



FORSAKEN HOUSE

THE LAST MYTHAL
BOOK I

RICHARD BAKER



PROLOGUE

15 Flamerule, The Year of Doom (714 DR)

The end came not at sunset, but an hour after highsun. Nor did mournful rains mark the city's passing, as the bards later sang. It was a sweltering summer afternoon, the forest air thick and hazy. Myth Drannor was burning, and the acrid smoke of many fires hung heavily in the humid air.

Fflar Starbrow Melruth stood wearily on the shattered flagstones of the courtyard before Castle Cormanthor, and took the measure of his enemies. Thousands of savage warriors—orcs, goblins, gnolls, even ogres—stamped and shouted in the square, roaring and shouting in their guttural tongues, clashing axes and spears on their hide-covered shields or shaking jagged swords in the air. Like a great black sea of blood and steel the horde roiled and

swarmed, clogging the marble streets and clinging to the feet of the white towers.

Too many, Fflar thought bitterly. And we are too few.

Behind Fflar stood the tattered heart of the Akh Velahr, the Army of Cormanthor. A dozen companies defended the broken castle, none with more than a quarter of its strength left. Tall and stern in their shining hauberks and green cloaks, the soldiers of the city knew they were defeated, but still they held. Each day they fought on, a few more of Myth Drannor's folk escaped to safety in desperate Flights, vanishing through whatever gates could be made to work.

At the head of the enemy host mighty nycaloths crouched eagerly, shadowing their faces with their vast black wings. Each was a great champion of the hells, kindred of the demons and devils whose vile spawn filled the lower planes. To see one such creature free to walk Faerûn was a terrible thing, but there at the head of their army stood gathered more than a dozen of the monsters. Hundreds of lesser yugoloths, creatures like the nycaloths but thankfully less powerful, drove the orcs and ogres into battle before them. Despite the painfully bright sunshine in the court, each nycaloth cast a terrifying shadow over the scene, living storm clouds about to break upon Fflar and his soldiers.

"Do not do this, Fflar," said Elkhazel from beside him. The sun elf swordsman stood a few paces behind him, his golden mail gouged in great furrows across his shoulder and breast. "Withdraw your challenge, I beg you. We may yet hold another few days, long enough for the rest of the Flights to escape."

Fflar kept his eyes on the roaring horde. The orcs and ogres did not advance yet. They held their ground, eager to see the duel to come. Even as he watched, a rift opened in their shouting ranks, and a great shadowed figure, a mighty prince of the nycaloths, made its way deliberately through the ranks. Brazen armor gleamed in the darkness, and a mace as large as a young tree dragged the ground. The bestial roars of the bloodthirsty horde

rebounded from the castle walls as their dark captain came forth to battle.

“Nothing but a lord of the infernal realms could hold that horde together,” said Fflar. “If I can defeat him, the rest of that rabble may well turn on each other. We could cut our way out of the city while they fight over the spoils.”

“Aulmpiter is a mighty foe,” Elkhazel replied. “If you should fall. . . .”

“Then you will fight on, as you must,” Fflar finished for him as he hefted his sword in his hand. “Do not fear, my friend. Keryvian and I have slain more than one mighty foe this summer. Demron crafted his banesblades well.”

“Fflar! Captain of Myth Drannor! Come forth!” bel-
lowed the monstrous figure wading through the enemy
ranks. *“I will have you answer for your boasts!”*

“Fflar . . .” Elkhazel struggled to find words. “Think of Sorena, and the babe.”

Fflar glanced over at his lieutenant and offered a little smile, and said, “She will understand, Elkhazel. I have seen this. It is my hour.”

He settled his golden helm on his sweat-soaked brow, and swept Keryvian before his feet several times to remind his hand of the sword’s balance, not that he really needed to. The blade seemed to sense the presence of a worthy foe. It shivered in his grasp, giving off a cold, pure whisper of hate.

How many of our heroes have fallen this year? Fflar thought bleakly.

Josidiah Starym could have carved Aulmpiter to pieces with steel and spell in a deadly bladedance. Kerym Tenyajn would have riddled the infernal lord with his blazing arrows of moonfire, slaying Aulmpiter where he stood. But they were dead, and Fflar had to meet the horde’s captain. He was exhausted, wounded already in the fighting at sunrise, but he could not let Aulmpiter detect his weakness.

“I am here, Aulmpiter!” he cried. “Your foul minions may have broken our walls and burned our homes, but

you will not live to savor your victories! Today Keryvian will send you back to whatever black hells spawned you, monster!”

The nycaloth lord fixed his smoldering gaze on Fflar. Despite his words of bravado, the elf captain could not still a quiver of terror deep in his belly.

“Bold words, elf,” Aulmpiter hissed. “I have slain a hundred of your kind this year. They died screaming for mercy. How will you die, I wonder?”

Fflar chose not to answer. He steeled himself, forcing the pain of his wounds and the heavy weight of his fatigue to a place where he would not feel them. Then, with a high, clear cry, he hurled himself at his vast foe, his feet flying over the broken flagstones of the square, the day spinning into timelessness as the chanting orcs fell silent and his heart, his will, his very life narrowed into a brilliant point. Keryvian sang in his hand and Fflar laughed aloud in fey delight.

Aulmpiter roared in rage and threw himself into the air with a powerful sweep of his mighty wings. Fflar leaped up to hew at the nycaloth lord with his brilliant blade. Then Aulmpiter’s giant mace came crashing down at him, a thunderbolt of infernal power.

Elf-wrought steel, holy and true, met the brazen maul of the nycaloth lord, and darkness fell in Myth Drannor.

CHAPTER 1

Midwinter, the Year of Lightning Storms
(1374 DR)

Angry winter surf boomed and thundered against Tower Reilloch's headland as Araevin Teshurr answered the high mage's summons. He turned his feet to the familiar halls and staircases, stretching out his legs with the long and quick stride he'd learned in countless years of devouring roads and paths in distant Faerûn. Tower Reilloch had been Araevin's home for more than eighty years, but in those eight decades he'd been away on far travels more often than not.

Araevin was tall for a sun elf, with all the height of a human but with a slender and more graceful build. He stood half a head higher than most other elves he met. Humans sometimes mistook his manner for cool disdain, but in truth he was simply thoughtful, in the sense that his mind was often engaged on distant things.

He was keenly interested in everything he saw, and he habitually studied his surroundings with an uncanny intensity.

His face set in a small frown, he came to the marble steps leading up to the great hall. Four elf warriors stood watch at the main door, dressed in green cloaks embroidered with a silver starburst insignia over coats of shining mail—Queen's Guards, assigned to Reilloch's garrison.

"Good day," Araevin said to the warriors. "Philaerin has summoned me."

The guard sergeant, a lithe young moon elf, nodded and replied, "Go on in, Mage Araevin. They're expecting you."

He returned her smile awkwardly, then swiftly took the last steps. He was still unused to the simple routine of passing the Tower guards.

Three years ago, he thought, we would have laughed at the notion that Evermeet's Towers required guards.

But in the Year of the Unstrung Harp renegade sun elves had joined forces with human sea-wolves and drow from the deep tunnels of the Underdark to launch a great assault against the island kingdom. A terrible spell launched from a traitorous Tower had obliterated the Tower of the Sun, home to the greatest mage circle of Evermeet. Queen Amlaruil and her supporters had defeated the attack, but a third or more of Evermeet's best mages did not survive the battle against the invaders. Since then soldiers of the queen protected the invaluable remaining Towers against any future attacks . . . and perhaps kept an eye on the circles themselves to make sure that no more scheming mages could gather undetected.

The great doors of blueleaf wood, bound with mithral, opened silently for Araevin. Hesitating only to draw a deep breath and calm his nervousness, he strode into the hall and stood before the Circle of Reilloch Domayr.

Three high mages awaited him near the center of the tall chamber, standing beneath the theurglass and mithral dome that crowned the hall. In Araevin's experience, high mages had no need to resort to trappings such

as ceremony or thrones in order to express the power they wielded. Each was a wizard of tremendous accomplishment, the youngest more than five hundred years old, the least among them capable of dueling a dragon and perhaps living to tell the tale. Araevin could sense the Art they wielded as a bright white flame, hidden from sight but powerful nonetheless.

He bowed and said, "You sent for me, Eldest?"

"Welcome, Araevin," said Philaerin. The Eldest of Reiloch Domayr, Philaerin was a moon elf, pale of skin and dark of hair. His expression was grave, but his eyes were kind and thoughtful. He was almost six hundred years old, a very great age for a moon elf, but his face was smooth and unlined. Elves were not truly ageless, of course. The spirit grew stronger, burning brighter and clearer as the years passed, until at last the frail body was no more than a thin envelope through which a brilliant soul shone. "I hope we didn't interrupt anything important."

"Not at all," Araevin replied. "I was inscribing a new wand to sell in Leuthilspar, but it will wait."

"How is Ilsevele?"

"I have not seen her for some time. Her duties lie in Leuthilspar. When I finish the wand I am working on, I think I will visit her."

Araevin smiled as Philaerin's courtesy reminded him of Ilsevele Miritar, his betrothed. It had been several months—or was it a year already?—since Araevin had last seen her. Too long, he decided.

"Your talents as an artificer are well known," said High Mage Kileontheal.

Araevin turned his attention to Philaerin's companions. Kileontheal was a small sun elf seemingly no more than a girl, but she was an illusionist of great power. High Mage Aeramma Durothil was a proud sorcerer from the high-born Durothil family, utterly confident in his powers.

"Crafting wands and such devices supports my studies and travels, High Mage," he answered.

"Your studies and travels," repeated Aeramma.

His manner was brusque and direct. Araevin felt an

unspoken exchange between the three high mages, as if their thoughts darted one to the other in a tangible but unseen form.

They mean to test me, he realized. Not a test of skill, or knowledge, simply . . . personality. What qualities are they looking for? he wondered. What recourse will I have if they do not approve of me?

He calmed his mind with a conscious effort of will as Aeramma continued, "Tell us a little of your journeys in Faerûn, Araevin. You have spent many years away from Evermeet, and we are not familiar with your interests."

Araevin met Aeramma's measuring look with a steady gaze, refusing to show any lack of confidence. "I have spent some years studying elven portals and spell structures throughout northwest Faerûn. Most are relics of Illefarn or Siluvanede."

"Evermeet's libraries were not sufficient for this task?" Kileonthel asked.

"The old elfgates are in Faerûn, not here. Besides, while the Tower's records have often provided me with useful clues, there is no substitute for experience." Araevin glanced at the tiny high mage and added, "As it turns out, our libraries are in need of some updating."

Aeramma Durothil folded his arms across his chest as if the remark had affronted him.

"Is it true you led humans and folk of other barbaric races"—Aeramma used the blunt term *n'tel-quessir*, or "not-People" in the Elvish tongue—"to secrets we hid from them centuries ago? And that you allowed them to despoil our tombs and sacred places?"

Do not give in to anger, Araevin reminded himself.

His eyes smoldered, but he retained his calm.

"It is true that I traveled in the company of *people* other than elves," he said, deliberately referring to them as *Tel'Quessir*. "I formed the Company of the White Star from the best folk I could find regardless of race, because I needed stout and loyal comrades to help me. And it is true that we explored some of the forgotten vaults, towers, and libraries of Illefarn and other long-fallen realms. But

it is not true that I despoiled elven tombs, or allowed my companions to do so.”

“Did you remove valuables and magical artifacts from places abandoned by the People, or not?” Aeramma demanded.

“What is inherently sacred about a place we have abandoned?” Araevin countered. “Many of our old cities and palaces in Faerûn have become dangerous places. Some are haunted by monsters, some are defended by decaying old spell wards that endanger any who come near, and some were dark and deadly places even before our People left them.” He looked away from Aeramma to the other high mages, and said, “We opened no tombs, that I can promise you.”

Aeramma seemed unsatisfied by Araevin’s answer, but Philaerin chose that moment to step in. The Durothil high mage subsided as the Eldest spoke.

“Ancient ruins and broken mythals are the extent of your interest in Faerûn, then?” asked Philaerin.

“To be honest, no. I have spent a great deal of time traveling the human realms, simply to see them. That was not my intent when I first went to Faerûn to find our lost portals, but you cannot seek out the old places of Illefarn or other elven lands without coming to know the human cities that have grown up along the Sword Coast.”

“What do you think of our human friends?”

Araevin considered his answer carefully before replying, “They are a strange folk, so like us in some ways, so different in others . . . a race of young giants who know not their own strength. Once I thought I was jealous of them. Why should humans inherit the lands where our ancestors lived, after all? But in the course of my travels I made the acquaintance of many humans, and I found among them friends whose wisdom would reflect well on any elf five times their age.”

“I am sure that there are individuals of outstanding character among humans, Araevin,” Kileontheal said. “Yet, as a race, do they not pose a grave danger? Their numbers grow every year. Their realms spring up with the speed of

a forest fire in Flamerule. They have no reverence for those who have gone before them . . . including us.”

“Yet that is an advantage as well as a danger, High Mage.” Araevin turned to Philaerin and spread his hands. “We live among the works of our ancestors. We are burdened by their misdeeds, and shackled by their mistakes. What history we write of ourselves in the years to come has already been determined, at least in part, by the wars and grief of ten thousand years. Humans are not bound by the past in the same way we are. Every day is a new beginning for them, an opportunity to discard the mistakes of the day before. We might learn something from that.”

Aeramma frowned and asked, “Would you also have us copy their squalid cities, their senseless squabbles, or their fickle gods?”

“It seems to me that you see everyone’s faults except our own, High Mage,” Araevin said sharply. Despite his determination to remain calm, he was growing angry. The Durothil mage’s smug self-assurance was exactly the sort of myopic view that had driven Araevin to seek his answers beyond Evermeet’s shores in the first place. “You don’t know humans as well as you think.”

“Nor do you, if you love them so well,” Aeramma retorted.

The noble-born high mage started to frame a more severe reply, but Philaerin raised his hand. He glanced at Kileontheal then at Aeramma. Araevin sensed the lightning-swift flicker of thought from wizard to wizard, and bleakly wondered if Aeramma’s thoughts were anything he would care to hear. He settled for clasping his hands before his belt, and waiting. Outside, the surf boomed like distant thunder.

When the high mages appeared to arrive at some consensus, they returned their attention to Araevin.

“We did not call you here to ask you to explain your travels among humans, Araevin,” Philaerin said. “We have been considering your request to take up the study of high magic for some time now, and we have arrived at an answer.”

Araevin steeled himself against the uncertainty in his stomach. He'd waited two years to hear the response of Tower Reilloch's high mages. He was confident of his lore, and he'd proven himself in his service with the Queen's Spellguard years before, but still . . . no one was made a high mage unless those who already held that exalted rank concurred in the decision.

This is where Aeramma puts me in my place, he thought bitterly.

"You have demonstrated competence and care with your Art in the years that you have studied at Tower Reilloch. Your skill rivals that of any other wizard in our circle who is not a high mage already, and your scholarship is even more noteworthy," Philaerin continued. "All in all, we consider you an excellent candidate for the study of high magic.

"However, you are only two hundred and sixty-six years of age. We would like you to continue your studies here at the Tower for another fifty years or so before we will begin to share with you the power that has been placed in our care."

"Fifty years?" I have been selected! he thought, with no small relief, but at the same time, he almost groaned aloud at the thought of the wait. He inclined his head to Philaerin and said, "Thank you, Eldest, for your confidence in me. But that is a long time, even by our measure. What am I expected to learn in that time that I do not know now?"

"To tell the truth, Araevin, I do not know," Philaerin said with a sigh. "You have shown an excellent grasp of your studies in the Art, and I believe you could embark on the higher studies tomorrow and not fail. But you know as well as I that, questions of skill aside, we do not make high mages of those who are still young, or those whom we do not know well. Your passion does you credit, but you are so young, and you have spent so much time away from Evermeet. We do not think it unreasonable to see what Evermeet and time might teach you."

Araevin did not attempt to conceal his disappointment,

but he accepted the decision with a curt nod. Arguing his case would certainly not convince Philaerin to let him begin sooner. "As you wish, Eldest. I look forward to beginning my studies, when it is time."

"We know you are nearly ready, Araevin," said Kileontheal, not unkindly. "I do not know of a single high mage who began his studies before his three hundredth birthday, and many of us do not take it up until we are a full five centuries in age."

"You are, of course, welcome to continue your studies in another Tower," Philaerin added. "But I hope you will remain here. You have much you could teach our younger mages. Your time will come, sooner than you think. We will wait."

Araevin could think of nothing else to add. He touched his hand to his lips and his brow, and bowed again.

"Of course, Eldest. Sweet water and light laughter, until next we meet."

With his heart a turmoil of frustration and hope, he withdrew from the great hall.



Araevin left Tower Reilloch the next day, following the old track that led east along the steep headlands and forested hillsides of the rugged northeast coast. In the north, Evermeet was covered in dark pine forest, and the trail threaded its way above striking views of the rocky shore and the angry gray sea. Streamers of windblown mist clung to the hilltops and hid the higher slopes above him as he walked, a sturdy staff in one hand and a light rucksack over his shoulders. The seaborne wind was strong in his face, and the forest sighed and rustled with the gusts.

From time to time he found himself glancing up into the treetops, as if to surprise his old companion Whyllwyst. Every time he caught himself at it, he frowned and pulled his eyes back down to the path before him, trying to ignore the stab of sudden grief. It had been more than ten

years since his familiar had died, and yet the small gray gyrfalcon still seemed a part of him. Araevin had thought once or twice about summoning another, but he was still not done grieving. For the time being, he preferred to be alone.

Late in his second day of walking, he came to a particularly rugged headland and turned off the track, following an overgrown trail above a precipitous drop to the rocky strand below. At the end of the path stood a battered lodge, a rustic place of fieldstone and carved cedar beams. Many of its rooms were cleverly sculpted balconies and open colonnades that rambled over the southeast side of the headland, open to the weather. Higher up on the hillside a living spring gave rise to a swift rill that rushed through the center of the house in a moss-grown waterfall. Humans might have built the place of similar materials, but they never would have managed to conceal it so well among the rock and the forest of the headland.

“Glad homeagain,” Araevin said softly, but the wind and the surf made no answer.

Araevin had not set foot in the House of Cedars for the better part of thirty years. When he was in Evermeet, he usually stayed in the apartments set aside for him at Tower Reilloch. The elements had been hard on the house. Water stains marked the woodwork, the cedar beams were gray and split, and some of the fieldstone walls had buckled and crumbled with thirty winters of freezing and thawing. He dropped his rucksack to the flagstone floor, and leaned his staff against the lintel with a sigh.

The house seems half a ruin already, he thought. Has it been so long? We are so changeless, but the world is so impermanent.

“Well, I can’t say I expected to find anyone here,” he said aloud.

Few of the Teshurrs remained, after all. His mother and father had passed to Arvandor a hundred years past, and his sister Sana lived in the open, sunny meadows of Dregala at the other end of the island with her husband,

children, and grandchildren. Still, he would have hoped that *someone*—at least his cousins Eredhor or Erevyella, or their children—might have made the House of Cedars into a summer home, a hunting lodge, or simply a place to go to escape their daily cares.

Araevin spent the next few days repairing the place as best he could. He had no skill to replace the great timbers—ancestors wiser than he in the ways of living wood had crafted much of the house—but he was able to coax the ancient spells sleeping in the beams back to life, and he had some hope that they would slowly heal themselves in time. Cleaning out the house and redressing the fieldstone was a matter of simple physical labor, which he did not shy from. He opened several of the storage rooms and brought out a few of the old furnishings in order to make the place more comfortable, though he had to resort to magic to dry out and restore many of them. He also spent hours each day clambering all over the headland, wandering the paths he'd haunted as a child while he considered what he wanted to do next.

On returning to the house from one such walk, a tenday after he'd left the Tower, he found a fine gray destrier grazing on the thin grass just outside the house's front door. A light saddle, blanket, and pair of saddlebags worked with a swan design lay nearby, alongside a large leather bow case.

"Well," said a clear voice from behind him, "I was wondering if you were going to turn up."

"Ilsevele!" Araevin exclaimed.

He turned and found her watching him from the doorway. She was lissome and pale, a sun elf with copper-colored hair and a graceful figure, and she wore a simple green and white riding outfit. Even among elves she was thought to be strikingly beautiful, and it had never ceased to amaze Araevin that her heart had turned to him. He had no gift for songs of love or dances beneath the stars, not compared to a dozen other noble-born lords and princes who had wooed her, and yet she had promised herself to him. The sun falling on her shoulders brushed

away his melancholy, and he laughed out loud in pure, unintended delight.

“Ilsevele! What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you, of course. You might have taken the trouble to tell your betrothed where you were going before vanishing from the Tower without a word to anyone. Fortunately, my father divined your whereabouts for me. I really should be angry with you, I suppose.”

“I didn’t mean to be away for long,” he said. “Without even thinking about it I found myself here. The house needed caring for, so I tarried to do what I could.”

“And to escape some weighty matter of the Tower, I am sure.”

“Well . . . yes. I suppose I wanted to slip away for a while and think of something besides the affairs of Tower Reilloch.”

Ilsevele set her hands on her hips and said, “You needed to escape the Tower for a time, but you didn’t think to come visit me? Now I think I am growing angry.”

“I thought you would be busy with your duties in Leuthilspar. I did not want to trouble you.”

“We are to be married, in case you’ve forgotten. You are not a trouble to me . . . unless I find myself riding all over Evermeet looking for you, because you were not at your lonely little Tower when I chose to slip away from my post to surprise you.” Ilsevele poked a finger in his chest. “Next time, send word to me! For some strange reason, I sometimes wonder where you are when we are apart.”

Araevin bowed, spread his arms wide, and said, “Lady Miritar, I offer my sincerest apologies.”

“Hmph. Well, that must do for now, I suppose.” Ilsevele swirled away, gazing at the old house around her. “So this is the place where you were born, all those many ages ago?”

Araevin smiled. The difference in their ages was a standing jest between them. He was almost a hundred years older than she. Of course, among elves there was really no such thing as a winter-and-spring match, as his human friends might have called it. Once an elf was

older than a century or so, age really did not matter much—except to high mages, he reminded himself. He stepped ahead of her and led her inside.

“You are gazing on the House of Cedars, ancestral seat of the Teshurr clan, my lady,” he said. “I suppose it is not much to look at right now.”

“You suppose wrong,” Ilsevele said. She ran her hand along a rich cedar balustrade centuries old, admiring the work. Sunlight and shadow dappled the waters of the broad cove below. “This place is beautiful. The sea, the cliffs, the forest . . . to sit in Reverie every night with the sound of the sea in your ears. It’s perfect, Araevin.”

“My family was content here for a long time.”

“Maybe they will be again,” Ilsevele said.

“Oh, we’ve all gone our different ways now. My sister lives in—”

“I wasn’t speaking of your sister, you dunderhead.” Ilsevele glared at him. “I thought mages of your rank were supposed to be brilliant, Araevin. Honestly, you’re as thick as a post sometimes. No, I was thinking of *our* family.”

Araevin glanced around the house, as if seeing it for the first time, and said, “I hadn’t ever thought of it that way.”

“We are to be married in only three years, Araevin, if you haven’t forgotten our promises. We will need a place to dwell, won’t we?” Ilsevele smiled at him. “I have no intention of taking up residence in an unused corner of your workroom in Reilloch. We will need a place that is ours, dear one, and with a little work, I think this might do quite well.”

Araevin stared at her in bemusement. They’d been promised to each other for almost twenty years, and of course their wedding was almost upon them. Yet when he was immersed in his work in the Tower, or traveling across Faerûn, the fact that he was betrothed to a beautiful and clever lady of high family had a way of escaping him. Ilsevele was right. He was thick as a post sometimes.

Ilsevele watched him as if she could follow the course of his thoughts. In truth, Araevin would not put it past her.

“Now—what dire challenge drove you away from the Tower, anyway?”

He started to wave off the question, but then thought better of it. Instead, he sat down beside her.

“The high mages met with me,” he said. “I will be permitted to study the high lore.”

“Araevin, that’s wonderful! I know you have hoped for this.”

“In fifty years.”

“Oh.” Ilsevele frowned. “Well, everyone knows that high mages must have a lifetime of experience before they can safely study the high magic spells.” She thought a moment, then her expression brightened. “Perhaps it isn’t so bad. That will give us plenty of time to get started on our family.”

“There is that,” he admitted.

“But?”

“But I find myself wondering what I am to do with myself between now and then.” Araevin stared at his hands. “For so long I have always felt that I needed to master one more spell, find one more old book and read it, learn one more secret of the Art, prove myself in one more way. I am afraid that I may find the waiting hard to abide.”

“I think you have spent too much time among your human friends,” she replied. “There is no hurry, Araevin. And I think you will find that I can demand your full and undivided attention if I so choose.”

She reached for him and drew him close, and Araevin was soon forced to concede that Ilsevele could do exactly as she threatened when she wanted.

Later, as the stars came out in the eastern sky and the last fiery glimmers of sunset burned in the clouds of the west, Araevin held her in his arms. Together they listened to the sea’s endless voice and the sighing of the breeze in the forest.

“I am going to Faerûn soon,” he said softly.

“I know.”

“I may be gone for some time. I don’t know what I am looking for.”

“I know.”

“You are not angry with me?” he said.

“Of course not. I am going with you,” she replied. She snuggled deeper into his arms. “Some desire in your heart is set on things you cannot find in Evermeet. I want to walk beside you and see what those things are. You will never be wholly mine until I do.”

Araevin thought on that for a long time. He found, somewhat to his surprise, that he wanted more than anything to have her come with him, to share the things he saw, to meet the people he knew and visit the places he loved.

“We’ll leave in a month, maybe two. I have a few things to finish at the Tower. By summer at the latest, I think. There is no hurry.”



Araevin was deep in Reverie when the call came. He and Ilsevele had tarried at the House of Cedars for two more days, content with each other’s company, considering their plans to journey into the world beyond Evermeet’s shores. But an hour after moonset, when the night was black and heavy with the wet sea winds and Araevin lay dreaming of times long past, a brilliant white flame impinged on his trance.

A swift, frightened voice interrupted his dreams: *Mages of Reilloch Domayr, rally to the Tower! Demons assail the circle, and many have been slain already. Arm yourselves for battle!*

“Kileontheal?” he cried out, as he roused himself from Reverie.

He could feel the imprint of the High Mage’s personality on the sending, as if her pale face hung before him in the darkened room. Araevin leaped to his feet, his mind stumbling over the message.

Demons in the Tower? Impossible! he thought.

Evermeet was warded by mighty spells that prevented creatures of the lower planes from setting foot on the

island of the elves. But Kileontheal would not be mistaken about something like that, would she?

“Araevin? Are you well? You cried out,” said Ilsevele, who stood at the door of the chamber, a dressing gown wrapped around her body against the cold breeze.

“Demons are attacking the Tower,” he said numbly. “The high mages have summoned the circle to its defense. I must go at once.”

“I will saddle Swiftwind,” Ilsevele said.

“No, it would be a ride of hours. I will teleport there immediately.”

“Can you take me?”

Araevin fumbled with his belt, sparing her a single glance. “Yes, but—something is very wrong, Ilsevele. I do not know what sort of danger is waiting there. Maybe you should—”

Ilsevele’s eyes burned as she said, “Don’t you dare suggest that it might be too dangerous for me, Araevin. I am one of the best spellarchers on this island and I am an officer in the Queen’s Guard. If you can take me, you will.”

She ducked out of the chamber, only to reappear with her belongings. Slipping out of her dressing gown, she shrugged a light arming coat over her shoulders and began to lace it up as quickly as she could.

Araevin quickly rummaged through the small chest he’d chosen to serve as his dresser and found a long vest of unusual cut. It was fitted with numerous pockets and a long bandolier filled with the ingredients and reagents he needed to cast many of his spells—carefully formed rods of crystal, spirals of copper, pinches of silver powder and dried blood, all the physical components needed to invoke his magic. Then he dashed out into the front hall for his cloak and staff. He was not as well-armed as he might like, since he had only two wands at his belt, but then he had not expected to be summoned into battle when he left the Tower.

“I am ready to go!” he called to Ilsevele.

“One moment!” she said. “I have to set Swiftwind loose. He can find his way back to my father’s house.”

She hurried past him out into the night, then returned, still lacing up her mithral shirt as she gathered her things. She slipped her feet into stout calf-high boots, threw the green cloak of the Guard around her shoulders, and uncased her bow. It was a powerful weapon of deep red yew, crafted from a rare and magical tree found only in Evermeet. She strung it with a single efficient movement.

“By the way,” Ilsevele said, “I hope you’re skilled with your teleporting spell. I don’t want to find myself a few miles out in the ocean if you miss.”

“Don’t be concerned.” Araevin paused to consider where he needed to go. Kileontheal’s call was no more than ten minutes old, but who knew what might have happened in that time? “I’ll take us directly to my workshop. It’s somewhat out of the way, so I should hope we wouldn’t appear in the middle of a battle. And I’ve a few things there that might prove useful, if matters are as desperate as the high mage indicated.”

He extinguished the soft lanterns all around the house with a gesture, then took Ilsevele by the arm and spoke the complex words of a spell.

Magic surged through him like a jolt of living fire, powerful, intoxicating, and frightening all at once. There was an instant of icy darkness, a sensation like falling but subtly different, and Araevin and Ilsevele stood in a large, cluttered chamber. Parchment notes lay scattered haphazardly across the workbenches, and a row of narrow theurglass windows looked out over the seaward walls of the Tower on one side of the room. Ilsevele winced and set out a hand to steady herself against the wall.

“Well, you missed the ocean, so we must be in your workshop,” she whispered. “Nothing seems out of the order here. Where now?”

“The great hall,” Araevin said. “But first. . . .”

He crossed the room quickly to a theurglass-faced cabinet built into one wall. He whispered an arcane word, and the glass door of the cabinet vanished. Theurglass was strong as steel at need, but those who knew how

could dismiss it into nothingness or call it back again with a word. Inside the cabinet lay the laspar-wood wand he'd been working on, as well as four more wands and a shirt of gleaming mithral mail. Araevin quickly donned the mail shirt, which was so light it scarcely interfered with even the most difficult spellcasting. He took a wand made of dark zalantar wood, ignoring the others. That one he had ensorcelled with a powerful spell of disruption, meaning to have it at his hip the next time he traveled in Faerûn.

Feeling somewhat better prepared for whatever he might find, he moved to the workshop door and carefully pulled it open, peeking out into the corridor outside. It was dimly lit by enchanted lamps at wide intervals, and showed no signs of enemies or friends. In the distance, some destructive spell rumbled menacingly, shaking the Tower, and Araevin caught the ring of steel on steel from far away.

Araevin set off at a trot, gliding swiftly and softly along the hallway. His workshop was high in a little-used tower. He quickly checked the rest of the floor, and descended a winding staircase to the level below. On the landing he found the first of the fallen—one of the Tower guards, savagely clawed or bitten around the face and throat. Araevin could do nothing for her, and so he and Ilsevele continued, following a long hallway to one of the Tower's libraries. The door stood ajar, with another guardsman lying unconscious at its foot. From the room beyond, Araevin caught the hiss and croak of sinister voices. He glanced at Ilsevele and gave her a steady nod. She set an arrow to her string, and nodded back.

Araevin kicked open the door and stormed inside. Two hulking hellspawned monsters, demons or devils or some such creature, crouched inside, pawing through the books and scrolls. They had chitinous bodies of deep red, and beaklike maws beneath green, multifaceted eyes. Their long arms ended in horrible talons that dangled below their knees. A third creature, almost human or elf in appearance except for his red, fine-scaled skin and sweeping batlike

wings, stood across the chamber, examining tomes laid out on a great table beneath the windows.

A demon-elf? Araevin hesitated, certain his eyes had deceived him. The features were elf enough—narrow skull, subtly pointed ears, eyes gently inclined down at the inner corners—but hellish malice glowed in those green eyes, and the bared teeth were small, sharp fangs. His stomach twisted in horror as the monsters wheeled to face him, jaws clacking, while the winged one started to bark out the words to a spell.

From over Araevin's shoulder, a pair of silver arrows streaked out and took the first of the insect fiends in the jaw, vanishing up to the feathers in its foul mouth. It went to all fours, black blood gushing from the wound. Araevin leveled his wand at the others and snapped out the wand's activating word. A shrill, deafening sound split the air as a coruscating blue bolt sprang out from the wand. It blasted past the second insect creature, who ducked away from the blast and snatched up an iron trident, but it caught the winged demon-elf in the midst of his spell and hammered him into the other wall. Bookshelves splintered and heavy tomes cascaded down on the creature.

"Taksha! Erthog! Slay them!" the winged one cried out.

The insect fiend took two steps and hurled its heavy iron trident at Araevin, who yelped despite himself and twisted to one side. He stumbled out of the doorway as the weapon thudded into the door with enough force to bring all three of its points clear through the thick oak. Araevin scrambled to his feet to cast a spell, sending five streaking missiles into the hellborn monster attacking him. The creature came on undeterred, its great talons raking inch-deep furrows in the wall behind him.

"Araevin! What are these things?" Ilsevele called.

She darted into the room herself, circling behind a table and loosing more arrows at the hellspawn. One arrow shattered on the thick plates of the creature's shoulder, but another sank into the eye of the monster who already had two in its throat, and a third punched a hole through

the membranous wing of the red-scaled sorcerer, just then picking himself up from the ground after Araevin's disrupting bolt.

"Mezzoloths!" Araevin answered.

He'd never encountered the things himself, but he had read of them in his researches—mercenaries of the lower planes, powerful fiends who served any master who could meet their price. The monster Ilsevele had shot crumpled to the ground and abruptly disincorporated into black, stinking mist, returning back to whatever foul plane it had been summoned from.

Araevin danced back from his own adversary to gain himself room to use another spell. Having observed the damage wreaked in the library by his first disrupting bolt, he didn't want to use the wand again unless he had to. He started on a spell of dismissal, but the winged demon-elf beat him to the punch, hurling a brilliant white orb into the fray. The spinning white disk exploded into a blast of unearthly cold and razor-sharp splinters of ice, peppering both Araevin and Ilsevele, as well as the pursuing mezzoloth. Araevin grunted in pain, but he kept his feet.

Enough of this, he thought. No sense saving my spells if I let these creatures claw Ilsevele or me to death.

He allowed himself to slide away from the mezzoloth raking at him while carefully focusing his attention on a deadly spell. The insectile monster surged forward, seeking to overwhelm him before he could finish, but Araevin snapped out the last word just as the fiend's beak descended toward him. From his outstretched finger a brilliant emerald ray sprang, taking the mezzoloth full in the chest. The creature seemed to glow bright green, screeching in agony, and it disincorporated into sparkling dust and streaming, foul smoke.

Araevin shifted his attention to the bat-winged sorcerer across the room. The demonspawn, hobbled by arrows in its hip and thigh, snarled out a vicious curse that wove a wall of darkness behind it as it ducked through the opposite door.

“Araevin! I can’t see it!” Ilsevele cried.

“It fled,” Araevin said.

He quickly dispelled the darkness, and glanced at his betrothed. Ilsevele had an arrow on her string. Patches of frostburn gleamed along one arm and the side of her face, but her eyes were bright and hard.

“Are you hurt?” he asked her.

“It’s nothing, just a touch of that ice spell the one with the wings threw,” she replied. “You?”

“The same,” Araevin said, then nodded at the other end of the library. “Come on, we’d better see if more of these things are still roaming around.”

They hurried out of the library, but their adversary was nowhere in sight. This corridor was a grand hall, wide and tall, leading to the great hall itself, where Araevin had met with the high mages a tenday-and-a-half before. A furious battle had been fought in the corridor. The walls were scorched by fiery blasts and broken by lightning bolts, and a dozen more elf guards lay dead alongside three of the sinister winged sorcerers.

Araevin halted and stared at the scene in horror. He had known many of the dead guards for decades.

“By the Seldarine,” he whispered. “What happened here?”

Violet light flared at the end of the hall, and an ear-splitting thunderbolt shook the Tower.

“Whatever it is, it is not over yet,” Ilsevele said.

She and Araevin picked their way through the shattered corridor to the great doors at the end, splintered and hanging crookedly from their hinges. The great hall of Reilloch Domayr lay on the other side of the doorway. The two elves glided up to the smoking oaken doors and peered inside.

In the center of the room, a fierce band of mezzoloths and other hellborn monsters stood around a large iron hoop or ring lying on the marble floor. Elf mages and warriors sheltered behind the tall columns ringing the room, surrounding the creatures. The Tower’s defenders hurled spell and arrow at the invaders, even as the yugoloths and

their winged sorcerers blasted back at the elves with their own infernal magic, filling the great hall with scathing rays of fire and glowing magical darts. Dead and wounded elves littered the chamber. The iron ring glowed with a ruddy light, and half a dozen of the attackers who had been standing within its confines—including, Araevin noted, the wounded sorcerer who had escaped him in the library, as well as another mezzoloth bearing a large iron coffer—ghosted into nothingness.

“They’re teleporting away!” cried several of the elf defenders.

The last of the infernal attackers stepped back into the hoop. Araevin broke from his cover and hurled a blazing sphere of lightning into their midst, while Ilsevele followed, her bow thrumming like a deadly harp as she sent arrow after arrow into the band. Two skeletal demons with swords of blazing bone crumpled under her deadly rain, but one of the winged sorcerers smothered Araevin’s lightning orb with a quick countering spell of its own. The demon had a shirt of fine golden scale mail, and wore its long black hair in thick braids laced with gold wire. A jeweled eye patch covered one eye. The creature fixed its good eye on Araevin and grinned maliciously.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” it rasped.

“As you wish!” Araevin growled. He gestured and snapped out the words of the deadliest spell he could manage, hurling a scything blast of rainbow-colored doom at the invaders. Each glittering ray carried its own deadly energy, and the great hall crackled with the power of Araevin’s attack. But the demons within the iron ring were already fading into nothingness, vanishing away from the great hall. Araevin’s prismatic blast scoured the space where they had stood only a moment before.

Araevin swore and started forward to see if he could decipher the workings of the teleporting ring, but at that instant an enormous blast of green fire exploded out from the device. Agonizing heat seared Araevin as he hurled himself to the ground, and all around him he heard the screams and cries of those other elves who were too close.

The chamber fell silent, save for the low crackle of guttering fires and the pelting of the rain, falling through a gap blasted in the great hall's dome. The emerald blast had seemingly contained a spell that carried away the bodies of the winged sorcerers that had fallen, since none of the creatures remained in the great hall. The iron hoop on the floor was nothing but a twisted band of scorched metal, its magic gone. Araevin slowly picked himself up, wincing with pain.

I should have prepared a spell against fire, he thought. But then, how could I have known that I would become embroiled in a spell battle such as this?

He turned and looked for Ilsevele, and found her slowly standing up from behind a heavy column that had shielded her from the worst of the blast.

"Ilsevele—?"

"I'm fine," she said. She stared at the hall, her face grim. "Sehanine, have mercy. So many have fallen here. Nothing to do now but see if we can do anything for the wounded."

Araevin nodded, but first he paced over the remains of the iron circle. He picked up a single twisted piece of metal in his fist.

Where are the high mages? he wondered silently. Have they fallen as well?

Then, with a sigh, he let the debris clatter to the floor, and turned to help with the injured.