



CHAPTER 3

FAREWELLS

The light of the rising sun crept across the floor of Cale's quarters. Half his room was alight with the brightness of dawn, half cast in shadow. Cale thought it an apt metaphor for his life.

His purposeful movements about the small bedroom took him between the light and shadow. In the process, he stirred up the seemingly endless amount of unswept dust on the floor. The motes swirled in the sun's rays like dancing faeries. If anyone on his staff had left any other room in Stormweather Towers as ill kept as Cale maintained his own quarters, he would have dismissed that person summarily. Cale was a poor housekeeper—a strange fault in a butler, he acknowledged—but he forbade any member of his staff from entering his quarters.

And for good reason, he thought, eyeing the battered wooden trunk at the base of his metal-framed bed. He had never wanted to risk an overly curious member of the household staff jiggling the lock of the trunk and drawing conclusions about him and his past from the contents.

He keyed the lock and opened the trunk's lid. Within lay his enchanted leather armor, slashed and grooved from the many blades it had turned, and a leather pouch holding two of the three potions he had taken from the Night Knives's guildhouse before he and Jak had burned it to the ground. Two months before he had paid a gnome alchemist to identify the properties of the potions. The one that smelled of clover would turn him invisible for a time, and the cloudy azure one would allow him to fly for a while. He laid the potion pouch and the armor on the bed. At the bottom of the trunk were his weapons belt with his enchanted long sword and two balanced daggers. Those too he laid on the bed. He would no longer keep his weapons and armor hidden away.

Through his window, the great bells of the House of Song sounded the sixth hour. Tamlin—*Lord Uskevren*, he corrected himself—would be taking his breakfast. Lady Uskevren would be there as well. He would inform them first.



Shamur and Tamlin sat at a small table on a sun-drenched balcony off of the main dining room, talking. Cale could not make out their conversation and would not be so impolite as to read their lips, though he could have.

Shamur wore a violet sundress, sandals, and only a few tasteful jewels. Her hair hung loose and cascaded down to her shoulders. To be dressed so casually, Cale deemed that she must have no appointments that morning. Tamlin, however, had already donned a formal doublet and hose. The lord of Stormweather had business that morning then. The fact that Cale did not know of Tamlin's appointments ahead of time showed

just how small a role he played in the life of the new lord of Stormweather.

Cale walked through the dining room toward the balcony—deliberately loud, so that Tamlin and Shamur would hear him coming. They turned in their chairs to face him as he approached. Tamlin looked grave, but not displeased to see him. Shamur smiled. Cale nodded a greeting to Tamlin and gave Shamur a warm look. Cale and Shamur had reached an understanding while in the strange otherworld reflected in a magical painting. There, they had faced death together and saved each other's lives. Later, they had mourned Thamalon together. Cale had come to realize that his lady was no more a sedentary noble in her soul than he was a butler in his. He marveled at her ability to suppress what she was. He had never been quite able to do it.

Out of habit, he evaluated the table settings and fare with a professional eye. All appeared in order—the table services appropriately set, the meal suitable for a spring breakfast. Cora, one of the household staff, hovered on the far side of the balcony, within earshot and sight of the Uskevren if they required anything, but far enough away to give them privacy. Cale gave the young woman a nod of approval then waited to be acknowledged formally by his employers.

“Mister Cale,” Tamlin said around a mouthful of poached egg.

“My lord,” Cale said, though he still found it hard to apply the title to Tamlin.

“Erevis,” Shamur said and smiled still more brightly. The sun reflected off the jewels in her hair, and sparkled in her eyes. She looked radiant. She gestured at a nearby chair. “How very nice to see you. Please sit down.”

Tamlin frowned at Shamur's familiar use of Cale's first name, and her offer to allow a servant to dine with the lord of the House.

“Lady, you are gracious as always, but I must decline,” Cale said. He smiled back at her, a soft smile but genuine. Having come to know her, he thought he

might miss her the most after he was gone, more even perhaps than Thazienne. He looked to Cora and said, "That will be all."

Tamlin and Shamur exchanged a glance at that. Cora looked surprised but made no protest before hurrying off.

Surprisingly, Cale felt no anxiety. In fact, he felt comfortable for the first time in months. He looked beyond both of the Uskevren and went straight to the point.

"Lord, Lady, some unfortunate events have befallen my cousin."

When he had first come to Stormweather, Cale had concocted a fictional cousin whose frequent problems required Cale's aid, and thereby provided cover for his guild activities. Tamlin and Shamur did not know that his cousin was non-existent. Even Thamalon had not known, though he may have suspected.

"I fear these events will require my long-term attention," Cale continued, "and will take me from the city. I must therefore request that you accept my resignation, which I offer now."

For a moment, the balcony stood silent.

At last, Tamlin said, "What? When?"

He did not look unhappy, merely surprised.

"Immediately, my l—"

"No." Shamur threw her napkin to the table, pushed back her chair, and stood. "Your request is denied."

"Mother . . ."

Tamlin reached for her hand, but she jerked it away. She had eyes only for Cale. And what eyes! For a fleeting, guilt-ridden instant, he thought how beautiful she looked, how much he wished he had known her in the days when she had been Shamur the burglar, before she had become the lady of House Uskevren.

"My lady . . ." Cale began.

She strode forward, looked him defiantly in the face, and said, "This is nonsense, Erevis, and I will not suffer it."

"Lady—"

"You have no cousin!" she hissed. "Do you think I'm blind or do you think I'm stupid?"

Stunned, Cale could only stare. Her eyes did not hold accusations, just certainty. How long had she known? He had never even told Thamalon.

"Neither, my lady," he managed to mutter.

Tamlin rose from his seat and asked, "What are you talking about? Of course he has a cousin. Mister Cale has spoken of him often. Tell her, Cale. And now he needs to leave to attend to family matters. Surely we can understand that."

Shamur didn't turn around but her face darkened—first with anger, then with . . . disgust? Was she that disappointed in the man her son had become? Cale thought her face gave him the answer and made plain her thoughts: How will the House survive with Tamlin at its head?

For an instant, that thought made Cale waver, but only for an instant. He could not help the Uskevren anymore. He thought of Thazienne and knew it would cost him too much to stay.

He glanced at Tamlin—who stood with his hands on his hips and his head cocked to the side—then to Shamur, whose proud eyes blazed fire.

Cale smiled and said softly, "You'll still be here, Lady. That will be enough."

At that, her gaze softened.

"Perhaps," she said, "but the House needs you here. *I* need you here."

"What in the name of the gods are you two going on about?" Tamlin asked. "The man said he's leaving. That seems simple enough to me."

Shamur still held Cale's eyes.

"You don't have to bring this ken, nipper," she said.

Cale tried to keep the surprise from his face. Hearing her use cant astonished him more than if she had punched him in the stomach. She, a noblewoman of Sembia, spoke the thieves' tongue with the practiced ease of a veteran boxman. Cale knew she once had been a burglar of note, but hearing his lady speak the tongue Cale had once used to arrange assassinations . . . it disquieted him.

“What did you say, Mother?” Tamlin asked.

Neither Cale nor Shamur even acknowledged that he had asked a question.

Thinking back, Cale better understood her happiness in that other world. Unlike Cale, she had never regarded herself as trapped there, even when they had been temporarily held prisoner by the elves. There, she had been free. For her, Stormweather was the trap, and one from which she could not even attempt escape.

He reached out a hand and brushed her fingers with his fingertips.

“My lady,” he said, “if you can speak that language, then you of everyone understand why I can no longer stay.”

Tamlin’s eyes narrowed. Obviously he didn’t like the familiar touch Cale had just shared with his mother.

“What language is that, Mister Cale?” he asked.

Cale did not look at him, instead keeping his eyes on Shamur.

Shamur considered Cale’s comments, smiled sadly, and replied, “I do understand, Erevis.” She straightened and backed up a step. “Sometimes the choices we make become too much of a sacrifice to continue them. Sometimes.”

Cale gave her a nod and looked at Tamlin.

“I believe Lady Uskevren is now in agreement with us, my lord. I will inform the staff and see that all is put in order prior to my departure. I expect that will take a day, but perhaps two. I believe you will find Orrin more than capable of assuming my duties.”

Orrin was the chief steward, an extraordinarily competent young man.

Tamlin nodded. He looked at his mother strangely while he walked up to Cale. He extended his hand. Cale took it. It was more callused than it had been once, harder.

“Cale, you’ve been invaluable to House Uskevren. You’ll be missed.” Cale heard sincerity in Tamlin’s tone, and it moved him. “Of course, I will see to a suitable severance.”

Cale shook his head. "Thank you, my lord, but a severance is un—"

Tamlin waved a hand dismissively and said, "I insist, Cale." He glanced at his mother. "It is the least we can do."

"Take it, Erevis," Shamur said.

"As you wish, my lord, lady. You'll say good-bye to Talbot for me?" he asked them.

The youngest Uskevren spent most of his time away from the manse, and likely would not return before Cale left.

"Of course," Shamur said. "And you'll speak to Tazi before you leave?"

Her tone dropped when she said that last, the way a person might speak a secret.

Cale's heart jumped at the thought of saying good-bye to Tazi.

"Erevis? She'll want to see you."

Cale nodded, mumbled something noncommittal, and began to walk away.

Before he reached the archway to the dining room, Shamur called out, "If I had it to do all over again, Erevis, I'd do it the same way. I understood my choice completely the day I made it. Make sure you'll be able to say the same years from now."

Cale heard the truth of her words and thought better of making a reply. Instead, he nodded and walked out.



Mairen Street, called Shop Street by Selgaunt's natives, bustled with late-morning activity. Merchant nobles, day laborers on morning repast, and farmers from the surrounding countryside all strolled the cobble walkways, browsing the endless booths of goods and two-story shops that lined the street. Donkey carts pulling wagons of produce, and lacquered carriages bearing the rich, picked their way through the crowded street and rolled slowly down the road. Street vendors

shouted into the sunny morning sky, hawking everything from apples and cabbage, to breads and sweet ices, to bolts of silk, candles, and scented spices. From the street's numerous open-air eateries and pastry bakeries wafted the pleasant aroma of cooking food—sausage and blueberry tarts. The smell reminded Vraggen that he had not yet eaten breakfast.

"That's him," Azriim said, nodding up the street. "Alkenen the peddler."

The half-drow, dressed in an intricately embroidered forest green cloak, finely tailored trousers, and polished black boots, indicated a vendor just up and across the busy street.

Vraggen and Dolgan tried to get a good look at him through the crowd without being obvious. Solin Dar, late of this world, had told Vraggen that he had sold the globe to Alkenen.

Alkenen straddled a stool before his small, road-worn peddler's cart. His crossed, goggle eyes watched the passersby as they browsed. Tufts of dull brown hair sprouted at wild angles from each side of his otherwise bald head. Even from a distance Vraggen could see that one of Alkenen's legs was shorter than the other, but even the good one looked spindly in its simple, homespun trousers.

"You had no problem tracking him down, I suppose," Vraggen said to Azriim. "His appearance is hardly unremarkable."

"Perhaps harder than you think," said Azriim. "He had been out of the city for the past tenday. He only recently returned to Selgaunt. From Cormyr, I understand. I was beginning to fear we would have to scour the Heartlands for him." He paused before adding, "But you are correct—his poor taste does stand out, even among the Sembians."

Vraggen made no comment but Dolgan snorted a laugh. Unlike Azriim, the big man never seemed to change his clothes. His ring mail, sweat stained brown tunic, leather trousers, and calf high boots might as well have been a uniform.

As for Alkenen, he looked every bit an itinerant peddler of the Heartlands. His pockmarked, road-worn face sported a few days' growth of wispy beard. The sun and rain had long ago faded his weathered overcloak, once probably blue, to an indeterminate gray. His worn leather shoes had soles as thin as a vellum sheet. Perhaps he'd seen thirty winters, perhaps he'd seen fifty. Vraggen couldn't tell. Funny that such a fool could find himself in the middle of such important events.

Alkenen's cart looked much like most peddlers', a sturdy wooden box on four wheels. A "roadship," Vraggen had heard them called. Goods were stored for travel inside the walk-in main compartment, accessible from a narrow door in the back, and rotating slats were built into the cart's sides. When turned down and locked into place, the slats could serve as display shelves. Alkenen had already done so and upon his shelves stood a dizzying array of goods—glassware knick-knacks, statuettes of wood and bronze, sterling pendants, old clothing, leather goods, used weapons, tools, even kitchen pots.

"We gonna stand here all day and stare at the cripple, or take care of business?" Dolgan asked. "I'm getting hungry."

Vraggen didn't think Dolgan meant he was hungry for food.

"We'll try my way first," Vraggen said to the big Cormyrean. "No need to draw attention unnecessarily. If that doesn't work, we'll remove him to an isolated alley and you'll get your chance."

Dolgan grunted acquiescence, but obviously hoped the peddler would need convincing.

Vraggen said, "Let's go," and started across the street.

As they wove their way through the thick crowd, Azriim flipped a copper penny up to a fat apple vendor sitting on the driver's bench of his cart and plucked a green sour from the back. The vendor gave a nod and the copper vanished.

Alkenen saw them coming and must have sensed

their intent. Perhaps he thought them guildsmen looking to chase him off. As they approached, he rose from his stool and tried to hobble into the safety of his cart. Dolgan and Azriim darted forward, intercepted him, and boxed him in against the side of the cart, near the driver's bench. Alkenen's draft horse, a road worn gray nag, idly chewed at a quarter-bale of straw set near it.

Wide-eyed and breathing fast, Alkenen swayed on his uneven legs. To maintain his balance, he steadied himself with one hand against the cart.

He looked fearfully at Azriim and Dolgan and asked, "What's this now? I'm an honest businessman. I'll summon the Scepters if need be."

He made wet sounds when he spoke, as though speaking caused his mouth to fill with too much spit.

Azriim took a loud bite of his apple, glared at the peddler, and said nothing. Dolgan took a step nearer Alkenen, fairly blotting out the sun. The peddler sank back and tried to meld with the wood of his cart.

Vraggen, ignoring the peddler for the moment, walked up and surveyed the peddler's goods, looking for the globe.

"What's this about?" Alkenen asked again, his voice quaking.

"Shut up," Dolgan said, in his deep, threatening voice. Alkenen did exactly that.

Vraggen looked carefully at each of the shelves in turn, but did not see the globe. He saw only the mundane wares of a mundane man, with the occasional item of modest value hidden in the mix—something Alkenen had fenced from a petty thief while in Cormyr, no doubt. Here a jade dragon figurine brought from the east, there a tarnished silver serving set lifted from a noble's manse.

"What is it that the sirs require?" the peddler asked, hopping awkwardly on his deformed leg and warily eyeing Dolgan. "Alkenen has wares of every sort." He nodded at Azriim. "Even clothes for the sir, who is obviously discerning."

Azriim took another chomp of the green sour and

eyed the peddler darkly. After he swallowed, he said, "You'd have to pay me to wear your common trash, fool. You've been told to keep your mouth shut, so do so. And don't refer to yourself in the third person. It annoys me."

Dolgan smirked, though Vraggen doubted the Cormyrean knew what "third person" even meant.

Obviously discomfited, Alkenen swallowed whatever reply he had thought to make. The sucking sounds continued nevertheless.

After a time, the peddler asked in a very small voice, "Are you guildsmen?"

Vraggen snatched the jade dragon figurine from the shelf and turned from the wares.

"No," he said, trying to keep the distaste from his expression. Vraggen approached the wretch. "My name is Vraggen, and we are not working for any guild. What we require of you is a particular item. Failing that, we require information regarding its whereabouts. Provide us with that, and we can all be friends."

He held out the jade figurine, and Alkenen took it, eyes wide.

Vraggen indicated Dolgan and Azriim with his eyes then winked conspiratorially at Alkenen and said, "These are good men to have as friends, peddler. As am I."

He did not need to say that they were bad men to have as enemies. Alkenen understood.

"No doubt," Alkenen said, managing an uncomfortable smile. The dragon figurine vanished into the pocket of his trousers. "What item do you seek?"

Vraggen gave a satisfied smile and backed off a step.

"First things, first."

He nodded to Azriim and Dolgan and they seized Alkenen by the arms. Alarmed, Alkenen began to struggle against their grip; a feeble attempt.

"W-wait," he sputtered, spraying spit. "No!"

Vraggen began to incant a spell that would cause Alkenen to believe that Vraggen was a trusted friend, a trusted friend to whom he would not lie or tell half-truths.

It took only a moment to tap the Shadow Weave and complete the spell. When he finished, an immediate change came over Alkenen. He blinked and shook his head in confusion. Perplexed, he looked at Azriim and Dolgan, who still held him by the arms.

“Vraggen, what’s going on? Call off the muscle, eh?”

Vraggen smiled as sincerely as he could manage and said, “Of course, old friend. My apologies.” He looked pointedly at Azriim and Dolgan. He could not resist. “These two are thick, and often misunderstand my directives.”

Azriim swallowed whatever comment he might have made, but his glare bored holes into Vraggen.

“Release him,” Vraggen commanded, and they did.

Azriim bit into his apple, still staring. Vraggen ignored him and put an arm around Alkenen.

“Now, old friend. The item I’m looking for is a translucent globe of quartz, grayish in color. About so big, with many small gemstones inset. You would’ve purchased this item from a battle-hardened warrior, a member of an adventuring company out of Cormyr who called themselves the Band of the Broken Bow.”

Alkenen rubbed his scruffy beard and said, “I remember that warrior. A few months ago, right? Big fellow, lots of weapons, but needed hard coin. A drinker, I think. Sold that globe to me on the cheap.”

“That’s precisely the item,” Vraggen said, and tried to keep the intensity out of his voice. “Where is the globe now? It’s very valuable to me and I will pay you handsomely for it.”

Alkenen sucked in some renegade spit dribbling down his chin and answered, “Sold it. If I’d a known you—”

Vraggen grabbed the peddler by the shirt and slammed him against the cart.

“*Sold it!* Sold it? To whom?”

Vraggen could hear the mockery in Azriim’s voice when he said, “Do attempt to control yourself, Vraggen. I know I’m ‘thick,’ but isn’t he your old friend?”

Vraggen shot Azriim an angry stare. The half-drow

merely chewed his apple and smiled. Vraggen turned back to Alkenen. The peddler was wide-eyed and too stunned to breathe. Even the sucking sounds had ceased, and a stream of spit dribbled from the side of his open mouth. Vraggen came back to himself.

He released the peddler, patted him on the shoulders, and said, "Forgive me . . . friend. I'm not myself." He took a deep breath. "Do you remember to whom you sold it?"

Alkenen smiled at that, a mouthful of stained teeth.

"Of course," said the peddler. "As I was saying, I put it together with some other unusual items I had obtained and sold the whole lot to the old man Uskevren. Walked by with his butler, he did. Took an immediate liking to that globe and an orrery. Bought the whole lot of items on the spot." Alkenen grinned and added, "I told him it came from Evermeet."

Vraggen breathed the name, "Uskevren."

He knew of the family, of course. Everyone with any familiarity with Selgaunt did. He also knew that Thamalón Uskevren had died recently—that news was the talk of the taverns—but something else itched at the back of his brain. Someone in the Zhentarim had once had ties to the Uskevren . . .

"Drasek Riven," he said softly, and frowned.

"Who?" Alkenen asked.

Vraggen ignored him. Riven, one of the Network's top operatives in Selgaunt, had once had cause to surveil the Uskevren manse, but Vraggen couldn't remember why.

The answer came to him then, all in a rush.

Because Riven had tried for years to get the Zhents to put down the Uskevren butler, who had been a member of the now defunct Night Knives. Likely the same butler who had been with Thamalón Uskevren when he had acquired the globe.

"Cale," he said softly.

Alkenen's head bobbed up and down and he said, "Cale! Exactly! He was butler to old Uskevren. Tall prig, he was. Mean looking too."

Vraggen frowned. Had Cale and Riven allied? Had Riven's hostility been only a cover? Maybe this Cale had learned what the globe was. Maybe he and Riven had murdered Thamalon to take it for themselves. It seemed too coincidental that the Uskevren patriarch would buy the globe with Cale at his side and die soon after. That work stank of Drasek Riven.

Vraggen looked to Azriim and Dolgan and said, "This complicates matters." While a simple divination attuned to the Shadow Weave could reveal if the globe was in the family's mansion, dealing with Cale and Riven would not be as simple. "Cale and Riven are professionals," he said simply.

Azriim smirked and chewed his apple.

Dolgan gave a hard grin and asked, "Mean looking, huh?"

Vraggen faced Alkenen and gave an insincere smile. "You've been of immeasurable help, friend Alkenen." Vraggen took ten platinum suns from his belt pouch, gave them to the peddler, and added, "For your trouble."

Alkenen stared wide-eyed at the coins, a small fortune by his standards.

"Take it. You've been a great help to me."

Alkenen said, "You're too generous, Vraggen. Anything else I can do—anything—you need only ask. I'll be in Selgaunt another few days, then I'm off to Marsember for the Festival of the Hart."

"Thank you, my friend. But nothing more for now." Vraggen forced himself to hold the smile. "Promise you'll spend the coin well, and soon. Otherwise, it'll chew a hole in your pouch."

Alkenen promised that he would and they parted ways.

When they had walked a block or two away from Alkenen, Azriim said, "Helpful fellow, your friend Alkenen. Maybe you two should get together for tendayly games of sava. Chess maybe. I suspect he'd give you a good game."

Vraggen resisted the urge to smack the smirk from Azriim's face, and said, "We'll track Cale and Riven for a few days. Once we've located the globe, we kill them and take it."

“Easy enough,” Azriim replied.

“We’ll need to involve a few more men.”

“I know just the woman,” said Azriim with a smile.

Vraggen looked a question at the half-drow. He wasn’t sure this was woman’s work.

“Don’t worry,” Azriim said with a laugh. “She’s no lady. And she’s only a woman when it suits her.”

Vraggen nodded. He would trust Azriim’s judgment. Azriim had brought him Dolgan, after all, and the Cormyrean mercenary had been a perfect addition to the core of their team.

“What is this globe anyway?” Dolgan asked. “What’s it do?”

Azriim patted him on the broad shoulder and said, “You’re only asking that now? Where’ve you been for the last three tendays?”

The half-drow laughed at Dolgan’s dull frown. “It doesn’t *do* much of anything, my big friend. It simply is.”

“Enough,” Vraggen ordered.

There were people all over the street. Azriim’s careless tongue was infuriating.

Dolgan continued to frown, obviously perplexed.

“Never fear, Dolgan,” Azriim said. “There’s a little man with a real brain hidden in that big body somewhere. I’m sure of it. He’ll figure it out in time.”

Dolgan gave the half-drow a good-natured thump on the shoulder.

Vraggen glanced back the way they had come. He could no longer see Alkenen’s cart.

“The charm on the peddler will wear off late this evening. After that, his loose tongue will be a danger to us. Follow him. After he’s spent the coin, kill him.”

Azriim raised his eyebrows and stared at Vraggen. Was that respect in his mismatched eyes?

“Seems you’re not such good friends, after all, eh?” said the half-drow.

Vraggen stared back meaningfully and asked, “Why would you say that?”



The staff took the news of Cale's departure well. Only Brilla the kitchen mistress had cried. Seeing stalwart Brilla blubbering like a child had almost undone Cale. He had fled the kitchen with a knot in his throat and only some of his dignity.

Word had spread to the guards quickly, and many had come up to his room to wish him well. He would leave that very night.

Alone once more, Cale gathered a final bit of gear. Glorious orange light cascaded through his window. The sun was setting on Faerûn, as the sun was setting on his time in Stormweather Towers.

He collected up a few necessities—some candles, a coil of rope, tindertwigs, flint and steel, a few favorite books—and placed them in his worn leather backpack. A peculiar numbness overcame him as he did so. It was as though his skin had grown thick.

With insensate fingers, he peeled off his butler's attire—hose, doublet, vest, tailored but still ill-fitting pants and shirt—and piled each article neatly on the bed. Next to them lay his leather armor, boots, weapons, and other traveling clothes. The two halves of his soul lay side by side on the bed: fine cloth on the one hand and worn leather on the other.

From now on, he vowed, he would wear only the leather, the clothes that fit the man.

He reached for his breeches, tunic, leather vest, and boots, and pulled each on in turn. After that he strapped on his armor. Each fastened buckle was a nail in the coffin of Mister Cale the butler. When he snapped on his weapons belt, he could not help but smile at the familiar, comfortable weight of steel on his hips. His coin purse, which was filled with the hundred or so platinum suns Tamlin had insisted he take as severance, he stuffed into an inner pocket of his vest.

Fully dressed and in his proper skin, Cale gathered up his cloak and backpack. He felt . . . true, for the first time in a long time. He would pick up the sphere from the parlor on his way out. Most of the staff would be involved with dinner preparations, so he would be able

to exit the manse without further ado or commotion. That was how he wanted it.

He took a last look around his quarters.

A tentative knock on his door turned him around.

He composed himself then said, "Come."

Thazienne pushed open the door. She wore an informal, sleeveless green dress and a soft frown. As always, she looked beautiful. Her skin shone in the light of the setting sun. Cale fought down the pangs of hurt and desire that he felt when he saw her.

She started to say something, but stopped when her gaze took in his weapons and attire, the cloak and backpack he held in his hand. Her frown deepened.

"You weren't going to say good-bye? To me?" Her voice was soft, diffident, the timid voice of the uncertain teenage girl she once had been.

He could not look her in the eyes. His hands fumbled absently with the straps of his pack.

"I hadn't decided yet," he said.

That was true. For two days he had vacillated between a need to see her one last time and a fear of what he might say if he did.

She looked at him sharply, and her voice changed into that of the confident woman she had become.

"You hadn't decided? What is that supposed to mean?"

He returned her sharp look and snapped, "It means I hadn't decided."

She took a step back, surprised by his harshness.

Hurt made Cale's words sound more callous than he intended.

"We said good-bye months ago, Thazienne. You did, at least."

He thought of the day she had returned to the manse with Steorf, the dolt whose bed Cale was certain she shared. His knuckles whitened around the straps of the backpack.

She understood what he meant. They knew each other too well for her not to know. A flash of red colored her face from chin to ear, though from shame or anger,

he could not tell. She spun as though to leave, but stopped herself, turned, and faced him.

She took a deep breath and said, "You were my friend, Erevis. My dear friend."

She could not have known that those words cut him more deeply than if she had said she hated him. Her friend? Only her friend? He swallowed the emotion that threatened to burst from him. He knew that he had misread her for years, that he had been a fool. He felt his own face color.

"Your friend." He spoke the words as though they were an expletive. "That's all?"

She started to reply but stumbled over her tongue.

Finally she said, "When I returned from abroad my mother . . . told me something."

She looked up at him and he could see tears pooling in her eyes.

His legs went wobbly. He held his breath.

"She said . . . that before you went to find the shadow demon . . ."

She trailed off and looked away, blinking. It took her a moment to recover.

"She said you left me a note."

His mouth went dry. He reached for his reading chair, to steady himself.

Shamur had found the note; Thazienne had never seen it.

He could not form words.

"She told me what it said."

He felt his whole body flush red. His eyes found the floor. For a fleeting, wonderful moment, he thought she might throw herself into his arms. She didn't.

"And?" he said.

She spoke softly, but Cale heard the firmness behind her tone. She had already had this discussion in her mind, tens of times probably.

"And? Gods, Erevis. What did you think would happen? We had a special relationship, but—Did you think I'd read that note and swoon? Did you expect me to fall into your arms at the power of your words? Did you—?"

"I don't know," he cut in. "I wanted you to know, that was all. Damn it!" He clenched his fist at his side. "What I *expected* was to die! Nine Hells, woman, I went after that thing because of what it did to you!"

The moment the words came out of his mouth, he regretted them. It shamed him to have stooped so low.

Her face reddened, and her forehead creased with anger. She strode forward into the room, right up to him, and looked into his face.

"How dare you even suggest that, Cale. Do you think I'm obligated to you for that somehow? You do, don't you?"

He didn't answer. Mostly, he thought the answer was "no." But at least some small part of him thought the answer was "yes." She saw the hesitation in his eyes and smacked him. Hard.

"I'm not a treasure to be won, you bastard." She put a finger on his chest. "Besides, you didn't go after that thing because of me. You went after it because it hurt *you*. Make no mistake about it. It may have hurt you by hurting me, but it was you—*you*—it hurt. Don't ennoble your motivations by cloaking your need for vengeance with . . ."

She stopped before saying "love," but Cale knew what she meant. The word hung between them, suspended in the silence, heavier than her perfume.

Cale did love her. He still loved her, despite it all. But now her presence only hurt him, and that hurt came out of him as anger, no matter how much he wished it didn't.

She went on, merciless, just as he had always told her to be: "You don't know what to do with yourself if you're not killing things, Cale. I know what you are. I heard how you fought that demon. How could you ever have thought—"

He didn't realize what he was doing until he had already grabbed her by the shoulders and started to fling her away. He stopped himself before throwing her to the ground.

Shocked, he looked at his hands as if they didn't

belong to him. She stared into his face, wide-eyed. He released her as though she were white-hot. His gaze found the floor, and tears formed in his eyes. He wanted to pull her to him and whisper an apology into her hair, but he felt paralyzed.

She had always brought out the best in him, and he had allowed her to see the worst. Shame and anger burned in him, shame that he had dared put his hands on her and anger at her words, which hit too close to his own thoughts. She thought he was a killer. She might as well have stabbed him in the gut and split him down the middle.

Silence sat heavy in the room for heartbeats that felt like hours. When at last he looked into her face again, the face of the woman he loved, he saw that it too was red with shame. She knew she had hurt him. Like him, she had done something she regretted. And both of them knew that what they had done and said could never be taken back.

“Leave, Tazi,” he said.

“I’m sorry, Erevis,”

She reached out a hand. He dared not take it.

“Me too,” he said. “Gods, me too. Now leave. Please.”

Tears welled in her eyes. She cradled her hands to her chest. He had to look away. He felt her eyes on him but neither said anything. After a few moments, she turned and hurried from the room. The slam of the door echoed in his brain. He realized then that the last touch they would share would be his hands on her in anger. In that instant, he hated himself.

After a time, he wiped the tears from his eyes and sagged onto the corner of the bed. Only then did he realize how badly he was shaking. He had killed men without allowing his heartbeat to accelerate, but arguing with Thazienne had left him a trembling idiot with no self-control.

An eternity later, a knock at his door brought him back to himself.

For a wonderful, hopeful moment, he thought it might be Thazienne returning. But he knew it could not

be—the knock was too forceful, too casual. He rose from the bed and composed himself. The knock repeated.

“Mister Cale?” Cora’s voice sounded from the hall.

“Yes, Cora. Come in.”

The young maid opened the door. Her eyes went wide when she saw his clothing and weapons. She had not been on staff when he had fought the demon in the great hall. She did not know that he was . . . what he was. He did not bother to explain.

She held in her hand a letter sealed with a dollop of dyed beeswax. She seemed to have forgotten her business.

“Cora, is that for me?” he asked, indicating the letter.

“Huh? Oh, yes. Yes, Mister Cale.” She approached him cautiously, as though he was a dangerous animal, and she held out the letter. “This arrived by messenger less than a quarter hour ago. Your door was closed so I—”

“That’s fine, Cora. Thank you for your consideration.” He took the letter and said, “That will be all.”

She fled the room without another word. Cale shut the door behind her, sat in his reading chair, and examined the letter. The wax was marked with the general seal of a licensed scribe-for-hire. He cracked it and unfolded the parchment. The letter contained only seven words:

Usual place. Tonight near midnight. Important. Riven.

Cale stared at the words without understanding their meaning. His exchange with Thazienne still preoccupied his mind. He replayed it again and again. His face still stung from where she had slapped him. His heart still stung from what he had done.

It took a few moments for the import of the letter to register.

Riven wanted a meet at the Black Stag. Why? Though the Zhents were in the midst of an internal religious war—Cale knew that the Scepters were pulling Zhent corpses from the bay almost daily; mostly

Cyricists—Riven had left the Network months before. He would not be involved in that. What then?

He shook his head. He could not reason clearly. His mind seemed unable to focus on anything but Thazi-
enne . . . the look of shock on her face when he had put his hands on her, the sound of her voice when she had called him a killer.

Tired to his bones, Cale refolded the letter and placed it in a pocket—a letter written by one killer to another. He looked around, at the door through which Tazi had exited his room, at the door through which she had exited his life.

There's nothing more for me here, he thought.

Whatever Riven wanted, there was only one way to find out. And it could not be worse than being in Storm-
weather Towers.

He threw on his cloak and walked out the door. At least he had somewhere to go.



CHAPTER 4

THE BLACK STAG

Cale exited Stormweather Towers through one of the manse's less-trafficked side doors. With the family at table and most of the staff occupied with dinner preparations, he managed to exit the house unseen by anyone. That was just as well. He had already said his good-byes.

He walked a flagstone path through one of the manse's many gardens to the small gatehouse in the wall facing Rauncel's Ride. The two house guards on duty there, Velorn and Del, seemed surprised to see him. He reassured them that all was well, explained that he wanted to leave quietly, and bade them farewell. They understood. They opened the narrow wrought iron gate and reminded him to keep his blade sharp—an old military farewell.

When he reached the street, he did not look back. He dared not. He feared he would lose his resolve.

A brisk spring breeze blew from the direction of Selgaunt Bay. Even at a distance, Cale could taste the subtle salt tang in the air. The sun had nearly set and the city's linkboys had already done their work. Rauncel's Ride glowed orange in the light of the tall, charcoal-burning street torches. Carriages and pedestrians peppered the street, going about their evening business. No one paid him any heed, just another evening traveler about his affairs. He fell into step among them and wandered the streets until well into the night. Only after he had walked for hours did he realize that he had forgotten to take the sphere from the parlor. Dark! His parting with Thazienne had left him distracted.

He told himself that it didn't matter. He didn't need a token to remind him of Thamalon. He would always remember the Old Owl.

From Temple Avenue, the bells of the House of Song and the gongs of the Palace of Holy Festivals sounded eleven bells. Time to move. He headed south for the Stag.

Fewer and fewer torches lit the streets as Cale moved into the rental warehouse district. There, adventurers, cutthroats, and seedy merchants ruled the packed-earth avenues. Prostitutes stood on corners, opportunistic muggers and pickpockets lingered at alley mouths, and purveyors of drugs went quietly about their illicit business. As much coin moved through Selgaunt's underground economy as through the coffers of the legitimate trading costers, and everyone knew it. The late Hulorn and his Scepters had made no effort to stop the trade in drugs and flesh so long as the associated violence was kept largely out of sight. In Sembia, the economy of vice was respected nearly as much as trade in Chultan spices. *Business is business* was the canon of the Selgauntan trader, whether pimp or coppersmith.

Passersby traveled in the safety of pairs and trios.

Hired muscle sometimes accompanied the wealthy. The poor traveled without bodyguards but had little worth stealing. Out of professional habit, Cale kept an alert eye on everything and everyone around him, though not out of fear. He was not the prey, but the predator. The thieves and pimps must have recognized that, because none challenged him, and few held his gaze for long.

Ahead, he saw the Stag, a ramshackle two-story building at the corner of two narrow avenues. The wooden structure leaned noticeably, as though itself as drunk as its patrons. The open shutters, their black paint long since flaked away to near nothingness, hung crookedly from the window frames. Smoke, laughter and a fairly steady stream of profanity boiled out of the windows and into the spring air.

On the street outside the Stag, a thin stream of traffic filed past: carts, horses, carriages, pedestrians. Cale lingered for a time in the darkness of an unoccupied alley, observing. Though he felt a strange connection to Riven—perhaps only empathy for another of Mask's pawns—he was not foolish enough to trust the assassin fully. Riven could have decided to try an ambush for his own reasons. After waiting for a time, Cale saw nothing that gave him cause for alarm. He exited the alley and walked for the Stag's front door.

He pushed it open and stepped inside. As usual, the Stag stank of sweat, smoke, and stale vomit. Blueleaf, an herbal incense, burned in a tin dish behind the bar but did little to obviate the smell. The haze of smoke hovering near the ceiling stung his eyes.

A crowd thronged the Stag, as thick as the dock market at noon—typical for the time of year. Adventurers of every stripe streamed into Sembia in the early spring, all of them looking to make quick coin, convinced that riches lay in their future. Most ended up taking work as mere caravan guards, just to keep enough ravens in their pockets to buy a few days of food and lodging. But Tymora always smiled on a lucky few. Those managed to make a fortune and a name. Bards

later sang ballads of their victories, and more and more returned each spring, certain they would find similar success.

The Heartlands suffered no shortage of fools, Cale thought.

While he stood in the Stag's doorway, appraising eyes took him in, apparently saw nothing of interest, and looked away. Conversation hummed.

The Stag's owner coated the planked floor in wood chips to ease the clean-up of the inevitable blood and puke that accompanied the influx of adventurers. The serving girls hired on for the season weaved through the crowd with tankards and platters held high.

Cale pushed his way in and scanned the tables for Riven. Because Cale stood a head taller than most of the patrons, he spotted the assassin at once. Riven sat alone at a small table in a dark corner near the bar. As usual, Riven wore his scarlet cloak, his twin sabers, and an unhappy scowl. Though the Stag was overflowing with sellswords, no one lingered within arms' reach of Riven. Even adventurers, an imprudent lot in general, could see the promise of violence in Riven's one good eye.

The assassin noticed Cale too. He raised his tankard to draw Cale's attention. Cale nodded and began to pick his way through the crowd.

A man stepped from the crowd to Cale's right and bumped him—hard. In one motion, Cale's hand first found his coin purse—he still had it—then moved for his blade. He stopped himself just before he reached the hilt.

“Mind your manners, dolt,” said the man.

The half-elf—the half-*drow*, Cale corrected himself, to judge from the long pale hair, narrow cheeks, and dusky complexion—had an unusual accent that Cale could not quite place. The fool stared a challenge into Cale's face. Though dressed in the expensive silk finery of a noble fop, the half-*drow*'s features had a hardness Cale did not miss. His reckless smile and mismatched eyes, one the palest blue, one a deep brown or black,

gave him an unbalanced look. His slim hands hovered near the steel that hung from his belt. Cale took in the hilt with a glance: well worn from much use.

Ordinarily, Cale would have ignored a fool like that, but his parting with Thazienne had left him in a foul mood. He grabbed two fistfuls of silk shirt, lifted the half-drow off his feet, and pulled him nose to nose. A few faces turned their way, but only a few. The Stag's patrons saw fights and violence most every night. A confrontation didn't get interesting until steel was drawn.

"And you mind your tongue, *irinal*," Cale spat into the half-drow's face.

He'd deliberately chosen to insult the half-drow with a word that surface elves used to refer to the drow. It meant "forsaken," and the drow were notorious for their dislike of the term.

Surprisingly though, the half-drow showed no anger. His expression didn't even indicate that he understood the word. Instead, he stared Cale in the face with crazed eyes, smiling hard. His hand moved to his sword hilt but he did not attempt to draw.

"If that blade comes a fingerwidth out of its scabbard, I'll split you right here," Cale promised.

The half-drow held his smile and said, "If you've ripped my shirt, I'll have first your tongue, then your heart."

Cale's knuckles whitened, and for an instant he considered tearing the half-drow's shirt intentionally, but thought better of it. The fool was likely just an adventurer with too much bravado and too little sense. Cale had seen his type before. Hells, Cale had killed his type before. But that night, he would let it pass. He had business with Riven.

"I don't have time to waste with you, *irinal*," said Cale. "Consider yourself fortunate."

He tossed the half-drow aside.

To his credit, the half-drow showed some agility by managing to keep his feet and avoid bumping other patrons. He did not look up at Cale, but examined his shirt with exaggerated care.

Cale put the incident out of his mind and began walking toward Riven's table.

Before he had taken five strides, above the thrum of the crowd he heard the half-drow call after him, "It's not ripped after all. Wrinkled though. Consider *yourself* fortunate . . . Cale."

That stopped Cale cold. He spun around—
—and somehow the half-drow had vanished into the Stag's crowd. Cale went after him a few steps, pushing a few patrons out of his way while scanning the crowd. He did not see the half-drow.

The hairs on the nape of Cale's neck rose. How had he vanished so quickly? More importantly, how did he know Cale's name? Cale was certain he'd never seen the man before. He would have remembered a half-drow. And he had been careful to keep a low profile in Selgaunt's underworld. The last thing he wanted was a reputation. One of Riven's men, maybe?

Maybe. He turned and headed for Riven's table.

The assassin greeted him with his signature sneer. To Cale's surprise, he saw that Riven wore a featureless black disc, perhaps of carved onyx, on a silver chain around his neck. A holy symbol of Mask? That tangible evidence of Riven's and Cale's service to the same god made Cale feel soiled.

Riven noticed Cale's gaze and his sneer deepened. He held the disk from his neck for Cale to see.

"Maybe it's exactly what you think, Cale. That make you uncomfortable?"

Cale stared in Riven's good eye and said, "No, but I'll wager it makes *you* uncomfortable." He pulled out a chair and sat. "I guess even Mask has lepers among the faithful."

Riven grunted an insincere laugh, took a pull on his tankard, and nodded at a spot behind Cale.

"I saw that bit with the half-elf," he said. "You stooping to picking fights with the itchies now?"

Professional assassins often referred to adventurers as "itchies"—as in, itching to prove themselves, itching for a fight.

Cale knew then that the half-drow was not one of Riven's men. That alarmed him.

"He's not one of yours."

Riven scoffed. He'd interpreted Cale's observation as a question.

"Are you jesting?" Riven said. "A little drip of piss like that? I'd as soon work with your boy Fleet."

He took another quaff of his beer.

Cale ignored Riven's barb at the halfling. Jak had once stabbed Riven in the back and the assassin had never forgotten—or forgiven.

Cale's mind turned to the half-drow. Who was he? If he was not one of Riven's, then for whom did he work? An uneasy feeling took root in his gut. His instincts told him to heed it. He resolved to hear Riven out, tell him to bugger off, and get the Hells out of the Stag as quickly as possible.

Riven eyed Cale over the rim of his tankard. Cale stared back. The silence stretched.

Riven lost patience first. "Well? I don't have time for more cryptic nonsense. What have you got? Your note was as clear as fog."

Cale's breath caught.

"My note?" he said. "You sent *me* a note."

They stared at each other for only a heartbeat.

"Dark!" Cale breathed.

"Damn!"

Both jumped to their feet, toppling their chairs in the process, and looked for the nearest exit. There! A large, open window.

Riven was off like a bowshot, dancing nimbly between the patrons. Cale, trailing a step or two behind and much larger than the assassin, had to shove his way through. He had no idea what was coming, but he knew it would be bad.

"Get out! he shouted to the patrons as he ran. "Everybody out now!"

Eyes looked his way, questioning glances and furrowed brows, but no one paid his words any heed.

Riven hopped atop a table, scattering plates and

startling the two mercenaries seated there. He dived through the window as the sellswords jumped to their feet and went for their steel. Before they could draw fully, Cale shouldered one to the ground and drove the other back with a punch in the chest.

“Get out!” he shouted at them.

He jumped atop the table and grabbed the window jambs. From out of the corner of his eye, he saw a tiny orange sphere streak through an open window on the wall kitty corner. He knew it for what it was.

He cursed and launched himself through the window as the pea-sized ball slammed into one of the Stag’s crossbeams. It exploded into a hell of fire and heat. Screams erupted, but only for an instant before being cut off by the dull roar of the explosion. The pressure of the blast and the superheated air blew Cale through the window and sent him flying. He hit the ground with a grunt a full dagger toss away from the Stag, in the middle of the street.

It took him a moment to recover his wits. When he did, he rolled over onto his back and stared up into the night sky, breathing heavily. His pants below his knees smoldered and the fire had scorched his boots, but otherwise he was largely unburned. He patted at his trousers dazedly and slowly rose to his knees. His eyes went to the Stag.

Fire engulfed the first floor, and thick black smoke gushed from the windows of the second. The street was alight in orange. Waves of heat blew from the blaze, so intense they stung Cale’s face. The Stag had gone up like kindling—wood walls, wood tables, wood chips . . . and human flesh.

Cale had expected to see a flood of flaming people, screaming in agony and streaming from the doors and windows. He would have healed those whom he could have, but no one came out. The smoke and fire had done its work almost instantly. The only sound was the hungry crackling of the flames. The Stag had been reduced to an inferno in a matter of moments. So too the people inside. Dozens of them. A few charred corpses that the

explosion had blown clear of the building lay smoldering in the street. He didn't see Riven.

The second floor of the Stag began to give way. Timbers cracked, the sound like bones snapping. Great showers of sparks rose into the night as the building shifted.

Without warning, another orange sphere streaked from somewhere to his left, flew into the Stag, and exploded with a roar. Flames blew from every window in long streamers, as though the building was spitting fire. The upper floor, already weakened, collapsed with a crash into the first. Flames and sparks roared into the sky like a swarm of fireflies.

Cale traced the path of the second fireball back to two men standing in the shadows of an alley a block and a half up the street. In one of the men Cale recognized the slim build and finery of the half-drow who had bumped him on his way into the Stag, the half-drow who had known his name. The other, a tall, dark man with his brown hair cropped close to his scalp, wore a dark cloak. Oddly, the darkness of the alley seemed to cling to him. Streams of shadow swirled around him like smoke swirled around the burning Stag. Cale figured him to be the mage responsible for the fireballs. Neither of the two appeared to have spotted Cale. He had been blown too far from the building.

Moving quickly but keeping low, Cale crawled the rest of the way across the street and sunk into the darkness near a closed chandler's shop. He drew his long sword and started to move in the direction of the half-drow and mage.

They had lured him and Riven there with forged notes to assassinate them. That they had used a spell in a public place and not steel in an alley suggested that they were not professionals. But why? Cale had never seen them before.

Riven then. What had the one-eyed assassin drawn him into?

To find out, he decided he would kill the wizard

quickly, then question the half-drow. He would find out later if Riven had survived the inferno.

Before he had cleared the chandler's shop, a hand reached from the darkness of the doorjamb, closed on his shoulder, and pulled him close—Riven

Out of instinct, Cale grabbed a handful of Riven's shirt and thumped him hard against the shop's door. Riven's sabers pressed into Cale's chest. Cale's long sword found Riven's jawline. They exchanged glares for a few heartbeats while the Stag burned behind them.

From behind the door, a man's voice sounded, tentatively, "Go away. I want no trouble here."

"Stay inside and you'll have none," Cale hissed.

The chandler said nothing more. Cale stared into Riven's face. The assassin had discarded his scarlet cloak and had a hard look in his eye.

"What in the Nine Hells are you into, Cale?"

Despite his desire to open Riven's throat, Cale heard the sincerity in the assassin's voice. He calmed himself and lowered his blade.

"I'm not into anything, Riven. You're not either, it seems." He released his grip on Riven's shirt, turned his back to the assassin, and pointed down the block to the half-drow and his comrade. "There."

Riven stared for a time, straining to see them in the light cast by the fire.

"The short one is that half-elf prig who bumped you," said Riven.

Cale nodded. "And the other is the wizard who torched the Stag—who tried to torch us." He turned to face Riven. "I've never seen either of them prior to tonight. You?"

Riven shook his head, but didn't look sure.

Cale went on, "This was a hit. On you, on me, maybe both of us. The half-drow walked out as I walked in, probably to signal the wizard that we were inside." Cale indicated the burning Stag. "Then that."

Riven shook his head and spat. "Friggin' amateurs. Steel, speed, and stealth for a hit. Never spells. And

sure as Hells never fire. How can you confirm a kill with a burned body?"

Cale made no comment. He knew well the assassin's code, but he also knew well the efficacy of spells for either combat or assassination. Since Riven had not learned that lesson, perhaps he wore the symbol of Mask but could not cast spells. Somehow, that thought gave Cale comfort.

Riven started to head up the street.

"Let's go," the assassin said. "I'll take the wizard. Alive, if possible. If not. . ."

"Then not," Cale said. "I've got the half-drow. We'll take him alive."

Using the shadows and keeping low, both moved forward. As they did, Cale spared a glance behind them.

Spectators had already begun to gather around the burning inn. Passing carts and pedestrians stopped to stare. A few shopkeepers along the street had emerged from the rooms above their shops to watch the blaze from second story balconies. Soon the Scepters and dutypriests would arrive to contain the blaze. That would leave Cale and Riven only a little time to put down the wizard and capture the half-drow before the street would be too crowded.

For the moment, the half-drow and wizard seemed content to observe their work from the shadows of the alley. Cale figured they were watching to see if either he or Riven had survived the blast. They would know that soon enough.

"Wizard's got a spell on him," Cale said softly. "See the way the shadows swirl around him?"

"I see it." Riven reached behind his back and pulled out a pair of throwing daggers. "I recognize him too, now that I see him more closely. Vraggen's his name—a shadow adept in the Network. I heard he was dead."

A shadow adept. Cale had heard of such mages. They seemed more common since the return of the city of Shade.

"Why would the Network want to hit us?" Cale asked.

“They wouldn’t. Vraggen’s a Cyricist.”

Cale nodded. The Banites were driving the Cyricists out of the Zhentarim. Vraggen must have gone rogue, though that still didn’t explain why he had targeted Riven and Cale.

“Payback for Gauston?” asked Cale.

Perhaps Cyric had sent his followers to put down Riven and Cale in the same way that Mask had used Riven and Cale to put down a Cyricist priest several months before.

Riven shrugged and said, “Maybe.” He stared up the street. “No way to get all the way up before they see us. We open with missiles, then finish it in close.”

“Good.”

Cale had a pair of throwing daggers, but also had a spell he thought would work better. He pulled forth his holy symbol.

Moving more slowly, and using as cover building eaves, barrels, posts, and the flickering shadows cast by the fire, they continued to close. Gawkers jogged past them, shouting and pointing. No one spotted them. They kept their eyes on their targets.

When they got to within a long toss of Riven’s daggers, Cale signaled a halt. Any closer and they’d risk being seen. Both scooted in behind some water barrels. Cale’s keen ears caught the tail end of a heated exchange between the half-drow and Vraggen.

“. . . was reckless!” said the wizard. “I told you not to underestimate those two.”

The half-drow waved a green-gloved hand dismissively and said, “I wanted to see his face and hear his voice. He suspected nothing. Nor did Riven.”

“It was foolish and unnecessary.”

The half-drow chuckled—a menacing sound with no mirth in it—and pointed a finger at the wizard’s chest.

“I’ll not argue with *this*, Vraggen. If you want to have a discussion with me, you come and look me in the eyes yourself.”

Cale didn’t know what that last meant, but he had confirmation that both he and Riven had been the target of the fireball.

“One may have escaped,” continued Vraggen.

“Perhaps,” acknowledged the half-drow with an enigmatic smile. “Watch, and we’ll soon know.”

That ended their discussion. They turned and watched the street near the Stag. Firelight lit their faces. Cale saw that the wizard wore a brass cloak pin in the shape of a jawless skull within a sunburst—the symbol of Cyric.

“See the pin?” Cale asked softly.

Riven spat. He saw it.

“Ready?” the assassin whispered.

“Ready.”

Cale began his prayer to Mask. Riven stood to throw. The moment he rose, the half-drow looked directly at them and grinned. His expression showed no surprise. He had known the whole time, Cale realized.

Riven didn’t notice, or didn’t care. He threw anyway, one dagger, another, then leaped over the barrels and charged for the wizard.

Riven’s first dagger pierced the wizard’s throat, his second the wizard’s chest, but both passed through him as though he was a ghost. The blades stuck in the wall of the building behind, quivering from the force of the throws. The wizard, or the image of the wizard, stared contemptuously at the onrushing assassin and began to cast.

In the midst of his prayer, Cale felt an itch behind his eyes, a splinter in his mind. He blinked and shook his head.

What the—?

A voice sounded in his brain. He recognized it immediately as that of the half-drow.

This is bigger than you, Cale. I’d stay incidental if I were you.

He saw the half-drow watching him, a feral grin on his face, a blade in his hand.

Cale gritted his teeth. Despite the uncomfortable feeling occasioned by the half-drow’s presence in his head, he maintained his concentration and completed his spell. He mentally selected a location just behind

the half-drow. There, a glowing long sword of magical force took shape and hovered in the air, poised to strike. At Cale's mental command, the blade slashed crosswise at the unsuspecting half-drow as though wielded by an invisible warrior. The blade sheared through the half-drow's silken pants, cut deep into his thigh, and erased his self-satisfied grin. Blood peppered the alley.

Uttering a surprised gasp of pain, the half-drow clutched at his slashed thigh and staggered. The magical blade continued to attack without Cale's further mental command, following up with another slash. Despite his wound, the half-drow whirled and managed to avoid a second blow. It took him only an instant to recover himself and parry the magical blade's next slash. The voice in Cale's head burned with genuine vitriol, though the subject matter was absurd.

These were new pants, Cale! For that, I'll tear off your head and eat it raw.

Cale put the threat out of his mind, stuffed his holy symbol into his vest, and ran for the half-drow. Between his own bladework and the summoned sword, he figured to make short work of the white-haired swordsman.

The mage, paying no heed to either the wounded half-drow or the darting blade of force, completed his spell well before Riven could reach him.

He waved his hand and a field of dark energy formed around the assassin, crackling. It stopped his charge cold, and . . .

Cale could scarcely believe his eyes. He faltered in his own charge. Riven's shadow, cast on the road before him by the light of the fire behind, rose up from the ground and tackled the assassin. Too late Riven whirled to avoid its grasp. Man and shadow went down in a heap, a tangle of limbs, blades, and swirling darkness. Though prone and scrambling, Riven lashed out with his sabers and tried to regain his feet, but the animated shadow, a featureless black copy of the assassin, anticipated every move and blanketed him like a dark cloud.

Cale shook off his surprise and ran forward to help, but before he could close, the shadow expanded and engulfed the assassin in an ocean of pitch. From within the darkness, Cale heard Riven shout faintly, as though from a great distance, but he could not make out the words. The darkness imploded. A soft *pop* sounded, and the road was bare. Riven was gone.

“Dark,” Cale murmured.

He couldn’t help it. He had never seen a spell like that before. Never even heard of one.

The wizard began to cast anew.

With Riven gone and the wizard free to cast, Cale changed plans. The wizard—or the *image* of the wizard, he thought, recalling the half-drow’s words and the ineffectiveness of Riven’s daggers—seemed immune to weapons, perhaps even to Cale’s enchanted blade. And the half-drow, though engaged in a vicious, whirling duel with Cale’s magically summoned sword, was clearly more than he seemed. Gods knew what else he could do in addition to telepathy.

Cale knew he had to get out of there.

With a mental command, he switched the target of his summoned blade from the half-drow to the wizard, hoping against hope that it might somehow affect the image and disrupt the mage’s spellcasting. Cale turned and darted to his right, heading for the nearest alley.

The half-drow responded instantly. Free from attack by Cale’s summoned sword, he limped after as quickly as his wounded thigh allowed. The wizard ignored the attacking sword. To Cale’s frustration, even the blade of force passed harmlessly through the image of the mage, just as had Riven’s daggers.

The alley was three strides away.

Before Cale reached it, the wizard completed another spell. A narrow beam of black energy streaked from the mage’s extended finger and caught Cale in the ribs.

He felt as though he had been dumped into ice water. His breath left him, his body went cold, and he stumbled. His senses went dull. Several spells he had

prepared vanished from his consciousness. Only adrenaline allowed him to keep his feet and remain moving.

From behind, he could hear the half-drow limping toward him, maybe ten or so paces away. Cale glanced back to see the half-drow gaining speed with every step, as though the wound bothered him less and less. Cale groaned and staggered for the darkness of the alley.

Running? The half-drow's mental voice mocked. *Are you frightened now, little man?*

The alley stank of urine. Barrels and trash lay scattered in his way. Breathing heavily, Cale stumbled down the narrow alley a few steps, nearly fell, and caught himself against the right hand wall. Far enough, he deemed. Before the half-drow reached the alley, he fumbled out his holy symbol and whispered a prayer to Mask.

Magical darkness took shape around him, filling the alley almost to its mouth. To Cale, objects within the darkness looked gray and colorless, but otherwise appeared as they would in twilight. To everyone else, within or without the spell's area, the darkness was impenetrable. The half-drow would be blind if he entered the globe.

Cale leaned against the wall and tried to quiet his breathing and recover his strength. He wiped his hands on his pants to get rid of the sweat and awaited the half-drow. He didn't have to wait long.

Limping only slightly, the half-drow came into view. His leg had ceased bleeding. He stopped at the edge of Cale's magical darkness, frowning thoughtfully. He peered within the globe. Cale was again struck by the mismatched eyes and the precision with which he moved. Cale had heard drow were enemies to be respected, and he believed it.

I've got my own darkness to visit on you, Cale. The half-drow looked back in the direction of the wizard. *But not now.*

Cale quietly withdrew a throwing dagger and considered whether or not to throw. No. If he did, they

would know he had not fled. He sheathed the blade.

The half-drow stared at Cale, as though he could see through the darkness. Who in the Hells was this man?

Questions, questions, the half-drow's mental voice mocked. *I'll consider giving you answers as I chew out your kidneys.*

The hairs on the nape of Cale's neck stood on edge. Could the half-drow read his mind?

The half-drow called back over his shoulder, "Vraggen, dispel this darkness. Cale and I need to talk in a more intimate way."

Cale heard the sound of casting from the road and his heart began to race. He wanted to run but knew he would only further exhaust himself. He would have to face the half-drow and wizard there, and he'd have to face them alone.

Whispering, he incanted a spell that would give him Mask's blessing in combat. Casting it brought him comfort. It reminded him that he wasn't alone.

He decided then to do what he had never before done—request something from Mask other than spells. He suspected that the half-drow would 'hear' his prayer, but he prayed nevertheless, prayed that Mask himself would bolster Cale's spell and resist Vraggen's attempt to dispel it.

The sound of Vraggen's casting ceased.

And nothing happened! The darkness remained. Cale gripped his holy symbol so tightly it made his fingers cramp. Mentally, he thanked the Lord of Shadows.

Now come down here and let's get intimate, he thought, for the half-drow's benefit.

The half-drow scowled and mumbled something unintelligible. Cale expected the wizard to appear presently, but he did not. Strange. Cale used the opportunity to cast another spell, a protective dweomer that would make him undetectable to divinations and hopefully keep the half-drow out of his head.

Passersby began to stream past the alley, followed by occasional troops of Scepters. The half-drow tried to look nonchalant as they passed, but the traffic was

thickening. More and more people streamed past. Cale had never before been so happy to see the city's watchmen.

After a few more moments, the half-drow gestured at his pants, shot a hate-filled stare down the alley, and walked out of view. Cale didn't need to have a voice in his head to read that look.

This isn't over, it had said. Cale agreed.

He slid his sword back into his scabbard and incanted a healing spell. The energy warmed him, but otherwise did little to obviate the dullness he still felt from the wizard's spell. Time would have to heal that. He wondered again why the wizard had not pursued him. Perhaps the spell that had projected the image of the wizard could not move far from the location in which the spell had been cast? Perhaps.

He gave himself a few more moments to recover.

From down the street, he heard the calls and shouts of the men and women who were struggling to contain the fire at the Stag. Wanting to avoid the street traffic, he turned and scaled the rough wall behind him. When he reached the roof, two stories up, he mentally dispelled the globe of darkness in the alley below. No one had seemed to notice it, but if he left it there too long, someone surely would.

Staying low on his belly, he slid forward to the roof's edge and scanned the street below. No sign of the half-drow or wizard. Up the block, smoke choked the air, and a full crowd milled in a semicircle around the Stag. He surveyed the crowd carefully but saw no sign of the half-drow or the wizard there either. They were gone. For now.

The Scepters, holding their glaives crosswise, had formed up a line to keep the crowd at bay. Priests of Milil, dressed in flowing burgundy robes, summoned water into the air above the fire and let it cascade down into the flames, all the while singing a soft dirge. Each such spell resulted in a hissing cloud of steam and smoke. Gondar priests in scale mail, obviously protected by fire wards, actually walked unharmed in the

midst of the flames. Mindful of the smoke, which could still kill, they pulled bodies from the cinders and laid them in a neat row in the street. As Cale had feared, there appeared to have been no survivors.

The fire at the Stag had not spread to other buildings and seemed under control. The priests did their work well. Cale couldn't linger overlong. Given the number of deaths, he knew there would be an investigation. He did not want to get caught up in that.

He crouched on the roof and considered the night's events. The wizard was a rogue Zhent, but why target him and Riven? Riven was out of the Zhents and Cale had never been a member. In fact, Cale had not had any interaction with Riven since the events with Gauston. While it could have been vengeance for that, Cale doubted it. Gauston had been mad—even the Cyricists probably were pleased to be rid of him.

Why take the trouble to lure him there?

The answer came immediately and brought him up short—to get him out of Stormweather Towers. They had sent him a letter there to get him to leave. Getting him out of the manse, away from the Uskevren, had been the real goal. Why? Were they acting as agents of a rival family? They had known his name and his affiliation with Riven. That meant that they knew what he was and what he could do. No wonder they wanted him out of Stormweather.

They've got another team infiltrating the manse, he realized. Dark and empty!

He prepared to drop to the street, but before he did, doubt chinked the armor of his certainty.

If who or what they wanted was in Stormweather Towers, why involve Riven at all?

He shook his head. He couldn't see it, but he needed to get back to Stormweather.

With his mind made up, he hung from the roof's edge and dropped to the street. In his immediate vicinity the avenue was deserted. Everyone was up the block watching the fire. Cale turned and headed west at a run.

From behind, he heard a soft *pop* followed by a low groan. He turned around.

Riven lay sprawled in the street, flat on his back, loosely clutching a saber in each hand. Cale hesitated. He felt no particular sympathy for Riven and he needed to get back to Stormweather Towers, but finally he hurried to Riven's side. The assassin's good eye was open but obviously unseeing. His breath came rapidly, and his skin had gone gray.

"Riven?" Cale nudged him unsympathetically with his foot. "Riven!"

No response.

Cale kneeled at his side, took out his holy symbol, and whispered the words to a healing spell. The moment the energy flowed into Riven, he gave a sharp gasp and sat up straight. Before Cale could pull away, Riven snarled and grabbed him by the wrist with one hand. His eyes were wild, his face contorted with rage and fear.

"Not anymore! I'll kill you—"

Cale grabbed Riven's forearm to keep him from inadvertently stabbing with his steel.

"Riven!" Cale repeated. "Riven!"

The assassin's gaze cleared. He stopped struggling and looked around, dazed.

"Cale? Where are they?"

"They're gone. I didn't get either of them." He looked up the street to the fire. "We need to move. Scepters are all over."

Though it took a conscious effort of will, he helped the assassin to his feet. He gazed into Riven's eye, the eye in which he had just seen fear for the first time.

"What in the Hells happened to you?" asked Cale.

The assassin stood on wobbly legs. His eye grew distant.

"I'm not sure," he said. "The spell . . . took me somewhere . . . else. Somewhere dark. I—"

He seemed suddenly to realize what he was saying, and how he must look. He shook his head, pushed Cale's helping hand roughly away and recovered at least a semblance of his sneer.

“It doesn’t matter what happened,” Riven said. “We didn’t get them, but they didn’t get us. They’re going to wish they had.”

That sounded like Riven. Cale gave him a nod.

“I need to get back to Stormweather Towers. Where are you staying?” said Cale. “Never mind, I’ll find you later. In the meantime, see what you can find out. We know he was a Cyricist.”

“Whoresons are everywhere. When do we meet?”

“I said I’ll find you,” Cale replied, and he sped off down the street.



CHAPTER 5

TO GUARD THE GUARDIANS

From Sarn Street, nothing appeared amiss at Stormweather Towers but that did not put Cale at ease. He sprinted up the slate-paved walkway to the main gate, breathing heavily and sweating. He held his blade bare. He must have looked a madman attempting to overthrow the House with only a single sword.

Two Uskevren guards, both young and unfamiliar to Cale, stepped briskly from the stone gatehouse, mail chinking, blades drawn, and shields ready. Two older guards followed hard after and took positions out wide, cocked crossbows leveled at Cale's chest. The oldest of the four, a paunchy, middle-aged warrior with a short black beard and mustache, gestured with his crossbow.

"Scabbard that weapon and cease your advance. Now!"

Cale stopped ten paces from the guards but did not sheathe his blade. In the dim light of the gatehouse torches, it took him a moment to place the speaker—Almor, one of the sergeants of the house guard. The old warrior had been with the family since the Year of the Wyvern.

“I said *scabbard that weapon*,” Almor said again, and Cale could hear the threat in his voice.

Cale had caught his breath. Being near Stormweather, he automatically fell back into his role as House Uskevren’s chief steward.

“I trust you do not greet all of our visitors who arrive after sunset with bared steel and challenges, Almor.”

Almor slid sideways and grabbed a torch from the sconce on the gatehouse wall. He stepped forward, holding the brand before him and squinting. His crossbow, held steady in one hand, still marked Cale’s chest.

“Step into the light.”

Cale stepped a few paces nearer.

“Mister Cale?” asked Almor. “Is that you?”

“It is.”

“By Tempus, man, what happened to you? You’re all covered in soot. Lower your weapons,” he ordered over his shoulder, and the other guards did. Almor looked back at Cale. “What’s going on here, Mister Cale?”

Almor always called him “Mister Cale,” though Cale had told him long before to drop the “Mister.”

“I’ll provide the details later, Almor. For now, find Orrin and organize some search teams. We may have intruders in the house.”

Almor’s mustache twitched and he said, “Intruders? Mister Cale, I assure you no one has passed this post and I’ve heard no alarm.”

“The manse has many gates, Almor, and these intruders wield powerful magic.” While Cale knew the wards on the manse proper prevented anyone from teleporting directly inside, an intruder could nevertheless transport himself onto the surrounding grounds and steal into the house from there. “Search

the house first, then the grounds. Go in the main door in front. Gather the guards there. Check on the lady, Lord Tamlin, and Mistress Thazienne first. Leave men with each. Clear the second floor. Shout if you notice anything suspicious. Anything. Do you understand?"

Almor nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

"You and you," Cale said, pointing at the two young men. "You're with me. We'll start on the first floor, beginning at the rear of the house, and gather men as we go. Go, Almor."

Without another word, Almor and the other guard turned and ran for the main door of the manse as fast as their armor allowed.

Cale looked at the two men with him and said, "Stay close to me and do what I say."

They nodded, and one of them said, "Word was you'd left, Mister Cale. I'm glad to see it's not so."

Cale didn't take the time to correct the guard's misperception. He was back, but only temporarily.

He sprinted for the house. Burdened with their mail, the guardsmen struggled to keep up. The gardens were empty, the shrubs and dwarf trees ghostly in the darkness. Cale stopped.

"Where are the grounds patrols?"

The young guardsmen shared a confused look, and one of them said, "I don't know, sir."

Could all of them have been put down? Cale wondered. Probably not. After all, the Uskevren estate covered a lot of ground. Unless there was a special event or some reason for alarm, only twenty-five or so guards were on duty at any given time. Possibly, there were just no guards in the immediate vicinity. It was dark and Cale couldn't see far. He hoped that was the explanation.

"You," he said to one of the guards. "See if you can find any of the grounds patrols. Alert them to what's happening and get them into the house."

Cale wanted to ensure the safety of the family foremost. The man looked unsure.

“What’s happening, sir?” the guard asked.

“I’m not entirely sure. But be careful. I mean that. You call out if you see or hear anything. Do not try to deal with it alone.”

The man nodded, turned, and sped off back through the gardens.

“Let’s go,” Cale said to the other.

They entered the house via a back entrance near the kitchens. Embers from the supper fires still smoldered in the three great hearths. Besides that soft glow, the kitchen stood dark and empty. Brilla and the kitchen girls were probably already asleep in the servants’ quarters near the stables.

Heading for the door that led into the main hallway, Cale moved past the preparation tables, the butcher’s block, and several stools.

“Stay close,” he said over his shoulder to the guard.

The young man nodded, tightening his grip on his long sword. The clink of the guard’s mail and the thump of his hobnailed boots on the wood floor sounded an alarm to Cale’s ears. He should have come alone. Nothing for it now, though.

Without warning, the kitchen door flew open. The guard behind Cale gave a start and stumbled backward over a stool. Cale dropped into a crouch, blade ready. The dim light from the hallway beyond illuminated an armored figure with his blade held high to strike. Cale recognized him immediately—Almor.

“Almor!” Cale said in a sharp whisper. “It’s us.”

“Mister Cale?” Almor hissed, and lowered his blade a bit.

“Where are the other guards, man? Godsdamnit, I told you to gather your men.”

Almor stepped through the doorway and spoke in a whisper, “I sent the guards stationed at the main door upstairs to check on Lord Tamlin and Lady Shamur. When I went to pick up the guards at the garden door, I thought I heard someone in the parlor. No one should be there, Mister Cale. I was on my way to check on it when I heard this one—” he nodded at the young

guard—"clattering around in here like a drunk cooking maid. I thought you were more of them and figured I'd better do something."

The young guard mumbled something and looked sheepish. Cale thumped Almor on his shoulder.

"You did well, Almor. Now keep quiet and follow me."

Only a single oil lamp on a side table illuminated the hallway beyond the kitchen. The parlor was just down the hall. From there, Cale's keen ears caught a faint scuffling, like a boot dragged over the hardwood.

Blade held before him, Cale stalked down the corridor. When he reached the parlor, he peeked around the doorjamb and spotted two figures standing near one of the bookcases across the room. Both had their backs to him. In the darkness, he could discern no features, but the light from the hall glinted on steel.

Cale charged, shouting as he ran, "Almor, here!"

His call startled the intruders. They whirled around and Cale saw them more clearly—

They wore the blue and silver livery of House Uskevren.

Even as the implications of that realization began to register, Cale tripped over something meaty in the middle of the floor. He caught himself on a reading desk before he fell but. . . .

Corpses. Three of them, all Uskevren guards with their livery stained dark. Cale looked at their faces—

This was impossible!

Almor was among the dead, his throat slit wide, his lips pulled back from his teeth in a grimace.

Then the other Almor . . . ?

An imitator, Cale realized, disguised by magic.

Thinking quickly, Cale hurdled a desk to his left and put it between him and the two intruders, just as Almor—or the Almor double, rather—entered the room behind him. The imitator had disarmed the young guard and held a blade at the lad's throat.

"Say nothing and I won't open a new mouth in his throat."

The double still spoke with Almor's voice. Cale

marveled at the accuracy of the disguise spell.

The young guard, Cale didn't even know his name, squirmed a bit and said, "Damn this prig to the Nine Hells, Mister Cale. Kill them! Almor, you trait—"

Faint pressure on the blade drew a thin stream of blood. The young man's protest ended in a grunt of pain.

"You hold your tongue too, boy, or the next one's deeper. And there's your Almor."

The double indicated the corpses on the floor. The young guardsman took in the corpses and went wide-eyed. The double smiled languidly at Cale—an incongruously feminine gesture from Almor's grizzled face.

"Cale?" the impostor prompted.

The two other men advanced a few steps nearer to Cale, cutting off his lane to the far door. Both had blades drawn. Able to see them better, Cale saw that they looked like house guards he knew—Derg and Halthor—but he figured them to be disguised by the same magic as the Almor imitator. The real Derg and Halthor were probably dead. The Halthor lookalike held something in his hand. It took Cale a moment to recognize it: Thamalon's crystalline sphere, the one Cale had intended to take with him when he had first left Stormweather.

"Cale, I grow impatient."

For emphasis, Almor again nicked the captured guard. To his credit, the boy gritted his teeth and made no sound.

Cale had no choice, so he said, "All right."

Almor gave a satisfied smile and moved farther into the room.

"You won't get away," Cale said, and meant it.

"Of course I will," Almor replied. He sidestepped across the room, watching Cale the while. "You're an intriguing man, Cale, from all I've heard and seen. I suspect I might find you entertaining in another context."

When Cale heard those words and the innuendo

registered, the realization hit him—a *woman* had disguised herself as Almor. A woman had led the attack on Stormweather Towers and killed the gods knew how many guards. For a terrifying moment, Cale had a mental picture of Tazi, Shamur, and Tamlin murdered in their beds—for clearly the Almor-imitator had not sent guards to protect the Uskevren bedrooms. The thought nauseated him, even while sending a hot rush of rage through him.

He forced his mind to focus on the three enemies before him. Perhaps they had attacked only to recover the sphere, and had only killed the guards in their way. He hoped so. But if that was true, what in the Nine Hells *was* the sphere?

He backed up until he felt the parlor wall behind him. If he had to fight all three, he wanted a wall at his back. He took care to ensure that as much furniture as possible stood between him and the intruders. With his combat mobility, he could use the furniture to his advantage if they tried to close.

He had few options. He considered casting another of his darkness spells but dismissed it because of the boy. The Almor double could kill him whether she could see or not. Cale was not prepared to sacrifice the young guard to save a piece of Thamalon's art. For the moment at least, they were in charge.

They had probably teleported into the courtyard and walked unchallenged right into the manse. It occurred to him then that possibly no one else knew the house to be infiltrated. No, he reminded himself. He had sent the other young guard to find the grounds patrols. They would be coming.

Cale eyed the sphere in Halthor's hand. It looked like . . . nothing more than what it was. An unusual piece of quartz with flecks of diamond and tiny gemstones suspended within it. He wondered what in the Nine Hells he and Thamalon had purchased.

Almor slid near her two comrades, dragging the guard with a chokehold while staring at the bloody corpses in the center of the room as though they were a feast.

"You have it?" she asked of Halthor.

Halthor nodded and held the sphere up for Almor to see.

Almor smiled and said, "Excellent. Then we'll be off."

Halthor, broad and going to fat, eyed Cale with narrowed eyes.

"And him?"

Almor, still keeping the hostage guard between herself and Cale, said, "I suspect he's going to follow us out. Probably staring daggers with his eyes all the while. Isn't that right, Cale?" She fluttered her eyelashes, a grotesque display from Almor's scarred face. "I'll be disappointed if you don't." Seeing the disgust on Cale's face, she jerked the house guard's head to the side to expose the jugular. "But not too close. Or else slice-slice."

Cale said nothing, merely gritted his teeth, clenched his fists, and forced himself to stay focused. At that point, he could have darted out of the parlor and recruited help—could have, that is, were he prepared to sacrifice the house guard and let the intruders go. But he wasn't. If they made one mistake, he'd make his move.

Halthor frowned at him and said, "I heard you were mean. You ain't mean. You're as tame as a pussy."

Cale made no reply, but promised with his stare what would happen if they met in another context.

It was Halthor who looked away first, muttering something unintelligible.

"Well done, Mister Cale," the Almor double purred. "You are interesting indeed."

They started to move toward the main exit. Derg and Halthor led, with Halthor holding the sphere in one big hand and his long sword in the other. Almor brought up the rear, facing backward toward Cale and holding the young house guard between them.

Cale followed at a few paces, tense, coiled, ready to act at the first opportunity.

"The main door," Almor said to her companions.

They nodded over their shoulders. She kept her eyes

on Cale as they moved down the hall. After a few moments, she shot him a grin.

"You're wondering how we did it, aren't you?" With her gaze, she indicated herself, Halthor and Derg, all the while keeping her blade at the guard's throat.

Cale knew how they had done it.

"Illusion," he said, and closed a stride closer.

Back on the street outside the Stag, Vraggen had used a sophisticated illusion to project an image of himself through which he could cast spells. A different but equally sophisticated sort of enchantment placed on these men and the woman could have altered their appearance and voices to look and sound like Uskevren guards.

She smiled enigmatically and said, "I suppose it is an illusion, of sorts."

Cale closed another half stride. Her gaze focused on him.

"Stay back, Cale, or he dies. He's just meat to me."

She pressed the blade so tight against the guard's throat that he gagged. The slightest motion would slit his throat. Cale backed off, seething.

The hallway beyond led through the Great Hall. From there, it was only a short distance to the high-ceilinged reception hall and the main door. Cale watched Almor carefully, hoping she would make herself vulnerable, even for just an instant. She didn't. She kept a hawkish gaze on him and a sharp edge at the guard's throat.

Cale could see the young guard growing increasingly nervous. Sweat pored down his clean-shaven face. His eyes looked wild. Cale realized then that he couldn't have seen more than nineteen winters. Despite his previous bravado, the tension had the young man close to breaking. If he did break, he might try something stupid and get himself killed. Cale tried to distract him.

"What's your name, guardsman?"

The boy's gaze focused on Cale. He blinked away the sweat dripping from his eyebrows into his eyes.

“Huh?”

Almor choked him off. “Shut up,” she hissed, and glared at Cale.

Cale ignored her. If he could have, he would have dug out her eyes with his thumbs.

The guard twisted his neck to the right to free his windpipe and said, “Ren, Mister Cale.”

Cale gave him a nod and said, “Stay calm, Ren. They don’t want to hurt you. They just want to get out. It’ll be over soon.”

“Yes, sir,” said the boy.

“Another word and I open him, Cale,” Almor said. Her eyes were hard. She meant it.

Cale said nothing more.

They reached the reception hall. Wood framed arches opened on all sides. Two dead house guards, stabbed through the chest, lay propped against the wall to either side of the closed main door. Cale knew them—Vondel and Mran. Good men. He resolved then and there that whatever happened that night, he would eventually find and kill the woman and her two lackeys.

Distant shouts from outside in the courtyard carried through the walls. The guard Cale had sent to find the grounds patrols must have rounded up some men and sounded the alarm. It would spread quickly.

As though to emphasize the point, from somewhere above them on the second floor, more shouts were taken up. The heavy thump of boots reverberated throughout the house.

“Outside! Now!” Almor commanded Derg and Halthor.

They hurried for the main door. Almor followed, dragging Ren across the reception hall, all the while keeping steel at his jugular. Cale kept pace. Though it might have, the raising of the alarm did not give him comfort. The tension level had risen. It showed on Almor’s face. And tense people did rash things. Were the guards to appear, Cale thought it unlikely that he could get Ren out of it alive.

“They won’t get here in time,” he said, trying to

reassure her. "Just let him go and get the Hells out."

Cale figured that the moment Almor and her team got clear of the wards on the manse proper, they could teleport out.

Almor sneered.

But I'll find you later, Cale silently promised. This isn't over.

At that, Almor gave an absent nod and replied, "I'll look forward to that, Mister Cale."

That almost stopped Cale in his tracks. Could Almor read his mind also?

Nine Hells!

"Who are you?" he asked.

She made no reply, only smiled.

"Let's go," she said to her team.

Derg reached for the large main door—

—and it flew open, smashing into Derg and knocking him back a step. Three house guards, no doubt one of the alerted grounds patrols, poured through, blades bare. Upon seeing what appeared to be three of their comrades holding another hostage and standing over the two dead guards at the door, they stopped in surprise—

"D-Derg?" one of them said, haltingly.

Before he could say any more, before Cale could shout a warning, Halthor stepped forward and stabbed the speaker through the chest. He went down immediately, bleeding and gasping. The two others bounded backward toward the doorway, confused, weapons held in uncertain hands.

"Bastard," cried Cale. He whipped one of his throwing daggers free from its belt sheath, and with a flick of his wrist, hurled it underhand at Halthor. It tore a gash along the side of his throat. Blood fountained to the floor. Halthor staggered, dropped his blade, and clutched at the slash with his empty sword hand.

At the same moment, Derg leaped over the dying guard and unleashed a powerful overhand slash with his falchion at the smaller of the two remaining guardsmen. The house guard tried to parry with his

shield, but too slow. Derg's heavy blade split the links of his coif and opened his skull. His eyes went white and he started to fall.

Cale drew another dagger, but before he could throw, before the small house guard had even hit the ground, Derg jerked free his blade, spun three hundred sixty degrees, and slashed low at the last guard. It took him below the knee, nearly severed his calf, and swept him from his feet. A stab through the chest finished him. The whole combat had taken the space of two breaths.

Halthor, still bleeding from his throat, shot Cale a glare. Cale took a step toward him, blade ready. He would gut the man.

Unarmed, Halthor snarled and advanced, raising the sphere above his head as though he meant to bludgeon Cale with it.

"Stop!" ordered Almor. She threatened the boy with the blade. "There's five dead here already, Cale! You want another? I'll kill him. I promise you. Dolgan! Put that down."

With effort, Cale stopped his own advance, but didn't lower his blade. Halthor—*Dolgan*, Cale corrected—also stopped. The big man lowered the sphere. Blood poured from his throat. He seemed unconcerned.

Cale struggled to keep his anger under control. Five men lay dead at his feet. He ought to kill every one of these sons of whores. But he could not simply sacrifice Ren, and he could not get to Almor before she could slit Ren's throat. So he fought down his instincts and did nothing. They would let Ren go when they got outside. It was the sphere they wanted.

Halthor continued to stare hate at him while stanching his wound with a fat hand. Surprisingly, the bleeding stopped. Halthor grinned. Cale returned a stare, promised with his eyes that their next combat would be fatal. Cale knew his real name—*Dolgan*. He would not forget it.

"As I was saying, Mister Cale," Almor said. "We'll be leaving now."

She glanced at the five corpses on the floor and

again somehow twisted a warrior's face into a feminine smile. Cale wondered what *her* real name was. He wouldn't have forgotten that either.

"You've been most hospitable," said Halthor, then he spat on the body of one of the guards. "Thank you."

"Whoreson," Ren said.

"Shut up," Almor ordered.

It was all Cale could do not to attack. Everything in him screamed for him to gut Halthor, to slit Almor's throat and tear her head from her shoulders. But he held on.

From back in the parlor, Cale could hear house guards rushing toward them. They'd be too late, he knew.

Halthor picked up his sword and stumbled through the doorway. Derg kicked one of the dead guards and followed. Still holding the boy to keep Cale at bay, Almor backed through the doorway.

To Cale, Ren mouthed the words, *Kill them*. Cale made no reply. He *would* kill them, but not there, not then.

He followed them through the door onto the large porch overlooking the lawn and courtyard. In one hand he held his sword, in the other, his last throwing dagger.

"More coming," Derg said to Almor. He didn't sound alarmed.

From across the courtyard, another patrol was rushing toward them. Cale couldn't see numbers in the darkness, only torches. Shouted voices rang out. More shouts answered from within the manse. House guards were closing from both sides.

"Halt! Halt!"

Cale figured maybe six or seven men. He looked to Almor.

"You're out," he said. "Let him go."

She grinned at him, winked, and said, "Good-bye, Mister Cale. Don't forget your promise to me, now. I'll look forward to seeing you again."

With a free hand, she removed a small bronze rod

from her belt. Gold runes swirled around it, and parts of it rotated. She began to manipulate it, with difficulty though because she could use but one hand.

To her men, she said, "Go."

In Cale's head, a woman's voice said, *Nice to have met you, Erevis.*

Hearing her "speak" his name made him feel soiled.

"You won't think it's so nice, next time," he said.

He'd never killed a woman before, though he had come close once. She would be his first.

Each of her men removed a similar device from a pocket and began to turn its parts.

Cale could do nothing but grit his teeth and stand there. She still had Ren.

Almor winked at him and said, "I'll keep him, Cale. Just to make sure."

Without any sound, without even a flash of magical light, Almor simply disappeared. And took Ren with her. One instant they were there, the next they were gone.

"Godsdamnit!"

In the next breath, Derg was gone.

Cale raised his dagger to throw. Halthor, his thick fingers slicked with blood, fumbled with the teleportation rod. Cale hurled the dagger and charged.

The sliver of steel took Halthor in the stomach and nearly doubled him over. Cale charged forward. Halthor pulled the dagger from his flesh and tried to parry with his sword. Cale would have none of it.

Using the force of his momentum, he swept Halthor's blade out wide, then suddenly reversed his motion and slammed the hilt of his sword into the man's face. Squarely. Bone crunched, and blood sprayed. The big man's head snapped back and he groaned in agony, a sound lost in the gurgle of blood pouring into his mouth. He dropped his teleportation rod and staggered back, reeling.

"Still seem tame, you bastard?"

Halthor muttered something, but a mouthful of blood, a split lip, and several dislodged teeth made it

unintelligible. He still gripped Thamalon's sphere in his hand. Cale knew that if he could stop Halthor, the Almor look-a-like would come back for it.

From behind, he could hear the guards charging into the reception hall. Behind Halthor, the grounds patrol closed in. They had him surrounded. They could take him alive if they wished.

No.

Cale decided that Halthor would be dead before the guards arrived. If they needed to speak with his corpse, the Uskevren could hire a priest. If he'd had time, Cale would have killed the man painfully for what he'd done.

He advanced, blade held low.

Though bleary-eyed and wounded, Halthor did not back away. Instead, he stood his ground and began to laugh. To Laugh. Not at Cale, it seemed, but as though he found being wounded and about to die exhilarating. His illusionary fat stomach bounced with his mirth. Blood frothed in the mess of his mouth.

Cale was disgusted, but lunged forward anyway and chopped downward, a blow that would split Halthor's fat, balding head right down the middle.

Stunningly quick for such a big man, Halthor raised his arms and interposed the sphere before Cale's slash, still smiling. Cale's enchanted sword rang off the quartz—

—and sound exploded in Cale's ears, as loud as the braying of a thousand Cormyrean bass shawms. A shower of sparks flew from the sphere, raced up Cale's blade, and danced around his arms. His hands went instantly numb. His sword fell from his grasp. A wave of concussive energy erupted outward from the sphere and blew him back toward the manse. He crashed into the doorjamb and sank to the floor with a groan.

The explosion knocked Halthor flat onto his back and drove him a full handbreadth into the ground. He recovered more quickly than Cale. As he sat up, he left the outline of his body imprinted in the soil.

Bleeding not only from his nose and mouth but also

from his eyes and ears, Halthor still somehow wore a twisted smile. He got to all fours and crawled forward toward his teleportation rod.

The guards were coming, Cale knew, but would not get there in time. The explosion had knocked them to the ground as well. He struggled to get up. His legs would not respond. He fell to his side, helpless as a babe.

Halthor fumbled with the teleportation rod, still grinning like a jester.

“Halt!” shouted the house guards.

They had regained their feet. The concussive energy must not have affected them as severely. Crossbows twanged, and bolts stuck in the earth beside Halthor. He ignored them.

“Wondafa,” he managed to say to Cale through his broken mouth. “Wondafa.”

It took Cale a moment to understand: Wonderful, he had said. Dark! Who in the Hells were these people?

Seemingly satisfied with the setting on his teleportation rod, Halthor leered at Cale. He tried to raise the sphere as though it were a trophy but was too weak to lift it. To Cale, the sphere looked wrong, as though the explosion had left it misshapen, though Cale’s muddled brain did not quite register how. So instead of lifting it, Halthor settled for cradling it to his side. One more twist of the rod and he was gone.

Guards rushed forward moments later. Voices filled Cale’s ears but he could not distinguish words. He stared at the ground near where Halthor had fallen. He stared for a long while, trying to focus on what lay there. When it finally registered, when he finally understood what it was, he began to laugh.

The guards helping him to his feet shot him perplexed looks. Cale did not bother to explain.

Wonderful indeed, he thought and laughed still more.

The sphere had not been misshapen, and Halthor, the fat dolt, had not teleported out with it. He had teleported out with only *half* of it. Cale’s blade had split it

cleanly down the middle, exactly what he had intended to do to Halthor's skull. The other half lay in the grass, inert.

They'd be after it, Cale knew. And next time, he would be ready.