

FORGOTTEN REALMS®



THE
PRIESTS

MISTRESS OF THE NIGHT

DON BASSINGTHWAITE
and
DAVE GROSS





THE **P**RIESTS

PROLOGUE

*Month of Kythorn, the Year of Rogue
Dragons (1373 DR)*

The black wood screens that lined the Fane of Shar on Shade Enclave had been oiled and polished over long centuries until the reflections of those who passed them flickered like specters in their ancient surface. Legends whispered among the faithful claimed that the wood of the screens came from trees that had grown in a mountain valley so deep that light touched its floor for only minutes each day, around a clearing where Shar herself had once danced alone in the shadows.

In fact, Variance Amatick knew, they had been carved by a once-famous artisan from perfectly ordinary wood and had originally graced the temple of another god entirely. An account of the looting of that rival temple and of the rededication of the screens to the glory of Shar resided in the vaulted archives beneath the Fane. Variance saw no good reason to dispel the legends, though.

They served Shar at least as well as—and perhaps better than—the truth.

Variance's own dim reflection rippled along the wood of the screens as she strode through the Fane. Gray-black skin, black hair, a black mantle over black clothes embroidered in the darkest shades of purple—her reflection might have been her shadow. She might have been her shadow.

“Mistress of the Night,” Variance whispered, touching the symbol she wore beneath her mantle, “guide me in what I must do.”

She found the man she sought in one of the rooms that lay behind the Fane's great altar. He and the seven men and women who sat with him around a broad table littered with papers looked up in surprise as she entered. Variance bent her head.

“Rivalen Tanthul,” she said humbly, “Flame of Darkness, Singer after Twilight. Father Night, I ask your permission to leave Shade Enclave at once.”

Surprise crossed Rivalen's face, momentarily furrowing skin as gray-black as Variance's own. The others at the table—two of them shadow-skinned as well, but the rest pale humans—glanced at the high priest. He gestured in dismissal and they rose silently and without question to file out of the room. When the last of them had closed the door, Rivalen rose and waved Variance to one of the vacated chairs.

“You wouldn't interrupt me without serious cause, vigilant sister,” he said. His voice was rich, but not displeased. “And I know you wouldn't seek to leave your charge unless the cause was even more serious. What's wrong?”

Variance stepped forward, but didn't sit down. She drew a deep breath. “At the time of the fall of Netheril,” she said, “there existed in the town of Sepulcher a remarkable temple to Shar.”

“The House of Mystery,” said Rivalen. “I remember it.” He seated himself and leaned forward, fingers steepled under his chin, to look at her intently. “What about it?”

“Among the mysteries within the House, there was reputed to be an ancient text, *The Leaves of One Night*.”

Rivalen’s eyebrows rose. “I’ve never heard of it.”

A trace of irritation had entered his voice. Variance inclined her head. She waited. After a moment, the high priest bent his head in turn.

“The Dark Goddess does not surrender her secrets lightly,” he said. “Vigilant sister, I am rebuked.” He smiled thinly and abandoned formality. “What of this text?”

Variance spread her hands and said, “It was lost—like so much of the empire while our city sheltered in the Plane of Shadow. It is referred to only sparingly in our own archives and not at all outside of them. I had thought it vanished for all time, if it was real at all.”

“But it is real, isn’t it?” Rivalen guessed. His smile grew wide and genuine. “And it has been found?”

“I . . . I hear it,” said Variance. “Here—” she touched her temple, then the symbol of Shar under her mantle—“and here. The Mistress of the Night wishes that what once was lost be returned to her possession.”

“It will be.” Rivalen stood up. “What do you need?”

“Nothing.” She lifted her mantle to reveal a satchel of black leather, packed for a journey. “Except your permission to leave Shade.”

“You have it.”

Rivalen stepped around the table and laid his right hand on her head. His fingers were cool. Within them, Variance could feel the even colder touch of the goddess.

“Shar bless you,” the high priest intoned, “vigilant sister, keeper of secrets, and recorder of doctrine.” He lifted his hand. “Be subtle, Variance.”

“Always, Father Night.”

Variance bowed her head to him once more, then turned and left quickly. Outside, the men and women who had been speaking with Rivalen were still waiting. They bowed to her as she passed. Variance ignored them. She swept back out through the Fane, past the great altar of Shar, and past the black wood screens.

The acolytes tending the doors of the Fane pulled them open in respectful silence as she approached. She stepped through.

The flying city of Shade, last enclave of an empire that fell out of Faerûn's history seventeen hundred years before, spread out below her. Overhead, eternal shadow churned in black clouds, a reminder of the dark dimension that had given sanctuary to the city during—and for centuries after—the cataclysm that had laid Netheril low.

And that had given birth to the powers within her.

Variance took a step forward. Shadows wrapped around and through her, sliding into the shadowstuff that took the place of her flesh and soul. She stepped out of another shadow hundreds of yards along the street. Two human Shadovar dipped their pale faces to the dark shade suddenly standing beside them, but Variance walked on. A few long strides carried her to the very edge of Shade. Scant feet away, the ground dropped off. It was a long fall from the floating city to the soil of Faerûn.

The shadows that wrapped the city were thinner at its edge. Stars glinted among the strands of darkness—stars and the silver-white radiance of a gibbous moon, waning but still bright. Variance clenched her teeth at the hated light and stepped back into deeper shadows. Calling to mind the location that Shar had revealed to her, the city to the south and west where *The Leaves of One Night* waited, she wove the shadows tight around herself and vanished into darkness.



Dhauna Myritar's eyes snapped open. Her body jerked and she sat upright, sucking air into her lungs in painful, wracking gulps. She stared around the dimness of her bedchamber. For a moment, everything seemed preternaturally clear as her mind and body struggled for unity, then the hazy nausea of interrupted sleep swam over her. Dhauna shook her head, trying to clear it of the terror

that had awakened her. She only succeeded in making her stomach churn. She sat back, propping herself against the headboard, and forced herself to breathe slowly.

A nightmare, a part of her mind urged her, it was only a nightmare. Lie down. Go back to sleep. You've already forgotten what happened in the dream, haven't you? By morning, you'll have forgotten you dreamed at all.

"But it's not always 'just a dream,' is it?" Dhauna muttered. "Not always."

The high priestess of Selûne reached down and untwined the bed sheets—damp with sweat born from another stifling summer night in the Sembian city of Yhaunn—that wrapped around her like a shroud, and swung her legs over the side of the bed. There was a robe of clean white linen on a chair next to it. She wrapped the robe around herself, then stretched to reach her canes. Bracing them against the floor with one hand she levered her old body up off the bed, then stood still for a moment and steadied herself. When she felt balanced, she wobbled carefully across the bedchamber and out into her sitting room.

Moonlight slanted through the many panes of the big window in the south wall. Selûne's celestial face was a waning gibbous tonight and at that hour, well past its zenith. Was that an omen, Dhauna wondered, a nightmare just as the moon entered its period of descent? She grunted. She was just imagining things.

She continued walking. The door of her sitting room opened into the hall outside, where sconces of frosted glass glowed with pale magical light. Dhauna shuffled her canes with care. Julith's room was next to hers and her secretary could hear a quill fall. No sound came from behind Julith's door, though. She was fast asleep.

To reach the head of the ramp that led down to the ground floor of Moonshadow Hall, Dhauna had to walk almost a quarter of the way around the temple. Under her breath, she cursed whatever ancient architect had decided that the high priestess's rooms should lie farthest from the head of the ramp. Maybe the idea had been, as

Julith often argued, to allow the head of the temple some peace and quiet rather than having novices and junior priests and priestesses continually tromping past her door. That was a stupid idea, Dhauna thought. The novice and junior clergy were young. They should be the ones walking the farthest!

She focused on getting along the corridor then down the long ramp, turning each slow step into a meditation, trying to remember her nightmare. There didn't seem to be much to remember, only her terror. There was something to be frightened of, she was sure of that, but just what . . . she couldn't remember. Even her terror was fading away, leaving her only with a vague sense of unease.

At the bottom of the ramp she turned, stepping through a door and out into the cloister around the temple's central courtyard. A night breeze tugged at her robe and wrapped its hem around one of her canes. Dhauna paused and shook the fabric free. The waning gibbous gate was only a few shuffling paces farther. With a small sigh of relief, she stepped through the gate and into the courtyard. The dew-cool grass was soft under her feet and much more pleasant to walk on than hard stone. She stood for a moment, digging her toes into the grass—and realized for the first time that she had forgotten to pull on her slippers. Had the nightmare really disturbed her so much?

Walking with more care, she made her way down the courtyard to the sacred pool and the low stone wall that surrounded it. Selûne's light entered the courtyard at a sharp angle, but as long as some light entered the courtyard, the moon was reflected in the still water. Dhauna sought out a patch of moonlight, settled herself sideways on stones that had been worn smooth by countless clerical hands and backsides, and stared into the water. Silhouetted by the moon, her reflection stared back at her. Dhauna closed her eyes, reaching deep within herself for the fleeting memories of her dream. They eluded her like fireflies, leading her on with flickers and flashes, only to vanish, leaving her lost in darkness. Dhauna ground

her teeth in frustration and strained, trying hard to remember what had frightened her into waking.

Moonmaiden guide me, she prayed silently. Help me remember—

More quickly than she could have thought, she brushed against a memory and a dread she couldn't name or even comprehend filled her. An old horror. So very, very old—but close as well. Very close. Her chest clenched and a thick bitterness choked her. She forced her eyes open.

She was staring up at the moon, Selûne's light falling full across her face. The memory—whatever it had been—was gone again. But there was a new, dreadful certainty in her belly.

"You sent it," she whispered to the moon. "You gave me a warning. But of what? *Of what?*"

Her last word came out as a shout. Dhauna clapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late. The windows of the temple's bedchambers overlooked the courtyard, and at Julith's window there was a flash of light. Dhauna muttered a curse. She wouldn't be alone for long.

The danger was close. But where? Within Yhaunn? Within Moonshadow Hall? A sharp ache throbbed in Dhauna's head as she struggled with the question. If the danger was so close, she needed help. Someone she could trust.

Julith's footsteps echoed on the flagstones of the cloister.

Dhauna dipped her hand in the sacred pool. "In the name of the Bright Lady, hear me," she prayed softly, "Feena of Arch Wood, daughter of Maleva, come to me!"

A single ripple shimmered across the surface of the water as her prayer took flight.

"High Moonmistress?" called Julith. "Is something wrong? Are you all right?"

Dhauna turned to see the young priestess hurrying across the grass. She smiled and shook the water of the pool from her hand.

"Nothing's wrong, Julith," she lied. "I'm fine."

Two Sisters

*From the shadows of chaos, two sisters are born,
One bright Selûne, the other dark Shar.
A harmonious balance soon to be torn
When Selûne gifts life with flame from afar!*

*At the dawn of the world, two sisters contest
Over dark, over light, over life, over death.
Shar seeks the void and with shadows coalesced
Snuffs Selûne's bright lights and with them her breath!*

*In the twilight of battle, one sister falters,
But Selûne hurls magic in desperate power.
From two sisters, one child the balance alters—
Mystryl's aid to Selûne ends Shar's dark hour!*

*Selûne, Moonmaiden—Shar, Mistress of Night,
Two sisters divided by one sister's spite.*

—composed by Veseene the Lark
Presented to Dhauna Myritar of Moonshadow Hall
in the Year of the Turret (1360 DR)