

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

VENOM'S
LASTE

HOUSE OF SERPENTS

JS

BOOK 1

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PROLOGUE

23 Kythorn, Darkmorning

So this is to be my coffin, Arvin thought.

Had he been capable of it, he would have groaned in despair.

He was sprawled on his back inside a leaky rowboat, too weak to lift himself out of the cold, filthy water in which he lay. Even blinking was beyond him. With eyes too dry for tears, he stared at the bricks that drifted past a short distance above him—the arched ceiling of the sewage tunnel. Water sloshed against him as the boat nudged against a wall with a dull thud. Then the lazy current scuffed the boat away from the wall again and dragged it relentlessly onward.

It was not so much the knowledge that he was dying that filled Arvin with impotent grief—even though twenty-six was far too

young for any life to end—it was the thought that his soul would begin its journey to the gods fouled with this intolerable stink. The sewage tunnel was slimed not just with centuries of human waste, but also with the pungent excretions of the serpent folk. The stench of the water eddying back and forth across Arvin's hands, plucking wetly at his hair and wicking up through his clothes, was unbearable; it brought back childhood memories of being unable to get clean, of tauntings and humiliation. Even Bane, god of crushing despair, could not have dreamed up a more perfect torment for Arvin's final moments.

He felt no pain, unlike those whose screams he could still hear echoing distantly from farther up the tunnel. There was just a dull heaviness that dragged him further toward unconsciousness with each passing moment, gradually slowing his thoughts to a trickle. Body and mind seemed to have become detached from each other, the one lying limp and unresponsive in the boat while the other spun in slow spirals, like water going down a drain. Pain would have been welcome; it might have blotted out the thoughts that were turning slow circles inside his mind.

Why? he asked himself, thinking back to the events of only a short time ago, of his meeting with Naulg in the tavern. Why was I... so careless? That woman...

The thought drifted away as consciousness fled.



CHAPTER 1

22 Kythorn, Evening

Arvin reached into his mug and fished a small, speckled egg out of his ale. He set it on the wooden table in front of him and, with a quick flick of his forefinger, sent it rolling. The egg wobbled to the edge, teetered, and fell, joining the sticky mess that littered the sawdust on the tavern floor.

He sighed as he raised the mug to his lips. Eggs. Why did the barkeep bother? Some humans had a taste for them—or rather, a taste for pretending to be something they were not—but Arvin despised the gagging, slippery feel of raw egg sliding down his throat. Next thing you knew, the Mortal Coil would be offering half-and-hares—ale mixed with rabbit blood.

The ale was surprisingly drinkable this evening; the barkeep had either forgotten to

water it, or he'd washed the mugs. Arvin sipped it slowly, hoping he wouldn't have to wait all night. The pipe smoke drifting in blue swirls against the low ceiling was already thick enough to make his eyes water. The twine in his breast pocket didn't like the smoke much, either. Arvin could feel it twitching within its tightly stitched leather pouch. But at least the air was cool, a welcome relief from the muggy heat of a summer evening.

The Mortal Coil occupied the cavernous, circular basement of one of the warehouses that lined the Hlondeth waterfront. The tavern had been named for its ceiling, carved to resemble an enormous coil of rope. At high tide the room's southern wall sweated seawater. Arvin, seated on a bench that curved along that wall, sat stiffly erect at his table, loath to let his shirt brush against the damp stone behind him. The sooner Naulg arrived, the sooner Arvin could get out of this crowd, with their tarred hair and unwashed clothes that smelled of tendays at sea.

It was late at night and the tavern was crowded—despite rumors that the waterfront had become more dangerous of late, with more than the usual number of disappearances from the area around the docks. Sailors jostled each other, tilting back mugs and blowing loud, ale-frothed kisses at doxies who'd come in from the stroll. One noisy group—a crew, judging by their linked arms—sang a boisterous song about hoisting the yard, complete with lewd actions that made the double meaning of the chorus clear. On the other side of the room, another crew had shoved the tables aside and were lined up for a game of toss-knife. A dagger suddenly spun through the air between the two lines of men, zigzagging back and forth across the gap as each man caught and tossed it as rapidly as he could. Halfway down the line, one man suddenly howled and yanked his hand back against his chest,

letting the dagger fall behind him. Blood dribbled from his clenched fingers as the others pounded him on the back, laughing at his misfortune at having to buy their next round of drinks. The wounded sailor, staggering under the thumps of mock congratulation, slowly opened his hand and stared, blinking and suddenly sober, at a fingertip that dangled from a thin thread of flesh.

Arvin winced. A dull ache flared in his finger as he involuntarily clenched his left hand. He opened his fingers and rubbed the smallest one, massaging it through the soft black leather of his glove. Years had passed since the Guild had cut off the last segment of that finger as retribution for intruding on their turf, yet the stub still smarted, especially if the weather was about to change. The wad of felt stuffed into the fingertip of Arvin's glove provided some padding for the lumpy scar tissue but not enough.

Waiting, sipping his ale, he smiled grimly at the irony. Back when Arvin was a teenager, living on the few coins he was able to filch from unguarded pockets and purses, the Guild had come close to depriving him of what was to become his livelihood. Thank the gods they'd found the rope he'd made and recognized his talent before they cut off the rest of his fingertips. Now, years later, they valued his skills highly—so highly they wouldn't let him go. They'd arranged for him to rent a warehouse at a ridiculously low price and saw to it that he was able to acquire whatever exotic and expensive materials he needed in return for the right to be his only “customers”—and the right to a steep discount.

Speaking of customers, where was Naulg?

Arvin glanced around the room but saw no sign of the rogue. His eyes darted to the entrance as someone in yellow—a color Naulg often wore—came down the ramp, but it turned out to be a woman in a yellow

dress. A yuan-ti, human in overall appearance, with long red hair, but with skin covered in a sheen of green scales that thinned to a freckle of green on her face and hands. She moved with a grace that contrasted with the rolling gait of the sailors and the pouting slouch of the doxies. Despite the fact that she was female and wearing a dress that hugged the sensual curve of her hips like a second skin, the sailors kept their hands to themselves. Several scrambled out of her way, automatically dropping their glance to the ground and touching their foreheads in a subservient gesture that their ships' yuan-ti masters had ingrained in them, one painful lash at a time.

Arvin watched the woman out of the corner of his eye as she settled at a table two down from his, her back to the wall. When she flicked a finger impatiently for ale, the barkeep hurried to her side, setting a mug in front of her. He took her coin quickly, jerking his hand back as she reached for the mug, then bowed and backed away. The woman lifted the mug to her lips, tipping it until the egg inside the ale slid into her mouth, then swallowed it, shell and all, with one quick gulp. A forked tongue flickered as she licked her lips appreciatively.

As she glanced in Arvin's direction, he noticed her eyes. They were sea-green flecked with yellow. As they met Arvin's they emitted a flash of silver, momentarily reflecting the lantern light like those of a cat. Aware that she was staring at him, Arvin hastily averted his eyes. Yuan-ti often slumped at the Coil, but when they did, they came in groups and looked down haughtily on the "lesser races" who frequented the place. What was this woman doing in the tavern on her own, quietly sipping an ale? She, like Arvin, seemed to be waiting for someone.

If she'd been human—and wearing even a scrap of green—Arvin might have worried that he was the

object of her search. The druids of the Emerald Enclave usually stuck to the wilderness, but were known to occasionally enter a city to sniff out wizardry—and Arvin’s craft required him to work with wizards on a regular basis. He did so only at arm’s length, through a middler, but the druids would hardly believe that if they discovered the ensorcelled twine in his shirt pocket.

This woman, however, seemed to have no interest in Arvin. After her brief scrutiny of him, she no longer glanced in his direction. She was obviously looking for someone else.

A second glimpse of yellow attracted Arvin’s attention to the tavern entrance—Naulg. Small and dark-haired, Naulg had eyebrows that formed an unbroken line over his squared-off nose. He had a big grin on his face—and one arm firmly around the waist of a doxy who snuggled tightly against his side. With his free hand, he reached up and rubbed first the inside corner of his right eye, then the outside corner—the sign that he was looking for somebody. It was an unnecessary formality, since he and Arvin had known each other for years, but Arvin played along. Placing an elbow on the table, he rested his chin on his fist and raised his little finger so that it touched his lips. *I’m your man.*

Naulg shoved his way through the crowd, dragging the doxy with him. He found an empty chair at a nearby table, dragged it over, and sat in it, pulling the woman down into his lap. As they settled themselves, Naulg waved for two ales, one for himself and one for Arvin. He insisted Arvin join him in a drink. The doxy looked impatiently around as if she’d rather complete her business with Naulg and move on to the next tumble.

Despite the perpetual frown his heavy eyebrows gave him, Naulg was a likable fellow, with his easy

grin, boldly colored shirt that drew the eye, and generous nature. He and Arvin had met when both were boys at the orphanage, during Arvin's first year there. Naulg had shared his meal with Arvin after a larger boy had "accidentally" knocked Arvin's trencher out of his hand. He'd been the only one to show friendship toward Arvin without wanting something else in return. They'd developed a close bond immediately and cemented it by twining their little fingers together like snakes.

Naulg had run away from the orphanage a year later—and had never been caught. His escape had been an inspiration to Arvin through the years that followed, and Arvin had always wondered to where Naulg had fled. After Arvin's own escape, he'd at last learned the answer. It was ironic that both men had wound up under the thumb of another, even more repressive organization—though Naulg didn't seem to see the Guild that way. To him it was a game, an adventure. To Arvin, the Guild was a rope around his wrist—one that kept him as bound to Hlondeth as a slave was to his master.

The doxy's shrill laughter jerked Arvin sharply back to the present. Staring at her, he decided that she would make a better rogue than Naulg. She was pretty, with fluttering eyelashes and long dark hair that coiled in soft waves around a milk-white face, but there was something about the hard glint in her eye that told Arvin she could hold her own. He disliked her immediately—perhaps because of the faint odor that clung to her—a ripe smell that reminded Arvin of spoiled meat. Of course, the smell might have been coming from Naulg, who was scratching absently at the back of his neck, revealing a large sweat stain in the armpit of his shirt.

"It's finished, then?" Naulg asked, ignoring the distraction of the doxy nuzzling his ear.

Arvin reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and pulled out a leather pouch that had been sewn shut with small, tight stitches. Keeping it hidden under his palm, he slid it across the table, leaving it beside Naulg's mug.

Naulg prodded the pouch with a finger and watched it bulge as the coil of twine inside it twitched. "Are there words that need to be spoken?"

Arvin shook his head. "Just cut the stitches and slip the pouch into a pocket. It'll do the job."

The doxy whispered something in Naulg's ear. Naulg laughed and shook his head.

"Be patient, woman. We'll be alone soon enough." Then, to Arvin, "Good. The middler already has your coin. You can collect it any time. I'm sure the goods will perform as promised."

"When will you be . . . using it?"

"Tonight,"—his grin broadened and he winked at the doxy—"much later tonight."

He picked up his ale and raised his mug to salute Arvin; his wide, sweeping gestures suggested he'd already had one too many.

Arvin nodded. He could guess what the twine would be used for—assassin vine almost always went for the throat—but maybe Naulg had something else in mind. Maybe he just meant to use it to bind someone's wrists.

Arvin twitched his mouth into a grin and covered his discomfort with a hearty joke. "Just be sure you don't let pleasure get in the way of business."

Naulg laughed. "Idle hands make merry," he quipped.

Arvin smiled. "You mean 'mischief,'" he said, correcting the motto that had been drummed into them at the orphanage. Then he *tsked*. "Brother Pauvey would weep for you."

"Yes, he would," Naulg said, suddenly serious. "He

would indeed." He paused then added, "Can we talk later?"

Arvin nodded. "I'd like that."

Naulg shifted the doxy from his lap and rose to his feet, slipping the pouch into a trouser pocket. The doxy staggered slightly, as if she'd had too much to drink, but Arvin noted the quick, sharp glance she gave the pocket where Naulg had stored the pouch. If she was a rogue, as Arvin suspected, one quick stroke of her hand would see it gone, especially if Naulg was . . . distracted.

Arvin had labored for two full tendays to make the twine—and he'd spent good coin on the spell that kept the tendrils of assassin vine fresh after their harvesting. Braiding them had been like working with writhing snakes; if he'd let one go even for a moment, it would have coiled around his throat. If the twine disappeared, would Naulg demand a replacement?

As Naulg headed for the door, doxy in tow, Arvin decided to protect his investment. At least, that was what he told himself he was doing. He waited until the pair were halfway up the ramp then rose to his feet.



Hlondeth by night was a city of whispers. Its cobblestoned streets had been worn smooth by the endless slither of the serpent folk. High above, the ramps that spiraled up the outside of buildings to join viaducts that arched across the street were alive with the slide of scales on stone. Soft hisses of conversation whispered out of round doorways and windows. From the harbor, a few hundred paces away, came the crash and sigh of waves breaking against the seawall, rhythmic as breathing.

The streets alternately widened and narrowed as they curved between the city's circular, dome-roofed

buildings, continuously branching into the Y-shaped intersections that were unique to Hlondeth. Cloaks rustled against walls as people squeezed against buildings in the narrower portions of the street, making room for Naulg and his doxy to pass.

The buildings on either side of the street they were walking along glowed with a faint green light—a residual glow left by the magics used to quarry the emerald-colored stone from which Hlondeth had been built. Its light, not quite bright enough to see by, gave a sickly, greenish pallor to the doxy’s skin, making her look even less appealing than she had in the Coil.

Arvin had been keeping a careful distance behind Naulg and his doxy. He lost sight of them momentarily as the street took yet another sinuous twist then spotted them a few paces later as they entered one of the small, circular courtyards that dotted the city. At its center was a lightpost, wrought in iron in the shape of a rearing cobra. The cobra’s mouth held an egg-shaped globe, which should have been glowing brightly, flooding the courtyard with light, but this one had dimmed, leaving the courtyard in near darkness. Arvin saw at once why the globe had remained untended. The residence whose walls formed the courtyard had windows that were boarded over and dark lines of soot smudged the walls above each window. Its main entrance was in shadow, but even so, he could still make out the yellow hand that had been painted on the door. Clerics had cleansed the building with magical fire more than fifty years ago, but like so many other buildings in Hlondeth that had been subjected to a similar fate, the residence remained vacant. The fear of plague was just too strong.

Arvin watched as the doxy steered Naulg toward the darkened doorway. Naulg either didn’t notice the faded symbol on the door—or was too engrossed in the woman to care. Judging by the way he was fumbling

at the woman's skirts, it looked as though they were going to complete their transaction then and there. Arvin waited just outside the courtyard, watching and wishing he were somewhere else. If he'd been wrong, it would just be a short while—Naulg's bragging notwithstanding—before the doxy would be on her way again.

Arvin stiffened, realizing he could no longer hear the rustling noises. Something was wrong; Naulg was no longer moving. Then Naulg's body fell out of the doorway to land with a thud on the cobbles. He lay, stiff as a statue—paralyzed. Nothing moved except his eyes, which rolled wildly in their sockets.

Arvin would have to be careful; the doxy obviously had magic at her disposal. He touched the clay bead he wore on a thong around his neck. The unglazed bead, about the size of a hen's egg and carved with circles representing a pupil and iris, was a cheap copy of the good luck charms known as cat's eyes. It was the last gift his mother had ever given him. "Nine lives," he whispered to himself, echoing the words she'd spoken that day.

As the doxy bent down over Naulg, Arvin reached under his jacket with his left hand and drew the dagger that was sheathed horizontally across the small of his back. He turned it in his gloved hand, ready for throwing, then whispered the command that activated the glove's magic. The dagger disappeared.

Arvin walked boldly into the courtyard, hands apparently empty at his sides. Out of the corner of his eye, he searched the shadows on either side, alert for any accomplice the woman might have.

"Get away from him," he ordered. "Leave now, and I'll forget I ever saw this."

He expected the doxy to startle, but instead she looked up boldly. Arvin saw with a shock that her face had changed. Instead of being smooth, her skin was

pocked with dozens of overlapping scars. So, too, were the hands that gripped Naulg's trousers. Arvin jerked to an abrupt halt, heart hammering in his chest as he recognized the scars for what they were—the hallmarks of disease.

In the moment that he stood, rooted to the ground with surprise, the doxy sprang into action. One of her hands rose and she began to chant. Arvin reacted a heartbeat later, speaking the glove's command word as he raised his hand. But even as the dagger point became solid between his fingers, the doxy completed her spell. Blindness fell over Arvin like a heavy curtain, leaving him blinking.

He threw the dagger—only to hear it thud into the door behind her. At a word, the magic weapon unstuck itself and flew back to his hand; even blinded, Arvin had only to grasp the air in front of him to catch it by the hilt. Now the doxy was whispering a second spell—and approaching him. Afraid of catching her contagion, Arvin jumped sideways, sweeping the air in front of him with the dagger to keep her at bay. The tip of his dagger caught and sliced through something—her clothing?—but then his foot caught on a loose cobblestone and he tripped. He landed hard, cracking his cheek against the cobblestones.

He started to rise, all the while slashing blindly with the dagger, but then a hand shoved against his back. He sprawled forward into a tight space that must have been the doorway, and an instant later felt something hard smack into his face. Dazed, he realized it had been the door opening.

He tried to get up again, but a foot slammed into his back, forcing him back to the ground. Strong hands wrenched at his arm then banged his hand against the ground in an attempt to loosen his grip on the dagger. Frightened now, realizing he might lose the magic weapon, Arvin spoke the command

that made it vanish into his glove. With luck, the doxy and her accomplice would simply take the coin in his pocket and run, leaving Arvin to recover from her spell.

But it seemed Tymora did not favor him this night. Instead of patting him down, the doxy's accomplice wrenched Arvin's hands behind his back and lashed his wrists tightly together. Then Arvin felt the hands shift to his ankles. He kicked violently but to no avail; whoever the doxy's accomplice was, he was strong. He trussed Arvin up neatly, like a swine ready for slaughter. He said something in a low voice to the doxy, and they both chuckled. Arvin thought he caught a name: Missim.

"Take what you like and leave," Arvin yelled—in a voice that was tight with fear. "I'll keep my mouth shut. Neither the militia nor the Guild will—"

The jerk of being hoisted into the air cut off the rest of Arvin's plea. As he landed across the accomplice's shoulders, he swallowed nervously, suddenly aware that words wouldn't save him. This was no ordinary bait and jump.

What in the Nine Hells had he blundered into?

22 Kythorn, Middark

Arvin tensed as the accomplice shrugged him off his shoulders and let him fall. Tensing was the wrong thing to do; Arvin hit the ground hard, cracking his head against stone. When the sparkles cleared from his blinded eyes, he tried to lever himself into a sitting position, but the ground was too slippery. He succeeded only in fouling his face and clothes with muck before falling back down again.

Judging by the smell, he was in the sewers. The stench was overwhelming; it filled his nostrils and throat, making him gag. The feel of sewer muck on

his clothes and skin was worse than being covered in crawling spiders and renewed his determination to escape. He thrashed even more frantically, half expecting a blow from his captors at any moment, and eventually managed to sit up—albeit awkwardly, with his wrists tied firmly behind his back and his ankles lashed together.

If he could only see, he might conjure his dagger back into his hand and start to cut himself free, but blind as he was, he had no way of knowing where his captors were. One of them might have been standing right behind him, ready to pluck the dagger out of his hand.

Then he heard chanting. Men's and women's voices together, perhaps a half-dozen of them. He tilted his head, listening. It sounded like they were close—no more than a pace or two away—and all together in the same spot. He turned so his hands were away from them and considered calling his dagger back into his glove. Should he risk it?

Suddenly his sight returned. Arvin saw that he was sitting inside a circle of yellow lantern light on an island of stone at the center of a large, water-filled chamber. The island itself was perhaps a dozen paces wide and no more than a handspan above the surface of the water that filled the chamber; in the shadowy distance he could just make out brick walls and a half-dozen arched tunnels leading away from this place.

Five figures—three men and two women, all dressed in grayish green robes with frayed hems and sleeves—were kneeling in a circle around a small wooden statue a couple of paces away. One was the doxy who had rolled Naulg. All had skin that was heavily pocked with thumbprint-sized scars. One of the men had a face so disfigured with disease that his eyes were mere squints; another—a hulking giant of a man—had hair that grew only in patches between the scars.

Turning his head, Arvin saw Naulg—no longer stiff with paralysis, but bound hand and foot as Arvin was. They were not the only captives. Three other unfortunates lay on the stone nearby: an older sailor with tarred hair pulled back in a tight bun; a boy of about twelve who was crying with soft, hiccupping sobs; and a woman Arvin remembered seeing inside the Coil earlier that evening, soliciting the sailors. She was struggling fiercely against her bonds, her hands white as the cord bit deep into her wrists, but the sailor appeared to have given up. He lay with eyes closed, whispering a prayer to Silvanus.

Arvin caught Naulg's eye then jerked his head backward to draw Naulg's attention to his hands. *Which way is out?* he signed in finger-speech.

Naulg glanced from one tunnel to the other and then shrugged. *Can't swim. Drown.*

Arvin ground his teeth. They lived in a port city, and Naulg couldn't swim? He glanced around, seeking other options. Just beyond the spot where their captors chanted, a rowboat was tied up. It seemed to be riding low in the water; its gunwales could barely be seen above the lip of the stone island.

Boat, Arvin signed back.

Naulg glanced at it out of the corner of his eye and shook his head. *Too far,* his fingers replied.

Arvin winked. *Wait. I signal. You. . .* He stared purposefully at the lantern and twitched one foot. Their captors had set the lantern down halfway between themselves and their captives, close enough that Naulg could kick it if he wriggled just a little closer.

Arvin wiggled his fingers to draw Naulg's attention to his gloved left hand. "*Shivis,*" he whispered, calling the dagger into it. Turning the weapon, he carefully positioned its edge against the cord that bound his wrists.

Naulg grinned and shifted—slowly, and without making any sound—just a little closer to the lantern.

The female captive, having followed their hand signals avidly—though presumably without understanding them—edged closer to Arvin. She turned her bound hands toward him and gave him a pleading look.

Arvin ignored her and continued his work with the dagger. His hands were numb from being bound, his fingers fumbling as he sawed at the cord. The dagger slipped, slicing into his wrist, and he nearly dropped it.

The chanting stopped. The pockmarked people rose to their feet and turned toward the captives, each holding a small metal flask with ridged sides that was shaped like the rattle of a snake. Arvin jerked the blade frantically up and down against the cord that held his wrists, heedless of the jolts of pain as its point jabbed into his forearm. He felt the cord start to part. But then the larger man with patchy hair kicked Arvin in the chest, knocking him onto his back. Arvin gasped as the blade sliced a hot line across the small of his back and lost his grip on it. He wrenched with all of his might against the cord, but though it gave slightly, it refused to break.

Arvin squirmed, trying to find the dagger again, but now the larger man was kneeling on his chest. Thick fingers pried at Arvin's lips, forcing his mouth open. Arvin tried to bite him—then immediately thought better of it, not wanting to sink his teeth into the man's pockmarked flesh, which exuded the same tainted-meat smell the doxy's had. Realizing this, the larger man laughed. He shoved Arvin's head to the side, forcing his cheek against the stone, and held him there while he popped the cork out of the flask with a thumb. Then he jammed the flask into Arvin's mouth. A vile-tasting liquid rushed out of it, making Arvin gag. He tried to wrench his head away and spit, but the larger man forced his jaw shut. The bitter liquid slid down Arvin's throat like a snake finding its hole.

“Embrace him,” the pockmarked man chanted. “Enfold him, endure him.”

The man’s four companions were also chanting. Above the drone of their voices, Arvin heard the female captive shouting violent curses and the boy screaming. The larger man released Arvin suddenly and clambered to his feet then reached down for Arvin’s ankles. Instead of wasting time kicking, Arvin fumbled for the dagger that still lay under his back and at last managed to close his fingers around it. He tried to saw at his bonds as the large man dragged him across the island toward the statue, but the dagger was nearly ripped out of his hand as it grated against the stone. Just before it left his fingers he spat out the command word that made it vanish. He’d try again in a moment, but first, a distraction.

“Naulg,” he shouted, “now!”

Then a wave of agony gripped him. It felt as though a hand were reaching into his guts, twisting them. Arvin’s skin suddenly went ice cold and violent trembles raced through his limbs. His jaw clenched and his neck spasmed, jerking his chin down against his chest.

The larger man dropped Arvin’s ankles and grabbed his hair, forcing his face closer to the statue. Arvin was trembling so violently he could barely see the thing. It looked like the statue of a woman, but the wood was so rotted and worm-eaten it was impossible to make out more detail than that. Still holding Arvin’s hair, the larger man coughed into his free hand and smeared his phlegmy palm against first Arvin’s forehead, then that of the statue. “Mother of Death, take him, torment him, teach him.”

All of the other captives were screaming now as they too were dragged toward the statue; Arvin could hear Naulg’s voice among them. Then he heard a loud clatter. Flashes of light spun across the ceiling as the

lantern rolled. It hit the water with a loud sizzle, and the chamber was plunged into darkness. Immediately, Arvin called the dagger back to his gloved hand. This time, despite the violent shaking of his hands—or perhaps aided by it—he was able to saw through the cord. His hands sprung apart. One arm clutching the ferocious ache in his belly, he spun around and plunged the dagger into the pockmarked man behind him. He wrenched himself away, leaving the man gasping, and slit the cord that bound his ankles. Then he began crawling toward the sound of Naulg's screams.

Someone was in his way—Arvin's outstretched hand encountered the soggy hem of a frayed robe and a pair of legs. He thrust his knife into one of them and heard a grunt of pain. Then the person whirled. A woman's voice began chanting; Arvin recognized it as that of the woman who had posed as a doxy. She was casting a spell. Arvin, already doubled over with pain, felt its magic strike his mind like a gong. Over the ringing in his ears came a single, shouted command: "Retreat!"

Compelled by its power, he scrambled backward across the slippery stone. He was barely able to crawl, so fiercely was he trembling; the pain caused by whatever they'd forced him to drink was almost overwhelming now. Suddenly there was nothing under his hand—he'd been driven all the way back to the lip of the island. He tumbled off the edge, twisting as he fell. Instead of splashing into water, he landed sprawled inside something that rocked back and forth as he landed in it—the rowboat. Cold, stinking water slopped inside, soaking his shirt and pants as he lay on his back. Arvin heard a wet tearing noise as the line that moored the boat to the island parted as easily as rotted cloth. Then the boat, nudged by the current, began to float away.

Naulg and the other captives were still screaming. Arvin, however, only dully felt the agony that had

gripped his body a few moments before. It had been replaced with an overwhelming weakness. He tried to sit up, but found he could not; his body no longer responded, not even so much as a finger twitch. Dully, he tried to make sense of what was happening, but his thoughts were as frayed as the pockmarked peoples' robes.

Dying, he thought. I'm dying. I thought I could escape, but all I was did was crawl into my coffin.

23 Kythorn, Darkmorning

Arvin's eyes sprang open as a sharp hissing noise filled his ears. Where was he? Had he been dreaming? No. He was wet, and shivering, and surrounded by the overpowering stench of sewage. He could feel its slime on his skin; inside his wet, clinging clothing; in his hair. And he could feel something more—something heavy lying on his chest. A moment later it shifted, revealing the source of the hissing noise he'd heard a moment ago. It was a snake twice the length of his arm and as thick as his wrist.

Two unblinking eyes stared into his.

Startled, Arvin sat up—only to crack his head against a low ceiling. He fell back into whatever he was sitting in, and it rocked to one side, nearly spilling him out. He saw that he was lying in a decrepit-looking rowboat, its gunwales almost touching the brickwork overhead. Worried it would sink, he kept as still as he could. The snake, meanwhile, turned and slithered across Arvin's body, down toward his feet.

Arvin turned his head to the right and looked through the space between the boat and the ceiling. He saw that the side of the boat was butted up against vertical iron bars that were rusted with age. Beyond these he could see the harbor, crowded with ships. From somewhere outside and above, he heard

the voices and footsteps of sailors walking along the seawall that lined the waterfront. Turning his head to the left, he saw a darkened, water-filled tunnel. From some distant point inside it, he heard what sounded like falling water.

After a moment's confusion, Arvin realized where he was—and remembered what had happened. Despite having been fed what he could only assume was poison by those crazed, pockmarked people, he'd survived. The pain and trembling—and the lethargy that had followed—were gone. Some time while he lay unconscious, his body must have conquered the toxin. He was alive and healthy—and covered in a stench that made his skin crawl. Somehow the rowboat he'd fallen into had made it, without swamping, down the series of spillways that carried Hlondeth's sewage to the sea.

"Nine lives," he whispered, touching the bead at his throat.

Was Naulg still alive? How much time had passed? The gods only knew how long Arvin had lain unconscious in this boat. The only thing he knew was that it was still night. He listened, straining his ears to catch the sound of distant screams, but heard only the low gurgle of water and the *plop-splash* of what was probably a rat dropping into the sewage.

The snake, meanwhile, slithered across his ankles and up over the edge of the boat and began to coil up one of the bars. Was it just an animal, or a yuan-ti in serpent form? And what was it doing in the boat with him? Arvin touched its scaly body with his fingertips. "Who are you?" he asked. "What—"

The snake paused and turned to look at Arvin. Light from the harbor glittered off its green scales. A slender blue tongue flickered in and out of its mouth as it tasted the air. Its eyes remained locked on Arvin's for several long seconds, as if taking his measure.

Then it drew back and slithered up the bar toward the seawall above. In another moment it was gone.

Quickly, Arvin took stock. The ensorcelled glove was still on his left hand, and—he spoke the glove’s command word twice and the dagger appeared in his hand then disappeared again—he hadn’t lost his dagger. Nor had his captors taken the braided leather bracelet that encircled his right wrist. All three of his magical devices were still with him.

He’d need them if he was going to rescue Naulg.

The chamber with the island of stone would be farther up the sewer line. If Arvin remained flat on his back and pushed with his hands against the ceiling, he could send the rowboat back up the tunnel. Carefully, not wanting to swamp the boat, Arvin placed his hands flat on the ceiling above.

Then he paused. Would he really be able to find his way back? The sewers were said to be as much of a maze as the streets above them, with more twists and turns than a nest of coiled snakes. By the time he found Naulg—assuming he did—Naulg could very well be dead.

Then there was the prospect of facing the pock-marked people again. Plague had always terrified Arvin; he didn’t want to expose himself to it in what was likely to be a lost cause. And really, Arvin didn’t owe Naulg anything. When Naulg had escaped from the orphanage, he hadn’t come back for Arvin. He hadn’t even sent word. Instead, he’d forgotten Arvin—until fate threw them together a second time. If it had been Naulg who had escaped, Arvin wouldn’t have counted on the rogue to rescue him; he’d have expected to be on his own.

Just as he had been in the orphanage.

Except for that brief time when Naulg had befriended him.

But those screams. . . . Could Arvin really turn his

back on Naulg and not expect to hear them echoing in his memory for the rest of his life?

Arvin had to rescue Naulg. That was who he was. Foolish and loyal, just like his mother.

He just hoped he didn't wind up dead, as she had, because of it.

He started to guide the rowboat back up the tunnel, but after moving it only a short distance, he noticed something. The gap between the gunwales and the brickwork above was getting smaller. The tide was rising, backing up the water in the sewage tunnel. It would be only a matter of moments now before the gunwales were touching the ceiling. Then the boat would fill with water and sink.

That was it, then. The tide had decided for him. In a few moments this tunnel would be flooded and there would be no way for Arvin to make it back to the chamber where Naulg was—not until low tide, by which time it would probably be too late, anyway.

Arvin wasn't going to be able to find that chamber again. . . .

Unless, of course, the pockmarked people returned to the Coil for more victims. And there was a slim chance that they might, since at least two of the victims—Naulg and the woman who had implored Arvin to cut her bonds—had been plucked from there. With luck, they'd assume Arvin was dead. If he could spot one of them at the Coil, he might be able to follow him back to the chamber.

The ceiling grated against the gunwales, shutting out the harbor lights like a coffin lid closing. The water in the tunnel was nearly at ceiling height now and streaming into the boat. Time to get out of here.

Arvin rocked to his right, deliberately swamping the boat, and grabbed for one of the bars as he was spilled into cold, stinking water. The bars were spaced far enough apart that he might just squeeze through

them, especially with sewage lubricating his skin. Clinging to the bar to keep his head above the rapidly rising water, he jammed his shoulder through the gap between two bars. By turning his head and exhaling, he was just able to squeeze through.

He climbed the brickwork of the seawall, levered himself up over the edge, and stood up, looking around to get his bearings. Then he set out, dripping stink in puddles around his feet, in the direction of the Mortal Coil.