

FORGOTTEN REALMS

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ABOLETHIC SOVEREIGNTY BOOK I

PLAGUE  
OF  
SPELLS



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## CHAPTER ONE

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*28 Tarsakh, the Year of Blue Fire (1385 DR)*  
*Starmantle, Dragon Coast*

The storm blew in from the east.

The storm's leading edge spread wide to shadow the Dragon Coast. It dripped cold rain and threw a pall across the sun. Behind this sullen herald churned the storm's bruised core, rumbling with elemental rage.

Rain, hail, and freezing winds burst into the port city of Starmantle.

In the first moments of the downpour, city dwellers attempted to go about their business. But the rain came stronger, and the chill deepened into an out-of-season wintry onslaught. Even sailors used to nature's fury dashed for cover. People exclaimed in shock and discomfort as needle-sharp sleet sought cracks in roofs, walls, and clothing.

The streets rapidly emptied. A man skidded in fresh mud and fell. A street merchant struggled to pull down the awning of his cart against the rising wind that tried to tear it away. Broadsheets and trash cavorted through the air. The fishy smell of the port town was overwhelmed with the tang of the thunderstorm.

A short woman holding a blue shawl over her head stumbled and nearly fell when her boot slid on rain-slick paving stones.

Raidon Kane reached out and steadied her. She nodded thanks, then hurried away, still seeking shelter. She and Raidon were alike, both caught out in the sudden, freezing deluge without a cloak.

Raidon returned his attention to the narrow cobbled way at his feet. The rain and sudden chill made the paving stones more than slick—in some places moisture and the plunging temperature conspired to spin icy traps for the unwary.

He frowned, one hand shielding his eyes from stinging rain. He wondered from where the winter storm had come, so far into the reign of Greengrass. His voyage across the Sea of Fallen Stars had seen mild days and cool nights. When he'd made landfall earlier that day, a balmy spring sun smiled from the east.

Raidon's fare for passage had required that he help the crew wrestle its cargo of iron ingots, spell-preserved cream, and Rethild-weave silk onto the pier. He'd sweated and labored with the others under a wide sky bereft even of haze. And now, freezing rain, hail, and possibly snow?

Raidon pulled a silver chain from beneath his shirt. The stone of his amulet dangled from it. A leafless white tree was etched into the stone, surrounded by a field of heart-breakingly pure blue. The symbol was the Cerulean Sign. Overlapping inscriptions so small they could easily be mistaken for texture covered the remainder of the amulet in a language he didn't know.

The stone warned him of aberrations and distortions of the natural order by dropping precipitously in temperature.

In the wind, Raidon could barely feel his hands, let alone whether the stone was colder than the air. Yes, it was chilled, but in warning? Or because the wind whistled with the bite of a frost giant's breath?

He squinted at the symbol through a flurry of ice crystals, looking for any discoloration in tree or border, or for any change in the tiny script crabbing the stone's remaining surface.

The Cerulean Sign betrayed no change. The blue of the border was as startling and sky bright as ever, while the tree at the center glimmered white as a star. Which meant the sudden onset of inclement weather wasn't due to aberrations.

The Sign's lack of response didn't rule out any of a host of other malign possibilities, of course. It was entirely possible some wizard or priest of the natural world was casting foul-weather rituals with a nefarious end in mind.

But Raidon's amulet wasn't keyed to respond to such mundane possibilities. Evil born in mortal hearts, no matter the depth of its wickedness, was of a lesser order than the abominations he watched for. Whatever the weather's origin, he judged it beyond his concern.

He released a relieved sigh.

A who-knows-how-long delay to ferret out and dispatch some local monstrosity was not in the offing. His schedule would not be disrupted. His daughter, Ailyn, expected to see him in Nathlekh in just five days, and he had vowed not to disappoint her again. She was too young to understand the long absences required by his ever wider searches.

Raidon slipped the amulet back beneath his shirt.

The amulet was a family heirloom left to him by his mother, a fey woman of Sildëyuir. In the years since he'd taken up the birthright, he'd walked much of Faerûn looking for some

trace of her. He'd found hints, stories, and long-stale traces but never his mother or even her grave.

Instead, Raidon discovered a terrible peril. A danger too few recognized to actively resist. Except for him, with the aid of his mother's amulet, a relic Cerulean Sign.

A cruel gust of wind cut through his reverie.

*Zai zi*, it was cold! His silk shirt offered next to no protection. A late-season snowstorm was well and truly begun. Even if birthed by nothing more than nature's random temper, the storm blew with a cold that was becoming dangerous.

Down a side street, he spied a wildly swinging placard in the shape of a white boar, with a flagon emblazoned upon it. Maybe someone inside would be willing to part with a cloak thicker than his own silk jacket. At least he could take a moment to warm up and perhaps wait out the freezing wind and icefall.

Raidon entered the tavern. The place was nearly filled with patrons who'd had the same idea as Raidon. A great fire burned in the hearth, and warm mead was being served at half price.

The tavern's layout reminded Raidon of a pub he'd visited in Amn a few years ago. He recalled how his amulet had become as ice against his chest when he talked to the pub's proprietor. Something foul lurked nearby. That night, the proprietor tried to brain him in his sleep with an iron chamber pot.

Thanks to the amulet, Raidon had been expecting trouble. He had punched the proprietor's sternum, breaking it, while simultaneously sweeping his attacker's legs, knocking the man to the floor. Examination of the proprietor with the aid of his amulet showed him to be in the thrall of a mind flayer, an aberration out of the deep earth scheming in the sewers below the city.

Raidon shook his head to clear the memory. Nothing like that was occurring here.

He sat down at the end of one of the long common tables. The half-dozen men and women already seated ignored him.

A server came up, a teenage boy with unkempt hair. The boy glanced at Raidon, then said, as if asking a question, “We have West Lake Dragon Well?”

The boy had correctly teased out his human Shou ancestry from his fey blood.

Raidon smiled his gratitude and nodded. He added, “Please bring me a pot. I would love to sample your West Lake Dragon Well.”

“Very good!” The server scampered off through the crowd.

Both Starmantle and Westgate had seen a flood of Shou across the Sea of Fallen Stars from Thesk and points farther east along the Golden Road. Both cities strove to become the destination port of choice for the immigrants. This rivalry was just one more avenue through which each city sought to capture the trade moving across the sea. The custom provided by the constant influx of Shou was considerable.

All of which meant that Raidon could now anticipate enjoying a cup of fine tea in a tavern that ten years earlier likely was known only for its mead and ale. Times change. Thankfully, the locals had figured out the quickest way to a Shou’s heart was through a proper tea service.

The boy returned soon enough with an oven-fired clay pot and a mismatched, slightly cracked teacup.

Raidon suppressed a frown at the presentation and even managed to tap three fingers on the table in thanks. He poured a cup, sipped.

Ah, yes. The warm brew was indeed West Lake Dragon Well, if just so slightly stale. The green tea’s growing popularity was well deserved. The boy held out his hand, “A silver, then?”

Raidon nodded and paid the profligate price. Tea was one of the few luxuries he allowed himself.

Ailyn loved tea too, despite her mere five years. He'd last seen her three months earlier over steaming cups. She'd giggled when he pantomimed burning his lips to show her to be careful. Three months was too long for a father to be separated from his daughter. It was nearly a lifetime for a child that age.

When he'd rescued her in Telflamm, she was just one year old. When he'd found her, the girl's natural family was already dead, killed and consumed by a nest of creatures who wore their victims' skins to secretly stalk Telflamm's alleys. Ailyn had been spared only because she was too small to bother with.

After Raidon wiped out the nest, he found her lying quiet in her crib. The girl had looked up at him, catching his gaze with blinking eyes the color of the sea. He lifted her out of the enclosure, and she fumbled at the front of his jacket with her two small hands. "Don't worry, little one. You're safe now," he'd promised.

But even as Raidon said those words, he wondered how they could be true. He knew the girl had no remaining family. He'd saved her life—now the child was his responsibility. The child finally managed to get a hold on his jacket and gripped it.

In the end, Raidon adopted her.

But he couldn't set up a home in Telflamm. Even though he'd cleaned out the nest of skinstealers, the city yakuza had marked Raidon Kane as an enemy to be killed on sight for a past offense against a crime boss. So he took Ailyn west across the sea, becoming one more Shou immigrant hoping to build something new for himself and his child south of the Dragon Coast. He'd settled in the city of Nathlekh, whose Shou population was burgeoning. With the gold he'd accumulated during years of fighting aberrations (and liberating their hoards), he'd established a household staffed with trusted nannies and guards. Ailyn always cried when

he left to continue his search, but he always brought her a gift on his return.

He pulled from a breast pocket a small bell. Its handle was mahogany, and the bell was wrought mithral. The clapper was stilled by a leather tongue. He'd purchased the bell in the Sembian city of Selgaunt. When he'd tested it, it had sounded with a pure, joyous note. Ailyn would love it. He smiled, anticipating her reaction, and returned it to his pocket.

Raidon took another sip of tea and noticed a white-haired woman. The woman's locks were pulled into a single long braid down her back. She sat nearly opposite him at the common table. Several patrons were gathered around the woman. The woman gazed into an irregularly shaped piece of yellowish crystal on the table before her.

Small sparks of light began to swirl within it, but the woman stared resolutely forward. Her tight mouth turned slowly into a frown. Finally, she broke visual contact with the stone. It immediately went dark. Raidon recognized the crystal as a prophesier's crutch—usually used as a prop by those who fabricated rosy-sounding futures in return for payment.

Raidon's young server stood at the woman's elbow, his duties apparently forgotten for the moment. Raidon heard him ask over the inn's hubbub, "What do you see, Lady Mimura? Will the storm soon pass? We're waiting on salt; do you think the salt ship will make it by morning?"

The woman glanced up and around, surprised to see the attention she'd gathered. She stood, gathering the crystal to her bosom. With her free hand, she gave the boy's head an absent-minded pat.

"Mistress? Are you well? Will the weather let up tomorrow?"

The woman shook her head, her frown still in place, a look of confusion and concern in her eyes. She muttered, "Something. I can't say. Somewhere, beyond our ken, a great crime shudders toward conclusion."



“A crime? What, do you mean a burglary? A murder?” demanded another patron.

She shook her head and replied, “I don’t know.” As if in a daze, she left. The briefly opened door sent a new chill into the room. Despite Raidon’s belief that the woman was merely a local fakir, he covertly checked his amulet again, just to be certain.

It remained pristine.

Some time later it seemed the storm was waning, but a cold rain still lashed Starmantle’s streets. In the interim, Raidon purchased a knee-length woolen coat from another patron.

The coat was black, with golden yellow piping at the cuffs and along the hem—quite striking, really. The coat would be useful against snow and cold, but Raidon guessed it would be soaked through in an instant in the ongoing downpour. More important, he doubted caravans would depart the city that afternoon or evening in such weather. The monk planned to travel the final miles swiftly on horseback or wagon as a hired hand on a merchant caravan. Not today, seemingly.

Raidon asked for a room to wait out the storm.

Though usually a heavy sleeper, that night he dozed fitfully, troubled by the pounding of the rain on roof tiles and window panes.

He opened his eyes to light leaking through shutter cracks. Sleep had apparently finally claimed him, though he recalled no dreams. Grogginess weakened his resolve to get an early start. But the rain’s patter was gone, and the howling wind too. He bounded from the cot, finished his ablutions, and descended to the common room. After a quick bite of cold pork, Raidon exited the establishment, tying the sash of his new coat.

A coat he was happy to have. White frost covered every surface, and his breath steamed in great fluffy billows. A strange calm held the frigid air, and dawn’s advance was tempered with a whitish blue hue. An unusual acrid smell, like that of burnt metal, suffused common urban smells.

The odor reminded the monk uncomfortably of when he'd witnessed a demonic aberration rip a sword in two with unearthly strength. The sharp, caustic smell was the same the metal gave off as it was pulled in two. It was the smell of something breaking.

Raidon made it to Starmantle's principal gate without delay. Hardly anyone was up and about. Those who were awake idled in the streets in small, awkward groups. They looked east, murmuring into the oddly tinted sunrise.

A two-story caravanserai hunkered just outside the city walls. Already merchants marshaled horses, wagons, drivers, coach hands, and guards. Trade did not wait upon strange colors in the sky or odd smells, for which Raidon was grateful. In his travels, he'd learned how to move swiftly around Faerûn, taking advantage of the continent's vast network of commerce. Through its use, he wasn't saddled with horses or travel coaches of his own to care for. Many caravan captains knew him by reputation, if not by sight, and were happy to have Raidon Kane's company on dangerous routes.

The half-elf entered the trade house and shortly accepted a commission to escort a trade company heading to Nathlekh after first skirting the Long Arm Lake's northwest edge. In return for loading and unloading, as well as serving as a caravan guard in a pinch, Raidon would make far better time than he could afoot. Pay was part of his contract, but the tidy sum he'd amassed cleaning out aberration lairs dwarfed anything a merchant lord could tempt him with.

They set out in four tarp-roofed wagons, each pulled by four horses, as well as a couple of outriders behind and ahead. Raidon volunteered to ride behind, keeping an eye out for bandits. A couple of squabbling goblin bands had lately encamped in the eaves of the Gulthmere Forest, the monk knew from his most recent trip. The creatures were cowardly in small groups, but en masse they represented a real threat.

The caravan chief lent Raidon a spirited horse to ride rear

guard. She told Raidon its name was Tanner. Raidon sat on the steed, waiting for the caravan to pull ahead. Tanner was a fine beast, unhappy to see her fellows pull away, but he calmed her with low words and pats.

The monk was stroking Tanner's mane when an odd noise distracted him.

The thudding beat of hundreds of wings against the still air pulled his gaze upward. A great flock of crows, their black silhouettes skating swiftly across the morning sky, flew out of the east. The flock didn't veer or hesitate. It swiftly overtook the caravan then passed it, flying arrow-straight into the west. Raidon squinted into the distance, looking for a pursuer—perhaps a griffon or a small dragon? No. Only the rising sun. A sun as blue as the eye of a storm giant and as devoid of heat as an advancing glacier.

Blue? What—

A cacophony of shrill calls and screams broke from a copse of sheltering trees to the south. A mob of stunted figures in patchwork armor dashed forth. Some brandished spears, others axes. Goblin bandits! Raidon estimated twenty at least. The one leading the charge dwarfed the rest and was shaggier.

Caravan guards tumbled out of the wagons, buckling on scabbards and fumbling cords to unstrung bows.

Raidon sawed on the reins, turning Tanner back toward the wagons. He spurred her into a gallop. Tanner responded, collapsing the distance between her and the creature leading the charge. The leader stood nearly seven feet tall. Coarse hair poked from the joints in its armor. Daggerlike fangs filled its gaping mouth. In one hand it wielded a broad-headed battle-axe, in the other a severed human head by the hair. It whirled the head like a flail. This was no goblin.

Raidon hijacked a portion of Tanner's momentum as he vaulted from the stirrups. He dived at the shaggy bandit leader, hands forward as if anticipating a plunge into the

sea. His foe swung its axe around, missing Raidon by several hand spans. The monk's reaching left hand touched the soil near the leader's foot. Raidon snagged the creature's nearest ankle with his right arm, hugging it close to his chest as he tucked into a roll.

In less time than it took to make a single revolution, an awful, meaty snap rang out. The half-elf loosed his hold and concluded his roll, allowing the maneuver to bleed away his speed in just three revolutions. Back on his feet with hands ready, he saw the shaggy bandit leader on its back, one leg splayed to the side at an obscene angle. It continued to scream, but no longer in challenge.

The remaining goblins, composed entirely of the smaller, greenish breed, stumbled to a halt. They looked down at their chieftain, then back to Raidon. The monk stared them down, knowing he could intimidate the goblin rabble with a confident stance. The goblins' greenish skin seemed to shift, flickering and brightening under his scrutiny, until it was blue. Not only their skin, but their equipment, the ground they stood upon, and everything else.

Was he hallucinating?

Uncertainty turned to alarm among the goblins. They pointed and spoke excitedly in their debased tongue. Raidon cocked his head. He couldn't understand their language or why their frightened pointing wasn't at him.

Raidon shifted his stance so he faced the sunrise.

The oddly chill sun was gone. Instead, the horizon was on fire.

Blue fire.

From beyond the horizon's rim, a pillar of azure fire with a fat crown tumbled toward the sky as if intent on piercing heaven's vault itself. The ravening pillar's crown was molten sapphire, and unleashed a fiery catastrophe in its wake.

Raidon gaped with all the rest, his focus lost in the apocalyptic image.

Was it some sort of demonic assault? Or had the monstrosities he hunted—the mind flayers, the aboleths, the beholders, the skinstalers, and all the other deformed and formless hordes—finally combined their efforts to find and ambush him? He fumbled for his amulet, his hands trembling with uncharacteristic haste.

No. It was just as when he'd checked it yesterday. The amulet remained warm to the touch, its image unblemished. Its serenity indicated aberrations were not responsible for the catastrophic skyline. That knowledge offered no comfort in the face of what was the most incredible display of destruction Raidon had ever witnessed.

Raidon let the amulet drop back against his chest, a groan on his lips as he looked to the south. A second fiery pillar clawed up over the jagged edges of the Orsraun Mountains, small in the vast distance. Whatever was happening, more than just the Dragon Coast was caught up in it.

Tanner shuffled sideways, snorting. Some of the goblins dashed toward the edges of the Gulthmere, but most stood rooted, comrades in fear with the caravan guards. All stared in mute incomprehension at the chaos in the east.

A shimmering wall of disrupted air raced over the lip of the horizon and down across the plain toward them. Within that wall, blue flames licked and cavorted. The wall stretched north and south as far as Raidon could see, and reached up too, miles beyond his comprehension.

Wild creatures tried to outrun the advancing wall of fire; bounding jackrabbits, sprinting deer, and a lone wolf stretching its stride in a desperate bid for escape. None could outrace death. The oncoming wall washed over them, burning each to ash.

Bandits and caravaners alike cried out in a single voice as panic grew. Scrambling, pawing, screaming, they turned west, already running, some falling in their fear, only to be trampled by their companions.

Raidon felt himself reverberate with the mob's panic, but he held himself back, mentally searching for his vaunted focus. If his end was imminent, he didn't want to perish in a moment of failed self-control. He spurred Tanner west. "Run," he murmured into the neighing creature's flicking ear. "Gallop as never before!"

The horse ran. She strained forward, shivering with her effort. She easily overtook the goblins and men fleeing afoot. Next she pulled past the other mounted caravan outriders.

A moment later, the oncoming front enveloped them.

A shrieking gust of air punched Raidon from Tanner's saddle. He saw the horse stumble and go down, but he was already past, spiraling through air flickering with fiery blue streamers. He twisted his body into the wind, trying to mimic his mid-gallop tumble from the saddle moments earlier.

The bare earth began to steam. The haze hindered Raidon's ability to judge his roll. He fell, out of control. Something hard cracked his left elbow. The snap vibrated through him, and his left arm went as loose as a rag doll's. His training temporarily shielded him from pain, though he already felt signals he couldn't long ignore gathering at the edge of his mind. His roll concluded in a flopping, painful heap. He came to rest in the lee of a larger boulder. The outcrop shielded him from the tornado-like wind.

He blinked into the torrent, trying desperately to comprehend what was occurring all around him. Raidon wondered if he wasn't within the belly of chaos itself. The wind's screech was so loud he was partly deafened. Blood trickled from one of his ears.

A woman lay just beyond the ravine that ran along the road. Raidon recognized her after a moment: the caravan chief. The roadside ravine, like his boulder, offered partial protection from the roaring wind. The woman struggled to rise from where the shock front had tossed her. Blood soaked one side of her face. She saw Raidon behind his boulder and reached.

Then she caught fire and screamed. Blue flame wreathed her in an instant. The eldritch flame burned brightest in her eyes and open mouth. Raidon cried out in sympathy and in fear, but he couldn't hear himself. A nimbus of cobalt flame sprouted from the woman's back as if she unfurled fiery wings, but before Raidon quite understood what he saw, the woman burned away to ash.

Then the pain from his inelegant fall shuddered through him. Tears further clouded his vision, but he recognized the dim shapes of caravan wagons as they tumbled by on each side, blowing and bounding along in twenty-foot hops, spinning and breaking into ever smaller fragments each time they struck the ground. He saw trees too, and horses, men, loose cargo, and goblins, all held in the wind's fierce grip. The boulder he sheltered behind continued to divert the displaced air, but he felt a terrifying force plucking at his garments and exposed skin, as if eager to embrace him once more.

A goblin smacked onto the leading face of Raidon's boulder. Its mouth was open in a soundless scream, for it was aflame like the caravan chief. But the flame wasn't consuming it; instead, the fire seemed to grip the goblin in a form-changing spell, one gone terribly awry.

When the goblin's head came off, Raidon gasped. But when the detached head began to pull itself toward the monk on suddenly elongating, blue-burning hair, Raidon's already tottering mental equilibrium shattered. He bellowed in full-throated alarm. Raidon kicked at the grotesque head. It bit at him, slavering. The tentacle-like hair tried to wind around his leg. But Raidon's kick was true, and the awful, animate body part sailed out into the surge and was gone.

The boulder began to shudder to a new resonance. Raidon squinted. Was it beginning to glow? No, it was losing opacity, and light shone through it. The stone slowly faded from dark, dirty brown to a glasslike consistency. He clutched the boulder desperately. It remained solid, though its new transparency

allowed Raidon an unimpeded view directly back toward the shock wave's origin.

The land shuddered and flowed, tossed and lapped, as if water, not solid earth. Crystalline spokes sprouted, their tips slowly revolving as they pushed ever higher until a madman's lattice squatted on the horizon. Even as Raidon's mind tried to grasp the structure's skewed, unsound geometry, the lattice began to evaporate.

Then his boulder sloughed away. The half-elf dived toward the ravine, but a passing streamer of blue fire caught him squarely through his chest, like an arrow fired from a divine bow.

Time's passage slowed to a trickle. Raidon's momentum drained away, and he hung suspended by nothing save fiery pain. Something tugged at his neck. His amulet fell up and away into the sky as the links of its chain flamed blue and melted.

He strained, body and mind, reaching for the glinting stone. He couldn't afford to lose it! It was more than the Symbol of the Cerulean Sign; it was the only tangible effect left to him by his mother. His finger tips brushed its fleeing edge. The normally cerulean blue surrounding the white tree changed, as if infected with the blue fire.

"No!" he yelled into the timeless moment. He saw the amulet, like its chain, begin to flare. A moment later, it dissolved as it fell upward.

Left behind was an image of the symbol surrounded by a roil of insubstantial glyphs. He continued to reach anyway, straining against the temporal pause. If he could just touch the lingering glow of retreating energy, perhaps . . .

As if responding to his desire, the remnant flared. Its upward trajectory slowed, then reversed. The disembodied symbol slashed back down, striking Raidon's chest. Fire burned through his new coat and consumed it in an instant. The symbol's cerulean blue now fully matched the cobalt blue



of the surrounding calamity—a subtle change, but enormous for what it implied. Not that Raidon was permitted any more time to think. The insubstantial symbol seared into his body, his mind, and his very soul.

All faded to blue, then to nothing.