

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

BRUCE R. CORDELL

ABOLETHIC SOVEREIGNTY BOOK II

CITY OF
TORMENT



CHAPTER ONE

*Eleven Years after the Spellplague
The Year of the Secret (1396 DR)
Veltalar, Aglarond*

The young tough thrust his dagger at Japheth's stomach.

Japheth retreated into the folds of his cloak. Shadows slapped his face like gauzy moth wings. With a second step, he was back in the abandoned brewery, a dozen yards from where the kid had tried to knife him.

He pointed. The weapon in the tough's grip flared with green fire. It clattered to the floor, trailing a spiral of emerald smoke. The kid bellowed in disbelief, clutching his scorched hand.

Japheth said, "You didn't answer me. Which one of you is in charge?"

An assortment of youths, lounging, boozing, and dicing away the afternoon stared at him in

slack-jawed surprise. A few scrambled for weapons, but most didn't move. They seemed unable to believe a single man would be foolish enough to enter their hideout uninvited.

"Word is, the Razorhides are the meanest gang on the wharf," continued the warlock. His back brushed a wall. He hoped it didn't conceal anyone else good with a knife. "Now that I found you, I'd like to make a deal."

The Razorhides recovered from their surprise. Like petals opening at dawn, blades appeared in their grubby hands.

The warlock forced a smile in order to demonstrate confidence. This was where his plan would be tested. He'd foreseen the gang's armed reaction—counted on it, even. But facing a small sea of glinting blades was different from imagining it. And the Razorhides had a reputation on the wharf. Those who crossed them ended up dead, usually with body parts strewn along the docks as a warning to merchants and freelance thieves.

"You're paying attention. Good," said Japheth, trying to make his voice light. "So, who's your leader? One of you? A merchant up in Old Town? Maybe a sergeant of the militia? Yes? No?"

Silence met him. Japheth girded himself for what he knew would come next.

"I'm the one you want," said a tall young man, stepping forward. He was twenty-odd years old but scarred and tattooed with more hard living than most could claim in double that span. According to one story, this bastard had killed a whole family in their home by sealing them in and then burning the structure down. "I'm Dherk. The Razorhides do what *I* say. What's it to—"

Japheth muttered a spell, one of the few he hadn't got from the Lord of Bats. An iron spear appeared in Japheth's right hand, glowing cherry red with infernal heat. The warlock hurled it. The spear transfixed Dherk's left thigh through



his spiky leather armor, nailing him to the brewery's dusty plank floor.

A scream of surprise burst from Dherk. Blood trickled from his impaled leg.


"You're wrong," Japheth yelled over Dherk's outburst and shouts from the others. "I lead the Razorhides. Starting today. Understand?"

"Get this bloodlicking sheepstraddler!" screamed Dherk as tears of pain glistened on his cheek.

So much for bluffing, thought Japheth. He produced from his cloak a whorled nautilus shell on a hemp cord. It represented a little extra insurance he'd prepared in case the Razorhides proved defiant.

Japheth blew on the shell. In answer, something smashed at the front doors of the abandoned brewery. Several heads swung nervously to regard the entrance.

The warlock said, "I didn't come alone. In fact, a friend of mine is at the door—"



A crossbow quarrel whistled toward him. His cloak caught the bolt and pulled it noiselessly out of the world before it found his flesh, but he dropped the nautilus amulet.

A tough charged Japheth, a dagger in each hand.

The warlock snatched up the shell, but he'd misjudged the dagger-wielder's distance. The kid was on him.

One blade drew a line of blood down Japheth's left forearm, but his cloak protected him against the thrust of the other.

He snarled at the unexpected pain. Then he raised the nautilus shell and yelled, "Come to me!" The shell sounded of its own accord in his hand.

Another crash sounded at the entrance. This time, light from the outer hall spilled in as the door came off its hinges.

A thing stood in the vestibule beyond the broken doors.

Japheth had spent the previous few days crafting a construct from driftwood and portside debris. It was simple

and relatively fragile as such things went, but impressive looking. With its crown of smashed shells, body of dirt and fish teeth, and cloak of sea mist, it looked immensely threatening. Terrifying, even.

A murmur of fear swept the Razorhides. Perfect! They were primed.

The warlock swirled his cloak in the dagger wielder's face, distracting the kid so Japheth could retreat a step.

A step was all he needed.

Japheth opened his mouth wide, releasing a devastating shout that cracked the stone column behind him, splintered the wood at his feet, and abraded the flesh of the advancing mass of gang members. A fiery image accompanied the blast, some sort of bat-winged, burning angel pulling itself free from a cavern lair.

The screams of fear, issuing loudest of all from the pinned Dherk, signaled to Japheth the fight was over. Many Razorhides had been pushed back by the strength of his terrible howl, a spell of mind-piercing fear he'd gleaned from his reluctant patron. Some had fallen over. One, nearest the driftwood scarecrow standing in the doorway, had fainted dead away.

"As I was explaining," said Japheth, "I am your new leader." He tucked the nautilus shell away in his cloak.

Several heads nodded. He watched them for clues they were playing him. But no—he judged they were truly cowed.

"Dherk is out, and I'm in. Although . . . if he plays his cards right, he'll remain second in command."

He fixed Dherk with a hard look, daring the man to order another attack. The conjured iron spear that pinned Dherk to the floor dissipated. The deposed leader remained sitting, his eyes wide.

"S-second?" stuttered Dherk.

"Yes. They'll answer to you. You answer to me. And what I want is very simple: tribute."



“Tribute?” said Dherk. Japheth almost felt sorry for the gang leader, until he remembered the burning family.

“Yes. Tribute. Think of me as your benevolent bandit king. You’re my duke, and these others . . . my knights. You fellows steal for your food and comforts. As your new king, you owe me a cut. Let’s say, oh, how about thirty percent of your daily take in coin?”

Gasps issued from the throng. Japheth waited a moment, his head cocked, but no dissent was voiced.

“See? Already we’re off to a promising start! I’ll come by once a day to pick up my cut. If I find you are cheating me . . . Well, don’t. Otherwise . . .” Japheth pointed to the scarecrow. “I’m leaving my friend behind. He’ll help you guard your lair. But it’ll also watch *you*. Disappoint me, and I’ll know.”

Japheth met Dherk’s eyes. Dherk jerked his head down in a frightened nod.

“And while you’re at it . . . find me a tin of traveler’s dust. I’m a little light.”




Japheth strolled through the wide doors of the Lorious Inn, his hands clutching a purse heavy with coin. A down payment on his tribute, courtesy of the Razorhides.

The Lorious was one of the finer establishments in Veltalar, catering to a clientele of wealthy ship captains, successful merchants, and high-stakes players who believed they won more often than they lost at various games of chance the inn featured. As such, the place was a destination of choice for those with more coin than sense.

Laughter, cursing, and the sounds of shuffling cards and bone dice issued from the game room just off the Lorious’s comfortable entrance hall.

Japheth glanced in. The wide chamber was packed, as usual. Elegantly dressed and flush-faced people stooped







over tables draped in red fabric. Men with flamboyant kerchiefs patted sweating faces, some laughing, others cursing. Women in elegant gowns and tailored, elbow-length gloves watched dealers and croupiers for any advantage. It didn't matter whether the sun was in the sky or not—all light within the Lorious was magically provided. It wouldn't do for a wealthy merchant on a winning streak to note the approaching dawn and walk away from a game before his coin pouch was empty.

Japheth wondered, not for the first time, what drove them to keep laying down wager after wager until their pockets were empty and their ships or homes were pledged to pay off imprudent bets. More fortunes were lost in the Lorious than were made.

The warlock speculated the rush a gambler experienced making a bet was akin to his own craving for the red crystals. Of course, casting the bones looking for double sevens wasn't the death sentence a traveler on the crimson road eventually faced.




Japheth shook off the association, as well as the temptation to try his luck at the table with the purse he held just to see what might happen.

No, he decided. He wouldn't chance the first installment of his tribute in there. He moved deeper into the Lorious.

The wide portico of the saloon's entrance was the next enticement. Within, patrons briefly rested from the exuberant highs and chin-trembling lows of the game chamber with the aid of popular and bizarre drinks. Spirits, ciders, and wines of both rare and common vintage flowed. Bundles of burning herbs in dark leaf wrappers and water pipes hazed the room with pale blue smoke.

He had no time for the camaraderie of the saloon either. He walked past.

It cost Japheth five gold coins a day to rent the adjoining rooms he maintained in the luxury inn, a sum more than



double what an opulent suite normally went for. But the warlock needed privacy to complete his task. He could have paid much less in nearly any other lodge, but seclusion wasn't cheap, especially when it had to be found quickly.


The Lorious offered both unquestioned privacy and more than a modicum of security. An extraordinary amount of coin passed through the establishment's halls. It could not afford to allow its guests to become the victims of thievery. So long as a visitor did not steal and did not cheat—or get caught at either—the proprietors were happy to allow paying customers all the privacy they required, no matter the deviant habits some were rumored to enjoy. The warlock doubted any had accumulated as many rumors as him in so short a time.

He'd heard the staff whisper he was a spy from Thay sent to keep tabs on Veltalar, or perhaps on the Red Wizard enclave that operated in the city outside of Thay's purview. One fellow had caught a chlorine whiff emerging from the warlock's suite and had sworn up and down Japheth was trying to reanimate the corpse of a rich heiress.

The warlock complained to the Lorious's management about that one and got him dismissed. A few rumors to maintain an air of mystery to keep folks away was one thing. Inciting local authorities with crazy lies about zombie uprisings was counterproductive.

To achieve his end, he'd accumulated all sorts of odds and ends, some of which were bulky, loud, smelly, or all three. He'd tried to transfer these components into his chamber without causing undue commotion, but he hadn't been entirely successful.


Japheth passed down a hallway lined with golden lamps and tapestries. A plaque indicated the tapestries were looted from the ruins of Mulhorand. This would impress most guests with coin enough to stay in the most expensive suite the inn had to offer. The warlock didn't much care.




As dearly as he paid for his privacy, in truth, solitude was the least of his expenses. His task required the acquisition of costly components, items more expensive even than illicit drugs, especially in uncertain times. Japheth had quickly run through his resources merely researching what might be required. He'd nearly despaired, until a rhymester in the saloon related a story of a bandit lord who deviled the city before the Spellplague.

The warlock spent two days without sleep chasing down wharf drunks, roustabouts, and petty thieves, learning bit by bit the various minor and major players of the Veltalar underworld. Every city concealed some amount of corruption just beneath its surface. Veltalar was no different. He finally discovered where the Razorhides made their lair.

Truth to tell, he was surprised how soft they turned out to be. Some of the stories indicated he might have been in for a desperate fight. But no.




He doubted his new gang leader role would survive more than a few tendays. But it didn't need to last forever—only long enough to pay for what he needed. Expensive things like green dragon scales.



The warlock reached the finely adorned but heavily reinforced door of his suite. He put the iron key into the lock, rotated it three times to the left and once right. A click, and he was in. The door creaked shut behind him.

The main room was adrift in tomes. Books of every size lay in untidy heaps, many open to a page Japheth had briefly perused before tossing it aside to refer to the next. Titles picked out in various scripts winked amid the clutter, including *Godren's Ritual of Waking*, *Breaking the Spell*, and *Recalling the Soul*. Much of the warlock's funds had gone into renting the tomes from private collections in Veltalar.

Japheth produced a second key and slid it into the massive door guarding the suite's vault. The door was iron with a core of lead. The vault was a perk offered by the Lorious




to guests willing to pay a little more for security. Japheth worked the key and heard the interior lock's dull thud as the bolts pulled back. Despite the door's weight, it was well balanced and opened smoothly.

A chorus of barks greeted the warlock. Then appeared a grinning canine head, followed by a wriggling black body and a waving tail.

“Lucky, you keeping our girl safe? Yes? Good boy!”

He reached down and ruffled the dog's ears. The tempo of its tail increased—a far cry from Lucky's reaction when Japheth had first claimed the dog's charge. The beast had guarded his mistress well on that forlorn island anchorage. Too well. When Japheth appeared from the folds of his cloak, Lucky had snarled and leaped. The scar on the back of Japheth's hand was from that bite.

He couldn't fault the beast for being protective. He was just grateful the loyal animal had recognized him and stood down. If he'd been forced to hurt the dog . . . Well, it hadn't come to that.



The vault's floor was smooth marble, with walls and ceiling to match. Two circular diagrams were engraved on the floor and inlaid with silver. Japheth had inscribed them himself.

Anusha Marhana's travel chest was set in the larger circle.

Japheth walked to the edge and gazed into it. There she lay, her eyes closed and her breathing slow and measured. As if she were merely sleeping.

A familiar pang clutched his chest. “I'm back, Anusha. I got what I needed.”

She didn't respond.

Anusha's features were delicate but drawn. Her arms lay at her sides. Despite how her hands lay in limp curls, they seemed perfect. He knew he'd had too much time to brood over her, but the damage was done.

He was smitten.

He took one of her hands and pressed the palm to his cheek.

The cadence of her breathing didn't change, but his did. "Not much longer. You'll see."

The smaller silver circle on the floor was inscribed so that it barely intersected the larger one. An oak stand rose from its center. On the stand rested an iron birdcage. The cage's bars were rusted, but they were still strong. The cage trapped a spherical object about the size of a human head. The trapped globe was black over most of its surface, save for the purplish red iris that appeared when the object's lids snapped wide, as they did every so often according to no schedule Japheth could discern. Every time the eye opened, the warlock flinched.


The Dreamheart.

It was the disembodied eye of horror itself. He'd layered it with rituals, attempting to blind the thing's gaze. He didn't know how effective his workings had been.

Japheth had devised the iron cage to contain the relic. The cage also gave him a way to handle the Dreamheart without laying his hands along its cold and somehow slick surface.

He'd touched it once, when he'd stolen it from Raidon's sword. That contact had granted Japheth the strength to travel miles through his cloak, when yards were the normal limit of the cloak's ability. The touch had also shown the warlock disturbing images, ones he'd tried to block. But those visions still seeped in and coiled around his dreams, clamoring for his attention during the night.

Japheth didn't have time to listen to their entreaties. He had too much to do already. Plus, based on what he'd seen of the Dreamheart's previous two wielders, the secrets of power offered by the relic came with a price of corruption. If he could come up with some way to protect his mind from that effect while at the same time accessing the relic's powers,



well, that would be something else. When he had more time, he'd think on that.

With Anusha's hand still in his own, Japheth addressed the Dreamheart rather than the woman beside him. "Anusha? If you can hear me in there, stay strong! I'll get you out of there, love. Soon!"