

The Wounded Kingdom

When their turn came to pass under the archway and be counted, Galaeron glanced into the arrow loop behind the guards and found a familiar cascade of golden hair shining in the depths of the gatehouse. He dipped his head in acknowledgement. The hair moved closer, and Princess Alusair's familiar face appeared on the other side of the loop. Her eyes were red and glassy, though it was impossible to say whether from weeping or exhaustion.



The Elven Enclave

The once-lush grass was gone, burned off or blasted away by battle magic, or withering beneath the rotting corpse of one of the thousands of elf warriors scattered across the field. In the center of the meadow, the marble cliffs of the Three Sisters were speckled around the base with stars of soot and sprays of crusted blood. Atop the hills themselves, curtains of black fume were rising out of the great bluetop forest, coalescing into a single dark cloud that left visible only the lowest reaches of Evereska's majestic towers.



The Dark Empire

Once inside the cloud, the enclave itself grew visible, a huge capsized mountaintop honeycombed with utility passages and ventilation shafts. Malygris began to circle the crags of the overturned peak in a widening spiral, his fear aura keeping the ever-growing colonies of bats and birds at a cautious distance. Even the jewel-eyed sentries who stood constant watch from their hidden crannies shrank back out of sight as the dragon passed.



RETURN OF THE ARCHWIZARDS

Book I

The Summoning

TROY DENNING

Book II

The Siege

TROY DENNING

Realms of Shadow

EDITED BY LIZZ BALDWIN

Book III

The Sorcerer

TROY DENNING



THE
SORCERER

Return of the Archwizards

BOOK
III



TROY
DENNING



THE SORCERER
Return of the Archwizards, Book III

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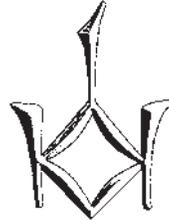
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***To Ed Greenwood
For sharing his world with so many***

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CHAPTER ONE

*7 Flamerule,
The Year of Wild Magic (1372 DR)*

It was the sound of despair, this strained silence that greeted the end of every report. With each account of yet another pact struck by the enemy, with every confession that a realm could raise no more troops, the envoys would drop their gazes to the polished surface of the conference table and study their reflections, and there would be no sound in the room but the sputtering of the oil lamps.

Only Princess Alusair Obarskyr, the Steel Regent of Cormyr, received the news with a raised chin, but it seemed to Galaeron Nihmedu that with each account of another cyclone spawned by the melting of the High Ice, with each description of a new city in flood or a nation's barley fields withering under a blazing sun, the furrows in the

princess's brow deepened, the circles beneath her eyes grew larger, darker, and more menacing.

Alusair turned her attention to Galaeron and said, "And what news from Evereska, Sir Nihmedu? How go matters for the elves?"

The question was for the benefit of the others present. Alusair was the one who had told Galaeron much of what he would pass along, and she was doing him an honor by asking him to repeat it on behalf of his city. Galaeron stood.

"Evereska will stand, Your Highness." This good news caused several envoys to raise their heads, and Galaeron continued, "The elven armies are camped outside the Shaeradim, ready to meet the phaerimm the instant the shadowshell falls."

"You're certain it will fall?" asked Korian Hovanay, the ambassador from Sembia. A foppish man with fleshy jowls and an outlandish feathered hat resting on the table before him, Hovanay glared at Galaeron as he spoke. "I see no reason the Shadovar should let it fade. The phaerimm are Shade's archenemies—and the Shadovar have succeeded in all of their other undertakings."

"All of their *diplomatic* undertakings," Alusair corrected. She had aged a decade in the forty days since Tilverton's loss, and her once striking face had become sallow and haggard with worry. "Their army—what remains of it—has been quiet since the Battle of Tilverton."

"My point exactly," Hovanay said. "How do we know they have not been marshaling their strength to renew their attack on the phaerimm?"

"That is wishful thinking, Ambassador," said Piergeiron Paladinson, who had come by magic all the way from Waterdeep. "Sadly, the Shadovar are too cunning to turn their attention elsewhere so our alliance can mobilize against the Melting."

"And the elven armies are as ready to meet the Shadovar as the phaerimm," Galaeron said. "The shadowshell damages

Evereska as much as it does the phaerimm, and our people will prevent the Shadovar from renewing it.”

What Galaeron left unsaid was that with two of Mystra’s Chosen—Laeral Silverhand and her consort Khelben Arunsun—still trapped in the Shaeradim, Storm Silverhand was just as determined as the elves to bring down the shadowshell. At the first hint of trouble, she would teleport straight to the mystical Splicing that held the dark sphere together and join six of Evermeet’s last high mages in preventing the Shadovar from renewing it.

Galaeron felt certain of little else in this strange three-sided war, but he was sure that the shadowshell would fall, and soon. What happened afterward was anyone’s guess. With the phaerimm loose in the world, the Shadovar thawing the High Ice, and the weather wreaking flood and famine across all Faerûn, the only thing anyone could predict for sure was calamity.

Hovanay studied Galaeron with a sneer, then finally said, “How wonderful for the elves. I’m sure you’ll forgive the rest of us if we don’t share your enthusiasm.”

“You have reason to wish Evereska ill, Ambassador?” Galaeron asked. “Perhaps Sembia hopes to strike a bargain for our treasure?”

Hovanay’s eyes flashed. “I trust you are not suggesting that Sembia would traffic with thieves, Sir Nihmedu.”

Galaeron braced his hands on the table and started to rise, but the Harper witch Ruha, seated next to him in her customary veil and head scarf, laid a hand on his forearm.

“Remember your shadow,” she said quietly. “You assume too much.”

Galaeron felt a sudden surge of anger toward her and knew instantly that something dark and sinister had risen inside him. His shadow self was asserting itself again, trying to make him see dark motives and evil betrayals in those around him. He lowered himself into his seat and folded his hands, then looked across the table to Hovanay.

“My question was unwarranted, Ambassador,” he said. It irked Galaeron to apologize, but it was wiser to trust Ruha in such matters than himself. “I hope you will forgive the implication.”

Hovanay smirked back at him. “Of course. We are all aware of your affliction.”

“Which is not to say that we understand your point, Ambassador,” Alusair said. She did not bother to disguise her own suspicion of the man, for there had been no love lost between their two realms since Sembia’s not-so-veiled attempt to carve off a piece of Cormyr during the Ghazneth Scourge. “Why shouldn’t we want Evereska to survive?”

“It is not Evereska’s survival that troubles us,” Hovanay answered. “It is the fall of the shadowshell. Commerce has suffered enough as it is. The last thing we need now is a legion of phaerimm making slaves and egg-bags of the few caravanners still bold enough to meet their obligations.”

Galaeron restrained the urge to berate the man for worrying about his purse while brave elves were dying—but Alusair did not. She studied Hovanay with a sneer usually reserved for something she scraped off her boot, then shook her head.

“There is more at stake here than gold,” she said. “Our subjects cannot eat gold—though I’ll be happy to feed you some if you’d like to experiment.”

Ruha snickered beneath her veil, and several other envoys had to bite their lips and turn away.

Accepting Alusair’s affront with the casual poise of one accustomed to such treatment, Hovanay merely smiled.

“Perhaps we cannot eat gold, but we *do* need it to feed our armies. Is there a realm among us whose treasuries are not barren already?”

When the table remained silent, the ambassador continued, “If our losses grow any worse, I dare say the alliance will lack the means to muster any army at all, much less one powerful enough to defeat the Shadovar and stop the Melting.”

Again, a tense silence fell over the council room, and Alusair's face turned stormy with frustration. Already exhausted of both gold and men, the realms of the alliance were stretched to the breaking point, and—just as Hovanay said—any pressure brought by the phaerimm would be enough to crush them. Even to Galaeron, the implications were clear. If Evereska were to survive, it would be at the cost of every other civilized land in Faerûn.

Galaeron began to feel that all eyes were turned on him. When he glanced around the table, it was to see the gazes of the other envoys quickly slipping away.

Lord Nasher Alagondar of Neverwinter, who had come by the same magic as Piergeiron Paladinson, coughed softly into his hand. The quiet thus broken, Alduvar Snowbrand—a Sword of Archendale and one of the three envoys shared by the Dalelands—wrapped his fingers around his chair arms and leaned forward as though he were about to pounce from his seat.

"We are looking at this wrong, I say." A tall, strong man with silky black hair, Alduvar had a spectral face and deep green eyes that seemed strangely distant and dull. "Our enemies are the Shadovar, not the phaerimm."

"That is an easy thing to say when it is someone else's home they have besieged," Galaeron said. "The phaerimm are enemies to the elves, I assure you."

"And who's fault is that?" Alduvar turned to glower at him, but there was no anger in his eyes, no ire or malice—no emotion at all. "Was it not you who freed them in the first place?"

"And who cursed us with the Shadovar?" added Irreph Mulmar, the ruddy-faced Constable of the High Dale. Like Alduvar, he was one of the three envoys from the Dales, and like Alduvar's, his eyes seemed oddly empty. "Were you not the one who brought them back from the Plane of Shadow?"

Somewhere inside, Galaeron realized that the vitriol of the Dalesmen was strangely at odds with their vacant eyes, but

his shadow was already rising to the bait, bristling at the accusations and urging him to answer with blade or spell. He started to stand and found Ruha's hand clamped to his arm, her nails digging in hard to remind him that he had to be strong, that to indulge his anger was to yield to the darkness devouring him from the inside.

"What is done is done," she said, continuing to hold Galaeron down. "Is there anyone here who can say he would not have made the same mistake?"

"Mistakes have consequences," said Mourngrym Amcatha, the third and last of the Dalelands envoys. A huge, powerfully built man with a brown mustache and neatly trimmed hair, his eyes were as vacant as those of his fellow Dalesmen. "The elf is the one who made the mistake. It's his people who should suffer for it—not ours."

Mourngrym's comment drew a chorus of astonished murmurs, for he was as respected across much of Faerûn as he was in his own dale. For him to speak so openly against Evereska's interests was to condone the resentment harbored in secret by many of the alliance's lesser leaders, who gathered at night in quiet little groups to complain of the hardships visited upon them by the mistake of one elf.

Galaeron was filled with such a black fury that he forgot about the vacant eyes and no longer felt Ruha's hand on his arm. He was up and leaning across the table toward Mourngrym, his weight braced on his hands and his words tumbling from his mouth of their own accord.

"And who would you blame had the Shadovar unleashed the phaerimm on the Dalelands instead of Evereska?" Galaeron demanded. "Some saurial from Tarkhaldale?"

Mourngrym's lip rose in a sneer, but his eyes remained as blank as before.

"A saurial did not release the phaerimm," he said. "An elf did. You, to be exact."

Suddenly finding himself off balance, Galaeron looked down to find his hand a foot above the table, his fingers

curled as though to call a shadow bolt. Ruha was using both hands to hold his arm so he could not cast the spell. Behind her, Piergeiron Paladinson was rising to help, watching the struggle with an expression that was half alarmed and half forbearing.

The sight was enough to shock Galaeron back to his senses. He let his arm go limp.

“Humans!”

Knowing he was still not fully in control of himself, Galaeron freed his arm and turned toward Alusair.

“If the princess will excuse me—”

“She will not, Sir Nihmedu.” Motioning him into his seat, she nodded at a pair of Purple Dragons posted along the wall. As they stepped forward to stand guard behind Galaeron’s chair, she said, “Actually, I have a keen interest in hearing Lord Mournngrym’s answer.”

Galaeron sat, and Mournngrym turned to face Alusair.

“What answer would that be, Your Highness?”

“To Galaeron’s question, Lord Mournngrym.” Alusair replied, her expression growing suspicious. “Who would you blame if the Shadovar had unleashed the phaerimm in the Dalelands instead of Evereska?”

“But they didn’t, Princess.”

“Lord Mournngrym,” Alusair said, “I am asking what if they *had*.”

“The question is meaningless, Your Highness. It was the elf who unleashed the phaerimm.”

An astonished murmur filled the chamber. Paying no attention, Mournngrym turned to gesture at Galaeron, and at last Galaeron understood what he had been seeing—or rather, not seeing—in the eyes of the Dalesman.

Anger clouded Alusair’s face.

“Lord Mournngrym,” she said, “as a guest in my realm, you owe me the courtesy of an answer.”

Mournngrym responded with an counterfeit smile.

“Of course, Your Highness. What I fail to understand . . .”

Galaeron did not hear the rest of the answer, for his own thoughts were whirling like one of the cyclones that had of late been laying waste to so many of Faerûn's farms and villages. The Dalesmen's attack on him had been carefully coordinated, with the envoys of lesser stature laying the groundwork for a final indictment by their most respected member. Given that the three came from the same area, it seemed entirely plausible they had come together before the council and settled on the strategy, but Galaeron suspected another explanation—a far more menacing one.

He leaned toward Ruha and felt a Purple Dragon's armored hand grasping his shoulder.

"Milord," the soldier whispered. "I think the princess meant for you to stay in your own chair."

"As I will." Though Galaeron answered in an amiable tone, it was all he could do to keep from cursing the man aloud. If he was right—and he was—the last thing he needed was the loud drawing attention to him. "I only wanted to thank Harper Ruha for her support."

Ruha raised her kohl-rimmed eyes to the guard and said, "Galaeron will do me no harm."

The soldier regarded her suspiciously for a moment, then nodded gruffly and released Galaeron's shoulder. Ruha looked to Galaeron, and as Alusair and Mourngrym continued their argument in more heated tones, waited.

"Uh, thank you," Galaeron said. It was all he dared say, at least with one of *them* lurking somewhere in the room, eavesdropping on the council and manipulating its mind-slaves. "I'm afraid I lost control of myself."

Ruha knitted her black eyebrows and replied, "Considering what was said, I thought you did well to keep your shadow in check."

Galaeron continued to look at her, trying to think of some other way to convey his suspicions without alerting the one spying upon them.

Irreph and Alduvar were lending their voices to

Mourngrym's, protesting that Alusair was wasting the council's valuable time with a meaningless exercise of imagination.

"Galaeron," Ruha asked, "is there something else?"

"No," he said. If only she understood fingertalk; as it was, he was beginning to fear he would have to use his own magic to save the council. "That's all."

Ruha nodded—a bit uncertainly—and turned back to the council.

Galaeron sat fidgeting, lost in his own thoughts, trying to think of some other way to do what was needed. It was easily two months since he had last cast a spell. Surely, he could cast this one, not even a very difficult spell. It was just a simple abjuration to reveal the spy he knew to be lurking somewhere in the council chamber putting words in the mouths of the Dalesmen. Of course, he would need to use shadow magic; he was no longer sure that he even *could* use normal magic, but shadow magic was better against the phaerimm anyway. Normal spells had a tendency to ricochet off their magic-resistant scales, but shadow magic always worked.

The thought of touching the Shadow Weave again sent a shiver of anticipation up through Galaeron's body. He could almost feel the cold power rising through him, quenching a thirst that had been building for two months. One simple spell was not going to do any harm. It would hardly give his shadow self the strength to overpower him completely—not for long anyway—and he had to expose the spy, didn't he? He had to make the council see that the Dalesmen's words were those of the enemy, that the phaerimm were trying to split the alliance—

A day never passed when Galaeron did not find some reason just as compelling to break his vow and reach out to the Shadow Weave. The temptation was always there, always awaiting the weak moment, always inviting him down the dark path, but he had only to remember Vala to

resist, to think of her enslaved in Escanor's palace in Shade and imagine the abuse being visited on her nightly in the prince's bed.

It had been Galaeron's shadow self that had persuaded him to abandon her there, that had filled his thoughts with so many bitter suspicions that he had finally surrendered to the darkness and vowed to have vengeance on a woman who had never shown him anything but love. It was a mistake he intended never to repeat, even if it meant his life.

And, with Ruha pledged to prevent him from slipping again, it very well might. She was watching him out of the corner of her eye, her thoughts hidden behind her Bedine veil, but her hand not far from the curved dagger stuck behind her sash.

For the second time in as many minutes, Galaeron wished that the witch understood fingertalk—then realized she didn't need to. He caught her eye then dropped his gaze to his lap, where he was running his fingers through the gestures of the magic he wanted her to cast. Though he was not trying to cast anything, the very act of going through motions filled him with a powerful yearning to open himself to the Shadow Weave.

Ruha's eyes widened, and she looked as though she might reach over to interfere. Galaeron stopped in what would have been mid-casting, then started over again. Ruha seemed to relax. He continued the gesture, being careful to make each element slow and precise so that she would have no trouble deciphering what he was doing. When the glimmer of recognition came to her eye, he stopped and looked down the table in the direction of the Dalesmen, who were now pretending that they did not understand the true nature of Alusair's question.

“. . . suppose that *had* the Shadovar tried to free the phaerimm beneath Tarkhaldale, there would have been no problem at all," Mourngrym was saying. "The saurials are far too intelligent to breach the Sharn Wall."

Without using his own magic, Galaeron had no way to be certain the phaerimm spy was anywhere near his mind-slaves, but it seemed like a good place to start. He glanced back and found Ruha studying Mourngrym almost too intently, hands lying in her lap and her veil billowing ever-so-slightly as she whispered her incantation.

“Very well, Lord Mourngrym, you win,” Alusair said from her end of the table. “You have made it abundantly clear that the Dalelands have no interest in placing the blame for our troubles anywhere but Evereska. Now, would you care to explain why? I fail to see what you hope to accomplish.”

Mourngrym’s smile was so wooden it was almost a grimace. “Your Highness, the Dalelands have no interest in blaming anyone. We merely wish to point out—”

He was interrupted by the last syllables of a Bedine incantation as Ruha stood. Using the elemental magic of her native Anauroch, she sprinkled a few drops of water in his direction. A sharp crackle blasted through the chamber, and there was a bright flash near the ceiling above and behind the Dalesmen. Galaeron glimpsed the familiar, thorn-covered shape of a phaerimm’s conical body, and the thing was gone, vanished in almost the same instant it appeared.

The chamber broke into a wild tumult of shouting and clanging as guards rushed forward. Several of the envoys—most notably Sembia’s Korian Hovanay—dived for cover under the table. Others followed the lead of Piergeiron Paladinson. Grabbing polearms from the guards, they leaped onto the table and began to chink the ceiling in an attempt to find the intruder.

The three Dalesmen remained standing in front of their seats. Their vacant gazes were fixed on the envoys and soldiers closest to them, and they held themselves ready to spring into action.

“Order!” Alusair called. She had produced a sword from somewhere beneath her robe of office and was banging the pommel down on the table’s polished surface. “It’s gone.”

Though the princess's assumption was a natural one—phaerimm usually teleported to safety at the first sign of danger—Galaeron rose.

"Actually, Your Highness, I believe it isn't." He pointed over Mournrym's shoulder. "I think it's probably somewhere there."

A dozen Purple Dragons immediately rushed to investigate. The three Dalesmen stepped away from the table and closed ranks around a spot not too far from where Galaeron had pointed. Caladnei—the slender, red-haired sorcerer who had replaced addled Vangerdahast as Cormyr's royal magician—stepped into view behind Alusair's chair and leveled her staff at the trio.

Before she could speak the word of command, the phaerimm appeared in the midst of the Dalesmen.

Hold! You have nothing to fear from me—unless you earn it.

Galaeron heard the words inside his mind, and he could tell by the startled reactions of those around him that they had as well. Caladnei held her attack, and the guards settled for surrounding the Dalesmen and leveling their poleaxes in the general direction of the phaerimm. Their restraint, Galaeron knew, probably saved their lives.

Better.

Galaeron saw a familiar blankness come to Ambassador Hovanay's eyes and knew the phaerimm was not repaying its enemies' restraint in kind.

Alusair laid her sword on the table and stared across its length at the intruder.

"This is a private council, worm, and you are our enemy." She glanced over her shoulder and motioned Caladnei toward the creature. "Give me a reason I should not have my guards peel the thorny hide from your viper's flesh."

Because they would fail, the phaerimm replied. And because even enemies need to confer, if they are ever to be anything else.

Nasher Alagondar's eyes went vacant.

Galaeron leveled a hand in the phaerimm's direction. "Speak through Mourngrym, or not at all." Then, without looking away, he said to Alusair, "Your Highness, this is how the phaerimm make their mind-slaves. Through their thoughtspeech."

Very perceptive. But you have nothing to fear from us, Galaeron. From what I understand, my people are indebted—

"If you know who I am," Galaeron interrupted, "you know that my magic will kill you as fast as a Shadovar's."

I also know you fear to use it.

"Not as much as I fear becoming your slave," Galaeron said. "Another word within my head, and I will use it."

"Another word in anyone's head, and I will command him to," Alusair added. "If you wish to treat with us, you will release your slaves and speak aloud."

"I cannot do both." This time, the phaerimm's words came from Mourngrym's mouth. "Though once we are finished, I am willing to grant your request."

Alusair's eyes flashed at the word "request," but she held her tongue and looked to Galaeron.

He was tempted to lie and claim that the phaerimm was deceiving her, for he already knew by the tenor of the Dalesmen's earlier arguments what the creature intended. But Alusair had treated him with nothing but courtesy and fairness since the day of his arrival, and—even for the sake of Evereska—he would not repay her with treachery.

"Phaerimm speak to each other through magic winds," Galaeron explained. "With other races, they must use thoughtspeech or an intermediary."

Alusair considered this, then nodded to the phaerimm.

"Very well," she said. "What is it you want?"

"Evereska."

Though the answer was exactly what Galaeron had expected, the impact of hearing it actually spoken aloud was more than he could handle. He started to twist his fingers into a spellcasting—then his arm was forced to his side by

the mailed hand of one of the Purple Dragons at his back.

Alusair cast a warning scowl in his direction, then said, "When I give the order, Sir Nihmedu—not before."

"Thank you, Princess," the phaerimm said. Its four arms appeared over the heads of the Dalesmen, spreading outward in what seemed to be a gesture of appreciation. "As I was saying, we and our allies from Anauroch will be content with Evereska and its lands."

This elicited a collective gasp from the envoys—at least those who were not still under the phaerimm's mental control—and even Alusair cocked a brow.

"Evereska is not ours to give," she said.

The noncommittal answer caused a dark anger to rise in Galaeron, and he had to fight it down by closing his eyes and reminding himself of all that Alusair had done on his behalf.

"Nor is it yours to defend," the phaerimm answered through Mourngrym. "All we are suggesting is that you concern yourselves with the Shadovar and leave Evereska to our brothers."

"Then you are not from Anauroch?" Alusair asked. She was stalling, trying to buy time to consider all the ramifications of the phaerimm's proposal. "You are here on behalf of the Myth Drannor phaerimm?"

"The Shadovar have made this the fight of all phaerimm," Mourngrym's voice replied. "Much as they have made it the fight of all the human realms."

"And what do we receive in return?" asked Ambassador Hovanay. The selfish light in his eye made clear that he was free of the phaerimm's influence. That was not, at least for Evereska, necessarily a good thing. "How will you repay us for our help?"

The phaerimm pushed its many-fanged mouth over the shoulders of the Dalesmen and said, "A better question would be what will *you* receive for *our* help."

Hovanay waited expectantly, and the phaerimm swung its mouth in Alusair's direction.

“Your enemy is our enemy,” the phaerimm said. “Should your alliance strike a bargain with us, it would be in our interest to stop the melting of the High Ice. Your realms would be able to rebuild their armies and feed their people. They would be strong again.”

Though every sinew in Galaeron was screaming for him to leap to his feet and denounce the phaerimm as a fraud and a liar, he knew he would win nothing by such a display. The humans would believe—rightly enough—that he was only trying to protect Evereska’s interests, that he would claim such a thing whether the phaerimm could be trusted or not. Instead, he had to speak reasonably and make the humans see the pitfalls for themselves, make them realize that by selling out the elves, they would be selling themselves out as well.

“You are promising a lot,” Galaeron said, not quite able to keep the quaver out of his voice, “but I’ve seen the Shadovar magic, and it is not defeated easily. If you can do what you promise, why do you need the humans at all? Why are your cousins still trapped inside the shadowshell?”

Instead of answering Galaeron, the phaerimm had Mourngrym turn to address Korian Hovanay again.

“We would pledge to leave your caravans in peace, even to protect them when it is in our power.”

This brought a grin to the Sembian’s lips, if to no one else’s.

Piergeiron Paladinson said, “You have not spoken to Galaeron’s point. If the phaerimm can do what you claim, why does the shadowshell still stand?”

“Because, as you yourselves learned at Tilverton, the Shadovar are formidable enemies,” the phaerimm said. “We who are free are too few to prevail, and those who are trapped in the Shaeradim are weak and starving. When the shadowshell falls, that will change.”

“So you say,” Piergeiron said.

“So we will prove,” the phaerimm replied. “You are familiar with the peak Untrivvin, in the east of the High Ice?”

“Where the tomb tappers rise,” said Borg Ohlmak, the woolly-headed chieftain sent by the barbarians of the Ride. “We know the place well.”

Mourngrym’s head nodded to Borg. “There are three shadow blankets at the base of the mount. When the shell falls, we will destroy all three as proof of our capabilities.”

“And still we will not be able to come to terms,” Alusair said. “Evereska is not ours to bargain away. Wouldn’t some other place serve you as well? The Goblin Marches, for instance, are—”

“Worthless wastelands,” the phaerimm said. “It must be Evereska. We have no interest in your castoff barrens.”

“Then perhaps the Tun Valley,” Alusair suggested. “The lands there are as fertile as any in Cormyr, and I’m certain the alliance would be willing to provide any assistance required to take Darkhold.”

“Evereska.”

Alusair frowned, clearly trying to think of some other place the phaerimm might desire. She was, Galaeron knew, trying to reach an unreachable compromise. The phaerimm wanted Evereska for the same reason they lived in Myth Drannor: its mythal. They needed magic the way other races needed air, and the mythals that surrounded both cities were living mantles of woven magic. Asking a phaerimm to choose another place to live was like asking a fish to make his home someplace other than in the water.

“Evereska is not ours to grant,” Alusair continued, still trying. “Name another place.”

“He’s not going to name another place,” Galaeron interjected, though he did not say why. The existence of the mythal was an elven secret, and he no longer felt any trust for the humans gathered there, not even Alusair. “When will you learn? You can’t treat with phaerimm—only surrender to them like cowards, or stand and fight them like warriors.”

Alusair’s head snapped around to glare at him, her eyes furious and black.

“And when will you learn, elf, that it is not wise to call someone a coward when it is her people’s blood that must be shed to save that of yours?”

Allowing no opportunity for a reply, Alusair glanced at the guards behind Galaeron’s chair and said, “I have heard enough from him.”

One Purple Dragon pinned Galaeron’s arms to his chair, and the other covered his mouth with a waist sash. A sinister voice whispered to Galaeron that Alusair had betrayed him and would seal the bargain by turning him over to the phaerimm, but he was wise enough not to struggle. The Steel Regent was famous for her fiery temper, and though some part of him knew she would never do as his shadow’s voice suggested, he did not think she would hesitate to have him thrown in a very deep, dark dungeon.

Alusair nodded her approval, then turned back to the phaerimm and said, “You were about to name a place it is in the alliance’s power to grant.”

“Evereska,” Mourngrym’s mouth said again. “There is no other place. The elf is right about that much.”

Alusair sank back in exasperation.

Through its mind-slave, the phaerimm said, “You have until the third blanket vanishes.”

The creature drifted out from behind its shield of Dalesmen, and ignoring the ring of guards around it, panicked Borg Ohlmak and Nasher Alagondar by floating to their end of the table.

“We expect your assent by then.”

Alusair’s eyes hardened. “And if we do not give it?”

The phaerimm braced two of its arms on the table.

You will.

Alusair sat bolt upright and started to order the guards forward, but the phaerimm had already vanished.

Mourngrym and his fellow Dalesmen cried out in bewildered voices, then stumbled toward the nearest chairs, their hands trembling and their mouths hanging agape. The

Purple Dragons looked to Caladnei for orders while the royal magician busied herself casting detection magic. The envoys sat in their chairs looking alternately relieved and uncertain as they considered the wisdom of betraying Evereska.

After a moment, Alusair brought order back to the chamber by turning to her royal magician.

“Can you tell me how that spy came to be in here?” It was a deft maneuver, turning the envoys’ thoughts from the phaerimm’s proposal to the threat it had displayed in its arrogant use of its power. “It could have killed us all!”

Caladnei paled and shook her head.

“The chamber is warded against invisibility, teleportation, scrying—”

“Obviously, it was not,” Alusair interrupted. Still determined to keep the envoys’ thoughts on the how of the phaerimm’s presence rather than the why—no doubt buying time to gather her own thoughts on the matter—she looked to Galaeron. “Perhaps Sir Nihmedu can explain how it was done?”

When the guard lowered the sash covering Galaeron’s mouth, he glanced around the council table and saw—or at least his shadow saw—guilty expressions on every face.

“Galaeron?” Alusair prodded.

No longer able to ignore the outrage rising in his breast, Galaeron glowered at the princess.

“You truly expect an answer?” he asked.

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because I am no traitor to my people,” Galaeron said. “I would never aid allies to the phaerimm.”

An indignant drone filled the chamber, but the expression that came to Alusair’s face was less anger than surrender.

“Leave us,” she said.

The envoys fell silent and began to look to one another, waiting for someone else to take the lead and either object or start the withdrawal.

“Now!” Alusair said. “We will discuss the phaerimm

tomorrow, when we have all had a chance to see whether we can strike such a bargain and still sleep at night.”

The envoys rose in a bustle of scraping chair legs and sharp remarks and departed, leaving only Caladnei, Ruha, and a dozen Purple Dragons in the room with Galaeron and Alusair. The princess motioned them all toward the door.

“You, too,” she said, standing and starting down the table toward Galaeron. “I am in no danger here.”

Though their faces clearly showed their displeasure, the others knew better than to question Alusair’s ability to take care of herself. They followed the envoys into the anteroom.

When they were gone, Alusair sat down at Galaeron’s side and clamped a well-callused hand on his slender knee. Though she was not squeezing, he could feel strength enough in her grasp that, had she wished, she could have broken his bones.

“Elf, what am I to do with you?” she asked. “You are your own worst enemy . . . and yet, I can’t say things would have turned out any differently if you were not.”

Galaeron’s heart fell.

“Then you are going to betray Evereska?”

“No, not Cormyr. That I promise,” Alusair said. “But I’m afraid we won’t be helping, either.”

“You’re leaving us on our own?”

Alusair looked across the chamber and said, “I didn’t really think it would be possible to negotiate Evereska’s safety, but . . .” She let the sentence trail off, then shook her head and turned to look at Galaeron again. “Diplomacy is the art of the possible, Galaeron—and there’s nothing we can do. You must know that.”

A surge of dark anger started to rise in Galaeron, but it was not difficult to fight down. He did know. Alusair was telling him the truth, and that was what friends did in circumstances like these. He took her hands.

“I know. Thank you.” He glanced toward the door, then added, “It was Alduvar Snowbrand.”

Alusair frowned in confusion. "Alduvar?"

"Who dispelled Caladnei's wards," Galaeron said. "The Dalesmen were already mind-slaves when they arrived, and the phaerimm knew they were the last ones you'd expect treachery from. He came in first and dispelled the wards, and the phaerimm came in between the other two."

Alusair raised her brow.

Galaeron nodded, but did not bother to explain further. When it came to the phaerimm, he just . . . knew. It was a little gift from a Shadovar he had known once.

"Well, thanks," Alusair said with a smile, then leaned over and kissed him—hard, and on the lips. "You watch yourself. I'm going to miss you."