezy, "what kind of spell can only be cast if you're carrying a picture of yourself?"

"An interesting question, sir," Wheezy replied, "but I cannot provide a helpful answer. There are many schools of spellcasting and much variation within schools. Two people casting the same spell may use entirely different components, depending on their personal backgrounds. Sorcerers from Prime Material worlds tend to be particularly idiosyncratic."

I threw a glance at Hezekiah. "You've certainly got a point," I told Wheezy.



Bleach-Hair left the parlor a few minutes after a nearby clock struck peak: midday. Wheezy had been watching the man invisibly, and had given us plenty of warning before he came out; therefore, Hezekiah and I were hidden well back in shadows when Bleach-Hair passed by on the street, gingerly dabbing a yellowish ointment onto his arm.

The tenderness of his new tattoo made it easy for us to follow him through the teeming streets of the Hive. Bleach-Hair just couldn't leave the tattoo alone—constantly staring at it, brushing it timidly with a finger, and rolling his arm so he could see how it looked in various kinds of light. With his thoughts so preoccupied by his new acquisition, he paid no attention to the people around him. We stuck close as he passed all the sights of the slums: the dingy shops, the whiskey-soaked bubbers lying unconscious on the sidewalk, the children pretending to play tag in the streets as an excuse for dodging around people and picking their pockets.

It took almost an hour for Bleach-Hair to weave through the labyrinth of streets to reach his destination, but I could see his goal long before we got there: a towering assemblage of glass vats, arranged in a haphazard corkscrew around a central wooden framework that rose twenty storeys into the sky. Each circular vat measured ten paces in diameter and at least twenty feet high, filled with murky water and stocked with fish that skimmed relentlessly past the glass walls.

This was Sigil's famed Vertical Sea, a fish farm built long ago by a wizard named Churtellius: no doubt a master sorcerer in his day, but now only known for his love of seafood. He had painstakingly constructed each of the vats, strengthening the glass with magic so they could contain the weight of the water; he had personally supervised the raising of the support frame, designing the maze of ramps and trestles and catwalks so that the seemingly random arrangement of vats perfectly counterbalanced each other; and he had even laid out the complicated schedules for changing water in the vats, shoveling in fish food, and harvesting the catch for later sale at the Great Bazaar. Quite possibly, Churtellius had created the Sea in a spirit of purest charity, to ensure that Sigil had an abundant supply of fresh cod and salmon and scallops... but the chant on the street said Churtellius was just another barmy spellchucker who'd do anything to lock down a dependable supply of kippers.

Bleach-Hair went straight to the base of the tower, spoke briefly to the guards who watched the entrance ramp, then began making his way up the tall corkscrew structure.

“Stay with him, Wheezle,” I whispered, though I had no idea if our friend gnome was within earshot. Quite possibly, he was already dogging Bleach-Hair’s footsteps while Hezekiah and I lingered in the shadows of nearby buildings.

“Should we follow too?” Hezekiah asked.

“We’re only here to watch,” I replied. “If we see evidence this really is enemy headquarters, we report back to Lady Erin and let her give these berks the rope. I for one am not spoiling to face a bunch of bashers with firewands.”

“Have you noticed,” the boy said, “when you get excited, you start to use words like berk and basher, the same as other folks in Sigil?”

“Pike it, Clueless,” I told him.

Hezekiah grinned from ear to ear.



Leaving the boy on watch near the base of the tower, I spent a few minutes roaming the neighborhood in search of a better view of the Vertical Sea. I found it at last in a tenement building across from the tower, much like the one we had used to observe the Mortuary, but with stairs leading up to the roof. Like most roofs in the Hive, it had a pathetically unproductive vegetable garden, several small chicken coops owned by various tenants of the building, and a crusty coat of bird droppings. I walked carefully across the guano, marking what an interesting squishy sound it made.

The smell was interesting too.

Crouching behind a chicken coop, I stared across the street toward the Vertical Sea. The tower was busy with people tending the vats—workers standing on catwalks above the water, netting up fish and dumping them into wheelbarrows, then trundling their loads down the ramps. Bleach-Hair pushed against the downward flow of wheelbarrows and continued to climb slowly. Since the last time I looked, he’d been joined by two familiar men: the other fireballers from the City Courts. Both of the newcomers held firewands in their hands.

Where were the three of them going? I scanned up the tower looking for anything out of place... and there, just below the level of my rooftop, was Yasmin.

Without the diligently developed eyes of a Sensate, I might not have recognized her. She wore drab work clothes now, and had smudged her face with soot. Nevertheless, her bony arm crests were clearly visible, and she still carried that sodding charcoal sketch I had drawn. In fact, she made a show of unrolling it from time to time, glancing at it, then rolling it up again, as if it was a scroll of instructions she was supposed to follow. The other fish-workers obviously accepted her pretense—they moved to and fro past her without a second glance.

Once I had recognized Yasmin, it was easy to pick out Oonah and Kiripao close by her side. Oonah still had her staff and Brother Cipher his air of serene lethality, but they too were disguised as workers, dawdling about with an empty wheelbarrow. I could only conclude the githyanki and githzerai had led my teammates to the Vertical Sea... and sure enough, as I looked farther up the tower, I saw the two thieves ambling along a ramp almost level with my rooftop.

They still wore their Dustmen robes, with hoods pulled down low. The clothes attracted attention from the regular workers, but probably not as much as the sight of a

githyanki and githzerai walking amiably side by side. I watched as the two stepped off their ramp and onto a walkway over a vat of dogfish: scaled-down sharks averaging three feet long, with hungry looks in their eyes as they prowled behind the glass walls of their home.

I could see no immediate reason why the thieves would be strolling along a dead-end catwalk over a vat of fish; but as I strained my eyes, I saw that the struts supporting the next vat above their heads formed a sort of archway... and the arch was glowing.

“Well, I’ll be piked,” I whispered. “It’s a portal.”

Not that I should have been surprised to see a gateway to another plane halfway up the Vertical Sea. Throughout the multiverse, Sigil is known as the City of Doors; the place probably has more portals than rats, and Sigil has a lot of rats. Walk down any street, and you’re likely to see a portal lurking somewhere—in the door to a bakery, along the covered cloisters of a temple, or even in the angle made by a ladder leaning up against a wall. Any sort of arch, no matter how temporary, can suddenly sprout a portal... and who knows if the portal leads to the blissful meadows of Elysium or the 500th level of the Abyss?

Of course, most portals are temperamental things; they refuse to work unless you’re carrying the right “key”. Suppose, for example, there’s a portal anchored in the door of your neighborhood greengrocer: ninety-nine times out of a hundred, you could walk through and simply end up staring at the shop’s supply of lettuce. However, if you happened to carry the particular class of object that activated the portal—a silver goblet, a triangular scrap of cloth, a rope with knots at both ends—the portal would magically wink open and deposit you somewhere else, a long way from home. If you passed through the doorway with a group of friends, they’d be sucked in too; open portals tend to be hungry.

Sigil’s portals, blossoming by the hundred, formed the heart of the city’s economy... especially among the local practitioners of magic. Some wizards, for example, worked on diagnosis; they detected new portals, divined what kind of key would make the portal open, and predicted where you’d end up if you passed through. Other mages specialized in prevention—for a hefty fee, they’d weave spells around your home to make sure the door into Great-Aunt Effy’s bedroom didn’t suddenly become a gateway to the Elemental Plane of Fire. A third class of sorcerers devoted themselves to understanding the whole portal phenomenon: what created them, why they worked, and how they chose what kind of objects would serve as keys.

That third bunch of sorcerers always went barmy in the end. There’s no rational system to explain portals. They just do whatever they want... like anchoring themselves in an arch over a catwalk, ten storeys up the Vertical Sea.

The githyanki and githzerai sauntered along the wooden walkway, glancing casually around to see if anyone was looking their direction. Their gaze brushed past my hiding place, but didn’t stop. When they were happy the coast was clear, they simply stepped forward and disappeared. From my position I couldn’t see what lay beyond the gate in the brief moment it was active; but a thick sifting of dust puffed out of the opening, slowly settling toward the catwalk and the water surface below.

Moments later, my three teammates came into sight, still pushing their wheelbarrow as if they were genuine fish farmers. Sharp-eyed Oonah immediately noticed the dust

cloud, still drifting downward—I could see her point to the dust, then up to the glow around the archway. Without hesitation, Kiripao dashed forward along the catwalk; but when he reached the portal he passed through it without effect, coming to a stop on the planks of the walkway a few paces beyond.

Typical of a Cipher like Kiripao: galloping full speed ahead, without an ounce of caution. Angrily, Oonah and Yasmin stormed onto the catwalk toward Kiripao, both women scolding him for taking such a chance... and that was when Bleach-Hair and friends came up behind them.

I had to give Bleach-Hair credit—he must have been a clever man to recognize Oonah in those dirty work clothes. On the other hand, she still carried her silver staff, which Bleach-Hair had good reason to remember from the rotunda. Whatever the reason, he took one look at Her Honor and I could see his lips mouthing DeVail. He must have realized that a Guvner lurking on the very brink of this portal meant big trouble, so he took immediate action: he seized a firewand from one of his companions and shouted, “Don’t move!”

Yasmin and Oonah froze immediately. Kiripao rushed back through the inactive portal, showing every intention of trying to fight the three fireballers by himself; but he had to pass Yasmin and Oonah first, and Yasmin grabbed him, whispering something short and sharp. As quickly as he had begun, the good Brother stopped and simply turned to face Bleach-Hair.

“You would not dare to shoot fire up here,” Kiripao said, his voice loud enough to carry clearly across the street to me.

“This structure is wood and we are far above the ground. If you set the tower on fire, you couldn’t reach safety before tons of water crashed down around your head.”

“You have no idea what I’d dare to do,” Bleach-Hair snapped. “Drop your weapons and get down on your bellies.”

“Weapons?” Yasmin said innocently, taking a step toward him. “I don’t have any weapons. All I have is this.” She waved the rolled-up sketch of herself; but from my vantage point, I could see the bulge of her longsword, slung behind her back and hidden by her work clothes.

“One more step and I fire,” Bleach-Hair told her. “This ain’t no bluff. I’ve been beat up and bobbed and badgered today, and no tiefling is gonna peel me now. Got that?”

Yasmin’s jaw tightened; so did the faces of Bleach-Hair’s two companions. They didn’t seem nearly as eager to start shooting fireballs ten storeys up a wooden tower... but they were obviously too afraid of Bleach-Hair to interfere.

“Come along,” Oonah said to Yasmin, taking her by the shoulder and pulling her back along the catwalk. “We have to be sensible here.”

“The sensible thing is to lie on your bellies,” Bleach-Hair shouted. “Now!”

If only I had a cross-bow, I thought to myself. Or even a good-sized stone I could whip at Bleach-Hair’s head. I had a decent chance of hitting him—the street between us was as narrow as every other street in the hive. But the rooftop where I crouched had nothing but the tiniest pebbles... and the pitiful garden, and the chicken coops...

Oh.

As my three teammates continued the standoff with Bleach-Hair, I opened the coop in front of me. “Nice chicken,” I whispered, “friendly chicken, quiet chicken...”

The hen inside glared at me with one furious eye. The other eye was missing, gouged out in some long-ago battle with another chicken or a cat. I hoped that didn't mean she liked to pick fights—she was sitting on an egg that would make a fine distraction when hurred at Bleach-Hair's head.

"Under normal circumstances," I told the hen in my most soothing whisper, "I would never deprive a lady of her offspring. But this is an emergency, life or death; maybe the fate of the whole city hangs in the balance. Just be quiet and let me—"

The leatherheaded bird pecked my hand: a good solid peck that drew a drop of blood. I bit my lip to avoid crying out, then snatched the sodding egg before the hen could tag me again. She let out a squawk, but only one; no doubt she had long ago resigned herself to the regular abduction of her children.

Bleach-Hair didn't react to the hen's noise: all his attention was focused on my three teammates. They were slowly backing away from him, but showing no sign of surrender. If I threw the egg, if I could hit Bleach-Hair in the face from this distance, and if he didn't immediately fire his wand... then Oonah could attack him with her staff, and both Kiripao and Yasmin would charge forward.

Of course, if everything didn't go perfectly, I'd get them all killed.

Wait, I told myself. Wait for the right moment.

"This is my last warning!" shouted Bleach-Hair. "Lie down or burn."

"Why don't you speak sense to him?" Oonah called to Bleach-Hair's companions, as she continued to back away on the catwalk.

Bleach-Hair's men looked queasy but said nothing.

"I'm counting to three," Bleach-Hair said. "One." I took a deep breath.

"Two."

I cocked my arm to hurl the egg.

"Thr—"

Yasmin threw herself backward. She must have intended to pull Oonah and Kiripao with her down into the vat of water, where they'd be safe from the fireball. However, her lunge moved her right under the arch of support struts, the one that glowed with the light of a portal. In an instant, Yasmin and my other two teammates were sucked through the gateway, yanked from this plane of existence.

Another puff of dust billowed out into the air.

Bleach-Hair lowered the wand. I quietly sank back behind the chicken coop, the unthrown egg still in my hand.

"Well, what are you berks waiting for?" Bleach-Hair yelled, turning to his companions and cuffing their heads. "We've got them boxed in now, don't we? Let's get 'em."

He grabbed each man by the shoulder and dragged them forward. When they reached the portal, all three bashers vanished.

The catwalk was empty, save for falling dust.

CHAPTER SIX



THREE BLOODS † THE RESCUE

the stairs from the rooftop, I had only one question: what was the portal's key? The githyanki and githzerai had been carrying packs; no doubt the key was inside one of those packs where I couldn't see it. Kiripao had run through the portal without activating it, so he didn't have the key. Yasmin, however, did—when she dove backward, she had hit the portal first, carrying Oonah and Kiripao with her. Then Bleach-Hair had done the same thing, taking the lead and dragging the other two behind.

RACING DOWN

But Bleach-Hair had almost nothing on his person: just the pants he'd stolen from the clothes line... the firewand he'd borrowed from his cohort...

...and the tattoo on his arm. A picture of himself, that he'd purchased with his last piece of gold.

Need I repeat, Yasmin had been carrying that piking sketch I'd made of her?

A portrait of yourself—that must be the key that opened the portal. It was the only answer. That's why Bleach-Hair had been so desperate for the tattoo: it was his only way home.

I hit the ground running and sped to where Hezekiah lurked in the alley, still watching the base of the tower. "What's wrong?" he asked as I dashed up to him.

"They have Yasmin and the others trapped," I answered. "Enemies in front and behind. We have to rescue them."

"How?"

"Take the bad guys by surprise. Can you cast another teleport spell?"

"It's not exactly a spell," he said. "I convince myself that here is there, and the world goes along with the idea just to humor me."

"Explanations later," I told him. "Can you get us up there?"

"Where?"

I pointed. And I pointed again. And I said a lot of, no, not that catwalk, the other one, just to the right... no, no, up one floor, can you see the dogfish...

You know how it is. When you're in a hurry, the people around you are always impenetrably leatherheaded. And every second counted; I had to save Yasmin. The moment Hezekiah was sure where to go, I grabbed him and shouted, "Now, now, now!"

The world flickered and we were suddenly standing on the edge of the catwalk. The very edge... in fact, we teetered on the verge of falling, with shark-like dogfish circling below us. By myself, I could have caught my balance; but Hezekiah had wrapped his arms around me to make sure we

teleported together, and now he was dragging me over the brink.

"Hezekiah!" I had time to say. Then someone grabbed the two of us from behind and pulled us delicately back to safe footing.

I turned to see who had saved us from taking the plunge. There was nobody there.

"Wheeze?" I whispered.

"A pleasure to be of service, honored Cavendish," answered the invisible gnome. "I am surprised to find you here."

"It surprised us too," I told him. "Did you see what happened when Bleach-Hair caught up with Yasmin and the rest?"

"Only from a distance," Wheezele replied. "Mr. Bleach-Hair's legs are considerably longer than mine, so I had difficulty keeping up."

"Pity... the others could have used your help. But it's still not too late." I pulled out my sketchbook and a piece of charcoal. "It'll just take a second to make a key for that portal."

"What portal?" Hezekiah asked.

I ignored him as I started drawing my own face, but Wheezele answered the boy's question. "There is a transplanar portal anchored in the archway in front of us. Alas, persons from the Prime Material plane do not have the attunement to see such portals, but those of us born in the Outer Planes have no trouble discerning it."

"A portal?" Hezekiah said, squinting at the arch. "I came through one of those to get to Sigil. My Uncle Toby showed me where it was."

"Well, you aren't going through this one," I told him, still drawing. "You're heading straight back to Lady Erin so you can report everything that's happened."

"Like what?" Hezekiah asked.

Pausing a second, I ripped off a blank page from my sketchbook and handed it to the invisible Wheezele. "Why don't you jot down everything Lady Erin should know... just in case Hezekiah isn't sure what's important."

"I know what's important," Hezekiah objected. "And it's not fair: you get to dash to the rescue while I have to stay in Sigil."

"We don't have time to argue," I snapped. "Someone has to rescue our teammates, and someone else has to report to the authorities. It's the only sensible plan."

"Then you report to the authorities," Hezekiah said. "I'm going to save the others." And he stepped toward the portal.

I didn't try to stop him; I doubted that he carried a picture of himself, and I had a sketch of my own to draw—every second I wasted might be one second too many for Yasmin.

Wheezele, however, didn't know what opened the portal and obviously didn't like taking chances. "Please, honored Clueless," he said to Hezekiah, "I cannot permit you to rush in unwisely." The paper I'd handed Wheezele fluttered in the air, then moved toward the portal as the gnome tried to block Hezekiah's passage. I had time to think, That's a blank piece of paper and Wheezele's invisible. Wouldn't it be a laugh if that counted as a picture of himself?

Then Hezekiah tripped over the invisible gnome, the two of them pitched forward under the archway, and <WHISH>, the portal was open.



You can never see much through a portal, and this one was murkier than most—a gap of twilight in the middle of Sigil’s afternoon. The twilight was darkened by a clot of dust clouds, whirling in thick spirals. Hezekiah tumbled into those clouds and out of sight, accompanied by a gnome-shaped silhouette that briefly broke through the dust.

At that moment, something went click in my mind. Sensates call it the “once-in-a-lifetime” instinct: an opportunity arises and you’re struck by some premonition that says this chance will never come again. You see a cheesecake and your nose tells you that this is the peak, the pinnacle, that if you pass this one by, you’ll never come close to such perfection ever again... or you meet a woman at some gathering, and the flames inside you say, “It has to be her, it has to be tonight, or my soul will shrivel to ashes.” Our Sensate leaders teach that your once-in-a-lifetime instinct is almost always wrong—there will be other cheesecakes, other encounters with this woman or someone equally fascinating—but they also say who cares? Pike common sense and leap in with both feet.

Once-in-a-lifetime instinct: see a portal, dive through it.

I dove.

I dove, throwing caution to the wind. More precisely, I dove throwing my sketchbook and charcoal wherever they might fall, because the portal would close within seconds and I didn’t want to miss it. One moment, I was traveling through the soot-laden air of Sigil; and the next, I struck the dust-choked atmosphere of the other side.

Dust enveloped me, as thick as a blanket. There was no way to tell when I actually hit the ground—the dust in the air blended so directly into the dust underfoot that it was all a continuum, clogging, raspy piles of dust. I sank up to my elbows before I finally stopped, and it took all my strength to struggle to my feet. Breathing was impossible, and visibility reached less than an arm’s length; a faint gray light barely managed to penetrate the continually swirling cloud.

How long could I hold my breath? Thirty seconds? A minute? How long before I had to fill my lungs with dust?

Something loomed in front of me, a slight darkening in the grayness. I grabbed at it and pulled it close enough to see; as I expected, the shadow was Hezekiah, blundering about blindly. Another moment and he might have been lost forever in the dust storm.

Leatherheaded Clueless—any citizen of Sigil knows, when you come through a portal into a hostile environment, you never stumble away from your entry point. Portals have to anchor themselves in some kind of archway; figure out what the arch belongs to, and maybe you’ve found shelter.

Carefully I looked up, keeping a firm grip on the boy’s arm. Sure enough, my eyes clearly made out that we were standing in the mouth of an open tube, high enough and wide enough that the walls were only slightly darker blurs in the gray wash of dust. I staggered forward along the tube with Hezekiah in tow, both of us pushing against a strong wind that roared into our faces. The dust dragged heavily at my feet; and then suddenly, there was a solid floor beneath us. Moments later, a door shut behind us with a sigh, closing off the wind and the sifting sound of dust.

Silence. We stood in a small chamber, its walls a dome-like patchwork made from triangles of glass. Outside, the dust continued to swirl in constant motion, dancing close

to the glass but never settling down. Gray light filtered through the crystal panes, a light as frail as the thinnest dawn.

“Britlin!” Hezekiah whispered sharply. I turned and saw the boy standing above a huddled mass that lay in front of a second door. A few steps closer and I recognized the shadowy bundle as a body, lying in a slick of its own blood—a hobgoblin in chain mail, its lifeless hand still clutching a short sword.

“It’s some kind of monster,” the boy said.

“The dead kind,” I told him. “Probably stationed as a guard on this door when Yasmin, Oonah, and Kiripao showed up. Poor berk never knew what hit him.”

“Now let us rejoice that his journey is done,” said a third voice in the room. “He has shed the burden of life and found the purity that awaits all creatures in the cup of oblivion.”

“Hello, Wheezle,” I sighed. “Cheerful as ever.”

“Indeed, sir,” the invisible gnome said. “The other Dustmen often remark on my high spirits.”

Hezekiah looked like he was going to ask a stupid question. I covered his mouth with my hand.



“Now,” I said, “the original plan still stands. Hezekiah goes back to Sigil, while Wheezle and I stay to rescue the others. Don’t argue, there isn’t time.”

“But how do I get back to Sigil?” Hezekiah asked.

“You go back to the portal and you…” I stopped. To open the portal, he needed a picture of himself; and I no longer had my sketchbook. “Wheezle, I don’t suppose you still have that paper I gave you?”

“In the confusion of falling through the portal, I fear I let the paper go.”

And now it was blowing out there in the storm, or buried under a couple feet of dust. “Blast!” I muttered, trying to think of anything else I could use to draw a picture of the boy. Nothing came to mind, and time was passing quickly. “All right,” I told Hezekiah, “you’re on the rescue team for now. But the second we find some way to draw a picture of you, you’re going back to Sigil to report.”

“Once we rescue the others,” the boy answered, “we can all report.”

“Pray that you’re right,” I nodded. “Just remember we’re in unknown territory. Be careful, be quiet, and don’t touch anything!”

“Yes, sir,” he saluted. And he immediately pushed the button that opened the door the hobgoblin had been guarding.

Under other circumstances, that would have earned him a couple arrows in the chest—two archers had been stationed on the other side of the door, crossbows ready and waiting. Fortunately for the boy, Yasmin and the others had come through ahead of us; the bow strings had been cut, along with the throats of the two men.

“Are you completely addle-coved?” I snapped at Hezekiah. “You don’t just barge through doors like that! Wheezle, you take the lead… and keep a sharp eye out for traps.”

“Yes, honored Cavendish.”

Something invisible nudged the boy out of the doorway, and he stepped aside. A

corridor extended for more than a hundred paces ahead of us, its floor ramping gradually upward. Like the first room, this corridor's roof and walls were made from triangles of glass fitted snugly together in a metal framework. Wan gray light filtered in from outside, so feeble it seemed the light itself had somehow become disheartened.

As we hurried up the ramp, the dust storm outside tapered off. By the look of it, the dust only tossed itself about near the entrance to the building; once we had gained some height, we could see that the dust lay flat and quiet farther off. The flatness had an eerie quality to it—in a normal desert, the wind leaves ripples in the sand or heaps the surface into dunes. Here, however, the dust lay as evenly as sifted flour. No scrub brush, no cacti, no hills or valleys... just a motionless expanse of dust stretching flat to the horizon.

"Creepy, isn't it?" Hezekiah whispered.

"Yasmin would love it," I replied. "The very essence of entropy. Wheezy probably likes the view too."

"Not especially, honored sir," the gnome answered. "I revere Death; this place is simply lifeless. It's not the same thing."

The corridor ended at an open door which led into a chamber stinking of smoke. Not so long ago, the room must have been a comfortable lounge, equipped with adequately upholstered chairs and well-cushioned divans; but some time in the past few minutes, a battle had ripped the place to shambles. The far half of the room was scorched black, walls caked with soot and furniture burned to the springs. The near half sparkled with a thick layer of hoar frost, couches and chairs encased in ice. Where the halves joined, icicles dripped down from the ceiling, slowly extinguishing the dribbles of fire still smouldering from the furniture.

Almost without thinking, I reached up and broke off one long icicle. I had always found icicles a comfort to suck—cold and clear, with a sharp point on the end that danced with your tongue. This icicle, however, tasted of smoke and soot; I spat out its water and tossed it away.

No bodies here. No evidence to suggest who won. But one way or another, the fight was over. If Yasmin and the others had lost... well, in the absence of corpses, I could tell myself they'd simply been taken prisoner. All we had to do was find them and stage a rescue. Of course, if they'd won this fight, they must be exploring the area ahead and could still use our help. Either way, they'd be glad to see us.

If they could still see. I couldn't help remembering the burnt bodies of the court rotunda, their eyes scorched out of the sockets.

No. That couldn't happen to Yasmin. Her eyes were too... worth looking into.

The battle-scarred room had two exits, one right, one left. Both had once been closed with sliding doors, but the doors had blown off their tracks thanks to the barrage of magic unleashed in the fight. I glanced out both doorways but saw nothing to indicate which direction our teammates had gone.

"Given a choice," Hezekiah whispered, "I always go left."

That gave me a strong urge to go right, but I resisted.



The left corridor curved around in an arc, circling away from the entrance we came in. I had no idea what this whole building was, but it resembled a huge central ring with

the occasional ramp-like corridor radiating outward from the center, like spokes from the hub of a wheel. We had come in along one spoke; looking out the window, I could see another spoke-corridor some distance in front of us. At the free end of the spoke ahead, a dust storm swirled in the air, just like the storm where we had entered. I wondered if that spoke had a portal too... if all the spokes had portals as exits from this bleak dustscape. Perhaps this building shot air out the mouth of each spoke to keep dust from clogging the portal—it made as much sense as any other theory that came to mind.

For the moment such questions could wait... but curiosity dogged me on one other point. If the heart of this building was a circular ring, what was inside the middle? I didn't know. The outer wall of this corridor might be made of those small triangles of glass, but the inner wall was sheet metal, polished to a mirror-like shine. All that wall showed was the haggard face of one Britlin Cavendish, his goatee and hair so streaked with dust they looked white instead of their usual fetching black.

In time, we approached the next spoke around the ring. Its construction followed the same design as the first corridor, with a large chamber at the point where the spoke connected with the central hub; but the door between us and the chamber was closed.

I waved at Hezekiah to stand back and walked up to plant my ear on the door. It was made of the same metal as the walls, and probably too thick to let sound pass through; but pausing to listen, futile though the gesture was, gave me a few extra seconds to debate what to do next. Enter fast or slow? Brash or sneaky?

“Ah, pike it,” I muttered. “Time’s a’wasting.”

The door was operated by a button on the metal wall. I kicked the button with my heel at the same time as I drew my sword.



With a soft swish, the door slid open. The only thing to emerge was an awful stench, like standing in the alley between a slaughterhouse and a tannery—the dull heaviness of blood and decay, overlaid with the piercing sharpness of harsh chemicals. I took a second or two to enjoy the bouquet, trying to identify the components by smell: certainly a lot of vinegar, and copper, and sulphur, and a dash of quicklime... but there were many more ingredients that eluded me, and no more time for sniffing. Wary of attack, I stepped into the room to see what made the reek.

Bodies: corpses heaped in a mound that nearly reached the ceiling. About half were human, both male and female. The rest were an assortment from the other common races of the multiverse—elves, dwarves, hobgoblins, even a tiefling or two. Arms dangled limply. Many eyes were open and staring. Most of the dead wore clothes, some dressed quite elegantly; but a few were simply naked, tossed on the mound like refuse.

I could see no injuries on any of these people, no indication of what killed them. The few closest to me looked like they had been young and healthy; the rest were simply hidden by shadows, and by the tangled mass of other corpses lying on top of them.

“This is appalling,” Wheezle whispered. From the sound of his voice, our invisible Dustman was standing quite close to the mound of bodies. A moment later, I noticed the hair rustling on the head of a gnome woman: invisible fingers combed through her curls, straightening out the snarls.

“Appalling,” Wheezle whispered again.

"I thought you rejoiced in death," I said.

"Clean death," he replied. "Pure death. But the dead deserve to be treated with dignity. These... can't you smell it?"

"The chemicals?" I took a deep whiff again. Now that I was inside the room, the acrid stench was as sharp as a needle, stinging in my nose; I kept inhaling until the stink filled the back of my throat with its heady rasp. Then, of course, I collapsed to my knees, coughing uncontrollably. "Good smell," I gasped between coughs.

"It is the smell of... certain vegetable extracts," Wheezy told me, clearly unwilling to be more specific. "They are used by ignorant ruffians who believe these extracts can reanimate the dead."

"The extracts don't work?"

"Perhaps one time in a hundred, the technique creates a wight," Wheezy replied. "These bodies are obviously the failures. But the low reanimation rate is only a minor concern. The great problem is..." I could hear him shuffling his feet in agitation. "The great problem is energy. Undead beings do not eat or drink or breathe—in order to move, they must derive their energy from other sources. Most are nourished by the unlimited magicks of the cosmos, as channeled through deities and other powers who rule the undead. It gives the undead a direct connection with the forces that sustain the multiverse... a profound spiritual link with the Great Blackness.

"But undead created through alchemical means..." Wheezy's voice choked tight with anger. "They are like candles who burn their own tallow. They are... closed in. Shut off from external energies. They have no link with the gods of the undead. Such beings can only survive by consuming the energy of their own souls—burning themselves down and down, like rats starving to death in a cage. It is an ugly fate."

I looked at the mound of bodies again, trying to detect any difference between these corpses and others I'd seen. No sign of rigor mortis in any of them, despite the overwhelming stench of decay. Was that unusual? I didn't know. As an artist, I'm only familiar with living subjects.

The boy Hezekiah also seemed curious about the bodies heaped before us. "So these failures," he began; "are they just dead? Or are they conscious, even if they can't move?"

"They have a type of consciousness," Wheezy nodded. "They simply do not have enough self-energy to stir themselves. Their souls will wither in time... unless, of course, we can free them from their damnation."

I didn't like the tone in his voice. Much as I recognized the horror of rotting away in your own corpse, I'd rather concentrate on saving a live Yasmin than dead strangers. Still, I had to ask one more question about the different types of undead. "Tell me," I said to the invisible gnome. "If someone used alchemy like this to create wights, would the wights obey the Dead Truce?"

"The Truce is a pact between my faction and the gods of the undead," Wheezy replied. "These chemical abominations are cut off from the gods; that is their curse. Therefore, this kind of undead live outside the Truce."

"So," said Hezekiah, "those wights who attacked the Dustmen at the Mortuary must have been the few successes out of all these—"

I clapped a hand over his mouth. My ears had picked up a slight rustle of sound. Listening harder, I heard it again: not from the corpses nor the corridor where we'd

entered, but from the door in front of us, leading farther around the ring of the building. The door was metal and closed tightly, but a murmur of voices still came through indistinctly.

Keeping my hand over the boy's mouth, I circled the mound of corpses, hoping there'd be enough room to hide at the rear. There wasn't: the bodies were stacked tight against the wall, with no space to slide behind them. The voices down the corridor were getting louder... so I shoved Hezekiah down beside me and burrowed straight into the corpse-heap.

Neither of us could dig in very deeply—the heap must have massed several tons in dead weight. Still, we could force our way past the outer tangle of arms and legs, to a point where we blended into the whole. I prayed that would be good enough.

The intruders' loud conversation covered our grunting as we squeezed into the press of tattered clothes and naked skin. Every exposed patch of dead flesh reeked with the stench of chemicals and decay, but I fought back the coughs that ragged my throat. I didn't know how many people were about to enter this chamber; I just knew we wouldn't be able to hear them from so far away unless they vastly outnumbered us. With a last surge of strength I pulled my legs inside the pile, just as the door whisked open and dozens of feet strutted into the room.

I couldn't see the newcomers, couldn't see anything but the lifeless face of a young woman close to mine. Her eyes were open, with the blind stillness of the dead. Death surrounded me—my left hand rested on someone's leg and my other arm was jammed under a woman's stomach. There was enough air to breathe, but I held my breath.

"All right," called a man's voice. "Everybody stop rattling your bone-boxes. Come on, I want quiet!" The talk subsided. "That's better," the man said. "Now, let's see if this thing works."

I gritted my teeth. Whatever "this thing" might be, I knew I wasn't going to like it. The speaker might even be testing a newly made firewand by incinerating the mound of corpses where Hezekiah and I lay hidden.

The man recited a few nonsense syllables, his voice uncertain and stilted, as if he were reading the chant from a piece of paper. A moment later, there was a soft chuffing sound followed by a crackle, like the crinkly edge of lightning before the full thunder's boom. A wand of storms? I asked myself. But then the weight of the corpse-heap shifted and I heard leather-soled boots hitting the floor.

Something hissed fiercely—a type of hiss that was all too familiar. A wight's hiss.

Several people in the room gasped. Several more whispered to each other, words I couldn't make out. Slowly, the whispering changed to a murmur of approval: "Amazing!" "Brilliant!" "Pike me with a feather!"

"Take a look at it!" cried the man who was obviously in charge. "Our very own soul-sucker. You'll never see a handsomer corpse. Say hello, deadman."

There was another loud hiss. The group of onlookers cheered.

"Tickle one of the ladies next!" shouted a male voice. "I want me a new dance partner."

Male voices laughed, but a female voice called, "You don't need a new partner, you need a new dance."

Female voices laughed at that one.

“Bar that talk,” snapped the leader. “We have work to do. Stand back, all of you.”

The buzz of conversation diminished as the leader started again: the muttered nonsense words; the chuffing noise; the crackle of lightning; then the mound of bodies shifted as another corpse pulled itself to its feet. Again and again the process repeated... until the leader said, “All right, that’s four of them. Theresa, this’ll be your team; lead ‘em down to the lock.”

“Right, captain,” replied a woman’s voice.

“And you undead berks,” continued the captain, “you’re going to take orders from Theresa, right?”

He was answered with a chorus of hisses.

“Good. Don’t give her no grief. Now off you go.”

I heard footsteps slowly recede—one person walking normally, and four shuffling behind. Four wights pulled off the pile; four less bodies hiding Hezekiah and me.

The process continued: corpses reanimated in groups of four, then each group sent off under the guidance of a living person. The darkness around me began to brighten as the mass of bodies decreased. Soon everything above my level would be gone, leaving me at the top of the pile. At that point... things would get interesting.

Lightning crackled and the woman lying on my arm came to life. She pushed herself upward, planting her hands on my shoulder for support. As she crawled across me, her knee dug forcefully into my back; I clenched my jaw to avoid grunting in pain. That woman was the last of another group of four, and she was quickly marched off under some living lackey’s leadership. How many active enemies did that leave in the room? I didn’t know, and couldn’t lift my head to look.

The next corpse reanimated was the woman with her face next to mine. I saw the transformation: one moment, she was blind and staring; then chuff, crackle, and jagged threads of blue light came lacing through her skin like bloated veins. Her eyes blinked once, lazily... she was staring right in my face. Then, twin pinpricks of fire erupted at the heart of her pupils, flaring outward until the entire surface of the eye blazed with flame. I could feel the heat on my cheeks.

She hissed directly at me and lifted one hand. The hand was sharp with newly grown claws.



Horror clutched at my heart, and I rolled away from the newborn wight, slipping out from under the few corpses that still weighed me down. The wight swiped her claws at me but missed; her hand slashed cleanly through the body beneath me, shredding the putrefied flesh. A fresh stink of rot and chemicals filled my nose, heady with nausea... but I continued my roll to the edge of the corpse-heap, sliding down the exterior like the side of a haystack. Even as I fell, I was grabbing for my sword, tugging to clear it from its sheath.

The bodies I brushed past slowed my fall, softening my impact on the floor. As soon as I landed, I scrambled to my feet and checked the opposition. Only two of the enemy squad remained, thank The Lady: a hobgoblin with its back to me and a drow, a dark elf, holding a bulbous scepter that glowed a sickly orange. The drow simply gaped, astonished at a corpse coming to life unaided. As for the hobgoblin, it turned to see what the

drow was staring at... which only made my job easier, giving me a clear opening to hit the soft part of its throat. My rapier slashed out once, bit deep, and severed whatever hobgoblins have in place of a jugular. Its blood sprayed gushers over the pile of still-dead bodies.

Something roared within the pile. For a moment, I thought it was the wight who'd tried to rake me with her claws—I could see her struggling to escape from the corpses still lying on top of her. Then a huddle of lifeless bodies suddenly heaved onto the drow as Hezekiah rose from the mound, roaring a battle cry. The drow fell cursing to the floor, struggling to lift his scepter despite the weight of corpses pinning his arms. Before he could manage it, the scepter was snatched from his hand by Wheezle, the little gnome finally turning visible as he scrambled away with his prize.

For a moment, we all stood waiting: me with my blade embedded in the hobgoblin's neck, Hezekiah wobbling to keep his balance on top of the corpse-heap, and Wheezle catching his breath as he leaned against the wall. Then the wight wrenched herself free from the mound and threw herself at the drow, slamming down where he was still pinioned by bodies. The wight's own body prevented me from seeing what happened next; but the drow gave a wailing scream of terror that ended abruptly in a gurgle.

Clearly, Madame Wight was not affectionately disposed toward the man who woke her from her nap.

"Stop!" Wheezle shouted. Hezekiah and I weren't moving, so he must have been talking to the wight; and sure enough, she rose from her kill peacefully, licking blood off her claws with great satisfaction. She even took a moment to look my way and smile. The smile appeared friendly enough... if only her teeth didn't have points as sharp as spikes.

First things first, however—I ran to the door and pushed the button to close it. The last thing I wanted was a friend of the drow prancing back with four wights in tow, coming to investigate why someone screamed.

The door slid shut quietly. Seconds dripped by and nothing happened. At last I let my breath out with a relieved sigh.

"All right," I said, "will someone please tell me what's going on?"



"I do not know all the answers, honored Cavendish," Wheezle began, "but this scepter tells me many things."

"The scepter talks?" Hezekiah asked with interest. He was still perched atop the corpse-heap, but he had lowered himself into a cross-legged sitting position where he seemed quite comfortable. "Uncle Toby once had a garden hoe that talked, but he sold it at the fall fair."

"The scepter does not talk, honored Clueless, but its presence here explains much. My faction calls this weapon Klemt Ur't'haleem, which might be translated as Unveiler. Unveiler is the creation of... a certain god, whose name it is unwise to speak aloud. Many centuries ago, the scepter came into the hands of the Dustmen; by which I mean that a party of Dustmen freed it from its former owner, and gave that owner a prominent place in our factol's retinue of zombies."

"So Unveiler belonged to the Dustmen and now it's here," I said. "That tells us what the thieves were doing at the Mortuary this morning."

“Indeed,” Wheezy nodded. “They must have used the exploding giant as a diversion while they crept inside and stole the scepter.”

“So what does this Unveiler do?” Hezekiah asked.

“It gives the user extraordinary powers to control the alchemical undead,” Wheezy replied. “It can even animate these pathetic corpses and fill them with energy; but for all that, it is still a despicable object. This poor creature...” He pointed to the wight, still greedily licking blood off her fingers. “She is out of touch with the cosmos. She cannot commune with the undead gods. Her death is a stifled, paltry thing.”

I couldn’t see any stifled quality myself—she looked quite happy for a corpse. However, Wheezy was the expert in such matters, so I deferred to his judgment.

“If the scepter is evil,” Hezekiah said, “maybe we should break it.”

“My faction has tried,” Wheezy told him. “Alas, it is too powerful. The best we could do was hide it in the Mortuary until we found a way to unmake it.”

“And the thieves must have stolen it because they were sick of the high failure rate from their alchemy,” I said. “Probably those three wights we killed back at the Mortuary were the only ones they had actually managed to get moving. Unveiler let them power up this whole pile of discards.”

“That is a reasonable conclusion,” Wheezy nodded. “The enemy obviously has need of an army of undead servants.”

“As if we don’t have enough headaches already,” I muttered. “Still, we have the scepter now; does that mean we can control the wights?”

“Any wights who see it in our possession will obey us,” Wheezy said. “We can turn them against their creators... as a temporary measure.”

“Why temporary?” I asked.

“These unfortunates must be freed,” the gnome replied. “We cannot leave them in their current condition. Yes, an army of wights might help us defeat our enemies, and I will reluctantly tolerate such an army until the task is accomplished. Once that is done, however, these souls must be released. The energy injection from this wand only lasts a few weeks—like throwing a few extra sticks of wood into a stove. Once that wood has been used, the wights begin to burn their own souls again. I will not be party to that.”

“And you have a way to release them?” Hezekiah piped up.

I wished the boy hadn’t said that.

With a wave of his hand, Wheezy shouted something that sounded like, “Hoksha ptock!” Unveiler’s orange glow curdled to a bilious green, casting sickly shadows over the heap of corpses. Bodies rustled like leaves; a few of them uttered heavy groans. The wight who had been licking her fingers gave a startled jerk, as if the ground had suddenly quaked beneath her. She turned to me with a puzzled look on her face, the flames in her eyes sputtering like a dampened fire. Her mouth let out a bewildered hiss... then her legs buckled and she fell to the floor.

Hezekiah, still sitting on top of the corpse-heap, yelped and tried to catch his balance. The bodies beneath him were shifting, muttering incomprehensibly. As fast as he could, the boy scrambled off the mound, running to my side as if I would protect him from whatever happened next.

No need. The one active wight was on her knees, rocking back and forth like a child trying to comfort herself. The corpses too were moving, the whole pile shuddering in

pulses. The muttering sounds grew louder, slowly blending together until all the bodies were moaning in unison, “Huhhhh... huhhhh... huhhhh...”

“Hoksha ptock!” Wheezle cried again.

“Ahhhhhhh,” the corpses sighed, and the wight hissed along. “Ahhhhh...”

“Hoksha ptock!”

Then, with a soft gooey sound, every dead body turned liquid—a runny brown liquid collapsing onto the floor with a loud splash, as gooey as egg whites. The fluid surged up to my feet like an ocean tide, flowing over my boots in a wave. Hezekiah tried to jump away, but there was nowhere to go: the spill of liquefying bodies covered the floor. We were both awash, up to the ankles.

“Yuck!” the boy shouted. “Euuu!”

“Do not fear,” Wheezle said calmly. “It is a form of ectoplasm. Not dangerous in any way.”

“So it’s not poisonous?” I asked. “Good.”

The taste was something like olive oil, but saltier. With a little vinegar, it might make a fine salad dressing.

CHAPTER SEVEN



THREE SLABS OF CLAY

a great thing this day,” Wheezle said. “The undead gods will not forget us.”

“Is that a good thing?” Hezekiah whispered to me.

“Probably not,” I whispered back. “But I’d rather have them pleased with us than angry.” In a louder voice, I said to Wheezle, “Of course you realize you’ve destroyed... sorry, freed... a lot of corpses who could have been on our side.”

“They would not truly be our allies, honored Cavendish. You must have

“WE HAVE DONE

observed how quickly the wight killed the drow once I took control of the scepter. Undead animated in this way always despise the persons responsible. The wights cannot resist direct commands from their creators, but they do their best to twist those commands contrary to the original intent. We will do better taking over the wights created by others—those wights will be grateful to us, at least for a time.”

I had to grant the truth of what he said. Wights would never be trustworthy for long, but the one we freed from the drow had smiled at me in a friendly manner... until Wheezle turned her into brown goop all over my boots.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s find more wights and tear this place apart.”



With a swish, the door opened in front of us. Wheezle took the lead; he was no longer invisible, but he carried Unveiler... something we wanted the wandering undead to see as soon as possible. I followed Wheezle and Hezekiah followed me.

The corridor continued to curve before us, following the building’s central ring. This time, however, the inner wall was not opaque metal—it was another triangular patchwork of glass, finally revealing what lay inside the ring.

The center was simply a bed of dust, light brown in the gray light. Our building surrounded the dust like an arena around a playing field, raised about two storeys above the surface. The enclosed region was enormous, a circle about four hundred yards in diameter—the far side of the ring was only a dim shadow in the grayness.

For a moment, I thought the dust floor was completely empty. Then I caught some motion a quarter way around the ring. Asking Wheezle to stop for a moment, I pressed my nose against one of the glass triangles and peered out at the unmoving dust.

Four figures had just emerged from a door at the base of the building, figures who moved with the peculiar arm-swinging gait of wights. Slowly, they waded into the arena, dust up to their thighs: a team of wights walking

directly forward, swinging their claws to scoop up handfuls of dust and throw it over their heads.

The disturbed dust did not drift down slowly as I might have expected—it fell as fast as stones. Was each dust mote as heavy as a boulder? No, the wights showed no strain as they tossed around handfuls of the stuff. After a few moments' thought, the explanation struck me: the arena had no air. The dust didn't drift because there was nothing for it to drift upon; with no air resistance, the dust fell as fast as anything else.

"No wonder they wanted to manufacture all those wights," I murmured. "Whatever they're up to down there, they need creatures that don't have to breathe."

As we continued along the corridor, I glanced out the window from time to time. More and more wights were wading into the dust—all the four-monster teams that had been assembled while Hezekiah and I hid in the corpse-heap. They soon spread around the whole circle, simply walking and throwing dust in the air.

"They're searching for something," Hezekiah said in a low voice.

"You think so?" I asked.

The boy nodded. "There must be something buried in the dust and they're trying to find it."

For once, Hezekiah appeared to be right. The wights slowly worked their way across the surface, sweeping through the dust with their hands. I wouldn't call it a methodical search; but perhaps this random wandering was one way the wights could do a bad job for their masters without actually disobeying orders.

In time, we heard the sound of shuffling feet directly ahead of us—four wights with a hobgoblin guide. Before I could stop him, Wheezy simply called, "Hello!" and waved the scepter. The instant the wights saw that someone new held Unveiler, they turned on the hobgoblin and ripped him to gobbets of bloody meat.

"Wheezy," I said, "next time, let's try to take one of these berks alive. If we can interrogate a prisoner, we might learn useful things."

"A hundred apologies, honored Cavendish."

Since the phrase was usually "a thousand apologies", I don't think Wheezy was particularly contrite.



We continued on our way with the four liberated wights trundling amiably behind us. Wheezy had chatted with them briefly, offering them a choice of being "freed" immediately or accompanying us on our hunting mission. All four were hissingly eager to slice into more of their former masters... which should be a warning to all you readers who want to create wights of your own.

The wights trotted along at a healthy speed, far faster than the sullen shuffle they had shown previously. In minutes, we had caught up with the next team of four, this group led by a human woman. "Take her alive!" Wheezy shouted as soon as her party came into view; and a heartbeat later, the woman was pinned against the glass wall by her former followers.

With four pointy-toothed wights grinning malevolently in her face, the woman opened her mouth to scream. Immediately, one of the wights stuffed its hand between her lips, pressing her head back hard against the glass panes. She still screamed, as any

sensible person might with a corpse's hand thrust into her mouth; but the muffled sound went nowhere.

As I trotted up to her, I told the wights, "Don't hurt her... for the moment." I said it only for the woman's benefit—as long as Wheezy held Unveiler, the wights didn't care a pin about orders from me.

The woman's eyes were wide and watery, glaring at me with vicious fury. She was in her early thirties, of middling height but very wiry. Up where the wights held her hands, her knuckles each sported a thick knot of callus, as if she liked to use her fists on passers-by; Brother Kiripao's knuckles had an identical set of calluses.

"Hello," I said to her. "I'm going to ask this nice wight to take his hand out of your mouth... and if you behave, he won't have to put it back in. All right?"

Grudgingly, she nodded. "Do what he says," Wheezy murmured to the wights, tapping Unveiler lightly against his thigh.

The wight slowly removed its hand, watching for any sign the woman might try to scream again. However, the hard-edged expression on her face showed that her initial outburst had been a one-time reaction; now she wanted to show how tough she was. "Who are you?" she growled.

"We don't have time to exchange life stories," I said. "You're going to tell us everything we want to know, and you're going to keep answering our questions until we say otherwise."

"If I don't, you're going to feed me to the wights?"

The wights all leered with their pointed teeth, but I shook my head. "That would be too easy. If you won't talk, I'll turn you over to... The Kid."

Dramatically, I spun around and pointed at Hezekiah.

"Me?" he gulped.

"Him!" I said, turning back to the woman. "Looks like a gawky little Clueless, doesn't he? Too stupid to live. I wish I had a ducat for every person who's thought that... every corpse left festering in an alley, the body mutilated and the face frozen in agony. Look at him again. Can anyone really be that much of a leatherhead? Or is it just an act to make you think he's harmless?"

"Britlin..." Hezekiah began, but I stopped him quickly.

"No!" I cried, cringing in front of him. "Don't be angry with me for giving away your secret. Please, master, don't... don't..." I stumbled against him, and in reflex, the boy reached out to steady me. The moment his hand touched my shoulder, I gasped, "Oh saints, the pain!" and collapsed, whimpering.

"Please," Wheezy said to the woman, "please, honored lady, you see I am a Dustman and no stranger to death. Yet even I cannot bear the hideous atrocities which this youth might visit upon your person. They claim he learned the arts of torture from the Lords of the Abyss. Surely you have heard of him? Surely you have heard of... The Kid."

A pity I was down on the ground, moaning like a barmy—I would have given a pound of gold to see the expression on the woman's face. Or on Hezekiah's face, for that matter. Still, I hoped the boy would have the wit to play along with the act; if we didn't scare this woman with cheap theatrics, we'd have to use real torture to get information out of her. That would mean noise and delay and a burden of guilt I preferred to avoid.

Carefully, Hezekiah stepped over me and approached the woman. I groaned louder

and wondered if the boy was about to mess up my plan. “Don’t let these berks peel you,” he said in a passable imitation of a Sigil accent. “I’m really quite harmless.”

And then, suddenly, Hezekiah was terrifying. From my position on the floor, all I could see was his boots; and they were the most frightening boots I had ever seen in my life. Terrible visions erupted in my mind, showing those boots kicking me mercilessly, breaking bones, crushing the skulls of children and grinding eyeballs under their heels.

Boots marching over the stubble of scorched fields.

Boots stamping face after face, annihilating every flicker of life.

Then, just as suddenly, Hezekiah was once more just a Clueless youth, innocent and ungainly. “You see?” he said in his normal voice. “I’m harmless.”

I moaned, and this time the moan was no act. It took all my strength to stop myself from shivering in the afterchill of terror. My sudden unreasoning fear must have come from magic, of course—some spell cast by Wheezy or Hezekiah himself, to make the little leatherhead seem monstrous; but my usual composure was shattered by the experience. I found myself asking which was the illusion: the suddenly horrendous aura surrounding the boy, or perhaps his usual bumbling persona. What did I really know about him? A Clueless hick who just happened to know high-powered magic... did that make sense?

“Keep him away from me!” the woman shouted.

“I do not have authority over The Kid,” Wheezy answered. “But if you tell what you know, perhaps he will not trouble himself to make an example of you.”

“All right, I’ll talk,” she said. And she did.



Her name was Miriam and she didn’t know much. Ten days ago, she’d been a streetcorner thug in Sigil, playing the protection peel over a few blocks of dingy shops: “Cross my palm with silver, or I’ll burn your place down.” When some basher in a tavern offered her a heavy purse in exchange for three weeks of strong-arm work, she’d said yes. That’s how she’d come here to the Plane of Dust.

Yes, this really was the Plane of Dust that Oonah had mentioned a few days earlier. The plane was nothing but an infinite ocean of dust—no water, no air, just dust untouched by the slightest wind. I’d heard a rumor that the Doomguard maintained a citadel somewhere on this plane, because it was the sort of lifeless place that appealed to their sensibilities; but this building didn’t belong to the Doomguard. Miriam told us we were standing inside the Glass Spider... “Glass” because of its see-through walls, even though they were constructed from something much more indestructible than ordinary window panes. The “Spider” part of the name came from the building’s shape: a circular central body almost half a mile in diameter, with eight arms radiating outward around the circumference. Each arm was a long sloping corridor like the one where we’d come in, and the outer end of each housed a portal to some other part of the multiverse.

The most surprising aspect of the Glass Spider was that it could move. Miriam claimed the Spider’s legs could crawl through the dust faster than an eagle could fly, stirring up silt in mammoth plumes that streamed away for miles behind the speeding bug. It had been racing through the dust for most of the past week, covering a hundred leagues every hour; but a short while ago it had finally stopped, apparently at its

journey's end.

What was the Spider's purpose? Who built it? Miriam didn't know, but at least she could list the people who had arrived with her ten days ago.

Her immediate superior had been the drow back at the corpse-heap; since the wights had torn him to bloody confetti, we didn't bother asking his name.

The drow's boss was our old friend Bleach-Hair, his real name Petrov. Petrov hailed from some Prime Material world whose predominant landscape was ice; Miriam didn't remember the world's name, and none of us cared. (I might comment, by the way, that so-called ice worlds usually have their share of green fields, lakes, and even jungles; when someone like Petrov says he comes from an ice world, he almost always comes from a perfectly normal world and just lived in an icy part of it. Folk of the Prime Material plane are so parochial they seldom know much about their own homes, let alone the multiverse at large.)

Petrov occupied the second highest rung on the ladder of command. Above him were two powerful figures who shared control of everything that happened in the Glass Spider. One was a human mage who called himself "The Fox"... although Miriam contended "The Loon" was a more appropriate title. The Fox loved fire the way another man might love women; he could gaze at flames for hours, talking to the blaze and showing every sign of listening to it talk back. Thanks to various magic spells, he could even caress fire, bathe in it, wear it like a cloak. Needless to say, the Fox manufactured the firewands used at the courts, and masterminded all the other fiery accidents that had struck faction headquarters in Sigil. The very first incident—the riot at the Gatehouse asylum—had started when the Fox broke out of a padded cell where he had been confined for years.

The Fox had managed his escape with the help of the other leader of this group, a human woman named Rivi. She was not a sorcerer—Miriam claimed that Rivi hated sorcerers, although she got along well with a barmy like the Fox—but Rivi could still do things that struck Miriam as magic: reading minds, for example, or projecting her thoughts through the building to give orders to underlings.

"Oh," said Hezekiah. "Rivi must be psionic."

"What do you know about psionics?" I asked him.

"How do you think I teleport?" he replied. "I'm not a magician."

"I thought you were."

"Nope. It's all mind over matter."

Hmm. If Hezekiah's mind could win that kind of contest, it substantially lowered my opinion of matter.



Miriam didn't know exactly what Rivi and the Fox were up to, but they wanted to find something that was buried in the dust a long time ago. The mysterious object had been unearthed once before, by an expedition under the leadership of Felice DeVail, Guvner Oonah's mother. The Fox had belonged to that expedition, along with members of many other Sigil factions; they had toured several planes including Dust, eventually jumping by accident into the middle of the Gray Wastes and finding themselves trapped between hostile armies in the Blood Wars raging there.

Most of the party had died in short order; the Fox had been battered by evil magics, and driven insane; but a few, including Felice, had escaped unscathed, dragging the Fox with them and eventually making their way back to Sigil. Naturally, the survivors had all reported these events to their factions, depositing personal accounts of the expedition in the various faction archives. Just as naturally, the Fox had set about stealing those accounts from faction headquarters the moment Rivi freed him. His eagerness to return here suggested that the long-ago expedition had found some kind of treasure in the Plane of Dust but hadn't taken it with them. Now, the Fox had come back to collect that treasure, using the information he had stolen from the factions.

Miriam's story introduced a dozen new puzzles about what was going on, but such questions could wait. At least we knew something about our opposition now: fire-wizard Fox, psionic Rivi, and an assortment of bashers from Sigil. There was only one other question in my mind, and I asked it. "If Petrov and his cronies captured some prisoners, where would he take them?"

"To Rivi," Miriam answered immediately. "She can do things to people's minds. She can... change you. Back when she and the Fox were recruiting people, they hired two first-rate knights of the post: sneak thieves. Only problem was, the thieves wouldn't work together—one was githyanki, the other githzerai. Hated each other like poison. So Rivi took them away for a few hours, and next thing you know, they're bosom buddies. Lifelong friends. She did something spooky to their brains."

"Is that really possible?" I whispered to Hezekiah. It irked me to turn to a Clueless for information, but he was the only authority we had on psionic powers.

"Rearranging a person's thoughts can be tricky," he whispered back. "Making it permanent is even harder. It once took Uncle Toby a whole day to stop two kings from declaring war with each other. Of course, he had to fix up their generals too, so that's what dragged out the time."

"Your Uncle... painted over their minds?" I pictured how easily I could change a frown to a smile with just a few strokes of the brush. Was it that easy for Uncle Toby? Was it equally easy for Rivi? If this brainpainter had enough time to work on Yasmin, to rape her mind...

"We have to save the others," I said. "We have to save them now."

"Where can we find this Rivi?" Wheezle asked quietly.

"Her quarters are on the lower level," Miriam replied. "I can show you."

I glanced at Wheezle, raising my eyebrows. "We cannot trust her," Wheezle said, answering my unasked question. "On the other hand, it is safer to take her with us than leave her or kill her. As long as she remains in our hands, she has an incentive to cooperate." The little gnome turned to her. "You understand what these wights will do if you betray us?"

The wights leered in her face, but she just jutted out her chin. "I know the game," she answered. "I'll play."

"And I'll make sure she does," Hezekiah said. "I'll take her under my wing."

He moved to her side and smiled. Suddenly, he was terrifying again—his face didn't change a muscle, but his smile took on the unnatural brightness of a killer, the placid tranquility of a child who could slay its mother without conscience. In that face was all the cruelty of childhood, the taunts, the bullying, the inventive tortures of insects and

younger siblings.

“You’ll be good, won’t you?” Hezekiah told Miriam. Then he was simply a Clueless boy again, his smile only a smile, his face only an eighteen-year-old face.

I couldn’t stand to look at it.

“Don’t worry about me,” Miriam mumbled. “You’re my high-up man, you are.” She edged away from him but kept her head lowered, like a dog showing submission to a wolf.

“Then we’re all set,” the boy said. “Let’s get going.”



With a pair of wights taking the lead, we proceeded down the corridor. Below us, in the circular arena surrounded by the ring of the Glass Spider, other wights continued to wade through the dust, searching for who-knew-what. I wondered how big their target was. Something the size of a needle would take days to find, but something substantial, like a spellbook or a magic sword, would surely turn up soon; there was a lot of ground to cover out there, but there were a lot of wights searching.

If we didn’t rescue Yasmin and the others before the wights found their objective, I knew we’d all be in big trouble. No one went to all this bother for something innocuous.

Soon, we were approaching the next intersection of a radial arm with the Spider’s central ring. As before, a furniture-filled lounge occupied the area where the arm connected with the body; but in the center of the room was a spiral wrought-iron staircase leading down to a lower level. The iron was bare and unpainted, yet I couldn’t see the slightest fleck of rust—either these steps were scoured daily by a platoon of wights with sandpaper, or there was some kind of magic at work, maintaining this place in pristine condition. I put my money on the magic: the whole Glass Spider was in good upkeep, but it had an air of antiquity about it, as if it had endured for eons, impervious to decay.

Miriam gestured that we should go down the stairs. Wheezy stopped her and sent two wights ahead to see if the way was clear. They came back smiling their pointy grins and hissing in a relaxed fashion that suggested no one was lurking in ambush. We formed up our company again, wights at the head and rear, more wights tightly surrounding Miriam; then we began our descent.

As we climbed downward, my ears picked up a rumbling in the distance. It took me a few seconds to identify the sound; but then I remembered a tour I had taken of The Lady’s Chime, that huge clock tower just down the street from Sigil’s Hall of Speakers. The upper floors of the tower had echoed with the clicking of gears, the whirr of flywheels, and the ratcheting of counterweights pulling time forward. The rumble I heard now had the same sort of mechanical edge to it—a giant clockworks muttering to itself. We must be approaching the machinery that allowed the Glass Spider to move.

A long arcing corridor led us away from the stairs, and soon the air filled with the smell of metal: bare metal, oiled metal, hot metal. The corridor was lit by glass globes suspended from the ceiling; each globe burned bright and white from some inner fire. Their light revealed that Hezekiah had linked his arm with Miriam’s as soon as we reached this lower floor. Clearly, he didn’t want to risk her running away while he’d been appointed to watch her.

The mechanical rumble grew louder as we continued forward. Ahead lay an open doorway, and beyond that was a room full of metal machinery: I recognized gears, chain-belts, cables, and other simple trappings, but the great bulk of equipment was beyond my comprehension. How could one understand a bank of square crystals glowing with hieroglyphs of light, or huge metal drums that occasionally hissed steam through red-hot stopcocks? What was the purpose of a dozen metal pistons pounding in and out of smoking cylinders, or a gold stalactite mounted above a copper stalagmite with squirts of lightning leaping between their points? All I knew was that the air burned and reeked with oil, like the vestibule of some fiery hell.

Wheeze stopped us once more and turned a questioning gaze toward Miriam. "It's always like this," the woman shrugged. "You're a gnome—you should know about machines."

"I specialize in death, not devices," Wheeze replied. "Are we close to where this Rivi would be?"

"Her quarters are in this machine room," Miriam said. "She likes it here."

"How can she sleep with all this noise?"

"She says it just takes discipline. Rivi is hot blazing barmy about discipline."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" I muttered. But Wheeze was already leading us forward.



A machine room full of moving parts is no place to go when your nerves are on edge. Gears clank; you whirl, expecting an attack. Steam erupts from a release valve; it leaves cloudy films on nearby surfaces, looking like ghosts out the corner of your eye. Pistons bang and conveyor belts flap; so much motion, so many nooks for enemies to hide. Every second, there was something new to jump at.

"There's a control room over in the corner," Miriam said above the clatter of machinery. "That's where Rivi spends most of her time."

"Then you stay here with Hezekiah," I told her. "Wheeze and I will see if Rivi's home."

"Whack her the second you see her," Miriam advised. "She'll addle your chops if you don't."

"No loyalty toward your former boss?" I asked.

"None," Miriam replied. "If you don't put Rivi down, she'll turn my brains to cheese for helping you."

"We shall try to avoid that eventuality," Wheeze said. Kowtowing briefly to those who were staying behind, he gathered a selection of wights and gestured for me to take the lead.

The control room in the corner had thick concrete walls without a single window. An odd design—if you were a worker controlling the machinery, wouldn't it be nice to see what the equipment was doing? On the other hand, perhaps the room was not a command post where you calmly watched gauges so much as a bunker to take cover when you pushed the wrong button.

The door to the control room was closed. I took one side of it, Wheeze took the other, and the wights stood directly back from the opening, ready to charge in as soon as I

turned the knob. Holding up his fingers, Wheezy counted off Three, Two, One. Flick, I threw open the door, and with a clatter of toe-claws across cement, the wights leapt forward. I jumped in right behind them, my rapier drawn and ready to impale anyone who could paint obscenities over other people's brains.

There was nobody home.

Undoubtedly, however, someone did live in this room. In the back corner was a small cot, its crisp sheets tucked and folded with a precision that would satisfy the most fastidious member of the Harmonium. Around the walls, wooden tables held neat stacks of paper, numerous books alphabetized by title, and a few scrolls hung on pine dowels. The whole place had an air of obsessive organization.

I turned my back on it. "Rivi's not here."

"True," Wheezy nodded. "But her library is. It could teach us a great deal about her intentions."

"It would take days to read all this, and that's assuming it's written in a language we understand. Let's keep moving."

"Surely we can spare a minute to glance at a page or two," Wheezy said.

I waved my arm at the collection. "Which page?"

"The oldest." He shuffled to the closest table and peered at the stacks—paper, parchment, vellum, papyrus. "The oldest," he went on, "is most likely to tell of the beginning of things. Obscure secrets. Forgotten wisdom." He moved to another table. "I have studied a number of ancient languages and am quite fluent in... ah, this looks interesting."

Standing on tiptoe, he pushed away a stack of papers to reveal something underneath: a clay tablet, covered with scratchy marks like the footprints of a mouse. At some point in the past, the tablet had broken into three flat pieces; later on, Rivi or someone else had reassembled the pieces like parts of a puzzle, imbedding them in newer clay to hold them together. I had to admit, it certainly looked like the oldest document in the room.

"Can you read it?" I asked.

"I have seen the script before," Wheezy replied. "The language is called Urqlish—extremely old. Some say it predates the eldest gods. No one knows how to pronounce its words, but my mentors taught me how to decipher such writings. The Urqs, whoever they were, left massive volumes of text to posterity. Much of it deals with incomprehensible facets of their culture, but this... this is something different."

"What does it say?"

"Let me see. The Words of Savant... I can't make out the savant's name, but it doesn't matter. The Words of Savant whoever to his liege lord: Know, O Queen..."



Know, O Queen, that in the mists of the past, things were not as they are today. There was a time when the secrets of magic were hidden from the seven races; indeed, some scholars say there was a time before magic was born, when humans alone lived in a fresh and simple world.

But the flower of magic blossomed in its time, and the simple world yielded to a more complicated age. Wizards seized great power for themselves; and in the way of all souls, some used their power for good while others used it for evil. Often, rival sorcerers waged

terrible war on each other, devastating the land and slaughtering innocents by the thousands.

At that time, our gods were not yet born. Some sages claim that the beings who walked the hidden places of the land were not true gods at all: they were mere mortals, but able to command engines of such puissance that our ancestors mistook them for gods. I do not know the truth of it, O Queen; but I can tell you there were celestial powers of one type or another who watched the havoc wrought by magicians and shook their heads in sorrow.

Some of these powers sought to curb the destruction by creating sorcerers of their own: priests who would shape the forces of magic in obedience to their patron's will. Thus began the practice of gods granting spells to the most devout of their followers.

But some celestial powers believed that fighting magic with magic was purest folly. "Surely," these powers said, "the best way to stop this madness is to stop magic itself." For many days, they debated how they could do this. The flux of magic had come to fill the multiverse, and no one was strong enough to exhaust the supply. At last, however, one group of powers, the most exalted among their colleagues, devised a plan: if they could not shut off the flux itself, they could at least prevent lesser beings from sculpting the flux, so that humans and others could no longer wield the stuff of sorcery.

Then gathered the greatest of those powers. Their names are forgotten; we know them only as the Warrior, the Poet, the Witch, the Prayer, the Healer, the Scholar, and Death. Using all the knowledge at their command, they constructed a laughably simple device—a grinder, such as a peasant might use to grind out pepper or salt. This grinder, however, ground out a never-ending supply of sticky white dust.

Such a simple thing; and yet, the dust was not simple. In the presence of a concentration of magic, the dust fed on that magic and grew as hot as molten steel—a magical heat so pure and piercing it could burn the very fiends of the pit. Now imagine, O Queen, what might happen to your court mage if he had particles of such dust on his clothes or skin. As he began to cast a spell, he would draw into himself the flux of magical energies, concentrating it within his being... when suddenly, his skin would sear with agony, his clothes catch fire! Wracked with pain, he could not complete the spell; or if he pressed on by sheer force of will, he would continue to burn until he turned to ash.

This was the plan of the celestial powers—to grind out such dust and spread it throughout the world... indeed, through all the realms of the multiverse. In every place, the dust would disperse, settling on people, on plants and animals, on houses and seas; and how could mages escape that dust? It would settle on their bodies, their clothes, their food, their drink... no amount of washing could get every particle.

Armed with the grinder, its creators began to tour the Ten Thousand Worlds. Wherever they spread their dust, magicians quickly ended their sorceries. Of course, some sought to develop spells to protect themselves from the dust; but how could they cast such enchantments? Even those who thought themselves flameproof, who danced with fire and drank molten rock, found themselves ravaged by the dust's awful heat. Thus all sorcery was suspended, and for a time, the Ten Thousand Worlds returned to the simplicity of life without magic. Most people, I believe, breathed a sigh of relief.

But what of the other celestial powers... the ones who had armed their priests with

magicks of their own? Those powers raged in fury at the anti-magic dust; for the deities with magic-wielding followers revelled in the influence exerted by their priests, and without magic, the priests were mortals like anyone else. Congregations began to ask uncomfortable questions, the most important being, "Do I truly want to worship this god?" People may bow their heads to any deity if there are sufficient rewards for devotion, or punishments for disobedience; but if the rewards and punishments stop, congregations soon realize some deities are less worthy of worship than others.

Great were the howls of wrath from celestial powers snubbed by their flocks. They raged against the creators of the grinder, and banded together to declare a war of vengeance. Long did the battle thunder through the heavens. The seven creators were the greatest of the powers, but arrayed against them were so many angered deities that at last the seven were defeated. I cannot tell you their fates, O Queen; some scholars say the creators were obliterated, while others say they were torn apart but soon re-formed to become the gods we revere today.

As for the grinder, the other celestial powers found they did not have the strength to unmake it, or even to stop the continuing flow of magic-killing dust. Their solution was to create a second grinder and a second type of dust: a brown dust that draws and channels the magical flux away from the white dust. I have told you, O Queen, what would happen if your court mage attempted to cast a spell with the white dust on his skin; but if he also had brown dust it would act as a funnel, drawing magic away from the white dust and directing it into your mage's soul. The white dust would not burn, and the magical flux would be even more focussed than usual.

In fact, O Queen, your court mage and all things in all places contain a few motes of both the white and brown dust. The creators of the first grinder spread its dust to all worlds; and after those creators were defeated, the other powers spread equal quantities of their own dust to counteract the first. Once the different dusts had come to balance, the two grinders were bound together, like mundane salt and pepper shakers, and thrown into an empty plane of existence. There they have continued to grind, even to this very day. They have filled that plane with their dust, from one horizon to the other, and they will persist in their grinding to the end of time.

Or so the ancient tales say.



When Wheezle finished reading, neither of us spoke for several seconds. Even the wights were silent, their burning gaze lost in some unknown distance.

"Miriam told us Rivi hated magic," I said at last.

"Indeed," Wheezle nodded. "And if she finds the two grinders... one grinder makes it impossible for people to cast magic, and the other is essentially the antidote. An exceedingly powerful pair of weapons."

"What would happen," I asked, "if she spread the white dust over a battlefield? While she and her allies were safely covered in the brown."

"Magic decides many battles," Wheezle replied, "especially when your opponents have none. With proper tactics, Rivi could become a fearsome conqueror."

"Of course," I said, "some god would eventually stop her. Step in and seize the grinders."

Wheeze shook his head. “I think if one god tried to possess such powerful artifacts, other gods would prevent that from happening. Suppose, for example, that a good god claimed the grinders; evil gods would fear such weapons wielded in the cause of virtue, and would try to take the grinders for themselves. The struggle might precipitate Ragnarok itself—the final battle of god against god, wherein the cosmos is destroyed. No,” Wheeze said, “the gods will be extremely wary of intervening... and if any god does, Rivi will be the least of the multiverse’s problems.”

“But suppose Rivi tries to conquer Sigil!” I protested. “Suppose she spreads her dust, then leads in an army equipped with magic. Surely The Lady of Pain would take direct action then—it’s her job to protect Sigil.”

“The Lady of Pain may or may not be a god,” Wheeze replied. “She is Sigil’s legendary protector, but she is also a great mystery. Perhaps she is only a sorcerer herself; in that case, she will be as helpless as any streetcorner conjuror. If by chance she is a god... well, as I say, gods of all persuasions would band together to prevent any other deity from claiming the grinders. Who knows the outcome?”

I shuddered. Scant minutes ago, our party had just come to rescue Yasmin and the others; now, it looked like the fate of whole worlds was on the line. Truth to tell, I still cared about Yasmin more than some abstract threat toward Sigil or any other realm... but the added pressure didn’t help.

CHAPTER EIGHT+



THREE SCORCHED PRISONERS

Wheeze and I left the control bunker, emerging once more into the full din of the machinery room. My Dustman colleague had stuffed his pockets with scrolls and documents, including the diary of Felice DeVail. Perhaps we didn't have time to read any more right now, but he fully intended to check through everything when he got the chance.

The wights greeted us with spike-toothed smiles, but Hezekiah and Miriam didn't notice us at first—they were too busy talking, or rather

SOMBERLY

yelling into each other's ears so they could be heard above the clang of pistons. Even with them shouting, I couldn't make out what they were saying from any distance away; and as we approached, Hezekiah saw us and guiltily broke off his conversation.

I didn't like the look of that. Miriam was scarcely an irresistible seductress, but how much voluptuous charm would it take to turn the Clueless boy's head? She could never talk him into knifing Wheeze or me in the back—he was too naively virtuous for that—yet I worried he might help her “just a little” and get us into trouble just a lot.

“Remember she's the enemy,” I told him, shouting loudly myself. “She's untrustworthy and dangerous.”

“She says I'm dangerous too,” he replied. “The way I scared her makes her want to... she says she'd like to serve me.”

That made me blink in surprise—I hadn't expected her taking the submissive approach. When Hezekiah made himself the embodiment of terror, did he touch a responsive chord in Miriam's heart? Some people love to be overwhelmed, I knew that... and when I glanced at Miriam, I saw her gazing at the boy with an expression that was almost worshipful. Of course, it was quite probably a sham: just a different sham than I'd anticipated. “Be careful,” I muttered to the boy, then turned away, embarrassed.



Within a minute, we had left behind the clamor of ratchets and throttles and gears. It hadn't been an interesting noise anyway—lots of volume but no finesse.

“Where are you leading us now?” I asked Miriam.

“Petrov's quarters are just up ahead,” she answered. “You said he might have helped capture your friends. If he's in his room, you can ask him yourself.”

“Looking forward to it,” I assured her as I drew my rapier from its sheath. Even if she was leading us into a trap, I'd be happy to face Petrov

with sword in hand.

The corridor opened into a sizable chamber with at least twenty bunk beds set into the walls, like the recessed niches of a mausoleum. In the middle of the room stood a few metal tables bolted to the floor, the sort of tables you might see in an army barracks, where the soldiers sit, play cards, and boast of their sexual exploits. These tables, however, were too brightly polished for a real barracks, with nary a stain from spilled beer, nor scratches from mugs slammed down in anger when someone's poker hand held one ace too many. The rest of the room also lacked any of the normal signs of occupation: the lingering smells of bodies, the scuff marks of boots on the floor.

"Remarkably tidy for a hide-out," I said to Miriam. "Is this really where your cronies live?"

"Don't be a leatherhead," she growled. "We underlings live farther down the hall. Mr. High-and-Mighty Petrov couldn't bear to tuck down with the likes of us, so he moved into this empty room. He tried to tell us Rivi wanted him close in case she got cold in the night... but that slag has so much ice in her veins, she couldn't warm up if she kissed a red dragon."

"Uncle Toby once gave a sponge bath to a dragon," Hezekiah piped up. "I don't know what color it was."

"Hush," I told him.

"No, really, this is an interesting story. The dragon had contracted a case of mummy rot from some adventurer she'd eaten, and Uncle Toby—"

I put a finger to his lips. "Button it," I whispered. "Someone's coming."

Chalk up another for a Sensate's razor-sharp hearing. Some distance ahead of us, a stream of grunts and groans echoed down the corridor, punctuated now and then by a juicy upswell of profanity. Wheezle gestured and immediately one of the wights wrapped its rotting hand over Miriam's mouth, just in case she tried to shout a warning. She tossed Wheezle an aggrieved look, as if the thought would never enter her mind... but even if she yelled her head off, the man approaching us probably wouldn't have heard. He seemed too caught up in venting his piteous moans to notice any of the world around him.

Thirty seconds later, he walked into what he thought was an empty room. The bleached white hair showed it was our old friend Petrov... but a Petrov who had clearly seen action since the showdown on the Vertical Sea. His head sported a blood-soaked bandage, and his bare chest had turned a bright lobster red. Under other circumstances, I might have believed his skin was sunburned; but I knew this particular damage was frostbite, courtesy of the blistering cold from Oonah DeVail's staff.

It made me smile that Petrov hadn't walked away from the fight unscathed. Unfortunately, the fact that he was walking at all suggested his side had won in the end. If Yasmin had come out on top, Petrov would even now be dining on dust outside the Spider.

Like a mountain of misery, the big basher shuffled to one of the tables and sat down with a heavy thud, letting his head slump forward into his hands. In all the time it took for him to get into the room, he had never spared a glance into any of the recessed bunks... which means he didn't notice eight wights and assorted breathers lying there in wait. His first clue that he wasn't alone must have been the tip of my rapier pricking the

back of his neck.

“Greetings, honored hoodlum,” Wheezy whispered in Petrov’s ear. “We would not hurt you for the world, but you have accidentally sat where Mr. Cavendish is about to thrust his sword. I suggest you keep very, very still.”



Wheezy assigned four wights to hold Petrov down, a number which struck me as excessive. True, old Bleach-Hair was a bulky brawler of a berk, and on a good night he could sling a pair of tavern wenches under each arm; but at the moment, a five-year-old with sharp fingernails could drop Petrov to his knees by poking the man’s frostbitten tum-tum.

“Should he really be moaning like that?” Hezekiah asked. “I think he’s hurt.”

“He wants us to let down our guard,” I said, as the wights slammed our captive onto the hard metal table. The jarring sound of impact was quickly replaced by a wail of agony from Petrov. “He’s such a big baby,” I muttered.

Wheezy clambered up on a chair so he could lift himself to eye level with the man. “Now, honored hoodlum,” he said, “we would like to know what happened to our colleagues: the ones you confronted back at the Vertical Sea.”

“The sodding berks froze my hide off!” he growled. “But I got my revenge—showed them what a haunch of beef feels like inside the oven.”

I let the tip of my rapier nestle down against his Adam’s apple. “Did you kill them?”

“I piking well wanted to... but Qi and Chi said no, Rivi would want to question them.”

“So all three are alive?”

“They were the last time I saw them. Not pretty,” he added with a leer, “but alive.”

With miniscule effort, I could have leaned forward and sent the bladepoint through his windpipe. Not pretty, but alive... the words flooded like poison into my heart. Petrov and his cronies had been carrying firewands as they fought our friends. I thought of Yasmin looking as savagely burnt as the victims in the court rotunda; and I had to walk away quickly before I forgot myself.

“Who are Qi and Chi?” I heard Hezekiah asking.

“Thieves. A githzerai and githyanki—they helped bring down your pus-swilling friends. While the boys and I made things toasty up front, Qi and Chi snuck up from behind and tickled some spines with steel. Your group surrendered nice and quiet once they’d been ventilated a bit.”

“Where are our teammates now?” Wheezy asked.

“Go pike yourself.” Petrov aimed some spittle in Wheezy’s general direction. He got more on himself than he did on the gnome, but it was the thought that counted. “I’ve said enough already,” Petrov snarled, “and I’m not rattling my bone-box no more.”

“Dear, oh dear,” I tsked from the corner of the room, “torture time again. Hezekiah,” I raised my voice, “what faction do you think boasts the most fearsome torturers?”

“Ummm... the Mercykillers?”

“Not a bad guess,” I told him. “The Mercykillers like torturing people and they put a lot of effort into it... but alas, they’re overly crude. They’re too fond of breaking bones and spilling blood; they haven’t devoted themselves to discovering what genuinely

causes the maximum amount of pain. The true students of excruciation are... well, I blush to admit it, but the most adept torturers in the multiverse belong to my own faction, the Sensates."

"You're a Sensate?" Petrov asked uneasily.

"That's right," I answered, stepping up to the table. "We've spent centuries documenting every possible sensation the human body can experience. Many people think we only pursue pleasure, but that's wrong. We devote equal time to the study of pain. To the science of pain. For example, let me try to remember the location of the capitus nerve."

I leaned over Petrov's body and drew out my tweak-knife. It was not an imposing blade, just a tiny thing I kept for whittling pen nibs when I wanted to sketch in ink; but it had a good sharp edge that I'd whetted less than a week earlier. In a pinch, it could double as a razor.

"The capitus nerve," I said, making up the story as I went along, "runs all the way from the ball of the right foot to the left lobe of the brain." I drew the unsharpened side of the blade up the length of Petrov's body. "Did you know that the longer the nerve is, the more pain it can experience? And the capitus nerve is the longest nerve in the body."

"Who the sod cares?" Petrov snapped.

"I, for one, find it most stimulating," Wheezy replied. "Please continue, honored Cavendish."

"The capitus nerve runs through the most pain-sensitive areas of the anatomy. The knee. The inside of the thigh. The groin, of course." I tapped each of these lightly with the flat of the blade. "Then there's the chest, which I notice is already in a tender condition. There's a great deal of individual variation in the route of the capitus through the chest, but you can usually find it by cross-correlating with a few other key meridians. First you find the small intestine..."

I jabbed my thumb deep into the pit of Petrov's stomach. He shrieked, probably thinking I was using the knife; or maybe he was reacting to true agony, from the frostbitten skin of his gut. "Ohh," I said with great sympathy, "if you think that hurt, you're in trouble. The nerve I just hit was an itty-bitty one... scarcely able to feel pain at all. About the same size as this one."

Extending a knuckle, I rubbed briskly along the man's sternum, raking back and forth across a knot of nerves I happened to know lurked there just under the skin. Petrov howled again. I wiped off my knuckle; flakes of chapped skin had stuck to it when it pulled away from Petrov's breastbone.

"Well, those two points of reference have given me a bearing on where the capitus nerve should be," I told him. Lifting my knife, I added, "It may take some digging to hit the nerve bang-on, but I guarantee it will be worth the wait." I leaned in toward one of the wights who was holding Petrov down. "Could you tilt his head so it's pointing away from me? They always vomit when I do this, and I don't have a change of clothes."

"All right!" Petrov yelled. "Who the pike cares? I'll take you where the rotten sods are locked up."

A few seconds ticked away in silence; then Wheezy touched my sleeve. "Could you show me where the capitus nerve is anyway? I would be most interested in learning."

Wordlessly, I shook my head.



More corridors to slog through, and time was ticking by. I wondered how long it would be till Rivi's wights found the grinders out in the arena of dust. There was no way to guess. If I were a true hero like my father, maybe I'd be racing after Rivi and the Fox instead of Yasmin: putting the fate of the multiverse ahead of a few individuals. We had Unveiler and could command the wights to attack our enemies. Unfortunately, the wights would all be wandering in the airless arena, where they couldn't hear us calling orders; meanwhile, we'd face a fire-mage and a mind-raper, plus their band of bully-bashers armed with flame-wands.

No, I decided, my father might have succeeded against such a mass of enemies, but I couldn't handle the odds. Saving Yasmin and the others was at least manageable. Once we rescued our friends, we could hightail it back to Sigil and fetch reinforcements. It wasn't a heroic plan, but it was something we might survive.

In time, I heard telltale sounds of clanking up ahead and Petrov led us into another machinery room, twin to the previous one. Obviously, the Glass Spider had several independent drive mechanisms, each with its own engine room; a separate motor for each of the Spider's legs. This machine room had the same number of pistons chugging away, the same layout, the same noise... but the control bunker in the corner had a huge wooden beam blocking the door shut.

"They're in there," Petrov pointed to the door. "Gods rot you all."

"Amen," Wheezle agreed earnestly.

Three wights held Petrov, one held Miriam, and the other four went to work moving the beam. Judging from the way they strained, I estimated the timber weighed close to a ton. It took the wights a full minute to get the beam clear of the door, and in that time Hezekiah made a discovery: Oonah's ice-staff, tucked in under a desk whose surface glowed with incomprehensible runes of light.

"Rivi threw it there," Petrov said grudgingly, as Hezekiah dragged the staff out. "Wouldn't let anyone else touch it because it was magic. She hates magic and every damned sorcerer in creation."

"Doesn't that make the Fox nervous?" I asked.

"The Fox hasn't got enough brains to be nervous," Petrov answered. "He's too sodding barmy to see Rivi's just using him."

"Using him for what?"

But Petrov clamped his jaw tight and wouldn't say another word. I didn't press the issue—once we got old Bleach-Hair back to Sigil, the Harmonium could sweat everything out of him.

The wights dragged away the beam at last, and Hezekiah leapt forward to open the door. I dashed after him, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, and barely managed to drag him back in time... because the second the blockage was gone, the door burst open with the force of a cannonball and Kiripao hit the floor in a diving roll. His momentum carried him up to his feet in one fluid motion, and he had embedded his fist through the ribcage of the nearest wight before he realized we were the good guys.

The wight, in life a female elf, glared pointedly down at Kiripao's hand plunged wrist-deep into her chest. Kiripao blinked for a few moments, then got the message.

“Sorry,” he muttered, and levered the hand out of her thoracic cavity, dragging with it some stray bone fragments and a spill of the red powder that seemed to serve these wights as blood.

“Could I smell your hand?” I whispered to him.

“No.”



Kiripao’s robes had been reduced to charred rags during the fire-fight. He’d rearranged the remaining scraps into a passable loincloth, leaving his chest and legs bare. The flesh thus revealed was a three-colored patchwork: the angry red of burns, the pale pink of an elf’s normal skin, and a milky white as unblemished as a freshly gessoed canvas. I’d seen that white before, and not just on blank canvases—it was new skin, recently regenerated by a powerful influx of healing magic. Over the next few hours, it would gradually adjust itself to match the rest of Kiripao’s body; in the meantime however, it showed that the pious brother had taken quite a beating, and someone had patched him up afterward.

Of course, I told myself, Kiripao must be in good standing with his god. If he prayed for his injuries to heal, the deity would answer his prayers. And he could have patched up Yasmin and Oonah too in the same way... at least to the point where they were out of immediate danger.

Oonah hobbled from the control room a moment later, working up a warm smile when she saw this was a rescue party. Whatever healing she had received, it wasn’t enough—her legs moved stiffly, as if each step brought her fierce pain. Her arms had the same stiffness as she reached to take back her ice-staff from Hezekiah; but once she grasped the staff in her hands, some of her constriction appeared to ease. I wondered if the staff had inherent healing powers, or if she simply felt better holding it. With reverent care, she set the butt of the staff onto the ground, then leaned her weight wearily upon it.

Several more seconds passed; I held my breath, waiting for Yasmin to emerge from the control room. Kiripao and Oonah said nothing. When I could bear it no longer, I rushed to the doorway and plunged inside.

When you’re a Handmaid of Entropy, it seems you don’t respond well to healing.

Yasmin sat propped against the far wall of the control room, her head sagging, her hands lying limply in her lap. For a moment, I didn’t know if she was even alive; but then her chest lifted with a soft and shallow breath.

In a heartbeat I was crouching by her side, but reluctant to touch her for fear of causing pain. Her dragon-skin sheath had not been damaged by the firewands, but where the sheath hadn’t offered any defense—her arms, her bare shoulders—Yasmin’s flesh was deeply singed. Her hair had burned down to the scalp. Even worse, there was a patch of wet stickiness on her back, just below one shoulder blade. I guessed that Qi or Chi must have dirked her with a magic dagger, strong enough to pierce the tough dragon hide that was supposed to protect her.

With a tortured moan, Yasmin lifted her head to look at me. Her cheeks glistened with tears, squeezed out by the pain against her will. In a sighing whisper, she said, “You’ll have to... draw another sketch of me, Britlin. The other one...”

She looked down at her hand and moved the fingers slightly. Flakes of burnt paper fluttered into her lap.

“What can I do to help?” I asked.

“Not much,” Oonah said from behind my back. “She’s resistant to healing magic—all the Doomguard are.”

“I tried my best,” Kiripao added, “but her will fought back too strongly.”

“Entropy... must not be cheated,” Yasmin whispered. “A Handmaid... must stay... loyal...”

Her voice drifted off. At first, I thought she was simply too tired to continue speech; but her eyes had focused on something at the far end of the room, and I turned to see the others entering the control room in the company of the wights.

“Wights...” she murmured.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her, “they’re on our side.”

“But they are... they have...”

A flicker of life pierced through her dull resignation; I had no idea why. “Yasmin, don’t get yourself excited—save your strength.”

“But the wights,” she forced herself to speak. “They could... contribute...”

She was too weak to finish her sentence, but Wheezle hurried forward. “As a Dustman, I am familiar with the devotions of Entropy, though I am not a follower myself. Handmaids disapprove of conventional curative magics, but they practice a different form of healing that adheres to the precepts of their faith. I believe they can simply... withdraw health from one body and transfer it to someone else.”

“Not all of the health is transferred,” Yasmin whispered. “Some life energy is simply... dissipated... in the process. Praise Entropy.”

Immediately, I offered, “If she wants a life infusion, she can have some from me.”

“No,” Yasmin said, putting great force into that single word. “The wights...”

“She is correct,” Wheezle nodded. “Once health begins to drain from one body to another, the flow is next to impossible to stop. Better to take the energy from the wights, honored Cavendish. It will lay them cleanly to rest, just as Unveiler would; and it is an obviously noble cause.”

“Noble!” Petrov snorted. “Pardon me while I puke.”

Hezekiah calmly threw a backfist into Petrov’s gut. The man doubled over, stopped from falling only by the wights who held his arms.

“Not bad,” said Kiripao, “but try for more snap in your wrist.”



Wheezle asked for four volunteers from the wights. All of them stepped forward, including the ones holding Petrov and Miriam. I wondered if they were simply eager to please the person who held the scepter, or if some measure of generosity still lurked behind those flaming eyes. Perhaps all undead possessed a degree of good will as well as bad; they merely walked down wicked paths because their creators were almost always evil.

For the sake of simplicity, Wheezle chose the four wights who didn’t have their hands full with our prisoners. The first was an orc woman with greasy black hair and a more than usually greenish complexion. She settled gently onto her knees beside Yasmin

and actually managed a smile (despite her boar-like tusks). Then the wight hissed softly and held out her hand for Yasmin to take.

Yasmin's lips moved in silent invocation. I found it difficult to picture an impersonal force like Entropy being able to confer favors on its faithful... but how different was this from the practices of druids? Druids didn't worship any particular deity, they attuned themselves to Nature itself; in time, that attunement let them draw upon the power of Nature to perform magical deeds. Thinking about it, I had to admit the downhill force of Entropy was just as strong, if not stronger, than the vitality surging through plants and animals. If you attuned yourself to Entropy, why couldn't you learn to channel that strength?

Even as I watched, the channeling began. Yasmin used her last reserves of willpower to reach out and take the wight's offered hand. Weakly, she pulled it in toward her body, pressing it against her stomach. "Do you give willingly?" she asked the wight.

It nodded.

For a long moment, nothing discernible happened. Then the wight's lips pursed into a tiny O, and its eyes opened wide. It let out a tiny trickle of sound, a small astonished breath; the noise made me think of a woman in passion, touched by her lover and finding herself swept with a deep surprising heat. The wight reached out with its other hand, taking Yasmin by the arm and holding tight, its talons digging into Yasmin's flesh. I shuddered for a moment as I remembered the wight behind the Mortuary, clawing its victim and withering her arm... but in the blink of an eye, it was the wight who began to wither.

The orc woman's hair went first. It fell, strand by strand, onto the rotting garment that covered the wight's shoulders. Then her skin puckered, wrinkling, cracking, flaking away. Underneath, her muscles were taut bands of filaments stretched over bone; but as the seconds ticked by, the tautness eased and the filaments separated from one another, like threads slipped off a loom, one by one.

Layer by layer, the wight's body fell away, sloughed off like unneeded clothes. Nothing decayed entirely—all the pieces remained. It was only the life energy that seeped off, drained from each fiber of flesh... and once the life was gone, the stray bits of anatomy had no remaining cohesion. The pieces separated quietly, like strangers who had no reason to stay together.

Despite the power flooding out of the wight, I could see little improvement in Yasmin. Perhaps the worst of her burns looked a little glossier, covered with an almost invisible veneer of regenerated skin; and perhaps the blood had stopped welling quite so quickly from the knife wound in her back. Even so, her eyes retained a deathly dullness and her hands showed only fatigue as they clung to the crumbling wight. Entropy might be allotting Yasmin a tiny portion of the wight's lifeforce... but it was keeping the lion's share for itself.

Soon, the wight had devolved to nothing but a meatless skeleton. One hand still pressed against Yasmin's stomach, and the other held her arm in its claws; but with a click of bones, it released its taloned grip and lifted its fingers to cup Yasmin under the chin. The gesture was exquisitely tender, like a mother reassuring her child... and then the skeleton peacefully relaxed into a litter of unconnected bones, their fall to the floor muffled by the dry pillow of tissues that had slumped off first.

“More,” Yasmin whispered hungrily. And the next wight stepped up, its face composed in total serenity.



Three more wights. Three more subdued collapses. I think Yasmin could have absorbed the energy of a dozen such donors and still longed for more; but the four who sacrificed themselves were enough to repair the most grievous damage. The stab wound under her shoulder blade was closed and clean. The patches of charred flesh on her arms and shoulders had now coated over with milk white, as smooth as the cataract in an old dwarf’s eye. There was even a dark fuzz of hair covering her scalp, like red-brown lichen on a stone—not a fashionable coiffure, but my fingers longed to touch that close-shaven beauty.

“Hello,” she said, a sparkle in her eyes at last. “Hello,” she said again, looking directly at me. “Hello. Hello. Hello.”

“Can I help you up?” I asked.

“Please.”

She reached out both arms, like a child eager for her father to lift her. I had to use one foot to sweep away the remains of wights surrounding her; then I raised her gently, wrapping my arms around her as delicately as I could, no matter how fiercely I longed to enfold her with my full strength. Yasmin had no such reserve—as she rose to her feet, her arms encircled me and pulled me close, squeezing as if she wanted to completely embed her face in my chest. I returned the embrace, clasping her as tightly as I dared and aware of nothing else in the world but the woman I held.

“Honored Cavendish, Honored Handmaid,” murmured Wheezle as he plucked at the hem of my jacket. “We must go now. There is so little time.”

“There is no time,” said a new voice. And suddenly the room was filled with a blinding cloud of fine white dust.

CHAPTER NINE



THREE DUSTY COMBUSTIONS

dust, I couldn't see for the next few seconds. Kiripao must have tried something, because I heard him utter a cry of attack; but he was answered with a thunderous boom, and he made no other sound.

Yasmin, still in my arms, whispered, "Didn't you have someone watching our backs?"

"Hezekiah was out there," I replied. "The Clueless little berk..."

"He's hurt," said Oonah, somewhere in the cloud.

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Gradually, the dust settled around us. Every face around me was powdered white; every stick of furniture, every scrap of clothing was clotted with the same white silt. The door to the control room had shut tight—the boom I heard must have been the door slamming. Kiripao was straining to push it open, but without success.

Oonah knelt a short distance from the door, bending over the motionless body of Hezekiah. I could see no wounds on the boy; and as Oonah gave his shoulder a shake, he groaned and rolled over on his back.

"What happened, Kid?" Miriam asked. Her voice was surprisingly full of concern.

"Someone blanked me," the boy muttered. "Shut me down." He slammed his fist against the floor. "I hate that."

"But you're all right now?" Miriam insisted.

"I'll live," he said. "But... I'm a bit scrambled at the moment. I won't be able to teleport for hours."

"Don't trouble yourself," Oonah told him. She raised her staff and pointed its silver-wire tip toward the door. "Now that I'm properly armed, this little cage won't hold us for..."

"Don't!" Wheezle and I shouted in unison.

"Why not?" she snapped.

Wheezle shuffled forward, dust dribbling off his ears like flour. "Alas, honored Guvner, this dust is dangerous... at least if you invoke magic. We must exercise extreme caution."

"What a shame," echoed an unfamiliar female voice. "I hoped you wouldn't know what the dust did. It would have been ever so interesting to see what happened."

The walls of the control room looked like concrete, coated with the chalky powder that covered us all; suddenly, however, the cement-like material turned as clear as glass, offering us a dust-smearing view of the machine room outside. No wonder this control room didn't have any windows: the walls themselves could become windows, and obviously someone outside knew the secret of making that happen. Quickly, I swept

a hand across the wall closest to me, cleaning away enough of the dust to see through clearly.

A gang of eight wights stood back five paces from the wall, their faces nearly as dusty as mine and ten times as ugly. All of them were huge bashers, their shoulders wide, their claws the size of pine cones. I saw no hint of friendliness in the expressions of these undead; hate blazed in their eyes. Perhaps the hate was inspired by the people who stood in front of the monsters—two humans who could only be Rivi and the Fox.

I'd seen men like the Fox many times before: grizzled old sods with streaky gray hair and five days of stubble on their faces. This particular example wore an ecstatic leer of madness, and his gaze never stopped swooping about the room, as if he were surrounded by wonders mere mortals could not see. Poor old barmy: his type wandered the streets of Sigil daily, begging for handouts or talking wildly to themselves until they were taken in by the Bleak Cabal and given a bed in the Gatehouse asylum.

Rivi was much more extraordinary. To say she was an albino would not do justice, either to Rivi or to albinos in general. She had the telltale white hair and eyebrows, the unpigmented skin and the pale pink eyes; but she had decided to paint herself, to apply make-up and dyes in a controlled chaos that only emphasized her pallor. Red eyeshadow made her eyes look like blood-filled sinkholes in her face. The merest touch of blue on her cheeks gave her the icy look of a corpse who has lain overnight in the snow. Her long white hair was streaked with bands of red and green, which would look cheerfully festive on some women; on Rivi, however, the effect was harshly lunatic, as if nightmares had bled from her skull and contaminated her scalp.

She wore a gown of clinging black silk, sheer enough to betray the stark whiteness of her body beneath; and like many venomous women, Rivi had the body of a goddess, maintained as carefully as a champion fencer might hone her sword. I could scarcely take my eyes off the play of black silk over white flesh, taut fabric stretching over tauter curves. Some sages claim that the powers of evil take delight in bestowing such visceral allure on the most corrupt of souls... and although I have known many beauties with no great darkness in their hearts, I have met a handful like Rivi, demons sporting the voluptuousness of an angel.

Rivi smiled at me now with the triumph of a viper watching its victim die. "Hello, darlings!" she cooed. "What lovely subjects for my experiments! No sooner do I find my wee trinket than you give me a chance to use it."

She held up the "wee trinket"... an artifact of terrifying power disguised as a harmless salt grinder, a small white container with a winding arm on top. Trickle of pale dust spilled out the bottom. "The crank controls the flow," Rivi said, holding the grinder up higher. "Anything from a light shower like this to that cloud that coated you all. Think what it can do against those precious wee schemers who use magic in Sigil."

"The Lady of Pain will stop you," Oonah snapped. "She'll seal every portal against you."

"Perhaps," Rivi admitted. "But a little bird told me there are some things too powerful for The Lady to stop. This coy wee grinder is one of the most potent relics in the multiverse; it will be such lovely fun to compare its strength to hers. And even if I'm barred from Sigil... oh, the planes offer a world of opportunities for a woman who can stop magic in its self-important wee tracks."

giant had him in its grip, Petrov turned to face the woman. Immediately, he tried to look away again. He couldn't. I don't think he could even close his eyes—as he shuddered under her gaze, flecks of dust shook free from his hair, wafted downward, and settled on his bare eyeball. Petrov didn't react... but prickles of sweat beaded up on his face as Rivi's eyes continued to pierce his mind.

"Please," he whispered. "Please don't."

Rivi answered with a calm smile. "Pick up the wee scepter, darling. You've been a bad boy, leading these people around our stronghold... but I'll forgive you with my soft girlish heart if you do me this kind wee favor."

Petrov took a jerky step toward Unveiler. At the top of his lungs, he screamed, "No!"

"We all love the sound of your voice, darling; but bring me the pretty wee thing."

Petrov jerked forward another two paces. The veins on his neck bulged with strain, resisting the flood of power from Rivi's mind; but mere flesh couldn't oppose the woman's dominating will. Roaring and weeping, Petrov was forced across the room like a convulsive marionette, his strings pulled by the cool albino.

At last, the scepter lay at his feet. One arm reached downward; the rest of his body fought back, tendons standing out like cables. Something burst with a loud crack—his collarbone, I think, snapped in the tug-of-war between different groups of muscles. It didn't matter. Slowly, agonizingly, Petrov picked up the scepter.

It blazed white-hot again. I had to avert my eyes to avoid being blinded.

"Tell the wights to obey me, darling," Rivi said. Her voice had turned thick and throaty, aroused. "Order them to obey me, and perhaps I'll let you set that bauble down."

"Obey her!" Petrov shouted to the wights. "Do whatever she tells you to. I command it!"

"Very good, darling. But I don't think you should let go of the scepter yet. Bring it to me."

Squinting, I looked back at Petrov. His entire arm was sheathed in flame, from the blazing sun of Unveiler to the smoking flesh of his shoulder. The air around him wrinkled with the heat, burning so fiercely I had step back. Still, I considered leaping forward with my rapier, plunging one clean thrust into Petrov's heart, just to put him out of his misery; but what good would that do? Rivi wanted someone to bring her the scepter. If Petrov were killed, she'd turn on the rest of us. Did I want to see one of my friends mind-raped and set on fire?

"Open the door," Rivi commanded the wights. "And don't let the breathers escape."

The wights bowed to her, their eyes blazing.



Twelve wights stood against us, with the Fox also stationed at the ready, his hands fluttering in mystic gestures—probably preparing a fireball in case any of us tried to escape the control room when the door opened. Not even Kiripao made the attempt; we were hopelessly outnumbered. As soon as Petrov staggered out of the room, the wights closed the door again and barred it shut with the heavy wood beam they'd used before.

"Well, darlings, that was fun," Rivi said, as the still-flaming Petrov dragged himself to her side. "However, all good things must come to an end..."

"What are you going to do with us?" Hezekiah demanded.

"I haven't decided," she answered. "I don't know any of you... except for Judge DeVail, of course, whose mother was a helpful dear to keep such a detailed diary. No doubt, you all have your wee talents or you wouldn't have got this far. Perhaps I'll let you live and work for my noble cause... after a wee adjustment in your attitudes, of course."

"What is your noble cause?" Oonah asked. Trust a Guvner to seek as much information as possible.

"My noble cause," Rivi repeated. "My noble wee cause. Well, darlings, let me tell you a story of a regal family: rulers of all they surveyed on a lovely Prime world planet... not a backwater either, because they had a stable wee portal to Sigil, which let them keep in touch with multiversal affairs.

"The royal family," she continued, "had three daughters, all charming wee girls. It was the tradition to teach such princesses useful arts—skills that would help them become wise and magnanimous rulers when they ascended the throne. Daughter One, whom we'll call Fatuous Smug Pig..." Rivi paused and gave us a coquettish smile "...was educated in the arts of white wizardry. Daughter Two, who'll be known as Loathsomely Drippy Cow..." another smile, "was raised as high priestess of an appallingly goody-goody power whose name can only be pronounced by his faithful. I usually called him Bunghole the Simpleton, but that's not what he wrote on his smarmy wee tabernacles.

"Anyway, Pig became a wizard and Cow a priestess. That only left the third and youngest daughter, whom we'll call Fabulously Beautiful and Shrewd Beyond Her Years... or Rivi, for short. When it came to Rivi's education, the king and queen chose the path of the mind, arranging for the ravishing princess to study under the greatest psionic masters of Sigil and the Outer Planes. It was hard work for the poor wee girl, but she devoted herself to it with a passion; because she dreamed of the day when she could tear her sisters' minds to confetti. When she could force them to draggle their tails in the filthiest streets of the Hive. When she could seize their pure wee brains and turn their thoughts into cesspools.

"And why was Princess Rivi so angry with Pig and Cow? Because they were generous to her. Because they were nauseatingly kind. Because they wanted to protect their poor wee sister who was all white like a maggot. Can you imagine? They pitied me. They actually pitied me! Pig would come into my room at night to amuse me with vapid tricks of sorcery, like making my dolls stand up and say, 'Rivi, Rivi, we wuv you!' And Cow was forever dragging me along on her holy rounds, curing the sick, comforting the wretched, bringing the word of Bunghole into filthy peasant huts... all in the hope of rallying my spirits to cope with my 'condition'. My condition! My pale wee condition... as if I were some repugnant cripple and soft in the head."

She stopped to glare venomously at each of us, daring us to speak. No one rose to the challenge. We all knew Rivi's big problem wasn't being an albino; it was being a total barmy. The lilting speech patterns, the fierce glitter of her eyes, the rationalizations for hating her sisters... the woman was mad as May-butter, and howling at the moon.

"Well," she continued, "despite what Pig and Cow thought, I wasn't soft in the head—I was very, very hard, and I made myself harder by the day. It took me almost no time to outgrow the limp-wristed berks hired to teach me the Will and the Way. Without my parents' knowledge, I arranged for more suitable tutelage: a renegade Dustman

mind-flayer. He taught me interesting wee secrets about raising the undead, but more importantly, he nurtured the full power of my mind. Sorcery and priestly magic were feeble things, sucking on the multiverse's dugs for a few drops of power. With psionics, the energy comes from within; from your soul, from your hate.

"So... when I learned about these darling wee grinders, I just had to have them. If I could bury a city—Sigil, for instance—in the white anti-magic dust, wizards and priests would be helpless: as they gather their power around them, it sets the dust on fire. Psionics, on the other hand... it's a completely different form of energy. Internal—it doesn't react with the dust. These grinders let me shut down spellcasters of every type, without the slightest effect on my own power. Delightful! I only wish I'd had them with me when I finally took on Pig and Cow..."

Her voice trailed off, but a dreamy smile remained on her face. I could imagine what happened to Rivi's poor sisters... or perhaps I couldn't. Some things go beyond a sane man's imagination.

"Well," said Rivi, suddenly snapping out of her reverie, "that's all bodies under the bridge now. You wanted me to explain my noble wee cause, and I believe I've done so. I want to make every wizard and priest in the multiverse suffer the torments of the damned... and then become my slave. Whoosh, I hit a victim with the white dust so she can't protect herself. Zap, I spend a few hours raking through her mind, until she loves me with eternal devotion. Whoosh again, I use the brown dust to give my new ally back her magic; but now she casts her spells in my service.

"I already have a list of targets in Sigil—deputies in all the major factions. Not people at the very top, but ones with influential positions: clever wee dears who can arrange for me to have private interviews with folks higher up the ladder. Once I've had time alone with a few factols..."

She laughed. From anyone else, the laugh might have been charming: totally open and honest. It chilled me to the bone.

"Let me get this straight," Hezekiah said. "You're doing all this—killing all those people at the courts, manufacturing wights, torching poor Petrov here—all because you didn't like your sisters?"

"Oh, darling," Rivi answered, "I don't like any spellcasters. Sorcerers and priests are all annoying sods..."

"I know I am," the Fox piped up cheerfully.

"So," Rivi continued, "consider it a public service when I serve the wee darlings their own entrails in a bowl." She took a deep breath. "Starting with the magic-users in your wee group. I intend to rip out your brains and stuff in thoughts of my own. By tomorrow, you'll kill your own mothers for the privilege of kissing my toenail."

"I know I would," the Fox piped up again.

"Watch them," Rivi commanded the old barmy. "I have to set up a suitable place to work—somewhere I won't have distractions. Somewhere soundproof, somewhere with clamps. I've been meaning to redecorate one of the lounges anyway. Give me an hour."

"But what if these berks get boisterous?" the Fox asked. "Can I burn them... please?"

"No, darling, they'll be more useful to us in one piece. But just in case..." She handed him the white grinder. "Take this. It's just barely possible they might scrape away their dust and try something foolish. If so, give them another blast."

“Yay!”

Cackling with delight, the Fox spun the crank of the grinder, loosing a flurry of white that sifted down over Rivi herself. Where it touched her skin, it was almost invisible; but her gown’s black silk was completely frosted over, making her white from head to toe.

“Dear, dear, Fox,” she chided as she wagged a finger in his face. “Try to be careful.” Taking his wrist lightly between her thumb and forefinger, Rivi moved his hand so the grinder pointed its stream toward the floor. “As I said,” she smiled, glancing back at us, “the dust doesn’t affect me. My wee tricks aren’t magic—psionic powers use a different type of energy.”

“Fire is energy too,” the Fox announced.

Rivi patted his arm. “Keep an eye on our guests, darling. I’ll be back in a while.”

She turned away and began to walk in the direction of her own quarters. Dust spilled from her clothes with every step. Part way across the machine room, she looked back and called, “Heel!” Obediently, the squad of wights lined up and traipsed after her. Petrov, too, followed along; the flesh of his arm had burned away, but the blazing scepter remained in his hand, fused solidly with the bone. Any normal man would have passed out long ago from the pain. I could only assume Rivi was keeping him conscious with the power of her mind.

She waited for Petrov to catch up, then wafted a caress under his chin. “You’ll be ever so handy come nightfall, darling—I’ll use you as a lamp.” Laughing, she strode from the room, with the wights and the fire-ravaged Petrov shuffling along behind her.



“Well,” said Yasmin to the Fox, “time for you to let us out.”

“Can’t,” he replied. “Not supposed to.”

“But it’s fun to be bad,” Kiripao told him. “Don’t you like being naughty?”

The Fox smiled and nodded.

“Then let us out,” Kiripao said.

“Can’t,” the Fox replied. “Not supposed to.”

“If I were Rivi,” I murmured to the others, “I’d dance all over the old barmy’s brain to make sure he always follows orders. He’s too unreliable to trust otherwise.”

“Agreed,” Oonah nodded. “I doubt if he’s capable of disobeying her directly. We’ll have to try something more subtle.”

I bowed slightly to her and leaned back against a dust-covered control console. Watching a Guvner be subtle could prove immensely educational.

“Fox,” Oonah called, “talk to me. You’ve got us at your mercy, right? This is the time when it’s traditional to gloat about all your plans.”

“Hah!” he replied. “Shows how much you know. Rivi never tells me her plans.”

“But you must have a little information... like why you were attacking the various faction headquarters in Sigil.”

“Oh that.” The Fox stuck out his tongue in distaste. “Rivi just wanted to bob all the records from the last expedition to come here. How to reach the Glass Spider, how to steer it, where the grinders were... boring stuff. If it weren’t for me setting fire to things, we wouldn’t have fun at all.”

“And how do you like to have fun?” Oonah asked.

“Burning things, of course. This white dust is supreme. Setting all the magicians and priests on fire... isn’t that a laugh?”

“I certainly would like to see you set something on fire,” Oonah said. “What do we have handy that would burn well?”

“That gnome of yours looks pretty flammable...”

“No, no,” Oonah shook her head, casting a quick glance back at Wheezle. Our Dustman friend had made no effort to get to his feet since the blast from Unveiler had blown him against the wall; I hoped he was simply conserving his strength. “Let’s see what else there is,” Oonah continued. “I’m sure you shouldn’t damage any machinery... or any of us... so we’re really just left with that useless chunk of wood right there.”

Of course, she pointed to the heavy beam blocking the door.

The Fox stared at it suspiciously. “I don’t know...”

“Oh, you don’t think you could burn it?”

“Of course I can burn it!” he snapped. “But...”

His brow furrowed, as he struggled to understand whatever misgivings he had. In a way, I felt sorry for the old barmy: his mind must be fragmented beyond recovery, broken by whatever hell he had experienced long ago. Once, he must have been a formidable man—Oonah’s mother wouldn’t have adventured through the planes with a weakling—but now he was simply a mad old twitch, falling for a trick that wouldn’t fool a child.

“I don’t think you can burn it at all,” Oonah said sharply, not giving him time to recognize the trick. “I think your flame has gone out.”

“Gone out!” he roared. “I’ve got a flame the size of a bread loaf!”

And with a bellow of arcane syllables, the Fox loosed a fireball at the beam.



Shooting a fireball precisely is like throwing an elephant from a catapult—you’ve got plenty of margin for error, but there’s going to be a splash. In this case, the splash hit the outer wall of the control room, giving those of us inside a view of angry red brilliance; then it bounced back into the machine room proper, washing gouts of flame across the collection of pistons, gears, and camshafts gallumphing through their regular paces.

Sturdy though the mechanisms were, they weren’t designed to withstand a sudden fiery blast. A cog blew off a spindle; the spindle sagged into the path of a flywheel; the flywheel flew off its mount, and churned whackety-whack through the outer plate of a boiler; and then there was steam everywhere, spurting from the boiler in scalding high pressure clouds.

“Oopsy,” said the Fox. He threw himself under the control desk where Hezekiah had found Oonah’s staff.

It was high time we vacated the premises; yet despite the pyrotechnics, Fox’s fireball hadn’t completely scragged the wooden beam. Yes, its exterior was charred and crumbly, but the flash-fire hadn’t penetrated the heart of the wood. Kiripao threw himself at the door with all his strength... and he bounced back with a bruised shoulder. Perhaps if we all put our backs to it, the obstruction might yield eventually; but before we could try, Oonah waved us away.

“We can’t waste time,” she shouted. “Stand back.”

As she raised her ice-staff, I shouted, “Don’t do it!” She did it anyway.

A split-second before the staff fired, it blazed as bright as the sun. Oonah's clothes instantly burst into flame; but her hands didn't waver an inch as she trained the tip of the staff at the door in front of her. A solid battering ram of ice shot from the staff, hissing as it contacted the fires around Oonah's body. Hot melt-water spattered us all; yet the flames only thawed the outer layer of ice, leaving the ram with enough mass to smack against the door with the sound of thunder.

The wooden beam shifted a scant two inches.

Screaming defiance, Oonah fired again. Another burst of magic-fueled heat exploded around the ice-staff, far too much to withstand so soon after the first flames. The staff vaporized in her hands, blazing so blindingly bright I couldn't see the result of Oonah's shot—my vision washed out in a blur of searing brilliance. Still, I heard the boom of impact, then the crunch of timber breaking to splinters. The door slammed open, letting in a rush of steam from the broken boiler.

Oonah took one step toward the doorway, then dropped to her knees. The white dust fire had taken a terrible toll—none of the victims I'd seen at the courts had been so viciously burnt. Her clothes were gone, her skin now as black as charred wood. Kiripao leapt forward to hold her up... and as he grasped her hand, it broke off at the wrist, like a twig reduced to ash.

"Go," Oonah said, her voice nothing but a whisper. "Stop Rivi. Preserve justice."

And she toppled forward, a dead and crumbling thing.

CHAPTER TEN



THREE T⊕T⊕S ⊕F A WHIS⊕LE

screamed in horror at Oonah's death. I wished I could find my voice to join him; but there was more pressing business, so I drew my rapier and headed for the door.

Kiripao beat me outside, of course... and before I reached the doorway, he dove back into the room, shouting, "Down!"

I had time to throw myself against the wall before a fireball burst at Kiripao's heels. A gout of flame poured in through the doorway, lighting

HEZEKIAH

our faces with hellish scarlet; but no one was in direct line with the blast, and a quick glance around showed only minor scorching.

Yasmin grimaced. "I take it the Fox has us bottled up."

"Hey," I shouted out to the old barmy, "Rivi said you couldn't burn us."

"Oh, yeah," he called back. "Sorry."

The next second, a storm of white dust came through the doorway with the force of a hurricane. Wheezle, just getting to his feet, was blown backward by the wind and smashed against the wall a second time. Kiripao gagged on silt rammed down his throat, then curled into a ball, racked with coughing. The rest of us did some coughing of our own, then took cover under whatever desks and tables were available.

Looking through the transparent wall of the room, I saw the source of the new onslaught—Foxy had cranked up his dust grinder to full power and trained its punishing gush on the doorway. He didn't have a straight line of fire into the room, but it was good enough to get about half the grinder's output inside the door. Half was plenty. Already our exit was partly blocked by a mound of white, and the pressure of the spray was driving more dust inside. Within minutes, we'd all be neckdeep in that fine white silt; if we tried to escape in the meantime, we'd have to fight against the powerful jet of dust, then face the Fox's fireballs.

I looked across the room at Yasmin. Her cheeks and forehead had accumulated a layer of dust sticking to sweat. "We have to make a run for it," she shouted. "I'll carry Wheezle. When we get out the door, we scatter."

She had to know how desperate the plan was: no matter how fast we scattered, a single wide-diameter fireball could incinerate us all. On the other hand, did I want to stay in the control room and wait for it to fill with dust? Even if Foxy stopped the spray before we suffocated, we'd be trapped in grit until Rivi returned to rape our minds.

I nodded to Yasmin. "Let's do it."



Kiripao exploded out of the doorway in a frenzied scattering of dust. Perhaps he intended to charge the Fox, because he took a step in that direction; but Kiripao was an elf, fine-boned and light. The continuing torrent of dust pouring from the grinder smashed him off balance, spun him around, and battered him back against the outside wall of the control room.

I didn't see any more than that... because I was next behind him.

The dust buffeted me with the force of an ocean wave, threatening to sweep me backward like Kiripao. I leaned into it, hoping my feet wouldn't slip on the silken mound of silt piled on the floor. My eyes were closed against the dust stream, but I could tell the moment I cleared the doorway by the sudden change of sound—the tightly enclosed control chamber opening into the wide and echoing machine room. Grappling for the edge of the door, I propelled myself forward, cutting directly across the brutal flood of dust.

My ear, the one facing toward the flow, filled immediately with the hammer-driven particles, clogging up so densely all sound from that direction was cut off. I wondered if this deafness just came from blockage, or if the pressure of the spray had ruptured my eardrum. For a moment, I panicked—loss of hearing or any other sense terrifies a Sensate. Fear spurred me on with desperate energy and I drove myself forward, harder, harder... until suddenly I escaped from the pounding barrage of dust, into the relative peace of the machine room.

Peace: deaf in one ear, and now assailed by sickening humid heat, as the broken boiler continued to spew steam into the air. I took a moment to wipe a clot of dust from my eyes, then ducked behind a screeching fan-belt and turned back to see how my comrades fared.

Kiripao had been beaten back into a corner of the room, unable to fight the unstoppable deluge of dust. As I watched, Yasmin joined him—she had been right behind me as I battled my way out the door, but had not been able to keep her balance with Wheezle in her arms. Woman and gnome had fallen together, and the cascade of silt had knocked them backward across the floor, both of them sputtering as the flood jammed dust up their nose. They struck Kiripao hard, all three pinned in the corner by the pummeling stream.

“Got you!” the Fox squealed in delight. His voice was barely audible over the hiss of fast-flowing grit. I saw him raise his hands, heard him begin the chanting invocation to shoot a fireball that would bake my friends.

“Stop!” I shouted, surging to my feet. But my voice was hoarse and I could never fight my way upstream against the dust spray in time to reach the Fox. Roaring, I threw myself into the storm anyway, hoping the old barmy might aim at me instead of Yasmin.

Dust slashed deafeningly around me. When the fireball went off, I wouldn't see or hear it; I would only feel the passing of its heat, either striking me down or exploding around my three allies still pressed back into the corner. Exploding around Yasmin.

Then, suddenly, the dust cut off like a blown-out candle. I had been leaning so heavily into it, I staggered and fell face down, landing on clotted dust as soft as a pillow. Immediately I lifted my head and saw the Fox a few paces away, his eyes closed in bliss,

In its way, the destruction ripping through the room had an admirable kind of vitality. An elegant thoroughness. An unrestrained energy that didn't care a whit for any flesh and blood that happened to stand in its way...

"Get moving, you Sensate leatherhead!" Yasmin shouted from the doorway. "You want a slice-job from some flying camshaft?"

At that very moment a tiny cog whizzed past my ear, whirling as fast as a buzz-saw; and I acknowledged that some experiences are best postponed for one's golden years.



A minute later, we had caught up with Hezekiah and Miriam who were taking a breather some distance down the corridor. Hezekiah still held the grinder, which pleased me no end—without that "wee bauble", Rivi's plans would go nowhere.

"All right," I said to the boy, as I drew even with him. "You want to tell me how you did that trick back there? One second you were behind me in the control room. The next, you were showering the Fox with his own dust. I thought Rivi had blanked you from teleporting."

"I thought so too," he answered, panting a bit after his run down the hall. "But..." He lowered his voice. "Oonah died right in front of us—she sacrificed herself. And then Miriam was watching me, as if she knew I'd do something to save everyone... I don't know, Britlin, it made me so mad and desperate, I felt this surge of energy, as if a little sun had caught fire inside of me. The next thing I knew, I was standing beside the Fox... and he'd left the grinder just lying on the floor while he was casting his spell... I didn't mean to kill him, Britlin, I just thought it would stop him from finishing the enchantment..."

Miriam took the boy's arm and squeezed it with fierce protectiveness. "The old berk had it coming. Barmy as a bison and twice as nasty."

"You used to work for him," Yasmin coldly reminded her. "And Rivi."

"Yeah, well." Miriam dropped her gaze to the floor. "I took Rivi's jink, sure... but I didn't give a tinker's about her cause. No one did. And Rivi didn't give a tinker's for any of us. You saw how she treated Petrov; she'd do the same to me as easy as breathing, and I'd return the favor if I could."

"What a paragon of loyalty you are," Yasmin muttered. Turning to the rest of us, she added, "Let's all bear that in mind, shall we?"

"Honored Handmaid," Wheezle said, staring up at Yasmin like an infant in her arms, "we have greater concerns than this woman's feelings toward us."

"That's right," I put in, "like your state of health. How are you doing, Wheezle?"

"Most of me is doing well, honored Cavendish. However, I have no feeling in my legs."

Hezekiah's face went pale. The boy whispered to me, "Wheezle hit that wall pretty hard..."

"I know... could be a spinal injury." In a louder voice, I told Wheezle, "Don't worry—whatever it is, they'll be able to fix it in Sigil."

"Indeed," Wheezle nodded, "many of those in my faction have quite remarkable magic for curing—"

The floor suddenly heaved beneath our feet, whipping all of us against the left-hand

wall. By luck, I happened to be standing between Yasmin and the wall's glossy steel, which meant I could cushion her and Wheezle from full impact. The experience was not quite so cozy for me—Yasmin was no featherweight debutante, starved down to look good in taffeta—but I'd had it easy so far compared to the others, so I couldn't complain about a few bruises.

A moment later, the floor's motion stopped; but the whole corridor remained slanted with a leftward slope of about five degrees. I didn't want to guess what was happening to the Glass Spider now that one leg was blowing its gaskets. Long ago, one of my father's friends had told me stories about all the planes, including the Plane of Dust: "There's places there, boy, where the dust runs a thousand miles deep. You can be walking along, dust only up to your ankles, and suddenly, the floor just drops away and you sink forever." If the Spider's malfunctioning leg had somehow kicked us off the edge of safe ground into one of those dusty morasses...

"Miriam," I said, "I believe you were showing us the closest way out?"

"Follow me," she answered.

And we followed.



Corridors blurred by. At first we ran full speed, but another lurch from the Spider sent us toppling again, banging painfully into the metal wall. From that point on, we slowed to a nervous trot, as fast as we could go while still retaining some hope of staying on our feet at the next shudder. Three more times, the Glass Spider quaked; and each time, the floor tipped a little more sideways.

"This feels like a sinking ship," Hezekiah blurted out as we pressed on after the third upheaval.

"I suppose you've been on a sinking ship," Yasmin said.

"No," Hezekiah replied, "but my Uncle Toby—"

"How far is it to the exit?" I interrupted: anything to avoid more about his sodding berk of an uncle.

"Not far," Miriam answered. "Every one of the Spider's arms has a portal at the bottom end. The one back to Sigil is too far away, but there's a portal nearby that goes to Mount Celestia."

I grunted in approval. Mount Celestia, the Plane of Lawful Good, was a bit restrained and conservative for my tastes, but it certainly qualified as a safe bolt-hole under the circumstances: the people were tolerant and friendly, the climate mild and hospitable. Sensates who visited there claimed it had the most boring night-life of any plane that wasn't actually encased in ice; at the moment, however, a short stint of tedium was just what I needed. No doubt we could find a portal from Mount Celestia back to Sigil, and then we could put this whole mess into the hands of Lady Erin.

We came to a spiral staircase just like the one we'd descended to get to this level. As each of us climbed, I waited for another Spider-quake, one vicious enough to toss us screaming off the steps; but the Fates were kind and we all reached the top before the next tremor hit. This tremor had none of the snap and tumble of the previous ones, but it seemed to go on forever: a slow and persistent drag that dropped one side of the Spider until the floors were all slanting at a tilt of thirty degrees.

“The ship is definitely sinking,” Hezekiah muttered.
None of us bothered to reply.



Miriam led us to the right, down a corridor that ran around the outer ring of the Spider’s body. Looking out the window, I could see that the closest legs to us had lifted right off the ground—the opposite side of the Spider must have plunged so deeply under the dust that the legs on our side could no longer reach the surface. I took some comfort in that; on this side, we’d keep our heads above ground level substantially longer.

In fact, I was feeling positively chipper until we ran into the wights.

Twenty wights—yes, twenty—waited in the next lounge area around the circumference of the circle. And at their head was a milky transparent image of Rivi herself.

“Hello, darlings!” she called. “After the Spider started its jumpy wee dance, I assumed you might head for this exit. Did you miss me?”

“That’s just a projection,” Hezekiah hissed, pointing at the ghostly Rivi. “She can’t exert any power through it.”

“True,” the projected Rivi smiled. “But I can still command these dear obedient wights to rip out your entrails if you don’t give me back the grinder.”

“Sorry,” I told her. “We’ve grown quite attached to the wee bauble. It would look simply precious on my dining room table.”

Rivi’s projection flickered momentarily, but I could see a storm of murderous fury sweep across her face. It lasted only a moment; then she forced it away and the ghostly image stabilized once more.

“I don’t want to kill you, I truly don’t,” she said. “You’re dangerous people; I admire that enormously. You’ve killed the Fox, crippled the Spider, and terrified all my lackeys. I’d love to have you conquer the multiverse by my side. But you must give me the grinder.”

“She’s playing for time,” Yasmin murmured. “She probably has more wights coming around behind us.”

“We can’t take on twenty wights in our current condition,” I replied.

“And,” Miriam added, “they’re standing between us and the portal to Mount Celestia.”

“Hezekiah,” I said, “can you teleport us around those wights?”

He shook his head. “I don’t have enough strength. I thought I was empty before I went after the Fox; now I know I’m tapped dry.”

Wheezle cleared his throat. “I might have a spell that could help...”

His face, his hair, his clothes were still caked solid with white anti-magic dust. “Don’t do it,” I told him. “Losing Oonah was enough for one day.” I turned to Miriam. “You said there was a portal at the end of every Spider leg?”

“Yes, but I don’t know where they all go.”

“Do you know what the keys are?”

She shrugged. “Whoever built the Spider left keys at most of the portals. Not the one to Sigil—the key there is a picture of yourself, so you have to make your own drawing. But the other portals have keys just lying around.”

“Darlings!” called out Rivi’s projection, “have you decided to surrender yet?”

“Just about,” I answered. “Or else we’ve decided to... run!”



The wights were not fast runners; that’s all that saved us. We ran back the way we had come and the wights pursued, but with the lunging arm-swinging gait of all their kind. It slowed them down... and perhaps they were also inhibited by the resentment of being controlled, of being forced to submit to Rivi’s every command. Slaves seldom move with the same zeal as those whose wills are free.

Even if the wights could not keep up with us, the projected image of Rivi dogged our heels every step of the way. It didn’t move by walking or running—Rivi’s pose remained as sedate as a statue, hands folded demurely across her lap—but the projection sped effortlessly along with us, as inescapable as starlight. The ghostly image wove among us, making sudden darting motions, trying to distract and confuse us, make us trip over our own feet. Along with the sight of her was the grating honey of her voice, “You won’t get away, you know. I have wights all over this building. Give me back my grinder!”

None of us answered. We were too busy running, trying to keep our balance despite the aggravation from Rivi and the increasingly frequent tremors that rocked the building.

Ahead of us was a lounge area, located at the junction of another of the Spider’s legs. Beyond that, I could hear the hissing of more wights racing toward us from the other direction. “We have to take this exit,” I said, pointing along the corridor through the leg.

“I don’t know where the portal goes,” Miriam protested.

“Doesn’t matter. Peel it.”

The corridor had originally sloped downward toward the ground; but as the other side of the Spider sank, this side had slowly tipped upward like the end of a see-saw. Now the corridor angled slightly skyward—only a bit, but it still took extra effort to run up it. “Kiripao,” I shouted, “I sure hope you’re praying to whomever you worship that this slope doesn’t get any steeper.”

“It is counter-productive to pray while running,” he yelled back. “While you are running, run. While you are praying, pray. Never whistle while you’re—”

The Spider gave a staggering heave. Our end of the see-saw tilted a little higher.

“Isn’t this glorious!” the ghost of Rivi crowed a hair’s breadth from my face. “Do you find this corridor getting a wee bit hard to climb? You’ll really have to watch your footing now, won’t you—one little slip, and you’ll roll all the way back to the waiting arms of my wights.”

“Pike it, slag,” Miriam snapped. But Rivi had a point: one or two more tremors and the corridor would become too steep to climb without pitons. The wights had already given up—they stood like a pack of undead wolves at the bottom of the ramp, waiting for their prey to slide down into reach.

The Spider rocked again. Hezekiah gave a surprised little, “Whoops,” and nearly lost his feet; but Miriam was right beside him and grabbed his arm before he went down.

The slope of the corridor was now more than forty-five degrees. It didn’t help that the floor was an artificial material as smooth as marble. The leather soles of my boots provided poor traction on such a surface; barefoot would be better, but I wasn’t about to sit down and waste precious seconds unlacing.

“Poor wee darlings,” Rivi mocked. “Time is running out.”

“What about you?” Yasmin snapped. “The whole place is sinking. Are you planning to go down with it?”

“So what if I do?” Rivi laughed. “The Glass Spider is air-tight... and given time, I can find the controls to set things right again. You’re the ones with the tight schedule. I’m afraid you can’t take another tremor. What do you think, Petrov?”

And suddenly, the ghostly projection of Rivi was joined by a second image: one whose appearance shocked me so badly, I nearly stumbled. Petrov stood before us, his mouth open in a soundless scream. Flames still surrounded him like a furnace; his arm had burned completely down to ash. Before Unveiler could drop from his hand, Rivi must have forced him to press the scepter to his chest. Now it blazed there like the symbol on a paladin’s breastplate, grafted to his skin by the withering heat. How could he still be alive? His heart and lungs must be on fire, his throat completely seared to charcoal; and still he stood before us, too agonized to scream.

“Release him!” Wheezle cried from his perch in Yasmin’s arm. “He has earned death. Let him go!”

“Give me the grinder and I will,” Rivi purred.

“Sorry, Petrov,” I muttered, and ran through the poor sod’s projection, trying not to think of the flames. Even the illusion of them made me shudder.



Up ahead lay the end of the corridor, marked by a closed doorway. Kiripao, running several paces ahead of the rest of us, slapped the button to open the door and leapt inside as soon as the gap was wide enough to let him enter. Miriam dragged Hezekiah through a moment later, followed by Yasmin carrying Wheezle. As soon as I had passed the threshold, Kiripao stabbed the button behind me and the door began to close.

The very second the door snicked shut, another tremor struck. All five of us fell backward, striking the door with our full weights. It gave one loud creak, and for a moment I thought it would give way, sending us flopping all the way back down the corridor to the waiting wights. I held my breath, heart pounding... but the seconds ticked by, one, two, three, with no sickening collapse and eventually I let the air sigh out of my lungs with relief.

Just across the room I could see the faint glow of a portal in the arch of the outside doorway. Imbedded in the wall beside the door was a steel cable from which dangled several cheap tin whistles on strings. Obviously, the whistles could open the portal, and the portal could take us away from Rivi’s madness; the only problem was that the floor between us and the exit now sloped upward at an angle of about sixty degrees.

Without hesitation, Kiripao pushed himself away from the door at our backs. His hands and feet were bare; although the floor was too smooth to offer convenient handholds, he still managed to pull himself up to the cable and seize one of the whistles.

“All right,” Yasmin called, “just hold onto the cable and lower a rope...”

But Kiripao had other ideas. Sticking the whistle in his mouth and blowing loudly, he threw himself directly at the portal.

It flickered open giving a glimpse of somber gray skies clotted with forbidding black clouds; then it winked shut again.

“Sodding berk!” Miriam shouted at the vanished Kiripao.

“Now, now,” Hezekiah told her, “he’s a Cipher. He probably decided to rush ahead and make sure the coast was clear.”

“Either that,” Miriam muttered, “or he wanted to give us the laugh before the damned Spider drops completely down a hole.”

“Problems, darlings?” The smirking image of Rivi flickered into existence once more, standing at an absurd slant in the middle of the room. “Abandoned by your wee friend?”

“He’s just scouting ahead,” I snapped, then turned my attention toward taking off my boots. The slope was sharp, but I could still climb up to the door barefoot, provided the Spider didn’t tilt anymore. I couldn’t participate in the conversation anyway—Yasmin and Miriam wouldn’t have let me get a word in edgewise, because they were too busy pouring curses on Rivi’s head. Rather intriguing curses I might add... I certainly wanted to find out what Yasmin meant by “that sneaky trick with the neckerchief.”

By the time I was ready to climb, Hezekiah had pulled out a rope from his own knapsack. “This’ll be good and sturdy,” he said as he handed the rope to me. “Uncle Toby made it himself.”

“Wonderful,” I growled. But perhaps my surge of annoyance at the mention of Uncle Toby had its positive side—it spurred me up the incline with a driving ferocity that brought me to the steel cable in record time. Once I had an arm safely wrapped around the cord, I set about fastening the rope for the others to climb.

“This is getting irksome,” Rivi’s image said to me as I let the rope tumble across the slanted floor. “Did you know, darling, that all this time I’ve been standing in one of the Spider’s other control rooms?”

The image bent over, as if Rivi was reaching toward something. Then, suddenly, the Spider careened wildly to one side, emitting a monstrous groan of protesting metal. Through the glassed-in walls of the room, I saw the next Spider leg to the right snap as viciously as a bullwhip, then come hurtling toward our own leg... as if one leg of the Spider was attacking the next. By my estimation, the incoming leg would hit our own leg about halfway down its length. There was nothing I could do but close my eyes and wait for impact.

When the collision came, it rattled my teeth like a punch in the mouth. Our leg weathered the blow rather well... by which I mean it didn’t break clean away. After a single bone-shaking shudder, our leg steadied back in position. Even before the vibrations had begun to die away, Yasmin was already climbing the rope, with Wheezle’s arms clasped around her neck.

“You were lucky, darlings,” Rivi’s projection said. “The legs aren’t really designed to mount such attacks. Then again, they aren’t designed to withstand them either. A pity I can’t move your own wee leg to shake you off... but that’s because you destroyed the appropriate engine room. Oh well, I’ll make do.”

The attacking leg swept back for another strike. As Yasmin reached me, I shoved a whistle into her mouth and shouted, “Go! Go!”

“Thanks for the advice, Britlin,” she muttered, despite the whistle held in her teeth. “I would never have thought of it myself.” And then she was blowing on the whistle and swinging her legs toward the portal. As it winked open, I caught a whiff of dank and fetid air; then Yasmin and Wheezle were gone.

Miriam and Hezekiah rushed through immediately after her, taking advantage of the few seconds that the portal remained open. Rivi screeched in fury as the Clueless boy, still carrying the white grinder, disappeared through the gate. A split-second later, the portal winked closed, putting the grinder finally out of Rivi's hands.

I wished I could aim some devastating taunt in Rivi's direction; but I had already stuffed a whistle into my mouth, and was busy shoveling the other whistles into my pockets. Why make it easy for Rivi to pursue us? Let her find her own whistle.

But I had momentarily forgotten the Spider leg that was hurtling in on a collision course. A leg like that doesn't move quickly; but once it is aimed, nothing can stop it.

Like a battering ram it slammed home again, and this time the impact nearly knocked me free from my grip on the steel cable. I heard a crunch, a snap... and then I could feel myself in freefall, as my half of this Spider's leg broke off and plunged toward the surface. Maybe the dust below would cushion the crash, but I didn't feel in a gambling mood. Blowing a piercing blast on the whistle in my mouth, I hurled myself through the waiting portal.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



THREE WELL-FERTILIZED SHRUBBERIES

for any would-be bloods who may be reading this memoir: try not to jump out of an unfamiliar portal while blowing a whistle loud enough to wake the dead. Stealth is better... trust me.

Since I had swung myself through the portal feet first, I emerged the same way, landing flat on my back in mud and still blasting away on the whistle. Yasmin leaned over me, snatched the whistle from my mouth, and hissed a desperate, "Shh!" I shushed with all due haste; and since I

HERE'S A TIP

expected that dragging myself out of the muck would be a noisy process, I simply lay where I was, hoping I had not dropped into quicksand.

Or a corrosive bog.

Or into the path of ravenous army ants.

All of which seemed distinct possibilities, since I didn't know where the sod I was.

My view of the world was restricted to a number of tree branches crisscrossing close overhead—gnarled and twisted branches of mist-slick wood, wreathed with dagger-like leaves. All the branches hung heavily with streamers of frosty green moss, like pale fat boa constrictors lying well-fed in the trees and letting their tails dangle.

The cool air smelled of damp-rot, strong and cloying... the normal smell of a swamp, of course, but more intense than any natural swamp I'd visited. There was nothing placid in this swamp's aura of decay, no calm decomposition of fallen leaves into rich brown muck—I had a hunch that putrefaction here would be swift and aggressive, enough to rot the boots off your feet if you stood still too long.

When I thought about it, that wasn't such an unappealing prospect: having my clothes decay off my body would be an interesting sensation, if not downright titillating. But I had no time to wait for the rot to set in, because somewhere off to my right, Hezekiah whispered, "They're coming this way."

"They heard the piking whistles," Miriam glowered.

"If I could just cast a spell—" Wheezele began, but Yasmin cut him off immediately.

"No spells. We're covered with dust."

"Then we must fight." That last voice was Kiripao's... no surprise. Our elven monk was beginning to worry me; impulsiveness was one thing, but his constant eagerness to plunge into battle would spell trouble if we couldn't keep him in check. I had to wonder what religious order Kiripao belonged to—the monks I'd met before Kiripao had all conducted themselves with delicate restraint, fighting only when circumstances left no

other choice. They certainly didn't leap into combat without the slightest attempt at parlay.

Still, I couldn't waste precious moments brooding about Brother Monk: it was high time to get off my back, and face whatever new ugliness was heading our direction. The mud put up sticky opposition to my plan, but it wasn't deep enough to hold me securely; in three or four seconds, I had ripped myself free and regained my feet.

We stood on a small rise in the middle of a bog that stretched as far as the eye could see. Stunted trees grew wherever the ground was solid enough to support them, but much of the landscape was covered with water: stale and brackish water, lying in stagnant black pools. As I continued to examine my surroundings, the surface of the closest pool broke into rings of dark ripples. Something white and shapeless rose from the depths, sucked briefly at the air, then disappeared once more into the lower darkness.

"What are they?" Hezekiah whispered.

Was he asking about the white thing in the water? No, his head was turned in a different direction. I followed his gaze out over the swamplands... and there, coming toward us with silent speed, were ten slices of blackness. For brief instants, as one or another of them glided over a patch of ground that was clear of tree-shadow, I could make out a gaunt humanoid shape, like a walking skeleton—a skeleton equipped with small bat-shaped wings ending in fearsome claws. Then the figure would move into the shade of another tree and virtually disappear, blending so completely with the shadows that even my Sensate's eyes could scarcely discern them.

"Does anyone know what they are?" I whispered.

"Umbrals," Kiripao replied. "Close cousins to shadow fiends. Umbrals steal souls and sell them to the highest bidder."

"If they want to steal our souls," Hezekiah said, "they'll have to use magic, right?" He lifted the white grinder and tapped it meaningfully against his palm.

"Use the dust sparingly, honored Clueless," Wheezy warned him. "Umbrals are only found on the Lower Planes; and if we have landed on a Lower Plane, we do not want to attract the attention of any powers who dwell here. They may decide to seize the grinder for their own."

"Back in the Spider," I reminded him, "you said that gods would leave this grinder alone... that they'd be afraid of every other god ganging up on them."

"That would be the attitude of any sensible god," the gnome nodded. "However, the Lower Planes are a patchwork of divine fiefdoms, each ruled by its own distinct deity. Every significant god is shrewd enough to exercise caution; but there are numerous small gods too, many of whom are gibberingly insane. If this land belongs to one of the mad powers, we must try to remain beneath its notice."

"Get ready to fire anyway," Yasmin muttered to Hezekiah. "Those things are getting too close for comfort."

The umbrals were now only fifty paces away, close enough for me to catch the occasional glimpse of mouths filled with bristling teeth. Those teeth could tear through throat-flesh like a rip saw; and I didn't want them any nearer my jugular than they already were.

"That's close enough!" I shouted. "Stop and we'll talk."

The creatures didn't slow down. They knew they outnumbered us; they carried no

weapons, but those teeth and claws could shred us just as efficiently as a butcher's axe. I drew my sword and waited. For the last twenty paces of their approach, the umbrals would have to climb the rise where we stood. Holding this higher ground was our group's one advantage, and I intended to exploit it to the fullest.

At the bottom of the rise, the shadow things halted... possibly because they realized a mad rush would be risky, possibly because they had something else in mind. One of their number slipped back into the thickest darkness under a tree and drew something from a black pouch at its waist. I could barely see the umbral, let alone the small object it was holding; but whenever a foe acts furtively, it's time for preemptive action.

"Down there by that tree," I said to Hezekiah. "Blast the berk."

Hezekiah cranked the grinder and let loose a stream of dust with all the pressure of the main jet in the Great Fountain of Sigil. The whiteness of the dust showered down over the fiend's head, clearly outlining the creature's form—we could see that it was bent over some sort of black-glinting orb and chanting an invocation. The spray of dust didn't interrupt the creature's attempt at casting a spell... but the subsequent fire did. The umbral's body flared with the fierce white brightness of a sun, sending its fellow fiends shrieking to cover their eyes. In a split second, the umbral dissipated into ash; and the orb it had been holding fell to the muddy ground with a dull thud.

"Now can we talk?" I called down to them.

"Talk, yessssssss," one of the other umbrals replied in a whisper. It rubbed its eyes furiously, trying to recover from the blinding burst of their comrade's incineration. "We like talking. Very friendly umbrals, yessssssss."

Yasmin gave a snort of disgust. "The first step in diplomacy," she muttered, "is always getting their attention."



As far as I could tell, only one of the creatures was capable of speech; the rest simply stared at us with huge hollow eyes, their hands constantly flexing as if they longed to imbed their claws into our flesh. I noticed Kiripao's hands were doing much the same thing, eager to break a few umbral heads... but he restrained himself while I spoke with the fiend leader.

"We don't want any trouble," I told the chief shadow, "we just want to get back home."

"Where isssssss home?"

"Sigil. Are there any portals nearby?"

"Portalsss. Portalsss." The umbral tucked a claw under its chin and made a show of pondering the question with great seriousness. "No portalsss here."

Kiripao growled. "He's lying—every umbral village has a portal in the center."

"No, no," the speaker said. "Our people very poor. No portalsss."

"There must be other villages nearby," Miriam suggested.

"Not friendly villagesss. Wicked, greedy sssshadowsss. Sssteal your sssoulsss."

"Like you tried to do," Yasmin muttered.

"Ssss'sssop very young," the umbral shrugged. "Impulssive. Not friendly like ussss." It smiled an unconvincing smile and took a step up the hill. Hezekiah gestured with the grinder, and the speaker backed up quickly.

“If you don’t know where to find a portal,” I said, “we have nothing else to say to you. Push off.”

“Oh, oh, oh,” the chief fiend replied. “Jussst remembered. A portal, yesssss. A portal to Ssssigil.”

“What a remarkable coincidence,” Yasmin murmured.

“Yesssssss, lovely portal,” the umbral continued. “Not far away.”

“A portal to Sigil?” Hezekiah repeatedly eagerly.

“Lovely clean portal, jussst your sssizzze. Lead you to it.”

“It’s a trap,” Kiripao whispered.

“I never would have guessed,” Yasmin replied.

“Even if it is a trap,” Wheezle said softly, “perhaps we should accept their offer.”

“Are you barmy?” Miriam snapped.

“I know something of umbrals,” Wheezle replied. “They are greedy creatures... greedy to trap our souls in those orbs they carry. If we try to force them away, they will almost certainly attack.”

“And we would fight back,” Kiripao answered.

“They outnumber us. If they won the battle, all of our souls would be trapped in gems forever, cut off from rightful death.” Wheezle shuddered for a moment, then continued. “Even if we managed to kill them all, we would surely have our own casualties... and I do not think any of us wishes to die on a Lower Plane. Souls seldom escape from these planes, even in death—we would be reborn as mindless things of evil.”

Kiripao gazed at Wheezle with narrowed eyes. “You want to go along with these creatures because you are afraid to fight.”

“Honored brother,” Wheezle replied, “why not go along with them until we see a clear chance for escape? We are too exposed here. We have nowhere to run.”

The gnome had a point: if push came to shove, our muddy rise of land gave us the advantage of higher ground, but it was exposed and visible to all the surrounding territory. I’d learned enough from my father’s stories to know that swamps in the Lower Planes are nasty places, filled with lurking vipers, stalkers made of ooze, and plants that suddenly lash their branches around your neck. Did we want to stay in plain sight with such threats slithering out there in the muck? On top of that, I wanted to get away posthaste from the portal at our backs—nothing more than a decrepit stone arch covered with clots of moss, but as soon as Rivi found a whistle to open the gate, she and an army of wights would come charging into this plane to retrieve the grinder. By the time that happened, we had to be long gone.

“All right,” I called to the umbrals. “Show us this portal of yours... but no tricks.”

“Tricksss? Tricksssssss? No play tricksss on friendsss... promissssssse.”

For some reason, that didn’t reassure me.



We kept our distance from the fiends, giving them a lead of about thirty paces. “Keep peery,” I told the others, as if they needed the advice. “We grab any chance of escape that presents itself, and we watch for any sign of a trap.”

“What kind of trap?” Hezekiah asked.

I patted his shoulder. “Let’s watch for every kind of trap, shall we?”

But that was easier said than done. The swamp was filled with rustles and slithers, with bogs of quicksand and shrubs sporting poison-drenched thorns. For the umbrals, this was home: they knew where they could step and where they couldn't, which snakes were harmless and which would strike if you walked within range. The rest of us had no such knowledge; and with each step along the muddy trail, my nervous tension screwed up another notch.

Approaching a patch of blooms whose smell made my head spin... were they giving off dangerous gas, or just a cloying perfume? And that clacking sound to the right... tree branches knocking together in the breeze, or a monster sharpening its claws? Every ripple in every pool... every drop of mist falling from the leaves overhead... every insect suddenly buzzing past our ears... we jumped at everything. Kiripao snapped his nunchakus at unknown phantoms; Yasmin plunged her sword into the undergrowth once or twice a minute, never telling us what she had seen; and even Hezekiah was jumpy, yelping at every odd gurgle of water, every croak from a frog.

My nerves were just as strained as my friends', but I concentrated on the umbrals, not creeping menace from the swamp itself. The fiends seemed in high spirits, conversing with each other in a language that consisted of hisses and hand gestures. From time to time they actually laughed, with a throaty sound like a dog being strangled. Whatever "tricksss" they had up their sleeve, they were obviously congratulating themselves at the cleverness of their plan.

This umbral snickering continued as they led us past a dozen black-water pools. After an hour or so, the tree cover thinned as the ground grew damper; and about a league ahead there appeared an honest-to-goodness river, perhaps ten paces wide. Trying to get a good view of that river, I almost missed something important closer to home: the fiends had stopped laughing.

In fact, they had stopped talking altogether—no hissing and none of the intricate hand gestures that made up their form of speech. They clutched their wings tight to their bodies, and they walked with a cautious, silent delicacy, like cats picking their way through mud. Why? I waved the others to a halt, placed a finger to my lips, and squinted carefully ahead.

Although there were no trees nearby, the path was still bordered by scrubby bushes, most of them reminiscent of nettles and burdock. At this very moment, however, the umbrals were passing three bushes that stood out from the rest: taller and fuller than the others, with leaves that had a soft reddish tinge to their green. The front fiend kept his gaze glued tightly to the bushes as he drew near them, and his pace grew even more cautious. Clearly, our "friendsss" intended to pass those bushes with the utmost silence... so just for the sake of interest, I pulled out a whistle from the Glass Spider and blew an ear-piercing blast.

With the force of an explosion, all three bushes expelled a barrage of white-wood flechettes, V-shaped thorns whizzing through the air. The fiends were mowed down like wheat, reaped by a thousand tiny scythes. Shreds of shadow were ripped from their bodies and scattered over the bulrushes behind them, black clots flung across the green.

The leaders of the party fell butchered without a single sound. The ones farther back, partly protected by their fellows, didn't die immediately, but uttered breathy little shrieks as the projectiles cut through their bodies. They shouldn't have made such noise—it

stirred the bushes to shoot another fusillade, thorns imbedding themselves in shadow flesh, shadow wings, shadow eyes. The umbrals fell in tatters, their bodies perforated like moth-eaten clothes.

“Quickly,” Wheezy shouted, “we must get to them now! We must perform the proper death rites.”

“Don’t be barney,” Yasmin snapped. “We can’t get close to those bushes.”

“We must!” Wheezy repeated. “Keep blowing the whistle, honored Cavendish. The plants cannot shoot thorns forever.”

And the little gnome was right: the bushes’ supply of ammunition was limited. When I blew the whistle again, the responding volley of flechettes was smaller than the first two bursts. Three more whistles and the attacks had dribbled out; I gave another two toots just for safety’s sake, but by then Wheezy was urging Yasmin to run full speed toward the slaughtered fiends. “The death rites are crucial!” he kept shouting.

“Dustmen,” Yasmin muttered and made a face. But she bounded into a sprint down the muddy path, goaded on by Wheezy shouting, “Faster, faster!”

The rest of us jogged along behind, wondering what could send Wheezy into such a tizzy. It didn’t surprise me he knew the death rites for umbrals—Dustmen study the sentient races of the multiverse, just to know how to bury each one. On the other hand, I had witnessed dozens of deaths since I met Wheezy, from the Collectors incinerated by the exploding giant, to the Fox and all the others we’d killed inside the Glass Spider; our gnome had shown no urgent need to give them a proper send-off. He hadn’t even offered a prayer for Oonah... so why did he care about monsters who’d tried to have us julienned by vegetables?

The moment Yasmin reached the closest fiend, Wheezy demanded to be set down. Quickly, he plunged his hand into the umbral’s belt pouch and pulled out a dark sphere about the size of a walnut—twin to the gem-like orb we’d seen before, the one used by the umbral who tried to steal our souls at the portal. Raising the orb in his hand, Wheezy called out, “Come, beloved, to your—”

Yasmin clamped a hand over his mouth. “No magic, Wheezy! You’re covered with dust—it’s too dangerous.”

“This is not magic, honored Handmaid. I am simply calling a soul that may yet be lingering near this body.”

“Using that gem was magic before. Remember a certain umbral bursting into flames?”

“The umbral was attempting to steal a soul against our will; such theft does require magic. However, showing a soul that we have a receptacle available for habitation... that is not magic. The soul chooses for itself whether to enter the gem.”

Yasmin didn’t look convinced, but she kept still as Wheezy called out again, “Come, beloved, to your home. A mansion has been prepared for you. Live in it and be glad.”

The dark orb flickered with a sudden thread of light. The gleaming strand shuddered once, twice, then blossomed into a deep purplish glow. It lit the gnome’s face with a soft violet radiance and he smiled. “Good. Good.”

Suddenly, he tossed the orb to me with careless disdain. “Hold onto that, honored Cavendish. Umbrals sell souls to the highest bidder... so can we. It’s justice.”

And then he urged Yasmin to carry him to the next body.



Nine orbs, glowing purple. Nine umbral souls, housed inside these strange gems. “A good haul,” Kiripao said approvingly.

“You know something about the soul trade?” I asked.

“Some,” he nodded. “It is a popular form of commerce here in Carceri.”

“You think we’re in Carceri?”

Kiripao pointed to the thorn-shooting bushes. “Those plants are called Tooth-Storms. I have never seen one before, but I have heard tales of how they... make their own fertilizer. They are found only in Carceri, on the swampy layer known as Othrys.”

“Wonderful,” I growled.

“What’s Carceri?” Hezekiah piped up.

“One of the Lower Planes,” Miriam told him. “A place of utter evil, with a dash of chaos to make things cozy.”

“So how do we get out?” the boy asked.

“First, we must find an umbral village.” That answer came from Wheezy, who lay on the chest of the last fiend and rolled one of the soul-gems between his palms. “As the honored Kiripao has observed, every such village is built around a portal of some kind. With luck, the gate can take us somewhere less hostile.”

“Walking into an umbral village will surely provide all the hostility we can handle,” I said. “This bunch wanted to steal our souls the moment they saw us... and their families won’t be pleased we’ve scragged a load of their cousins.”

“Umbrals have hard hearts,” Wheezy replied. “They feel no fondness for others of their kind, and will not grieve over those who have died. The one thing they do feel is greed: greed for...” He held up the glowing soul-gem.

“So the second we walk into a village,” Miriam growled, “they’ll put us in the dead-book so they can bob our gems.”

“Not true, honored ruffian. Umbrals respect few rules, but the trade in souls occupies the center of their lives. If we present ourselves as merchants with goods for sale,” he held up the soul-gem again, “they will treat us as respected guests. We will embark upon a formalized process of negotiation, and during the time it takes to strike a bargain, they will provide us with free lodging, food, and clean water.”

The moment he said the word food, I could feel my stomach rumble. It had not been so long since my last meal—astonishing though it was, we had only left Sigil three hours earlier—but I was definitely growing peckish for a feed. Was there anything edible out here in the swamps of Othrys? Probably, but it would be sheer luck if we found it. None of us had any wilderness experience. Kiripao showed some small familiarity with this plane, but he hadn’t recognized the Tooth-Storm bushes till they started shooting their thorns. That didn’t bode well for stumbling around the swamp, trying to find food without getting eaten ourselves.

“Are you sure the umbrals won’t kill us?” I asked Wheezy.

“They will rip out our throats the moment we conclude negotiations,” he answered, “but until then, they will show meticulous hospitality. It is their way. Umbrals have no honor as we recognize it, but while there is business to be conducted, they make every show of friendship.”

“Like half the merchants in the Great Bazaar,” Miriam muttered.
I was beginning to like her.



We continued along the muddy trail in the direction we had been traveling. There was no guarantee it would lead to an umbral village, but we could see it was a well-used path. It was also heading for the river far ahead of us, and that was another good sign; even in the Lower Planes, it’s practical to build your village close to a waterway, for the convenience of transportation and drinking.

An hour later, however, when we finally reached the river, it became apparent that drinking this particular water would be risky. It was not just black; the water had an oily obsidian gloss to it, as if it could immediately squash the color out of anything that touched its surface. The smell of sulfur tainted the air, possibly from the water, or possibly from the curling clumps of mist that hung above the river at random points along its length.

As we watched, a dark skiff emerged from one of the banks of cloud. It moved slowly, giving us plenty of time to examine the ornate illustrations painted on the prow—row upon row of faces, some humanoid, some not, and all consumed with a quiet, ineffable sadness.

In time, the skiff emerged far enough from the mist for us to see the boatman: skeletally thin, clad in a hooded robe that didn’t quite hide the fleshless face. A human woman sat passenger on the wooden seat behind, her eyes sewn shut with coarse black thread. Her hands lay folded in her lap, and no matter how the boat rocked on the river’s current, the woman remained immobile... as if she weren’t really sitting in the skiff at all, but gliding forward on the strength of some unknown destiny.

The woman was Oonah DeVail. Her soul. Her dead spirit.

She took no notice of us as the skiff silently floated by; but the boatman turned to look at us briefly, pale eyes in a face of bone. Then the skiff entered another pillar of mist and disappeared without leaving a ripple.

“This is the River Styx,” Kiripao said.

None of us spoke for some time.

CHAPTER TWELVE



THREE BLOSSOMING RAPORTS

trail led along the Styx for the better part of a mile. Then as we rounded a bend in the river, we saw a gathering of black huts ahead, tucked beneath a grove of moss-laden trees. The huts seemed to be sculpted from solid darkness, as if they had congealed from the gloom of shadows that permeated the grove.

“Each of us will carry a gem,” Wheeple said softly, handing around the glowing purple orbs. “We must all present ourselves as soul-

OUR MUDDY

merchants.”

Hezekiah wore a pained expression. “I don’t think Uncle Toby would approve of me—”

“Do not worry, honored Clueless,” Wheeple interrupted. “The umbrals voluntarily chose to enter these gems. It is how they always expected to end their lives: as objects of trade. And we must remember the treasure you carry.” He pointed to the grinder, still trickling out white dust. “We have a responsibility to keep that out of the wrong hands.”

Hezekiah nodded gravely... as if he found it obvious what the right hands would be. To me, the issue was not so clear-cut. I was inclined to pass on the grinder to Lady Erin as fast as possible; but I knew Wheeple would want to turn it over to the Dustmen, Yasmin to the Doomguard, and Kiripao either to the Ciphers or to whatever power he worshipped. When the time came, there would be a sodding huge argument. Still, we tacitly agreed we didn’t want the grinder taken by Rivi or the umbrals, so the question could be postponed a while.

With each of us prominently displaying a soul-gem, we walked toward the village. I almost missed the sentry fiend, posted beside the path; it stood under the hood of a willow-like tree, glaring at us from the shadows. When it saw I had noticed it, the umbral took to its wings immediately, staying low to the ground but swinging its flight-path over the Styx, getting an unobstructed route to the huts. Since we were still on foot it took us longer to cover the remaining distance, forced to clamber over fallen logs and detour around spots where the muddy bank had crumbled into the river; so by the time we reached the umbral village, a sizable welcoming party had assembled along the path.

Every pair of hollow eye sockets pinned a yearning gaze on the soul-gems we carried, as if the villagers were deciding which gem they would claim as their own. Yasmin’s free hand strayed to the hilt of her longsword; but the fiends made no motion toward us. They watched in silence, shadows among shadows, each sepulchral face lit by the purple glow of the gems.

Without speaking, we walked to the very heart of the village, coming to a circular patch of mud with a shallow flame-pit dug in the middle. Unfamiliar runes had been carved in the stones that lined the pit; I suspected they were invocations to whatever god the umbrals deemed it necessary to mollify.

Wheeze nudged Yasmin and she held him aloft, her hands under his arm-pits like a mother lifting her child. “Honored fiends,” he called, “we have come to negotiate trade.”

The crowd of shadows uttered no words, but they rustled like poplar leaves stirred by a stiff wind. Every shade-dark face crinkled into a razor-toothed smile.



The swamps of Othrys have no cycle of morning and night. The sky is always somber and overcast, the air pregnant with the anticipation of a storm that never comes. Sages claim that the red-tinted light of Carceri comes from the land itself; but in the fetid umbral swamps it leaked up to the sky, then reflected down again from the clouds, casting a cold illumination whose chill gradually seeped into our bones.

Wheeze told us the negotiations to sell the soul-gems would take three days—not more, not less. I wondered what a day meant in a place without light or dark; but Kiripao told me the umbrals measured out time in chunks of twenty-four hours, just like so much of the multiverse... an enigma that has puzzled more learned brains than mine.

As promised, the fiends supplied us with all the necessities of life, even before Wheeze and Kiripao began discussions with the village council. Umbral food consisted of marsh weeds and beetles, which the others refused to eat until I assured them the insects had an appealing nutty flavor... rather like a cross between grasshoppers and earthworms, although the worm taste probably came from the mud clinging to each beetle carapace. (Haven’t you found that no matter how thoroughly you wash a bug, you can never clean away the grit that lodges in the crannies of its exo-skeleton? Then again, my dwarven friends say the dirt is the best part.)

The water offered by the fiends had a greasy aftertaste, but it was drawn from a well, not the river. I had heard stories about water from the River Styx—how the tiniest dribble touching tongue or skin could erase your memories, leaving you empty as an infant—and I worried that some portion of the Styx might have seeped into the well. However, after steeling myself to try a sip, I suffered no ill effects... so I used every drop in the bucket to wash off the sticky white dust still coating my body. The others did the same with their own buckets, and Yasmin went so far as to begin a tiny invocation to test whether the dust was safely gone. A second later, she broke out in a fit of coughing, pressing her fists to her chest.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, wrapping my arms around her.

Wheezing, she gasped out, “Lungs... my lungs!”

As I held her, waiting for her to recover, I contemplated how much dust we must have inhaled during our fight with the Fox. How much lurked in our noses, our throats, our bronchial tubes and deeper? I couldn’t say; but none of us would be casting magic for a long, long time.



The umbrals gave us a single hut for lodging, with a floor three paces square... not much space for five human-sized people and a gnome. On the other hand, we weren’t all

going to sleep at the same time; even with the fiends on their best behavior, we scheduled a watch around the clock.

To prevent the enemy from catching any of us alone, we decided to pair off. Wheezle and Kiripao, our two most knowledgeable bloods when it came to umbrals, would handle negotiations. Miriam volunteered to accompany Hezekiah wherever he went, leaving Yasmin and me together... which caused us a nervous blush or two, but we didn't ask for a different arrangement.

The four of us who weren't negotiating took on the task of learning if this village had a portal, where the portal went, and what key was needed to open it. Accordingly, Yasmin and I took a stroll around the area, keeping our eyes peeled for the faint glimmer of a gate. Soon, however, I found my attention straying to something totally unexpected: umbral art. The huts weren't the only things molded from solid darkness; everywhere you looked there was brooding black statuary, sculpted from pure shadow. A few had recognizable subjects—a fat human man laughing wildly, a woman being crushed under a stone—but most were utterly alien shapes. What was I to make of a pitted block that resembled a human knucklebone, or something like a huge axe-head attached to a shriveled cone?

As I was looking at this last one, an umbral slithered up beside me and murmured, "You like ssstatue?"

"Is it supposed to be a tomahawk?" I asked.

"Isss absstract," the umbral replied, sounding as if I'd offended him. "Isss ssstatement."

"What kind of statement?"

"Come now, Britlin," Yasmin said beside me. "It shows the precarious balance of all our lives... how we cling fanatically to familiar concepts, while deep in our hearts we doubt if we've made the right choice."

"Yessss, yessssss!" the umbral whistled. "Issss exactly that." He sidled closer to Yasmin. "You are artissst?"

"No, I just know what I like." She reached out to tap on the axe-like statue, but her finger went right through. It seemed the shadow-stuff wasn't so solid after all. "Were you the one who made this?" Yasmin asked.

"Made it, yesss," the umbral replied. "Jussst a humble effort."

"It's very good," Yasmin said. "It has a particularly strong sense of form and motion."

"There's no motion," I muttered, "it's a sodding statue. The piking thing just sits there, doesn't it?" In a louder voice, I asked the fiend, "Have you considered making a piece that actually looks like something? Perhaps you could get a pretty she-umbral to model for you. Nothing develops your attention to accuracy as much as sculpting from the figure..."

But that was as far as I got. The fiend covered its ears with its hands and ran shrieking into the marsh.

Yasmin patted me on the shoulder. "I don't think they're ready for these advanced artistic concepts."

"Primitives," I growled. "I can't understand why their work gets so much attention."

And for several minutes thereafter, I found myself kicking at any pebble with the

audacity to lie in my path.



Our walk through the village and outlying regions took several hours, after which I arbitrarily declared that night was drawing in. Of course, there was no change in the uniform grayness of the Carceri sky; but fatigue was pressing down on me, compounded by the many exertions of the day. Yasmin agreed it must be dark by now, back in Sigil... and she took my hand as we walked quietly back to the hut.

When we arrived, Miriam announced she had found the portal. It lay inside a piece of sculpture shaped something like a ruptured watermelon, with a crack down the side just big enough for an emaciated umbral to squeeze through. The crack was, of course, the portal; and it remained to be seen if we humans could fit into the gate. We would have serious difficulty at the best of times. It would be next to impossible to squash through quickly and quietly.

Alas, “quickly and quietly” was exactly what we needed. After hours of formal discussions, Wheezle and Kiripao had established only one point: the umbrals would double-cross us as soon as bargaining concluded. The moment they handed over the agreed-upon price, any outsiders in the village would change from “merchants with goods to sell” into “targets with gold to steal”. Of course, the fiends hadn’t said this in so many words; but the undercurrents of gloating hostility were too obvious for our companions to miss. The gnome and elf insisted we must have an escape route ready by the time negotiations ended.

I did not sleep well that night; and I was grateful when Hezekiah woke me to say it was my watch.



As I stepped out of the hut, I saw Yasmin already standing in the gloomy shadows. The sky was still gray and overcast, unchanged since we had arrived in Othrys; but the village had a brooding silence to it, as if true night had fallen. No umbrals walked the streets or hovered in the doors of their huts, watching us with greedy eyes. Perhaps they had gone to sleep too... if shadows are capable of slumber.

“It’s quiet,” Yasmin whispered.

I nodded.

After some time she said, “Sometimes I have this vision of Sigil, completely empty. No one left in the city—no people, no dogs, no rats—everyone gone but me. I have the whole perfect silence to myself.”

“It’s a Doomguard kind of dream,” I said. “The twilight at the end of the world.”

“Not the end of the world,” she replied. “The completion of the world. Have you ever been in a tavern when a truly great bard starts to sing? At first, people keep talking to their neighbors, clinking tankards, making noise... but as the bard’s voice reaches them, they stop to listen, one by one. The hush spreads over the crowd, until all you can hear is the singing. No one wants to breathe or move, for fear of missing a note of the song.

“That’s what Entropy means to me, Britlin: the beautiful song of Time. I dream of the day people stop their desperate jabbering and finally hear the music.”

“A pretty metaphor,” I told her, “but in real life, people don’t just fall quiet and listen to the Harmony of the Spheres. In real life, people die—often painfully and pointlessly.

Where's the music in that?"

"You're too short-sighted," Yasmin replied. "Death is merely a transition, like adolescence. It may be easy or hard, but it's not the final word. Your soul moves on to another plane, Upper or Lower, wherever your heart truly belongs. And when your afterlife ends, you move on again, absorbed into the multiverse one way or another. We'll all be present for the final song. We'll all be part of the final song."

I shrugged. "Pardon me if I want to put off choir membership as long as possible."

"I'm a Handmaid of Entropy, not a leatherhead. I don't want to die in the near future either—there are still a million things I have to do... and a million others I want to do."

"Even so, you're devoted to helping Entropy along."

She shook her head. "Entropy doesn't need help, any more than stars need help to shine. Entropy is always on the job, berk, and whatever pace it wants to move is fine by me. I only get annoyed when someone tries to jig the natural progression faster or slower. Trying to accelerate Entropy is just as bad as trying to stop it: both are presumptuous... tinkering with the great bard's song. The path of wisdom is just to go about your business and try to hear the music." Her eyes were distant; but suddenly she broke into a chuckle. "By the gods, I sound pompous."

"Let's be kind and say you're profound."

"I've never been profound in my life. I've been..." Her voice broke off. "I've been a lot of things, but never profound."

"Tell me what you've been."

She bit her lip. "You don't want to know, and I don't want to remember. Life was not good before I became a Handmaid. Life was very bitter and lonely."

"No friends or family?"

"No friends, bad family. My mother died. My older brother—he died eventually too, but not soon enough." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Let's talk about something else."

I looked at her closely. Maybe I was jumping to conclusions, imposing my mother's history on another woman; but the sound of her voice when she mentioned her brother... ugly. So much ugliness in the world. And despite my grouching, I knew I had lived a pampered life, all things considered.

Reaching out, I took Yasmin's hand. "Okay. Let's talk about something else."

Her mouth curved into the ghost of a smile. "What did you have in mind?"

"Giving this place the laugh. Declaring that this patch of ground is not Carceri at all, but other plane entirely. What would you like it to be?"

"The Plane of Dust," she answered immediately.

"Dust?" I snorted. "Pardon me, but I was there mere hours ago, and didn't enjoy it at all."

"The Glass Spider wasn't the real Plane of Dust," she said. "I visited Dust years ago, while studying to be a Handmaid. It was very soothing. Quiet and healing."

"But it has no air!"

"They taught us spells that could cope with that."

"You can't cast spells at the moment," I reminded her.

"Oh no?" She draped an arm over my shoulder. "Imagine we're on the Plane of Dust," she said in a low voice. "No umbrals. No swamp. No smell or noise..."

“No air.”

“Shh.” She put a finger to my lips. “We’re in the Plane of Dust and I have wrapped us ‘round with spells that will keep us very safe. Very private. No one for a million miles around but you... and me...”

For more than an hour after that, we weren’t very good watchguards.



Early on our second “day” in Othrys, a boatman from the Styx arrived at the village. At the time, Yasmin and I were sitting on a clump of moss, watching an umbral artist shape a block of shadow into what looked like a headless rhinoceros. The sculpting process appeared no different from molding clay, full of kneading and squeezing and slapping; yet when I tried to touch the lump of darkness, I found it as insubstantial as mist. Maybe the shadow-stuff existed on a shifted plane of reality, one the umbral could contact and I could not... or maybe I was just spouting gibberish because I didn’t have any rational explanation.

Yasmin, of course, didn’t care about the “how” of shadow-sculpting. Every few minutes, she hiccupped with admiration as the fiend’s hands pinched out a blob of blackness or smoothed down a dimple in the rhino’s left buttock. No doubt, my tiefling inamorata would have happily explained how the piece symbolized the Voice of Irony, the Cosmic Jest, or some other deep theme; but I refused to ask. In fact, I was delighted when a group of umbrals broke into hysterical gabbling down by the riverside—it gave me an excuse to leave. Leaping to my feet I hurried to the Styx, with Yasmin close behind.

As we came into sight of the river, the boatman’s skiff was just drawing up to the shore. A crowd of umbrals stood back a short distance, clacking their teeth together rhythmically. The sound seemed to be their way of offering a cheery hello; and they kept up the noise as the boatman tied his skiff to a tree stump and climbed onto solid ground. Yasmin grabbed my arm and whispered, “Maybe we should get out of here.”

I hesitated. True, this skeletal ferryman gave me more cold chills than a trip to the privy in January; but he hadn’t shown any overt hostility. The umbrals seemed delighted to see him... and as for myself, I’d never met such a creature before. Would he let me shake his boney hand, maybe take flaky samples of his skin? No—I wouldn’t ask him about that at the moment. But I didn’t want to run either. I simply watched as his pale gaze flicked our way then moved on, as if Yasmin and I didn’t deserve his attention.

Stepping into the circle of fiends, the boatman bowed once in the direction of the village fire-pit, then a second time toward the Styx. The umbrals bowed back... and I noticed their bows were much deeper than the boatman’s, like peasants bowing to their lord. Dapperly waving his hand, the boatman acknowledged the bows; then he cleared his throat with a loud raspy cough, sounding as if he hadn’t spoken in weeks. When he finally opened his mouth, his voice resembled the scrape of gravel on sandpaper.

“Greetings,” he said huskily. “I have come to bring light to your dreary circle of hovels... because I find myself in need of an artist.”

Yasmin’s grip on my arm tightened. I’d have to talk to her about clipping her fingernails.



Five minutes later, the boatman's skiff was beached on shore, open to the inspection of every fiend with artistic aspirations. The starboard side of the bow was painted much like the skiff we'd seen before: with a profusion of faces from many sentient species, all of them clouded by a profound sadness. None of these people wept openly, or even seemed close to tears; instead, they wore the dull expression of long-term grief, too wearily dispirited to cry. I had to admire the technique of the painter—each face, rendered in muted browns, had a clinical accuracy I found uncanny.

Unlike the painted starboard side, the port side of the bow was completely undecorated: bare wood, simply sanded smooth. The planks looked freshly cut and trimmed; and as I ran my fingers along the wood's surface, the boatman stepped up to my side. "You will notice this is newly repaired," he said in his rasping voice. "My boat suffered damage after... a financial disagreement with some passengers."

I made a sympathetic noise. "Customers can be so hard to please."

"Indeed. They had quite a falling out." He smiled. His teeth were yellow, with dark brown stains that gave me cause for unpleasant speculation. "Now that my boat has been refurbished," he went on, "I wish to restore the usual... embellishments." He turned to the crowd of umbrals. "Your fame as artists has spread the length of the river. I would be pleased to pay a reasonable commission to anyone who could copy the images from the starboard onto the port."

A chorus of murmurs rustled through the assembly. Every bat-like wing trembled with dark shivers. "Copy?" several voices whispered. "Copy?"

"Yes," the boatman replied. "These faces are my personal insignia. I must have them painted on both sides of the bow so that I am recognized by my... clients."

"Copy?" the whispers continued. "Copy facesssss..."

"Surely this is not a difficult assignment?" the boatman said. "I've brought the necessary paints, and even a few brushes."

"Not facessss," said a nearby fiend. "Maybe nice mandala with ssstar motif?"

"Yessss," agreed another, "or Cosssmic Egg with wreath of ssstylized sssnakesss?"

"Ssscythes," chirped up a third, "I ssee sssstunning assemblage of peach-toned ssscythes, sssuperimposed on mauve medicine wheelsss, sssurrounded by cresssscent moonsss and dolphinsss."

"Dolphins?" the boatman shuddered.

"Sssscarlet onesss. Very pudgy, with lightning boltsss coming out of tailsss."

The boatman made a strangled sound. "I do not want scarlet dolphins, whether or not they come equipped with anal lightning bolts..."

"Isss sssymbol," an umbral put in quickly. "Dolphinsss sssymbolize river Ssstyx."

"There are no dolphins in the Styx!" the boatman snapped. "There are only unpleasant creatures called hydroloths, and they would rip a sissy little dolphin to fillets just for the fun of hearing it squeak."

One fiend cocked its head to the side. "Hydrolothsss look good with lightning boltsss?"

"A hydroloth wouldn't look good if you put a bag over its head, and one over yours while you're at it. I do not want hydroloths; I do not want stylized snakes; I do not want a nice mandala. I want an exact copy of the faces that are already on the other side of the boat, all right? Do you think you can handle that?"

The umbrals bristled with artistic indignation and stormed away, stomping louder than you'd think shadows could manage.

Yasmin stepped forward and tapped the boatman on the shoulder. "Sir," she said above the noise of the fiends' departure, "you don't need an artist; you need a hack. Let me introduce the most unrepentant hack in the multiverse..."

I tried my best to look modest.



In the next few minutes, I learned several things: that the skeletal boat people who ply the Styx call themselves marraenoloths; that marraenoloths are the only creatures who have learned the secret of navigating the river's black waters; and that this particular marraenoloth was a haughty berk named Garou, who refused to admit how lucky he was to find the one village in Carceri with a painter who would (a) take his commission and (b) not charge an arm and a soul for it.

"There is no element of luck involved," Garou insisted. "I simply concentrated on my need for a suitable artist, and the Styx carried me here. You could have been anywhere on the Lower Planes and the river would have brought me to you... or to someone else equally talented and perhaps less imbued with that foul-smelling dust."

I was going to snap back a caustic reply, but stopped myself before the words came out. Instead, I asked, "Can you really smell the dust on me?"

"Most certainly," Garou replied. "And let me add that in my day, I have inhaled the stench of rotting corpses, the reek of embalming chemicals, the odors of a thousand types of river pollution... but never have I smelled such a disgusting aroma as that which arises from the dust in your garments." He leaned toward me, thrust his gaping nasal cavity against my jacket, and drew in a heady breath. "Ah yes," he sighed with pleasure, "totally, putridly repugnant."

Yasmin's jaw tightened and she let out her breath slowly. "You're a Sensate, aren't you, Garou?"

"I have the good judgment to belong to the Society of Sensation, yes. Is there something wrong with that?"

"No, no," she answered, a fatalistic tone in her voice. "Britlin, shouldn't you give him the secret handshake or something?"

"Handshake?" I snorted. "The formal Sensate greeting is rather more tactile than a mere handshake."

"Indeed," Garou said. "It requires a hundred and twenty-seven meticulously prepared props, takes a day and a half to perform, and may only be conducted under the auspices of a qualified surgeon."

"I've done it twice," I told Yasmin. "Remember that scar I showed you last night? The sodding duck moved at precisely the wrong time."

"You too?" Garou asked with something close to sympathy in his voice. "I now make a point of ramming ducks with my skiff whenever they cross my path. Of course, all marraenoloths like to ram ducks—it's one of our little traditions. But for me, it has personal meaning."

"Yes? Then clobber one for me sometime," I said.

And if there is such a thing as friendship between humans and creatures of evil, that

was the start between me and Garou.



We negotiated a simple deal: I'd paint Garou's boat, and he'd ship us out of the village before the umbrals had a chance to butcher us. The Styx flows through all the Lower Planes, offering access to every form of hell imaginable; but it also passes close to a number of portals, and Garou promised he could take us to gates that led to relative safety. Nothing so convenient as a route directly to Sigil, alas—the best Garou could offer were portals to the so-called gate-towns, outposts which serve as staging points between the Lower Planes and the neutral Outlands. From the stories my father told, I knew the gate-towns to the Lower Planes were vicious places in their own right, tainted by evil seeping up from below... but as long as they retained some vestige of neutrality, any gate-town would be less lethal than where we were now. In a gate-town, we could contact the local chapters of our factions and get help. After that, we could worry about our next move.

Soon I had a paintbrush in hand, and was roughing out the sorrow-filled faces I would have to copy. There were sixteen of the portraits, a day's work at most: by the time the umbrals retired to their huts for the night, I'd be finished. Garou assured us he could slip our party out of town quietly while the fiends slept.

"Can we trust him?" Yasmin whispered to me as I started to paint the grief-ravaged face of a high elf.

"That's the question, isn't it?" I muttered. "He has nothing to gain by betraying us and we seem to get along passably well; but it still might amuse him to deposit us in some festering cesspit. On the other hand, he is a fellow Sensate... and I think he'll be impressed on with my work on his boat."

"Maybe you should leave one face unfinished until he takes us somewhere safe."

"Good idea," I nodded. "It'll give Garou some incentive to live up to his half of the bargain."

Yasmin watched me paint a few strokes, then asked, "Which gate-town do we aim for?"

"I don't know. Have you visited any of them?"

"No." She shrugged. "Maybe one of the others has."

"Why don't you check with them?" I suggested. "I'll be all right here."

She stared at me for a moment, clearly debating whether she could safely leave me by myself. "Very well," she said at last. "I don't want to watch you work on these pictures anyway. Too depressing."

"Because the faces are so sad or because it's just a hack copy job?"

She didn't answer. I watched her walk away.



Time passed. Garou watched long enough to see me finish the high elf's face, then wandered off into the village. I took that as a vote of confidence; he had accepted I possessed sufficient talent for the job, and could work without his supervision. The umbrals were not so quick to drop the issue—I could feel their hollow eyes peering at me from dark vantage points under the trees, and could hear their rustling voices whisper unrecognizable words—but in time they too faded away, vanishing on unknown errands.

I was left alone with the grieving faces.

Whoever painted the originals had done good work: nothing too difficult in the way of technique, yet with a sure touch in capturing the pathos of each subject. It was easy to believe the faces had been taken from life; but I didn't want to pursue that line of thought. Sixteen people, heartsick people, herded together and forced to pose for the unknown artist... it didn't bear thinking about.

But I couldn't keep my mind off the subject. Garou's previous artist had done that old trick with the eyes, aiming them out flat so they seemed to follow me wherever I moved; and it is hard to bear up under such sorrowful scrutiny for long periods of time. Sad, mad eyes, always watching.

Among the faces was a human man, light-haired, full-bearded, nothing like my dark and well-trimmed father... yet the more the face stared at me, the more I felt this was Niles Cavendish: not dead, not lost these fifteen years, but still alive somewhere here in the Lower Planes and crushed by overwhelming grief. Time and again, I caught myself staring instead of painting. It was not my father, it was nothing like him—nothing like anything he could have become since I saw him last. And yet, when I was fleshing out other faces, I would repeatedly catch sight of the man from the corner of my eye and gasp. My father. Papa.

"Magic," I muttered under my breath. "Sodding magic." It could have been in the paint, on the boat, or hanging in the very air around me. Every plane lays its fingers on your soul and toys with you, trying to seduce you into its dance. Carceri wanted to embrace me with its ripe despair, and why not use visions of Niles Cavendish as bait? The man in the picture was not my father... any more than I was.

That was it: I was not my father. He had been a hero. I was a mere copyist; as Yasmin said, a hack. How long before she despised me for that? She knew I was the son of Niles Cavendish—we'd talked about it the night before, after... after we'd finished being inattentive sentries. Maybe my father was the only reason she cared a twig for me. Maybe she thought I was a savior with a sword, like him; and when she learned the truth, how I could scarcely bear thinking of him... would she walk away disappointed, longing for a real man, and a real life, and real emotion on the canvas...

"Painting more pictures, huh?" said a nasal voice behind my shoulder. "You must be really dedicated—working every chance you get. Uncle Toby says artists are like that."

I turned and saw Hezekiah looming over me. For some reason, he didn't look like a gawky Clueless nuisance at this moment; he looked downright welcome. "I don't know sod about artists," I told him. "I don't know sod about anything, except this piking place is playing tricks with my mind. Sit down on that stump and keep me sane."

"How do I do that?"

"Grant me wisdom. Grant me truth. Grant me the secrets of life. Or failing that, tell me about your home town, the girls you left behind, and your piking Uncle Toby."

Which he did.



Like every home town, Hezekiah's birthplace of Templeford had the dewiest dawns, the slowest horses, and the tangiest cheese in the multiverse. The barber was missing a finger and knew more jokes than any man in history. The tailor who sold men's clothes

held a “going out of business” sale at least once a year. There were two blacksmiths, one competent, one not... and the well-to-do patronized the fumble-fingered fellow because the other man’s smithy was always full of commoners. Of course, no one locked their doors at night. Of course, everyone went skating on the creek in winter time. Of course, there was an old house suspected of being haunted, a young woman suspected of selling her nights for silver, and a butcher suspected of adding cat-meat to the ground pork.

Born and bred in Sigil, I still knew Hezekiah’s home. I’d never been there... perhaps no one had ever been there, including Hezekiah. In real towns, drunks are sad or intimidating, never innocently amusing; and the girl next door has a complicated life of her own, not centered on being your foil. In real towns, marriages are neither unending bliss or unmitigated disasters, but always somewhere in between; and the same goes for children, never purely angels or demons as the stories would have you believe. But none of us comes from a real town—we come from home towns, where everyone is a “character” and where our stories, smiling or angry, are all painted in primary colors.

At that moment, I liked primary colors; they were a welcome change from the subdued browns on the palette in front of me. Thus I let Hezekiah prattle on about the dances in Pecksniffle’s pack-barn, and the blizzard three years ago that buried houses up to their eaves. Was the creek full of trout in spring? Of course. Did the leaves turn crimson and gold at harvest time? Every tree in the forest. And every grandmother could cook better than the greatest chefs in Sigil, every grandfather could whittle better than the most famous sculptors, every hunting dog could sniff out a partridge ten miles away...

What about Uncle Toby?

“What do you want to know about Uncle Toby?” Hezekiah asked.

“He raised you?”

“Yes.”

“And he taught you the tricks of mind over matter?”

“Oh sure—he taught me lots of stuff. But...” Hezekiah’s voice trailed off and he sighed a sigh of theatrical proportions.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Well,” the boy said, “I think Uncle Toby skimmed on one part of my education.”

“Yes?”

“He never... well, Uncle Toby was a bachelor, see. He knew about the multiverse, and the gods, and the powers of the mind, but he never really talked about... you know.”

Hezekiah looked at me with anxious brown eyes. I knew exactly what kind of guidance he wanted, and as a Sensate, I had plenty of experience to draw upon. The trick was not to unnerve the boy with excessively hydraulic details.

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

“Well... it’s just that... ummm, well... I think Miriam likes me.” He lifted his eyes quickly, then lowered them again. “I could be all wrong about this, but...”

“But you’re probably right,” I finished for him. “That trick you did back in the Spider—making yourself look terrifying—I think that caught her attention.”

“That? But that was... she liked that?”

I held up my hands in a shrug. “All I said was, it caught her attention. By now, I’m sure she realizes you aren’t the demonic horror we claimed you were. But she’s still here,

isn't she? What do you think of her?"

"I don't know..."

"Do you want her to go away, or do you want her to stick around?"

"Oh, I don't want her to go away."

"That's all you have to know at this point," I told him. "You want to spend time with her and see what happens. Right?"

"Right."

"So don't start worrying about a million other things." I gave him a quick smile. "You've known her less than two days. There may come a time when you should start thinking of the future, but right now, stick to the present."

"Thanks, Britlin," Hezekiah answered earnestly, as if he believed I'd given him advice instead of platitudes. "I've been really confused about... oh, hi Eustace, what are you doing here?"

"Eustace?" I repeated. The boy was looking at something behind my back. "Eustace?" I choked. And then I was diving out of the way as sharp wight claws sliced down through the position I'd occupied a split-second earlier.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THREE MINUTES OF DEPARTURE

paint while wearing a sword, so I had set mine down... only a few paces away, but the wight now stood between me and the weapon. While alive, this particular wight had been mostly human, but back a generation or two his family must have received an infusion of giant blood—the creature stood close to seven feet tall, with shoulders as wide as a wheelbarrow. He looked vaguely familiar; and in the split second before he lunged for another attack, I realized where I'd seen him before.

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This was one of the wights attending Rivi when she confronted us back in the Glass Spider.

“She’s found us!” I yelled to Hezekiah; then I was too busy rolling out of the way as two handfuls of talons tried to embed themselves in my chest.

“That isn’t Eustace, is it?” Hezekiah observed.

The boy was still sitting blithely on his tree stump, watching as the wight took another whack at me. This time, the monster dug his claws so deep into the muddy ground I had time to scramble to my feet before he could pull his hands free. With a snap of his wrist, the wight flicked the muck on his fingers into my face, spattering my cheeks and nearly blinding me in one eye. A moment later, he charged straight for me, hoping to run me through while I was distracted. He very nearly managed it too; but I dove over the skiff I’d been painting and scudded away along the slipperier mud.

“My sword!” I gasped to Hezekiah. “Get me my sword!”

The wight didn’t bother to jump the skiff after me; he simply bent down, planted his hands on the boat, then shoved it forward with all his strength, like a carpenter shoving a wood-plane over the flat of a board. The keel of the boat skimmed up a mound of mud as it skated over the ground, but the resistance wasn’t enough to slow down the wight. In an instant, the skiff slammed into me and propelled my whole body forward, knocking me roughly down the beach. I could handle the bruises; but another five paces would drive me straight into the River Styx. From the blazing fury in the wight’s eyes, I guessed that was precisely the plan.

Digging my heels into the mud, I tried to resist the steady push forward; unluckily for me, the wight’s toe-claws gripped the ground and gave him excellent traction, much better than the smooth leather soles of my boots. I slipped and slipped and slipped again, as the wight bent his back into one heave after another. There was no respite to let me stand up, no chance to scramble away around the front or back of the skiff. It might have been possible to clamber over the gunwale into the boat, but that would only put me within range of the wight’s life-draining touch.

“Hezekiah!” I yelled. And the lapping sound of the Styx was almost as loud in my ears as my own voice.

The wight hissed with glee. The river was only inches behind me; one more push and I’d be swimming... at least for a second or two, before the memory-stealing waters wiped out all knowledge of how to keep myself afloat. The wight’s arms flexed, ready for the final thrust...

...and then he stopped and turned around, an expression of polite curiosity on his face.

Behind him Hezekiah held my sword, both hands on the pommel. The boy had taken a swing at the wight, perhaps trying to whack off the creature’s head with a single mighty blow. However, he’d scarcely made a mark; he had botched the angle of attack and delivered a glancing strike with the flat of the blade. To the wight, it was no more than a shaving nick. The creature curled his lip in something approaching a grin and reached out toward the boy, close enough to crush Hezekiah’s head like a wineskin.

That’s when I shoved on the boat with all my strength and caught the wight at the back of his knees.

The skiff was the perfect height for buckling the monster’s legs. He jerked backward, trying to keep his balance; and at the same time, Hezekiah had the presence of mind to jab forward with the rapier. It didn’t actually pierce the wight’s chest—the boy hadn’t kept his wrists straight as he thrust out—but the tip of the blade banged against the creature’s breastbone, giving him some extra momentum for falling. As the wight began to topple backward, I reached up and helped him along, grabbing a handful of his ripped clothes and yanking with all my strength.

For a moment, the wight’s arms flailed. His rotting face loomed close to mine, his pointed teeth gnashing, his hot breath hissing rankly against my cheeks. Then he was spearing down headfirst into the black water, his body collapsing into globules of greasy pus the moment he hit the surface.

I froze. He hadn’t made much of a splash as he went under, but a small shower of droplets had splattered over my clothing. Should any of that wetness soak through to touch my skin... so I didn’t move, didn’t breathe, didn’t blink an eyelash. If I lost my memory now, I’d have to start experiencing life all over again from the very beginning. I might even have to eat another swineberry.

Seconds passed. The only dampness on my flesh was sweat, pouring out in gushers. Thank all the friendly powers, the day had been cool and I was wearing my jacket; it had given me that extra bit of protection against the splash. At last I let out a shuddering breath and struggled to my feet.

“That was exciting, wasn’t it?” I said to Hezekiah.

He nodded. “I can hardly wait to tell Miriam.”

“Wonderful. Give me my sword.”

“Could I practice a little with it?”

“No. Give me my sword.”

“Yes, Britlin.”



No other wights showed their decaying faces before lunch. Over the meal, however, the six of us met and agreed it was only a matter of time before we received more undead

company. Rivi must have brought the Glass Spider back to an even keel, then sent wights through the portal to search for us. When that ugly basher from the riverside didn't report back to Rivi's base, she would eventually muster other wights to find us. Dangers like the Tooth-Storm bushes might slow her forces down, but I doubted the nasty wee albino would be completely stymied by such

nuisances. To someone as vicious as Rivi, the swamps of Othrys might look as congenial as a backyard garden.

The news was not good from Wheezy and Kiripao either. For the umbrals, negotiations were a process of "becoming one mind"... a process that consisted of long silences, punctuated by grisly stories of life among the fiends. "The stories are bad," Wheezy murmured, "and the silences are worse. They press in on one's brain..." He shook his head and refused to say more; but his face looked more haggard than it had through all the trials of the Glass Spider.

After lunch, the others accompanied me back to the Styx, keeping watch as I continued painting the boat. I welcomed their presence as a way to steer my mind away from morbid brooding; the face of that man on the bow looked less like my father while Miriam was telling about a drunk who walked into a tavern of centaurs and called it a "hay bar".

So the afternoon passed with inconsequential conversation. By the time Garou returned to view the work, my stomach was growling for supper... which just goes to show what addle-coves stomachs can be, since I was not looking forward to forcing down more bulrushes and beetles. The boatman looked over my shoulder for a few moments, gave a soft sigh, and said, "I suppose it will do."

"It's an exact copy," Yasmin offered on my behalf.

"Close enough," Garou replied. I recognized the voice of a customer who doesn't want to sound too enthusiastic for fear the price goes up. "Have you decided where you want to go when the job is done?"

"Do any of us know anything about the gate-towns?" I asked the others.

"I know people in Plague-Mort," Miriam answered. "I've been there a couple of times."

"What's a Plague-Mort?" Hezekiah asked.

"Gate-town on the edge of the Abyss," Yasmin replied. "From what I've heard, it's a depraved and violent place to spend your time."

"No worse than a lot of neighborhoods in Sigil," Miriam protested. "And it has some first-rate taverns."

"Dens of iniquity?" Hezekiah asked hopefully.

"Dens, yes," Miriam said, "but I wouldn't use big words like iniquity there, unless you want your teeth shoved down your bone-box. A bunch of us from the Glass Spider had some fine nights in Plague-Mort."

"From the Glass Spider?" I choked.

"Sure," she replied. "One of the Spider's portals led straight to a Plague-Mort butcher shop."

"It seems to me," Yasmin said, "if there's a direct portal from the Spider to Plague-Mort, we should head someplace else. We don't want to make it easy for Rivi to find us."

“Rivi’s looking for us here,” Hezekiah piped up, coming to Miriam’s defense. “This Plague place is several planes away, right? She won’t suspect we’ve gone there.”

“True,” Yasmin admitted.

“And I know the lay of the town,” Miriam said. “I also met someone there, claimed she knew a portal from Plague-Mort to Sigil.”

“Was this someone you could trust?” I asked.

“Depends what you mean by trust,” Miriam replied. “Her name was November. Would I let her hold my jink-bag for a few days? No. But if I gave her a handful of gold, would she stay bought an hour or two? I think so. She showed me a license from the Arch-Lector authorizing her to ‘arrange divers services’ for visitors to town... which probably means she knows who to bribe to get things done. I know how bloods like November work—they peel your pennies every chance they get, but they won’t try to do you a slice-job.”

I had to admit I’d met the same sort of person, in Sigil and most other places I’d visited in the universe. If you wanted a room or a meal or some lamp oil, she’d escort you to an establishment that overcharged and slipped her a kickback under the table; but in exchange for wringing your purse dry, she’d honestly take good care of you. Then again, I’d met some not-so-honorable “city guides” too—the kind who smiled with helpfulness till nightfall, then led you straight into ambush. Usually, there was no way to distinguish the two types.

“We should go to the Plague place,” Hezekiah said with surprising firmness. “Anywhere else would be worse, right?”

Yasmin looked at me. I shrugged. “From everything I’ve heard, all the Lower Plane gate-towns are bad. If Miriam knows Plague-Mort and can find us a quick way back home... Garou, I assume you can ferry us to Plague-Mort?”

“The Styx does not touch on the Outlands anywhere near Plague-Mort,” the maraenoloth replied, “but I can take you to a portal which jumps to the town.”

“And you can supply us with a key to that portal?” Yasmin asked.

Garou smiled. I’ve never liked the sight of a smile on a fleshless face—it’s all in the mouth, without touching the eyes. “As it happens,” the boatman said, “the key to that particular portal is an open bleeding wound. I would be happy to supply you with an appropriate gash; but I suspect you’ll be spoilsports about that.”

A bleeding wound: just what you’d expect to open a portal in the Lower Planes. I shuddered and kept on painting.



The light never changed, the clouds never varied... but night fell.

Wheeze and Brother Kiripao emerged from the hut where they had been “negotiating”. They looked exhausted, and were deliberately vague about what had happened in the most recent discussions. “We learned how the umbrals think,” Kiripao said. “I have never... pondered such subjects before.” He refused to say anything else.

Wheeze looked worse and said nothing for the first few minutes in our company. After a while, he chose a moment when the others were engaged with trifling conversation and dragged himself close to me. His still-useless legs trailed along behind him through the mud.

“Honored Cavendish...” he murmured.

“Yes?”

“The umbrals have undeniable powers of persuasion.” He mopped his brow with the hem of his sleeve. “I told you they want us all to become ‘of one mind’. Do you know what that means?”

“Tell me.”

“We talk of ourselves... they talk, Kiripao and I talk. All together in a single hut. It becomes hard to breathe; their bodies take on a peculiar smell; the room darkens almost to blackness...”

“In other words,” I said, “there’s magic at work.”

“Perhaps.” The thought seemed new to him. “Perhaps magic. Perhaps the power of their thoughts. But there were times... times I felt I was losing myself. Becoming one of them.”

“Maybe that’s why they spend so much time over negotiations like this,” I suggested. “After all, how long does it take to agree on a simple selling price? But if this bargaining process is actually some kind of assimilation that takes three days to complete...”

“It could be,” Wheezle nodded. “I do not think I can withstand another day in that hut. By the end, I would be an umbral... mentally, if not physically.”

“Not to worry,” I assured him. “We’re getting out tonight: Garou will help us escape to Plague-Mort. Of course, Plague-Mort has risks of its own—”

“Please,” the gnome interrupted, holding up his hand. “I do not wish to hear about risks, honored Cavendish. If you believe this is our wisest course of action, so be it. As long as we leave tonight.”

I patted him on the shoulder. “We’re just waiting for the umbrals to go to sleep.”

But the umbrals showed no sign of sleeping. There were always a few of them sliding silently through the streets, though they had long ago abandoned their daytime activities of sculpting and harvesting beetles from the marsh. Even when I couldn’t see the fiends amidst the shadows under the trees, I could still feel their hollow eyes gazing at us from the pockets of darkness.

At last Miriam whispered the words that must have been on everyone’s mind. “Something’s up tonight. Maybe they suspect we’re trying to give them the laugh.”

“Impossible,” Kiripao answered immediately. “They cannot know our thoughts.”

I looked at him and wondered why he used that turn of phrase. Know our thoughts. Kiripao and Wheezle had been cloistered with the fiends most of the day, with the purpose of becoming one mind. Perhaps our monastic companion was steadfastly trying to deny something he secretly feared was true: that as umbral thoughts invaded his brain, some of his own thoughts bled into the fiends. They might have caught enough psychic vibrations to know we were jumping their cage tonight... which was why they now kept a peery eye on us.

Hezekiah turned to Garou, who was sitting watching me paint. I had already explained I would not finish the job until we’d reached some sort of safety; the marraenoloth was not pleased, but he wasn’t surprised either. “So little trust in the world,” he had sighed. Now he looked at Hezekiah and said, “What do you want?”

“Do you know what the umbrals are up to?” the boy asked.

“I believe they will hold a revel—in honor of negotiations with your group. They will dance, they will sing, they will play the pipes... all to make you feel at home, of course.”

He cracked a wicked smile at Kiripao and Wheezle. The elf quickly spun away to face the Styx, but the gnome simply stared, his face slowly turning ashen. In a strained voice, he finally said, "I do not think I can tolerate any sort of carousal. It might... overwhelm me."

I knew piking well what he meant. If he and Kiripao were in danger of being assimilated, the last thing they needed was an umbral orgy getting under their skins. Music, dance, perhaps debauchery... even in the absence of magic, those were powerful forces for establishing communal unity; and there would be magic at work too, I didn't doubt that.

In the heart of the village, fire blazed to life in the flame-pit: a fire that burned as scarlet as blood. "Isn't that interesting," Hezekiah said. "The wood here must have strange alchemical properties to burn such an odd color of red. Uncle Toby would be interested in—"

"Hush!" Wheezle snapped, the sharpest I'd ever heard him speak. That didn't bode well; the strain was already showing on his face.

And then the pipes began to play.

I couldn't see the pipers, let alone the pipes—the flame-pit was fifty paces away, too far to distinguish unmoving umbrals from normal shadows—but my ears were keen enough to identify the instruments as simple unreeded flutes, made from some wood like bamboo or rattan. A trio of the flutes played, weaving together three separate melody lines with a subtle dissonance that made my flesh crawl. Wheezle clapped his hands over his ears and began to whine softly. Kiripao just listened slack-jawed, as if he had lost the ability to move.

"We have to get out of here," Yasmin whispered to me.

"Don't rush your painting," Garou snapped. "I'll be very upset at a slapdash job."

"I'm just about done," I told him, then turned to Hezekiah. "Can you teleport yet?"

"Sure, I just needed some sleep," he replied. "What did you have in mind?"

"Jump from here to our hut, gather everyone's packs, then teleport back here."

"On my way," he nodded, but Yasmin stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Is it safe for him to teleport?" she asked me. "Remember the white dust."

"The dust doesn't affect psionics," I reminded her. "That's why Rivi wanted the grinders in the first place—the dust stops other people's magic but Rivi's own powers stay intact. Get going, Hezekiah."

The boy furrowed his brow, then winked out of existence without a sound. "I'll have to learn that someday," Miriam muttered.

Wheezle began panting. Yasmin wrapped her arms around him and tossed a meaningful look in my direction. I knew what that look meant: finish the painting fast.

Fortunately, I was close to the end. In fact, I'd been dragging things out over the past hour, waiting for the umbrals to slink off to bed. Three minutes would be enough to finish as much as I wanted to; I just hoped we had that much time.

Up at the flame-pit, someone started playing a drum: a soft pattering beat, like raindrops. Wheezle groaned. I dipped my brush into the paint and concentrated on not making mistakes.



Two minutes later, Hezekiah returned with our gear. By then, Yasmin was rocking

Wheeze like an infant, while he whimpered, “No... no...” A few paces away, Miriam stood beside Kiripao, ready to wrestle him to the ground if he took one step toward the center of the village; but the elf had not budged, simply blinking at the distant fire and swaying in time with the flutes.

“All right,” I said with a last swipe of the brush, “I’m done. Let’s go, Garou.”

“Are you mad?” the boatman asked. “We can’t put into the river till the paint dries.”

“The paint is more than a foot above the waterline,” I told him. “It will be perfectly all right if you keep the splashes to a minimum.”

“I shall not be the one to splash,” Garou replied. “Your companions, however, may choose to rock the boat.”

“Miriam,” I said without looking at her, “can you safety-proof our friend Kiripao?”

<THUD>, “Oof!”, <THUD>, “Oof!”, <THUD>.

“He’ll be quiet as a lamb now,” Miriam announced. She and Kiripao would no doubt debate the ethics of sucker-punches when the elf woke up, but that could wait.

“Put him in the boat,” I told her, “and let’s get out of here.”

Under Garou’s supervision, Hezekiah and Miriam eased the boat into the water, while Yasmin held Wheeze and I packed equipment. “Peel it away,” Wheeze muttered. “Peel away the shell.”

“What’s he talking about?” I said.

“Look,” Yasmin replied, nodding toward the fire in the center of the village.

The umbrals had begun to caper around the flames, a dance with slip-sliding shuffles and extravagant leaps through the blood-red fire itself. Back-lit by flames, one fiend stood motionless at the center of the dance, hissing the same words as Wheeze: “Peel it away. Peel away the shell.” Then the umbral reached up to its face, dug its talons into the skin of its cheeks, and raked down with all its strength.

The flesh fell away: ribbons of it, sloughing off in tatters. Beneath was something darker—pure shadow, the blackness that had been visible in the umbrals’ hollow eyes. Faster and faster the creature slashed at its skin, ripping away the dross and letting it pile up on the ground. Naked darkness emerged... still shaped like an umbral, but much harder to see, even silhouetted against the flames. The figure seemed to flicker with every move of the fire, blending into the shadows cast by the other dancers.

“Peel it away,” hissed a second umbral. “The shell, the shell...” And its claws sank into its face up to the quick.

“Sod me,” I thought; I was seeing the umbrals’ true form for the first time. The bodies they had previously worn were conveniences, garb for everyday. Now they had revealed their genuine selves: shadows of profane blackness, the stuff of nightmares.

“Peel it away,” Wheeze giggled. “Peel away the shell.”

His fat little hands reached up toward his face. I barely caught them in time; a moment later, and he would have raked out his eyes. “We have to get to the boat,” Yasmin shuddered. “Maybe if he can’t hear the music...”

It was awkward getting into the skiff, with Yasmin holding Wheeze, and me holding the gnome’s hands. The boat rocked precipitously on the greasy waters of the Styx; then Garou plunged his punting pole down to the river bottom to hold the craft steady. “If you’ve damaged my paint job...” he growled.

“My paint job,” I replied, “and I’ll fix it if I have to.” Looking around, I saw

Hezekiah and Miriam at the far end of the boat, arranging the unconscious Kiripao into a safe position. "Get us out of here," I said to Garou, as I struggled to keep Wheezle from clawing his face.

"One last thing," Garou replied. "You may think of the Lower Planes as a crude and vicious place, but manners are manners." He held up his head and shouted to the dancing umbrals, "Thanks for your hospitality. We're going now."

"You berk!" Miriam exploded. She lifted her fist but Hezekiah caught her arm. "You sodding, sodding berk!" she cried at the marraenoloth. "They'll come after us now... and we're sitting ducks out here on the water."

"That's what we get for making deals with evil," Yasmin muttered. She snatched up her sword and thrust the point a hair's breadth away from the boatman's face. "Get us out of here, Garou, or I swear you'll die before we do."

"You have your hands full already," he sneered, and nodded back toward the flame-pit.

Shadows were speeding toward us; shadows racing on scaled bat wings, vanishing into every pocket of shade beneath the trees as if they were winking out of existence. Their wings rustled like leaves on the clammy air—a hundred umbrals, stripped of their outward flesh, angry to be cheated by our escape.

I shouted to Hezekiah, "Take Wheezle," and heaved the gnome toward the far end of the skiff. There was no time to see if the boy managed to keep the Dustman from harming himself; I grabbed one of our packs from the floor of the boat and threw open the flap. "Garou," I snapped, "it may seem like fun to betray us, but remember I haven't finished the painting. You think you can find a painter like me anywhere else in the Lower Planes? One who won't try to pike you the way you're piking us?"

"Don't be so melodramatic," the boatman replied. "I'll get you out of here."

Languidly, he pushed off the bank with his pole. "Faster!" Miriam cried.

"And ruin my paint job? I think not." He planted the pole with extravagant slowness and gave a soft nudge. The boat moved inches forward, drifting into the river's sluggish current.

"Ten seconds before the fiends get here," Yasmin murmured to me. "Are you the sort of man who likes to hear mushy things before he dies?"

"I'll let you know if I come close to dying," I told her. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw the fiends were almost upon us: pure darkness, with teeth. "Chew on this!" I yelled, as I plucked a soul-gem from my pack and hurled it into their midst.

The rushing horde hissed like hot iron thrust into ice water. The three front-runners all fell back to catch the prize, colliding with the fiends racing up from behind. I heard a dull crunch, the sound of delicate wing-bones breaking in the tangle of bodies. A moment later, two fiends fell screeching out of the scrum, their wings trailing uselessly behind; they both caromed off the bank and into the water, where their caterwauling stopped abruptly.

Several more seconds passed as the mob of flying fiends fought over possession of the gem. At last, a victor shot away from the group, clutching the gem to its chest—the gem's purple light throbbing against the umbral's blackness. A few fiends broke off to pursue the one with the gem, but the rest turned back toward us and howled with fury.

"Yeah, yeah," Miriam growled back. Following my lead, she had fished out another

gem from our packs; now she hurled it full-force at the screaming fiends.

“Please don’t rock the boat, madam,” Garou chided.

“Please get the lead out of your sodding arse,” Miriam snapped back.

“Language, language,” Garou sighed. He gave another half-hearted push with his pole, sending us out a few more inches into the stream. The current angled the prow around and drew us forward, aiming us toward one of the pillars of mist hovering above the Styx. My guess was that each such cloud acted as a portal, opening to another part of the river on a different plane; even spurred by greed, umbrals would fear to follow us through... I hoped.

The struggle to claim Miriam’s gem ended after only a few seconds. No one’s wings broke; indeed, a few of the fiends ignored the gem entirely, circling around the other umbrals and continuing to pursue us. Did that mean they wanted to attack us more than they wanted to claim a gem? Or had they remembered we possessed many such gems, free for the picking if they managed to dump us in the Styx?

I had plucked up another gem and Yasmin had found one too; we threw simultaneously, aiming for the closest fiends. One fiend managed to catch a gem, and was immediately set upon by two others. The remaining gem was fumbled by clumsy-clawed hands and fell toward the river. Two fiends dove for it at full speed; they reached the gem simultaneously, clonked heads like a clown act, and plummeted the rest of the way into the water. A moment later they surfaced, sputtering and gasping. Both gripped the gem... and both stared at its purple glow as if they’d never seen such a thing before. There was no way to tell how much the water had affected their memories, but they goggled at the gem with obvious greed, like crows coveting a shiny bauble. Immediately, they began clawing and biting at each other, splashing showers of greasy water into the air.

“Peel it away,” Wheezy shouted. “Peel away the shell!”

“Britlin...” Hezekiah gasped, as he struggled to hold the gnome’s hands. “We’ve got more trouble.”

I glanced in his direction. At first, I couldn’t tell what Hezekiah was talking about; then I saw that Wheezy’s eyes had turned into hollow pits of blackness, as empty as the night sky. Nightmare eyes. Umbral eyes.

“He’s converting,” Yasmin said. “What do we do?”

“Keep throwing gems,” I answered. “Keep the fiends off our backs until we get into that mist.”

I nodded toward the closest bank of cloud, but Garou gave a low chuckle. “You’d be very upset if I took you through that one. There’s no air on the other side, and the temperature’s cold enough to freeze your eyeballs to ice cubes.”

“How do you know?” Miriam asked.

“It’s my business to know,” Garou replied. “We’re heading for that fog there.”

He pointed to another patch of mist, some fifty paces away. It seemed like a long distance with a swarm of fiends screaming for our blood; I wondered if Garou was stringing us along, taking pleasure in our fear. “Make it snappy,” I told him, “if you ever want your painting done.”

“Britlin!” Hezekiah cried again. “Hurry!”

Wheezy’s fingernails had begun to extend into claws, ripping at Hezekiah’s hands as

the boy tried to hold him still. The gnome hissed and growled, spitting out words like a snake spitting venom. “Peel, peel, peel! Peel away the shell!”

There was another soul-gem in my hand; perhaps that would pacify him. But when I dropped the gem in Wheezle’s lap, it only spurred him to greater exertions, screaming and foaming at the mouth. Bar that then—I grabbed the gem and threw it at an umbral flying less than two yards behind the boat. The fiend caught the gem, squealed in triumph, and sped away, three other fiends chasing him.

“I can’t help but think,” Yasmin said matter-of-factly, “that our visit has had a negative effect on this village’s sense of community.”

“Peel, peel, peel!” screeched Wheezle.

“I can’t hold him,” Hezekiah warned. The gnome’s claws had torn the boy’s hands bloody.

“Damn it,” I said. Poisonous umbral thoughts must be filling his mind completely. If only...

I froze. Desperate times call for desperate measures. My sword lay on the floorboards, ready to be snatched up if I needed to fight the fiends. I grabbed it now, dipped its tip into the Styx, and lifted it out again. Carefully, I moved the blade over Wheezle’s screaming face and let a single drop fall on his cheek.

He stopped shouting immediately. To be precise, he fell completely quiescent, as if he had plunged into a coma. Two seconds later, we passed through a pillar of mist and the rest of the world fell silent too—the hissing of umbrals, the splashes of fiends fighting in the water, all vanished in a trice.

We emerged into a bleak expanse of gray.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



THREE PLANES + ⊕ PLAGUE-MORT

a mournful lack of color, like a muted winter's day when the snow falls somberly from dawn to dusk. The land was equally bleached of anything to please the eye: nothing but dying willows and poplars, their leaves white, their bark black, all drooping limply along the shores of the Styx. Gray mold fuzzed over the soil, stifling any chance for grass to struggle up into the light... but I wondered if even grass would have the heart to grow in such a cheerless world.

THE SKY HAD

“The Gray Wastes,” Garou announced... as if any of us needed to be told.

In the Walk of Worlds at the Sigil Festhall, the Gray Wastes were portrayed in dignified shades of silver, with soft enchanted mists draping demurely over the entire scene. It was a popular room for elderly lovers, dancing with unhurried composure to the slow music that plays continuously.

But there was no music in the real Gray Wastes. I doubt if you could find lovers of any age, and unhurried composure would quickly degrade into dejected lassitude. The oppressive gloom of gray trees/gray land could deflate the most confident of spirits.

“Lovely day,” Garou said, inhaling deeply.

He had no reason to inhale. Admittedly, the plane offered breathable air, but it was completely devoid of smell. No odor came from the trees, the moss, the oily river water... I sniffed at my own skin, damp with the sweat of exertion and fear; but I couldn't smell the slightest hint of perspiration. In a way, it was worse than going blind.

“How's Wheezle?” I asked loudly, to force my mind onto other thoughts.

“Better,” Hezekiah replied. The gnome's hands had reverted to normal, the claws shrinking as quickly as they had grown. His eyes looked like gnome eyes, watery and brown, not empty hollows in his face. The single drop of Styx water had made Wheezle forget all that had happened to him among the umbrals, had purged his mind of their influence; the only question was, how much more of his memory had it stolen?

“See if you can wake him up,” I told the boy.

Hezekiah gave the gnome's cheek a few light pats, and said, “Come on, Wheezle. Wake up, come on.”

Wheezle stirred. His eyelids fluttered and his gaze focused on Hezekiah. “Who are you?” he asked.

“You remember me—Hezekiah Virtue.”

“Ah.” Wheezy’s voice sounded polite, but dubious. “Who are all you other people? Why can’t I move my legs?”

Garou laughed. “Think of the positive side: at least he still remembers how to talk.”



As closely as we could figure, Wheezy had lost a year of his life: a year of unreclaimable experience vanished like smoke. To a Sensate, stealing those memories was a hideous crime; I cringed with guilt at the thought. Certainly, splashing him with that drop of water prevented him from turning into an umbral... but I felt as if I should have found some less destructive way to help him.

My father would have thought of something.

Garou poled on past the silent gray banks, as the others explained to Wheezy what had happened. He took it calmly, for the most part; he even thanked me for saving him. His voice, however, had nothing in it but formality, good manners without warmth... and his hands were continually straying down to his useless legs, pinching the skin as if he could not accept that he would live paralyzed all the rest of his days.

Wheezy lapsed into silence soon enough; and the rest of us found we could think of nothing to say to each other. The gray quiet pressed in around us, muffling emotion as well as sound. It was actually a relief when Kiripao woke and grabbed Miriam by the front of her shirt... but his anger evaporated almost immediately into a slump of exhaustion that laid him down on the floorboards.

“Are you all right?” Hezekiah asked.

“I’m tired,” Kiripao answered softly.

“If your mind is full of umbral thoughts,” Hezekiah pressed on, “Britlin has found a cure.”

“Yes?” Kiripao did not sound hopeful.

“It’s only a last resort,” I said. “Why don’t you sleep for a while? Now that we’re clear of Carceri, the umbral influence should fade.”

Kiripao didn’t answer. He closed his eyes, but I could tell he was nowhere near sleeping.



Time passed like an old man on weary legs. This stretch of the river had its share of misty patches, but Garou steered around them. Once I came close to asking him how much longer we’d have to travel through this soul-wearying plane; but the effort of opening my mouth seemed too great to bother.

Yasmin leaned back against me, her head settling against my chest. The feel of her there was a comfort; I wrapped my arms loosely around her, and after a while, the warm solidity of her body eased some of the dissipated melancholy weighing down my heart. Touching me must have had the same bolstering effect on her, because after a while she found the strength to ask Garou, “How much longer here?”

The boatman’s eyes grew a deeper black, just for a second. In that moment, I had a flash of insight: that Garou was toying with us again, just as he had alerted the umbrals to our departure out of sheer malignant whim. Garou wanted us to succumb to the dreary oblivion of this place, the dull ache of its emptiness... not because he planned to rob us, sell us into slavery, or otherwise exploit the erosion of our wills, but simply because he liked to see us miserable. Suffering for suffering’s sake: just to know he had the power to

get under our skins.

“Yes,” I said loudly to him, “are we going to hang around this boring place much longer? It’s putting me to sleep.”

Garou let out an angry snort and stabbed his pole into the water. “If you’re so impatient,” he replied, “perhaps we’ll take a short-cut.”

With a ferocious shove, he sent the skiff veering into a patch of mist we had almost passed by. The fog thickened around us until I couldn’t see Yasmin’s head still pressed against my chest; then the clouds wisped away and we were somewhere else.



Open water spread without end beneath a jet black sky. There were no stars, but three moons, all of them full—a white moon, a silver one, and a moon of frosted green, each lunar face pocked and ravaged with craters. The moons cast enough light to provide a clear view around us: the waters of the Styx, as foul and fetid as ever, streaming out like a malodorous black stripe across an otherwise crystal sea. Two paces away the sea water glistened with the dappling of moonlight, as calm as a windless lake. The sight made me yearn for a swim in the soft, beckoning waters; but even as I tried to touch the cleanness beyond the polluted path of the Styx, a body bobbed to the surface.

The body was naked and female, possibly human... but it was difficult to be sure, given the bloat of the corpse, plus the damage done by fish and eels. The woman’s ears were completely eaten away; the fingers were simply bones held together by gristle, and the cheeks were both torn open into ragged holes. As I watched, a delicate silver pilchard darted in through one of the cheek cavities, bit into the dead woman’s tongue, and tried to wrestle away a piece of pink meat.

I had to look away. When I did, I saw other bodies drifting up out of the sea, as if our arrival had loosed them all from some confinement fathoms below. Each corpse was tattered with bite marks; each belly was swollen with the gases of decay.

“A pocket in the Astral Plane,” Garou said. “The Sea of the Drowned.”

But Yasmin looked at the woman closest to us and whispered, “Mother.”



The woman’s half-eaten eyelids opened. I saw now that her eyes had a tiefling cast: blood-red and feline, with no discernible whites. She did not move a muscle, but her body circled on some undetectable current until her face was focused on Yasmin. “I have been recognized,” she said, in a breathy voice that released the stink of gases from her gut. “What do you ask?”

“Nothing,” Yasmin answered immediately. “I don’t want anything from you. Go away.”

“What do you ask?” the woman said again. Her breath fouled the air like sewage.

“I told you, I don’t need anything. I don’t want to talk to you.” Yasmin snatched up her sword, though the body was floating just too far to reach. “Go back wherever you came from.”

“Impossible,” the dead woman said. “I have been recognized. What do you ask?”

“I ask you to get out of my sight!” Yasmin’s voice was becoming shrill. “Now!”

“That is not within my power,” the floating corpse replied. “What do you ask?”

Yasmin balled her hands into fists and covered her eyes. I put an arm around her shoulder and growled at Garou, “What’s this all about?”

For a moment he didn't answer, perhaps debating whether the truth would cause us more pain than ignorance. Then he said, "Nothing truly dies in the multiverse. When a soul is killed in one place, it is merely re-embodied on another plane... but with no memory of its former existence."

"Any leatherhead knows that," Miriam muttered.

"But if the memories are gone, where do they go?" Garou asked. "They can't just vanish—the multiverse doesn't let anything slip through its fingers so easily. Every dying person's memory drifts like flotsam on unseen tides, until it fetches up in a holding basin like this one. Here lie the remembrances of all those drowned on a million worlds. I could show you other such memory sinks: the Poisoned Jungle, the Plain of Knives—"

"What do you ask?" interrupted the floating corpse.

"Why does she keep saying that?" Yasmin whispered.

"The memories are drawn to those who knew their owners in life," Garou replied. "If you recognize and name them, they are compelled to reveal a secret to you. Your mother—or rather, the cast-off memory of your mother—will not rest until she has discharged this burden."

"What do you ask?" the dead woman said. She spoke in a monotone, devoid of emotion; yet I suspected she would follow us the length of the Styx until we had let her disclose something of her past.

"Ask her anything," I told Yasmin in a low voice. "If you don't have an important question, ask something trivial. What she had for breakfast the day she died."

But Yasmin wasn't listening. She simply stared at the floating woman, an unreadable expression on her face. Yasmin had never spoken to me of her mother, nor revealed a word about her childhood... but then, we'd had so little time to talk. Anyway, a child may have a hundred hard questions to ask her mother, and be afraid of every answer.

Yasmin licked her lips. "Who..." She cleared her throat. "Who was my father?"

The corpse sighed. I could almost see the air thicken with the bilious smell of corruption from her guts. "Your father was a man, a human man," the woman said. "For the week we were together, he called himself Rudy Liagar. But later, much later, I saw him from a distance in the streets of Sigil; and every tongue chanted admiration for the hero, Niles Cavendish."

Without hesitation, the corpse disappeared once more beneath the clear moonlit water. I would have sold my soul for her to leave ten seconds earlier.



"It could be a lie, couldn't it?" Hezekiah said, when no one else spoke. "Some kind of demonic trick..."

His voice trailed away. Even a Clueless boy knew when he was grasping at straws.

Still, Yasmin turned to me with a fierce look in her eyes. "Tell me it is a lie, Britlin."

I couldn't meet her gaze. All I could say was, "My father was a hero, not a saint. I know he had other women: mostly short-lived romances during his adventures, but a few dalliances in Sigil too. It always made me so sick at heart, but... never mind. I usually didn't know the women. One of them might have been your mother; but by all the gods, Yasmin, I never suspected... if I ever suspected..."

Could I say it would have made a difference? It made a difference now, yes, with Yasmin staring at me in horror; but still, the sight of her, the brown skin of her

shoulders, the flow of her body... could I have resisted her on mere suspicion?

"It's possible," I sighed. "It's very possible. What else can I say?"

Miriam made a spitting sound. "How about saying, 'Who the hell cares?' I've been watching you two; I have eyes. And the way I see it, people should play things for themselves, and pike the rest of the world. Why should fathers and mothers matter? The past is past, and bloody good riddance. Seize the present, make it yours, however you want. It's your own hearts that matter, and sod all else."

None of us said anything in reply. Garou laughed and continue to pole past the silent floating bodies.



The skiff was moving swiftly at last. Our marraenoloth boatman had no more reason to dawdle; he had hurt us and was happy. Soon we entered another spume of fog, leaving behind the haunted moonlight and coming out under a swollen red sun. A wash of heat struck our faces, like stepping into the Great Foundry when the furnaces blazed their brightest. In seconds, sweat was dribbling profusely down my forehead.

The banks of the Styx rose high on either side of us, twenty feet tall and made of dusty red clay. Much of the bank was covered with bramble, a thick brush reminiscent of Sigil's omnipresent razor-vine; but in spots, recent earthslides had left patches of bare dirt, now squirming with ants and beetles. Fossilized bones poked out from the soil, all of them blood-red, of no recognizable species. A skull with three fat horns protruded some distance over the water... and each horn ended in a screaming skeletal face.

"The uppermost level of the Abyss," Garou announced, "called the Plain of Infinite Portals. We're not far from a portal that can take you to Plague-Mort."

"And you'll show us which that is, right?" Hezekiah said.

"All part of the service." The boatman bowed mockingly.

The river soon widened and the banks fell away, to reveal a desert of rusty gravel and stone. Here and there, pools of molten metal dotted the landscape, sizzling with bright orange heat; their shores were scattered with lumps of glowing lava, spat out by the pools as subterranean gases belched up to the surface. I could see no lifeforms larger than insects moving amidst this desolation, but I was sure bigger game lurked out of sight—creatures that could eat our party and wash it down with a slurp of liquid iron.

"Just your typical homey hell," I said aloud; and I huddled myself sullenly on my chosen thwart of the boat, refusing to gawk at the infernal scenery. As a Sensate, maybe I should have tried seeking out ever more sulfurous fumes to sniff, or strained my ears to hear the wailing of the damned... but frankly, I wasn't in the mood for such melodramatic fizz-fazz. I'd seen lava before. I'd tasted iron-contaminated dust. For a while, let the world rot on without my active participation.



Garou put in at the base of a ruined bridge: a construction of pure white marble that seemed to have dropped in from the Upper Planes by some fluke of magic. Local citizens had obviously taken offense at the arrival of such a pristine celestial object, and demolished the central span—fallen chunks of marble congested the river below, raising doubt whether we could sail our way past. However, it appeared we didn't need to; Garou pointed up the bank and said, "There's your portal."

We all looked. Hezekiah was the first to say, "I don't see anything."

Garou chuckled, in a tone I had come to dread. “It’s up there, my esteemed passengers. Do you recall I said the key was an open wound? Go up there bleeding, and see what happens.”

“How addle-coved do you think we are?” Yasmin demanded.

But Hezekiah had the required addle-coved look in his eye, the kind that was seconds away from volunteering. The boy took a moment to look over at Miriam; and I realized he wanted to show her how brave he was. The truth clicked for Miriam too. Before Hezekiah had a chance to speak, she hopped from the boat and growled, “Wait here, you berks.”

“You’ll need this,” I said, holding out my sword. She stared at it a moment, then swiped her finger along one edge of the blade, opening an inch-long cut. Her expression didn’t change as she squeezed the edges of the incision to force out a line of blood. Then she slapped the blade out of her way and walked away from the river, with an obvious stiffness to her gait. I suspected Miriam hadn’t made many sacrificial gestures in her life, and she was floundering in self-consciousness trying to pull this one off.

Hezekiah hopped out of the boat himself, with every sign of following Miriam into whatever nasty surprise awaited. Yasmin grabbed him by the shirt-tail and held him back; but she stepped out on land too, and unlimbered her sword in case she had to run to the rescue. In short order, we were all poised on the bank, weapons ready for action.

Now that we were on our feet, we had enough height to see a large carcass lying on the sandy red dirt, about forty paces inland from the Styx. The dead thing might have been an elephant before the scavengers got to it, but it was hard to tell now. Dozens of carrion-eaters had already eaten their fill, and now it was the turn of the flies, buzzing all over the corpse as they chewed inroads through its leathery hide. When Miriam approached, the buzzing increased; like sharks, the flies could smell her blood from many paces away. I tightened my grip on the pommel of my sword, and offered up a prayer to any friendly powers who might be listening—if those flies went for her, we’d have a sod of a time getting them off.

No sooner had the thought entered my mind than it came true.

As a single mass, the flies lifted off the carcass and swarmed Miriam, roaring. Flies covered her face like a buzzing hairy-legged veil; they clotted her clothes and tangled themselves blackly in her hair. The densest concentration, however, attached themselves to her hand, to the finger with the bleeding cut. They teemed there by the hundreds, a thickening ball of insects the size of a massive beehive. Their weight dragged Miriam down to her knees... and I could imagine the ones closest to the wound jostling each other to attach their filthy sucker mouths for a sip of human blood.

“We have to save her!” Hezekiah cried, taking a step forward.

Wheeze, lying on the ground at the boy’s feet, grabbed the leg of Hezekiah’s pants. “Wait, honored Clueless. If this were a true feeding frenzy, the flies would have flayed her to the bone in the blink of an eye. She is still alive; wait.”

Miriam was so carpeted with flies, I couldn’t tell how Wheeze knew she still had flesh on her skeleton... but perhaps Dustmen have an instinct that can sense life and death. I stared at her fly-laden body, trying to discern any sign of a living woman beneath the buzzing mass; and as I watched, a few flies struggled out of the clump on her hand and soared into the air.

The flies were glowing red, like blood-colored sparks.

Moment by moment now, more of the insects were taking their leave, all of them blazing the same color. They flew a short distance, then simply stopped and hovered... until enough of them had taken position to show they were arranging themselves in an arch. A red-glowing arch.

"A gate of flies," Kiripao murmured. His voice betrayed an unhealthy tone of rapture. Clearly though, he was right. As more flies tasted Miriam's blood, they too joined the arch, filling in a parabolic curve that shimmered with buzzing power. Other flies, still clinging to Miriam's body, flapped their wings in unison, raising enough wind to spin up dust-devils in the surrounding red sand. They didn't have the strength to lift a full-grown woman into the air and fly her through the portal; but they generated sufficient force to propel Miriam forward, still on her knees and blinded by so many insects on her face.

At the very last moment the flies scattered away from her, swarming off her skin and clothes, giving her one last push toward the glimmering arch. Miriam toppled forward, head and chest crossing the line. Immediately, they vanished into darkness beyond; a moment later, the rest of her body was sucked through, as if some monster had grabbed her by the arms and was dragging her away.

"Well, that was amusing," Garou said with a raspy chuckle. Standing beside him, Hezekiah tried to punch the boatman in the jaw; but Garou caught the fist in his own hand and squeezed until the boy grimaced with pain. "You're amusing too," Garou laughed. He shoved the fist away, and Hezekiah backed off, nursing his knuckles.

"We have to do something," Hezekiah muttered to the rest of us.

"Wait a second longer, honored Clueless," Wheezy told him. "The honored thug-lady—"

"Miriam," Hezekiah interrupted. "Her name is Miriam."

Wheezy dipped his head, as much of a bow as he could manage in his condition. "Your honored Miriam may well..."

The flies, mostly quiet for the past few seconds, suddenly burst into a thunderous buzz. The hovering archway, still intact, darkened again; and this time I could see that the other side wasn't complete blackness, but simply a normal night sky, scattered with clouds. Miriam emerged from the darkness, her face fly-specked, but definitely in one piece.

A very angry piece, I might add.

"Garou!" she roared, loud enough to be heard over the din of buzzing flies. "You're going for a swim, you berk!"

The boatman curled his fleshless grin at the rest of us. "Cherished friends, if you'd be so good as to prevent your comrade from rash action..."

"Oops," said Yasmin, "my boots are all dusty." She bent down and busied herself picking invisible flecks of dirt from the black dragon skin.

"Sorry," I smiled at Garou, "I have to finish that last painting." I picked up a brush and made a show of cleaning the bristles.

Garou looked nervously at the approaching Miriam, much closer now and still furious. "I brought you all to a perfectly respectable gate," he stammered. "It leads to Plague-Mort and you can see this woman is unhurt..."

"You should have warned her about the flies," Hezekiah said. The boy stepped back

to give Miriam a clear path to the boatman.

“A swim should not harm you,” Wheezy added. “Your kind are immune to the Styx, are they not? Unlike the rest of us.”

“Make him suffer,” Kiripao murmured softly to no one in particular. “Make him wriggle with fear. Come from the shadows, come from the night...”

“Hush,” Wheezy told the elf.

“I can defend myself,” Garou told Miriam in a cracked voice. “I have powers beyond your mortal ken.” He lifted his hands in something that might turn into a mystic gesture.

“Naughty, naughty,” I said. In my hands was the salt grinder. A moment later, Garou was covered with white dust. “If you try any magic now,” I told him, “you’ll really regret it.”

He tried anyway. He howled in pain as the dust briefly flared with heat. And that was about the time Miriam grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and heaved his flailing body into the river.

The splash was magnificent.



Garou came up spluttering. The dunking hadn’t washed off much of the dust—I doubt if Styx water can make anything clean—so there were patches of white caked wetly all over his head. “You’ll regret this,” he coughed. “You have earned the enmity of the marraenoloth race...”

“Why?” Yasmin snapped back. “You set a price for transporting us here. We paid it. And for all the other services you’ve done us—alerting the umbrals to our escape, showing me my mother, feeding Miriam to the flies without warning her—well, we’ve paid you for those too. And a damned low price too, considering. You’ll dry soon enough. How soon do you think Wheezy will get his memory back?”

Garou dragged himself onto the bank and lay there glowering. A sweep of sand clung to his wet clothes, forming a crusty red layer over the dusty white one. “My anger is not so easily calmed,” he rasped.

“You aren’t looking at this the right way,” Hezekiah said. He squatted over the dripping boatman, much closer to the Styx water than I would have dared. “Back in my hometown,” the boy told him, “people were constantly throwing me into the river too. It was just their way of being friendly... you know, smearing your face with swineberries, pulling down your pants in public, pelting you with horse apples... it’s all in fun. Like I’m sure when you yelled good-bye to the umbrals, you were just playing a joke, right?”

Garou looked up at Miriam, who happened to be cracking her knuckles meaningfully. “Yes, a joke,” the boatman answered hurriedly.

“And throwing you in the Styx was the same kind of joshing around,” Hezekiah said. “Miriam’s way of being friendly. We’re all friends now.”

“Absolutely,” Garou nodded. “Just high-spirited monkeyshines.”

“He fears us,” Kiripao whispered to me. “The dust has robbed him of his power, and he grovels before our strength.”

“We aren’t so strong ourselves,” I whispered back. “Keep quiet.” In a louder voice, I said, “Now that there are no more bad feelings... Miriam, what’s on the other side of that portal?”

“Rich Man’s Row in Plague-Mort,” she answered, still glaring at Garou but restrain-

ing her fists. “I recognized the street. It’s night there now; a bit cold for my tastes, but nothing unnatural. The town looked pretty quiet.”

“You see?” Garou asked. “I kept my part of the bargain.”

“That’s why I only threw you in the drink,” Miriam told him, “instead of feeding you your ears.”

“Then let me finish my part of the deal,” I said, “and we can get out of here. I’ve had enough of the Lower Planes for a while.”

The others fanned out in a watchful circle as Garou beached the skiff and I went to work with the paints. Hezekiah held Wheezele in his arms, ready to dash for safety if the need arose; and Yasmin stayed close beside Kiripao in case Brother Elf broke into more umbral babbling. Kiripao certainly had the twitches, hearing sounds and smelling odors the rest of us couldn’t detect... but Yasmin reined him in with a gentle hand on his arm, and nothing unfortunate happened.

From time to time, I glanced in her direction. She wouldn’t meet my eye.



It took me ten minutes to finish the last painting. My nerves were on edge the whole time—this was, after all, the Abyss, filled with some of the most hellish creatures in the multiverse—but apart from a green-fire explosion many miles away, we saw no sign of trouble. I took my time to get the final face right, did some touch-up on the other faces, then pronounced the work done. Garou wasted another five minutes on close scrutiny of each grieving figure, but that was expected; I had already sized him up as a customer who would love to find fault if it existed, but not the kind who invents last-minute changes just to impose his stamp on the artist’s work (like a dog, urinating on a stick to make it smell more like himself). The faces I had painted were exact copies of the ones on the other side of the boat... and eventually, Garou had to admit it.

“Acceptable,” he said grudgingly. The boatman bowed a fraction of an inch, and in a formal voice recited, “Britlin Cavendish of Sigil, there is no bad will between us.”

I supposed that was a ritual farewell among his people. For a moment I considered giving him my business card, in case he or his fellow marraenoloths had work for me in future. Then my gaze lighted on that picture of the man who reminded me of my father; and I decided I could do without such employment.

“Good-bye, Garou,” I told him. “Safe journeys.”

But he was already putting his skiff back into the Styx. Within seconds, he had disappeared into another pillar of mist.



Slowly, our group trudged away from the river. The archway of flies was gone; the insects, no longer glowing, had returned to picking apart the elephant carcass. They buzzed lethargically as they sucked at the leathery hide.

Wheezele cleared his throat. “It seems we must open the gate again.”

“Count me out,” Miriam snapped. “I refuse to be smothered by bugs twice in one day.”

“We could draw lots...” Yasmin said, with an obvious lack of enthusiasm.

“Don’t you dare,” I told her. “Treats like this should be savored by those who appreciate them.”

And in the next minute, a million flies gave me an experience I shall not easily forget.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



THREE HOURS OF AUTUMN NIGHT

wind thrust me onto the cobblestoned streets of Plague-Mort. I landed on my knees, just short of an open sewer that was surprisingly empty of slops; water running at the bottom of the ditch showed that it must have rained here recently. The air had a just-washed cleanness to it, touched with the bittersweet fragrance of woodsmoke. As Miriam had said, the night was cool: an autumnal chill, as if the land had grown tired of life and longed for winter's oblivion.

A FLY-SPAWNED

Footsteps sounded behind me. I turned to see Kiripao pounce onto the street, followed more warily by Yasmin and the others emerging into this plane of reality. The portal they used was simply the doorway of a house—a house whose windows had been broken and whose walls had been vandalized with the word *Traitor!* written in red paint. The woodsmoke smell came from inside, and suddenly the odor didn't seem so dreamily nostalgic.

Hezekiah sniffed, then turned toward the house. "Fire?" he asked, looking around at the rest of us to see if we smelled it too. The boy took a step toward the closest broken window, and said, "Maybe we should check if everything's all right."

Miriam placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Whatever happened, it's over now. Anyway, this is Plague-Mort; don't borrow other people's problems."

"But if someone is in trouble..."

"No," she told him. "This is Rich Man's Row, Kid, the closest thing this town has to a Nob Hill." That in itself said volumes about Plague-Mort, I thought. The houses, even the ones untouched by vandals, exhaled an air of decrepitude. Roofs sagged; cement footings were riddled with dark gummy cracks. "The people who live here," Miriam went on, "can pay for protection against normal cross-traders and bub-heads... which means if a house like this gets smashed open, the Arch-Lector was behind the job."

"What's an Arch-Lector?" Hezekiah asked.

"A fancy title for the head thug," Miriam replied. "In a slumtown like Plague-Mort, you can't just call yourself king. Rulers need chi-chi titles: 'Viscount' or 'Rajah' or 'Holder of the Sacred Sphere'. All comes to the same thing, though—the guy who tells his soldiers to break down your door if you've got something he wants. Whoever lived in this house had a pretty wife, or a fast horse, or maybe just one piece of gold too many. Tonight, the Arch-Lector decided to claim it for himself... and unless you want to fight the local army, you'll mind your own business."

“But the army isn’t here anymore!” Hezekiah protested. “They’ve taken what they want, right? And if someone here is hurt and needs our help...”

He didn’t bother finishing his sentence, as if it was obvious we should dash to the rescue. I thought, Father would have dashed in too; and he’d save the life of a beautiful woman who’d be boundlessly grateful... the berk.

“Miriam,” I said softly, “how long before the looters come?”

“At least a day,” she answered. “Even the greediest knight of the post keeps clear of the Arch-Lector.”

I nodded. “Then for a day, this house could be a safe bolt-hole.”

“Sure,” she admitted, “provided the Arch-Lector doesn’t come back in the morning to finish cleaning the place out.”

“We can post a watch,” Wheezy suggested. “If the soldiers return, they will make no effort at secrecy. They have had their fun with the first attack, ripping whoever lived here out of their beds.” The gnome looked at the broken windows, the smashed-in doors. “If the soldiers left any corpses in there, perhaps we could offer the proper obsequies...”

“In Plague-Mort,” Miriam muttered, “the only last rites are cleaning out a deader’s pockets.” But she didn’t stop the Clueless boy from heading inside.



Hezekiah went through the door. If he’d had an open wound, he would have ended up back in the Abyss—the door was a portal, and blood was the key. However, the lucky sod had survived the last few days without so much as a paper cut, so he entered the house without incident. The rest of us went through a smashed-in window, stepping down on splinters of broken glass that crunched under the soles of our boots. Rats skittered away from the noise; in Plague-Mort, even the vermin watched their backs.

Hezekiah sped toward the back of the house while Kiripao bounded up the stairs to the top floor. Sighing, the rest of us split up to keep the two of them out of mischief... and I noticed that Yasmin waited for me to head after Hezekiah before she chose to follow Kiripao.

Anything to avoid me.

The house was dark, and we dared not light a lantern that might be seen from the street. Miriam and I stumbled through the front room waiting for our eyes to adjust to the dimness. All of the furniture had been demolished, as well as a collection of china that had once been displayed on plate-rails around the ceiling. The carpet smelled of urine; I supposed that had to be blamed on the soldiers, determined to despoil every inch of the house... but I could not picture men doing such a thing.

Miriam noticed me sniffing at the odor. “Hounds,” she said in a low voice. “The Arch-Lector’s troops call themselves the Hounds. Sometimes they go out of their way to act like dogs.”

“Charming,” I murmured. “If I head into town I’ll carry a bucket of water, in case one goes for my leg.”



The back half of the house contained the kitchen and servants’ quarters... although in Plague-Mort, those “servants” might actually be slaves. There was no way to determine their status looking at their rooms now—after the Hounds had smashed, slashed and thrown around slops, who could tell if these were the cozy quarters of valued

retainers or the squalid pens of chattel? Whatever the servants might have been, they were gone now. In the darkness of the house, I couldn't tell if those smears on the kitchen wall were blood or perhaps just gravy; but there were no bodies here, living or dead.

"The smoke is coming from the basement," Hezekiah whispered in a low voice. He had just opened a door at the rear of the kitchen, showing steps that descended into blackness. Dank air seeped up from below.

"Can you see down there?" I asked. As a half-elf, Hezekiah had better-than-human eyes when it came to poking around in the dark.

"There's a tiny bit of light," he said, taking a few steps down. "Yes, over in the corner: the remains of a fire."

I ventured warily down the stairs after him. In the blackness, I could just make out the dull glow of embers, maybe twenty paces away. The smell of smoke was strong down here, and suddenly that struck me as odd. The Hounds hadn't lit fires elsewhere in the house—they probably had orders from the Arch-Lector not to burn a valuable property (and half the neighborhood with it). Why had they chosen to torch a small corner of the cellar, and left the blaze untended? Were they afraid of something that had been here?

"Be careful," I whispered to Hezekiah ahead of me. "Something isn't right."

"There's nothing down here," he replied, approaching the glowing coals. "I'd be able to see the body heat of any warm-blooded creature."

"That still leaves cold-blooded..."

At that instant, a gigantic snake rose amidst the remains of the fire. Hundreds of silvery spines lined its back, each spine edged like a razor. The serpent lifted itself a full six feet into the air, hissing with rage... and in the dim light, I could have sworn its head was that of a human woman.

Hezekiah gave an incoherent yell, and suddenly disappeared: the Clueless little berk had teleported away, and this time he'd forgotten to take me. "Nice snakey," I murmured in what I hoped was a soothing voice. "I'm not with those other guys. What did they do, set you on fire? They're scum, but I'm not like that."

All through this speech, I was slowly moving my hand to the pommel of my sword; but I froze when the snake spoke in a gentle female voice. "Please help me, good sir," she said. And then her upraised body toppled forward, slumping flat across the burning coals.



A moment later, Hezekiah reappeared behind me. "Sorry," he whispered. "I jumped by reflex." The boy glanced down at the snake lying across the embers and said, "Looks like you didn't need my help."

"I need it now," I told him. "We have to get her away from that fire."

"Are you nuts?" Hezekiah asked. "Sorry... barmy?"

"Just give me a hand, would you?"

Despite his misgivings, the boy followed me toward the snake. She seemed unconscious now... which might have been a blessing, given the burning coals under her torso. I stepped into the simmering ring, ignoring the smell of singed leather as my boots began to smolder. Putting my hands under the snake was out of the question, because of the bed of embers; but I could squeeze the sides of her body enough to lift her off the ground, and

then get an arm underneath for support.

She was about nine feet long and heavy—two hundred pounds of solid muscle—but between us, Hezekiah and I wrestled her away from the fire and up the darkened stairs. Scaly skin flaked off liberally in our hands. I hoped this was normal reptilian shedding, but feared it was actually burned tissue ripping away from her body.

Grunting and panting up the last few steps, Hezekiah gulped, “Uncle Toby... says snake-meat... tastes like chicken. Is that why we’re... Britlin, look at its head!”

Enough starlight filtered through the dirty kitchen windows to show what had astonished the boy. The snake did have a human head: the face of a girl about twelve years old, soft and vulnerable, with delicate green skin and long hair of burnished gold. True, she had two sharp fangs protruding from her mouth; but they didn’t negate the sweet gentleness of the rest of her features.

“What is she?” Hezekiah breathed.

“A naga,” I said, “one of the snake-people. I’ve met a few adults in Sigil, but never one this young. She’s just past her first molt; while they’re children, their heads don’t look human at all.”

“What’s she doing here?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps she was a pet... or a slave. They’re as smart as most humans, and have magic abilities. If you got hold of an infant and raised her as a member of the family, she could become a powerful asset.” I laid a hand on her cheek; the flesh was cold, but I could feel her breath on my fingers. “At least she’s still alive.”

“But what do we do with her?” The question came from Miriam who stood in the kitchen doorway. I didn’t know where she’d been for the past few minutes; possibly rummaging through other rooms in search of removable goods.

“We treat her kindly,” I replied. “Some naga breeds are innately malicious, but most are quite civilized.”

“She’s still a snake,” Miriam grumbled, as if anything else was irrelevant.

“Who’s a snake?” Yasmin asked, coming in with Wheezle in her arms.

“Her.” I pointed. Even in the dim light, I could see Yasmin’s eyes grow bigger.

“She is a snake,” Yasmin admitted.

“And she’s waking up,” Hezekiah said.

The naga’s eyelids fluttered and a soft moan escaped her lips. Miriam tensed and Hezekiah backed away; but I stayed put, hoping she was too ladylike (and too weak) to use those wicked fangs.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“Friends,” I told her. “My name is Britlin.”

“My egg name is Zeerith,” she replied. “I must choose a tooth name soon, but... I apologize. I’m so tired.”

“What happened here, Zeerith?” Yasmin asked gently.

“Men came,” the naga answered. “I don’t know why. I had been downstairs for a day, enduring my... transformation. The family was very kind, giving me privacy—since they found me outside town, they have always been kind.” She blinked, and a tear beaded in the corner of one eye. “Can you tell me what happened to them?”

“Nothing good,” Miriam muttered.

“I fear she is right, honored snakeling,” Wheezle said. “We have searched the house

and found it empty. One can always hope—”

“Not in Plague-Mort,” Miriam cut him off.

Zeerith closed her eyes. The lingering tear spilled down her cheek. “This is not a happy town,” she murmured. Opening her eyes again, she said, “The soldiers thought I was an ordinary snake. They were cowardly men, too fearful to approach and see what I was.”

“Count yourself lucky,” I told her. “If they realized the truth, you wouldn’t be here now.”

“Perhaps not,” Zeerith nodded. “As it was, they simply lit burning sticks, then threw them at me until I played dead.”

“Played dead!” Miriam snorted. “I thought nagas could cast magic.”

“I do not know what I can do,” Zeerith answered. “I am virtually new-born. As the men pelted me with fire, I was still in the final stages of molt. I... pardon me, I feel so weak...”

Yasmin handed her a water flask. It only contained brackish water from the umbral village, but Zeerith drank it gratefully. When the naga was finished, I eased her head down to the floor and told her to rest. Hezekiah stayed by her while I stood up to talk with Yasmin and Miriam.

“So?” I said in a soft voice.

“There’s no one in the house,” Yasmin replied. “I say we stay here while Miriam finds this friend of hers... November, was that the name?”

“And if the Hounds come back?” Miriam asked.

“We head out the back door and take Zeerith with us,” Yasmin replied. “The Hounds will kill her if they find her; and she can’t go far on her own.”

“Won’t that look subtle,” Miriam grimaced. “The bunch of us wandering the streets, carrying a boa constrictor.”

I smiled and patted Miriam’s shoulder. “You still haven’t got the hang of this friendship thing, have you?”



Zeerith pleaded for more water. Hezekiah found a rain barrel in the house’s back garden and fetched in a few quarts with a soup cauldron. As he was beginning to apply cold compresses to the naga’s burned skin, Hezekiah looked up and asked, “Where’s Kiripao?”

“Right behind me,” Yasmin answered. Then she turned and let out an angry breath. “Sod it, he’s gone.”

“He could just be lurking in shadows,” I said. “Yasmin, search the house. Hezekiah, you stay with Zeerith. I’ll have a peek outside.”

“Me, I’m going to find November,” Miriam announced. “That piking Kiripao will stir up trouble, I can feel it in my bones. Before that happens, I want an escape route back to Sigil.”

“If we have to leave this house,” I told her, “we’ll head for the closest inn.”

She nodded and hurried out the front. I looked through a window into the back garden but didn’t see any sign of Kiripao. That left the street. When I stepped onto the cobblestones, Miriam was jogging away to the right so I went left, hoping that one of us might catch sight of our missing ally.

Assuming, of course, that Kiripao still was our ally. Since the very beginning he hadn't been easy to trust; now, with the umbral contagion infecting his mind, he might well turn stag on us. Would he stoop so far as to sic the Hounds on us? Or would he simply go berserk in the dark streets of Plague-Mort?

I reached a T-intersection, but saw nothing in either direction. Arbitrarily, I turned left again. Halfway up the street, I heard the far-off sounds of a tavern—a rumble of conversation, bar wenches shouting orders to the tapman, and the ragged muddle of inept musicians: drum, fiddle, and flute. It occurred to me Kiripao might be drawn to the flute's music, even though it was nothing like the piping we'd heard from the umbrals. Crossing my fingers that the tavern wasn't some killhole catering to vacationers from the Abyss, I pushed through the pub's front door.

The place smelled of every staleness known to humanity: stale sweat, stale beer, stale dreams. Not that the place was quiet—it was full of people in constant motion, shouting at each other and playing cute with members of the appropriate sex. What was missing was the sense that anyone took delight in the frenzy. When a patron pinched a passing barmaid, I saw no lust or teasing lechery; it was simply something to do with his hands, some meaningless gesture he'd learned a long time ago and was still repeating because he knew no other tricks. The whole thing looked like a bar scene in the thousandth performance of a long-running play... people going through rehearsed motions, their minds disengaged and distant.

As in most pinch-crust taverns, the proprietor saw no need to invest in over-many candles. The back recesses were too dark to inspect from the door, so I wove my way through the clutter of tables and found some leaning space at the bar. I put a coin down on the counter and the tapman replaced it with a mug of something foamy; but after one sip, I set the mug down with the intention of never touching it again. Perhaps somewhere in the multiverse, a tavern owner has found a way to water ale that I haven't tasted before... but this wasn't it.

I let my gaze roam around the room, searching for Kiripao. He'd be lurking in the shadows, if he was here at all, but that didn't make my job easier—the whole taproom was one big shadow, and the constant movement of people running to the bar or privy made it hard to check every face. I had covered most of the left half of the room when someone squeezed in on my right, calling to the tapman, “A mug of your best for me and my friend!”

Idly, I turned my eyes to glance at the newcomers... then looked away again, my blood running cold. Leaning next to me at the bar were a certain githyanki and githzerai: Qi and Chi, Miriam had called them.

Don't go blubbery, I told myself. They never saw you at the City Courts, the Glass Spider, anywhere. They don't know you... and after traipsing through the Lower Planes so long, you're just a dirty and unshaven cob like everyone else in the room. They won't give you a second glance, as long as you don't go addle-coved.

I picked up my watery ale and had another sip after all; no local pub-patron would leave without emptying his glass. I'd calmly finish my drink, then walk out the door. If Kiripao was hiding in a corner, he could sodding well look after himself.

Another sip, as unhurried as I could make my hand move. Please let it be a coincidence Qi and Chi were here. Miriam had said people from the Glass Spider came

to Plague-Mort for rest and recreation; and this tavern was right on Rich Man's Row, which meant it had to be one of the best in town. I'd been here five minutes and hadn't seen a fight yet—in a place like Plague-Mort, that meant the ultimate in chic. Come to think of it, Miriam had recognized Rich Man's Row the second she walked through the portal, so she must have spent time here. Maybe the portal from the Glass Spider came out in this neighborhood too. Qi and Chi were merely here for a drink.

Or else they knew everything, and I'd get a poniard in the back the moment I went outside.

I quaffed off the last of the beer, wiped my mouth in what I hoped was typical Plague-Mort fashion, and eased away from the bar. There was a strong temptation to glance at Qi and Chi to see if they were following; I resisted the urge. Still, as I ambled past tables of irritable customers, most simply looked up in annoyance, then looked down again as soon as I passed. Qi and Chi couldn't be trailing along behind me—otherwise, there'd be three people's worth of glaring instead of just me.

The doorknob was under my hand and I was building up to a sigh of relief, when suddenly the latch snapped away from me. I took a step back, unnerved... and there, outlined in the doorway, stood Kiripao. He hissed softly and pointed at the musicians in the corner of the room. "The flute is mine."

"What are you talking about?" I whispered.

"The flute is mine, it's mine, it's mine."

"It is not," I told him. "It probably doesn't even belong to the flute player. She's so bad, she must have found it in the gutter on her way over."

"Have you no ears?" Kiripao hissed. "She is playing blasphemies."

"It sounds more like The Maiden and the Hungry Pigboy." I put my hand on his arm. "Why don't you come along—"

He shrugged me off, glared at the flautist, and screamed, "Blasphemer!"

"That's enough!" I said sharply... but the tavern had already grown quiet behind me. The small of my back itched at the thought of Qi and Chi staring at us. Even so, I couldn't turn around—Kiripao might notice me look at them. The two thieves shouldn't recognize him, but the elf knew them well enough; he had followed them back in Sigil, from the Mortuary to the Vertical Sea. If he caught sight of Rivi's two henchmen, I didn't know what he'd do. I just knew I didn't want him to do it.

"You're coming with me," I told the elf with all the command I could muster. Since the tavern was silent, every patron listening to our conversation, I added, "Your mother has been distraught since you chewed your way out of the straitjacket. Come home now, or Doctor Uvula will feed you more quicklime."

A few people behind me laughed. That was good.

Brother Kiripao had no sense of humor. That was bad.

I remember grabbing the collar of his robe and tugging him toward the street. I remember going, "Whoof!" as Kiripao's fist connected with my solar plexus. After that, I don't remember much of anything, but I hope he hit me a few more times, and maybe landed some flying drop-kicks to my head—it would be embarrassing to get knocked out by a single punch.



The process of "coming to" spread itself over ten seconds: first a muddy emergence

of my brain, then other parts of my body checking in to complain about how much they hurt. Several ribs spoke the loudest, followed by a diffuse throbbing around my left cheek and eye.

There was a rough wooden floor beneath me, with splintered furniture scattered all over it... and let me assure you, it hadn't been the kind of furniture that splinters easily. No tavern in Plague-Mort, not even an upscale one in Rich Man's Row, would buy bar stools that had to be replaced every time people played fast and loose with their fists. All the chairs, all the tables, had been thick, heavy oak; and now they were thick, heavy sticks of firewood, littering the floor around me.

Knowing it would hurt, I sat up. Yep... it hurt. I wasn't the only person laid low by the brawl—unconscious bodies sprawled in undignified poses everywhere I looked—but I was the only one moving at the moment, which I took as a tribute to my constitution. Perhaps I hadn't been out long at all; for one thing, I still had my money-purse, which meant there hadn't been time for thieves to go through my pockets. It was still dark outside too, as I could see through the open doorway: somehow, the door had got knocked clean off its hinges.

I tried to struggle to my feet... but the moment I moved, gravity suddenly increased by a couple hundred per cent, and I sat down again abruptly. Just what I expected in a place like Plague-Mort: natural forces playing dirty tricks on me. I resolved to try again in the near future, this time leaping up fast to catch gravity offguard; but seconds turned into minutes, and the time never felt right.

A figure appeared in the doorway—a lean woman with bony ridges protruding from her arms. Sitting on the floor I waved to her, then found that very funny for some reason and started to giggle.

“Britlin?” she whispered.

“Hello,” I said in a loud voice. “Hello,” I repeated more softly, then wondered how it would sound in a deep voice. “Hello,” (deep bass). “Hello,” (falsetto). “Hell-o-ohh!” (an unsuccessful combination of both).

Yasmin knelt beside me. “What are you doing here?”

“Having a concussion, that's what I'm doing.” Those were the words in my mind; but all that came out of my mouth was a jumbled syllables. My incoherence struck me so funny, I laughed out loud. Flashes of purple light exploded in front of my eyes, with a pain like a mace pummeling my head from the inside; but I couldn't stop laughing, no matter how much it hurt.

“Shh,” Yasmin said.

She laid a hand on my lips, then immediately jerked away again. I guessed she'd made some vow not to touch me, and I was going to tell her how stupid that was as soon as I could remember how to string words together intelligibly. Another thought struck me and I pulled myself together enough to say, “Qi and Chi.”

“Shh,” she said again, as if I was babbling.

“Qi and Chi,” I told her. “Qi and Chi, Qi and Chi, Qi and Chi-di-dee-di-dee.”

Yasmin showed no sign of paying attention to my words. She looked around the ruined tavern as if one of the other unconscious patrons might offer advice on what to do next; then she slid a hand under my armpit and jerked me to my feet. The room spun and more of those purple flashes burst in front of my eyes.

I remember thinking, If she gives me a good fast twirl, I should feel something really worth remembering. But she didn't. The Doomguard can be so repressed.



Yasmin half-dragged me out of the tavern, my feet bouncing along like a mari-
onette's. A few more crumpled bodies lay outside on the cobblestones, but none I
recognized. Kiripao must still be on the loose... as if Plague-Mort wasn't a dangerous
enough place already. Qi and Chi were also gone; I wondered if they had slipped away
from the fight, or bashed in heads until no one was moving.

All these thoughts seemed very lucid to me; and yet, when I tried to speak to Yasmin
again, all that came out was, "Qi Chi there-there." Even I had to admit that probably
wasn't helpful communication.

Perhaps to keep me quiet, Yasmin started talking herself. "It took me an hour to find
you," she said in a low voice. "The town's quiet tonight—absolutely no one on the
streets. Maybe people heard the Hounds were out on a raid, so they're staying indoors."

"Rivi Qi Chi," I answered. "Here, Rivi Qi Chi."

"Hush," she said, "you're delirious."

"Run, hide, Rivi Qi Chi—"

Yasmin clapped her hand over my mouth. "No noise," she whispered. "The Hounds
may prowling. Please, Britlin, please... don't talk."

She said those last words staring straight at me—the first time she'd allowed me eye
contact since the Sea of the Drowned. I tried to meet her gaze clearly, despite the
dizziness coating my brain... tried to be the man she had kissed in the darkness of the
umbral village. She must have seen something in my eyes because she quickly turned
away again, and whispered, "Don't."

I didn't say anything. At the best of times, I probably couldn't have found the right
words.

After a while, she started helping me along again. Without looking at me, she
murmured, "I told you I had a brother. Well, maybe two brothers if I count you... skip
that. My brother Jadon was eight years older than me, and always in trouble. Drinking,
gambling, bashing old bubbers for fun..."

She kicked at a pebble lying in the street. It clattered over the cobblestones, then
splashed softly into the rain-filled gutter.

"When I was ten," Yasmin went on, "my mother died. Found floating in the Ditch.
No one knew if it was suicide, murder, or accident, and apart from me, no one cared.
After that, Jadon 'took care' of me. You know what I mean? My own brother. Put me on
the streets at ten years old, and used me himself whenever he felt like it."

I thought of my mother. I shuddered.

Yasmin didn't notice. "Four years of hell," she said. "Until one night, Jadon roughed
up a woman who turned out to be a succubus in disguise. So much for Jadon; and praise
The Lady for making Sigil a city where such things can happen. Anyway, I joined the
Handmaids of Entropy the same night, thinking they would turn me into a remorseless
killing machine... which is what I dearly wanted to become at that moment. I was all
wrong about how the Handmaids actually worshipped Entropy, but I was all wrong about
wanting to kill people too. The Handmaids gave me what I needed, and here I am.

"But Britlin... if you really are my brother, half-brother, I can't let those old wounds

open again. I can't. It's not your fault, it's Jadon's... and maybe mine too, maybe it shouldn't make a difference to me. You and I were happy yesterday, why should it make a difference? But it does. When I think that you might be my brother, it wrenches my stomach and I feel so sick... I can't breathe. And the only reason I can even say this in front of you is you don't understand a word."

She bent in and kissed my cheek, a kiss thick with good-bye. Even as she continued to help me down the street, Yasmin had left me—as surely as if she had stepped through a portal and disappeared forever.



In minutes we were back at the smashed-up house. Hezekiah had found an old wash-tub and Zeerith was dipping herself in it to soothe the pain of her burns. Her serpent's body was much too long to fit inside the tub all at once, so she was immersing a bit at a time, the rest of her body hanging out over the sides. It looked uncomfortable, but the soaking had clearly eased the pain on her gentle face.

Wheeze sat propped against one of the kitchen cupboards, his hands folded placidly in his lap. Missing a year from his life, paralyzed from the waist down, he was still as tranquil as death... but when the gnome caught sight of me, his eyes opened wide and he cried, "Honored Cavendish!"

"I found him in the remains of a brawl," Yasmin said as she lowered me to the floor. "I don't know how Britlin got involved... maybe Kiripao was there."

"Qi Chi," I told everyone. "Rivi Qi Chi."

"He keeps saying that," Yasmin muttered. "He must have a concussion and it's making him delirious." She let out an exasperated snort. "If it weren't for the sodding dust in my lungs, I'd have the magic to heal him!"

"Is he very ill?" Zeerith asked softly. The naga raised her head three feet off the ground and gazed down at me as I slumped on the floor.

"He's incoherent," Yasmin replied. "Conscious but incoherent... and that scares me. Something's seriously wrong with his brain."

I wanted to tell her I could think just fine; but my tongue couldn't put the words together. It occurred to me, maybe there was something wrong inside my head—some rupture in the conduits connecting thought and speech. Very bad, very very bad.

"Perhaps," Zeerith murmured shyly, "I could..." She lowered her eyes in embarrassment. "People have suggested I can work magic, but I never... still, now that I have molted..."

"It is worth a try, honored snakeling," Wheeze said. "And perhaps we can offer you some small advice for focusing the energy..."

"We'll help," Yasmin assured the naga. "If you have the power inside, we'll show you how to draw it out."

"This'll be great," Hezekiah enthused. "A magic lesson!"

"Rivi Qi Chi," I said. But nobody paid attention.



With deep concentration, Zeerith stared into my eyes. The rest of her green-scaled body had coiled around me, not tightly but with a firm grip that held me solid. It took all my self-control not to squirm—not just suppressing fear of being crushed by a constrictor, but also a frisson of arousal at this embrace from a girl just entered into womanhood.

You're delirious, I told myself; such feelings are beneath you. But her face was the only thing I could see... her solemn, beautiful face meeting my gaze with the intensity of a lover.

"Stay relaxed," Yasmin whispered in the naga's ear. "Think of a time when the world filled you with awe."

Zeerith bit her lip, a child's gesture. "Do you want me to talk about it?"

"If it will help you remember."

She closed her eyes, then opened them again, staring directly at me... into me. Her face was not just as beautiful as an angel, it was equally profound.

"Years ago, when I was small," she began, "a storm struck the town—not one of the fire storms that leaks over from the Bad Place, but a rain storm, with a fierce and terrible wind. That's what I remember most, the wind: roaring through the streets, rattling all the shutters, ripping leaves off the trees. Candles and lamps kept blowing out, even inside the house... because drafts gusted through every chink, and the chimney sucked up a steady breeze. People ran about, trying to plug the holes, keep the shutters from banging; and in the middle of it all, the front door blew open right in front of me. The open door, right there.

"I had never ventured into the street before. The family told me there were people out there who would hurt me; and I knew they were telling the truth. But the door was open, the street was empty, the wind was blowing so hard that the rain made horizontal streaks... and before I knew it, I was down the steps and sliding along the cobblestones.

"The wind pulled at me, but I stayed low. I stayed low. And the feel of the pavement was rough and wonderful against my belly, the sting of the rain beating on my skin, the howl of the wind tearing at the shingles of every roof... I was the only one out that night. Legged creatures would have been knocked off their feet by the wind, but I could move freely. I had the town to myself. The dark and stormy town, not a light to be seen.

"All mine."

Her voice was a whisper and her eyes shone. She still gazed at me, but I knew she was seeing the blackness of that gale-battered night.

"You are touching the magic," Wheezy murmured. "Now, invite it into your soul."

He spoke so softly, I wondered if the naga even heard him. Suddenly, however, the hairs of my skin bristled, tingling with the presence of unseen energy. Zeerith's eyes widened and her mouth shaped into an O: surprise, wonder, awe. Her breath caught in a small gasp; then a creamy warmth gushed around me, pouring out of her body, streaming from every scale. It flooded into my brain, so powerful it turned into a fiery pain, just for a moment. Purple flashes burst inside my eyes once more, a single moment of explosion quickly dissipating into relaxed sparkles.

Zeerith's body loosened around me and slumped to the floor. Yasmin leapt forward to prevent the girl's head from slamming down; but the naga stopped herself without help and offered a weak smile. "Was that magic?" she asked.

"Yes," I told her. "I assure you it was magic." For the briefest of seconds, I let my fingers twine quietly through her hair. Then I forced myself away. "Thank you, but now we have to get out of here. Qi and Chi are in the area; it's not safe to stay in one place."

"Sod it all!" Yasmin growled. "That's what you meant by Rivi Qi Chi?"

"That's what I meant. Let's get moving before—"

"Hello, my wee darlings," called a gloating voice from the street. "Have you missed me?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



THREE SOUND SLEEPERS

I shouted to Yasmin. Then in a much quieter voice I asked Hezekiah, “How many people can you teleport at once?”

“I’ve never tried more than two,” he answered, “but I should be able to... gahhhhh!”

The boy keeled over, squealing and pressing his hands to his face. “She’s trying to blank me again!” he shouted. “I hate this!”

“Fight it,” I growled as I snatched up a heavy crockpot lying on the

“GRAB WHEEZZLE!”

floor. “I’ll try to break her concentration. If you get a chance to port the others out of here, don’t wait for me.”

Without giving time for an answer, I sprinted into the dark front room of the house. Through the broken windows, I could see the damned albino standing outside on the cobblestones, her face more painted than ever: crimson stripes down one cheek like claw marks, and blue bands radiating out like spokes around both eyes. She still wore that filmy sheath of black silk, sheer enough to reveal intimate details of her flawless body beneath; yet the sight aroused nothing in me but the ardent desire to bludgeon her sluggish skull with the crackpot in my hand.

Rivi held her fingertips lightly to her temples, eyes half-shut as she tried to crush her way into Hezekiah’s brain. Wights flanked her left and right, at least a dozen of them; I didn’t stand a chance of getting close to her. Still, I had a clear shot for heaving the pot straight at her face... and I only spent a moment taking aim before I hurled it through the broken window.

The pot sped swift and true, too fast for the clumsy wights to react... but as the crockery hurtled through the darkness, a blur of motion intercepted it, smashing it to the ground mere inches in front of Rivi’s feet. The blur snapped around to block any more projectiles that might fly out of the building; and I saw it was Kiripao, a look of ecstasy on his face.

“Peel it off,” he said, staring straight at me. “Peel away the shell.”

With one fluid motion, he tucked a toe under the lip of the crackpot and kicked it back at me with the speed of a cannonball. I dove for the floor; the wind from the passing pot whisked coldly against my neck. A moment later, plaster spattered around my legs as the pot gouged a chunk from the wall behind me.

Expecting Kiripao himself to barrel through the window any second, I whipped out my sword and rolled to my feet. He might be fast, but I had the advantage—he’d have to land gingerly to avoid the broken glass on the floor, giving me time to impale him straight through the heart. The question was, could I really do it? I’d never really liked Kiripao, but he’d

been on our side to begin with. Even if he worked for the enemy now, he wasn't responsible for his actions: the umbrals had infected him with their twisted mentality, and perhaps Rivi had done some tinkering too. Did Kiripao deserve to die?

No. He didn't. But I'd kill him anyway if he came through that window. When a dog goes mad, you don't have a choice.

I waited, forcing myself not to hold my breath. He'd come through the window, or maybe the broken-down door. I stood where I had a clear path to each, a single step forward and the killing thrust. Seconds trickled by; and then a wail came from the kitchen, Hezekiah cursing, "Damn, damn, damn, she did it to me again! I'm completely blanked."

"You really have to work on your willpower, darling," Rivi called from the street. "You're a dear wee child, but you don't have the instinct for blood. Too soft. Too... undirected."

Hezekiah shouted back, "I'll 'direct' you if I get my hands on you."

"That's the spirit," Rivi laughed. "Focus on hatred and vengeance; you'll be as strong as me in no time. Of course, that's precisely what you have: no time."

"How'd you find us, Rivi?" That was Yasmin, asking a question I would have asked myself, except that I didn't want to give away my position.

"Your friend Kiripao has been an utter dear," Rivi replied. "He met two of my colleagues in a drinking establishment not far from here. Picked them out of the crowd, walked right up, and told them precisely where you were. I'd say that he sold you out, except that he's not interested in monetary reward."

"Peel them," Kiripao cried. "Peel them all!"

Rivi chuckled. "Apparently he's developed some fascinating ideas on how to free your souls from their wee prisons of flesh. He cares about you, he really does; he sees himself as your personal liberator."

This last statement prompted Kiripao to make a whuffling sound, like a bear slavering over a carcass. Perhaps the sound was laughter... or weeping.

"Now, darlings," said Rivi, "far be it from me to interfere with a monk enlightening his flock; but I could try to restrain him, if you showed a wee bit of cooperation. Give me the grinder, right here, right now, and I guarantee we'll all walk away from this, whistling tunes of cheer."

"I can't whistle," Hezekiah snapped back, in what he must have thought was a brilliant retort.

Wheezle said in a low voice, "Once the honored madwoman gets through, you'll whistle any tune she wants."

"I don't have to be nice about this," Rivi called. "I have enough wights to take what I want by force. But Plague-Mort is such a dear wee town, it makes me sentimental to a fault. Why don't I give you a count of ten? One... isn't this exciting? Two... no, it isn't. Ten. Sorry, I got bored."

That's when the wights charged en masse.



I don't know what instructions Rivi had given the wights—probably to fight their way inside and kill anyone who resisted. Whatever she told them, the nasty wee albino still hadn't realized her hate-filled slaves yearned to pervert the intention of her

commands; or perhaps, Rivi was so used to being loathed that she no longer gave it any thought. She certainly hadn't told the wights to exercise any useful tactics, like a two-pronged attack through window and door. Instead, the wights simply swarmed forward, claws swinging, throats hissing, until they collided with the front wall of the building... then they took out the wall.

It didn't happen all at once. A dozen sets of claws smashed the building simultaneously, stabbing through the wood exterior and the plaster inside. I could see individual fingers piercing the wall in front of me, talons flexing. In unison, the fingers clenched into fists and pulled backward with supernatural strength. Plaster broke off in handfuls... and with a groaning of rusty nails, board after board ripped off the front of the house, leaving long horizontal gaps. It took the wights a few moments to shake off the lumber still clinging to their fingers; then their hands crashed out in unison again, like claw-tipped battering rams.

You know, I thought to myself, in a normal town, bar fights, prowling monsters, and a house being demolished by the undead would eventually catch the attention of the city watch. But in beautiful Plague-Mort, pearl of the Outlands...

The wights heaved and ripped off another bunch of boards. It was a riveting visual effect, strips of the house being ripped away to let lamplight glimmer through: lamplight choked with plaster dust and twinkling off the broken glass on the floor. A painting of that would sell very well to an Anarchist... not that most Anarchists had money, of course, but there must be some prominent merchants who were secretly Anarchist sympathizers...

"Are you going to stand there and let them tear the house apart?" Yasmin demanded.

"Sorry," I murmured, collecting my thoughts. "I was just contemplating the beauties of Entropy."

She looked at me narrowly, debating whether I was mocking her beliefs. Before she could come to a conclusion I'd regret, I said, "Let's get busy, shall we?" and lifted my sword.

Truth to tell, wights whacking the wall of one's only refuge might look sodding scary, but the house was built to withstand hurricanes like the one Zeerith had described; the undead were still a long way from collapsing the place, or even clawing their way inside. All they'd really done was rip out the horizontal equivalent of arrow slits: four-inch wide holes, ideal for stabbing swords out at attackers. Even better, as soon as the wights rammed their talons into the wood again, they were as good as handcuffed, like condemned prisoners waiting for the axe.

Yasmin and I gladly played their executioners.

I took out two the first time: a pair of quick thrusts, both through rotting faces, the jabs hard enough to drive bone chips liberally through the wights' brains. The first one fell without a sound. The second had enough time to spit a hiss of rage; then my rapier plunged straight between its eyes, pithing whatever last thoughts such a creature might have.

The other wights tore away a few more boards; but the monsters Yasmin and I dispatched only slumped where they were, their claws still deeply imbedded in the wall. I wished I could see them from the street—a group of dead wights dangling from the front of the house by their hands, their heads skewered and spilling out brains.

A nice score, I thought to myself. If Yasmin and I both killed two wights with every assault, we'd soon whittle down the opposition to just Rivi and Kiripao... and Qi and Chi, of course, wherever they were.

Sod it all... where were Qi and Chi?

The wights slammed forward again... and even as I cleaved the heads of two more, my thoughts raced in other directions. Why had Rivi let the wights make another charge? She'd seen how easily we could kill them. No doubt she had more wights back at the Glass Spider, but they weren't here now. And where were Qi and Chi? Two sneak thieves who had robbed faction headquarters in Sigil while the defenders were kept busy with a diversion...

"Sod it, she's peeling us," I growled. In a low voice, I said, "Yasmin, you deal with the wights. I have to check on the others."

Still cursing, I dashed toward the kitchen. Breaking into this house would be child's play for experienced thieves: over the back wall into the garden, then a short sneak up to the kitchen door. If the others had their attention focused on the fight out front, they wouldn't notice Qi and Chi till much too late.

And it was too late. Even before I reached the kitchen I heard the sound of snoring—Hezekiah's snore, something I'd heard often enough since we began keeping vigil outside the Sigil Mortuary. The Clueless boy certainly wouldn't fall asleep in the middle of a battle, even if someone else was doing the fighting; indeed, I should have been suspicious when he didn't come running to gawk at the wights. Slowing down, I walked the last few paces to the kitchen door as quietly as I could, trusting that the banging and hissing from the street would cover whatever little noise my boots made.

My father could probably list all the ways of putting people to sleep against their will—spells, magic powders, potions and vapors—but my only knowledge of the subject came from the penny dreadfuls I read as a teenager. In those stories, both heroes and villains had infallibly effective ways of knocking each other out, ones that never made you vomit afterward, never gave concussions, never killed people with weak hearts. I stopped reading penny dreadfuls when I stopped believing in such wondrous tricks, but clearly I'd done the books an injustice... Qi and Chi had apparently put Hezekiah, Wheezele, and Zeerith to sleep as easily as snuffing out a candle.

Boy, gnome, and naga all lay on the floor, limp and peaceful. Qi and Chi were already inside the room, one of them rummaging through our backpacks while the other stood guard with a crossbow. Luckily for me, the guard had to divide his attention between the front and back doors of the kitchen; and at the moment I peeked around the corner, he was looking out into the garden. I ducked out of sight again immediately.

All right, Britlin, think. Rivi sent the thieves to steal the dust grinder while the wights kept us busy in front. I could simply let the bad guys take the piking grinder and hope Rivi would leave us alone once she got what she wanted; or I could try to stop them, hope I won the fight, and hope we could still get out of Plague-Mort with our skins intact. One hope to two—a gambler would say that letting them walk off with the grinder was the safer bet.

On the other hand, no self-respecting Sensate ever made safety his first priority...

The Hounds had scattered plenty of debris during their raid. Close to hand were numerous pieces of ripped clothing, the smashed remains of a wooden chair, and an oil

painting with its canvas slashed. From what I could see, the painting hadn't been much of a treasure—a bad approximation of a woman looking at an even worse version of her face in a mirror—but its gold-leafed frame was sturdy and solid, rendered with admirably detailed curlicues. Flat and heavy, it would fly like a discus, at least over the short distance between me and the thief with the crossbow. If it stopped him from plugging me with that arrow, the painting would have served a more useful purpose than most abstract art.

A deep breath in. A slow breath out. Then I leaned around the corner and whipped the painting at the Bowman with all the strength I could muster.

The frame struck him hard, one corner burying its point into his solar plexus. His breath whooped out and his trigger finger on the bow must have jerked in pained reaction—the arrow snapped away from the bow with a crack, glancing off the closest wall, and digging into one of the cupboards. Even before it had chunked home, I was crossing the gap between me and the Bowman, shouting at the top of my lungs in the hope of jolting him. It didn't work; before I got close enough for a slash with my rapier, he had raised the bow to block, knocking my blade away

from a killing stroke.

“Qi!” he shouted... or maybe “Chi!”, it was hard to tell. Not that he needed to alert his partner to my presence—I'd made enough noise to wake the undead, though my sleeping companions continued to snore placidly. Any moment now, the other thief would enter the fray, probably with a crossbow of his own; and my current target only had to parry my thrusts until I took an arrow through the heart.

You wouldn't think a crossbow made an effective fencing weapon; and in more appropriate conditions, it wouldn't have. However, the kitchen was dark, its floor was littered with easy-to-trip-over rubbish, and I was doing everything I could to keep my target (the githyanki) between me and his fellow thief—the last thing I wanted was to give the githzerai a clear shot at me. All these complications prevented me from delivering any swordplay worth the name... which meant that thrust after thrust got deflected by the crossbow's wooden body. Even worse, it was just a matter of time before my blade bit too deeply into the wood. If my sword got stuck, the githyanki would leap on me instantly, scrabbling to take me apart with his bare hands.

An arrow buzzed past my ear—the thief at the far end of the room had taken a shot at me, despite his partner in the way. I wondered if a fragment of his racial instincts remained, despite Rivi's tinkering with his mind: the githzerai hatred of githyanki, secretly delighted if his bolt went awry and took the githyanki in the back. Perhaps he simply thought he could hit me... and he came piking close, near enough that I felt the arrow's wind. If I gave the berk time to reload, I wouldn't be so lucky the next time.

Still, what could I do? The githyanki in front of me had reflexes like an eel, swiping aside my every strike. He had a smile on his ugly face, almost as if he was playing with me—as if he knew he could hold me off for as long as he needed. Perhaps he could have too, if he hadn't made the mistake of stepping too close to Wheezy's small body.

The gnome wasn't really asleep: he'd just been playing possum, biding his time for the moment when a magicless paraplegic could make a contribution.

Wheezy reached out, grabbed the githyanki's ankle, and bit hard into the thief's fleshy leg.

The githyanki opened his mouth as if to yell from the pain. It looked like a target to me... and I jabbed forward with an all-or-nothing thrust, the tip of the blade punching through the roof of his mouth and straight into the hind-brain. His body jerked in a violent spasm, dancing uncontrollably on the end of my sword as muscles were suddenly freed from the mind's command; then he slumped into dead-weight, dragging my rapier down until he slid slickly off the blade.

"Thanks, WheeZle," I sighed.

"A pleasure to serve, honored Cavendish."

"When this is all over," I said, "tell me what his leg tasted like."



I leapt the crumpled body of the githyanki, prepared to plunge my sword into his githzerai partner. What I wasn't prepared for was a ram-force gusher of white dust smashing me in the chest. It knocked me backward like a mace, and I tripped over the corpse I'd just killed; WheeZle barely got out of the way as I fell heavily to the ground. Then the dust spray struck again, sending me, the gnome, and the githyanki corpse skittering across the trash-strewn floor. Pans clattered as we smashed into them, and silver cutlery, knives and forks, were swept up by the hurricane of dust to slap against our faces.

"The githzerai has found the grinder," WheeZle observed, as the spray slammed us into the wall.

"So how," I said, choking on dust, "can the sodding thing have so much kick without a speck of recoil?"

"It was made by gods," WheeZle replied, "and gods despise physical law. They regard action/reaction as a personal affront, and defy it whenever they can."

All this time, of course, I was attempting to squirm to my feet. The effort was fruitless: whenever I managed to get my legs underneath me, the spray simply bashed me down again. Dust clogged the air, pooling up an ever-increasing mound on the floor. I covered my face with my coat-tail, just for the chance to breathe something other than white powder; but the dust kept pelting down, burying me like a Pharaoh.

Long seconds passed. At last, I realized the pressure from the spray had eased and I heaved myself up, scattering a haze of dust around me. Emerging from the cloud, I saw the githzerai was gone, fled out the back door. I ran in pursuit, but when I reached the garden there was no sign of him—he must have hopped it over the fence, and I had no delusions about catching such a speedy runner in the twisting lanes of Plague-Mort.

WheeZle came crawling toward me, pulling himself across the dust-heaped floor. He looked up at me, saw my expression and said, "We're piked?"

I nodded. "We are completely, totally piked."



WheeZle stayed in the kitchen to wake up Hezekiah and Zeerith, while I hurried out front again to check on Yasmin. She was still in one piece, her sword blade covered with clots of hair and cerebellum. "I'm worried," she said as I entered the room. "All this wight-fighting... it's making me dependent on head-shots. I mean, spearing a wight through the heart isn't an instant kill, so a head-shot is the most effective approach. Still, I worry about getting into the habit of avoiding the body, when really, in most opponents... I'm babbling, aren't I?"

“Yes, Yasmin.”

“How are things in the kitchen?”

“It looks like the cook spilled some flour.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “What does that mean?”

“It means Rivi got what she wanted.”

With so many boards ripped off the front of the house, I could easily see out into the street. Only one wight was left, standing on one side of Rivi while Kiripao stood on the other. The ice-skinned woman faced our direction, but her glittering eyes were distant, focused far elsewhere. As I looked at her, she suddenly straightened up and smiled.

“Darlings!” she called, “my wee githzerai pal tells me he’s got away with the grinder. What fabulous news! My business here is done.”

I shouted, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“O, dear heart, I’m bound for Sigil. I told what fun I’ll have there—all those wizards and priests, who think they’re protected by magic. Can’t you imagine the looks on their faces when they can’t cast a single spell without burning to cinders? And then I’ll claim their minds.”

“You’re barmy,” Yasmin told her. “The Lady of Pain will never let you into Sigil with those two grinders.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Rivi smirked. “The grinders are older than the gods, older than The Lady, older than the most ancient barriers guarding Sigil. I’ve heard our quiff modern deities can’t even sense the grinders—that’s why you could carry them through the Lower Planes without infernal powers trying to steal them. The most powerful forces of antiquity made the grinders invisible to divine eyes... which means that The Lady won’t know what I’m doing till it’s too late.”

Yasmin whispered to me, “We have to get out of here, Britlin. We have to warn someone what this slag is up to.”

“I know.” But secretly, I was gauging how fast I could reach the gloating albino: through the door, into the street, across the cobblestones. Could I reach her before the wight and Kiripao stopped me? Not likely; she was just too piking far away.

“Time to say good-bye,” Rivi announced. “I have ever so much work planned out. Things to do, people to brainwash... in the meanwhile, however...”

She chuckled. It was definitely not a chuckle to make children sleep smiling in their beds. Then she clapped her hands, and suddenly a stream of new wights poured around the corner: ten of them, twenty, thirty, and more, all of them racing forward with that peculiar arm-swinging gait, their eyes aflame with crimson fire.

“Have fun, my darlings,” Rivi said with a cheery wave. “I don’t think we’ll see each other again.”

Then she was gone, Kiripao covering her withdrawal as more and more wights filled the street. I could see lamplight glint off their pointed teeth. Then, in a rush, they struck the front of the house like a tsunami.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



THREE MILES THROUGH THE OUTLANDS

only been a dozen wights clawing at the wall, the house stood up well against the destruction. With the demolition team multiplied threefold however, the building quaked at the very impact of so many talons smashing into the wood. Yasmin and I leapt forward, eliminating two attackers each; but the remaining undead heaved with such force, the entire wall ripped away in a solid flat. It wobbled in the wights' grip, two storeys high and shaken by the brisk wind that blew through the streets of

WHEN + HERE HAD

the town. The wights tried to keep it upright, but they had no leverage. Slowly, the top of the facade tipped back, farther and farther, until a sudden breezy gust blew it <SLAM> against the house on the opposite side of the street.

The collision was the last straw for the poor battered wall. The lower storey, torn to tatters by previous wight attacks, broke apart completely, a wagon-load of lumber thumping down around the wights' ears. Then the upper story dropped in a single piece, like a great fly-swatter slapping down in a cloud of shattering plaster. Every wight was knocked to the ground, buried under the mass of wood.

Silence descended, broken only by soft, ominous creaks from the ceiling sagging over our heads. Yasmin stepped forward, staring out the open hole where a wall had once separated the house from the street. She peered at the tangle of timber heaped over the wights and whispered, "Do you think that crushed them?"

In answer, the mound of boards exploded upward, wood flying in all directions as undead muscles threw off the clutter. Planks whizzed in our direction, forcing us to duck; other boards smashed through windows of neighboring houses, or thumped heavily along the pavement. In a moment, an army of wights stood intact on the cobblestones, teeth gleaming, eyes filled with blazing hate.

The wall was gone. There was nothing separating them from us.

"Fight or flee?" Yasmin asked, lifting her sword.

"If we flee, they'll just catch us in the back garden," I told her. "We can't all get over the fence in time."

"But if we fight," Yasmin said, "the others have a chance to get away."

"Let's make it a last stand in the kitchen," I suggested. "The Tooth Guild here can only come through the door one by one."

"Until they rip out that wall too."

"Don't give them ideas," I growled. "Now we'll just back away."

For our first two steps backward, the wights did nothing—just fixed

their burning gaze on us with a palpable intensity. At our third step, one wight hissed; immediately, all the others took up the sound, a harsh rush of breath cutting across the midnight wind

“Time for a strategic withdrawal?” Yasmin suggested.

“I’d prefer to run like a son-of-an-orc.”

So we ran, an army of undead at our heels.



“Out the back!” I shouted to the others as Yasmin and I hurtled into the kitchen.

“What’s the problem?” Hezekiah asked, his voice thick with sleep.

A wight stuck its head through the door. Yasmin cut it off.

“Oh, them again,” Hezekiah said. He heaved Wheezle into his arms, and nudged a yawning Zeerith with his foot. “Time for us to go.”

“Perhaps,” said the naga, “I should stay and fight. If I have magic...”

I looked down at her sleek body, now coated in a flouring of the white dust that layered the whole kitchen. “The magic’s gone,” I told her. “Wheezle will explain on your way out.”

Two more wights charged at the door. I took left, Yasmin took right, all the while yelling to our companions, “Run!”

Then there was no time to think about anything but the undead surging toward us like a hissing ocean.



Within seconds, we had six wight carcasses piled in front of the door—enough to form a rampart that kept the other monstrosities at a disadvantage. They still shuffled forward, trying to push down the wall of bodies and shove their way inside; but with a flurry of jabbing and stabbing, Yasmin and I held the line against them.

Minutes passed: long, tiring minutes of constant fighting. I didn’t know if wights felt fatigue, but I was on the verge of exhaustion. My swordplay had turned sloppy... and my mind was clear enough to recognize the degradation in technique, without being able to sharpen up. Claws whisked by my face, coming close enough to tear at my jacket; and the smell of rotting flesh filled the kitchen, biling my stomach with nausea.

“Maybe...” Yasmin panted, “we should try... to escape after all.”

“You think... you can move enough... to run?”

“No.”

Her reply was almost drowned out by the hissing of wights. They could smell victory.

“Yasmin...” I began. “If we’re going to die... let me just say—”

“Don’t!” she cried. “You’ll break my heart.”

I closed my mouth and found enough strength to lop off the arm of a wight reaching for me. The amputated stump spurted red dust; the arm, dropping like a dead-weight, continued to clench its fingers, futilely trying to grab at something. “I know how you feel,” I told the fallen hand.

Yasmin’s mouth turned up in a small grin. “Sentimental berk,” she said, trying to hide the smile. Then she tucked a toe under the cut-off arm and kicked it back into the scrum of undead...

...which for some reason had eased off their mob action at the kitchen door. Indeed, they were snarling up a storm of hisses, but not aimed at us—every wight had turned to

“And what race are you?” Hezekiah piped up cheerfully.

His question was greeted with frosty silence from November, and embarrassed shuffling of feet from the rest of us. Finally, November said in a chilly voice, “There are some things you don’t ask strangers, unless you like floating face down in the nearest sewage pond.”

“I was just trying to learn,” he protested. “How will I learn if I don’t ask?”

November’s eyes narrowed. “The multiverse does not care whether or not you learn. The multiverse does not care whether or not you live. Only people care, and precious few of them. Do you hear me?”

Hezekiah gulped. “Okay. Sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” November answered evenly. “And because I know you will make a nuisance of yourself, constantly staring and wondering what I am, I shall tell you I was born the child of a human man and a hell-spawned succubus. Some like to call my kind alu-fiends, but I do not want to hear that word cross your lips. You will call me an alu; my father raised me to suppress the fiendish aspects of my soul, and his spirit would grieve if I were forced to kill you over mere terminology.”

“Alu,” Hezekiah nodded. “A good old alu. Got it.”

He continued bobbing his head like a berk until a scowl from November stopped him.



On the other side of the wall, another explosion raked the sky, followed by a cracking of timbers. Any second, I thought I’d hear the entire house collapse; but the carpenters of Plague-Mort had clearly surpassed themselves in building the place. After two fireballs, an army of wights, and the earlier invasion by Hounds, the house remained standing—on fire now, but still mostly upright.

“What is happening?” Zeerith asked, an edge of panic in her voice.

“Hounds versus wights,” Miriam replied. “Pity we can’t go out front and watch.”

“I’ve seen fireballs before,” I said. “Unless, of course, the Hounds have some new, more interesting kind...”

“Standard stuff,” Miriam answered with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I happened to know where the Fox stashed a few firewands, right here in town. They came in handy for bribes.”

“Not bribes,” November bristled, holding up two wands of her own. “Payment for services to be rendered.”

Miriam shrugged. “You got payment, the Hounds got bribes.” She turned back to me. “I gave the Arch-Lector’s doggies some fire-toys in exchange for fighting your wights.”

“You knew we had wights?” Yasmin asked.

“November and I came by a while ago when that sod albino was just setting up her attack. Rivi had stationed a few wights out front, and a lot more around the corner, so I knew you were going to need help. I bribed the closest detachment of Hounds to come and give you a hand. It took all the wands I had left, but they did come through.”

November gave a small snort. “They just wanted a chance to shoot fire at moving targets.”

“Probably,” Miriam admitted, “but they did what they were paid to and mounted a frontal assault. I knew you’d be smart enough to run out the back. That’s why we’re here.”

“And now we should go,” November said. She gestured at the red flicker of flames on the other side of the wall. “We only have minutes before that fire engulfs the whole quarter. Besides, I’m sure you want to see that gate to Sigil as soon as possible.”

Despite her exhaustion, Yasmin insisted on carrying Wheezle; and so we hurried away, following November’s lead. Miriam fell in beside Hezekiah and the two of them began whispering to each other, heads close and the ghost of giggles in their voices. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but I didn’t need to: they weren’t saying anything, they were merely talking... pleased to have the worst behind them, pleased that each step took us closer the portal home.

Zeerith slid along beside me, a stricken expression on her young face. She was leaving the only world she could remember, her adoptive family butchered by Hounds. Some cynical part of me didn’t believe the family had been quite so kindly as Zeerith maintained; but they were all she knew, the center of her life. Now she was fleeing in the company of strangers, abandoning everything familiar.

For a time, I tried to reassure her—Sigil had a small community of nagas, a few of them Sensates whom I knew personally. We’d find someone to care for her until she was ready to fend for herself. Zeerith nodded politely and said she was sure Sigil was a fine city... but then she lapsed into silence again, her face wracked with grief.



Plague-Mort had no city wall, no definite edge at all. The raggedy shacks housing citizens outside of Rich Man’s Row simply grew farther and farther apart, and their yards increased to the size of small fields. Perhaps they were fields, and I was just too much the city-dweller to tell. It was, after all, late autumn in Plague-Mort, with the chill of winter in the air. Whatever crops might have filled these fields in summer were harvested now, leaving nothing but stubble.

We kept walking, down a dark dirt road with ankle-deep ruts. The fields came right up to the road, with only a thin strip of weeds separating the two. On a larger scale, the fields were just a thin strip themselves: a few hundred feet of cleared land on either side of the road, and beyond that, the Bush... virgin forest, walled with shadows. No doubt, local hunters ventured into the woods often enough, following the game trails and daring the underbrush; but hunters tended to camp where their ancestors had camped, to stake out the same watering holes, to lurk outside the same lairs. I was sure the trees concealed wilder places, a deep heartland where humans had not penetrated in all the lifetime of the multiverse.

And then the fields ended.

I could see the end coming: the point where the forest closed in around the road. The trees were tall and rustling in the wind, mostly elms and oaks and maples; in daylight, their leaves might be the vibrant reds and oranges of fall, but in the darkness they looked jet black. Branches reached across the road, choking off the slight glow of the overcast sky. As we approached, the way ahead looked like the mouth of a cave.

“Honored alu,” Wheezle said in a low voice, “is this truly wise? The trees provide perfect cover for bandits... or perhaps more fearsome threats.”

“I’m hard to surprise,” November answered. “Besides, this road runs spikeward and very little traffic comes this way. You may find the occasional barmy out here, living on nuts and berries, but the caravan routes run east-west around the rim. That’s where you

get bandits.”

She said nothing about other lurking things; and the Outlands were surely filled with dangerous beasts, especially near a cursed town like Plague-Mort. I looked at the blackness of the woods, drawing nearer with each step we took, and asked, “Where is this portal anyway?”

“Not far,” November said. “The gate is just a short way into the forest, inside a small chapel... built long ago by a group that worshipped the snake people.” She nodded toward Zeerith. “The nagas claim a huge tract of land spikeward from here, but they seldom come this close to town. According to legend, the nagas were embarrassed by the snake cult’s form of worship, so they left the area in distaste. The cult faded away soon after; some say they all committed suicide in the hope of winning back the nagas’ attention. All I know is, the chapel has been abandoned for as long as I’ve lived in Plague-Mort, and probably centuries before that.”

Hezekiah cleared his throat. “Have you, uh... ever been to this chapel at night?”

I could guess what was on the boy’s mind. Abandoned chapels do not qualify as safe places for nocturnal visits, especially if all the former devotees killed themselves. But November said, “It’s not haunted, if that’s what you mean. Do you know how many do-gooders come through Plague-Mort every year? And can you imagine how they drool when they hear of a deserted chapel not far from town? If there were ever ghosts in the place, the poor shades got cleaned out generations ago. And don’t worry about other kinds of trouble either: a party of adventurers toured the place just last week, and the worst they found was a squirrel who bobbed a crust of their bread.”

The others smiled at that, but not me. My father once listed for me a dozen lethal creatures who could magically disguise themselves as squirrels.



The road through the forest was dark enough; but soon November led us off on a side-path that was positively Stygian. Only a hint of light could struggle through the dense cover of autumn leaves, making our trail as dark as a mineshaft. Occasionally something would dart across the ground, stirring up a racket through the crisp fallen leaves; then November would call out “Rabbit” or “Badger” to calm our startled nerves.

I had thought rabbits and badgers were field animals, not the sort to prowl through thick woods.

We made an unconscionable amount of noise—I defy the stealthiest of forest rangers to walk quietly along a path covered with crinkly dry leaves—but no monsters attacked us in the ten minutes it took to reach the chapel. Tree roots tripped us, nettles pricked us, and a pair of crows cawed indignantly at having their sleep disturbed; still nothing happened. In time, we walked into a clearing wide enough that the trees could not block a large patch of sky... and there in front of us was a square stone building perhaps ten paces on each side.

“The portal is the door to the inner vestry,” November said. For some reason, she was whispering. “The key is anything shaped like a snake. I’ve got a little talisman in my pocket, but frankly, your friend Zeerith would probably...”

Her voice trailed off. Speaking of things shaped like a snake, an enormous serpent had just emerged from the door of the chapel. It measured more than fifteen feet, almost twice as long as Zeerith; and although it had a male human head, it had no hair. Instead,

it flared out a cobra's hood with menacing intent.

"Honored naga," Wheezele shouted quickly, "we come in peace!"

"Do you?" His voice was iced with hostility. "When you hold my daughter captive?"

"Daughter?" Zeerith whispered.

"She isn't a captive," Yasmin put in quickly, "she's a refugee. If we hadn't helped her out of town—"

"She should not have been in town!" the male naga roared. "Do you think we approve of leggers stealing our children? I have missed this daughter for years. I have sought this daughter for years. And only tonight, in the moment of her molting, could I finally sense her awakened soul. It is a gift our kind possess, to locate kin. Now she has been found, and her kidnappers will pay!"

"They didn't kidnap me," Zeerith protested weakly. "They saved me from a fire—"

"Silence!" the other naga commanded. "You have known nothing but slavery, since the day of your birth. It has confused you. You think of your captors as generous people who gave you food and attention; but all leggers are exploiters, child, and they want you to do their bidding. If these particular leggers have not hurt you, it only means they are more subtle than most—they snare you with honey, rather than violence. You are too young and trusting. I know better."

"You know fizz," said November in disgust. "If this is your daughter, take her and be piked; but save the sermons for someone with a stronger stomach. I'm not getting paid to put up with such barcardle, and I certainly won't—"

A beam of red light lanced from the naga's forehead. It struck November in the face, splashed out, and wrapped around her head like a veil. She lifted her hands as if she could pull loose the weaving scarlet; but the glow swept down her body like a wave washing over the shore, speeding down to her toes and out to her fingers in less than a second. Her arms jerked to a stop. Indeed, her whole body froze as stiff as rigor mortis, and she tumbled to the ground like a statue knocked from its pedestal.

After a few seconds, the red light faded. She looked no different—still flesh and blood, not turned to stone—but if she was breathing at all, it was too thready to tell.

Yasmin slid her sword from its sheath. Reluctantly, I did the same. "Sir," Yasmin called to the naga, "whatever you believe, we've done nothing wrong. The truth is, we've only known your daughter a few hours, and in that short time, we've saved her life from three separate threats. Of course, you'll just dismiss my claim as another lie. However, I'm not lying when I tell you this: the fate of thousands depends on us reaching Sigil before disaster strikes. You stand between us and the portal we need. We don't want a fight, but we'll do what we must with a clear conscience—you struck the first blow."

Miriam raised her fists into a fighting stance, but whispered out of the side of her mouth to Hezekiah. "Why don't you just teleport us inside?"

"I can't," the boy grimaced. "Rivi blanked me back at the house."

"You've had a sleep since then," I reminded him, but Hezekiah simply glowered.

"Not enough sleep," he muttered, "and not the right kind."

"We're waiting," Yasmin called to the father naga. "Get out of the way, and we'll leave without a fuss. We're fond of Zeerith and would hate to hurt you for her sake; but we will if you leave us no choice."

"You never had a choice, leggers." The naga's voice was venomous... not a pleasant

word to consider while confronting a giant snake. “When I sensed my daughter’s molting,” he continued, “she was still inside the town. I thought I’d need an army to rescue her. As it turns out, you’ve conveniently brought her to me... but I still have the army.”

Suddenly, we were surrounded by scratchy rustling sounds. More than a dozen serpentine heads lifted from mounds of fallen leaves scattered around the forest—a platoon of nagas emerging from camouflage. Yasmin sprinted for the door of the chapel, but beams of scarlet light shot out from three directions and brought her down like a lassoed steer. She had time to curl into fetal position before the rays froze her as solid as November.

Miriam cursed and threw herself on top of Hezekiah. I dropped to the ground and rolled in the general direction of the chapel, aware that snakes were probably better at dirt-hugging than I was. Out in the darkness, Zeerith sobbed, “No, please, no...”

...then my world went scarlet, rapidly followed by black.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



THREE TESTS,
COME WINTER

have many different aftereffects. Some leave you feeling as if giants have diligently clubbed every bone in your body; others cause no direct pain, but make you painfully sensitive to loud noises; a few put you into a state of insatiable arousal; and one I ran into in Ysgard left me unable to see any shade of green for three days.

I paid the mage double for that one.

When I awoke from the naga's spell, my throat was ragged by a raspy

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dryness, as if some frenzied clawed creature had crawled down to my epiglottis and was now digging its way out. There was a marble floor beneath my cheek, and lying on it had stiffened most of my muscles; but I was alive and relatively undamaged, a condition I certainly hadn't expected after the nagas coldcocked me.

Blinking, I sat up. The space around me was huge and very white, with marble slabs on the floor, walls, and even ceiling. In front of me, a row of unglazed windows opened onto a grayly overcast day, its sky displaying that muted fluffiness that always promises snow. Narrow marble benches ran under the windows, situated so that you could lean back and prop your arms comfortably on the window-ledge behind you.

A man was doing precisely that, sitting casually, watching me gather my senses.

"Hello, Britlin," he said at last.

"Hello, Father," I answered.



Niles Cavendish had aged considerably since I'd seen him last. His black hair was now amply salted with streaks of white; his mustache had turned completely gray, and every line on his face had deepened. Laugh-lines they were called, and Father Niles had obviously laughed a great deal after walking out on his wife and child.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Physically or emotionally?"

"Let's go with the physical for starters."

I shrugged, then silently chided myself—if I reverted to a sulky adolescent at the first glimpse of this man, I'd soon despise myself. Being able to act like a grown-up was something that set me apart from him... wasn't it? "No broken bones," I said. "I'm fit to fight a pit fiend."

"With my sword." He nodded down at my side, where the rapier still hung from my belt. "I'm glad it wasn't lost."

"You can have it back any time you want."

I began to unbuckle the sheath, but he waved at me to stop. "Keep it. I

outer promenade around a much larger building; how big I couldn't tell, but as home to a goddess, it might extend for miles.

Outside the window, fat quiet snowflakes had begun to drift on the air. It surprised me Shekinester allowed such weather—it couldn't be good for her cold-blooded devotees. On the other hand, it wasn't cold here in the hall, despite the open windows; obviously the goddess kept her palace at a suitable temperature and let the surrounding environment take care of itself.

"Are we supposed to stay put?" I asked my father. "Or can we look around?"

"Do what you like," he answered. "When Shekinester wants to test you, she'll start wherever you are. I wouldn't go far outside though." He gestured through the window. Now that I was standing, I could see that the building was surrounded by winter-dead gardens, and beyond them, dense forest. "Bad things happen to people out in the trees," Father said. "You're lucky the nagas carried you through to the hall. If they'd left you in the woods, you'd soon become something's dinner."

"I'll stay inside," I assured him. "I just want to stretch my muscles."

"Is this a way of saying you want to get away from me?"

"You can walk with me if you like."

He must have realized I was only making the offer out of politeness; but he rose from the bench and dusted a few stray snowflakes off his shoulder. "After you, son," he said, waving vaguely to let me decide which direction to go.



We walked in silence for several minutes. Considering how little our surroundings changed, we might have been walking on a treadmill that kept us in the same place. The walls and floor remained pristine marble, with no distinguishing features. The scenery outside the windows continued to be gardens and trees, slowly accumulating a cover of white. Nothing grew closer. Nothing grew farther away.

Finally, my father said, "They call this place the Hall of Tests. Today it must be testing our boredom threshold."

"You said Shekinester was judging your patience."

"Perhaps."

He made a face and continued walking. When I was young, I could remember him striding with the grace and power of a tiger: master swordsman, hero of forlorn hopes, a legend in Sigil and many other corners of the multiverse. Now his feet slapped ponderously along the marble floor and I was forced to slow down so he could keep up with me.

After a few minutes, I cleared my throat. "You haven't asked about Mother yet."

"No. I haven't."

"Guilty conscience?"

"Britlin," he sighed, "I was abducted. Something I'd done must have caught Shekinester's attention—I still don't know what. One night, five nagas simply came out of nowhere, hit me with five separate paralysis spells, and dragged me here. I know you must have suffered when I didn't come back, but there was nothing I could do."

I didn't answer for several seconds. Then I said, "Mother is healthy enough, but she never leaves the house."

"That was true long before I left."

“If she had a husband at home to help her—”

He cut me off. “Anne had a grown son at home. What could I do that you shouldn’t be doing yourself?”

“I do what I can,” I snapped. “It’s mostly her father’s fault, I know that, but you didn’t help: filling her head with stories about the horrors you’ve faced...”

Father looked at me with an unreadable expression on his face. At last he said, “She already knew the world was full of horrors, Britlin; what I told her was that the horrors could be defeated.”

“You could have stayed with her, instead of traipsing off on so many adventures...”

“She wanted me to go!” he growled. Then in a quieter voice he said, “Anne wanted me to go, Britlin. She wanted to be a good wife, but under the surface she feared me, just as she feared everyone else but you. Whenever I walked into the room, she just... tensed like a frightened rabbit. She worked so hard to hide it—sometimes I heard her chanting to herself, He saved me, he saved me, he’s not like all the rest. But she was always relieved to have me out of the house.”

“And was she relieved when you bedded other women?” I asked.

“Yes, Britlin, she was.” He ran his fingers sadly through his hair. “That part of marriage was beyond her. But Anne couldn’t stand the thought of me living like a monk because of her. When I spent time with other women, it was a great relief to her; she was glad I wasn’t... deprived.”

“I’m sure it comforts you to see it that way.” I refused to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Anne encouraged me time and time again,” he answered, “and seemed genuinely pleased when I... I’m not a lecherous man, Britlin, but over the course of a lifetime, passion does occasionally gain the upper hand. When your heart is filled with triumph or loneliness, and there’s a woman in front of you, preciously eager... can you tell me you’ve never been swept away?”

“No. But I’ve never been married either. And I never had a son at home... or a daughter, as it turns out.”

He looked at me curiously. “What do you mean by that?”

“Did you ever tell a woman your name was Rudy Liagar? A tiefling woman?”

He said nothing. I could see the answer was yes.

“She bore you a child,” I told him. “A daughter named Yasmin... who may be under judgment by Shekinester even as we speak. The nagas took her the same time they took me.”

He closed his eyes and lowered his head. “Now I know you’re simply an illusion, sent to taunt me. A daughter? I have a child... a daughter?”

“So I believe.”

“And what is she like?” he demanded. “Is she... never mind!”

Without waiting for me to speak, he ran to the nearest window and vaulted over the sill. He struck the ground heavily, crumpling to his knees in the thin layer of snow; but he quickly regained his feet and staggered out across the garden. His breath steamed away from him, and the snow clogged around the edges of his boots. He ran stiffly, as if he hadn’t moved at speed for a long time.

As if he had grown old.

I realized, of course, that he must have an idea where Yasmin was being held... that he was going to her, or going to appeal to someone on her behalf. It didn't matter—I couldn't bring myself to follow him, although I could easily catch up with his clumsy old running. Some part of me felt pleased I'd finally pierced him; another part felt burning shame.

In about a minute, he disappeared behind a cedar hedge. Then he was gone. His footprints began to fill with unhurried snow.



After a while, I started walking again—if I had stayed in one place, watching the snow fall so somberly, I might have crumbled into tears. There is always something sad about the first snowfall; I told myself that was all I was feeling.

With every step along the marble floor, I replayed the conversation with my father... our first talk since he'd disappeared twelve years ago, or maybe the first talk in our lives. A hundred things I should have said rose unbidden in my mind: resentments that refused to solidify into rational phrases. I knew I was right—he'd been a bad father to me, a worse husband to my mother—but every time I put my reasons into words, they sounded childish and petty. That must be his fault too; his oh-so-noble attitude reduced me to a whining adolescent.

And still the snow fell. Still the hall continued unchanging in front of me: white floor, white wall, white ceiling. Suddenly, my anger at my father veered off into fury at the bland surroundings, and I cried, "Enough is enough! Where's the door out?"

The only answer was silence, all echoes of my voice soaked up by the snow outside.

Should I take the easy exit: hop through an open window into the garden? If this boring sameness was a test from Shekinester, leaving by the obvious route wasn't a clever answer. Perhaps there was a hidden way out, some concealed door I was supposed to find... or perhaps this featureless hall was simply an illusion I could break with sufficient willpower.

"All right," I said to the air. "You do understand, you're dealing with a Sensate?"

Shekinester must know my faction; I wasn't sure how deeply a god could see into my soul, but it didn't take omniscience to notice the signet ring on my finger. Had she designed this test to see how true I was to the Sensate ideal? Or had she set things up specifically to deceive the Sensate mind?

I'd soon find out.



Step one: marking the territory. I jumped into the garden, and cleared away enough snow to dig up two handfuls of loose earth. Clambering back inside was accompanied by a certain amount of soil spillage, leaving dirty smears down the front of my pants; but I managed the trick at last and deposited one hand's worth of loam on the immaculate marble floor.

"Starting point," I said to no one in particular.

Keeping my eye on the dirt, I paced up the hall—about a hundred and fifty yards, until the brown clot of soil was getting hard to see against the white background. Looking the other direction along the hall, I didn't see any such clump. That was comforting: you never knew when a tricky magical effect might turn a seemingly straight corridor into an endless loop. The possibility still existed, of course, if the length of the

loop was longer than three hundred yards; but I had a hunch that I wouldn't have to stray so far afield to find a way out. Stooping again, I placed my other handful of dirt to mark out the end of the region I'd search.

For the next hour or so, I scanned the walls, floor and ceiling between my two markers: looking for tiny irregularities, tapping each tile, pressing and probing to see if any marble square had even the ghost of a wobble. No such ghosts materialized—whether Shekinester built this palace herself or allowed her worshippers to build it for her, someone had achieved a flawless feat of construction.

When my search reached the original marker, I turned around and started up the hall again, this time examining the window sills and the benches beneath them. The benches, made from solid slabs of marble, were too heavy to move without risking a hernia; I decided I wouldn't try to budge one unless I had good reason. That meant minute investigation of each bench and the floor where it stood, hoping to detect evidence of jiggery-pokery... but again, I found nothing but the most solid construction, not the tiniest scratch or blemish. By the time I reached the other marker, I knew I had to take a different approach.

Think—Shekinester, queen of the nagas. What did I know about nagas? Snake-people: no arms, no legs. They could all cast magic spells... but I couldn't, so if the way out required sorcery, I had no chance of success. Gods have never been noted for playing fair with mortals, but I didn't think Shekinester would set me a test that was completely impossible. It wouldn't have enough entertainment value.

Nagas... snakes... slithering along the ground, flicking their forked tongues...

Hmmm.

I lay down on my stomach and stuck out my own tongue. As I told Zeerith, I knew a few Sensate nagas in Sigil, and they were forever bragging about the acuteness of their taste buds. They could taste things on the air the way a bloodhound smells odors... and the forks of their tongues even let them track directions—if a taste was stronger on the left fork than the right, they knew where to turn to hunt out the source.

Could I taste anything now? Just a hint of bitterness. I sniffed about, and soon realized I was sensing the heap of dirt I'd placed as a marker in front of me. Crawling away from the soil, I felt rather pleased that I could detect anything at all. In a few yards, the taste/smell of the dirt faded and I got down to the serious business of examining the world, serpent-style.

Slither on my stomach. Stick out my tongue. Sniff for any odors beyond my own sweat. I must have looked ridiculous, but I regarded that as a positive thing—if Shekinester disdained “leggers” like the naga we'd met at the chapel, she'd be delighted by my clumsy performance. It would confirm her sense of superiority.

Mind you, she was a goddess. She was superior.

For the first few yards, I kept my tongue out continuously, thinking that the more exposure, the more chance I had of tasting something worthy of note. After a minute, however, the air left my tongue as dry as an autumn leaf, its surface as numb as leather. Changing tactics, I began to flick out my tongue for a few seconds, then pull it back into my mouth where I could contemplate any flavors that might have been procured... like a wine taster, swishing around the latest vintage in search of fruity aftertones.

Surprisingly, I found something.

Was it a testament to my refined Sensate perceptions? Or did Shekinester amplify the taste to give my dim “legger” senses a fighting chance? It didn’t matter. After a mere five minutes of dragging around on my belly, I caught a distinct flavor of oranges wafting on the air. Sniff, sniff... there was no smell, just the taste. That had to be a good sign: it smacked of magic.

I wriggled forward a few more feet, and tried the air again. The orange flavor had weakened. Were my taste buds becoming jaded? Oh, for a quick sorbet to refresh the palate! But I backtracked and found the flavor as strong as ever in my original position. All right: I was on to something.

Lick, lick the air. Toward the windows... the flavor dwindled. The opposite direction... and the taste grew more acute, tartly acidic as if the oranges were still completely green. By the time I reached the wall, the sensation was as sharp as spikes on my tongue, like lapping the spill from a tannery: the purified essence of oranges, biting and nasty. It burned my mouth, bringing tears to my eyes and making my nose run freely.

If it had somehow started a ringing in my ears, the moment would have been perfect.

My tongue touched the wall, and suddenly the taste vanished. For a few worried moments, I wondered if my tongue had totally shut down under the bitter assault; but I lifted my fingers to my mouth and could taste the gamey salt of my perspiration. I tried the wall again—absolutely nothing.

Hmm.

As an experiment, I dropped my mouth to the marble floor. It was warm, probably the source of the heat that kept this hall more livable than the snowy garden. The tile tasted of dust, and the slightly mineral tang of marble.

The wall looked exactly like the floor—pure white stone the two of them. Yet the wall had no taste at all.

I moved down a few panels and tasted the wall again. This set of tiles were much like the floor, warm against my tongue and tinged with dust. But on the first patch of wall, the tiles still radiated an intense flavor of oranges but had no taste at all when my mouth actually touched them.

It had the unmistakable air of magic at work. That part of the wall had to be an illusion—good enough to fool sight and touch, but not meant to deceive all five senses. A snake sliding down the hall would be led straight to this spot by the spoor of oranges, and would know with its tongue that the tiles were false.

Dropping down to my stomach again, I closed my eyes and stuck out my tongue. Inch by inch I crawled forward, waiting for the moment when my tongue would actually press against the wall and stop.

The moment never came. The illusion yielded, as intangible as mist... and when I opened my eyes, I was no longer in the featureless marble hall. Nor was I alone. A centaur, tall and muscular, towered above me.

“Ah,” he said. “I see that you’re painting.”



“I’m not...”

For a moment, my head spun dizzily, blackness crowding around me. Then the world snapped back into focus: a noisy world, full of people talking to each other or simply waiting in lines. I was standing beside my easel, a brush in my hand... and all around me

was the complacent ruckus of the Sigil City Courts.

“The hustle and bustle of what this city calls justice,” the centaur continued. “Prisoners hobbling by in chains. Litigants glaring at each other as they await trial...”

His voice droned on, but I ignored it. This whole scene was unquestionably an illusion. Even if Shekinester could magically transport me to Sigil, the City Courts would not look so pleasantly normal. By now, the Guvners might have scraped up the charred corpses; but it would take months to clean away the scorch marks, and even longer to purge the ashen smell of cooked pork.

“What is your theme, young man?” the centaur demanded.

“My theme?” I asked, coming out of my daze.

“What artistic statement are you making? How the law oppresses—”

I grabbed him by his husky shoulders. “Stop rattling your bone-box! You’re a sodding illusion, that’s all you are. This is all a sodding illusion!”

“Ah... now that is an interesting theme,” he answered with a judicious nod. “Far from original, of course, but still a meaty proposition. Is our existence simply a fantasy in the mind of some unknown dreamer? Are we all figments of some higher imagination? I applaud you, young man. That is precisely the sort of issue Great Art should address...”

I closed my ears to his prattle. It was not the time to think about Great Art; it was a time to gape at Bleach-Hair Petrov as he and two cronies walked into the rotunda. The trio were once more disguised as Harmonium guards... and dangling at their sides hung three ruby-glittered firewands.



It hadn’t happened this way: the fireballers hadn’t arrived till later, maybe half an hour after I’d brushed off the centaur. Hezekiah had been with me then—Hezekiah who had teleported me away from blazing death. It was too early, the Clueless boy was nowhere in sight... and Petrov was moving toward the center of the rotunda.

What to do? The sword at my side had vanished—I hadn’t been wearing it that day at the courts—and a bare-handed attack on the false guards would buy me nothing. All three were broad-shouldered brawlers, more than able to hold their own in a fist-fight with me; even given the element of surprise, I’d be lucky to deck a single one of them before the other two roasted me in my boots. There were a pair of genuine Harmonium guards flanking the front entrance, but they would be no use. Even if I had time to run across and persuade them to help, we could scarcely approach the fireballers without being noticed. As soon as they saw us coming, Petrov and his henchmen would start blasting.

Of course, I did have time to run—to dash down the closest corridor and lose myself in the warren of Guvner offices before the carnage started. I even considered standing my ground, doing nothing; this was an illusion, wasn’t it, sent by Shekinester to test me. With an iron will, I could ignore the flames from the firewands... but could I ignore the screams of the people as they burned? The high whistling shrieks of throats too ruined to make any other sound...

No. There are some sounds willpower can’t shut out. And there are times when a man has to fight with the only weapons he has.

I snatched up a stick of charcoal from my box of art supplies.



The top of my canvas was filled with curlicues, but the lower two thirds was still blank. That was where I would draw my picture. Closing my eyes for a moment, I thought of the image I wanted to draw, re-creating every detail in my mind. There wouldn't be time for details, for flawless accuracy or technique—just a thirty second sketch that conveyed a message so powerful it would freeze the hand of a killer.

Taking a deep breath, I began to draw.

The outlines of a man's body. A short scepter in his hand. A face, Petrov's face: I had no time to spend on every feature, but I could show a man weeping in agony.

Flames ravaging Petrov's flesh as Unveiler burned.

Rivi, simpering at Petrov's pain.

It was all suggestion, all sweeping lines and rough edges... yet I knew what I was drawing, could see it clearly in my mind's eye. Petrov in the machine room of the Glass Spider, forced to do Rivi's will—forced by her to hold Unveiler while ungodly heat shriveled his arm.

I had no time for niceties. The finished picture was scarcely a picture at all, just allusions of horror and suffering; to other eyes it might be jumbled nonsense, but to me it was as clear as the most fastidious rendering.

I had captured the essence, not the image. Pray that Petrov saw what I did.

Ripping the canvas off the easel, I held it high above my head. The false guards had gone into their huddle in the middle of the room, concealing their actions as they drew their firewands. I walked toward them, arms high; and people, looking at the swirling sketch over my head, shuffled back out of my way. Each viewer's eyes opened wide. Mouths dropped open, and a few hurried around in front to get a second look. The centaur, now standing across the room, squinted at the canvas, then softly began to applaud.

Throughout the rotunda, the noise of the crowd changed. Many fell silent, just staring. Those out of position to see the sketch whispered to one another, asking what it might be. The Harmonium guards at the front entrance stepped inside, hands reaching for their swords; no doubt they had heard the hush and thought it meant trouble.

Petrov and his henchmen sensed the growing silence too. They broke their huddle, firewands snapping out to the ready. Over by the entrance, the real guards sucked in their breaths—they recognized the lethal potential of the situation. If they charged their way forward, hundreds of innocent people might die... and no matter how bull-headed the Harmonium can be, these two had their priorities straight. They froze, blades drawn, anger glittering in their eyes; for the moment, they would restrain themselves, rather than precipitate a bloodbath.

"Don't anyone move," one of the real guards commanded. "Let's all be peery as angels."

The closest henchman curled his lip and raised his wand; but I shouted, "Petrov!" and Bleach-Hair turned to face me.

His gaze swept across my face without recognition. Then he looked higher, to the canvas over my head, and his eyes narrowed. "What's that then?" he snapped.

"Look at it," I replied. "It's your future. If you use those wands, if you keep working for Rivi, your future ends like this."

He sneered, but his eyes remained on the picture. I continued forward to give him a better view. No one else moved in the whole rotunda; no one whispered, no one shuffled feet or tried to draw a weapon.

“You can see it’s real,” I told Petrov. “This isn’t just a figment of my imagination, this is something I saw. Look at it. You know what you’re seeing.”

His expression scarcely changed—a small tightening of the lips, a tiny narrowing of the eyes—but I knew the very instant when the image blazed its way into his mind. He saw himself burning, he saw Rivi laughing... and he saw it was the truth.

Petrov let out his breath slowly. “Come on, bloods,” he said without looking at his henchmen, “let’s hop it.”

“But we haven’t—”

“I said, hop it.”

With deliberate slowness, he reached into his shirt and pulled out a golden amulet hanging around his neck. His gaze never left my sketch. He lifted the amulet to his lips and paused a moment: for the briefest of seconds, he lowered his eyes and nodded toward me. Then he kissed the amulet’s golden face, and the three fireballers vanished in a shimmer of silver.

Inch by inch, the shimmer spread: enveloping the closest bystanders, still frozen in shock; sweeping across the two Harmonium guards, one gritting his teeth that the criminals had escaped, the other simply looking relieved. On and on the silver glimmer grew, dissolving the tapestries that covered every wall space, the cornugon, the deva... until the entire rotunda had vanished, the people, the stones, the curlicues. I was wrapped in a soft vibrancy of light, warm and approving.

Then, stepping through the shimmer came my father and Yasmin, walking arm-in-arm.



“So you found her,” I said to my father.

“She was looking for me,” he replied.

“One of the Shekinester’s little tests,” Yasmin muttered. I waited for her to say more, but the clench of her jaw showed she had no intention of explaining.

My father had also noted the grimness of her expression. Patting her on the shoulder, he said, “That’s all behind you now, girl. And I can tell you something to cheer you up.”

She slipped away from his arm. “What is it?”

“Britlin,” he turned to me, “Yasmin says you two... that you’ve been...”

“Incest,” I said. “Is that the word you’re looking for?”

“That word must be on your minds,” he nodded, “but you can forget it.”

“I can’t forget it,” Yasmin told him, a harsh edge to her voice. “I can’t... not if Britlin’s my brother.”

“But he isn’t your brother.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You aren’t my father, after all?”

“I may be your father, Yasmin, but I know I’m not his.”

He turned his finger to point to me.



“What are you talking about?” I demanded. “I know you’re my father.”

“No, Britlin, I’m not.”

“You’re lying,” I snapped.

“Britlin,” he said softly, “you know how your mother is. Do you really think she’d let me touch her? Ever? I didn’t father you, boy. Of all the women who took me to their beds, your mother wasn’t one of them.”

“Then who was my father?”

“Duke Urbin, of course—Anne’s own father. She was pregnant by him when I found her. That was really the only reason he let me take her away: he wanted her out of Aquilune before his neighbors noticed her condition. They’d all know who had fathered the child, and there are some crimes even a duke can’t get away with. He performed the wedding ceremony himself, then sent Anne and me back to Sigil where she’d be safely out of sight.”

My heart had seized in my chest. “And I was the…”

“You were the child, yes. Not the fruit of my loins, but I tried to be a father to you. At first, just for Anne’s sake, but then for your own. I liked having a son, Britlin. Just as I like having a daughter.” He smiled at Yasmin. “But you two have no common blood. Nothing stands between you.”

I wanted to sit down; but there were no chairs, just the surrounding silver shimmer, as if we stood completely separate from the rest of the multiverse. With all the resentments I had felt toward my father... but he was not my father, he was just a professional hero, who had saved my mother as he would save anyone else in trouble. He married her because that was the way to save her, and he had supported me throughout childhood because that was the honorable thing to do. Could I resent him anymore? In a single revelation, he had released me from the burden of living up to him... not to mention freeing me to love Yasmin.

By all the gods, it was slickly done.

Yasmin stepped forward, her face beaming. She was reaching out to wrap her arms around my neck when I said, “No.”

“‘No’ what?” she asked.

“No to everything.” I pulled away from her. “This is all too piking convenient.”

“What are you talking about?” Her smile collapsed. “Why are you acting like a berk?”

“My father,” I said, gesturing toward him. “After twelve years, he just shows up here in the Court of Light. He has a plausible explanation for everything—why he never came back, how my mother would be happy that he consorted with other women—and he even tells us it’s perfectly all right to be lovers if we want. Isn’t that neat? Isn’t that glib? One little secret clears away all the shadows.

“Well, I refuse to believe it,” I continued. “I would refuse to believe it if I heard it in Sigil, and I certainly refuse to believe it when it’s delivered here in the Hall of Tests. Niles Cavendish is my father. I know that so deeply in my heart, all the waters of the River Styx couldn’t wash the knowledge away. I’ve longed to be someone else’s son, but I’m not—I don’t have that choice. Neither does Shekinester.”

I waved my hands to dismiss the people in front of me. “Go back to the goddess now. Tell her I’m my father’s son. I won’t say I’ve made my peace with that, but it’s time to stop denying the truth.”

Both the others opened their mouths as if they intended to argue; but no words came

out. The expression on my face must have told them debate was futile. For a moment, the two exchanged glances... and then my father simply dissolved into copper-colored sparks that fell to the ground like rain.

“An illusion, of course,” I murmured. Turning to Yasmin, I said, “He was never here at all, was he?”

“He visited our court long ago,” came the answer. “He is elsewhere now.”

The voice was not Yasmin’s—it was still female but deeper, impossibly golden. No human throat had ever spoken with such soft power. In the blink of an eye, Yasmin’s body flared to a brilliant white, so dazzling I had to avert my eyes. The image thinned and lengthened, twisting and turning in spirals around me, until I was ringed by a snake of white fire, its tail stretching around and around in ever-widening circles. A fierce heat beat against my face; but I managed to stammer out, “Shekinester?”

“Only one of Her daughters,” the flaming serpent replied. “You have passed our Mother’s tests. Be glad.”

“What about my friends?”

“They are being tested too. If they are weak, they shall fail.”

“I’d like to help them,” I said.

“You cannot. In this place, all souls stand alone.”

The naga’s blazing face sizzled close to mine, too blindingly bright for me to make out any features. With the speed of a cobra striking, her head darted forward, directly at me; but instead of a bite, I felt the kiss of fiery lips on my cheek. Light flared from all directions... and abruptly, I was standing near the center of a large stone chamber, high-ceilinged and devoid of decoration.

There was only one source of illumination in all that great wide space—a pillar of snow-white flame, burning in the very heart of the room. I stood at the base of a flight of low stone steps, leading up to the fire like the ascent to a tabernacle.

Surrounding me, filling the chamber to the very walls, stood an army of the undead. Simple zombies, their skins hanging in loose and rotting sags... skeletons with bony faces in perpetual grins... a cloudy congregation of ghosts, specters, haunts, and wraiths, as thick as midnight fog... vampires, pallid and mesmerizing, standing shoulder to shoulder with lich sorcerers, their fleshless fingers a’glitter with heavy-jeweled rings... and of course, scattered throughout the dark company, the baleful bonfire eyes of wights.

From reflex, my hand dropped to my side. It touched my father’s rapier, restored to me now that the testing was over; but I let my fingers relax, and did not draw.

“Okay,” I called to the assembled horde. “Hands up all those who feel as uncomfortable as I do right now.”

I thought I saw a zombie lift its arm, but it might just have been rigor mortis.



With a rattle of bones and armor, a death knight stepped from the front row of watchers. It wore chain mail, covered with a tabard that had once been pure white linen; but a fuzzy black smut had grown over the cloth, powdering out whatever emblem this knight had fought for in life. The creature’s face was skeletal, with the orbit around one eye raggedly smashed away—probably a death blow from a mace, sending this once-noble warrior to an uneasy afterlife.

When the knight spoke, its voice had the chilling tone of a crumbling mortuary.

“Now,” it said, “you must enter the Arching Flame.”

“The Arching Flame?” I looked back over my shoulder at the pillar of fire. “That flame?”

“You have passed the easy tests,” the creature said. “Now you must be purified.”

“If that involves incineration, I’d rather not.”

“The flame does not burn those who are true to themselves. It cleanses. It restores.” The knight turned its head toward the brightness. “I would enter it myself if I could.”

With a wave of my hand, I said, “Be my guest. I’ll sign over my ticket.”

The knight’s sword whipped out of its scabbard so fast the blade was a blur. Its tip pointed directly at my throat. “Take care,” the knight whispered. “Take care your flippant tongue does not start you down the road I have traveled. It is Shekinester’s will that you enter the flame. If you defy the goddess... but I shall not let you do that. Damned though I am, I will not permit you to suffer such a curse.”

The creature stepped forward and I had to retreat, backing away hurriedly from that sword. The weapon’s blade was fuzzed thickly with the same black smut that covered the knight’s tabard—fungal rot from a corruption that should have returned to the soil long ago. I leapt toward a gap in the front row of monsters... but suddenly, a phantom flickered into existence to fill the space, milky and groaning.

“No escape, mortal,” the death knight said behind me. “Shekinester wishes you to enter the flame. Whatever we might have been in life, we are hers now. She has given us relief from the raging insanity that affects others of our kind. In thanks, we do her bidding within this chamber.”

I looked out at the decaying company. Their faces did not twist with rage or regret, the two great anguishes of most undead; I saw only resolve, a determination to fulfill their duty to Shekinester and her flame.

“All right,” I shrugged. “Into the fire I go.”

Tossing a rakish wave to the knight, I ran up the steps and did a half-gainer into the heart of the blaze.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



THREE FLOPS IN THE FOREST†

remember what happened within the Arching Flame, I'd try to describe it. Heaven knows, I could peel free drinks for the rest of my life, just telling the tale to Sensates who wanted to know what it felt like to stand within that withering blaze. All that remains in my mind, however, is a brief moment of light, sensed not just with my eyes but with my skin, as if every inch of my flesh could see the brilliance that pierced me to the bone. My clothes vaporized in an instant, every fiber bursting into dusty smoke...

IF I COULD

...and then I lay naked under a night sky, the chill of snow beneath me. Clouds drifted across the darkness, but only a few: high wisps and tatters slipping along the starless black.

I sighed; and my breath turned to steam, drifting straight up on the calm air. For one brief moment, I was content to watch it mist away to nothingness... then the cold against my backside finally bit into my consciousness, and I dragged myself to my feet.

Before me stood the chapel to the nagas, the small stone building just outside of Plague-Mort. Snowflakes now dusted its roof, and nestled in the cracks of its crumbling masonry; but nothing else had changed. The surrounding forest had lost some of its dense foliage, the trees too disheartened to keep hold of their leaves now that the snow had come; and the rustle of small creatures scurrying through the darkness had grown quiet in the time we had been gone. Winter had descended, true winter... a time of peace and resignation, no matter how the cold shivered against my skin.

"Oh good," said a pleasant female voice. "You're awake."

A few yards away, Zeerith had coiled herself into the bole of an ancient elm, her tail draping down the tree's rough bark. It disconcerted me to stand unclothed in front of her cherubic teen-aged face; but she showed no sign of embarrassment herself. I suppose she must have looked upon me with the same indifference a human feels to see a dog naked. Then again..."Aren't you cold down there?" she asked from her perch. "I came up here to get

away from the snow."

"It would be nice to have some clothes," I told her. "Something warm."

Her brow furrowed for a moment, and she closed her eyes. The air filled with a barely audible buzzing, both a sound and a tangible prickling against my skin. I looked down and saw motes of white dust drifting out of the night, floating up to my body and settling down with the softness of feathers. More and more of the tiny specks swept from the darkness, until they began to clump together in downy swatches that quickly warmed with

my body heat. Still the dust streamed in; it thickened into a matted layer as cozy as brushed felt, but lighter than the finest linen. Almost as an afterthought, the covering of dust partitioned itself into separate garments, pants, shirt, jacket, gloves, and all of an utterly pure white.

“Feet,” Zeerith said, still concentrating intensely. I lifted one foot, then the other, to give the inflooding stream a chance to coat me with dense white boots, lighter than my old ones but as tough as metal plate. When those were done, I thought the outfit was finished; but the flow of dust simply shifted to my head, fashioning itself into a warm cowl that covered my hair and the back of my neck. I had the suspicion that Zeerith had shaped it to resemble a cobra’s hood: a young naga’s attempt to make a “legger” look less like a pathetic monkey.

“Well,” I said when the dust had stopped pouring in, “you seem to have mastered the knack of magic fast enough.”

“My father’s been helping me,” she answered. “He’s, um, insistent I learn my lessons quickly.”

“He looked like the kind to be strict,” I agreed. “Where is he now?”

“Prowling the woods. He’s impatient to get back to his own territory, but I wouldn’t leave till I knew you were all right.”

“I appreciate that,” I assured her. “And what about my friends?”

“Mother Shekinester will test them in Her own time,” Zeerith said. “If they survive the flame, my uncles and aunts will carry them back here. My relatives may not like leggers, but if your friends pass the Mother’s tests, my family will be honor-bound to provide that much help.”

“What happens,” I asked reluctantly, “if my friends don’t pass Shekinester’s tests?”

“They still enter the flame,” Zeerith replied. “They just don’t come out. The fire... it burns the soul as well as the body; there’s nothing left.”

“Does that happen often?”

“I don’t know. I’ve asked my father a great many questions, but some he refuses to—”

“Zeerith!” shouted a voice from the forest. “It’s time to go.”

“But, Father...”

“You wished to ensure the legger’s safety. You have done so. I see no reason to waste further time in such a creature’s presence.”

Zeerith gave me an apologetic look, but I simply smiled. “Fathers take some getting used to,” I said.



After they had gone, I took stock of myself. If the Arching Flame had “purified” me, I could detect no obvious difference. True, I felt superbly limber, free from the twinges and stiffness one gets from sleeping on the floor of an umbral hut; but why jump into a pillar of fire, when I could get the same relief from eight hours in a decent bed? At the moment I didn’t feel hungry or thirsty either, although days might have passed since I last put something in my stomach... still, you’d expect that visiting a goddess might have more profound effects than a good meal. Perhaps the blaze had burned away intangible imperfections—the “plugs of butter congealing in my heart”, as one dour Athar doctor warned me—but I had no way of perceiving such hidden cleansings.

Suffice it to say, I felt good but not supernaturally blessed... which left me wondering what I should do next.

November had told us the chapel held a portal to Sigil, and its key was the image of a serpent. I could make such a picture easily enough—rip off bark from the nearest tree and use a sharp stone to scratch out a drawing—but did I want to run back to Sigil before my companions returned? The thought of leaving without them turned my stomach: Niles Cavendish's son did not abandon his friends. On the other hand, did I dare waste precious time waiting for them when Rivi might be running rampant in the streets of my home?

And how much time had I lost already? The nagas had kidnapped us at night, it had been daytime at the Court of Light, and now it was night again. That meant at least twenty-four hours... but it could have been much more, depending on how long the nagas had kept us paralyzed and how long I'd been unconscious after going through the flame.

As I debated the question, my gaze roamed around the dark clearing and lit on something that reflected the white of my clothes like a mirror. When I investigated, I found my father's sword thrust into the frozen earth, almost a foot of its tip dug into the soil. The nagas must have brought it with them as they carried me to this place; but I found it hard to imagine either of them gripping the hilt by mouth and plunging it into the ground so forcefully. Perhaps Shekinester herself had transported the rapier here: a hint from the goddess that it was time for me to do battle.

Wrapping my fingers around the sword's pommel, I pulled up tentatively, just to test how firmly the blade was implanted in the soil. It slid out of the ground as soft as a whisper, as if the weapon was pushing itself free and I was simply holding on. When I looked at the tip, there wasn't the slightest fleck of dirt on the metal, nor any of the nicks and notches you'd expect from ramming a honed length of steel into the frozen forest floor. Indeed, the sword gleamed sharper than I'd ever seen before; and it occurred to me that I'd been wearing the rapier when I jumped into the flame. Just as the fire had scorched away my little aches and pains, it must have refined any minute imperfections in the weapon, leaving it sharper, more lethal, more magical than ever.

I laughed softly, then lifted my head to the sky. "You think you had a great sword, Father... you should see mine."



Five minutes later, I was putting the last touches onto a sketch scratched into a punky piece of oak bark. To make the image of a snake, I might have got away with a mere squiggly line—portals are seldom picky—but I had my pride. The picture showed a cobra ready to strike, its body raised, its hood flared, its fangs dripping venom... which is easier said than done, when your only drawing implement is a 4B wedge of limestone.

In the dim light I stared at the sketch, trying to decide if it needed something else or if adding more would clutter things up—the perennial dilemma of every artist—when I heard a rustling in the woods. Immediately I sprinted for the chapel, where I could hide in the blackness of the doorway... and where, if worst came to worst, I could use my drawing to flee through the portal to Sigil.

Silent moments passed, and I began to wonder if I'd been spooked by some porcupine, late for hibernation. Then, as hushed as an owl in flight, two nagas entered

the clearing. The one in front, a huge female with fangs so white they glowed, carried her head warily; her tongue flicked in and out constantly, left, right, left, as if she were certain that trouble must be lurking close by. Behind her, the other naga was smaller, with the fresh-hatched face of a boy scarcely older than Zeerith. He showed none of the caution of the other—in fact, he sported a beaming grin, suggesting he was enjoying every second of this adventure away from home.

Clinging to his neck, like a child riding a pony, sat Wheezy. The gnome wore an over-long robe cut in Dustman style; but instead of a somber gray, this garment was as white as the face of a moon. Even in this starless night, the cloth shone and shimmered as if it had been peeled off an unusually generous ghost.

The front naga hissed sharply, and stared in my direction. Belatedly, I remembered that I too was dressed in purest white—not the best sartorial choice for someone hiding in shadows. “It’s all right,” I called quickly. Stepping from the darkness, I said, “I’m a friend.”

“Honored Cavendish!” cried Wheezy with delight. He hopped from his perch on the young naga and ran forward, his arms wide. I was so astonished to see him on his feet again, I didn’t react; so when he reached me, he wrapped his arms around my knees and squeezed in warm embrace.

“You can walk again!” I marveled.

“He has passed through the flame,” the older naga said. “Why should you doubt that it healed him? Do you think the sacred fire is weak?”

“No, no,” I answered quickly. “I’ve been through the flame myself, you know.”

The naga blinked once, then she grudgingly nodded her head. “You are to be congratulated for passing Our Mother’s test.”

“And you passed too, Wheezy.” I squatted and returned the little gnome’s hug. “Your legs are really all right?”

“Better than that, honored Cavendish. My memory has returned.”

The boy-naga made a scoffing sound. “Why not? Shekinester’s stronger than the stupid old Styx.”

“And look,” said Wheezy. “Look at this.”

He held up his wrinkled old hand and made a circling gesture with his thumb. A ring of blue light flared into existence where the tip of his thumbnail traced through the air, then sprang up a few inches and dropped like a hoop around his index finger. With a small rattling noise, it disappeared again.

“What was that?” I asked.

“That was sorcery, honored-but-slow-on-the-uptake Cavendish. Shekinester’s flame burned me clean of Rivi’s dust. I have my magic back!”

“What about the others? Have you heard anything about them?”

Wheezy shook his head, but turned to the nagas who’d brought him here. The old female shrugged... or made a motion that would have been a shrug if she’d had shoulders. “No one knows how the Holy Mother will conduct Her tests,” she said. “It may take an hour, it may take a year. I can give no better answer.”

“We don’t have a year,” I muttered. “We may not even have an hour. Rivi’s taken a long headstart, and she’s not one to waste opportunities. Still,” I clapped Wheezy on the back, “you’ve got magic, and I’ve got one shining blood of a sword. Why don’t we go

kick some—”

Suddenly, the air ripped open in front of me, spilling out a stench of sulfur stronger than the vilest pits of Baator. The nagas hissed, Wheezy's hands blazed with eldritch energies, and I whipped my rapier up to attack position.

Obliviously, Hezekiah stepped from the reeking rift. “Hey Britlin,” he said, “see how far I can teleport now?”

CHAPTER TWENTY



THREE FLOORS OF MADNESS

wait for Yasmin, Hezekiah wanted to wait for Miriam, and surprisingly, Wheezle showed interest in waiting for our alu-friend, November; but we couldn't afford the delay. On another piece of bark, I scratched a note saying that the three of us had gone ahead... and I hoped Shekinester would release our companions in time to read the message.

The young and old naga watched wordlessly as I propped the chunk of bark beside the chapel door. For a moment, I considered asking them to

I WANTED + +

join against our enemies—heaven knew, we could use all the help we could get—but what incentive could I offer? The chance to get shredded by Rivi's wights? Or perhaps the possibility of having their minds enslaved by Rivi herself? The older naga was almost certainly the mother of the young one, and would never put him in danger.

Instead, I simply gestured for the mother to come nearer. She slithered warily across the snow. "If we fail," I told her in a low voice, "this area may not be safe in future. Sigil's on the other side of that portal, and Sigil may turn ugly. Talk to your people about mounting a guard."

She stared at me a moment, then nodded. "Try not to fail," she said.

Then she and her son slid quietly into the woods.



The interior of the chapel was filled with gloomy thickets of shadow, but a few shreds of light still managed to slip through the dirt-crusting windows. A smell of damp rot hovered in the air, coming from the clumps of fungus that fed off the long-unused pews. Here and there along the walls, a spill of white showed where snow had blown in through cracks between the stones; and somewhere close to the front of the sanctuary, a steady drip told of a leak in the roof.

Hezekiah's hand clutched at my sleeve. "November promised this place wasn't haunted, right?"

"Hezekiah," I said, "correct me if I'm wrong, but you went through a series of tests in the Court of Light, true?"

"I don't want to talk about them," he muttered.

"But at the end," I continued, "you must have walked into a pillar of fire, surrounded by several hundred undead of all descriptions. Now you're worried about this little place being haunted?"

The boy cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I wouldn't exactly say I walked into the pillar of fire. I was kind of escorted there."

"Escorted?"

"Okay, dragged. By three vampires, two ghouls, and this big white thing that kept groaning all the time."

to match her curtsy. “We are not of royal blood, nor are we potential husbands.”

“Ah, you have come incognito,” she smiled. “I find that charming. But I have waited so very long... very long, very long... it has been hard to keep up my spirits through the cruel days and nights. No doubt you were delayed by dragons?”

“Something like that,” I murmured; but my attention was elsewhere, scanning the view out the barred and dirty window. It showed a wide cobblestone street, a few ramshackle hovels, and a queue of people—humanoids and others—waiting somberly in dim twilight before this very building. Something about that queue seemed familiar: young adults standing with writhing children; older adults carrying stretchers where elderly white-hairs lay as still as corpses; men pleading with monsters only they could see, and women cringing as if every sound around them was a needle plunged into their flesh...

Suddenly, I recognized it all and knew where we were. “It’s the Gatehouse,” I said to Wheeple.

The gnome nodded as if he’d been thinking the same thing, but Hezekiah asked, “What’s the Gatehouse?”

“A place for those whose minds are bruised,” Wheeple told him. “It means we have truly returned to Sigil,” he added; but his tone of voice suggested he would prefer the blood-soaked streets of Plague-Mort to the Gatehouse Asylum.

Hezekiah’s expression said he felt much the same as Wheeple. “We’d better leave,” he muttered.

“Your majesties, please!” the orc woman cried. “You must not...” Her agitated voice broke off, and eased once more into a tranquil smile. “But of course, you will take me with you.”

“Honored lady,” Wheeple began... but she placed a wrinkled hand to his lips and shushed him.

“I know,” she said. “Gossiping tongues will wag—a young and vulnerable lass traveling unchaperoned with three lusty princes. But I have waited... I have waited so long... and people have said so many cruel things already. They have tried to tell me... they have claimed I am... foolish.” Her hands were still folded in front of her, but the knuckles had turned white as they squeezed against each other. “Please, your majesties... I have waited... I have worn this dress... this dress... I saved every farthing for this dress because I knew you would come... and marry me...”

I couldn’t meet her tear-filled gaze. As I lowered my eyes, I realized all my clothes were pristine white... as were Wheeple’s robes and Hezekiah’s foppishly-tailored outfit. No wonder she took us for princes, princes dressed for a wedding day. When this poor old woman had seen us, we must have fulfilled her every confused dream.

“What is your name, young miss?” I asked as gently as I could.

With another curtsy, she answered, “Irene, may it please your majesty.” It wasn’t an orc name, but then, the white satin gown was not an orc wedding dress. Perhaps she fancied herself human... or perhaps, she had been raised by humans in a manner at odds with her orc heritage. Such things happen in Sigil.

“Irene,” I told her, “my fellow princes and I must go on a dangerous quest. It would not be safe for a delicate—”

Before I could finish the sentence, she seized my arm. “Please don’t leave me here,”

she whispered. “If you leave me after all this time, I fear I might... go mad... please, don’t make me be a mad old woman...”

I turned to Hezekiah and Wheezle. Both of them were staring at the floor.

“All right,” I told her. “You can come with us a little way.”



Hezekiah offered Irene his arm. He didn’t look comfortable about it—he held himself as rigid as a steel fencepost, and never let his eyes stray in her direction—but the boy was clearly making an effort to show her courtesy. Irene didn’t seem to notice his tension; she settled in against him with the composure of an experienced courtesan taking a baron’s hand.

The room had only one exit, the doorway that framed the portal to the Outlands. I threw away my sketch of the cobra before leaving—otherwise, I’d find myself back in the chapel. Wheezle led the way into the corridor, followed by Hezekiah and Irene, with me trailing as rear guard... which meant I was the last to confront the full squalor of the Gatehouse Asylum.

The place stank of desperation. Yes, the smells in my nostrils were more specific, mildew, slops, and a wispy tang of blood; but over everything hung an oppressive desolation, tangible enough to make my skin crawl. Half the rooms along this corridor had their doors closed, secured with cast-iron padlocks. The others had their doors wide open, letting out the whimpers and moans of their inhabitants. A few patients had emerged from their rooms, to lean against the walls and stare vacantly into the distance, or to stand with eyes closed, rocking and humming tunelessly in their throats. One wore an unbuckled straitjacket; the rest wore unwashed garments, some no better than rags.

Wheezle headed for a door at the end of the hall. Most of the patients took no notice of us as we passed; those who did covered their eyes with their hands and shivered until we were gone. Irene touched one of the shiverers on the shoulder and said in a gentle voice, “You may have my room, Mazey. I shall not need it again.”

Past the door, we came upon what passed for a nurse’s station: a flimsy wooden table where a bulky young dwarf sat picking his teeth with a sliver of bone. He glanced up at us, and his eyes widened. “I told you they would come for me,” Irene said triumphantly. “I told you they would come.”

He stared for another second or two, then shrugged and went back to digging between his molars.



Irene’s room had been on the third storey; and when we finally found a stairway, it only went down one floor. That meant we had to backtrack along the length of the whole wing before we could get down to ground level. I assumed this design made it harder for barmies to escape, forcing them to run all the way along one floor, then all the way back on the next floor down, keeping them inside the building that much longer... but that only worked if someone tried to stop them from leaving. As far as I could see, none of the staff showed the least concern as we passed. No one asked who we were or where we were going; no one even recognized our existence.

No one in an official capacity, that is—we got plenty of attention from the inmates. Many tried to hide from us; many more tried to talk to us, in languages that may or may not have been spoken by anyone else in the multiverse. A few followed us, gesticulating

as they babbled, and pointing at odd objects: cracks in the wall, their own teeth, a single red shoe someone had left in the hallway. After a while, each lost interest and wandered off some other direction, still talking and waving incoherently.

Down more stairs and an exit door came in sight—its glass smudged by the noseprints, gawkers looking in and inmates gazing out. A pair of guards in badly scuffed armor leaned against the wall near the door, passing a flask between them; but they straightened an inch as they saw us approach.

“Yeah?” said the taller one, as if we had asked a question. She had a sleek crown of black feathers on her head instead of hair; I couldn’t tell if it was a hat or actually part of her body.

“We are leaving, honored guard,” Wheeple replied. “May your death be everything you hope it to be.”

“Huh?” Feather-Woman asked. She must have shone in conversational skills at the job interview.

“Don’t mind him,” Hezekiah said hurriedly. “He’s a Dustman. They say things like that.”

“Dustmen wear gray,” observed the other guard. He had the head of a tortoise-shell cat, and by the looks of it, his fur went all the way down. Unlike most cats, this one hadn’t done much in the way of licking himself clean for a long time.

“Alas,” Wheeple told the guard, “my gray robes were burned when a death knight directed me to walk through a pillar of sacred fire. These clothes were reconstructed for me by nagas.”

I cringed. If Wheeple blurted out everything from the past few days, these guards would leave us directly into padded cells. Magic salt-and-pepper grinders, camping out with fiends, getting chummy with wights on the Plane of Dust, then fighting them in Plague-Mort... this was not a story to convince people of our sanity. “We have to go now,” I said, stepping toward the door.

Feathers hiked up her foot and planted it against the opposite wall of the narrow corridor, neatly blocking my exit. “Pass?” she grunted.

“I beg your pardon?”

“She wants to see your pass,” the Tortoise-Shell said. “A paper what says you can leave.”

“We don’t have a pass,” Hezekiah answered, too quickly for me to stop him.

“Gotta have a pass,” Tortoise-Shell replied. “Patients get a pass from their doc. Visitors get a pass when they come in.”

“That’s the problem then,” Wheeple said. “We entered the building through a portal from Plague-Mort. Well, not directly from Plague-Mort... from a chapel outside of town, dedicated to nagas.”

“Little berk’s got a thing about nagas,” Feathers observed. “His doc must have a lot to say about that.”

“I don’t have a doctor,” Wheeple snapped. “We are just passing through on our way to fight an evil albino.”

“Albino naga?” Tortoise-Shell asked with interest. “That’s what you might call a provocative image.”

“The albino’s not a naga,” Hezekiah retorted, “she’s a psionic. She’s sucked all the

power out of my brain twice, but I won't let her do it again."

"Good thinking," Feathers said. "I sure hate it when albinos suck power out of my brain."

"If you berks got a thing about albinos," Tortoise-Shell asked, "why are you all wearing white? Some self-punishing identification-with-the-enemy thing?"

"They are wearing white," Irene announced, "because they are three royal princes come to marry me."

"All three gonna marry you at once?"

"They're princes," Irene answered. "They can do whatever they want."

"Just the kind of attitude that gives royalty a bad name," Tortoise-Shell observed. "Shame on your highnesses."

"Majesties!" Irene corrected.

"A prince is Your highness," Feathers said. "Your majesty is for kings and queens."

"Is that how it works?" Hezekiah asked. "I always wondered."

"They are all majesties," Irene insisted, "because they will marry me and make me a queen."

"Even if they're only princes themselves?"

"Maybe," Hezekiah suggested, "if you marry three princes at once, you become a queen. It could be cumulative."

"All right, that's it!" I snapped. "Much as my companions belong in a barmy bin," I told the guards, "we have to get out of here. So here's my proof that we aren't really inmates."

In a split-second, the tip of my rapier was poised a hair's breadth from Tortoise-Shell's right eye. The cat gulped and froze. Feathers followed suit.

"Follow my logic, if you please," I said. "Patients surely aren't allowed to carry weapons, right?"

"Right," the guards answered in unison.

"I am carrying a very sharp, very lethal sword... right?"

"Right," they chorused again.

"Therefore, I must not be a patient, right?"

"Got me convinced," Tortoise-Shell said, swallowing hard.

"Pass, friend," Feathers added, carefully dropping the leg that barred our way, and nudging the door open.

Wheeze smiled and trotted out, followed by Hezekiah. As Irene glided regally past the guards, she stopped and whispered, "Please forgive Prince Britlin's impulsiveness. He is the eldest, and has endured many long years of chaste abstinence, waiting for our union."

"Perfectly understandable," Tortoise-Shell answered, now cross-eyed from staring at the tip of my blade. "A cutter gets keen, I can sympathize with that."

"Explains all the talk about nagas," Feathers agreed. "You have a nice honeymoon now."

I kept my sword at the ready as I backed out the door, but the guards made no rash attempts to nab us. As we hurried away from the asylum, I saw Tortoise-Shell raise the flask in our direction and drink off a hearty toast.



The Gatehouse Asylum imposed its doleful presence on one of the least desirable zones of Sigil's Hive district... and since a sensible person would rather play leapfrog with a unicorn than visit even the best parts of the Hive, you can imagine what a sordid neighborhood we walked through now. Beady-eyed kobolds watched us passing, their boney fists clenching and unclenching with hate; but there must have been something imposing about our band—something in Irene's stateliness, or our ethereal white clothing, or maybe just the gleam of my rapier—that kept the hostility restricted to venomous glares. Within minutes, we had reached the relative safety of a patch of blighted grass, just outside a fortified Harmonium squad-station.

"Do we go in?" Wheezy asked.

"I'd prefer to report directly to Lady Erin," I said. "Our story is too addle-coved to foist on a Hardhead desk sergeant. Still, we could beg for an escort between here and the Festhall; it's coming on night, and we're in a dangerous part of the city."

"I might be able to teleport us to the Festhall," Hezekiah offered.

"Back in Plague-Mort," I reminded him, "you said you'd never tried a jump with more than two people."

"I feel stronger now," he answered. "Since I came out of Shekinester's flame—"

"Save it," I interrupted. "This is not the time to try anything risky. We get some guards, we have them march us across the city, and we tell Lady Erin what we know. Let's keep it simple."

Normally, a station like this one would have muscle posted at the front door, just in case some local bully-boys barged in. At the moment we entered, however, the guards had left their post to take part in a free-for-all behind the front desk. The cause of the brouhaha was a gigantic minotaur, fully eight feet tall and bellowing drunken curses as four of the Harmonium's finest tried to wrestle him to the ground. A fifth, the desk sergeant, had given up on grappling and was bashing the creature's head with a truncheon; but minotaur heads are noted for horns, not brains, so the sergeant's cudgel was having precious little effect.

"Should we help?" Hezekiah whispered, gaping at the fight.

I shook my head. The Harmonium don't take kindly to interference from strangers; besides, with so many people fighting already, we'd just get in the way. "Wait till they're done," I told the boy. "They won't take long."

Soon enough, I thought, the minotaur would gore one of the guards with his bull-like horns; and the moment Harmonium blood was spilled, the Hardheads would draw their swords and butcher Mr. Mino like an Aberdeen Angus. To my surprise, however, no matter how bubbled up the bull-man appeared, he retained some particle of prudence: he kept his horns to himself, never giving the guards an excuse to slice him to ribbons. Even worse, the sergeant with the truncheon was more gifted with zeal than accuracy—he clubbed his own comrades as often as he whacked the minotaur, thereby keeping the fight even for several minutes.

It was only when the guards were finally getting the upper hand that Hezekiah tugged on the hem of my jacket. "Britlin..."

"Not now," I told him, "I have to talk to the sergeant."

The sergeant, hearing my voice now that the ruckus had subsided, looked up to see who had come in. His eyes opened wide with surprise... I told myself a snow-white outfit

had that effect on people.

“Britlin, this is important,” Hezekiah said, still tugging.

“It can wait,” I snapped, giving the sergeant a smile of apology at the interruption.

“Honored Cavendish,” Wheezy murmured, “perhaps this deserves your immediate attention.”

I sighed and held up a finger to the sergeant. “Back in a second,” I said, and whirled on my companions. “What?”

Hezekiah pointed to a row of six WANTED: DEAD OR ALIVE posters tacked on the wall of the office. The faces were all too familiar... but frankly, the pictures must have been drawn by an untalented chimpanzee, given the abysmal quality of the sketches. When had I ever had such a protruding forehead? Why had they made Wheezy’s ears so hairy? How could they depict a beauty like Yasmin as a blowsy draggle-tail?

On the other hand, the picture of Hezekiah was pretty good.

Yes, we were all there... including Miriam and even November. A hefty bounty rode on all our heads, authorized by “Her Honor Lady Erin Darkflame Montgomery, and His Worthiness Capt. Sarin (Harmonium Fact.)” Apparently, my companions and I had committed, “Numerous Acts of Sedition, Murder, and Most Grievous Crimes of Arson on Divers Public Buildings.”

“Looks like someone is blaming us for Rivi’s crimes,” I sighed.

“Rivi is setting us up,” Hezekiah put in. “If she’s taken over the brains of influential people...”

“I know. She could easily manufacture a case against us.”

“But how did she know we’d be here?” Wheezy asked.

I shrugged. “She probably checked the house in Plague-Mort after the dust had settled. When she didn’t find our bodies, she concluded we were still alive. She asked around, discovered we’d made contact with November, and guessed we’d be heading for Sigil. Clever wee Rivi took the time to frame a nasty reception for when we showed...”

A sword point tickled the back of my ear.

“...up,” I finished.



The guards had clearly decided that arresting three bounty-paying murderers made better sense than tussling with one garden-variety drunk. In fact, they had pressed the minotaur into temporary deputyship; he was on his feet again, little the worse for the fisticuffs, and looking keen to take us down if it would earn a share of the reward.

The sword pricking my ear belonged to the desk sergeant, who showed strict adherence to the Harmonium Book of Clich...s by saying, “Don’t move a hair or you’re dead.”

“Why not kill them anyway?” one of the other guards asked. “The signs say DEAD OR ALIVE.”

“Because these berks may know where the other three are... and if they start talking right now, we’ll promise not to cut their throats.”

“Cut their throats?” Irene repeated. “How dare you threaten three royal princes!”

“How many princes’ve you killed, Saul?” one guard asked another.

“Including goblins, kobolds, mephits—upwards of a dozen, I’d say... and then, there’s all the Prime world princelings, but who counts them?”

Hezekiah gulped. “We’re really, really in trouble, aren’t we?” he cried. With sobs in his throat, he reached out and grabbed a handful of my shirt, steadying himself on Wheezy’s shoulder. “After everything we’ve been through...”

The boy blew his nose loudly on my lapel.

“Sorry,” I apologized to the nearest guard. “He’s Clueless.”

“He is my prince!” Irene said, stepping forward to lay a comforting hand on his arm. “I shall stand by him for eternity.”

“As will I,” Wheezy pronounced. “Wherever we go, we shall go together, because we are joined as one.”

Which offered confirmation, if Hezekiah needed it: the boy now had physical contact with all four of us. The next moment, we were someplace far away from the squad station.

Hezekiah straightened up with an impish grin on his face. “I told you I could teleport us all. Sorry about the shirt, Britlin.”

“It will wash,” I answered graciously.



Hezekiah had teleported us somewhere he knew well: the street in front of the Mortuary. Not that it looked much like the place we had watched a few days earlier; the tenements were nothing but cinders, with occasional upthrusts of wood that had not burned completely to ash. Much of the surrounding pavement had been washed clean by rainfall—you can always count on Sigil for drizzle—but some patches of roadway were crusted over with crumbly residue that I guessed was humanoid skin... bits from the giant and the Collectors who’d been carrying him, grafted onto the cobblestones by the flash heat of the explosion.

The Mortuary itself showed little of its damage directly; the masonry had been black to begin with, so the singe marks blended in. However, a gridwork of scaffolding had been erected all around the building, with wooden beams propping up sections of the roof and walls. Even if nothing had collapsed immediately, the Dustmen must not trust the current structural soundness.

“It brings tears to my eyes,” Wheezy said softly.

“Do you want to go inside?” I asked. “Look up any of your friends?”

“That would not be wise,” he answered. “If Rivi has convinced the city I am one of those responsible for the fires—including the explosion here—I will have few friends. Besides, Rivi might well station spies in our factions, watching for our return. I do not think she could steal the mind of Factol Skall...”

“Agreed,” I said, remembering my brief encounter with Skall, as he drained the life from the renegade wight.

“But,” Wheezy continued, “I cannot reach the factol without first talking to his aides. Any one of them may have been compromised by Rivi.”

“The same goes for me approaching the Sensates,” I said. “Whom can we trust?”

“You can trust me, your majesty!” Irene answered, going down on one knee. “I am your humble servant.”

“Thank you,” I smiled, patting her wrinkled hand. “Your loyalty is well-pleasing to me.”

She beamed.

“So far as I can see,” Hezekiah said, “we have to find Rivi ourselves. Find her and defeat her.”

“Including Kiripao?” I asked. “Qi and Chi? A hundred renegade wights?”

“Sure,” the boy shrugged. “Them too.”

“But honored Clueless,” Wheezy said, “we don’t even know where to find Rivi.”

“That’s easy,” he answered. “The Vertical Sea.”



Hezekiah explained his reasoning as we slunk through the Hive toward the Sea. “It has a portal to the Glass Spider, right? And the Spider is Rivi’s real base of operations. So even if she isn’t at the fish-farm right now, I bet she comes and goes through the gate all the time. We just watch the place until she shows up.”

“Why should she come and go?” I asked. “Couldn’t she take over some mansion in town? Just brainwash a wealthy leatherhead and peel everything he owns.”

“That would attract attention,” the boy answered. “Wealthy people have servants and nosy neighbors, not to mention business competitors spying for any advantage. Rivi might brain-nap a few rich vassals, but she won’t want anyone to know they’re connected with her—she still has to play things very carefully until she consolidates her power. Besides, she needs to secure the Vertical Sea, whether or not she’s using the portal right now. It’s her backdoor out of the city... and an access point for all her wights, if she ever needs them.”

“What you say makes sense,” Wheezy admitted, “but I cannot understand how Rivi could enter Sigil in the first place. All portals are controlled by The Lady of Pain... who has established an infallible track record for keeping out destabilizing influences. Why didn’t The Lady simply close the doors to Rivi? Let our albino friend plague some other city.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” I said, “and I have a theory. If Rivi couldn’t enter Sigil, she’d try someplace else... where she’d either win or lose. If she won, she’d become that much more of a threat; if she lost, the grinders would fall into someone else’s hands, and the mess would continue. In fact, the mess might get worse if the person who got the grinders was a high-powered fiend, something like that. Perhaps The Lady of Pain prefers to have Rivi and the grinders here within reach.”

“Then why doesn’t The Lady just kill Rivi now?” Hezekiah asked. “Do you think she’s afraid of the grinders, like Rivi said? Or that The Lady doesn’t know where the grinders are?”

“It is possible,” Wheezy replied, “but more likely, she does not wish to earn the enmity of other gods. As I have told Britlin, the grinders are so supremely dangerous, the pantheons may unite to destroy any Power who tries to claim them. The Lady would surely try to avoid such a threat.”

“Besides,” I said, “it’s not The Lady of Pain’s style to take such overt action. She expects her people to keep the city streets clean.”

“Her people,” Hezekiah repeated. “Does that mean she’s got a specially chosen team to deal with threats like Rivi?”

“Yes,” I told him, “and at the moment, the team is us. Let’s not pike this up, kid—The Lady of Pain is notoriously unforgiving toward sods who let her down.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



THREE DOWN,
ONE TO GO

reached the Vertical Sea, it was filled with wights: wights dressed in workers' clothes, wights trundling wheelbarrows from one level to another, wights whose eyes blazed with utter fury at the indignity of this pretense.

I didn't want to think about what had happened to the real workers; but I wondered if the fish had fed better than usual over the past few days.

From the vantage of the same tenement roof I'd used before, we

WHEN WE

crouched behind the chicken coops and watched the undead stalk about their business. For the most part, they stayed at least three floors above the ground, where their fiery eyes would be unlikely to attract the attention of passers-by. Lower down, the workers were all Rivi's hired goons, dealing directly with the delivery carts that came to pick up their supplies of seafood. Lanterns hung at regular intervals throughout the structure, on the stairs, on the ramps, and on the catwalks over the fish-tanks... enough light for the tower to be seen thirty blocks away, and to steal the night vision from anyone who might look in our direction.

While it was impossible to scan the whole twenty-storey structure, by the end of an hour I had seen no familiar faces: no Kiripao, no githzerai, and definitely no Rivi. We'd just have to cool our heels until they showed up.

"So, honored Cavendish," Wheezy murmured, "what is our strategy now?"

"Wait for your enemies," Irene replied calmly, "then strike from stealth, and claim your plunder."

"Hey," said Hezekiah, "look who's a real orc after all."

I patted Irene's hand fondly. "It's a good plan. If we see Rivi show up with the grinders and Unveiler, we teleport over and run a rapier through her gizzard. Then we grab the trinkets and teleport away again."

"Doesn't sound very heroic," Hezekiah grumbled.

"Neither does letting Rivi take over the city."

"But couldn't we just jump in front of her and give her the chance to surrender?"

"You mean give her the chance to poach our brains," I corrected him. "We can't afford to be charitable, boy."

Hezekiah didn't answer, but I could see he wasn't happy with stabbing people in the back. I would have liked to have a different option myself; but the stakes were too high to take chances. Maybe—maybe—if I had a clear shot and no risk of missing, I would club-punch Rivi with the butt of my sword rather than slicing through her liver. If I knocked her out, we

could take her prisoner without killing her... but if the first blow didn't put her down, I'd use my blade as a follow-up, and sod how much blood I spilled.



Time passed. Somewhere far in the distance, the Stern Bells near Sigil's prison chimed antipeak: midnight. Five hundred years ago, a Mercykiller sorceress named Justice-by-Fist had enchanted the bells so they could be heard all over Sigil—not making them louder, but simply making the sound carry all around the circle of the city. True Sigilians could tell where they were in town, just by the lag between the clockwise and counter-clockwise passage of the ringing.

"Do you think anyone's going to show up tonight?" Hezekiah asked. "It's pretty late."

The boy was munching a not-quite-ripe peach Wheeze had procured from a greengrocer in a short trip down to ground level. Considering that all our pocket money had vaporized in the Arching Flame, I don't know how Wheeze paid for the fruit... but a gnome illusionist has resources even when he has no resources, if you know what I mean.

Wheeze, his face the soul of innocence, finished a mouthful of his own peach and answered the boy's question. "The people we seek are more likely to work by night than day, honored Clueless. We should not give up hope simply because the hour is late."

"Before we start getting sleepy," I said, "we should set up a watch schedule—take turns napping. It won't be comfortable bedding down up here..."

"I shall make it comfortable for you," Irene announced.

Hezekiah winced. Wheeze had more self-control, but his face paled. "Honored lady, perhaps we should discuss certain... misunderstandings between us."

"In an arranged marriage," Irene replied, "there are always adjustments to be made." She had dribbled peach juice down the front of her wedding dress, but took no notice of it. "It simply requires the husbands and wife to meet each other halfway. Now," she continued, smoothing her gown demurely, "do you want to decide which of you shall be first, or would you prefer that I choose?"

"First for what?" Hezekiah asked uneasily.

"Sounds like the boy needs the most education," I leapt in. "Start with him."

"Yes, yes," Wheeze agreed. "He is clearly in need of your guidance, honored lady. Your lengthy guidance. Spend several months if you have to. Years. We others can wait."

"What are you talking about?" Hezekiah demanded. "Because it almost sounds like we're discussing, umm... wedding nights..."

"We are," Irene answered serenely. "Shall we withdraw behind the chicken coops, your majesty?"

Hezekiah's eyes threatened to skitter out of his skull and go dancing about the rooftop. He spun away wildly, possibly summoning his energy to teleport all the way back to the safety of Uncle Toby's parlor; but the insufferable luck of the Clueless saved him.

"Look!" he cried, pointing a wobbly finger across the street. "There's Qi... Chi... one of the gith guys!"



Hezekiah was right. The githzerai thief—let’s call him Chi, though I never found out which he really was—had reached a point several storeys below us, climbing one of the Sea’s corkscrew stairways. The other thugs gave him plenty of space to move up the steps; even the wights stood clear to let him pass. The look on his face showed they were wise to do so: his expression was gauntly savage, a hailstorm ready to break. I wondered if he’d worn that grimace ever since I killed his partner in Plague-Mort, or if his ferocity had a more recent cause.

Not that it mattered. The only important thing was to capture the berk and make him tell us which stone Rivi was hiding under. We’d just teleport across, hold a knife to Chi’s throat, and take him somewhere for interrogation.

“Okay, Hezekiah,” I whispered, “we keep this simple. Wait till he’s a good distance from anyone else, then take us right in behind him.”

The boy looked like he was going to object, but I stared him down. In silence, we watched the githzerai glower his way upward... heading for the portal to the Glass Spider, I realized. One level below the portal, he would have to climb a ramp that crossed above a tank of squid—or calamari, if you prefer—and at present the area was clear of wights. “There,” I said to Hezekiah. “That ramp. Ready?”

He nodded. I got a good grip on the boy’s arm, and Wheeze grabbed hold of his belt. “We’ll be back soon,” I assured Irene... who waited till the last moment, then laid her hand on Hezekiah’s shoulder before I could stop her.

Together all four of us materialized on the ramp—a dozen paces in front of the githzerai.

“Sod it all,” I snarled, then charged toward the thief, my rapier glinting in the lantern light.

“Surrender!” Hezekiah shouted to Chi. “You’re outnumbered so just...”

The githzerai whipped out a firewand.

“...surrender...” Hezekiah finished lamely.



“It appears we have a standoff,” Chi said.

I stood, sword ready, three paces away from him, while the others loomed behind my back. He held the firewand casually, but I didn’t doubt he could trigger it in a split-second if any of us moved a hair.

“We wouldn’t have a standoff,” I answered through clenched teeth, “if someone had landed us behind you.”

“I didn’t want you to kill him,” Hezekiah pouted.

“I wasn’t going to kill him. I wanted to take him prisoner so we could interrogate him.”

“You never told me that.”

“Do I have to explain everything?” I growled at the boy. “You knew he was carrying something magic. The first time we saw him, you sensed magic on him.”

“I didn’t know it was a firewand!”

“Enough!” Chi roared. “Do you think you can distract me by feigning an argument? I’m not a complete leatherhead, you know.”

“Feigning an argument,” Hezekiah murmured. “That would have been clever.”

“Stop rattling your bone-box!” Chi thundered. “I’m trying to decide whether to burn

you where you stand.”

“If you start a fire here,” Wheezy said, “you will burn down the Vertical Sea. Your portal to the Glass Spider will lose its anchor and disappear.”

“The Spider has other portals,” Chi answered. “It’s no great burden to gate into Plague-Mort and head for Sigil from there. You did exactly that, didn’t you?”

“It is possible to find an indirect route,” Wheezy admitted, “but would Rivi approve? She does not seem a woman who tolerates inconvenience.”

“If I killed you three times and for all, she’d give me a medal,” Chi answered. “The slag in the wedding dress is gravy.”

“Here’s an idea,” Hezekiah piped up. “Why don’t I just teleport my friends out of here, and call it a draw? You don’t set us on fire, and Britlin won’t cut out your heart.”

“Like he did to my partner?” Chi asked sharply.

“Actually,” I said, “I didn’t cut out your partner’s heart, I stabbed through the roof of his mouth and... well, maybe this isn’t the right time to split hairs.”

“Funny man,” Chi glared at me. “A lot of people have told me that, Cavendish—you like to make jokes. Does it surprise you I’ve talked to your friends? I’ve made it my business to find out about you, since we met in Plague-Mort. You won’t believe the stories I’ve heard... and not one of your acquaintances doubts you could be a killer. Like father, like son.”

I sighed. “Is this the part where we both taunt each other into a rage?”

“No—rage is overrated.” Chi smiled an ugly smile. “This is the part where I kill you in cold blood.”

I prepared myself to lunge forward: ready for the slightest lapse in his concentration, a laugh, a moment as he savored his triumph. All I needed was the merest instant of distraction; but Chi was an experienced blood who didn’t make stupid mistakes. The wand in his hand didn’t waver an eyelash. His lips opened to speak the invocation that would fire his weapon...

...and an egg sailed out of nowhere, smashing his face with yolk.

I was almost as surprised as Chi. Almost. But while he was still spitting egg-white from his mouth, my rapier punched clean through his ribcage, smashing bone fragments into his heart and lungs. I kept driving forward, hearing the edges of my blade scrape against vertebrae as the tip pierced out his back; and I held him upright on the end of my sword until I could pluck the firewand from his strengthless fingers. Then and only then did I turn across the street to see who threw the egg.

On top of the tenement across the street stood three women in brilliant white.

Miriam waved to Hezekiah.

November leaned coolly against a chimney.

Yasmin flexed her fingers and scowled. “That sodding chicken pecked my hand.”



“Thanks for the egg,” I shouted to her, then didn’t have time for more conversation. Six wights had appeared, trundling up wheelbarrows to harvest squid from the tank below us; but when they noticed our presence, their eyes blazed like volcanoes and they hissed with delighted fury.

“Hezekiah,” I called, “this would be a good time to get us out of here.” No such luck—the leatherhead boy was still a dozen paces behind me, and puppyishly waving

back to Miriam; he hadn't even noticed we had undead company. "Hezekiah!" I roared, even as the stench of dead flesh and chemicals filled my nostrils.

"Hi," I said to the wights, mere inches from my nose.

"Hiss," they replied by way of repartee.

The first two monsters to reach me had simply abandoned their wheelbarrows and charged, their claws ripping greedily through the air. If one hadn't stumbled over Chi's dead body, I might be writing these memoirs with a fistful of talons embedded in my face; but Chi's body sprawled across a good portion of the ramp, and the wight was too filled with bloodlust to care. It ran forward, tripped, and went down, catching itself from a face-plant only by throwing out its hands. Those nasty claws struck the wooden ramp like fourpenny nails, digging deep into the board... and by the time the creature could pry itself loose, I had dispatched the other wight with a nicely executed decapitation.

The wight on its knees suffered the same fate, just as it pulled itself free. Its head bounced briefly across the ramp, scattering a trail of red dust; then it toppled over the edge and into the squid tank below.

"Hezekiah!" I shouted again, but couldn't spare a glance in his direction. Another wight was racing up; and this one, her brain less decayed than her fellows, was still jockeying her wheelbarrow—a big heavy wheelbarrow, wide enough to block much of the ramp, and long enough that my blade couldn't reach over the cart to impale the creature. Not that she gave me time to try such an attack: she simply drove straight at me, the wheelbarrow crunching over assorted corpses on the way, as it hammered forward like a battering ram. The ramp gave me no room to move aside, unless I wanted to swim with the squid... so I took the only choice left and jumped forward into the wheelbarrow itself.

When I say I jumped, I wish I could claim that I nimbly hopped into the cart and landed on my feet with panther-like grace. The truth was less feline: just as the wheelbarrow was about to bang into me, I rolled over the front lip and landed lumpishly inside.

My rapier was pointed in the right direction, and I stabbed out with it, just to keep the wight from coming at me with her claws. The tip pierced the rotting meat of her shoulder and sliced off a pound or two. She hissed in pain, and heaved on the wheelbarrow handles with supernatural strength... or more precisely, she heaved on one of the handles—the other arm, injured by my sword thrust, didn't have nearly the same amount of muscle. One side of the wheelbarrow went up, the other scarcely moved at all, and I found myself tipping sideways out of the cart, staring down at a school of eagerly waiting squid.

"Gack!" I commented; and trying not to drop my sword or gash myself on its blade, I scrambled to grab the edge of the wheelbarrow cart before I plunged straight into the water. My fingers found purchase, splinters found my fingers, and I stopped my immediate fall. The wight kept heaving sideways, however, and my feet slid out of the cart, slipped past the edge of the ramp, and plunked knee deep into the tank.

So here's the picture—I'm dangling over the side of the ramp, one hand clutching the cart, the other aiming my sword in the wight's direction to discourage the monster from lunging for me... and a crowd of squid are caressing my feet with their suckered tentacles, trying to decide if I'm edible. "You can't eat me raw!" I called down to them.

“You have to marinate, then simmer for a few hours or I’ll be all rubbery.”

The wight hissed. “Everyone’s a critic,” I muttered. Then I noticed that the wight was hissing because its body had been hacked lengthwise from shoulder to crotch by a familiar-looking longsword. A white-shod foot kicked the bisected wight off the ramp, much to the culinary appreciation of the squid; and moments later, another white-clad woman with ridiculously puny wings tucked her hands under my armpits and flew me up to a solid footing.

“Thanks,” I said to November, then “Thanks,” again to Yasmin who was dealing with the remaining wights. “I take it you flew across?”

“Why not?” November answered, folding her wings back flat across her shoulders. “I’ve never been fond of barrow wights.”

I buried my face in my hands and groaned.



“More company,” Yasmin called, as a dozen new wights clattered up a spiral staircase from the next floor down.

“Pike this nonsense,” Miriam growled.

She bent and picked up Chi’s firewand, something I’d dropped in the course of my gymnastics on the wheelbarrow. Before I could guess what she was up to, she shouted “In nomine Vulpes!”

The wand loosed a crackling fireball straight into the wight’s faces.

“What the sod are you doing?” I cried. To be sure, the wights had abruptly ceased to be a threat—in fact, with all the chemicals used to resurrect them, their bodies burned as if they had been doused with Phlegistol. One fell off the ramp and into a fish-tank two storeys below, releasing a gush of steam as thick as a pea-soup fog. The rest simply blazed down to ash in seconds, oil-soaked torches burning in the night... and all around them, the Vertical Sea burned too, a framework of age-old wood.

“Honored Miriam,” Wheezy said, “while you should be congratulated for guessing the firewand’s invocation—”

“No trick there,” Miriam interrupted. “The Fox used the same phrase for every wand he made—the old sod had a real bee for mass production.”

“Still,” Wheezy continued, “one cannot help noticing that your fire has cut off our route to the ground.”

“It’s cut off the wights too,” Miriam answered. “We won’t have to worry about those berks anymore. If you’re worried about getting away, November can fly some of us out, and the Kid can teleport the rest to safety. What’s the problem?”

“In polite company,” I told her, “we don’t use city monuments for kindling. On the other hand, we can discuss that after Hezekiah... Hezekiah?”

The boy had slumped to his knees and was pressing his hands against his head. “Rivi’s trying to blank me again,” he wailed.



“I’ll kill that slag!” Miriam roared, flourishing the firewand with homicidal intent. But the nasty wee albino was nowhere in sight... not that we had much of a view of our surroundings. With so many ramps, tanks, and support beams in the way, we had no clear line of sight to any of the other levels in the tower; and to make matters worse, smoke from the burning stairway had drifted in around us, stinging our eyes and

reducing visibility to only a few paces.

“November!” I shouted, “start flying people out of here. Take Irene first...”

“Who’s Irene?” the alu asked.

“I am Irene,” the old orc answered serenely, “betrothed bride to these three noble princes.”

“Do tell,” Yasmin said. “You’ve been a busy boy, Britlin.”

“Can we start the evacuation?” I snapped. “The Sea’s on fire, Hezekiah’s in trouble, and...”

The boy howled with fury and pounded his hands against his temples. “I am not... in... trouble!”

He threw his head back and screamed, the kind of scream used by martial artists the instant they drive their fist through a brick wall. A moment later, the cry was echoed from somewhere overhead: a woman’s shriek, poisoned with outrage.

“I beat her!” Hezekiah crowed. He threw his head back to stick out his tongue in the direction of the woman’s cry. “Three’s the charm, Rivi!” he called. “You may think you’re tough, but I’ve been incinerated by a goddess. You’d better not mess with Hezekiah Virtue or I’ll... uh-oh.”

Hurling down through the smoke came Kiripao, brandishing Unveiler and coated from head to toe in brown dust. “Peel it!” he screamed. “Peel away the shell!”



The elf monk struck Hezekiah feet first in the chest. It was a glancing blow, but still enough to knock the boy backward. Hezekiah wheezed, trying to force his lungs to draw breath, then toppled off the ramp into the tank.

Miriam shouted a curse and raised the firewand toward Kiripao. She might have blasted him then and there, catching all of us in the radius of the fireball; but the monk sprang forward the moment he struck the ramp, and bolted straight at Miriam before she could speak the invocation. He swung Unveiler at Miriam’s head, a whipcrack strike that would have crushed her skull if she hadn’t thrown up her arm to block. Bones cracked as the scepter smashed her forearm; and she shied back a step, trying to bring the firewand to bear on her screaming opponent.

Kiripao didn’t give her time—he had been fast before, but the umbral insanity had keyed him to a fever pitch, removing every inhibition and giving him a lust to inflict pain. He followed up the scepter smash with a snap kick that caught Miriam flush on the floating ribs. Breath whoofed out of her and she flew backward off the ramp, moving so fast I feared she might be knocked clear of the squid-tank and fall nine storeys to the ground; but Miriam was a tough old basher, one who could take a few hits without letting it rattle her. Somehow she managed to snag her foot on the rim of the tank as she hurtled by, then gave herself a backward thrust. Instead of going over the side, she splashed into the water, sending dozens of squid into panic. The tank began to fill with their ink, an opaque blackness that hid both Miriam and Hezekiah sinking beneath the waves.

“Kiripao, you fool!” Rivi shouted from the level above us. I could see her garishly painted face peering over a catwalk—the catwalk leading to the Plane of Dust portal. She and Kiripao must have come from the Glass Spider, possibly to meet with Chi; and when the fighting started, the ever-impulsive elf had decided to break a few heads himself.

“Kiripao!” Rivi continued, “I command you to get back up here.”

Easy for her to say... but our side had recovered from the confusion of Kiripao’s sneak attack. Now Yasmin and I stood shoulder to shoulder, our swords ready for blood. Smoke roiled around us. In the tank below, water thrashed and churned, a sound I hoped meant Miriam was swimming to help Hezekiah. Even if the noise was actually my friends being dragged under by squid, I knew what my first duty was. This fiasco had to end now.

“Kiripao,” Yasmin said in a cold voice, “you have one chance: put down Unveiler and surrender. I consider you diseased, not evil... but I would not hesitate to kill a rabid dog. The choice is yours.”

The monk’s eyes glittered, reflecting the fire that crackled behind our backs. I could not read the expression on his face—did he even understand what Yasmin had said?

“Get up here!” Rivi snarled.

“You saw what she did to Petrov,” Yasmin told the elf. “You know she’d do the same to you, just for amusement. Put down the scepter.”

Kiripao’s gaze dropped and he looked at Unveiler with surprise... as if he hadn’t realized he was carrying anything more than a convenient weapon for clubbing people. He held it up, like a curious object he’d just found lying at his feet; firelight glinted off its surface, throwing beads of ruby illumination across his face.

“Peel,” he whispered. “Peel it! PEEL IT ALL AWAY!”

I tensed, waiting for him to charge... but Kiripao’s brain brimmed with the pus of umbral thoughts, and forthright attack was not the umbral way. He fainted toward us, then spun off in the opposite direction, up the ramp. Perhaps he was responding to Rivi’s summons after all; perhaps he was simply looking for a shadowy spot to lie in ambush. Either way, he never made it—two steps before he reached the stairs to the next level, he ran smack into something invisible.

Yasmin and I had raced after our quarry as soon as he ran. We had no hope of catching him—the monk moved as fast as a ferret—but we were close enough to see what happened next. Kiripao swung Unveiler at whatever he had bumped into; and two gnarled little hands flickered into visibility as they deflected the strike.

“Honored Madman,” said the owner of those hands, “this scepter is an abomination. It must return to the keeping of my faction.”

With a strength I had never suspected, Wheezy yanked down Unveiler, pulling Kiripao’s whole upper body with it. The monk’s mouth flopped open in surprise; and while Kiripao was gaping, Wheezy jerked the scepter up again, driving it into the underside of Kiripao’s jaw. Teeth clacked together hard, and Kiripao’s tongue must have got in the way—the monk spat blood, splattering Wheezy’s face and dribbling more down his own chin.

“Peel it,” he gurgled, the pronunciation fuzzed by his wounded tongue. “Peel it hard!”

Wheezy struggled to twist Unveiler out of Kiripao’s hands, but the monk simply smiled—a smile with blood-smearing teeth. He lifted the scepter, with Wheezy clinging fiercely to it, and swung it at high speed over the edge of the ramp. His intention was obviously to play crack-the-whip: spin Wheezy out, then give Unveiler a vicious snap that would send the gnome flying free. Wheezy would fly a long way; they had moved

far enough up the ramp that the squid tank was no longer beneath them. The drop was now a full nine storeys down to the cobblestone street.

Wheezele's feet lifted off the ramp as Kiripao swung the scepter. His body swept out to the horizontal, but he maintained his grip, hands clenched on the artifact he called an abomination—to a Dustman, death was far less terrible than what Unveiler could do to an undead soul. Kiripao gave the scepter a snapping jerk to throw Wheezele free... but the little Dustman found some well of strength as deep as death itself and clung on despite the jolt to his wrists.

Kiripao had never imagined the gnome would keep hold. Brother Monk had thrown everything he had into the snap; now he was off-balance, Wheezele's weight dragging him forward to the edge of the ramp. For a split-second, Kiripao fought to keep his feet... then both he and Wheezele were plunging away from the tower, hurtling toward the ground.

"November!" I shouted. But the alu had already taken to her wings, swooping after the two with every scrap of speed she possessed. Time blossomed the way it sometimes does when you can only watch the inevitable. November sped like a sling bullet through the smoke, through the darkness; and I could see she would make it, she was right on target. Her arms reached forward, one aiming for Wheezele, one for Kiripao...

...and Kiripao lashed out a fist as hard as iron, hooking around November's head and smashing into her closest wing.

The wing bones didn't just break, they shattered... as if they had always been as flimsy as twigs and someone had finally called their bluff. The other wing, still intact, spread wide as November reflexively tried to use it as a brake; but its effect was minimal, providing no more than a meager ability to steer. All three, gnome, elf, and alu plummeted downward.

Just before impact, Kiripao threw out his arms and gave a single flap, as if he had an umbral's wings to pull out of the dive. He didn't; and with a last sweep of her good wing, November twisted the falling group so that Kiripao took the brunt of the crash.

The crunch was loud enough to hear nine storeys above.

Thanks to her last second maneuver, November came out on top of the heap. After a few moments, she rolled off the other two and onto the cobblestones, clutching her belly as if she'd ruptured something. Her good wing jerked back into place across her shoulders; her bad wing trailed out across the pavement like some limp cloth streamer barely attached to her body. She made a weak gesture in our direction, but at that distance, I couldn't understand what she meant.

Wheezele stirred. His fall had been broken by Kiripao beneath him, but he'd still had November squash down on his body from above. As the gnome pulled himself off the motionless monk, I saw that his legs were dragging uselessly behind.

"Oh Wheezele," Yasmin whispered. "Your spine again?"

There was no way to tell how badly he was injured. But the little gnome still held Unveiler, even as he crawled to the street curb and propped himself up so he could face the Vertical Sea.

I looked down at the lower levels of the tower. Every wight had stopped in its tracks... waiting, watching Wheezele.

The gnome raised the scepter. "Hoksha ptock!" he shrieked, his voice so piercing it

echoed over and over again from the surrounding tenements.

Unveiler erupted with sickly green radiance, blindingly bright against the darkness of the street. The faces nearby were lit as clearly as day, November grimacing, Wheezy stone-faced with determination... and Kiripao, blood trickling darkly from his nose. The extra illumination made it easy to see the unnatural angle between Kiripao's head and body. I had seen such an angle once before: at a public hanging.

"Hoksha ptock!" Wheezy shrieked again.

From every level of the Vertical Sea came the sound of wights hissing. "Sssss... sssss." They had started rocking, wavering in unison as the glow of Unveiler intensified. "Sssss... sssss." A hundred wights swayed together on the burning tower; I could feel shivers through my feet as the tower itself vibrated in synchrony. Wights above, wights below. "Sssss... sssss."

The living thugs, down on the lowest levels, had begun to flee for the street. Given the fire and the behavior of the wights, they must have decided their jobs with Rivi were terminated. Those who reached the pavement first didn't spare a second glance at Wheezy or the others; they simply ran, disappearing into the impenetrable warrens of the Hive.

"Sssss... sssss. Sssss... sssss."

Wheezy held Unveiler over his head, the scepter's metal blazing like a small green sun. My mind went back to Petrov, holding the same scepter and consumed with anti-magic fire; for the first time, I wondered if Unveiler might be burning hot in the little gnome's hands. He showed no sign of pain—nothing but an iron-clad resolve to finish what he had started.

"Hoksha ptock!" Wheezy said. This time he didn't shout; but his words carried just the same, resounding the full twenty storeys of the tower.

Every wight turned to ectoplasm in the blink of an eye.

Floods of ectoplasm spilled down the ramps, down the stairs, splashing into the fish-tanks to form gooey slicks on the water, slopping in cascades down to the pavement, plopping in huge drops on our heads, our shoulders. Runnels of it poured into the fire; and like fuel oil, the fluid ignited into a blue-hot blaze, the flames racing up the ectoplasmic streams faster than the liquid could fall. In seconds, the fire had spread to a dozen other levels of the tower, spewing greasy smoke as it fed on the wights' last remains.

Wheezy slumped back limply against the curb. Unveiler slid from his strengthless hand.



"Wheezy!" Yasmin cried.

Her voice choked off as a sudden gust of smoke billowed up from the floor beneath us. Not only did the smoke make it impossible to see the ground, it brought home the precariousness of our own situation.

"We have to get out of here!" I shouted, as flames roared from below.

"Say, there's an idea!" Yasmin replied. "Why didn't I think of it?"

We turned back to our companions. Only Irene was still standing on the ramp, and she had calmly lowered the train of her bridal gown into the tank to let Miriam climb out. Miriam fought to extricate herself and Hezekiah from a weight of squid now

attached to both their bodies; but Yasmin and I rushed forward to help, jabbing our swords carefully to persuade tentacles to let go. In seconds, Miriam had wrenched herself all the way out, and together we hauled Hezekiah onto the ramp with us.

“He’s out cold,” Miriam muttered, giving the boy a few sharp whaps on the face. “Still breathing though.”

“Kiripao hit him pretty hard,” I replied. “Harder than the kid could take, anyway. I’ll carry him.”

“No,” Miriam said, “I will.”

I didn’t fight her for the honor—a sopping wet Clueless was not something I really wanted to throw over my shoulder. Miriam, however, was already soaked to the skin, so carrying the kid wouldn’t drench her further.

“You grab the boy,” Yasmin nodded to Miriam, “and then let’s peel it. Britlin, show Irene the way to the portal.”

“The portal?” I shuddered.

“It’s the only way out,” she said. “Hezekiah can’t teleport. November can’t fly up to us with that broken wing. There are a dozen fires between us and the ground, not to mention the entire tower’s going to fall any second. Up to the portal before it all tumbles down!”



The first tank fell as Irene and I were coming to the top of the stairs. It came from a few levels below us, down where the fire had been burning the longest; a huge vat of water and fish breaking through its weakened supports and crashing down onto the next level. The whole tower quaked with the force of the impact—I couldn’t see the extent of the damage, but I could hear the cracking of timbers, and feel the sudden bend as the tower pitched out of balance. Only quick reflexes allowed me to grab the stair railing with one hand and Irene with the other.

“Your majesty is most eager,” Irene smiled.

“Sure am,” I muttered under my breath. “This is exactly how I pictured a honeymoon would be.”

As we stepped onto the next catwalk, however, I sighed with relief. I had half-expected to see Rivi waiting for us, brandishing yet another of the Fox’s firewands; but the nasty wee albino was nowhere in sight. No doubt she had retreated through the portal as soon as the fire hit the fan.

This level of the tower had less smoke than the one below, but our visibility was still obscured—wisps of steam rose off the tank of dogfish below us, as the fires beneath heated the water. A tank that size would take ages to come to a boil, but already the little sharks were darting about in agitation, thumping desperately against the tank walls. Their fear churned the surface, splashing hot water across the boards of the cat-walk.

“Don’t worry,” I assured Irene, “we’re almost safe. Just ahead there’s a portal that will take us out of here.”

I didn’t mention that a homicidal psionist could be lurking on the other side, waiting to trample our brains. Nor did I mention that Rivi might have more wights with her, or thugs, or a firewand, or other lethal tricks we hadn’t seen yet. I thought those were our only concerns... until Irene brought up an issue that had completely slipped my mind.

“And what,” she asked, “is the key to this portal?”

“Key,” I said. “Key. Yes. We need a key.”

The key to this portal was, of course, a picture of oneself. I didn’t have such a thing. I doubted my companions would either—they all wore naga-spun clothing, so I had to assume that all their possessions had burned when they entered the Arching Flame. Yasmin’s sword must have had enough magic to survive, just as mine did; but everything else was gone, cinders, smoke.

“Sod it all!” I muttered. No paper, nothing to draw with... oh yes, in time the tower would be a plentiful source of charcoal, but by then we’d be charcoal too. Could I use the tip of my rapier to scratch out an image on a chunk of wood? Maybe, if I had a useful chunk of wood; but the Vertical Sea was built of stout beams and planks, and nothing close to hand was thin enough to chop or pry loose.

Think, Britlin, think. How do you make a picture when you can’t make a picture?

“Okay,” I told myself. “Other artists do this all the time. Nothing to it.” Turning to Irene, I bowed deeply. “Your pardon, good lady, but I require a swatch of your gown.”

“Ahh,” she said, a gleam in her eye. “You are so bold.” She didn’t flinch as I lifted my rapier and sliced out a section of cloth the size of my hand, taken from the bottom front of the dress.

White satin of the finest silk, smeared with unidentifiable smudges of brown and green. Lovely.

“Now, milady, a lock of your hair.”

She lifted an eyebrow, but there was a smile on her face.



By the time the others arrived—Miriam cradling Hezekiah’s unconscious body, while Yasmin kept her steady whenever the tower shuddered—I had assembled a somber montage on the catwalk in front of me.

A scrap of stained silk, frayed on the edges.

A few weedy strands of gray hair.

A shred of Irene’s veil, covering the hair.

Four thin splinters of wood shaved off the catwalk, lined up side by side on the white cloth; one of the splinters was partly broken halfway down, canted off at an angle.

“Britlin,” Yasmin scowled, “what do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m making a portrait of Irene. It’s an abstract.”

“Oh.” Yasmin leaned over my shoulder. “It needs a teardrop.”

“I know it needs a teardrop!” I snapped. “Any fool can see it needs a teardrop.”

Pause. “Where does it need a teardrop?”

“On the veil,” Yasmin and Miriam said in unison.

“Okay.” I bent over the catwalk and reached down toward the fish-tank.

“What are you doing now?” Yasmin asked.

“I’m going to dip my finger in the vat. Get some water, get a teardrop.”

“That just gives you a water drop, Britlin.” Yasmin sighed. “You’re making art—you want to ruin it?”

“Men!” Miriam muttered under her breath.

“Fine!” I said. “Irene, can you produce a teardrop?”

“A sad tear or a happy one?”

I turned to other two women. “Your opinion, ladies?”

Before they could answer, another vat of fish fell off the tower. This one started three stories above us: smashing down to the next lower level, then angling off a slanted beam that tipped the tank sideways and deflected it to the rear of the structure. Several tons of water and confused lobsters streamed past us in a thunderous cataract, followed by the heavy vat itself.

“No point getting picky about the type of tear,” Yasmin said quickly.

“Yeah,” Miriam nodded. “The leatherheaded portal can’t tell the difference.”



Like many a bride, Irene had a ready source of tears; happy or sad, I couldn’t say. She took almost no time to deposit a lady-like dewdrop on the veil of my collage... and speed was good, considering the ominous creaks now wracking every inch of the tower. The Vertical Sea’s lifetime could be measured in minutes, if not seconds, and we fervently hoped to relocate before it collapsed.

I spared a last glance at our comrades down below on the street, and was relieved to see November dragging Wheezle into a nearby alley. She could barely stand, her body doubled over with the pain of her own injuries; yet the look of determination on her face showed she would get the gnome to safety before the tower came crashing down. They were still in serious danger—in the Hive at night, with a price on their heads—but they would not die in an avalanche of lumber and boiled prawn.

Now to make sure we didn’t die either. “Irene,” I said, putting the collage carefully into the orc-woman’s hands, “you’re going to lead us through the portal now. You’re holding the key.”

I hoped I was telling her the truth. Yasmin and Miriam might believe a few scraps could substitute as a portrait, but I was far from convinced. Yes, the assemblage suggested a deluded bride—dirty silk, a broken splinter, an ambiguous tear—but was it enough? Would the portal accept a depiction that was at most vaguely evocative? Or did its magic require a clean representation of face, flesh, and bone?

A beam overhead gave a loud crack as flames licked around its girth. “Go ahead, Irene,” I said, swallowing hard. “I’m sure this will work.”

“Of course, your majesty,” she answered with a small curtsy. Showing no doubt at all, she walked toward the dim outline of the portal, the rest of us following behind...

...and the portal opened.

Dust skirled around us, buffeting our cheeks. The wind had to come from the Glass Spider itself—air leaking out, or perhaps deliberately sprayed to keep dust from accumulating around the entrance. Putting my arm around Irene to keep her on her feet, I pushed forward against the gale, unable to see if the door in front of us was open. It was; and as soon as we had fought our way inside, it slid shut with a hiss, closing off the rasping rush of the duststorm.

“How about that!” I said to the others. “The sodding collage actually worked. The portal thought it was a picture of Irene!”

“This is a picture of me?” she asked, looking down dubiously at the scrap of cloth, the hair, the wood splinters.

“Absolutely,” I told her, laughing with relief. “We got approval straight from the portal’s mouth.”

“Then,” she said graciously, “I must add this to my hope chest... to complement my other portrait.” She reached into her bodice and withdrew a cheap tin locket. “See this?” She opened the locket to show me a tiny watercolor of herself, perhaps thirty years younger. “Rather a good likeness, don’t you think?”

I looked at the watercolor, then at the collage, then at the watercolor again. Don’t ask me which was the better portrait—ask the sodding portal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO⊕



THREE TIMES THE BANG FOR THE BERK

Hezekiah on the floor of the entrance area... not far from the smear of blood where we'd found the dead hobgoblin the first time we came to the Glass Spider. "How is he?" Yasmin asked.

"Still breathing," Miriam replied, trying to sound unconcerned. "He'll come around when he's ready."

"And what do we do in the meantime?"

"The last time we were here," I said, "you talked about a portal to

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Mount Celestia."

"Yeah," Miriam nodded. "The place is supposed to be boring as a beadle, but at least no one will slip a dagger into your kidneys."

"And Mount Celestia has gates to Sigil?" Yasmin asked.

"Every plane has gates to Sigil," I said. "We'll find something." I glanced back at Miriam. "Have you ever visited Mount Celestia?"

She shook her head without meeting my gaze. "Didn't think I'd be welcome. They, uh... the Mount Celestials have a reputation for hunting down evil."

"You are not evil," Irene said without hesitation, "you are simply gruff. It is unfair to judge people as wicked, just because... they are gruff."

I got the feeling our orc friend was speaking of someone other than Miriam; but she suddenly shifted her bridal veil and lowered it over her face, turning away as she did. Whatever submerged pain had bubbled to the surface, she didn't want to share it.

There was a brief but awkward silence. Finally, Yasmin said, "Whatever any of us might have been, we aren't evil now. There's only one true evil in the Glass Spider, and that's Rivi."

"She's probably not in the Spider any more," Miriam muttered. "Odds are she's done a flit out one of the other portals... and not to Mount Celestia."

"Do you really think she'd run?" I asked. "I doubt she's desperate enough yet to abandon a posh base like the Glass

Spider. Who could she possibly believe would track her here? No one but us—we were the only people close enough to get through the portal before the Vertical Sea collapsed. Do you think Rivi's afraid of us?"

"She should be," Yasmin replied, drawing her sword.



It only took another minute to formulate a plan. Miriam would carry Hezekiah to the Mount Celestia portal, and wait for us there with Irene. Yasmin and I would scour the rest of the building for Rivi; we would take

appropriate action if we found her. Neither of us expected the job to be that simple, but we knew we had to try: Yasmin in the cause of Rightful Entropy, me on behalf of Wheezele, November, and Oonah DeVail.

Time to get on with it.

Yasmin and I started with a circuit of the Spider's upper floor—rooms full of the wights' chemical smell, but empty of opposition. Puzzling; but then, in the past few days, we had whittled down the numbers of Rivi's bashers, both the living and the undead. The personnel needed to work the Vertical Sea must have exhausted the rest of her crew. To all appearances, there was no one left in the whole of the Glass Spider... either that, or they were all waiting in ambush on the lower floor.

Outside the windows of the Spider, the infinite Plane of Dust lay quiet and gray. Patient. Ashes to ashes...

When we had assured ourselves the top floor was clean, we headed for the stairs to the basement. There was only one staircase to the bottom level, a perfect spot to set a trap; and considering how the Fox mass-produced firewands, Rivi must surely have kept one for herself. Even so, we descended the steps without incident, down to the spartan utility corridors that echoed with the throb of machinery.

"Maybe Rivi doesn't know we're coming for her," Yasmin murmured.

"Or maybe she died laughing at the thought," I replied.

"If we find her dead, we'll muss up her corpse and say we killed her," Yasmin smiled—a beautiful, pure smile, as if for this one second in all eternity, we were together. I don't know if we were together as lovers, as brother and sister, as comrades-in-arms... and for that one second in all eternity, it didn't matter.

One second in all eternity: most people don't even have that.

She smiled again... and I opened my mouth to say something, I don't know what, I'll never know what, when she turned away from me and put out a hand to steady herself against the corridor wall. The gesture didn't seem out of place—I thought she just wanted to stop me from speaking, to let the moment last a little longer without being spoiled by words. That's why I held back, giving her time with her thoughts.

Perhaps thirty seconds passed, and still she stood there, head slightly lowered, hand against the wall... until finally, a needle of fear worked under my skin and I stepped around to look her in the eye. "Are you all right?"

She didn't answer right away, but finally she lifted her head, eyelids flickering. "I'm fine, darling," she answered. "Quite, quite well. In fact, I'd be completely on top of the world if you'd kiss me."

Another wide smile swept across her face as she stepped toward me and draped an arm over my shoulder. She leaned forward with her lips slightly parted, but I held up a hand to stop her. "Before you kiss a Sensate," I said, "you have to remember that our perceptions are... heightened through intensive training. We have a better sense of smell..." I touched her nose lightly with my forefinger. "A better sense of hearing." I brushed her earlobe. "Extremely keen vision... not just for seeing, but for observing. For staring at a beautiful woman, and taking in every nuance."

"Do you see any nuances that... interest you?" Her voice was throaty.

“Definitely. A minute ago, your smile started in your eyes and bloomed through your whole face. Now, it’s only your mouth that’s smiling. Your eyes are as cold as the ninth level of Hell.”

She swung her sword, but I had my own blade ready, easily parrying the attack. Skittering back a few steps, she graced me with a glittering leer. “What a clever boy! Who would have guessed your wee male brain wouldn’t be completely blinded by animal lust? Once I’ve made this tiefling slag my own, I must have you on my side too.”

The voice came from Yasmin’s lips... but of course, it wasn’t Yasmin speaking.



The woman in front of me held her sword with Yasmin’s strength, but none of Yasmin’s skill. I couldn’t tell if she was even making an effort to guard herself; certainly, it would have been laughably easy to knock the blade aside and run her through. Just one small problem...

“Yes,” Rivi laughed with Yasmin’s mouth, “you must be torn, poor man. On one hand, I’m sure you could kill this lovely body without a speck of trouble. On the other, I’ve detected a wee fondness, shall we say, between you and this woman. Can you really kill her to get me? Especially when you have no idea whether killing her will hurt me at all.”

“If you’ve switched bodies with Yasmin—”

“But that’s the question, isn’t it?” Rivi interrupted. “Is Yasmin’s wee soul safe and sound in my own body... a simple swap? Or is Yasmin still inside this body, but dominated by my vastly superior willpower?”

“In a contest of willpower between you and Yasmin,” I said, “I’d put my gold on Yasmin any day.”

“Loyalty!” she chuckled, clapping her hands with delight. “How quaint. And perhaps, darling, the contest between me and Yasmin might have been a wee bit fiercer another time, another place. However, for one enchanted second, your dear-heart completely let down her guard—no doubt staring into your strong manly eyes. She opened herself so wide... well, I just couldn’t resist slithering in. And now that I’m inside, only another psionic could possibly throw me out again.”

She simpered, as if she expected praise for being so clever. I marveled at just how repugnant I could find the face that I loved; at how the same flesh and bone could be so transformed by the spirit within. Then again, a painter’s eye is keenly attuned to such subtleties—a tiny stroke of the brush can change a portrait’s features from stern composure to pompous buffoonery. I’d played such tricks many times on canvas; I just never expected to see the effect in real life.

“All right,” I said, “have fun in Yasmin’s body. I’m going to find your real carcass.” Stepping around her, I strode off down the corridor, heading for the room where Wheezy and I had found Rivi’s belongings on our first visit to the Spider. Perhaps Rivi’s body wouldn’t be there, but it was the natural place to start looking.

Rivi/Yasmin loosed an indignant squeal and scurried to follow on my heels. “You can’t just ignore me!” she cried. “I’m in your lover’s body!”

“So?”

“So you should... you should...” Her voice trailed off.

“I should moan and groan that Yasmin’s possessed? Beg you to let her go? Pike that, Rivi,” I laughed, “the best way to handle brats is to ignore them.”

And I ran down the hall, leaving Rivi to fume.



Let me say for the record that I was not so blas... as I wanted Rivi to believe—seeing the nasty wee albino inside Yasmin’s body gave me cold chills. If Rivi wanted, she could use Yasmin’s own sword to start carving up her body, flesh wounds just to horrify me or a good slash to the throat to end it all. One reason I ran was to get away before such ideas occurred to Rivi’s foul mind; she wouldn’t hurt Yasmin unless I was there to watch. Besides, Rivi might not be able to damage Yasmin without dislodging herself: the pain of injury might break Rivi’s concentration, sending her back to her own body. I didn’t know if psionics truly worked like that, but I prayed to The Lady it was so.

In less than a minute, I had reached the machine room where Wheeze and I found the clay tablets. Unlike the room where we’d fought the Fox, this place still had its engines intact: pistons clanging, steam hissing, belts slapping through pulleys and gears. In the corner of the main room, the walls of the control bunker had turned transparent... a disconcerting effect, even if I’d seen it before. Rivi’s body lay comfortably on a cot inside the room, her eyes closed, her hands folded, her chest rising and falling with tranquil breaths. The grinders, white and brown, stood atop large glass jars beside the cot; dust trickled out of each grinder like sand through an hourglass, so that the jars were now half full.

This looks easy, I thought to myself: just walk in, put my rapier to Rivi’s throat, and threaten to carve her like mutton unless she lets go of Yasmin’s mind. But why waste breath on threats? Why not try a gash or two, non-lethal cuts to see if the pain made it impossible for Rivi to keep Yasmin under control? I strode toward the door, ready to wreak violence on the albino body...

...and the sodding door was locked.

The body on the cot stirred, opened her eyes, and smirked as she sat up. “Troubles, darling?”

“Just a minor setback,” I replied. “If I can’t get in, you can’t get out. How long does it take to die of thirst, Rivi?”

“More time than you’ve got, Britlin dear. I’ve given back Yasmin her precious wee mind... with one tiny alteration.”

I shuddered. “What did you do?”

“A simple illusion—when she sees you, she’ll think she’s looking at me.”

Behind my back, Yasmin roared, “Rivi, prepare to die!”



Yasmin had a longsword, I had a rapier. Her weapon gave her the edge in strength, mine the edge in speed. In terms of skill, I thought we might be evenly matched, but in terms of motivation... she burned with a killer’s fury, while I was sick at heart.

Her first charge was pure rage, no feints, no tricks, no strategy—just a lightning lunge that would have gutted me if I hadn’t knocked it aside and backed off fast. I would

have gone for Rivi the same way: swift and lethal, trying to put her down before she could use her mental witchery. Yasmin followed up with more brute strength, slashes, thrusts, hammering at my guard, urgently pressing to end this quickly. I parried, dodged, blocked, and sideslipped, until I finally saw a momentary opening and drove a kick into her stomach. She staggered back a foot, then retreated further to a point where she could study me warily.

“You’re better than I expected,” she said. “Maybe because you’re using Britlin’s sword. What did you do to him?”

“I am Britlin,” I replied. “Can’t you tell?”

“Sorry, darling,” called Rivi, lounging on her cot, “she won’t understand a word you’re saying. All she hears is gibberish.”

I cursed and pointed toward the control room. If Yasmin couldn’t understand what I said, at least she could follow my finger. “Look!” I told her, “there’s the real Rivi!”

“Sorry again,” Rivi laughed, “but her wee brain can only see one of me. I’m afraid that one is you.”

“If you’ve hurt Britlin,” Yasmin stared venomously at me, “I’ll run you through—”

She stabbed forward in the middle of her sentence: an old trick, aimed at skewering your opponent while he’s waiting for you to finish the phrase. I parried, ducked under a moving machine-belt, and blocked another thrust mere inches from my groin.

The next two minutes were hell: Yasmin attacked me with everything she’d got, and I could only defend. Such a fight goes against all a swordsman’s training—you always follow blocks with attacks, because more than half of defense is your opponent’s fear of offense. If Yasmin ever realized I wouldn’t strike back she could take enormous advantage of the situation... throw caution to the winds, commit to extravagant all-or-nothing thrusts, leave herself wide open as she tried to take me down. I’m sure she considered such tactics after our first few exchanges, for she must have noticed I was reigning myself in. Still, she may have thought my lack of aggression was a trick on Rivi’s part, some ruse to lull her into a mistake; and to be honest, I couldn’t completely restrict myself to defensive maneuvers. Sometimes, when I saw an opening, when her blade moved an instant too slowly or she had to duck a rocker arm that clicked past her head, my fencing reflexes took over and I attacked in spite of myself. Thank The Lady, I always stopped short of a death thrust... although most of the time, it was Yasmin who stopped the blow, not I.

Don’t get the idea that we duelled for so long without landing any touches. Yasmin caught me a dozen times, and despite my intentions, I pinked her back just as often. Our salvation was the uncanny white cloth the nagas had produced for us: Yasmin’s outfit shaped like her original dragonskin sheath, covering her body from toe to throat; and my outfit tailored into normal jacket, shirt and pants, but still protecting everything but my hands and head. The cloth had an uncanny ability to turn straight thrusts into glancing blows, to resist slashes and soften the force of even the most vicious chops. True, the clothes were not totally impervious to steel (as I found when Yasmin’s blade tore a gash in my left forearm), but they saved me on several occasions when skill and guile could not.

And so we fought amidst the machines, clambering over cogs, scalded by spurts of steam, playing cat-and-mouse around the slamming pistons. Rivi sat in her control room, mocking and jeering in the hope of goading me to a moment's inattention. I ignored her taunts and spoke only to Yasmin: "It's me, it's Britlin, can't you tell?" She couldn't be fooled forever, could she? Rivi's illusion would have to falter eventually; or Yasmin might figure it out on her own. Yasmin knew well enough that Rivi could play tricks on her mind, and if she thought everything through—how reluctantly I was fighting, how my clothes had the same unnatural protective quality as hers, how my words turned into babble as they came from my mouth...

Yes, in the long run, Yasmin would figure it out. The only question was whether she'd kill me first.

A furious gout of steam sprayed from a release-cock off to my right, blasting a mist of condensation over a large pressure dial on the side of a boiler. The dial's face was glass, and almost three feet in diameter—made big, I suppose, so even a short-sighted operator could see if the gauge hit the red. The fogged-over glass gave me an idea... an idea that almost killed me, as Yasmin took advantage of my momentary distraction to make a vicious hack at my throat. I dodged back by the narrowest of margins, so close her blade trimmed my beard; then I spurred myself into a flurry of offense, driving her back almost ten yards until I forced her to duck behind a camshaft for protection.

She braced herself, expected me to press the attack. I didn't; now that she was safely out of the way, I ran back to the steamed-up dial and wrote with my finger, I'M BRITLIN.

The letters were abysmally blurred, partly because I was writing as fast as a panicked rabbit, partly because condensation is not well-suited for calligraphy; but I squinched out my message in dripping script, then stood back, waiting for Yasmin to look at it. She came forward cautiously, fearful of tricks... and even after she'd read the words, I could see she was far from convinced: this was just the sort of deception Rivi might use to hoodwink a gullible enemy. Yasmin didn't lower her sword, and the look in her eye said she might start the fight again any second. For the moment, however, she wasn't trying to put me in the dead-book. That was all I could hope for.

The real Rivi, still on her cot at the rear of the control room, couldn't quite see the fogged-over dial from where she was sitting. Now she stood up and came forward to the spot where the controller would normally sit, a place with a clear line of sight to the gauge. Her jaw dropped, her eyes widened, and she split the air with a screech of rage, so intense I swear I could feel it as tangible heat scorching the air. Yasmin gave a start, the turned her eyes in the direction of the scream. Her grip tightened on the butt of her sword, and she took a single step toward the control room.

"My, my," I said to Yasmin, "looks like Rivi just fumbled her hold on you."

"Hush," Yasmin growled. "I'm fantasizing how lovely it will look to see fresh red blood on that scrawny white skin. A nice gingham effect."

"Unfortunately, the control room door is locked."

"I'll chew it open."

"Don't—I like your smile." Patting her on the shoulder, I whispered, "We have a way

past locked doors as soon as he wakes up.”

“And what will Rivi do to us in the meantime?” Yasmin demanded. “Make us kill each other? Make us into her slaves? We can’t afford to wait for Hezekiah...” She stopped for a second, then continued. “...to come and save us from this mind-raping slag who just gloats inside that unbreachable control room...”

Yasmin’s voice grew louder with every word, but I wasn’t listening to what she was saying, anymore than she was listening herself. She was simply talking, ranting to hold Rivi’s attention; because in the moment that Yasmin had fallen silent, Hezekiah, Irene, and Miriam had materialized inside the control room, appearing silently behind Rivi’s back. Yasmin had recovered her surprise quickly enough to continue her tirade... and in mere seconds, I expected big-knuckled Miriam to punch Rivi’s face through a control panel.

I should have known better.

Miriam stepped forward stealthily, fists coming up to the ready; but Hezekiah, Clueless boy, had somehow talked Miriam into giving him the firewand she’d acquired at the Vertical Sea. He aimed it at Rivi now, and shouted, “Surrender or I’ll shoot!”

Despite the rumble of machinery all around us, I could distinctly hear the sound of everyone cringing.



Miriam leapt forward anyway, hoping to scrag Rivi before the nasty wee albino had a chance to react. Unfortunately, Rivi’s tantrum had run its course, and she was ready to cause more trouble. Before Miriam could land the first punch, Rivi lashed out a blast of psychic force so powerful it rippled the air. The bolt struck Miriam square in the face, so hard it knocked her to knees... but she got up again after a long count of three, moving as stiffly as something undead.

I didn’t like the blank expression she wore.

“Surrender!” Hezekiah cried again. “I really mean it.”

Rivi laughed at him. “You’re going to shoot me with a fireball, are you? In this tiny wee room? Do you know the damage fireballs make in such a confined space? You’d be fried to a crisp yourself.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t mind frying to a crisp if I took you with me.” Keeping the wand trained on Rivi, the boy crouched beside the cot and tucked the grinders into his pockets. “Maybe I should just grab you and teleport you out where there’s no air.”

“What a brave wee you!” Rivi jeered. “And in time, you might actually find the courage to do it. Pity you won’t have the chance.”

She snapped her fingers and Miriam surged forward. Hezekiah could only stare in horror as the woman of his affections knocked the firewand out of his hand and threw him back against the wall. A moment later, she had pinioned his arms at the wrists, holding him as solid as granite despite his struggles to break free.

“You’re such a trusting wee soul,” Rivi told the boy. “Miriam worked for me, you knew that. Do you think I’d put her on the payroll without a handle on her? Oh yes, her mind is almost entirely her own—it’s a bore to make someone your abject slave, and it’s tiring work too—but I left a wee seed of submission in the deepest cranny of her brain,

just in case I needed it. Which means I win again.”

“No.”

The word came from Irene. She had picked up the firewand. She aimed it at Rivi.

“And who’s this new addition to your merry band?” Rivi asked. “An wee orc maiden... how charming. Orc maiden, do you realize that I can crawl inside your mind and twist it around my finger?”

“You can’t.” Irene took a step forward.

“You think I can’t control two people at once?” Rivi said. “You’re quite... quite...”

Irene took another step forward.

“Stop!” Rivi shouted.

Hezekiah, still held tightly by Miriam, let loose a nasty chuckle. “You’re in trouble, Rivi. Uncle Toby says it’s next to impossible to control people who are insa—... whose minds work in unusual ways. Their delus—... I mean, their special thoughts are like impenetrable labyrinths between you and their real selves.”

“Your Uncle Toby’s a berk,” Rivi snapped. “Just because this old slag is barmy doesn’t mean I can’t...”

Irene took another step toward the albino. “My prince wants you to surrender. Surrender!”

“You can’t fire that wand,” Rivi snarled. “You don’t know the invocation.”

“I heard Miriam say the words,” Irene replied. “Back at the Vertical Sea. Surrender to my prince!”

“Never!”

I would have sworn Rivi couldn’t conceal so much as a toothpick inside that sheer black gown of hers; but she crossed her arms so that each hand could reach into the opposite sleeve, and a second later, out popped two more firewands—twins to the one Irene held.

“How many of those sodding things did the Fox make?” Yasmin groaned; but Rivi was already fixing Irene with a look of sneering superiority.

“See these?” Rivi gloated. “See what I’ve got, you addle-coved wee barmy? I’ve got you outnumbered, that’s what I’ve got. Outflanked and out-firepowered, follow me, darling? Even your pathetic excuse for a brain should see you’re beaten.”

“You will not surrender?” Irene said quietly.

“Why should I?” Rivi asked. “You’re a loser, just like the rest of your pathetic wee band. You surrender to me!”

The wand in Irene’s hand aimed straight at Rivi’s heart. The old orc opened her mouth. “In nomine—”

“Uh-oh,” said Hezekiah.

“Irene, don’t!” said I.

“Down!” said Yasmin... but I was already throwing myself onto the floor.

“—Vulpes,” Irene finished.

Not just one fireball. Three of them. From three firewands. Irene’s and Rivi’s, all triggered by the same invocation. All going off simultaneously in a single small room.

A moment before, the control room walls had been as transparent as glass. Now with

a triple flash of fire, the interior was splash-blasted black: as black as a coat of paint, except that this blackness came from the incinerated remains of everything inside. All the people, all the control panels, even the air itself had been baked in an instant, vaporized to opaque black char.

Then came the sound of the explosion: an almost delicate CRUMP, as if the inferno was so sure of itself it didn't need to make noise. The walls of the room gave a tiny shiver, but that was all—whatever the room was made of, it was strong enough to stand a volcano.

Slowly, Yasmin and I stood up. The blackened hulk of the control room gave off heat like a cast-iron stove; touch a paper to it, and the page would burst into flames. No mere human could approach those sizzling walls without roasting his skin.

"Hezekiah!" I called. "You teleported away in time, didn't you? Hezekiah?"

No answer.

Yasmin turned a slow circle, eyes scanning the machine room around us. I did the same—no sign of the boy.

"Maybe he teleported to another part of the Spider," Yasmin said in a low voice.

"I hope so," I replied. "If he panicked and ended up out in the dust, he's dead. Hezekiah?"

My only answer was a sharp hiss of steam: a protracted hiss that sent a cloud of vapor roiling into the air.

"I just had a nasty thought," Yasmin murmured. "All these machines must be controlled from inside that room, right?"

"Right."

"And I'll bet there's not much left of the control panels in there."

I stared at the charred walls, still radiating a blistering temperature. "No argument," I told her. "We'd better get out of here."

"What about the others?"

"Hezekiah was touching Miriam. If he managed to get away, he took her with him. They'll know enough to head for the gate to Mount Celestia. As for Irene and Rivi... they're gone."

"Are you sure?" Yasmin asked.

I lifted my hand to feel the heat from the control room walls. "No chance of going inside to check for bodies. You won't find bodies anyway—just albino cinders." In the rear of the room, a cog suddenly gave a loud clank, followed by a hideous grinding sound. "Come on," I said, holding out my hand. "We have to go."



By the time we reached the upper floor, it was obvious the Spider was sinking into the dust again—not a precipitous dive like the last time, but a slow swiveling descent like a screw twisting into a board. Some of the legs were walking; some of the legs had stopped. And so the Spider rotated gradually downward into the infinite sea of Dust.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Yasmin said, staring out the window at the endless gray expanse.

"It's stark," I replied. "I suppose to a Handmaid of Entropy, that's the same thing as

beautiful.”

“Sometimes,” she nodded.

In silence, I contemplated her face. In silence, she contemplated the ultimate desert. I thought of how fondly she’d talked about the Plane of Dust back in Carceri; so it didn’t come as a surprise when she murmured, “I’m not going with you to Mount Celestia.”

“You’re staying here?”

“For a while,” she nodded. “When I look out and see all that peace...” She tilted her head toward the dust. “I need this, Britlin. Just for a time. It’s not your fault, but I need to let things sink in... see what I can put behind me.”

“Are you sure you can survive out there?”

“I have the spells I need,” she answered. “Besides, this plane is my spiritual home. It will sustain me.” She pressed one palm to the glass, then slowly let it slide downward. “Somewhere out there,” she said, “the Doomguard have a stronghold: the Citadel Alluvius. It’s very quiet, very peaceful. I healed there once before.”

“There’s no real proof you’re my sister,” I told her.

She smiled and turned my way. “Trying to kick me out of the family?”

I shook my head.

Laying a cool hand on my cheek, she leaned in very close and whispered, “If you come across proof, one way or the other, come find me.”

“Find you here?”

“Or someplace else. It’s really quite a small multiverse.”

She let her hand linger on my face a moment longer, then turned away. With one last look out the window, Yasmin smiled and began walking down the nearest arm of the Spider. When I moved to follow her, she gestured for me to stop. “I have to go alone, Britlin. I can survive out there, but you can’t.”

“You think you can walk where you’re going? This plane is infinite—the Citadel could be millions of miles away.”

“This plane is the chalice of my soul,” she said. “When my soul has walked for long enough, the Citadel will come into sight.”

“And if I walk long enough, will you come into sight again?”

She made no answer.

I stayed by the window. In time, I saw her white-clad figure slip into view, walking lightly on the dust. She left no footprints.

Slowly, the Spider continued to rotate, notching its way ever downward. Yasmin disappeared from sight; and when the Spider had come around once more to the same angle, my sister was gone.



“What’cha looking at?” said a nasal voice behind my shoulder.

I let my head thump forward against the window pane. It felt so good, I banged it again. “Hezekiah,” I grimaced, “I’m coming to believe that nothing in the multiverse can kill you.”

“Shows how Clueless you are,” the boy said. “Uncle Toby will slice me for sure if he hears I have a price on my head. How long have I been away from home? Two weeks?”

I turned to face him. Miriam was there too, her arm clasped tightly around his waist. Both of them wore grins that managed to be smug and sheepish at the same time. “What have you two been up to?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Hezekiah answered defensively. “I teleported away from Rivi in the nick of time, and a second later, Miriam’s mind snapped back to normal. She was grateful to be free.”

“Grateful,” I repeated.

“Can’t a woman be grateful?” Miriam demanded.

“You might have told us you were all right.”

“There was no hurry,” Hezekiah replied. “Rivi was totally incinerated, right? You two were outside the room, so you were okay. And Miriam was grateful.”

“Yes, I believe we’ve established Miriam’s state of mind,” I muttered. “Do you still have the grinders?”

“Nah, I teleported them outside. High time they got lost in the dust again, right?”

“Best place for them,” I nodded.

“That’s what I said,” Miriam put in. “Sod the piking grinders.”

“Anyway,” Hezekiah went on, “I was glad to get rid of the grinders but I was feeling pretty lowdown about Irene—and Oonah and Wheezle and everyone else—and Miriam said, Kid, you could use some cheering up...”

The boy continued to babble all the way to Mount Celestia.

THE END

