



TWILIGHT FALLING

BOOK I



THE
EREVIS CALE
TRILOGY

PAUL S. KEMP



The Erevis Cale Trilogy, Book I TWILIGHT FALLING

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PROLOGUE

FACT-FINDING

The young Tymoran priest lay unconscious on his side, bound hand and foot with thick hemp rope. A purple bruise was already beginning to form around his left eye. Vraggen eyed him coldly.

“Get him up,” Vraggen ordered his agents.

Dolgan, the big Cormyrean, slung his axe and kneeled at the captive’s side. He took the priest’s face in his ham hand and squeezed.

“Awaken,” Dolgan said.

The priest groaned, but did not open his eyes.

“Well done,” taunted Azriim. He stood beside Vraggen with a smirk on his dusky-skinned face. “Very creative.”

Dolgan looked at the half-drow with his typically thick expression and grunted, “Huh?”

Azriim, dressed in the green finery and high

boots that he favored, flashed a smile at Vraggen.

“He never gets the joke, does he?”

Vraggen made no reply. To Azriim, everything was a joke.

“I don’t?” Dolgan asked, still dumbfounded.

“Wake him up,” Vraggen said to the Cormyrean warrior.

“And try not break him,” Azriim added. “We need him capable of speech.”

Dolgan nodded, turned back to the captive, shook him by the shoulders, and said, “Wake up! Wake up!”

The young priest groaned again. Dolgan lightly tapped his cheeks, and after a moment, the priest’s eyes fluttered open.

“There,” Dolgan said. He stood and backed away a few steps to stand beside Azriim and Vraggen.

The priest’s bleary eyes cleared the moment his situation registered. He struggled against his bonds, but only for a moment. Vraggen waited until he saw resignation in the Tymoran’s eyes before he spoke.

“What is the last thing you remember?”

The captive tried to explain, but found his mouth too dry. He swallowed, and said, “You abducted me from the streets of Ordulin.” He looked around the cell. “Where am I?”

“Far from Ordulin,” Vraggen replied.

Azriim chuckled, and the sight of a laughing half-drow must have unnerved the Tymoran further. His face went pale.

“What do you want?”

Vraggen stepped forward, kneeled at the priest’s side, and said, “Information.”

For the first time, the priest’s eyes went to Vraggen’s broach pin—a jawless skull in a purple sunburst—the symbol of Cyric the Dark Sun. Fear flashed in his brown eyes. He uttered a prayer under his breath.

“Is it reasonable for me to assume that you understand your situation?” Vraggen asked.

“I don’t know anything,” the Tymoran blurted. “I swear! Nothing.”

Vraggen nodded and stood. “We shall see.”

He beckoned Dolgan and Azriim forward. His agents stepped up to the priest, grabbed him by the arms, and lifted him to his feet.

“Don’t! Please don’t!” the priest pleaded.

Vraggen stared into the captive’s fear-filled face. For effect, he let shadows leak from his hands and dance around his head. The Tymoran’s breath audibly caught.

“You are a shadow adept,” the priest whispered.

Vraggen didn’t bother to answer; the shadows were answer enough.

“I’ll tell you everything I know.”

“Of course you will,” Vraggen said. “The only issue is whether or not I feel I can trust you to tell me the truth without my having to resort to more forceful means. The resolution of that issue will determine whether or not your last moments are spent in pain.”

The priest’s lips trembled. He looked into Vraggen’s eyes.

“I have a family,” he said.

Vraggen was unmoved.

“No doubt they will miss you,” Azriim said, smiling.

Dolgan too grinned and shifted from foot to foot, fairly giddy at the thought of bloodshed. The Cormyrean had a fetish for pain—administering it, and receiving it.

The priest’s whole body began to shake. Tears began to leak from his eyes.

“Why are you doing this? I don’t even know you. I don’t know any of you.”

Azriim scoffed, “What does that have to do with it?”

Vraggen patted the priest’s cheek, as close as he would come to offering comfort, and said, “I am going to cast a spell that will subject your will to me. Do not resist it. I know that you will speak the truth under the effect of this spell. That is the only way I can be certain. Otherwise. . . .”

He left the threat unspoken, but the priest took the point. He nodded in resignation.

Vraggen smiled and said, “You’ve made the right decision.”

Beside the captive, Dolgan sighed in disappointment. Vraggen ignored the Cormyrean, drew on the Shadow Weave, and pronounced the arcane words to a spell that would make the Tymoran his thrall. When he finished, the captive priest's eyes went vacant. Ever careful, Vraggen verified that his spell had taken hold of the priest by casting a second spell that allowed him to see dweomers.

The priest glowed a soft red in his sight, indicating that he was under the effect of a spell. Surprisingly, so too did Dolgan and Azriim. Vraggen looked a question at his lieutenants.

Azriim took the sense of that look immediately. He held up one long fingered hand, upon which hung a platinum band.

"Our rings, Vraggen."

Vraggen nodded. He had forgotten that each of his lieutenants wore a ring that warded them against scrying. He turned his attention back to the captive priest.

"About one year ago, your adventuring company looted a ruined temple in the Sunset Mountains. Do you remember?"

"Yes," the priest answered in a monotone.

The priest and his comrades, calling themselves the Band of the Broken Bow, had happened upon an abandoned temple of Shar that Vraggen had been seeking for months.

"Among the treasures you took from those ruins was a crystal globe of gray quartz, about fist-sized and inset with chips of gemstones." Vraggen tried to keep his voice level when he asked the next question. "Do you remember this globe?"

"Yes."

Vraggen shared a glance with Azriim. The half-drow smiled and winked.

"Where is the globe now?"

The priest's brow furrowed and he said, "After we left the temple, we disputed how to divide the plunder. The globe was a curiosity but not very valuable. Solin took it as a throwaway part of his share."

Vraggen kept his eagerness under control. The fools had no idea what they had taken from that temple.

“Solin?”

“Solin Dar,” the priest replied. “A warrior out of Sembia.”

“Where in Sembia?”

“Selgaunt,” the priest answered.

Vraggen would have laughed if he'd had a sense of humor. He hailed from Selgaunt himself, had served with the Zhentarim there. It was almost as though the globe had been trying to find *him*. He decided to take the news as a sign of Cyric's favor.

“Thank you, priest,” he said to the Tymoran. He looked to Dolgan. “Throttle him.”

Dolgan grinned, grabbed the priest around the throat, and choked him. While the bound priest gagged and died, Azriim moved to Vraggen's side.

“At least we have a name now. Selgaunt?”

Vraggen nodded. They would use their teleportation rods to move quickly to Selgaunt, find Solin Dar, and subject him to the same technique as they had used on the Tymoran priest.

Soon, Vraggen would have his globe.



CHAPTER 1

MIDNIGHT OF THE SOUL

Cale sat alone in the darkness of Stormweather Towers's parlor. He had not bothered to light one of the wrist-thick wax tapers that stood on candelabrum around the room. The darkness enshrouded him, which was well. It suited his mood. He felt . . . black. Heavy. The Elvish language had a word that perfectly expressed his feeling: *Vaendin-thiil*, which meant "fatigued by life's dark trials." Of course, in elven philosophy the concept of *Vaendin-thiil* never appeared alone, but was paired always with a balancing concept which the elves, in their wisdom or folly, deemed a necessary corollary: *Vaendaan-naes*, "reborn in life's bright struggles." For the elves, dark trials necessarily gave rise to bright rebirths. Cale was not so sure. At that moment, he could see only the darkness. The brightness of rebirth seemed impossibly distant.

Selûne, trailed by her tears, peered gibbous through the parlor's high windows, casting the room in a faint luminescence. Artwork from the four corners of Faerûn decorated the dim parlor: paintings from the sun-baked lands of the far south, sculpture from Mulhorand, elven woodcarvings from the distant High Forest. Suits of archaic armor, ghostly in the silver moonlight, stood in each corner of the large room: a suit of fine elven mail taken from the ruins of Myth Drannor, a set of thick dwarven plate mail from the Great Rift, and two suits of ornate Sembian ceremonial armor, both centuries old. That armor was the pride of Thamalon's collection.

Reflexively, Cale corrected his thought—the armor *had been* the pride of Thamalon's collection. His lord was dead. And the Halls of Stormweather felt dead too, a great stone and wood corpse whose soul had been extinguished.

Cale settled deeper into his favorite leather chair and brooded. How many evenings had he spent in that parlor with his nose in a tome, feeding his appetite for literature and languages, finding respite in the lore and poetry of lost ages? Hundreds, certainly. The parlor had been as much his room as were his own quarters.

But not anymore.

The books and scrolls lining the recessed walnut shelves held for him no comfort, the paintings and sculptures no solace. In everything Cale saw the ghost of his lord, his friend. Thamalon had been as much a father to Cale as an employer, and his lord's absence from the manse felt somehow . . . obscene. The heart had been ripped from the family.

Cale's eyes welled, but he shook his head and blinked back the tears. His blurry gaze fell on one of the last acquisitions Thamalon had made before his death. It sat on a small three-legged pedestal on an upper shelf, a solid orb of smooth, translucent, smoky-gray quartz the size of an ogre's fist, with pinpoints of diamond and other tiny gemstones embedded within it. The chaos of the piece was striking, a virtual embodiment of madness. Thamalon had taken a liking to it at

once. He had purchased it only a month before, along with a variety of other oddities, from Alkenen, a wild-eyed, eccentric street peddler.

Cale had been at Thamalon's side that day, one of the last days of his lord's life. They had played chess in the afternoon, and in the evening shared an ale and discussed the clumsy plots of the Talendar family. Cale smiled at the memory. He resolved then and there to take the orb with him when he left Stormweather, as a memento of his master.

He didn't realize the full import of his thought until a few moments later. *When he left Stormweather. When had he decided to leave? Had he decided to leave?*

The question sat heavy in his mind, fat and pregnant.

He leaned forward in the chair and rested his forearms on his knees. He was surprised to see that he held between his fingers a velvet mask—his holy symbol of Mask the Lord of Shadows. Odd. While Cale always kept it on his person, he didn't remember taking it from his vest pocket.

He stuffed the mask back into his vest, interlaced his fingers, and stared at the hardwood floor. Perhaps it *was* time to leave. Thamalon was gone and Tamlin was head of the family. And Tamlin had little use for Cale. What else was there for him?

The answer leaped into his consciousness the moment he asked the question: Thazienne. Thazienne was there for him.

He crushed the thought, frowning. Thazienne was not there, at least not for him. Her heart belonged to another. Her arms embraced another. Another shared her—

He snarled and shook his head, struggling to control his anger. Anger did him no good, and he knew it. He had spent years loving her, though he had always feared it to be futile. She was the daughter of a merchant noble, he but an assassin playing servant. But the rational understanding that she could never return his love had not quelled the secret hope—he could

finally admit that to himself, that he had hoped—that somehow, *somehow*, they would end up together. Of course, his rationality had done nothing to stop the knife stab of pain he had felt when she had returned from abroad, smiling on the arm of Steorf. Merely thinking the man's name shot him full of rage.

The Cale of fifteen years past would have killed Steorf out of spite. The thought of that still tempted some tiny part of him.

But Cale no longer heeded that part of himself. And he owed that change to Thazienne.

It had been nearly two years since he'd left her a note containing the sum total of his feelings for her: *Ai armiel telere maenen hir*, he had written in Elvish. *You hold my heart forever.*

She had never even acknowledged the note. Not a word, not even a knowing glance. They had stopped meeting in the butler's pantry late at night for drinks and conversation. She had turned away from him in some indefinable way. When he looked her in the eyes, it was as though she didn't see him, not the way she once had.

She was not there for him, and it was time to leave. Stormweather Towers was suffocating him.

Once made, the decision lifted some of the weight that sat heavily on his soul. He did not yet know where he would go, but he *would* leave. Perhaps he could convince Jak to accompany him.

As always, the thought of the halfling rounded the corners of Cale's anger and brought a smile to his face. Jak had stood by him through much, through everything. They had faced Zhents, ghouls, and demons together. Perhaps most importantly, Jak had helped Cale understand Mask's Calling. Jak had taught him how to cast his first spells.

Of course Jak would accompany him. Jak was his best friend, his only friend, his conscience. A man—even a killer—couldn't go anywhere without his conscience. He and Jak seemed linked, seemed to share a common fate.

Cale smiled and reminded himself that he did not believe in fate. At least he hadn't. But maybe he had come to. Or at least maybe he should. How could he not? He had been called to the priesthood by his god and had defeated a demon through that Calling.

But I chose to accept the Calling, he reminded himself.

Korvikoum. That word—his favorite concept from dwarven philosophy—elbowed its way to the front of his mind. Dwarves did not believe much in fate. They believed in *Korvikoum*: choices and consequences. In a sense, fate and *Korvikoum* stood in opposition to one another, as much as did *Vaendin-thiil* and *Vaendaannaes*, as much as did being a killer and being a good man who killed.

Cale reached for the wine chalice on the table beside his chair and took a sip. The five-year-old vintage of Thamalon's Best, a heavy red wine, reminded him of the nights in the library he and his lord had played chess over a glass. Thamalon had believed in fate, strongly so. The Old Owl had once told Cale that a man could either embrace fate and walk beside it, or reject it and get pulled along nevertheless. That evening, Cale had merely nodded at the words and said nothing, but ultimately he wondered if Thamalon had gotten it right.

Still, Cale was convinced that the choices a man made could not be meaningless. If there was fate, then perhaps a man's future was not fixed. Perhaps a man could shape his fate through the choices he made. Fate delineated boundaries; choice established details. So fate might make a man a farmer, but the farmer chose what crops to plant. Fate might make a man a soldier, but the soldier chose which battles to fight.

Cale liked that. Fate may have made him a killer, but he would decide if, who, why, and when he killed.

He raised his glass to the darkness, silently toasting the memory of Thamalon Uskevren.

I'll miss you, my lord, he thought.

He would miss the rest of the Uskevren too, and

Stormweather Towers, but he would leave nevertheless. From then on, he would serve only one lord.

He reached back into his vest and again withdrew his holy symbol. The velvet of the mask felt smooth in his hands. He held it before his face and stared at it, thoughtful. The empty eye holes stared back.

Fate or choice? they seemed to ask.

Cale considered that, and after a moment, he gave his answer.

“Both,” he whispered, “and neither.”

With that, he turned the mask around and put it on, the first time he had ever done so in Stormweather Towers. It did not bring the expected comfort. Instead, it felt wrong, as obscene as Thamalon’s absence from the manse. He pulled it off and crumpled it in his fist.

“What do you want from me?” he whispered to Mask.

As usual, his god provided him no answers, no signs. Mask never provided answers, only more questions, only more choices.

Months before, in an effort to better understand his Calling, Cale had scoured Thamalon’s personal library for information about Mask and the Lord of Shadows’ faithful. Unsurprisingly, for Mask *was* the god of shadows and thieves, after all, there was little to be found. He had finally concluded that serving Mask was different than serving other gods. The priests of Faerûn’s other faiths proselytized, ministered, preached, and in that way won converts and served their gods. Mask’s priests did no such thing. There were no Maskarran preachers, no street ministers, no pilgrims. Mask did not require his priests to win converts. Either the darkness spoke to you or it didn’t. If it did, you were already Mask’s. If it didn’t, you never would be.

The darkness *had* spoken to Cale, had whispered his name and wrapped him in shadow. And now it was telling him to leave Stormweather Towers.

He sighed, finished his wine, and stood. If he was to be reborn in life’s bright struggles, he would have to do it elsewhere. It was time to go.



CHAPTER 2

THE DEAD OF NIGHT

“Well met, mage,” said Norel, as he slid into the chair across the table from Vraggen.

“Norel,” Vraggen acknowledged with a nod. He unfolded his hands to indicate the tin tankards on the table, each foaming with ale. “I purchased ales for us.”

Suspicion narrowed Norel’s eyes to slits. Obviously, he thought the ale might be poisoned. The thought amused Vraggen. As if he could be so . . . banal.

As quick as the snake that he was, Norel reached across the table and snatched the tankard from in front of Vraggen, rather than the one set before him.

“Appreciated,” Norel said, “but I’ll have this one, if you please.”

From the smug smile on his face, he seemed to think he had made a point.

Vraggen shrugged, took the ale in front of Norel, and said, "Well enough. This one will be mine then."

Vraggen immediately took a draw, grimacing at the watery taste of the indifferent brew. It reminded him of the swill he had endured as a mage's apprentice in Silvertown, before that city's destruction by agents of Shade Enclave.

Seeing Vraggen drink and not fall over dead, Norel grinned and gave an almost sheepish nod—the closest he would come to apologizing for his mistrust, Vraggen supposed—and took a long pull on his ale.

Vraggen watched him while he drank, smiling with an easy disingenuousness, but wondering if he would need to kill him later in the evening. Not with anything as vulgar as poison of course, but dead was still dead.

Time would tell, he supposed.

The two sat at a small table in a back corner of the Silver Lion, a mediocre taproom at the intersection of Vesey Street and Colls Way, a boisterous corner deep in Selgaunt's Foreign District. It was spring, and near the tenth hour. As usual for the Lion, a thick crowd of merchants, drovers, and caravan guards filled the tables and slammed back drink. The heavy aroma of the Lion's infamous beef stew—a thick, wretched concoction inexplicably favored by caravanners—hung in the air. When mixed with the ubiquitous smell of pipeweed smoke and sweat, it made Vraggen's stomach turn. Tankards clanged, plates clattered, and conversation buzzed. Everyone wore steel; everyone drank; and no one paid any attention to Vraggen and Norel.

Exactly as Vraggen required.

He had chosen the Lion as the location to meet Norel for two reasons: first, it was in the Foreign District. Zhent operatives like Norel considered the area a "hot zone," a high-trade area well patrolled by Selgaunt's Scepters, the city's watchmen. Norel would therefore consider himself safe, and not fear the meeting to be a pretense for a hit. Second, the noise of the crowd made eavesdropping difficult by all but the most skilled and determined spy. That was well, for Vraggen wanted no

premature disclosure of his plans. Many Zhents thought him dead already, and he wanted them to continue to think as much until he was ready to move.

Vraggen took another draw on his ale. When he placed the tin tankard, engraved with the crude crest of a rearing lion, back on the table, he glanced casually into the crowd behind Norel, looking for his lieutenants.

There they were.

Azriim sat three tables away, his dusky skin gray in the light of the oil lamps, his long pale hair held off his face with a jeweled fillet. Only in Selgaunt's Foreign District could a half-drow like Azriim go unremarked. Sembians were notoriously prejudiced against elves of any type, but in Selgaunt coin spoke before race. And Azriim's taste in finery suggested great wealth. Had they been in the Dalelands, Azriim would have been arrested on sight, probably hanged.

Dolgan shared Azriim's table. The weight of the large Cormyrean, heavy-laden with axes, ring mail, and a round gut, bowed the thick legs of the wooden chair.

Vraggen brought his gaze back to Norel, though the Zhent made only occasional eye contact. "I thought you were dead," Norel said.

Vraggen smiled and replied, "You can see that I am not. I was merely away from the city for a time."

Norel gave a quick nod, and took a long pull on his ale. The Zhent operative was struggling to look calm, but Vraggen saw through the facade: the furrowed brow, the white-knuckled grip on his tankard. Norel was nervous.

Norel put back another long gulp of his ale, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and set the tankard down on the table with a smack.

"You wanted me here, mage, and here I am. What you got? A side job?"

A side job—work beneath the attention of the Zhent leadership that an operative might do on his own time to fill his own pockets rather than the coffers of the organization.

"Of a sort," Vraggen replied, being deliberately vague. That was mundane enough that it seemed to relax Norel. He leaned forward, an eager gleam in his dark eyes.

"Let's hear it then."

Vraggen folded his hands on the table and looked Norel in the face. The Zhent's initial response to Vraggen's next words would be important.

"There's a war brewing in the Network, Norel. It's time each of us picked a side and fought. Do you see that?"

Norel's eyes narrowed. He probably was still stuck on the idea of an ordinary side job. It took a moment for him to redirect his thoughts.

"War? You mean—" His eyes went to Vraggen's brass cloak pin, in the shape of a jawless skull in a sunburst, and his expression showed understanding. "You mean what I think you mean?"

Vraggen nodded but added nothing. He wanted to let Norel's thoughts run their course.

Norel's gaze returned to the pin, returned to Vraggen. The Zhent's thoughts were writ plain on his face. Bane, the god of tyranny, had returned to Faerûn and the resurgent Banites were in the process of retaking their historic place amongst the Zhent leadership. The Cyricists, who had murdered many Banites while seizing power in the Network, found themselves the target of the Banites' vengeance. An internal schism had rent the organization. Mostly it was fought in the shadows with poison, assassinations, and the like, but of late, the Banites had grown confident, and the murders of Cyricists had become public and ritualized. Message-killings, really. Vraggen had heard that message and heeded it. That was why he'd left Selgaunt in search of the globe.

But Norel knew none of that, or little anyway. Like most Zhents who were not in positions of leadership, Norel wanted to stay neutral and weather the religious storm. But that day was past. Either he would side with Vraggen or he would die.

Ultimately, Vraggen planned to retake the Network with his own private war on the Banite leadership. For that, he needed soldiers—Zhents without loyalty to the Banites, Zhents like Norel—and power. He was in the process of gathering both. The risks were high, but if he were successful he would have taken the first step in eliminating the Banites from the Zhentarim. Surely Cyric would reward such a coup.

He returned his thoughts to Norel and asked, “Well?”

“Well? Dark and empty, man! Are you mad? It hasn’t been a war. It’s been a slaughter.”

Vraggen could not deny it, though hearing Norel say it aloud brought a flash of rage. It *had been* a slaughter, at least so far. Cyric was culling his flock of the weak, Vraggen supposed. Unfortunate, but necessary.

Norel, warming to the subject, went on, “I mean, I haven’t seen a priest of Cyric on a job for over a month. Not one that was alive at the end of it, at least.”

Vraggen bit back the impulse to smack the smugness from Norel’s face, and said, “I’m not a priest, Norel.”

Norel’s eyes flashed fear. He looked into Vraggen’s face, only for an instant, and looked away.

“No. I guess you’re not. But you’re still a mad bastard. Seeking a fight with the Banites is . . . is . . .” He stuttered, obviously struggling for the right word, and finally settling on the rather unimpressive and repetitive, “. . . is madness.”

Vraggen sighed and decided to give Norel one more chance.

“Consider the rewards, Norel. If I’m—if *we’re*—successful, imagine the power, the wealth. What’s your take per job, now? A twentieth?”

Norel nodded slowly.

“I’m prepared to double that. Think about it. A tenth.”

Vraggen could be free with promises of coin because wealth meant nothing to him. This was to be a religious war, not the pursuit of lucre. But he knew coin would mean something to Norel.

"But the Banites . . ." Norel said, shaking his head. "I mean, do you want to die?"

Vraggen knew then that Norel was lost. He stared daggers into the Zhent's face.

"No. Do you?"

Norel's gaze went hard, though Vraggen could see the fear behind the bravado.

"You threatening me, mage? You think that shadow shite will keep you safe from *this*?"

His hand went to the hilt of his short sword.

Calm as a windless sea, Vraggen leaned back in his chair and took a slow drink of his ale—using his left hand, the signal to alert Azriim and Dolgan.

"I find your attitude regrettable," he said softly.

Norel scoffed, but kept one hand on his sword hilt.

"Regrettable? You know what I find? I find you're a friggin' fool. Did you think I'd buy into this tripe? That I wouldn't go straight to Malix? There's the real coin, selling you out. I don't give a damn if Cyricists or Banites or the High Prince of the Ninth Hell is running the show, as long as I get my cut." He smirked derisively and added, "And I'll keep my twentieth. A dead man can't spend a tenth."

Azriim and Dolgan were cutting through the crowd, closing on the table.

Vraggen smiled softly and held Norel's gaze, so as not to alert him.

"I can't say I'm entirely surprised by your reaction," he said, "but I'd hoped you'd agree with my vision. I'd hoped that you'd see the potential in it for you. Of course, if you didn't, I realized you'd threaten to take it to Malix."

Malix was the highest ranking Zhent in Selgaunt, and a Banite. He'd pay well to know Vraggen's whereabouts and plans.

"Then you know I'm looking at a dead man, Cyricist. Unless—" Norel's eyes grew cunning—"you care to give me a reason why I *shouldn't* take it up the chain."

A play for coin. How common.

Dolgan loomed behind Norel's chair. Azriim, standing

beside his big comrade, could not keep the smile off his face.

"I'll give you two," Vraggen said, and he nodded to his agents.

Norel sensed his peril a heartbeat too late. Before he could stand, before he could pull his steel, Dolgan planted a ham hand on each of the Zhent's shoulders, a hold that might appear innocuously friendly to observers, but that held Norel in his seat as effectively as a vise. In the same instant, Azriim slid gracefully into the empty chair beside the Zhent and put a dagger to his ribs.

"Mind your manners, now," Azriim ordered with a smile and a wink. His perfect teeth shone in the lamp-light.

"One and two," Vraggen said, and he let Norel digest his situation for a few heartbeats.

The Zhent obviously understood his danger. His breath came fast, and he started to sweat. Flush, he spoke through gritted teeth.

"I've got friends. People who know I'm here. If you do anything, you whoresons—"

Azriim pricked him with the blade to cut him off, and said, "I said, 'mind your manners,' and that means no expletives."

The half-drow continued to smile, but the cold glint in his mismatched eyes left no doubt about how deep the dagger would go the next time. Azriim had a peculiar distaste for profanity, one of a number of the half-drow's idiosyncrasies. Vraggen didn't understand it, and didn't try to.

"I believe you're lying, Norel," Vraggen said. "No one knows you're here except the persons at this table."

"And we're not telling," said Azriim with a smile.

Vraggen continued, "Who would you dare tell that you were coming to a meet with a Cyricist? The leader of your cell? Malix?"

Norel's eyes darted around, seeking escape. Fear squeezed sweat from his pores. He spoke rapidly, his voice almost a hiss.

"I'm not being 'escorted' out of here, mage. You want

to do something to me, you'll have to do it here, if you've got the stones. Someone will see. The Network will hear—"

He started to squirm but Dolgan held him fast. The big Cormyrean flexed his shoulders and fairly ground Norel into his seat. The Zhent folded over and gave a squeal of pain. Azriim chuckled softly, as though the whole affair was a grand joke. Norel tried to lunge at Azriim but could not escape Dolgan's grip. The veins of his neck stood out like a network of tree roots. When he spat his next words, strings of spit dangled between his lips.

"What's so godsdamned funny, you black skinned sonofa—"

A deeper stab from Azriim cut short Norel's tirade. This time, Azriim did not smile.

"I saved your life by keeping that curse in your mouth," said the half-drow. "Thank me."

"Bugger off."

"Thank me."

Another prick of the blade. Another squeal of pain.

Norel gritted his teeth. Pain paled his face.

"Thank you, you son—" He stopped himself before Azriim cut him again.

The half-drow smiled with satisfaction.

Before things could get louder, Vraggen reached into his robes, removed a thin iron wand, and pointed it at Norel under the table.

"Be still," he ordered.

Those simple words triggered the magic of the wand. Norel went rigid, held immobile by the power of the wand's magic.

Dolgan, chuckling in his slow way, loosed his grip on the immobilized Zhent and took a seat at the table. The chair creaked under his weight. A few curious eyes turned their way, but Azriim laughed loudly and slapped Norel on the shoulder.

"You villainous rogue," he said with a gleeful snort, as though scolding an old friend for getting drunk and bedding a serving girl. "You didn't?"

Dolgan laughed along, pounding the table with false mirth. The prying eyes of the other patrons went back to their business. Azriim's laughter immediately died, and his eyes—one pale blue, one deep brown—recaptured their usual hardness.

"He has a foul mouth," Azriim said to Vraggen and Norel. "Doesn't he?" He looked at Norel. "You have a foul mouth." He took Norel's drink and had a slug. "And you drink swill."

Looking at the immobile Zhent, Vraggen sighed with disappointment. Norel would have made a fair addition to their crew. He'd shown backbone, there at the end.

Ah well, he thought, what had to be done, had to be done.

He stared across the table into Norel's unblinking eyes and said, "As I said, Norel, you've made a regrettable decision. You do know what comes next, don't—"

The *smack* of Azriim's asp-quick backhand across Norel's face stopped Vraggen in mid-sentence. Even Dolgan's dull eyes widened with surprise.

"I told him, 'no expletives,' did I not? I believe I did." The half-drow spoke in the same relaxed tone of voice that he used when ordering a meal. "You have a foul mouth," he repeated to Norel.

Vraggen glared. "Do attempt to maintain your self-control, Azriim," he said.

The half-drow sneered and said, "Do I appear to you to be out of control?"

Vraggen indicated Norel. A thick stream of blood flowed down the Zhent's face from the left nostril.

"I told him, 'no expletives,' yet he cursed nevertheless," Azriim explained. "My striking him was meant as a further rebuke for his disobedience. He deserved it." Before Vraggen could frame a reply, Azriim added, "And I don't take orders from you, Vraggen. I'm your partner, not your lackey. I can interpret the globe, and therefore know how to find what you seek. You're the adept who can gain entrance. That makes us equals."

Vraggen's fingers pressed into the soft wood of the table and he hissed, "Watch your tongue, fool."

He glanced around at the nearby tables, but no one seemed to have taken any notice of the half-drow's comments. Vraggen sometimes regretted his alliance with Azriim. The half-breed outcast of House Jaelre had a mouth that ran like the River Shining, and he too often took unnecessary risks. Still, Azriim spoke truth—they were partners. Inexplicably, the half-drow had a sage's understanding of the heavens—he had never explained to Vraggen how he had come by that education, and Vraggen didn't ask. Vraggen brought to the partnership knowledge of the Zhents and Sembia's underworld, and a mastery of the Shadow Weave and related arcana.

They had met years before, near Tilverton, when Vraggen had first received training in the use of the Shadow Weave. Since then, their partnership had solidified. Vraggen needed Azriim's knowledge to find the Fane of Shadows and plumb the secret that lay within, while Azriim needed Vraggen to help him establish a new criminal organization to replace the Zhents in Sembia, an organization with the half-drow at its head. Partners indeed.

Dolgan looked at Azriim with a vague, puzzled expression and said, "Hang on, then. You sayin' *I'm* a lackey?"

Azriim smiled. "I'm saying—"

"Shut up," Vraggen commanded, and they did. Partners or no, in the end Vraggen was in charge. "Clean up this mess. It's time to move on."

There were other Zhents to recruit, other Zhents to kill, and most importantly, the globe to locate.

Azriim looked surprised, and distantly pleased. "Clean it? Here?"

"How?" asked Dolgan, in that same puzzled tone.

"How do you think?" Vraggen said. "Bloodless."

He put back the rest of his ale.

"But—" Dolgan started.

"Just do it."

That seemed enough for Azriim, who took the initiative.

The half-drow scooted his chair nearer to Norel's, gave an apologetic shrug and said, "I told you to mind your manners."

With one hand he pinched the Zhent's nose closed; with the other, he covered his mouth. Unable to move, Norel could only stare wide-eyed while he was asphyxiated. Vraggen wondered distantly what thoughts were going through Norel's mind while he died. Nothing of worth, he was sure.

Presently, it was over.

"Interesting," Azriim observed with a smile and scooted his chair back. He wiped Norel's snot and blood from the tips of his fingers. "I've never killed a man with only my fingers."

"I have," Dolgan said. "Back outside of Ordulin. Rememb—"

"Do shut up," Vraggen said, and Dolgan did.

Norel's corpse, held rigid by Vraggen's spell, remained upright in the chair, staring across the table with eyes gone glassy. Vraggen looked around to see if anyone had noticed the murder. No one had.

"I'll animate the corpse," Vraggen said. "You two escort him out, as though he's drunk."

"Be serious," Azriim replied, shaking his head. "I'll not have his stink on my clothes. Even alive he stank. And dead, well. . . ."

Vraggen bit back his frustration. As much as Azriim loathed profanity, that was how much he loved his tailored finery, almost always in one shade or another of green.

"Very well," Vraggen said, and indicated Dolgan. "You then."

The big man frowned, but nodded.

Vraggen withdrew a small, roughly cut onyx from the inner pocket of his cloak, reached across the table, and pushed it between Norel's dead lips. In a low voice, he dispelled the magic that held Norel rigid then recited the charged words to the spell that would tap the Shadow Weave and animate Norel's corpse.

"Place your hands on the table, Norel," he commanded, to test the efficacy of the spell.

Norel—or Norel’s shell—did exactly that. Vraggen looked to Dolgan and said, “Walk it out of the inn, then lead it to the bay. Stab it in the lungs a few times so it will sink.”

Dolgan nodded.

Vraggen looked at the corpse and said, “Rise and walk out accompanied by this man.” He indicated Dolgan. “Allow him to lead you where he will.”

Norel pushed back his chair and rose, awkward and shuffling. Dolgan wrapped one of his huge arms around the zombie and the two shuffled out. Norel’s irregular stride was at least passable as the stumbling meander of a drunk. Dolgan began to sing as they made their way to the door.

After they were gone, Azriim raised Norel’s tankard and gave Vraggen a mock toast.

“Well done.”

Vraggen acknowledged the compliment with nod.

“What’s next?”

“We find the globe. I believe that the time of the Fane’s appearance is near.”

Azriim nodded, swirled the tankard thoughtfully. He was silent for a time, then he said, “Remind me again why you’re doing this?”

“Power,” Vraggen replied. “Do you think the Network will cede us Sembia? We’ll need every advantage we can get, and what I propose to do represents the pinnacle of what the Shadow Weave has to offer. You should consider it yourself.”

In truth, Vraggen cared little for personal power, or at least cared little for power for its own sake. His plan to war with Sembia’s Zhents had nothing to do with self-aggrandizement. As he saw it, he had no choice. He could flee the city and die a coward—something he could not live with—or he could stand, fight, and serve the god he had chosen to follow. At least the latter offered a chance for survival. But to maximize that chance, he had to maximize his own power.

Azriim smiled at Vraggen’s offer, a secret smile Vraggen did not care for, and said, “You won’t be human anymore.”

“No,” Vraggen acknowledged, staring across the table. “I’ll be more than human.”

Azriim seemed to digest that.

“Well enough,” the half-drow said with a laugh. “I sure hope you don’t die before we find the Fane. This, I really want to witness.”