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THE CITY OF THIEVES

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THE DISTANT DESERT

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THE UNCERTAIN FRIENDS

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THE DAUGHTER

Thazienne Uskevren, determined to make her own life in a family where few options are offered, sets out on a mission of revenge and exploration that takes her farther than she ever imagined.

**THE COMPLETE
SEMBIA
SERIES**

**THE HALLS OF
STORMWEATHER**

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Voronica Whitney-Robinson

LORD OF STORMWEATHER
Dave Gross
MARCH 2003



SANDS
— OF THE —
SOUL

**Voronica
Whitney-Robinson**



To Roderic,
Still my darkest knight.

SANDS OF THE SOUL
Sembia

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U.S., CANADA,
ASIA, PACIFIC, & LATIN AMERICA
Wizards of the Coast, Inc.
P.O. Box 707
Renton, WA 98057-0707
+1-800-324-6496

EUROPEAN HEADQUARTERS
Wizards of the Coast, Belgium
P.B. 2031
2600 Berchem
Belgium
+32-70-23-32-77

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PROLOGUE

The Month of Marpenoth 1372 DR

The fog rolled in. Ebeian Hart pulled his light-weight cloak closer around his slim shoulders. The red-haired elf did it more out of nervous habit, not really suffering any chill this unseasonably warm night. He didn't like it when things were out of the ordinary, even the weather, especially when he was in the middle of a theft. And tonight was something special.

Ebeian crouched lower behind a rather muscular statue and surveyed the rest of the inner courtyard. With his slim hands grasping granite biceps, he cautiously peered around the carved elbow of the bygone Soargyl and scanned for more guards. A pair of ill-equipped sentries had trudged past him a few moments earlier, and the Waterdhavian elf counted past

one hundred to see if there would be more, but no others made any rounds.

Ebeian shook his head. Things had certainly changed at Sartrumpet Towers, he mused sadly, and not for the better. There was a certain shoddiness to the manor and grounds. While the Towers had never been known as a great beauty, at least in the past it had been well kept. That was obviously not the case anymore. Ebeian was nearly ready to change his mind, toss the escapade aside as worthless because there was no challenge, but he hated changes in plans even more than he hated events out of the ordinary. He had gone this far and would go farther before the night was over.

Fairly sure that he would encounter no other guards, Ebeian lightly hopped off the granite pedestal, gave a quick bow to his carved, temporary partner in crime, and began to pick his way toward the five stone towers that rested in the center of the courtyard.

“Doesn’t look like I’ll need this tonight,” he whispered to himself as he tucked his enchanted glass in a hidden pocket. “No need to waste my ‘seeing eye’ when there’s clearly nothing to be seen.”

He had discovered that only simple glow spells were being used to illuminate the sundry statues and fountains that littered the courtyard, and none were for protection or alarm. Ebeian had heard from “colleagues” of his that Lord Rorsin, head of the Soargyl family, was no longer paying top coin for his magic, and it appeared that they were right. The young Soargyl had let many things fall into disarray, including much of the family fortune. Ebeian shook his head sadly. He was sure Lord Rorsin’s father would have been the first to agree that the lad was not ready for the early leadership that had been thrust upon his hulking shoulders. But death had taken no notice of qualities like readiness.

Ebeian shivered again and tugged the dark gray cloak tighter still. This time it was to ward away the unpleasant memories of more than a year past. Horrible

events transpired then that had contributed to the second-rate condition of Sartrumpet Towers and had actually led Ebeian there this night, in a roundabout fashion.

Obscene shadow monsters had invaded the home of the Uskevren during a gala, not to mention the Soargyl manse as well. It was as though he could still sense their lingering touch. The wraiths had left a huge swath of destruction in their wake. Many party goers lay dead after the attack at Stormweather Towers, the Uskevren family home, but a few were left worse than dead. Lord and Lady Soargyl, Rorsin's parents, were murdered in their own bed that same night. Ebeian, after viewing what those shadow monsters were capable of, fervently hoped that the Soargyls had been asleep when it happened, but somehow he doubted that.

A slick sweat was forming under his leathers. Ebeian took several deep breaths of the heavy night air, trying to clear his head. He could taste the tang of Selgaunt Bay, though it was not too near. Of course, he reasoned, changing the direction of his morbid thoughts, there was another rationale why the garden and, most likely, the manse was not overly protected and it had nothing to do with Rorsin's competence or lack thereof.

Families such as the Soargyls and the Uskevren controlled Selgaunt. It was practically a sacrosanct rule that the homes of such elite families were inviolate. Burglaries simply weren't done. That was why Ebeian Hart was there this sickly evening, when the delicate elf would have much rather been sitting comfortably in his rooms at the Lady's Thighs Inn, sipping some mulled wine and perhaps regaling some lady of the eve with one of his many tales.

He was there for a prize that only one particular woman would appreciate—one woman who would understand the irony and the value of stealing something from one of the Old Chauncel, a family from whom stealing just wasn't done. That woman was Thazienne Uskevren.

For just a chance to bring a smile to her lips or hear her laughter he was willing to do this and a fair bit more.

“Ah, Tazi,” he whispered at the thought of her raven hair and sea-green eyes, a green much deeper than his own.

She was also one of those attacked on that fateful evening not so long ago. Not killed, she was left, in Ebeian’s opinion, much, much worse. It had taken song priests most of that night to reunite her torn soul with her body. Even twenty-one months later she was still not herself, was still almost a shadow. Her shape and form was right, Ebeian thought, but her substance was wispy.

Of course, the only daughter of Thamalon Uskevren continued to go about her daily duties—and a few of her more risqué night callings—as she had before, but Ebeian could tell that some of Tazi’s fire was gone. He sincerely hoped that passion was simply resting . . . dormant. Like a flower waiting for spring, perhaps Tazi only needed some warmth.

I would warm you again, he thought, if only you’d let me back in.

Ebeian shook his head to clear the reverie.

I can reminisce some other eve, he chided himself. Tonight, I have work to do.

Picking his way through the garden of stones, not a single plant in sight save for a few weeds that were spidering their way over the flagstones, Ebeian reached the center tower. How Rorsin was able to sleep in the same tower, let alone the same bed, where his parents were murdered caused Ebeian to wonder once more if the boy was addle-brained. What dreams plagued him was not something Ebeian wanted to contemplate for very long.

Ebeian decided not to use a levitation spell to raise himself the distance up to what he suspected was the bedroom window. After all, he reasoned, he didn’t want whatever bauble he pilfered to simply be handed to him. Everything else had gone far too easily so far. If this was

going to be worth it, he decided, he was going to sweat for the prize a bit.

Scanning the steep side of the tower, Ebeian could discern large chinks in many of the stones. A smirk played on his face. He had just the right tools with him this particular jaunt. Of course, he prided himself on always having the right tools for every occasion.

Reaching into a satchel belted to his waist, Ebeian pulled out a pair of enchanted metal claws and stuffed his cloak in their place. Each claw had four talons and a pair of leather thongs attached to the crossbar where they joined. It had been some time since he used them, but they glinted in the sparse light as though new. Carefully wrapping each one of them over his slender hands, Ebeian was soon ready.

The lower stones that made up the tower were beginning to crack badly. With relative ease, Ebeian hoisted up his light frame and, like a lizard, began to methodically work his way up. His fingers always unerringly discovered a handhold, no matter how insignificant. Years climbing around the great city of Waterdeep had honed his skills. This was almost second nature to him.

The higher he ascended, though, the more difficult it became to find a grip. Without as much weight resting on the upper stones, the less damaged they were. Cracks were fewer and far between. This was when the talons came in handy. The thin yet sturdy metal was able to slip into the slightest of scratches and afford Ebeian a handhold.

"Perhaps a bit of the old levitation *was* in order," he muttered, growing sweatier.

The damp air didn't help, and Ebeian was certain that the only way he was going to remove his thin leathers at the end of the night was to peel them off . . . or maybe get some willing barmaid to peel them off for him. That was something pleasant to contemplate.

Ebeian was so engrossed in trying to decide which

barmaid he wanted to assist him that he didn't notice that the notch he had wedged his hand into was close to crumbling. The moment he began to raise himself up with that hold, the stone fractured apart and Ebeian started to drop.

Clawing wildly at the tower side, Ebeian slid a good story or two before one of his talons caught in a chink of a marble slab. He winced as the momentum of the sudden stop wrenched his left shoulder, and hissed in pain as his arm tried to leave its socket.

"Dark," he moaned. "That's going to slow things down."

He dangled by his left hand for a moment.

"By Fenmarel, I must look like some beast from the jungles of Chult, swinging here."

Needing to catch his breath, Ebeian looked down as best he could. By some good fortune, the guards had still not made another pass, and the mild enchantment on the claws had kept them silent on the frightening slide down the tower. When Ebeian realized that the fog would block the sentries' view of him, if they did come by, he breathed a little easier.

It took Ebeian twice as long to recoup the distance he had lost. When he finally reached the ledge under what he believed to be Lord Rorsin's bedroom window, what little good humor he had possessed was long since gone. Once again the thought crossed his mind to toss the whole plan to the wind and try again another night. But, despite some of the things he said and did, Ebeian was determined. Tazi meant more to him than he let on, even to himself. He wanted to be the one to reach her, when it seemed that nothing and no one else could. He firmly believed that what he stole from this place would be the gift Tazi needed to restore herself.

His resolve strengthened, Ebeian swung his right leg up and hooked the ledge with his ankle. With only slightly less grace than normal, thanks to the throbbing ache in his injured shoulder, he pulled himself up. Taking

advantage of his narrow perch, the elf rested his face against the cool rockwork. There wasn't much of a view at his elevation, he realized vaguely, what with the fog obscuring the city lights. In fact, Ebeian noticed with some unease how that same fog had covered the Soargyl grounds like a shroud. The various statues and figures were indeterminate ripples under the mist. Yet again he found himself shivering.

Each breath was an effort, and that concerned him. The pain from his shoulder was excruciating and Ebeian was afraid that it might slow him down.

"It's probably the heavy air tonight," he told himself. "I could cut it with my eating dagger, it's so thick."

Using that poor theory to mollify his concerns, Ebeian turned toward the window casement and untied the talons from his hands. He rubbed the tattoo on the side of his neck with his declawed right hand. It was his way of offering a silent prayer to Fenmarel before he began any caper.

A dim light flickered within the room. By its uncertain glow, Ebeian was able to make out a large bed. Mountains of pillows were heaped upon it as well as several large blankets. Ebeian thought unkindly that it looked like Lord Rorsin was unable to convince anything living to keep him warm at night and relied on the extra bedding for his company, but the bed was unoccupied.

"I wonder what the dull lad is up to? I was certain I was going to have to step lightly around his big form."

It was simply one more piece that didn't fit into Ebeian's plans for the night.

Gingerly, he removed a set of lockpicks from a strap on his left forearm, careful to jostle that shoulder as little as possible. The lock on the casement opened in short order. Since no one was there, the elf didn't have to concern himself with the breeze created by the open window. As Ebeian slipped noiselessly into the room, he marveled once more how easy everything was to get into.

At this rate, he thought, the boy might as well leave the doors open!

The situation didn't sit well with the thief. Why indeed leave everything so unprotected? Could Rorsin feel so certain those unwritten rules would protect him from common thievery? Even if he did, how could he ever feel safe after those heinous shadows killed his parents? Or did he have something *inside* the tower to keep him safe? There was food for thought.

Ebeian allowed his eyes to adjust to the dim lighting of the master bedroom. There was a large trunk at the foot of the bed, but he dismissed rifling through that.

"Some moth-eaten blanket wouldn't draw anything but a moue of distaste from Tazi," he reasoned correctly, "and I am not some chambermaid, bearing fresh linen!"

Padding softly through the room, his pointed ears straining to hear the slightest noise, Ebeian moved toward the dressing table. He was hopeful that there might be some shiny trinket worth his time. Sifting through the pile of coins on the tabletop, though, Ebeian began to feel somewhat disappointed. He wanted something that screamed the Soargyl name to present to Tazi and he was turning up nothing at the moment. The pain in his shoulder was making him impatient.

Unwilling to sift through too many of the drawers of the table and make unnecessary sounds, Ebeian noticed a set of double doors to one side. He was curious if they led to a study attached to the bedroom, which would be a logical assumption. The "colleagues" he had consulted the other night did not know many details of the layout of the interior of the Soargyl manse. Perhaps there might be some paperwork of the Soargyls' most recent dealings lying about. Rorsin struck him as the unorganized type. Ebeian knew Tazi appreciated information as much as, if not more than, some twinkling gem.

He walked carefully, avoiding a few of the worn floorboards, and leaned cautiously against one of the doors.

After a suitable amount of time passed without hearing anything, Ebeian cracked it open.

He could see that a fire was burning in a marble fireplace along the east wall and that was the only light in the room. There was a leather sofa and a few divans as well as a table, but no desk or the like to be seen. A carafe glinted ruby-red in the firelight and two empty glasses rested nearby. Just like the bedroom, there were pillows everywhere. Ebeian wondered at Lord Rorsin's decorating tastes. Either he didn't have any of his own or he had simply left everything the way his mother had chosen.

More and more, Ebeian was sure Rorsin wasn't ready for leadership. He seemed to be the kind of boy who simply followed. Ebeian was so caught up in his analysis of the young Soargyl that he almost didn't catch the tread of footsteps in an outer hallway. Luckily for the elf, Lord Rorsin was a lumbering clod and the elf was able to skitter back out of the room as soon as he heard the sound. Ebeian started to shut the door, but an icy voice froze him in mid motion.

Through the tiny sliver of space between the doors he afforded himself, Ebeian peered into the sitting room. He could see Rorsin nearly stumble in, so intent was the young lord on his visitor. The blond-haired Soargyl kept peering over his shoulder at the dark figure behind him. From his vantage point, what he saw caused Ebeian's heart to skip a beat. If the figure was whom he thought, Ebeian understood why Rorsin hadn't bothered with any magic inside the house. He wouldn't need it tonight.

That silky voice spoke again and was unmistakable to Ebeian, even from a distance. Though he had only seen the man, to use the term loosely, from afar on a few occasions, Ebeian didn't need to see the dark, close-shorn hair or the goatee to know it was Ciredor.

What is he doing back with the Soargyls? Ebeian wondered.

The elf didn't know much about the mage—Tazi had

preferred to tell Ebeian very little about her last encounter with Ciredor—but what he did know was enough.

At one point nearly two years past, Tazi's mother had tried to match her wayward daughter with this man. It was not her first attempt at matchmaking, but as far as Ebeian knew it was the first real error in judgment the Uskevren matriarch had ever committed. Shamur had been under the mistaken impression that Ciredor had the potential for a good match with Thazienne. Playing the dutiful daughter, Tazi agreed to meet with him, as she did with all her mother's selections, and, as was her way, Tazi proceeded to steal something from him.

On the night of a celebration to Lliira, Ebeian couldn't remember which one, Tazi had set out to steal a diamond stud from Ciredor that she had presented him with on a previous occasion. What happened beyond that Ebeian never found out for certain. All he did know was that Ciredor disappeared and Tazi was a changed woman. She immediately dismissed her closest companion and refused to speak to Steorf since. Ebeian had tried a few times to ply her with drinks and find out the whole story, but the icy looks she shot him stopped him dead in his paces. The only piece of information he ever got was from Steorf.

The mage-in-training let it slip out that Tazi nearly died at the hands of that necromancer and wouldn't say more. Ebeian didn't pursue the matter, secretly glad that Steorf was no longer a part of Tazi's life—he detested competition of any sort—but if Ciredor was back, that didn't bode well for Tazi.

"Can I offer you something to drink?" a nervous Lord Rorsin asked his guest.

"It's not what you can offer me that intrigues me this evening," Ciredor replied smoothly. "It is what I might be able to offer you."

A slow smile curved his lips. Ebeian watched as Ciredor motioned Rorsin to sit, as though it were the mage who was master of the house.

And perhaps he is, mused Ebeian.

“I have something for you, something special.”

With that, Ciredor reached into a hidden fold of his dark red doublet, and pulled out a crystal flask. He placed it carefully onto the teak table beside the couch with the slightest hint of a flourish.

Lord Rorsin studied the amethyst-hued flask for a few moments. Ebeian thought he was probably not looking at it so much as trying to work up the nerve to speak to Ciredor again.

“What is it?” the Soargyl finally asked.

“I thought you’d never ask,” came Ciredor’s easy reply. Ebeian sensed that the mage was simply toying with the slow lord and enjoying it.

“It is something your father hired me to do, before his untimely demise. His last wish, so to speak.”

Ebeian watched as Lord Rorsin’s head dipped slightly at the mention of his father’s death and saw how that reaction did not go unnoticed by the dark mage.

The bastard, Ebeian thought.

“Within this crystal is something very unique. One might call it a one-of-a-kind piece.”

The elf could see Ciredor lift the flask off of the table and allow the firelight to play on its many facets.

He is a good showman, I’ll give him that, Ebeian grudgingly admitted to himself. He knows how to work the angles. Lord Rorsin is very much out of his league here.

As Ebeian predicted, the blond man could not outwait Ciredor. He didn’t grasp the rules to this undeclared game.

“You still haven’t told me what it is,” he said, with a touch of petulance.

“I would have thought you would have guessed by now,” Ciredor answered, and as though he couldn’t resist the twist of the knife, he added, “and I would have thought your mother would have taught you better manners when speaking to a guest.”

The elf realized that Ciredor was not someone he wanted to be on the opposite side of. Ebeian could see that he had an unerring ability to find his opponent's weak spot and dig in. He wondered even more what this mage had done to Tazi and what it had taken her to drive him away. He listened even more closely, the pain in his shoulder all but forgotten.

"What I have here is both precious and useful. Mark my words, boy, that combination does not occur in this life very often." He carefully placed the flask back on the table. "That"—he pointed at the container with one long finger—"holds part of Thazienne Uskevren's soul."

It took all of Ebeian's self-control to remain silent at that revelation. How could that be, he wondered. When and how would the mage have been able to take *that* from her? His fingers practically bit into the doorknob as he, like Lord Rorsin, waited for an explanation. Even as it came, Ebeian realized when Ciredor could have accomplished it.

"I'm sure you recall the night your parents left this mortal coil," Ciredor began.

When this produced a nod from Rorsin and—Ebeian wasn't sure if it was a trick of the light or not—what appeared to be a tear from his pale, blue eyes, Ciredor continued his narrative.

"On that fateful evening, the Uskevrens," Ciredor began, and Ebeian noticed the subtle insult to Tazi's family name, "were hosting a party. As you know, many attendees were slaughtered just like your parents. The shadow creatures seemed to draw the very essence from their victims."

Ciredor paused for a moment, and Ebeian wondered if it was only for effect or if the necromancer actually appreciated the creatures.

"I am also quite certain you would remember that the Uskevrens nearly lost their only daughter during the attack. Or were you too overcome with grief to assimilate that fact at the time?" he questioned solicitously.

Ebeian could see that Rorsin was becoming flushed. The elf was silently rooting for the Soargyl to actually display a little backbone, but that didn't seem to be in the cards. He could also see that Ciredor recognized he wasn't going to get a bite from the lad this time. He hurried along with his story.

"With Thazienne gravely wounded and the household in disarray after the evening's slaughter, I saw my chance."

Ebeian watched in fascination as Ciredor continued as though he were alone.

"I had been waiting forever, it seemed, for just the right moment to claim that little bitch. I owed her so much. . . ."

Ciredor absently rubbed his chest for a moment before he realized where he was and regained his composure.

"Word spread quickly among the survivors of the debacle that Thazienne had been gravely wounded and her father had sent for High Songmaster Ammhaddan. It was simple enough for me, disguised as that very priest, to intercept Thamalon Uskevren's servant and be escorted inside. In they led me to poor little Tazi's bedroom, begging me to save her."

Ebeian's lips twisted in anger at the casual way Ciredor used Thazienne's special nickname.

"Her soul had been partially torn from her body, but still it lingered nearby. It was a difficult decision, whether to simply send that part of her to the Abyss and help the rest to follow or to take what was lost for myself."

He glanced at Rorsin to see if his audience was still hooked, and he wasn't disappointed.

"And all the while," the mage continued, pacing back and forth before the fire, "she lay there, so very . . . vulnerable."

Ebeian noticed how Ciredor savored that last word, as a cat might some delectable morsel.

"So I decided to take what was available for myself. I saw the value in it, and now I offer that to you," Ciredor finished, turning to stare at Rorsin.

Ebeian held his breath as he waited to hear what the Soargyl would say in response. All the while, his mind worked at how he could return Tazi's soul fragment back to her. This is what had been wrong with her all along, he reasoned, and now the elf could save her.

"I-I don't know what to say," Rorsin stammered, obviously frightened to anger the mage.

"Well, try, dear boy. I don't have all night."

With that, Ciredor seated himself in a cloud of maroon velvet back onto the couch.

"What I meant to say was that I wouldn't know what to do with something so 'precious,' as you phrased it. I have to wonder why you would be willing to part with it to someone like me."

Ebeian smiled from his hidden vantage point. Perhaps Rorsin might have a backbone after all.

"Here," the mage began, "try to follow along. If you have possession of part of Thazienne Uskevren's soul, you will have the ability to scry through her."

Both the elf and Ciredor realized Rorsin was confused.

"A window through her eyes," Ciredor explained. "You would have the inside view to all her family's dealings. I think even you," he added derisively, "can recognize what that could mean for you and your family."

"I guess I'm not making myself plainly understood," Rorsin interjected. "I don't understand why you would ever part with something that special?"

Good question, thought Ebeian. The elf had been wondering that himself. If Ciredor hated Tazi so much for that mysterious, past offense, why sell her so cheaply? Surely the dark mage could come up with a more interesting fate for her than this.

"I have to admit," Ciredor grudgingly revealed, "that you pose a good query, boy." He stood up and his maroon clothing turned black against the firelight. "I was never able to fulfill my bargain with your father and I find loose ends to be . . . annoying. As delightful a morsel as the splinter of little Tazi's soul is, I cannot

be bothered with fragments right now. They have no worth to me.”

Ebeian saw that Lord Rorsin was curious, and that curiosity emboldened him.

“No worth?” the lord asked.

Ciredor turned to gaze into the fire, and when he spoke again, Ebeian recognized that he did it more for himself than anyone else in the room.

“I have been collecting flasks such as these for some time now, and one like hers would be worthless. It would sully my offering. I wouldn’t risk that when I only need three more to complete my objective.”

“You’ve got more of these,” Rorsin pointed to the flask on the table, “here with you?”

Warming his thin, long fingers by the fire, Ciredor did not even turn around when he responded, “Not here, but in hot Calimport. I need only collect one more and I will be quit of this frigid city. Fannah’s is the last, and I need find only two other, minor souls.”

Ebeian’s green eyes grew wide at the mention of one of Tazi’s only friends.

“Though tonight,” Ciredor added as he turned to smile at Rorsin, “I find it quite comfortable here.”

Rorsin made no reply, not knowing how to. His smile fading, Ciredor became brusque.

“Enough dawdling, boy. Do you want what I have to offer, or has this evening been a waste of my time?”

Ebeian could sense Rorsin’s fear of Ciredor coming off of him like waves. His own mouth was drying out at the prospect of this bargain and what part he would have to play.

“I can’t refuse such an offer, can I?” Rorsin astutely answered. “But what amount could I possibly pay you?”

Ciredor’s easy smile returned at the sound of acquiescence.

“Don’t trouble your blond curls at this moment, dear boy. One day, I will come for my payment, and have no doubt, you will be able to pay.”

With that, he reached for the flask, covered it with both of his hands, and closed his eyes.

“A few words,” he told Rorsin, “and this bit of Thazienne Uskevren is yours.”

Ebeian could feel his bowels turn to water as he watched Ciredor close his eyes. The pain from his shoulder was already a memory. This was the moment, and there was no turning back, even if part of him might want to.

Ciredor had only spoken a word when the elf hurled himself from his hiding space. The double doors slammed open from the force of his explosive leap. Ebeian saw confusion register on both the faces of Rorsin and Ciredor, but surprise was his. Before Ciredor could react, Ebeian smashed the crystal flask from his grip. The momentum of that leap brought both necromancer and elf to the ground, upsetting the heavy teak table. The flask shattered on the floor.

Ebeian watched as gold wisps rose from the shards of the broken container, and he almost laughed aloud at the picture Ciredor presented, scrambling over to the pieces and his hands closing on empty air. The wisps stole their way to the fireplace and, in a deafening roar, they were gone through the chimney, extinguishing the flames in their wake.

“She’s free,” Ebeian whispered, forcing himself to his feet in the darkened room. He knew his moment was at hand, but he had given Tazi a gift no one else could.

Ciredor turned wildly in the elf’s direction. He stretched out his arms, and two green balls of light exploded from his fingertips. Ebeian was helpless before the spell and was flattened to the ground under its weight.

In two angry steps, Ciredor was at the elf’s side. Through a haze of pain, Ebeian saw Ciredor raise his hand in what was sure to be a killing blow, but he hesitated.

“What have we here?” asked Ciredor, almost gently,

the glow from his hands having revealed the thief's pointed ears.

Ebeian could feel Ciredor's icy hands on his face. Between the suffocating weight of Ciredor's magic and the pain from his shoulder he was nearly unconscious, but the elf could tell that Ciredor had raised his head from the floor and was lightly turning it this way and that.

"It is almost too impossible to be true," came Ciredor's shocked response. "An elf in this city . . . and one who bears the mark of Fenmarel Mestarine?"

Ebeian watched as at the wave of Ciredor's hand the heavy table righted itself. He could see that Rorsin had finally found his feet and was nearly to the door to the outer hallway, clearly out of his element. Ebeian could have laughed at the sight the boy presented. He looked for the entire world like a child waiting for the punishment of a schoolmaster, if he could have made any sound at all.

Ebeian was rapidly losing consciousness. His thoughts drifted back to Tazi. He could see her green eyes and smiling mouth, and he could hear her joyful giggles.

"You have no idea how special you are," Ciredor said, "and what is in store for you."

Ebeian was startled awake from his dazed vision to see black eyes boring into him. Turning his head slightly, he realized he was stretched out on the heavy table. Almost against his will, tears slipped from his eyes to run their course into his pointed ears.

In a low, melodic voice, Ciredor began a heinous chant. Pain exploded both inside and out of the elf's body. Rorsin crouched in the corner, unable to look. Gut-wrenching screams tore from Ebeian's lips. Outside, the sickly fog swallowed all light and sound.



CHAPTER 1

A TENDAY LATER

“Dark and empty,” Tazi spat out.

Her hair was plastered to her face, and the rain showed no sign of slowing. It was difficult enough trying to keep her balance on the taut rope but the winds added another element she had to compensate for. She couldn't even afford to wipe her hair away from her eyes. She needed her arms positioned right where they were for balance.

“This seemed like such a good idea a few hours ago,” she shouted over the wind, to no one in particular.

The only thing Thazienne Uskevren was not concerned with was discovery. In such foul weather, no one in their right mind would be out, let alone looking up between the tallhouses of this quarter of Selgaunt. There was nearly no

chance she would be seen, let alone heard, balanced as she was on a thin rope stretched between two of the more reputable buildings in the area.

She inched her way across the slick rope, with her night's reward clutched tightly in her right hand. It was her first theft in almost a year. The glass figure Tazi had pilfered was meant to be a gift but was quickly turning into useful ballast. With that in one hand, and her sack of tools in the other hand, arm outstretched for counterbalance, she was nearly to the opposite tallhouse and relative safety. Her lips began to curl upward in a slightly demented smile as her "wilding" neared its successful end. If the wind hadn't been howling so, she probably would have heard the telltale creak that rope makes just before it gives way, but she couldn't hear anything over the roar of the wind.

With only a few more paces to go, the line snapped near where it was tied off on the first roof. Tazi plummeted toward the ground with no time even to scream. Without thinking, she immediately let go of both her sack and the glass bauble she had so recently liberated. Using a move the family butler, Erevis Cale, had taught her a few years back, Tazi twisted to one side and curled herself into a tight ball. She began to tumble through the air in a more managed fashion and gain some control. She broke out of her somersault when she caught a glimpse of a pole screaming into view. It was fastened to the side of the second tallhouse.

Normally, the tallhouse owner's colors would have hung there, but the banner had been taken in due to the weather. Tazi grabbed onto the wooden staff and spun around it madly for a few revolutions. The rain, of course, as well as some moss had made the wood slick, and her dismount was uncontrolled, leaving much to be desired. Fortunately for her, the ground was not too far below.

Landing hard on her rump, Tazi lost her breath in one whoosh. Momentarily dazed, she could only blink water

from her eyes, a mostly useless exercise in the deluge. Even if she weren't dressed as a not-so-respectable young man, part of her normal, "evening" clothing when she was on jaunts such as this, anyone who knew her would have had a hard time recognizing her. The only daughter of one of Selgaunt's wealthiest families had come to rest ignominiously in a puddle of mud in the alleyway between the two tallhouses.

Regaining her composure, Tazi stood and disgustedly tried to wipe her leathers clean with her gloved hands, as she flexed this part of her and that to assess any injuries. Realizing there was little chance of cleaning off the bulk of the filth, Tazi allowed a foul expression to fix itself on her face. Acknowledging to herself that it was her pride that was wounded and nothing more, she began looking for her prize.

It only took a few moments of foraging for her to discover her sack, half hung up as it was on one of the lower window casements of the second tallhouse. The broken end of the rope swayed mockingly nearby and Tazi cursed herself for not examining her equipment more closely earlier in the evening. She decided to berate herself later and salvage at least something from this miserable night.

With a quick jump, she reclaimed her sack with slightly more grace than her previous endeavor. The glass figurine did not fair so well. It had smashed into a few large shards. Tazi held one piece up for a moment and examined it absently, then let the piece drop to the street and kicked at the remains viciously, lucky that her boots were tough leather.

"I quit," she cried aloud and began to make her way out to Rindall's Way.

As she had rightly suspected, Tazi passed no one on her slow march back to the Oxblood Quarter and the Shattered Kit Fox. With the unusually warm weather passed nearly a tenday ago, the blustery and wild conditions of Marpenoth had returned. Only the most

destitute or desperate would have no choice but to brave the inclement weather that night. And, of course, the serious sellers that Selgaunt was famous for. The climate, as it turned out, was a perfect match for Tazi's mood: stormy. The cloak she kept in her sack provided little cover and practically no warmth. All she wanted was a warm mug of wine and some dry clothes—and to be left in peace.

Such a simple job, she chided herself, and I still failed. What's wrong with me? she wondered, but she had no answer.

Soon enough, she was on Larawkan Lane, with the Kit in sight. The tavern had been her home away from home for nearly the past five years. Stormweather Towers, the Uskevren mansion, was spacious enough most of the time, but Tazi had discovered that keeping rooms at the Kit afforded her a certain amount of freedom that she found almost nowhere else. It was a place where, even though she was disguised, Tazi could be herself.

"There is privacy in anonymity," the family butler had once remarked to her. Like so many of his lessons, Tazi had taken it to heart.

She reached the battered door of the Kit and pushed at it, her anger fueling her. The door slammed open, drawing bemused stares from the few patrons inside. The foul weather had made for a slow night at the normally bustling tavern. At the sound of the clatter, the barkeep shot the newcomer an angry look. Tazi returned his glare for a moment before turning to close the door behind her. As Tazi passed under one of the glow lights fixed near a support timber, Alall, both barkeep and co-owner, was able to get a better glimpse of the sopping wet intruder. Recognition lit across his face, and his gray-grizzled jowls softened as he began to smile.

Ignoring his welcoming look, Tazi made for a table in the northwest corner of the bar. She shook off her wet cloak and slung it on a nearby stool with her sack. Slumping into a chair against the wall, she began to

peel off some of her outer garments, but not enough clothes to ruin the illusion that she was a young man. She was always careful about that. As Tazi began to scrub ineffectually at her soaked hair, a dishrag was suddenly thrust under her nose.

“Here you go, poppet,” Alall offered. “I believe you’ve brought in enough water tonight to rival the River Arkhen,” he chuckled good-naturedly.

Tazi quietly accepted the cloth and began to towel dry her short, dark locks.

Not too put off by her silence, the barkeep continued, “What can I offer you to warm yourself? Some hot cider or a mug of mulled wine?”

“Just some hot wine, Alall,” Tazi replied abruptly, not looking him in the eye.

“Right away,” he cheerfully answered, but the cheer was somewhat forced.

Alall had a keen, albeit somewhat aged eye, and he knew something was troubling the cleverly disguised woman in front of him. In fact, he suspected something had been bothering her for some months. He decided to try another tactic.

“I’ll see if I can scare up my good-for-nothing wife and get her into the kitchen for you,” Alall said, as he lit the gutted candle on her table.

Tazi looked up sharply until she realized that Alall was teasing with his “good-for-nothing” remark.

“Don’t trouble Kalli on my account,” she said.

“No trouble for you, poppet,” he replied.

He walked away before Tazi could come up with another reason not to eat.

Tazi sighed and leaned back in her chair as she watched Alall bustle off. She shook her head disgustedly. There was just no stopping the innkeeper once he had a notion fixed in his gray head. Normally, she felt comfortable and safe there. Nevertheless, she was antsy and agitated.

“It must be these wet things,” she mumbled and tried to dry herself with Alall’s dishrag.

As she blotted her throat and shoulders, Tazi winced when she ran the cloth over a section of her chest. She dropped the rag and ran her hand along her breastbone. Once more she realized that the wound had long since healed over. There was hardly any trace of the scar left after all this time, just the memory of pain. Almost against her will, though, Tazi found her thoughts drifting back to that fateful evening nearly two years past.

It had all started out well enough. The typical family response to a semi-important festival day: over the top and all the most elite of Selgaunt in attendance. Tazi had again favored a Cormyrean-styled gown chosen to drive her mother, Shamur, to distraction. Some details were vague but Tazi smiled slightly as she was sure Shamur had been angry about her clothing selection that evening. Tazi was also certain her mother was angered by the fact that her daughter was once again ignoring the eligible men Shamur carefully positioned before her. Tazi had chosen to give most of her attention to the daughter of a family friend: Meena Foxmantle. Tazi had chosen this course for its aggravation value alone.

Meena was not the most exciting company, being rather a mousy sort of girl. Normally, Tazi would have only spent time with her if she had been forced to, but more than anything she enjoyed being contrary where her mother was concerned. Talking to a girl all evening was not what Shamur expected her daughter to do.

As the evening and Meena's ceaseless prattle dragged on, Tazi recalled letting her eyes wander. She remembered her elf friend Ebeian had been in attendance, but he was too busy working the room to do more than nod in her direction. Of course, Erevis Cale managed to catch her glance more than once that evening.

Erevis . . .

"What can I fix up for you?" a warm voice interrupted.

Tazi was startled out of her reverie by the question. She looked up into the hazel eyes of Alall's wife Kalli.

The tall woman loomed over Tazi, who sat hunched in the corner. Almost as old as Alall, Kalli stood a good head taller than her husband. Tazi could tell that Kalli, like Alall, was trying to mask the concern etched on her face with little success.

“Please don’t bother, Kalli,” Tazi said with a half-hearted smile. “I told Alall not to trouble you, but he just doesn’t seem to listen to anyone but you once he gets an idea stuck in his head.”

“He knows well enough to mind me,” she replied jokingly, almost distracted by Tazi’s comment. But too many years in the Sembian army had trained the woman well. She could recognize misdirection when it came her way. “It really is no trouble. You should have something substantial inside you, especially if you’ve been up to no good.” At this, Kalli gave a slight nod to Tazi’s cloak and sack. “Even a bit of stew would do you good.”

Tazi would have bridled if her mother had talked to her like that, even though their infamous quarreling had softened over the past year to something more like gentle fencing. But with Kalli, she had never felt anything other than companionship. Tazi respected and even envied the quiet discipline the older woman possessed. It went beyond her years of military service and training. Tazi recognized that Kalli felt complete in herself and with who she was.

“Maybe just a little stew, if it isn’t too much trouble,” she relented, mostly to please Kalli but also to buy herself some time alone.

The tall woman brushed a strand of her slightly graying blond hair from her eyes, and her strong features relaxed some at Tazi’s acquiescence.

“No trouble where you’re concerned.” With that, she headed off to the kitchen.

Tazi’s gaze drifted to the flickering light of the candle, and she shivered slightly. She could hear the rain pounding outside. It would take some time before her

leathers would dry out after the night's failed escapade. While it would only take a few moments to wander upstairs to her rented room and change, Tazi found that she was suddenly too tired to bother. Her failure weighed her down. Nothing seemed to go her way and hadn't since that night. Involuntarily, her fingers trailed lightly across the faint scar on her chest. Once again, Tazi was caught up with memories.

That night had carried on so uneventfully. Tazi's only recollection of her conversation with Meena was her saying something about Steorf. That had captured Tazi's full attention. It had been many months since Tazi had seen or heard much about the mage-in-training. She had broken off their relationship after she had discovered in a most foul manner that the young man had been hired by her father to keep her out of harm's way and clean up after her. Tazi wasn't able to get past the sense of betrayal she felt. She could number on one hand those people she counted as friends, and she had thought he was one of them. She couldn't take the fact that it appeared that he was a hired friend.

As much as that stung, still she found herself scanning the room for him at Meena's mention. While her sea-green eyes were not able to find his tall, blond figure that didn't mean he wasn't somehow there. He was a formidable enough mage in his own right that a cloaking spell would have been easy enough to manage. That night wasn't the first time that thought had crossed her mind. Sometimes she just sensed he was near, somehow, but before she could look much more, all hell was unleashed in the main hall.

Black shadow creatures descended on the unsuspecting guests as well as a veritable army of ghouls. While the ghouls fought in the expected fashion, those revelers the shadow demons managed to slash paid a horrible price. Tazi had watched as one victim after another fell under their claws. As the victims were ripped open, wispy vapors escaped their bodies. The fiendish wraiths seemed

to feed on the vapors, and as the mist left the wounded person's body, the corpse itself shriveled away, leaving nothing but a dried husk behind.

Tazi couldn't remember how many of those creatures invaded her home. Defensive pockets of people formed as both ghouls and shadow monsters made their way through the crowds. Some of the guests fell while others tried to protect themselves. She recalled grabbing Meena by the hand, who had become immobilized at the sight of the creatures. Tazi had planned to drag her over to where her parents were circled by the family guard. She thought they would stand a better chance there. Only a few ghouls stood in her way. Since Tazi had defied her parents' orders, she was not unarmed as were so many others in the main hall.

She had hidden an enchanted dagger beneath the folds of her dress. It only took a moment to grab it and free herself of a few of those folds at the same time. Without the long skirt of her gown tripping her up, Tazi had been able to move more freely. It was a good maneuver on her part, for a ghoul was eyeing Meena and herself. Realizing her companion was helpless, Tazi knew it was up to her to save them both.

The ghoul was formidable, and it did an insidious job toying with Tazi. As soon as she saw her opening, Tazi had slashed the creature's throat and drove her dagger home as the ghoul writhed on the ground, gushing purple blood. Seizing Meena once more, Tazi again tried to reach her parents and the guard, but a shadow had other plans.

With her parents only a few paces away, a shadow demon descended in front of Tazi, cutting her off. She immediately shoved Meena behind her and brandished her enchanted dagger. Of everything that happened that night, Tazi most remembered the icy yellow eyes of the shadow and how they bored into her very being—and how hungry they were. She felt caught by their intensity. The only thing that snapped her to awareness had been the sound of Cale shouting her name.

Overcome by the horror, Meena fainted dead away. Tazi had no choice other than to position herself over the insensate girl. She couldn't abandon Meena. She slashed at the shadow, which swirled around her, to no avail. Once more, she heard Cale scream her name and she recalled fearing he was somehow in mortal danger. Perhaps those thoughts distracted her enough, she wasn't sure, but the shadow moved in with lightning speed to rake her with its talons. Though she was agile enough to sidestep the brunt of the attack, the creature still tore open her shoulder. The blow brought Tazi to her knees. She dropped her dagger and clutched at her shoulder. Once again the shadow swooped in and sliced across Tazi's chest.

Instead of the warm blood Tazi thought she was going to feel ooze down her chest, a chill stole over her. It was as though she was sinking in cold waters. She could vaguely make out the face of Erevis Cale, but it had an unreal quality to her. A gray mist obscured her vision then, and everything became darkness.

Tazi couldn't remember much after that. Her parents later told her what they were able to learn about the shadows. It seemed that they fed off the souls of their victims. Many had perished that night, but Tazi was spared, thanks to Cale's brave intervention. She was told he managed to stop the shadow demon before it was actually able to feed on her soul. Furthermore, after he successfully wounded and drove the creature from the Uskevren mansion, most of Tazi's essence flowed back into her. It took song priests many hours to reunite the rest of her soul and life-force with her body. Tazi recalled the long and painful months of recuperation that followed.

She trained tirelessly, trying to regain her former strength and agility, but every day was a struggle. She was amazed to discover how weak she had become, and she was too frightened to admit it to anyone. Those closest to her saw how tired and pale she was, but she

persevered through her own self-imposed training and had reached a point, or so she thought, when she was ready to try her hand at some of her more larcenous activities. When the winds of Marpenoth turned cool again, Tazi woke up feeling oddly refreshed. She took it as a sign that she was ready again, but she had failed tonight.

"Sorry to interrupt your daydreams," Kalli said, "but your stew's ready."

Kalli looked at her, clearly disturbed by the vacant look in Tazi's eyes.

"It looks good," Tazi replied after a moment's hesitation. "It should be fine," she added, sensing Kalli wanted her to say something else.

Kalli placed both her hands on the wooden table and leaned closer to Tazi.

"Child, what is wrong?" she whispered.

Tazi looked up into Kalli's face. She could see how worried Kalli was. Glancing past the older woman's shoulder, Tazi could see that Alall was watching the scene from behind the bar. As soon as Tazi caught his eye, he turned his attention back to the mug he had ostensibly been polishing for the past five minutes. If everything had been normal, Tazi would have laughed at the two mother hens clucking over her, but all she felt was suffocation.

"Just leave it be," she whispered to Kalli and saw the hurt register on the woman's face.

Kalli straightened her back and turned to leave. Tazi shot out her hand and caught the woman's wrist lightly. Kalli turned at her touch.

"One day," Tazi promised, "I'll try to explain."

If I'm ever able to explain it to myself, she thought.

"When you're ready, child, I am always ready to listen. You know I . . ." but the older woman was unable to say more. Tazi's words had been enough to soften Kalli.

"I know," Tazi said sincerely and squeezed Kalli's hand once before letting go.

Kalli smiled at her and walked away, leaving Tazi to her solitude.

She picked absently at the bowl of steaming stew, one of Kalli's finer concoctions, with little interest. She knew if she didn't at least play with the bowl for a little bit, either Kalli or Alall would find some excuse to come back over and worry over her. Tazi really didn't want to say something to either of them that she would regret later. They had been too good to her over the years to deserve that kind of treatment. The only other person outside her family that she had known longer than the Ulols was Steorf.

Why does his name keep floating up tonight? she wondered.

Pushing the bowl away from herself, Tazi reached for the mug of wine. She sipped at it slowly, feeling its warmth start to spread through her. She warned herself not to drink too much without food, but Tazi had already decided she would spend the night in her rooms here. Her condition, inebriated or otherwise, really wouldn't make any difference. She hoped the wine would help her forget the evening's failure.

Tazi set the mug down and pushed her fingers through her drying locks. She leaned her chair back against the wall, balancing herself on its back legs, and closed her eyes. Her mind would not stop replaying her fall from between the buildings. Like a dog worrying a bone, she kept playing the scene over and over. Abruptly, Tazi slammed down the chair with a thud. She balled her hands into fists and stared at them as they rested on the wooden table, as though they were separate entities.

"Why can't it be like before?" she whispered plaintively, suddenly shivering again.

She reached for her mug, hoping to drive the chill away, but a strong hand grabbed hers. Without looking to see who it was, Tazi used her free hand to reach for the dagger she kept secreted in her boot. Gripping its

worn handle, she drew the small but deadly weapon out in a flash. Her unwanted guest didn't flinch at the blade brandished before him.

"I've faced worse," he said simply.

Tazi froze at the sound of his voice. She glanced past him and saw that no one seemed to notice him standing before her. Tazi stared up at the hooded man in shock and amazement. She didn't need him to pull back his black hood for her to recognize him, but as though he read her last thoughts, the stranger used his free hand to pull the hood away from his face. Tazi found herself staring into the gray eyes of a man she hadn't seen in two years: Steorf.

His blond hair was a little longer, she noticed, and slightly unkempt. It gave him a wilder look, Tazi thought. Even though his black cloak still obscured most of his body, Tazi could see he was just as muscular as she remembered. She found herself momentarily curious as to how much more powerful his magic had become since they were last together. It didn't take long, however, for her surprise to be quickly replaced with anger. Though she might wonder about him and his abilities, she had neither forgotten nor forgiven his betrayal.

Not lowering her dagger, Tazi replied, "While you *think* you might have faced worse, do you really want to find out?"

Steorf didn't even blink at her bravado. He yanked Tazi to her feet. While she stared at him in a stunned fashion, he reached over with his free hand and passed it across her sack and cloak.

"You'll need those," he said.

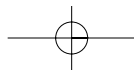
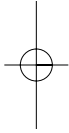
Too startled by his actions to speak, Tazi removed her gear from the stool. She noticed that both items were bone dry, and a quick pass of her hand over her vest revealed that all her clothes were dry as well.

"Just what do you want?" she asked the mage.

She wondered what could have possessed him to act

in this manner. He took her arm and led her from the taproom into the stormy night.

“There is something you have to see,” he answered enigmatically.





CHAPTER 2

THE LADY'S THIGH INN

How?" was the only word Tazi managed to choke out as she stood in the doorway of Ebeian's room.

For the entire march from the Oxblood Quarter to the Lady's Thigh Inn, Steorf had not spoken one word to her. The only thing he had done to acknowledge her presence was to extend the ward that kept him dry to cover her as well. Tazi found herself wondering if he was simply playing at being the silent type for some sort of effect, marching a step ahead of her the whole way. Standing in Ebeian's door, she understood that there would have been no words for him to describe to her what lay in this room. She would not have believed him.

Tazi recalled that she had always teased Ebeian about his almost insane penchant for

neatness. He had explained to her once after an evening escapade of theirs that there was a method to his madness.

“It’s like this,” he had told her. “If I keep the room impeccable, it’s much harder for someone to nose around through my things without my noticing.” He shot her a pointed look at that before snuggling closer to her and adding, “By maintaining everything scrupulously precise and to a minimum, there’s less of a chance of leaving tell-tale clues as to my business.”

In fact, it was when Tazi was snooping through his things that he’d caught her in the act. He had, in turn, discovered a few of her secrets that day. Since then, they became slightly more than friends.

Her father, of all people, had once tried to pair her up with the elf “silver trader” when Ebeian first appeared in Selgaunt. Tazi decided to do a little investigating of her prospective beau. Before Ebeian stopped her, she’d discovered that the elf was a fraud, simply accepting payments from clients in Waterdeep to fund his travels. He was no more than a glorified servant, running errands for the wealthy with no real fortune of his own. But she discovered he was ambitious and was always looking for a deal. Ebeian was made for Selgaunt, or, rather, he *had* been made for Selgaunt. All that remained of her sometimes lover was scattered about his rented room.

As Tazi stepped across the threshold into the dimly lit chamber, she was almost overcome by the smell of rotting flesh. It took all of her control not to gag on her own rising gorge. Against the far wall was Ebeian’s bed and Tazi saw what looked like his head and part of his torso. The rest of him was scattered in between. There were flies buzzing everywhere.

As though moving through a dream, she carefully picked her way around and over what turned out to be chunks of her friend, littering the floor. Tazi had to duck under one of the cross beams because it was festooned

with ribbons. She paused to stare at the innocuous sight, so out of place in the chamber of death, and Steorf, who had never left her side since she entered the room, murmured something. His right hand immediately started to glow and he held it up closer to the ribbons. Tazi blanched at what his light revealed.

The ribbons hanging the length of the timber were entrails. She squeezed her eyes shut and swayed slightly, stepping on something decidedly spongy. Steorf grabbed her upper arm, fearing she might stumble. As soon as he did this, Tazi whirled to face him. His touch had galvanized her into action.

“Who did this to him?” she demanded fiercely, her sea-green eyes blazing. Steorf involuntarily took a step back at her vehemence.

“I haven’t been able to discover that yet,” he replied, “but I wanted you to know what had transpired without delay. Considering the nature of your friendship—” he paused, almost tripping on that last word—“what happened to Ebeian could come back to you.”

He looked down at her with his solemn gray eyes.

It took a moment for his words to sink in. When they did, Tazi was indignant.

“Are you saying you or someone else could think I did this to him?”

“Once again, Thazienne Uskevren, you misunderstand me,” he answered gravely. “When I discovered Ebeian like this, I was concerned there was the possibility that you might be in jeopardy as well.”

Tazi peered up at Steorf closely for a moment, weighing his words a little more carefully. What she said next was somewhat difficult for her to tender.

“Thank you for that. We need to find out who did this to him, though, and why.”

Tazi could see various emotions briefly flicker across the young mage’s face. He looked both pleased and sheepish at her words.

The mage said, “I believe the best way for us to do

that is to bring in a cleric of Mystra. He would be able to speak with the dead.

“It is one of the necromancy spells,” he added quietly, “that I have not yet mastered.”

Ignoring his look of discomfort, Tazi ordered, “Then do it now, before any more time passes. Judging by the smell and the flies”—she motioned to the clouds of insects—“we’ve already lost enough of that. I’ll pay whatever they ask.”

Steorf looked hard at her.

“Coin,” he said evenly, “has never been an issue for me. Will you be all right here with him?”

Tazi turned to face Ebeian’s bed and nodded briefly. With that, Steorf turned like some great bird of prey and was gone, leaving Tazi alone.

She stood staring at the bed a few paces away, collecting herself. With Steorf gone, the room took on a menacing air. Every creak the floorboards made as Tazi neared the bed she had often shared with the elf was like a scream. Her nerves were stretched to their limits. Death was something she didn’t see much of, but when Tazi did, it was always horrific, and this time it had claimed someone close to her.

Tazi reached the bed and could feel the sting of tears behind her eyes. She rubbed at them and forced herself to look closely at what was left of her friend. Carefully, she sat down near his remains and rummaged through her sack. She was surprised to find she had stuffed Alall’s rag in there without realizing it.

Almost gingerly, even though she knew Ebeian couldn’t feel anymore, Tazi began to wipe his face free of the caked blood. She wanted to do something for him, to see his face as it had been, but she also needed to keep busy for her own sake. The coppery smell of blood was overwhelming and nauseating, and the entrails strewn about recalled a gruesome night for her. She found herself dragged into memories she had desperately tried to forget.