

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

# FINAL GATE

THE LAST MYTHAL  
BOOK III

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## PROLOGUE

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*6 Flamerule, the Year of Stern Judgment  
(666 DR)*

**B**lood ran in the streets of Myth Drannor. Fflar Starbrow Melruth stared at the bodies of elf and human alike, cut down in the square before the ruined Rule Tower. Crowds of angry partisans loyal to a dozen different noble Houses quarreled over the bodies of the fallen, shouting and brandishing steel at each other.

“Someone else is going to be killed here before long,” Fflar said. “We need to put a stop to this.”

“I don’t see how we can,” Elkhazel Miritar replied. “We’d need a hundred warriors to disperse this crowd and prevent any more bloodshed.” The young sun elf shook his head, appalled by the senselessness of the scene. “Have we all gone mad, Fflar?”

“The answer lies in the streets before you,” Fflar murmured. He was young as the People counted

it, a tall moon elf of only sixty years. In a different day he would not yet have been accepted into the Akh Velar, the army of Myth Drannor, but in the short years since the coronal's death many things had changed in the city of his birth. "They are killing each other for the privilege of dying with their hands on the Ruler's Blade."

Across the square a diademed high lady of some sun elf House spoke the words of a flying spell and ascended. She soared up toward a great globe of golden energy that hovered over the spot where the Rule Tower had stood. Inside the shimmering sphere the silver Ruler's Blade hung in the air, point to the sky, spinning slowly as it awaited the hand of the elf who could claim it. Around the royal sword five high mages floated in the air, safeguarding the ancient rite of choosing. Until an elf set his hand on the hilt of the Ruler's Blade and lived, Cormanthyr had no coronal.

"Is that Tiriara Haladar?" Elkhazel asked, gazing up at the noblewoman who ascended toward the blade hundreds of feet above.

Fflar peered closer, not sure which of the Haladars soared toward the waiting test. But it did not matter; when the lady approached the sphere of magic, some mage amid the crowd of onlookers hurled a deadly green orb of crackling energy at her. With a shriek of dismay, the Haladar claimant dropped to the ground, her golden robes fluttering around her. A furious scuffle broke out in the crowd, as Haladar-sworn warriors leaped after the mage who had brought down their lady. Adherents of other Houses shouted defiance or even cheered the fall of the would-be coronal, who lay broken in the center of the plaza amid her beautiful robes.

"Corellon, have mercy," Elkhazel whispered.

Fflar stared in stunned amazement; he'd just seen murder done in broad daylight in the heart of Myth Drannor. With a sick feeling in his stomach, he started to push his way through the crowd toward the place where the lady had fallen. As a warrior of the Akh Velar, he was supposed

to keep order in the city—though how he could hope to calm the chaos around him, he had no idea.

“Stop!” he shouted. “All of you, stop! There is to be no more killing today!”

“This is no business of the Akh Velar!” a bold human bravo snarled. The man shook his heavy rapier in Fflar’s face. “Where were you when Lord Erithal was murdered? Do you think to tell me that the life of a human lord is less than that of some sun elf sorceress?”

Someone behind the human swordsman drew steel, and Fflar took half a step back and swept his own blade from its sheath. We should have a full company of Akh Velar swords here to put a stop to this, he fumed silently. But the Akh Velar barracks were three-quarters empty, as warriors of all races had answered the calls of their own native Houses and causes.

“You will not tell us what to do, moon elf!” the human hissed at Fflar. “We will make our own justice today!”

“Wait!” cried Elkhazel Miritar. “Wait! The Srinshree speaks!”

Fflar lowered his sword and looked up into the sky. All around him, noble-sworn blades did the same, enmity forgotten for a moment. The great golden sphere of magic in which the Srinshree and the four masked high mages hovered grew brilliant, throwing off gleams of golden light. The shadows of evening fled, and dusk brightened into bright daylight beneath the radiant orb overhead. Fflar could distinctly make out the Srinshree herself, in her elegant robes of black, floating a few feet above the Ruler’s Blade itself.

“Attend me, people of Myth Drannor!” the Srinshree said, and by some artifice of magic her voice, high and clear, rang out over the whole city. “Look on what you have done today, and despair! A great gift was given to you, and it lies in shambles!”

Fflar let his gaze drop to the shattered stump of the Rule Tower, smoldering a bowshot beneath the great mage’s feet. His heart ached at the sight. This is not who we are,

he told himself. This is not what Myth Drannor stands for. What madness has stolen over us? From somewhere in the ranks of the Maendelyn House blades, he heard an elf sob openly at the Srinsee's words.

"Two score elves have reached for this blade with arrogance, with ambition, with hate or division in their hearts," the Srinsee continued. "All have been found wanting. The tower of the coronal's rule lies ruined under my feet! You have spurned the blessing of the Seldarine! Do you not understand what has been lost here today?"

"I can bear no more. I will attempt the blade myself, because your madness must be made to stop. Should I prove less than worthy, the Claiming will continue. Decide your own fate thereafter!"

Robes swirling with the magic she wielded, the great archmage confronted the sword floating in the air over the shattered tower.

"Corellon's wrath!" Elkhazel murmured. "Does she mean what she says?"

"She must," Fflar answered.

The Srinsee had stood beside Cormanthy's throne for as long as anyone he knew had lived, six centuries or more. In all that time she had been content to aid, advise, and serve. The magical might she wielded had never been employed in her own service. Fflar was terrified that she would be destroyed by the sword, incinerated as so many others had been in the last few days. How could Myth Drannor survive without the Srinsee to counsel and protect the city?

Or, worse yet—what might happen if she succeeded? Who could gainsay the Srinsee in anything? Power such as she wielded, unfettered by bonds of fealty and service . . . that way lay tyranny so black and desperate that Fflar quailed to consider it. No one possessed the wisdom to wield that sort of power. No one!

"Someone must stop her!" shouted a highborn noble in the street.

“The Srinsee will save us!” cried another. “She brings us hope, you fool!”

“She cannot draw the Ruler’s Blade!” cried the human rake who stood by Fflar.

Dozens of shouts of reproach, of acclaim, of protest filled the air, but the Srinsee paid them no mind. With only a moment’s hesitation, she reached out her slender hand and grasped the hilt of the mighty sword.

A great white gleam shot from the blade in the Srinsee’s grasp, and the mighty orb of magic hovering above the wreckage of the Rule Tower glimmered white in response. Fflar felt the shock of the blade’s acceptance even where he stood, the tremendous magic of the Claiming taking his breath away like a hammer blow.

“She has done it!” he gasped.

Thunder pealed through the streets of the city, and slowly died away. The Srinsee, her face streaked with tears, turned the Ruler’s Blade point down and drew it close to her dark robes.

“I have proven worthy,” she whispered. Magic again carried her words clearly to everyone in the city. “But I will not be coronal. I will not rule from the throne.”

“But she drew the Ruler’s Blade,” Elkhazel murmured. “Now she refuses it?”

Other voices nearby muttered in consternation, but the Srinsee continued. “When peace rules your hearts, and you remember the dream of this place, I will return. When Oacenth’s Vow is fulfilled, I will return.”

Return? Fflar thought. What does she mean to do?

The Srinsee paused, and the Ruler’s Blade grew bright as a star in her slender hands. “Now, people of Myth Drannor, attend. Look upon what I do today, and remember hope.”

She released the Ruler’s Blade, and the silver-glowing sword plunged down into the rubble of the Rule Tower. For a moment, Fflar could not perceive anything other than a single sheet of dancing white lightning that darted and

crackled over the place where Cormanthyr's heart had stood. And he saw the rubble begin to shift, to move, the broken stones mounting to the sky like autumn leaves blown before a whirlwind. Thunder rumbled throughout the city, so heavy and strong that he felt it through the stone beneath his feet. He staggered back from the majesty of the sight, finding himself shoulder-to-shoulder with the swordsmen and rakes who had defied him only a few moments before.

There was one more peal of thunder, and the brilliant lightning faded. At the center of the square stood the magnificent Rule Tower, completely intact, as if nothing had ever happened to it. Fflar glanced up to the spot where the Srinsee and the high mages attending her hovered, the Ruler's Blade restored to their midst. The great golden sphere of magic surrounding them grew dimmer, fading even as he watched.

"What is happening?" the man near him asked in a whisper. "What does this portend?"

No one replied. But in the air above the restored tower, the Srinsee and her mages silently faded into nothingness. The royal sword gleamed once in the dusk and was gone. Stillness governed the square. Elf, human, noble, commoner, all stood quiet and stared at the white tower gleaming in the summer dusk.

"We have been given one more chance," Fflar answered the man. "The Seldarine and the Srinsee have put it in our hands, and no others can carry our fate. That is what it portends, friend. That is what it portends."

With a sigh, he sheathed his sword and moved forward to see to the dead.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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*18 Flamerule, the Year of Lightning Storms  
(1374 DR)*

Moonlight danced on the waters of Lake Sember as Araevin Teshurr landed on the Isle of Reverie. He commanded the graceful elven boat to remain fast by the shore, and leaped lightly to the pebble-strewn shore. Wet gravel crunched beneath his fine suede boots, and he paused to study the wooded islet around him.

Araevin was tall even for a sun elf, nearly six and a half feet, with a lean build and long hands and legs. In the moonlight his bronzed skin glowed with a golden hue, almost as if he were a ghostly image of himself. That was the work of the *telmiirkara neshyrr*, the rite of transformation he had performed two tendays ago in the darkness of Mooncrescent Tower. He was still becoming accustomed to the rite's effects—the changes in



his perceptions, the magic that flowed through his veins, and the sheer wild *otherness* that he felt sleeping restlessly in his heart. Simply standing on the moonlit lakeshore, he felt almost lost in the simple delight of the wavelets caressing the beach and the creaking and rustling of the islet's ancient trees in the warm summer wind.

He climbed a winding path that led away from the landing. Despite the serenity of the Isle, Araevin was armed for battle. He wore a light shirt of fine mithral mail beneath his crimson cloak, and his sword Moonrill rode on his left hip, next to a holster carrying three wands of his own devising. Peril was never far off in that summer of wrath and fire, and even in the heart of Semberholme the daemonfey or their minions might strike.

Araevin soon found that the Isle was not large at all, little more than a small, rocky retreat nestled close to the northern shore of forest-guarded Lake Sember. It was an old place, a sacred place. He could feel the deep forgotten magic that slumbered beneath its ivy-grown colonnades and fragrant trees. In the days when Semberholme had been the heart of an elven kingdom, the small islet in the forest lake had served as its tower of high magic, and the stones, trees, and waters still dreamed of spells from days long past.

The soft breeze strengthened and shifted, whispering in the boughs of the white sycamores that grew among the ruins. Araevin climbed a winding set of stone stairs and found himself at the island's little hilltop, in an open shrine or chamber formed by a ring-shaped colonnade surrounding a floor of old moss-grown marble.

"I am here," he said to the old stones, and he composed himself to wait.

As it turned out, he did not wait for very long at all. Only a few minutes after he arrived, a feather-light touch of powerful sorcery caught his attention. Araevin glanced around the colonnaded shrine, and fixed his eyes on an old archway in the ruins. A silvery light blossomed in the arch. Then a slender sun elf woman in a stately robe of white

stepped out of the light and into the Isle's ancient close. She looked around at the ivy-wreathed pillars and the softly rustling sycamores, pausing in the doorway.

"I have not set foot on the Isle of Reverie in four hundred years," she said softly, drawing a deep breath of the fragrant summer night.

"Good evening, High Mage Kileontheal," Araevin replied.

Kileontheal stepped away from the portal, and another elf followed her—a silver-haired moon elf in a simple gray silk tunic, whose dark eyes danced with warmth and wry humor.

"High Mage Anfalen," Araevin said, offering a shallow bow.

Anfalen nodded back at him and moved aside, joining Kileontheal. After him came another sun elf, the Grand Mage Breithel Olithir. Olithir wore elegant robes of green and gold, and carried the tall white staff of Evermeet's chief wizard. The grand mage inclined his head to Araevin as he stepped through, and Araevin bowed in response.

The grand mage has come? Araevin wondered. He did not think he had ever heard of a grand mage leaving Evermeet, even for a short time, but then again, he hadn't known many grand mages.

"Grand Mage. I am honored," Araevin began. "I did not mean to summon you from your duties on Evermeet. I would have been happy to journey to Evermeet to speak with you."

"This is probably better, Mage Teshurr," Olithir answered. Behind him the portal's silver light faded, leaving the four elves alone in the shadows beneath the white trees and old stones. "We would prefer that you do not attempt to set foot in Evermeet for now."

Araevin had not expected that. He stared at Olithir in amazement, and realized that the grand mage was thoroughly warded by subtle and powerful spell-shields. So, too, were Kileontheal and Anfalen.

“What?” Araevin managed. “But why?”

“Some among the high mages believe that the Nightstar has mastered you, and that you are a very clever Dlardrageth high mage who has managed to fool us all by walking around in Araevin’s body,” Anfalen answered. “High Mage Haldreithen has petitioned for Queen Amlaruil to ban you by royal edict, but I don’t think she would do that without giving you an opportunity to respond first. Still, we think you should stay away from Evermeet for a time.”

“I am standing here before you,” Araevin said. He reached into his shirt and drew out the *selukiira* that had once been the Nightstar. In place of the virulent lambent hue the gemstone had once possessed, it gleamed with a pure white radiance. “This is what remains of the Nightstar. Look at me. Handle the stone for yourself. Do you think that I am Saelethil Dlardrageth?”

Kileontheal approached Araevin. Small and frail as she appeared, to Araevin’s eyes the power in her blazed like a bonfire. She studied his features for a long moment, frowning a little as she took in the aura that played faintly over his skin and the opalescent brilliance of his eyes. They were no longer blank orbs of many-colored light, as they had been for a time after Araevin had completed the *telmiirkara neshyrr*, but his irises still shimmered with a striking, shifting hue that few others could look at for long. Araevin had taken to wearing hoods for the comfort of the people around him.

“I cannot read your heart,” she whispered. “What have you done to yourself, Araevin?”

He had thought long and hard about how to answer that question, if the high mages asked him. In the end he could see that nothing except the truth would serve.

“I performed a rite devised by the star elf Morthil, once the Grand Mage of Sildëyuir. He was a student of Ithraides of Arcorar. The rite has fitted me to wield high magic in a tradition that Evermeet has forgotten.”

The three high mages did not look at each other, but

Araevin felt the swift, subtle exchange of thoughts among them. If I had achieved high magic by following their way I would understand what they are saying, he told himself. But it seems that my path has led me in a different direction.

The Evermeetian mages finished their silent conversation. “There is a good reason why our high magic spells require more than one high mage, Araevin,” the grand mage said. “Our spells *require* consensus, cooperation. No one person should have the responsibility of wielding such power. Do you not see how dangerous you have become? How can you resist the temptation to act when you can, instead of when you must?”

“I had little choice,” Araevin countered. “The *telmiirkara neshyrr* gave Ithraides the power to defeat the daemonfey when they first arose in Arcorar, more than five thousand years ago. How else could we hope to defeat Sarya and her corruption of our old mythals?”

“Haven’t you simply emulated the methods of our enemies by suiting yourself to wield high magic as they do?” Anfalen asked.

“I cannot unlearn what I have learned, High Mage. All I can do is put my knowledge to the best use I can find for it. What else would you have me do?”

“Make no works of high magic without our consent,” Olithir said. “That would be a start.”

Araevin sighed. “I can’t make that promise, Grand Mage.”

Olithir frowned, and the humor in Anfalen’s eyes faded. “Tell him about the visions, Kileontheal,” the moon elf said.

“Araevin, there is something more.” The small sun elf folded her hands into her sleeves. “High Mage Isilfarrel has warned us that great danger attends you. She is a seer of no small skill, as you know. She doubts you because you have featured prominently in her visions of late. The specter of some awful disaster hangs over you, and she fears

that you will bring it down on all of us.”

Araevin stood silent for a moment, digesting her warning. “I can’t say that I am pleased to hear that, but I am not surprised,” he finally said. “That is why I asked to speak with you in the first place. I have discovered a terrible peril that threatens all of us, not just Cormanthor or the Crusade. Isilfarrel must have seen this, too.”

“It seems that these days are full of terrible perils,” Olithir said wearily. “Speak, then.”

“Have you heard of the *Fhoeldin durr*?” Araevin asked.

Olithir and Anfalen frowned, shaking their heads, but Kileontheal nodded and said, “The Waymeet? It is a place where hundreds, perhaps thousands, of doorways meet. Magical portals, leading to many different places in Faerûn, the farther lands of Toril, and even other planes. Some human sages call it the Nexus.”

“That is almost correct,” said Araevin. “The Waymeet is not the place where the doorways meet; it is the *cause* of the doorways. Many of the old elven portals that crisscross Faerûn are emanations or earthly manifestations of the Waymeet. It is the Last Mythal of Aryvandaar.”

Kileontheal looked up at Araevin. “I did not know that it was a work of Aryvandaar,” she said.

“The high mages of Aryvandaar broke kingdoms and erased armies with the war-mythals they created,” Araevin said. “The *Fhoeldin durr* was their final work, perhaps their greatest work.”

“But how does the Waymeet present an imminent peril?” Anfalen asked. “If you are correct, it has existed for ten thousand years, perhaps more, and its purpose is benign. Magical portals have linked elven kingdoms together for ages.”

“It is not simply a device for creating portals,” Araevin replied. “The Vyshaanti lords who ruled over Aryvandaar secretly made it into a weapon as well. Not only would the Waymeet allow Aryvandaaran armies to invade any land at

any time, but any place one of the Waymeet portals touched could be attacked directly with destructive magic of awesome power. I believe the Vyshaanti created the Waymeet as a weapon of last resort. They would have laid waste to the world rather than admit defeat in the last Crown War.”

The high mages frowned, thinking on his words. Araevin continued, “Some of the myriad portals surrounding Myth Drannor, and likely other old elven ruins as well, are constructs of the Aryvandaaran mythal. Sarya Dlardrageth has already mastered Myth Drannor’s corrupted mythal. She is on the verge of gaining control of the Waymeet as well. If she does, she will be able to employ all of the device’s powers, anywhere she wishes to. She could open doors between Evermeet and the Nine Hells, erase Evereska as if it had never existed, or shatter the wards and bonds of every vault and prison where we have entombed evil things since the world began. That is what we face, High Mages.”

Kileontheal paled. Anfalen looked away to the moonlit waters, glinting beneath the trees, and Olithir stood still, his face graven from stone, before he raised his staff and took a half-step closer to Araevin. “Are you certain of this?” the grand mage demanded.

“The *selukiira* that was the Nightstar preserves lore inscribed by the Vyshaanti mages of ancient Aryvandaar. I know what Saelethil Dlardrageth knew about the Waymeet and its uses.” Araevin hesitated, then added, “What I do not know is exactly how close Sarya is to gaining mastery over the device, or even how she is doing it. I had thought that the Nightstar was the only place where that lore was still preserved, but clearly she knows more than she did even a few tendays ago.”

“What do you propose, then?” Kileontheal asked.

“I need more high mages to study the *selukiira*. Some of you will have to master what is in the Nightstar. I believe that we may be able to undo Sarya’s manipulations if we combine the strength of Evermeet’s cooperative high magic with the lore of ancient Aryvandaar.”

Olithir frowned. "I am hesitant to do that without a very thorough study of the rite you performed and the risks involved."

"With all due respect, Grand Mage, I doubt that we have the time to deliberate on the issue. You have wasted days in debate over the question of whether to even hear me out. How much more time do you need?"

"Works of high magic are not to be rushed into, Araevin," Kileontheal said. "You have always lacked patience with us, but the damage that can be done with a moment's carelessness is unspeakable. We cannot trust your judgment alone in this matter."

Araevin took a deep breath and reminded himself to remain calm. "I understand that you have reason to doubt my judgment," he said. "But if a fool warns a village of a forest fire, it doesn't mean that the warning can be disregarded simply because he's a fool. I hope you don't think I am a fool, but even if you do, you must examine this for yourself. The Waymeet has the potential to cause terrible harm."

"We hear you, Araevin," Olithir said. The grand mage turned back to the stone archway through which the three high mages had come, and woke it again with a gesture and a whispered word. "We will do as you ask, and study this threat. I promise you that no other question has greater priority."

"Very well." Araevin stilled his protests, recognizing that it would not help to be any more insistent than he had been. "I would be eager to present the evidence in the *selukiira* to any who wish to see it."

"Haldreithen would warn us against any contact at all with that loregem," Olithir remarked.

"I am sure that he would, but I think I trust Araevin," Kileontheal said. She turned and inclined her head to Araevin. "Sweet water and light laughter until we meet again, High Mage."

Araevin smiled. "And to you, Kileontheal." He watched

the three Evermeetian wizards step back through the silver door, standing in the moonshadows beneath the sycamore trees. Then he found his way back down to the shore where the boat waited.



At sunrise, Seiveril Miritar found Adresin's body.

The captain of the elflord's guard had died fighting alone, trapped in the wreckage of an old watchtower at Semberholme's eastern border. Seiveril couldn't begin to guess when Adresin had become separated from the banner, or how he had found his way to this silent ruin. But the manner of his death was all too clear. Cruelly thorned vines of purple-black had burst through his body, piercing him from the inside out. Nearby the foul winged bodies of two vrock demons lay hacked to pieces, attesting to the fury of Adresin's last fight.

"Vrock spores," murmured Starbrow. He shook his head and turned away, leaving unvoiced the thought that ached under Seiveril's heart like a dull knife: Gods, what an awful way to die. In the last few tendays Seiveril had seen far too many elves fall to the foul malevolence of demons and their ilk, each seemingly gifted with its own particular poison or black sorcery to end the lives of mortals. But spores that took root in living flesh and bored their way slowly through muscles, bones, and organs . . . it was hideous beyond belief.

"Burn the body where it lies," Seiveril said wearily to the survivors of his guard. "Be careful of the vines, or you may share his fate."

He followed Starbrow out of the old tower and into the clean woodland outside. When things were ready, he would go back in to speak the funeral prayers himself, but until then he needed to feel sunlight on his face and think of anything other than what the young warrior's last moments must have been like.



He found Starbrow leaning against a fallen menhir, absently oiling the long white blade of Keryvian. The sword had served its purpose a hundred times over since the Crusade had come to Cormanthor. Starbrow was strong for an elf, taller than most humans but almost as sturdy in his build. He also had the quickness of a cat and the best instincts for battle that Seiveril had ever seen in his own four hundred years. In the moon elf's hands, the ancient banekblade was a weapon without peer.

Starbrow looked up as Seiveril limped to his side. He brushed his russet hair from his eyes and said, "We fought well last night, Seiveril. You know that, don't you?"

"Apparently not well enough for Adresin." Seiveril drew off his armored gauntlets and reached up to loosen his pauldrons. He looked down at the greaves of his left leg, where a set of deep furrows had creased the elven steel—the mark of a canoloth's jaws. He'd been lucky not to have had his leg torn off.

For the better part of a month, ever since leading the Crusade into the forest of Cormanthor, Seiveril's host had endured battle after battle—skirmishes against the daemonfey, clashes with the mercenaries of the Sembians, a smashing blow struck against the Zhentarim, and endless running fights against the demons, devils, yugoloths, and other infernal monsters conjured up out of the pits of the nether planes and set loose by Sarya Dlardrageth. The past night's battle had been a desperate struggle to repel a warband of fiendish creatures from the refuge of Semberholme, and Seiveril's elves and their Dalesfolk allies had driven off the raid. But he did not doubt that another one would follow in a day or two.

"Is there any end to this, my friend?"

Starbrow looked up sharply. "If you give in to despair, Seiveril, there will be exactly one end to this. I didn't come back to see another Weeping War."

"I do not mean to despair, Starbrow. But something has to change." He ran a hand through his silver-red hair, and

grimaced. “Sooner or later, you’d think that even the Hells must be emptied.”

The clatter of horses’ hooves caught Seiveril’s attention, and he looked up as a pair of riders cantered into the clearing by the tower. His daughter Ilsevele, dressed in the colors of a captain of the queen’s spellarchers, reined in her mount.

“I’ve been looking all over for you, Father,” she said.

“Ilsevele,” Seiveril said warmly. He pushed himself upright and embraced his daughter after she dismounted. “I am glad that you are not hurt. And you too, Lord Theremen.”

“Lord Miritar,” the ruler of Deepingdale replied. “You should have sent to us. We could have spared a few swords for you.” Theremen Ulath was a handsome man whose pale skin and fine features clearly showed more than a little elf blood. The folk of Deepingdale had welcomed the Crusade’s arrival in the great forest with few reservations. For his own part, Seiveril had been somewhat surprised to find a strong, secure, and friendly Dale at his back when the Crusade marched into Semberholme. Deepingdale’s archers and riders were a welcome addition to the Crusade’s strength. Lord Theremen swung himself down from his warhorse and clasped Seiveril’s arm.

Ilsevele frowned at Seiveril’s awkward stance, and her eyes fell on the bloody creases in his greaves. “Father, you’re hurt!”

“It is nothing.” Seiveril settled himself back on the fallen menhir. “I am afraid that there were many who needed my healing spells more than I did last night. I take it things were quiet on the eastern marches?”

“For us, yes,” Theremen answered. “But my scouts reported that the Sembians entrenched in Battledale had a furious time of it. The daemonfey aren’t shy about sharing their fury with everyone around them, it seems.”

“Sarya hates us more, but the Sembians are an easier target,” Starbrow remarked. “If there’s a strategy to her attacks, I can’t see it. If I were her, I’d choose one enemy at a time.”

In the ruins of the watchtower, a pillar of gray smoke started up. Ilsevele glanced over, and her face tightened. "Who fell?" she asked.

"Adresin," Seiveril answered quietly. "We were separated in the fighting last night. We found him only a short time ago."

Ilsevele looked down at the ground. "I am sorry, Father. He was a courageous warrior, faithful and good. I know you will miss him."

"He will not be the last, I fear," Seiveril said. He sighed and looked away from the smoke twisting into the sky. "Well, we have gone to ground in Semberholme, and Sarya seems unable or unwilling to push us any farther. So what do we do now? How do we bring some sort of hope out of this horror?"

"Seek aid from Cormyr?" said Ilsevele. "I would think that Alusair might be disposed to help us."

"You forget, we are currently at odds with Sembia as well as the daemonfey," Theremen said. "Alusair can't afford to be drawn into a war against Sembia by helping us in the Dales. Cormyr is still recovering from the troubles attending Azoun's death."

"Find Archendale's price and buy their help?" said Starbrow.

"You face the same problem," Theremen said. "The swords of Archendale don't want to stand opposite Sembia unless Sembia itself threatens them."

Seiveril looked up into the smoke-streaked sunrise. "We can't deal with the Shadovar, not after the way they treated Evereska. Is there some friendly great power nearby that I am forgetting about, Lord Ulath? Otherwise I am out of ideas."

A distant birdsong filled the silence as the elves and the Dalelord examined their own thoughts. Then, slowly, Ilsevele said, "We have to make common cause with Sembia. It's the only course of action that makes sense."

"Not while they're holding three Dales under their fist,"

Theremen countered. "I will not countenance any deal that concedes Battledale, Featherdale, or Tasseldale. We dare not feed that beast, not even once. They'd be swallowed whole in a generation, and we'd be feeding Mistledale or Deepingdale to Sembia next."

"Better the Sembians than the daemonfey," Starbrow pointed out.

"Some of my neighbors would say that it's better to die sword in hand than to live on as chattel in their own homes," Theremen snapped.

Seiveril raised his hand for calm. "It's an academic question anyway, isn't it? Sembia and Hillsfar have determined to carve up the Dales between them. We simply can't go along with that."

"But that was before the daemonfey fell out with Hillsfar," said Ilsevele. "We don't know if that accord still stands, do we? And even if it does, well, I'm willing to lay aside my differences with the Sembians long enough to end the daemonfey threat. How do we know that the Sembians wouldn't feel the same? After all, Sarya's triumph would be a disaster that none of us could stand for."

The lord of Deepingdale shook his head. "The Sembians hold more Dales than the daemonfey at the moment."

"But we don't know that the Sembians would insist on keeping those lands," Ilsevele answered. "As far as we know, they might be asking themselves what price *we* will insist on before we consent to aid *them*."

Starbrow studied Ilsevele for a long moment, deep in thought. "You know, Seiveril, we would find it harder to fight a war with the Sembians once we've fought alongside them. If Ilsevele is right, they'd find it hard too."

"But we would have to, if they tried to absorb the Dales their soldiers hold," Theremen warned. "What if it proved easier to lay down our swords and let them have what they've taken, instead of making them give it back?"

"I hear you," Starbrow said. "But we don't have the strength to beat the daemonfey and the Sembians both, so

there's damned little we can say about Sembians in Featherdale right now anyway. As long as things stay the way they are, we aren't about to throw the Sembians out."

Seiveril leaned forward to rest his head in his hands, thinking. He hadn't picked the fight with the Sembians, and it made him sick to his stomach to even begin a conversation with humans who'd seen fit to throw an army between him and Myth Drannor. But for all the maneuvering, marching, and sharp skirmishes of the past two months, he had yet to try the Crusade against the Sembian army. And the real challenge thrown in his face had come from Hillsfar, not Sembia.

Corellon, guide me, he prayed silently. The Sembians have feared and envied us for a thousand years. How can we hope to set that aside now? He straightened and looked up at the sunrise again, watching the smoke of the burning tower—Adresin's funeral pyre, he reminded himself—glowing in the early light.

"Seiveril?" Starbrow asked quietly. "What do you think?"

"I agree with Ilsevele," Seiveril said. "We will send an embassy to the Sembians, and see if we can set aside our quarrel long enough to defeat the daemonfey. I will leave tomorrow."

"No, not you, Father," Ilsevele said. "The Crusade would be lost without you. I will go and speak for you."

"Absolutely not!" Seiveril stood up so fast that his injured leg almost buckled under him. He grunted in pain and sat back down again almost as fast as he had stood up. "The Sembians may prove treacherous, Ilsevele! The Hillsfarrians certainly are. I can't let anyone else shoulder the risk."

"No, she's right, Seiveril," Starbrow sighed. "You can't go, and if you can't, there is no one better than Ilsevele. Besides, it was her idea."

"If the Sembians used her as a hostage against me, there is nothing I would not do."

"I know," said Starbrow. "I will go with her and make

sure that does not happen. I promise you, my friend, I will keep her safe.”

Ilsevele crossed her arms. “I don’t think—”

“I didn’t ask you,” Starbrow said firmly. “I’m going for your father’s sake. Now, when do you want to leave?”



Sunlight and warm pine scent filled the forest glade when Araevin appeared. He ghosted into solidity, his hand resting on the battered old stone marker that stood in the center of the clearing. He felt the mossy stone cool and damp under his fingertips and allowed himself a small smile.

“I suppose they haven’t barred me yet,” he murmured.

It was late afternoon in Evermeet, a perfect summer day with just the faintest whisper of the ever-present sea somewhere far off beyond the forest. The glade stood high in the rugged hills overlooking the isle’s northern shore, not far from the House of Cedars, where Araevin had grown up. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, momentarily lost in the memories of childhood years spent wandering in these hills.

“Well, this is a pleasant enough spot, but I was beginning to wonder why you’d asked me to come here.”

Araevin turned at the sound of the voice. Quastarte, the ancient loremaster of Tower Reilloch, sat with his back to a tree trunk, resting in the shade. Araevin smiled and waved in the human manner.

“Quastarte!” he called. “I did not know if you would puzzle out my sending or not.”

“They call me a loremaster for a reason,” the old sun elf muttered. He squinted, looking closer at Araevin. “Now, why the secret summons to this place? And what has happened to your eyes? Unless I miss my guess, you have walked some strange roads indeed since we last met.”

“First question first,” Araevin answered. “I have been asked to stay away from Evermeet for a time. Given that,

it hardly seemed like a good idea to rap on your door in Tower Reilloch.”

“But this seemed like a less flagrant act of defiance?”

Araevin shrugged. “I needed to speak with you, and I felt that it could not wait.” He sat down by a boulder near the loremaster, and dropped his rucksack to the ground at his feet. He rooted around in the sack and drew out a wineskin and two wooden mugs. “I have much to tell you, and I hope you will share some of your wisdom with me.”

“I have no other business to attend this afternoon,” Quastarte said. He poured himself some of the wine, and settled back against the tree. “Start at the beginning.”

“That would be about eleven thousand years ago. . . .” Araevin drew in a deep breath, and he told Quastarte the story of his search for the secret of the *telmiirkara neshyrr*, the strange twilight quest in the fading world of Sildëyuir, and his subsequent conquest of Saelethil Dlardrageth’s malevolent presence in the *selukiira* known as the Nightstar. He explained what he had learned from the ancient loregem and how that had illuminated what he had seen of Sarya’s works in his visit to Myth Drannor’s mythal. The better part of the afternoon passed as Araevin recounted his tale to the loremaster, while Quastarte listened attentively, frowned, and swirled the last swallow of wine in the bottom of his cup, thinking hard on Araevin’s story.

“And you spoke with the high mages?” he asked Araevin after the mage finished.

“Yes. I asked them to help me expel Sarya’s influence from Myth Drannor and the Waymeet, but they wish to study the threat more carefully before they employ high magic against the daemonfey.”

“And you think that no such study is necessary?”

“I do not think that we have the luxury of deliberation. If Sarya succeeds while we still are pondering how to stop her, there will be no end to the damage she causes.” Araevin took a swallow of his own wine. “I can’t overthrow her by myself, and I can’t wait for the help of the high mages.”

“And so one old loremaster will have to serve in place of a circle of Evermeet’s most powerful mages.” Quastarte set down his cup. “All right, then. As I see it, Araevin, you need the Gatekeeper’s Crystal.”

“The same device Sarya used to open Nar Kerymhoarth, and free her fey’ri legion? It’s powerful enough to destroy the Waymeet?”

“I suppose it might be, but that’s not what it’s for. The Gatekeeper’s Crystal is the key to the Waymeet.”

Araevin looked at him with a blank expression.

The loremaster shook his head. “See, that’s what you get for drinking your knowledge from ancient loregems. If you had studied honestly, you would know this. The Gatekeeper’s Crystal is not just a weapon, Araevin. It is intimately connected to the Waymeet. Now, we never had the whole crystal at Tower Reilloch, only one of the three shards, so I never had the opportunity to experiment with it. But we learned long ago that the crystal we guarded drew its power from the Waymeet.”

“I never knew,” Araevin said.

Quastarte sighed. “Trust me, I understand. I did not know that the Waymeet itself was a mythal of old Aryvandaar until you told me just now, and I have had centuries to figure it out.”

“Sarya Dlardrageth holds the Gatekeeper’s Crystal. I doubt she would let me borrow it to deal with the Waymeet.”

“She had the crystal when she rent the wards of the Nameless Dungeon, yes. But she has it no more.”

“How do you know?” Araevin demanded.

“It’s the limitation of the crystal. When its full power is employed—as Sarya did when she opened Nar Kerymhoarth—its component shards fly apart and scatter themselves across the face of the world. She has not had the crystal since the day she freed her fey’ri.”

Araevin leaped to his feet, and gathered up his rucksack. “Thank you, old friend. I think you’ve given me more hope than I’ve had in a long time.”



Quastarte rose more slowly. “If you intend to assemble the Gatekeeper’s Crystal again, start at the Nameless Dungeon. When the weapon shatters, it often leaves one of its component shards near the place where it was last employed.”

Araevin clasped Quastarte’s arm. “If you could neglect to mention to the high mages that I was here, I would appreciate it.”

The old loremaster gestured at the forested hillside. “I went for a long walk in the woods on a fine summer day, and that is all. No one needs to know any more than that.”