

FORGOTTEN REALMS

# THE SUMMONING

*Return of the Archwizards*

BOOK  
I

TROY  
DENNING





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## CHAPTER ONE

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*20 Nightal,  
the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR)*

**L**ike every burial cairn Galaeron Nihmedu had ever entered, this one stank of the bodies and breath of those who had opened it. The air was permeated by the odor of saddle soap and camp smoke, and the reek of musty human armpits and sour human breath. What Galaeron did not smell was blood, which meant these crypt breakers were more skillful than most. Usually at least three fell to traps and magic during the entranceway excavation.

As Galaeron led his patrol deeper into the cairn, his dark sight began to illuminate the passage walls in shades of cool blue. Inscribed into the flat wall stones were ancient elven glyphs recounting the lives and deeds of the ones buried within. Like most entrance tunnels, this one was low and narrow, with just enough height to stand upright and barely

enough room for an elf's slender shoulders. How the burly humans had found room in the cramped space to clear the corridor he could not imagine, but they had deftly spanned the death pits with rough hewn planks and braced the dead-falls with oak posts.

Galaeron followed the tunnel to the burial chamber. He was surprised to find the room both quiet and dark, given that a pair of his elves were outside guarding twenty shaggy horses and three red-faced sentries. Nor could there be any doubt the humans had reached the crypt. The bronze shield that had once served as a door had been melted almost into nothingness, a crude but effective entry that hinted at plenty of magic.

Galaeron slipped cautiously into the chamber. Seven elf dead lay undisturbed on their ancient biers, their flesh and hair perfectly preserved by the crypt's now shattered magic. Their bejeweled weapons and gold-trimmed armor were lying untouched beneath a thick layer of dust. By their amber skin and ornate bronze armor, Galaeron knew these to be Aryvandaaran nobles, high lords of the aggressive Vyshaan clan who had touched off the First Crown War and plunged the entire elf race into three thousand years of carnage. Though he wished them no peace in their sleep, he would bring their crypt breakers to justice. As a tomb guard, he had sworn to protect all elven burials.

In the tomb's far corner, Galaeron found a knotted rope leading down into a freshly opened hole. The shaft had been excavated by the same magic that destroyed the bronze door, for there was no dirt or rubble heaped around the collar. Trying to imagine what the greedy humans might be seeking down there more valuable than the priceless armor and enchanted weapons of the Vyshaan lords, he led the patrol down the rope.

Thirty feet later, the shaft opened into a labyrinth of low, square-cut dwarven tunnels. By the looks of the working, it had been old when Evereska was young. Dust clung to the walls two fingers thick and lay on the floor a foot deep. The humans'

path twined its way eastward through the powder, looking for all the world like a trail through snow.

Galaeron sent two scouts ahead, then, as the last faint light from outside faded, he took a pinch of stardust from his pocket and flung it into the corridor ahead. Though the phosphorescent dust was too faint to be seen by humans, it provided light enough for the sensitive eyes of elves. Recalling the care his quarry had displayed in defeating the crypt traps, he ordered a three-elf rear guard to follow behind. Stooping almost double beneath the low dwarven ceiling, the patrol moved into blackness. Galaeron left his sword in its scabbard and took his customary position three places back from the leader. Though all tomb guards could fight with both spell and steel, he usually served as the patrol's primary magic-user. Not only was his magic more versatile than that of most elves, he had learned in his few battles that crypt breakers often targeted spell-flingers first, and he preferred to shoulder that burden himself.

The human trail ran eastward for a thousand yards, circling past a dozen ancient cave-ins. Narrow seams of sand began to appear in the ceiling, suggesting to Galaeron's experienced eye that they had crossed under Anauroch itself. Not long after, the distant clatter of falling rock started to echo through the tunnels, and his favorite scout returned to report.

*We must be careful with these spiders. They look to have venom.* A svelte Wood elf with a cupid's bow smile and brown eyes the size of a doe's, Takari Moonsnow's slender hands streaked through the near darkness in finger talk. *And their pet has fangs of its own.*

*Pet?* Galaeron's fingers weaved a basket of lines before him. *What kind of pet?*

Takari smiled coyly. *Better you should see for yourself.*

She spun away and started up the passage, leaving Galaeron knowing little more than he had before her report. He shook his head and followed. If he wanted a Wood elf for a scout, Takari had to be allowed her fun.

Aragath, the second scout—a moon elf—lay near the inside

wall of a gentle curve, his head silhouetted against a flickering blue glow that filled the tunnel ahead. The clatter of falling rock was louder, punctuated by the gruff talk of men at work. Galaeron lay on his belly and crawled up beside Aragath. After stooping so long, it was a relief to stretch out on the floor—even if it did mean breathing through his fingers so the dust did not make him sneeze.

Galaeron peered around the corner and almost cried out in shock. Less than ten paces away hovered a leathery orb of gray-green flesh, nearly three feet in diameter and shaped more or less like a head. A huge eye bulged out from the center of its face, and beneath that gaped an enormous mouth filled with sharp teeth. Atop its pate writhed ten thick tentacles, each ending in a single bulbous eye. Nine of these tentacles had been folded over a small length of wood and bound so that the eyes could look only at the top of the gruesome head. The tenth tentacle was sweeping back and forth, spraying a brilliant blue beam across a four foot width of stone wall. Wherever the light touched, six inches of stone deteriorated into yellow smoke.

Galaeron swallowed, hardly able to believe what he saw. The creature was an eye tyrant, one of the rarest and most feared killers of the Underdark. Galaeron had never fought one himself, but he had seen a trophy specimen in the Evereskan Academy of Magic. According to the Histories, the monster had taken possession of King Sileron's crypt in the Greycloak Hills, then gorged itself on two patrols of tomb guards before the great Kiinyon Colbathin finally killed it.

So stunned was Galaeron that he barely noticed the creature's companions until a section of roof collapsed and several men crawled forward to clear the rubble. All were heavy-boned and huge, with thighs as large as an elf's waist and dark braids of hair swinging about their shoulders. Their high boots and battle-worn scale mail were trimmed in black sable, while the belts that girded their thick middles were made from white dragon scales.

As the men worked, the eye tyrant's blue gaze drifted downward, cutting a swath of smoking emptiness inches above their backs. They dropped to their bellies and grunted something in a harsh, rasping language, then a small fist appeared on the other side of the monster and clasped one of its bound eyestalks. Though the hand was hairless and smooth, it was also strong, pulling so hard Galaeron thought the tentacle would pop off.

"Shatevar!" a voice called.

A female face appeared in the narrow gap between the ceiling and eye tyrant's head. Her features were heavy and rough by elven standards, yet striking and surprisingly beautiful, with hair the color of honey and eyes as blue as tourmalines.

Her second hand came into view and pressed a dagger to the trapped eyestalk, then she said in Common, "Try that again, and I'll make a cyclops of you."

"Then keep your oafs out of my way." The eye tyrant's voice was deep and gurgling. "I'm too tired to watch them."

"Tired or dead, your choice."

As the two argued, Galaeron tried to take count of the humans. Behind the eye tyrant stood two men holding what appeared to be glassy black swords. The weapons might have been obsidian, save that they were perfectly molded, with shadow-smooth blades and none of the conchoidal flaking marks he would have expected. Four more men squatted along the near wall, their scabbards resting across their knees. Judging by their shimmering pommels, these weapons were also made of black glass. It was impossible to see how many men might be lurking beyond the eye tyrant, for the brilliance of its disintegration beam washed out Galaeron's dark sight. Still he did not think his patrol too badly outnumbered. There had only been twenty horses outside.

Galaeron backed away from the corner then issued his orders in finger talk. He did not relish trying to capture someone who made slaves of eye tyrants but had little choice in the matter. Word of such a strange encounter was bound to

circulate through Evereska, and any leeway given the humans would reflect badly on the entire patrol. The matter would not trouble Galaeron overmuch. It was his reputation as a malcontent that had landed him a posting along the Desert Border in the first place, but there were some among his elves who still hoped to make names for themselves in the Tomb Guard.

Once his warriors had readied themselves, Galaeron used a spell to turn himself and four more tomb guards invisible. Trusting the rest of the patrol to follow, he led the way around the corner, the magic of his boots smothering all sound as he skulked along opposite the crouching humans.

Unfortunately, even magic spells and elven boots could not keep dust from billowing when someone walked through it. Two paces from the eye tyrant, one of the humans pointed at the gray cloud around Galaeron's feet and spoke in his harsh language. When the warrior started to rise, the heavy pulse of bow strings throbbed through the passage. Four white arrows streaked out of the empty air and struck their targets in the unarmored calves, the heads sinking only to the depth of a fingertip. The astonished humans leaped up, banging their skullcaps on the low ceiling, then their eyelids rolled down and they collapsed facedown into the dust.

Rendered visible by their attacks, Takari and three more elves rushed forward, exchanging bows for swords and pausing to turn the heads of the sleeping warriors sideways so they would not smother in the thick dust. Behind them, another half dozen elf archers appeared in the low tunnel, three kneeling in front and three standing hunched behind them.

"Elves!" hissed the female human, still the only woman Galaeron saw in the band. A trio of threatening arrow tips appeared out of the darkness to each side of her broad shoulders, and she glared over the eye tyrant at Takari. "My men better be alive."

"They are only sleeping—as are the sentries you left outside," Galaeron said. Trying not to let the woman's apparent lack of alarm worry him, he annulled his invisibility spell. He

signaled Takari and the three elves with her to wait against the opposite wall, then waved at the sleeping men. "These are now our prisoners—as are you. Lay down your weapons and explain—"

"No."

The interruption took Galaeron by surprise. "What?"

"I said no." The woman spun the eye tyrant so that its largest eye faced Galaeron. "We will not lay down our weapons, and we have no need to explain anything to you."

"You have broken a crypt," he said. "In these lands, that gives you much to explain. Surrender now, or you will be the first to fall."

The woman merely looked past Galaeron's archers and called, "Sterad?"

"Here."

A trio of muffled thumps sounded from the rear of the tunnel. Galaeron glanced back and was relieved to see his archers still standing. He was not so relieved to see a pair of burly human warriors standing behind them, looming over the unconscious bodies of the rear guard he had assigned to watch the patrol's back.

"Your rear guard will have a few lumps when they wake," said the woman. "Their headaches will trouble them no more than the wounds in the legs of my men."

As she spoke, the front rank of elf archers spun on their knees to aim at the newcomers. The rear rank ignored the peril at their backs and continued to train their arrows on the woman. If she noticed, she did not seem to care. She said something in her own language to the two men who had delivered Galaeron's rear guard, and they laid their black swords across their breasts. Though the move was not overtly threatening, Galaeron noticed that it placed their weapons at a good height for hacking his archers in the neck.

The woman looked back to Galaeron. "You've no idea what you've blundered into here, elf, but know I mean no harm to you or your people. You may leave while that remains so."



"Pay her no heed, my princep," said Louenghris, one of the archers in the rear rank and the patrol's only Gold elf. "Let them cut my throat. My aim will still be true."

"Thank you, Louenghris, but it won't come to that," said Galaeron, hiding his annoyance. At only a hundred and ten, Louenghris was the youngest of the patrol's elves and still foolish enough to put the humans on their guard by inviting such things. Allowing a nugget of coal to drop from his sleeve into his palm, Galaeron looked back to the woman. "Perhaps you meant no harm, but in breaking the tomb's seal, you have caused it. Now you must come before the *erlagh aneghwai gilthrum!*"

Slipping smoothly into a spell incantation, he crushed the coal nugget and brought his hand forward. A fan of pink radiance shot from the eye tyrant's huge central eye, speckling Galaeron's vision with pale light. Even through the red spots in his eyes, he could see that the tunnel remained as bright as before.

The woman tapped her dagger above the monster's huge central eye. "Haven't fought many beholders, have you? Magic's not much good around Shatevar."

"I am aware of an eye tyrant's power." Galaeron lowered his gaze to address the creature directly. "But I had not heard they were such faithful slaves. We have no quarrel with you, Shatevar."

Shatevar twisted his toothy maw into a sheepish grin. "Sadly, your warriors are not the ones holding darkswords to my back. Should that change, rest assured I will serve you as loyally as I have Vala."

"Vala?" Galaeron repeated, guessing the reason the eye tyrant had spoken her name. Charm spells were much easier to use when a caster knew his quarry's name, and they did not require anything so clunky as hurling coal dust at someone. "What kind of name is Vala? *Meshim deri*—"

"Enough!" Vala pricked her dagger into the eye tyrant's head, drawing a single bubble of brownish blood.

Shatevar's central eye widened, and again the pink flash filled the corridor. Galaeron's spell died on his lips.

"Try that again, elf, and there will be blood." Still keeping the eye tyrant's largest eye pointed at Galaeron, Vala cut another eyestalk loose from its bonds and aimed it at a fist-sized hole the creature had inadvertently drilled into the wall. "You've eleven eyes. Back to work."

"As you command, mistress."

The eye tyrant began to sweep its blue beam across the wall again, revealing a strange square of glimmering radiance deep inside the hole it had created. Content with a standoff for now, Galaeron dropped his hand and used a pair of curt finger gestures to issue two instructions, the most important being to wait. With a little patience, he might learn what the humans were doing and—more importantly—not get anyone killed.

The eye tyrant continued to melt the rock away, shaping something that looked ominously like a doorway. As the opening grew, so did the shimmering square of radiance, though it seemed little more than a sheet of silvery light. Shatevar's blue beam passed through undisturbed, continuing to disintegrate stone on the other side, while the rocks that occasionally fell from the ceiling tumbled back through into the chamber. Given their location, Galaeron wondered if he might be looking at the fabled Sharn Wall, a barrier of ancient magic rumored to lie buried along the perimeter of Anauroch. If so, he could not imagine what the humans wanted on the other side. The few veteran tomb guards who gossiped about such things claimed the hell beyond was rivaled only by the slave pits of Carceri.

Vala kept a wary watch while Shatevar worked, and the patrol was still awaiting Galaeron's signal when the blue beam began to leave black nothingness in its wake.

"We've broken through," reported a human.

Vala's eyes shifted, and Galaeron knew this to be the best chance he would have. He curled the tip of his index finger,

signaling the attack, and a trio of white arrows flashed past. He was already diving as the shafts struck home, two above Shatevar's central eye and the third in Vala's cheek. Though the arrows sank only fingertip deep, that did not prevent the victims from crying out.

To Galaeron's surprise, no human arrows clattered off the wall behind him, and no elf voices cried out in pain. As he rolled, he glimpsed Louenghris falling beneath the blow of a human sword's lustrous pommel and saw two more archers lying in the dust unconscious but unbloodied, then Takari and her companions swept past him, flinging sand and uttering spells of sleeping.

Galaeron came up face-to-eye with Shatevar. Though the lid of its central eye was drooping, the eye tyrant had not yet fallen to the sleep arrows and was swinging around two unfettered eyestalks to attack. The blue beam swept past above Galaeron and tore a six inch hole across Aragath's chest. The scout did not scream; he simply dropped his chin and stared at the red mess spilling down his stomach, then he fell into the dust.

Galaeron was already raising his hand to spray magic at the eye tyrant when a black sword fell on it from behind. The shadowy blade slid through the leathery head almost effortlessly, splitting the skull down the back and spilling the ghastly contents onto the floor. Shatevar's many eyes grew foggy and vacant, then the blue disintegration beam died and left the tunnel in darkness.

"You fool," growled a gravelly voice.

Galaeron looked up, struggling to see. The silvery radiance was still glimmering in Shatevar's door but did not seem to *cast* light so much as *be* light. As his dark sight returned, he found a mustachioed human staring across the eye tyrant's deflated orb at him. By the look of utter contempt on the man's face, it was clear he could see in the dark as well as any elf.

"You have no—"

Takari interrupted the human by catching him across the jaw with the dull side of her blade. He staggered backward, then stumbled over Vala's legs, protruding from beneath Shatevar's cleaved skull, and landed on his back. Takari placed a boot across the back of his neck and kicked his sword away, but the precaution was hardly necessary. The man was sleeping as soundly as his commander.

"Don't break his neck." Galaeron rose. "They aren't killing, so neither should we."

Takari glanced at Aragath's body, then said, "The beholder was theirs."

Despite the bitterness in her voice, she scuttled off to join the hunched battle at the head of the tunnel. It was a strange fight, with stooped figures on both sides striking with hilt pommels and flat blades, the walls echoing with the ferocious yelling of any combat, but no one wailing in fear or grief. Galaeron was not pleased to see that his elves were winning only by dint of magic and numbers—and had the humans been willing to kill, even these advantages would have failed to achieve victory. Determined to end the fight before someone made a mistake and turned it into a mortal brawl, Galaeron summoned to mind the incantation of his sleep spell.

*"Can you fools not be silent out there?"* The voice was wispy and dark and as deep as the tunnel itself. Galaeron stopped and looked to the hole in Shatevar's doorway, but the voice seemed to be coming from everywhere around him. *"You have led the devils straight to me!"*

The remaining humans fell silent and lowered their swords. Takari knocked one unconscious, and two moon elves slipped quickly forward to take charge of the prisoners and prevent them from restarting the fray. Galaeron used finger talk to divide his patrol between caring for his fallen archers and binding the humans, but he kept Takari at his side. He did not want the unpredictable Wood elf venting her grief over Aragath's death on their prisoners.

Turning to the nearest of three humans still standing, he asked, "Who did that voice belong to?"

The humans looked blindly about, uncertain as to who Galaeron had asked, and he realized they could see in the dark only with their swords in hand. He touched one on the chest.

"Who was that voice? What are you doing down here?"

"No harm to Evereska," answered the man. "That's all—"

The last few words were lost to the crack of a magic blast, then the cavern vanished into an instant of murk thick enough to feel. The clatter of falling stones echoed through the tunnel, almost inaudible to Galaeron's ringing ears, and his vision slowly returned, spotty and filled with strings of spidery darkness. He motioned the guards to continue watching the prisoners then turned toward the source of the explosion.

The head and shoulders of a burly human protruded through a saddle-sized cavity in the back of Shatevar's doorway. Behind the screen of silvery radiance, he looked pale and ghostly, despite what Galaeron guessed to be a swarthy complexion and hair as black as jet.

"Melegaunt?" called one of the prisoners. "Melegaunt Tanthul?"

The figure nodded, then thrust a beefy arm through the hole and shouted, "Help!"

The humans started forward at once, trying to bull their way forward despite their bound hands. It was a bad mistake. Takari laid one out with an elbow to the nose, and the other two fell to their guards' pommel strikes. Fortunately for Melegaunt Tanthul, half a dozen elves were rushing forward in the humans' place. They slowed as they passed through the silvery barrier, then caught hold of his arms and began to pull. The human slipped forward, then abruptly stuck and screamed for them to stop.

The shocked elves obeyed, and the human vanished back through the hole. There was a muffled thump but no scream.

Takari looked to Galaeron for orders, as did the elves inside the silver barrier.

Galaeron shook his head uncertainly but started toward the doorway. "I guess we should see what—"

Something that looked like a mouth surrounded by four arms shot through the hole and began to slam itself around, catching elves between its scaly head and the doorway's rocky walls. One elf tried to scream but instead poured forth a torrent of frothing blood. Another fell with her flattened helmet still on her head. The survivors tried to draw weapons and back away. The creature lashed out with its four arms, catching two of the elves by their throats and arms, then came slithering the rest of the way out of the hole.

With a spiked, slug-shaped body tapering back from its huge mouth to a thin tail, the creature was the strangest living thing Galaeron had ever seen. It had no eyes or ears but was aware enough of its foes to jerk its captives away from the two elves who had escaped its grasp. As they moved to help their comrades, a black bolt materialized out of thin air and struck one down. The second warrior fell when the thing hurled one of its prisoners into her head. Both elves fell with broken necks.

"What hell did these human bastards open?" Takari yelled, reaching down for a second sword. When her palm closed around the leather-wrapped hilt of human's sword, she hissed and dropped the black blade then displayed a welt of frozen skin. "By the Night Hunter, even their weapons are profane!"

On the other side of the wall, Melegaunt's muffled voice rose up, sounding pained and quivery as it growled out a string of arcane syllables. Something long and spike-covered floated past the hole, then the bearded wizard finished his spell. The only effect Galaeron could see was a set of scintillating shadows.

"Bows—choice of arrows!" Galaeron yelled.

"What of Ehamond?" Takari asked, referring to the elf still struggling in the creature's grasp.

Galaeron started forward without bothering to answer. Of all the elves in his patrol, Takari had been with him the

longest, and they shared an almost instinctive rapport. He nudged her toward Ehamond, indicating he would attack and she should rescue.

"When wolves mount porcupines!" she snapped.

Pushing Galaeron behind her, Takari snatched up the human sword and hurled it at the strange beast then sprang forward behind the tumbling blade. Galaeron followed close behind, his spell ready on the tip of his tongue.

The human sword passed through the silver barrier and buried itself to the hilt in the creature's squirming torso, then Takari pushed through the light and was on the creature, slashing and slicing. Galaeron danced through behind her—the barrier dragged at him like a curtain of cold spider silk—and slid over behind Ehamond. The elf was coated in blood, screaming, hacking wildly at the thing's teeth.

"Calm yourself, guard!" Galaeron dodged a claw, then caught a free ankle. "We can't help you like this."

Takari parried a claw, dodged the creature's snapping mouth, then brought her blade down on an arm holding Ehamond. The sharp elven steel bit deep, nearly slicing the limb off at the elbow, and Galaeron pulled Ehamond's right side free. Crying out in elation, Ehamond brought his own blade around and lopped off the hand still holding him. Galaeron stumbled back through the silvery barrier, dragging Ehamond after him, and saw the monster's barbed tail arc around behind Takari.

"Behind—"

The barb struck her between the shoulder blades, piercing Takari's leather armor as though it were parchment. Her arms dropped and her body arched forward. The tail began to pulse, pumping its contents into her body. Galaeron dropped Ehamond's leg and leveled his hands at the tail then cried out an incantation. Four bolts of golden magic shot from his fingers and blasted the barb off the tail, freeing Takari to collapse back through the silver barrier.

She had not even touched ground before a flight of black

arrows sizzled past Galaeron to strike the creature. The first three bounced off the thing's thorny hide, but the final stuck deep in its mid-section. The archer who had fired it spoke a command word, activating its death magic.

A puckered white ulcer appeared around the wound, but the strange creature did not fall. It did not even sag.

Leaving Ehamond to scramble off on his own, Galaeron grabbed Takari and dragged her away. Her eyes were open but glazed, more shocked than frightened. Another flight of arrows hissed past, but the creature's hide turned gray and stony, and all four bounced off harmlessly. The small number of shafts filled Galaeron with despair, but with Ehamond and Takari wounded and three more elves unconscious from the fray with the humans, only four warriors remained to him.

Much to Galaeron's relief, the creature stayed in the cramped cavity between the silvery barrier and the hole at its back. It snapped the single arrow that had wounded it and tossed the ends at the elf who had fired the shaft.

Galaeron rolled Takari to her side and plucked the creature's barb from her back. The wound was already swollen and pestilent. Deep in the puncture was something small and round, glowing hot scarlet in Galaeron's dark sight. Knowing better than to attempt removing the thing now, he called Ehamond over and pushed Takari into the arms of the battered elf.

"Take her and go. If we don't follow, make a report."

"You'll follow," said Ehamond, glancing toward the strange creature. "You'd better—who'd believe this if you don't?"

With that, he pulled Takari into a cross-shoulder carry and vanished up the tunnel. Galaeron started to toss the tail barb aside, but thought of what Takari would do and threw the spike contemptuously across the silvery barrier. The creature caught it, then rose a few inches and floated to Galaeron's end of the cavity. Though it was impossible to perceive anything resembling emotion on the faceless thing, Galaeron had no doubt that were it able to attack across the silver barrier, he would be dead.



The creature was still hovering in front of Galaeron when a beam of purple magic crackled through the hole, catching the thing in the back and slamming it against the barrier. It writhed madly, loosing an ear-piercing squeal that sounded like it would bring the roof down.

*"Now!"* It was the same voice that had filled the tunnel earlier. *"Take up my swords and kill it now!"*

The remaining elves reached for their weapons and started forward, but Galaeron did not want them anywhere near the creature. "Not swords! Magic bolts." He raised his hand. "On my count . . . now!"

Shafts of golden magic began to converge on the creature. Some sank into its stony hide with no effect whatsoever, but most struck powerfully, hurling the thing back into the purple beam, blasting off thorns and pieces of hide. Galaeron's first spell had barely left his hand before he repeated it, firing another flurry of raw magic even as the creature tumbled away from the first. His bolts flashed through the silver curtain and met the beam of purple magic coming from the other side.

The result was not exactly an explosion. There was a flash of a thousand colors and the roaring silence of the void, then a horrid prickling and the bewildering realization that he now lay slumped against the tunnel wall. The air reeked of burning iron, and everything ached. There was a crimson ring on the silvery barrier, flickering and steadily growing dimmer as it expanded outward. On the other side of the curtain lay the strange creature, its body pocked and pitted with blast marks, strips of peeled hide showing long strips of green flesh. As Galaeron struggled to comprehend what he was seeing, the thing rose off the ground and floated over to the barrier, then stuck its head through the smoldering hole.

Galaeron's stomach grew hollow, and his stunned elves began to fill the tunnel with low groans. The huge mouth seemed to smile, then the creature floated the rest of the way through the hole. It plucked an unconscious human off the floor, then delicately pulled off his helmet.

Galaeron forced himself to his feet. "Stand if you are awake!" he yelled, reaching for his sword. "Defend yourselves!"

Only a handful of figures stirred, but it was enough to make the creature drop the human. The thing's mouth swung toward Galaeron, shooting a plume of black fog out between its teeth.

There was no time to shout a warning. Galaeron barely managed to close his mouth before the cloud rolled over him, burning his eyes and nostrils and making his lungs cry out for air. The sound of coughing and retching filled the tunnel, anguished and frightened and all too brief. By the time Galaeron could summon to mind the words of a wind spell, half the voices had fallen silent. By the time he actually uttered it and sent the deadly fog whirling down an empty side passage, the rest of the voices were also quiet.

Knowing he would be the next to fall, Galaeron did not fight the terrible rage rising up inside him. Anger bred folly, but it also bred desperate courage and mad strength, and he had seen enough of this devil-creature to know what he needed most. He charged after the receding edge of the black cloud, still holding his breath and swinging his sword blindly into the murk. He felt the edge bite once, then inverted his grip and lunged, driving forward with all his strength.

The blade sank perhaps a foot before slowing to a stop. Galaeron dropped to a squat and heard two arms whistle past his head, then he jumped back and saw two more come slicing out of the swirling cloud. He pulled a glass rod from his sleeve. The fog spun away and left the creature's body floating not five paces away, his sword lodged up near its mouth. Hoping a lightning bolt would prove more effective than the rest of his magic, he leveled the rod at the thing's body and started his incantation.

"Not magic," boomed the deep voice. "I said swords!"

Galaeron glanced over and saw the swarthy wizard stepping through the barrier, dark robes swirling around him like

shadow. The creature whirled toward the human, twenty tiny tongues of flame already crackling on its fingertips. Melegaunt circled his hand, creating a wheel of cold blackness in the air before him, and stepped confidently forward. The flames shot straight from the monster's hands into the shadowy wheel and vanished.

Galaeron was already moving, snatching a black sword from the hands of a fallen human and leaping to the attack. Even with the leather wrapped around the hilt, it was so cold it burned his flesh, instantly turning his fingers numb and stiff. He attacked anyway, bringing the edge down two feet from the creature's tail.

The dark blade sliced through effortlessly, cleaving the tail off cleanly.

The creature shuddered in pain and whirled on Galaeron but stopped when it nearly impaled itself on the dark blade. Galaeron lunged for its throat, nearly dropping his weapon when the thing pulled back and his frozen fingers could not adjust.

Galaeron changed hands. In that instant, his armor grew so hot it began to glow, filling the tunnel with eerie pink shadows and washing out his dark sight. He screamed in agony but rushed forward slashing wildly. The creature had no choice except to fall back—straight into Melegaunt Tanthul.

The wizard pushed forward, driving the thing onto Galaeron's blade. It gave the same pained squeal it had earlier, but he could hardly hear it over his own wail. He found the strength to twist the blade and drag it along as he fell.

A pile of green entrails landed on the dust before him, and the creature drifted slowly to the floor at his side. Galaeron screamed and rolled away, fumbling for his dagger.

Melegaunt Tanthul placed a restraining foot on his stomach, then kneeled at his side. "It's dead. Well done, young fellow. Now hold still." The wizard passed his hand over Galaeron and spoke some strange magic, and the armor cooled. "Better?"

Galaeron nodded. "What—"

"No time for talking. There are another dozen on the way." The man pulled Galaeron to his feet, then gestured at the hole in the silvery curtain. "And now they can get at us."

Biting back a scream of pain, Galaeron asked, "They?"

"Later, or we'll be as dead as everyone else."

The wizard started to pick his way through the bodies. Elf and human alike, their faces were contorted into masks of anguish, their chins covered with beards of red froth.

Melegaunt stopped beside Shatevar's deflated body and pointed at Vala's legs. "That one's still alive. Bring her."

Though the wizard looked capable of carrying his own wounded, Galaeron pulled Vala from beneath the eye tyrant. Much to his astonishment, her chest was rising and falling with breath, just as the wizard had said it would be. Galaeron loaded her over his shoulder and started after the wizard, paying no attention as her black sword dropped silently into the dust.

Melegaunt spun on his heel and pointed at the weapon. "Her darksword, you fool."

"I can't carry it." Galaeron displayed his frozen palms.

The wizard stepped closer, running his gaze over Galaeron's face. "What are you doing here?" he asked, seeming to notice Galaeron's pointed ears for the first time. "You can't be of the Granite Tower . . ."