

# SEEDS OF DOUBT

The cover art features three stylized characters against a black background. On the left is a warrior with a dark beard and intense blue eyes, wearing red and grey armor with a large silver pauldron. In the center is a man with a serious expression, wearing a blue robe with a white collar and a sword slung across his chest. On the right is a man with a long dark beard and blue eyes, wearing orange and blue armor with a decorative helmet. The overall style is reminiscent of classic fantasy role-playing game art.

DARK DESCENT  
BOOK II

CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES



After a few seconds passed, the fog around his mind started to clear and the scene in front of him took shape, but it only filled him with more confusion. Instead of looking at the side of the carriage, he was looking at the floor. Hadn't he been sitting up? He looked down and saw that he was kneeling on the side of the carriage. Somehow, while he was lost in his thoughts, his mobile prison had tipped over. But how could that have happened? he asked himself, raising a hand to his face. That was when he realized his arms were free. He quickly looked down and saw that in the tumult, the chains holding him to the floor had broken. He was free!

Suddenly, strong hands grabbed him from behind. They latched onto his shoulders, yanked him to the ground, and dragged him out of the carriage. Pain shot through his body again as he was pulled across the ground. Then, he was roughly flipped over and jerked to his feet. When his eyes lifted from the ground and his mind cleared, he looked up, expecting to see Dex. Surely, that was who had rescued him from the wreckage? He was wrong.

Standing in front of him, with blood streaming down the side of his head, was one of the guards that had been escorting the carriage. The man's face was caked with dirt and painted with rage. He looked at Druzeel in anger and eyes burning with fire.

“What's—”

That one word was all Druzeel managed to say before the guard reared back and swung his sword at Druzeel's head.

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*December 2014*

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Printed in the USA

Cover art by Christopher Lapidés  
First Printing: January 2014

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For Shenaë. I still miss your smile.





# PROLOGUE

The streets were bathed in the blue light of Lunaria, which hung low in the sky, but the dark streets of Pelartis looked almost purple. The red stones that made up the wide avenues mixed in with the cerulean glow and made it look as if most of the city was paved with amethysts. Usually, the moon shone white, which helped bring out the rich colors of the stone and metal that decorated the tall towers and structures that made up the city, but with Solaris slowly creeping over the horizon, the warm color of the morning sky blended with the dim glow of the sinking moon, turning everything azure. It really was a beautiful sight and many of the people that were still walking the streets took a moment to bask in the beauty that was the amalgam of night and day. Many of them only paused for a few moments for they had others matters to attend to, such as finding a bed to sleep in, and wanted to be off the streets before the new day began. They had completed their business, be it noble or malicious, and slumber was their reward for work well done. Unfortunately, there were those that could not retreat to the comfort of their beds. Though they had been working for most of the night, the events of the last few hours told them that sleep was still many hours away, if it managed to find them at all.

Many of the Pillars, the name given to those that had decided to dedicate their lives to the safety and security of Pelartis, had been up well past their normal working hours and wanted nothing more than to find somewhere to rest their heads. They wanted sleep, they wanted to dream, and they wanted a soft pillow against their cheek, but all three were unlikely to happen any time soon. They mumbled and groaned but most of them kept their complaints to themselves. They were soldiers and this was a part of their lives.

For those that were lucky enough not to have been working last night,

they were just waking, emerging from slumber to begin their eight-hour shift. They stretched their arms, ate a good breakfast, and set off to report to the barracks, unaware of what awaited them. As they entered the large building of stone and bronze plates, intending to relieve those men and women that had been working during the night, they found themselves thrown into a tumult of shouting captains and flustered fellow Pillars, all of which looked haggard and worn. Once such guard—Fourth Pillar Kanter Elmis—was one of those newly awakened men that had walked into the chaos.

“What’s going on?” he asked a fellow Pillar, one who carried dark circles under his eyes. He knew better than to ask those he had arrived with what was happening for they would be just a clueless as he was.

“There was a series of murders last night,” the man with bloodshot eyes replied as he sat and slapped the bottom of his boot, which he had taken off his foot. A few small pebbles fell to the ground. As Kanter quickly put on his armor and donned his sword, he watched as the small stone was kicked away as another group of Pillars rushed by.

“Those responsible have been caught but the captains are saying there may be others involved that are still roaming free,” the man said as he replaced his boot on his foot.

As soon as Kanter finished getting ready, he and the man walked from the room to the large meeting hall, which held dozens of Pillars, all lining up, getting ready to receive their orders. Most of the time, this room would consist of only twelve or so guards, those that were just beginning their work for the day, but now it held almost three dozen, including those men and women that had been working all night. Everyone was standing in a series of lines. Those that had just arrived were wondering what was going on. Questions were being asked of others about the deaths that had apparently happened only a few hours ago. Kanter, wanting to know more as well, followed the man he was speaking with.

“I’ve been involved in more than a handful of murder investigations,” Kanter said, looking at the tired man beside him, “but never have I seen such commotion.” In his four years of service, he had seen dozens of dead bodies, most of them victims of bar quarrels that had got out of hand. He had seen a few assassinations but even when they had no idea who the culprit was, the Pillars had never been rallied so.

“Well,” the man said, “apparently one of the victims was that crazy old archmage. Pallis or something.”

“Piyus?!” Kanter said in shock. “Piyus the Magnificent?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“You’re saying that Piyus the Magnificent is dead?” Kanter could not believe his ears. Piyus was a very powerful archmage that lived in the city, one of the most powerful wizards in the city in fact. Kanter only knew of him because he had trained with another Pillar that was something of a magic enthusiast. The man did nothing but talk about magic and those who used it, including the eccentric archmage. Even though he had no inclination to the mystical arts, he loved to read and talk about it. He never seemed to shut up about the wonderful and all-powerful Piyus the Magnificent. Kanter could not believe, based on what he had heard about the man, that someone had managed to kill him.

“Yeah,” the tired man replied. “Found him with a dagger stuck in his chest. In fact, the murders were still—”

“Listen up!” came a shout from the front of the room.

One of the captains strode in and stood in front of the men. The tired man and Kanter, as well as the entire room, immediately went silent and stood a rigid as statues. Their eyes went forward, they held their shoulders square, and they put their arms at their sides. Kanter looked to the captain, listening intently. The man wore a look similar to the Pillar he had just been speaking with. Dark circles sat under his eyes and even though he held himself with strength, Kanter could see the weariness in the man’s shoulders. It appeared that no one from last night had gotten any rest.

“As I am sure you are aware,” the captain said in a loud, deep voice, “there was a series of murders last night. Those responsible for at least two of the occurrences have been caught and placed in the dungeons. We think that those responsible for the third are still in the city and may be connected with the ones in custody. We need to find them and bring them in before any more harm is done, but we still need men guarding the crime scenes. That’s you,” he said, pointing in their direction. “We don’t know if this last group may try to cover the tracks of the others so we want all these areas watched. If they show up, you are to do your best to take them alive. When we have all we need from those areas, those of you from last night’s watch will be able to get some rest, but not until then.” The man took a deep breath. Kanter could see the weariness in his eyes.

“It’s going to be a long day,” the captain said.

After those last words, the man turned and left. A trio of Ninth Pillars stepped forward and divided the lines into groups. When they were finished, there were three groups of eleven or so Pillars. Kanter found himself separated from the man he spoke with earlier and soon caught up in the rush to get to their assigned locations. Before he knew what was happening, he was on

horseback, following one of the Ninth Pillars down the street. The man never told them where they were going. They all just followed. As they quickly traveled through the city, Kanter looked around, suddenly envying those he could not see.

There were those that were not even aware of what was happening, he said to himself. The average Pelartian was still tucked away in bed, lost in their dreams. Soon they would awake to a sky filled with sunshine and a city whose streets would be packed with people, many of which would have no knowledge of what had happened last night. True, many shopkeepers and merchants were already awake, but they were too busy preparing their shops or carts for business to look to the Pillars that were rushing by. A few glanced in their direction, but they quickly turned back to their duties. Morning was still a few hours away, but preparing a large business for the rush of customers could sometimes take an hour or two. Bakers were warming up their ovens, blacksmiths were preparing their furnaces, and dozens of other merchants were dusting off jewelry, clothing, and a variety of other items, making them clean and tidy for wandering customers to see. For them, making coin and staying in business were their only concerns. At the moment, Kanter wished that he were among them, only worrying about what was in his pockets and not the gruesome scene he was surely heading for.

As they turned down the next alley, Kanter quickly figured out where they were heading. He knew that in the next few moments he would be standing in front of that odd, domed-shaped building that everyone in the city knew of. He knew he was heading toward The Eye of All Things, the home of the outlandish archmage. So, he said to himself, it is true. Piyus really is dead.

For some reason, a sense of dread coursed through him. He had seen a fair amount of dead bodies and even been part of a contingent of guards that had taken down a killer, but he had never felt anything while hunting those men or searching a crime scene. During those times, he had been able to keep his emotions in check and under control, but knowing who had died, knowing that a powerful archmage had been killed, made him a little bit nervous. What type of person can take down someone with so much power? he asked himself. How strong and evil can they be? Luckily, the killers had been caught, but there may be others like them running loose in the city. To Kanter, that truly was an unsettling thought.

The Ninth Pillar leading them slowed down, indicating that they had arrived. Kanter had been so involved in his thoughts that he had not even noticed until his mount slowed to a trot. Luckily, the horse knew what to do and as the surrounding horses slowed, it did the same.

He looked up and saw the large dome before him. Its mirrored surface reflected the torch light of the nearby buildings and the light coming over the horizon. In a few more hours, the strange building would look like a shell of sunlight, though Kanter knew from experience that the reflection would not be nearly as harsh as it should be. Some type of magic kept the archmage's home from blinding everyone that looked at it. Kanter suddenly found himself wondering if the magic would still hold now that Piyus was dead. I guess I'll know soon enough, he thought.

As they came around the long fence, Kanter saw a few Pillars standing in front of the archway that led into the building. The opening they guarded was nothing but a square of darkness. Kanter couldn't see anything inside. It appeared to be a doorway to nowhere, but he knew better. It led inside, where more Pillars would be, combing over the interior, gathering information about the death of Piyus. Another handful of guards were walking the grounds, looking all around the building, apparently searching for points of entry. Half a dozen stood at the gates, patiently waiting for the approaching Pillars' arrival.

Kanter dismounted when they came to a stop and fell into line with the others. They stood before the large gates of the archmage's home. Each gate, which was wide open, was adorned with a large M that sparkled like a starry night. Surrounding the elegant letter was beautiful scrollwork consisting of leaves, flowers, and odd symbols that were surely runes of some sort. Since he was not learned in the ways of magic, Kanter had no way of knowing.

"Captain Tilgramin," Kanter heard the Ninth Pillar that had led them here say. He tore his eyes from the gates and looked to the man standing in front of the men that had been waiting for them.

Captain Scarost Tilgramin stood almost six feet tall and held piercing blue eyes. He carried a strong, square chin, an aquiline nose, slim eyebrows, and short, dark hair. A small scar painted his right cheek and another peaked just above his collar. Just standing there the man looked impressive. He had an air about him that said control, strength, and courage. He just looked like someone who knew he was destined to be a leader of men.

Scarost was one of the most well known and respected Pillars in the city. Though many of the men disliked him because of his strict demeanor, they thought highly of him. He treated everyone as equals, unless they gave him reason not to, and was extremely disciplined. He was a strict follower of the law and some said he would be the next High Captain, but only if the current head of the Pillars ever left his post. Since Xavdak Warstout, the current High Captain of Pelartis, was a dwarf, most knew Scarost would most likely be dead before he had his shot at the top. Dwarves lived a long time.

“Ninth Pillar Kimbal,” Scarost said and offered the customary greeting, a fist held over his heart. “Divide your men,” he said, getting straight to the point. “I want half to relieve these men at the gates, three for the archway, and the final three to join the others inside. I want you inside as well. The Eye is a large place and we have much to cover.”

Kimbal nodded and divided his men. Kanter managed to hold back a frown when he found that he would be one of the six that would be guarding the gates and the fence, though a small part of him let loose a sigh of relief. It would have been excellent to see the inside of a place as marvelous as The Eye of All Things, but he had no desire to witness the massacre that had surely taken place. He had heard the whispers of the men that he was relieving that most, if not all of The Eye’s inhabitants had been brutally murdered in their sleep. Though he had no qualms about being around the dead or blood, deep inside he felt *that* this particular scene was not something he wanted to witness.

Ninth Pillar Kimbal, Captain Tilgramin, and six of the Pillars that had just arrived walked toward the entrance of The Eye. Three of them took the place of the men guarding the archway while the others walked inside, disappearing from sight. Kanter actually had to rub his eyes for as soon as the bodies passed through the archway, they were gone, as if a blanket of black had just been pulled behind them. He knew that some type of magic kept the insides of the domed structure from revealing its secrets to all but those that were allowed entrance.

“You two keep watch at the gates,” came a voice from behind Kanter. He turned to see one of the Pillars he had arrived with pointing at him and another guard. He almost said something but noticed that the man was a Fifth Pillar, which gave him the right to issue commands to lower ranking guards. “We’ll walk the perimeter.”

Kanter nodded and took his place to the right of the gates as the others started to patrol the fence. He stood with his back against the cold stone and watched as those men he had been sent to replace mounted the horses he and the others had brought with them. With hardly a glance back at the archmage’s home, they rode off. Kanter didn’t know if they had actually been dismissed or reassigned. Based on what he had heard when he first arrived at the barracks, they would be soon patrolling another part of the city after a very short reprieve. It seemed that no one that worked last night was going to get rest any time soon.

The three guards that had been replaced at the archway walked past Kanter with hardly a word. Two of them kept on walking, their bodies clearly showing how tired they were. Kanter was unsure of where they were heading but did

not envy the men. They looked exhausted.

The third man stood just a few feet from Kanter. He was a short man with messy hair, ashy skin, a scraggly beard, and dark, beady eyes. His other features were almost rodent-like, with a sharp nose, large eyes, and a pointed mouth. As Kanter stared at him, the man leaned back and stretched his back. He let loose a deep breath and shook his head to each side, trying to push away his fatigue.

“How is it in there?” asked Second Pillar Jeric Youngsky, the guard that was watching the gates with Kanter.

The man slowly turned and shot Jeric a glare that could crack stone. He looked annoyed, angry, and tired. Kanter then saw that the man was an Eighth Pillar. That shouldn’t have mattered but he was clearly in no mood to talk.

“Were you ordered to speak?” he asked in a rude voice. Jeric, taken aback by the comment, just stared at the Eighth Pillar in surprise.

“I–” he began but the man cut him off.

“Just shut up and guard,” the Eighth Pillar said, turning away. He let loose a yawn and walked away. Kanter and Jeric watched as he disappeared into a nearby alleyway. Apparently, he had been dismissed.

“Who was that?” Kanter asked, perplexed by the man’s rudeness.

“I...I don’t know,” Jeric responded, a shiver passing through him. “I’m glad I didn’t ask him anything else.”

Kanter said nothing after that. He just stared at the alleyway the Eighth Pillar had walked down. He had almost asked the man a question as well. After seeing his demeanor, he was glad that Jeric was quicker. Clearly, whoever that was, he was not very happy.



The stench of blood and dead flesh was engrossed in his nose. The bottoms of his boots were painted with the stuff and the sides were stained red. Even his knee guards held bits of dried blood. His back throbbed from both the lack of sleep and tedious work. His knees ached as well for he must have knelt down over a hundred times, peering under furniture, gathering fallen books, or carefully rolling dead bodies out of the way so the wizards could better examine the massacre he had just left. Amazingly, he had avoided getting the sticky fluids on his hands by moving slowly and cautiously through the murder scene. Unfortunately, his knees were suffering for the cleanliness of his hands. He was sore, tired, and angry, and those stupid guards and their idiotic questions were doing nothing to elevate his mood. He needed sleep and

a bath, but it would still be some time before he had either.

Regardless of when he managed to have some sort of rest, he knew it would not be the relaxing kind. For almost two hours, he had been around nothing but blood and gore, helping Captain Tilgramin, the city's wizards, and his fellow Pillars investigate the murder of Piyus the Magnificent and those that dwelt inside his home. The old wizard's body was relatively clean, but the others looked to have been caught in the path of a rampaging dragon. They had all been torn to pieces, seemingly caught by the murderer while they slept. The Eye of All Things had been left a very violent and disgusting slaughterhouse, a slaughterhouse that he had been ordered to clean up. When he finally managed to close his eyes, he knew he would be seeing nothing but shredded flesh, faces frozen in terror, and walls painted in blood. Even he could not sleep soundly through that.

When a new contingent of Pillars had arrived, Captain Tilgramin had ordered him to the barracks, to clean up, grab some hot food, and report to another captain on the other side of the city for routine patrol. His commander had told them all that they were rotating the guards so those helping with the murders could get a break from all the violence. He would have thought they would have dismissed those that had been working through the night, but the series of murders and investigations following were stretching the Pillars thin and almost every able guard was ordered to work through the night. Rest would come later, much later it seemed. Though he was glad to be leaving the massacre behind him, he had hoped he would be leaving it for a soft mattress. Instead, it was off to work, again.

"Slave-driving, hammer pounding, worthless piece of trash," he said through clenched teeth, referring to his commanding officers. "You're not paying me enough for this."

He had been a Pillar in Pelartis for almost fifteen years and was still only Eighth Pillar. He should be a captain by now, should have been over a year ago, but those above him had constantly held him back, citing absurd and outrageous claims of laziness and lack of drive for reasons to withhold his promotions. Over his career, he had to sit and watch as others, even those with less experience, had climbed the ranks higher and faster than he had. It was ridiculous and made him angry and frustrated. One day, he told himself, he'd get his just rewards.

After leaving the archmage's home, he made for a nearby alleyway, intending to take his time returning to the barracks. He deserved a little respite and was going to get it, orders be damned. The Pillars were so busy that if he arrived a few hours late, no one would notice. Even if they did, with all



the commotion, he could easily come up with an excuse for his tardiness. He needed a tall drink before returning to work.

As the sultry women of the Dryad's Kiss floated through his mind, he suddenly felt intense warmth in his front pocket. It took awhile for his brain to register the feeling, but when it did, he immediately froze, confused at the sudden sensation. Then it dawned on him what it was and he slowly backed up against a nearby wall. His eyes scanned the paths to each side of him and the roofline above. When he was confident he was alone, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the item causing the heat.

He withdrew a simple copper coin and held it flat in his palm. The side staring back at him was blank, showing nothing but a nicked up surface. It held scratches, a few specs of dirt, and a small dent right in the center. It was defiantly not a normal Pelartian coin for those were usually more decorative. This one just looked like a discarded piece of junk, but that was the point. No one would want it or try to steal it for it looked worthless. The man that had given it to him had planned it that way. A coin like this was meant to be discarded if anyone but the intended owner managed to get a hold of it.

As the Eighth Pillar turned the coin over, showing a side similar to the first, the copper piece grew even warmer, though it did not burn. He knew exactly what the warming sensation meant and his eyes quickly left his palm and fell to the nearby shadows. When the coin warmed, it meant that the man that had given it to him was close and wanted to talk.

"Ricus," came a voice from behind.

Eighth Pillar Ricus Gildric almost jumped out of his armor. The voice was so close it sounded like the man was just inches from him. Sure enough, when he turned, the man who had given him the coin was standing just a foot away.

The man was slim and scrawny, standing only five feet tall, but an aura of malice and cruelty surrounded him, telling everyone that approached that he was not someone to be fooled with. He was dressed in simple leather armor the color of night, decorated with dozens of thin straps and black buckles. A black cloak rested on his shoulders and a snug hood was pulled over his head. A black mask covered the bottom half of his face but his piercing green eyes were plain to see, even in the shadows of the alleyway. They even seemed to glow in the darkness, much like a snake's eyes as it stalks its prey.

"Silzezar," Ricus said, trying to catch his breath. The appearance of the thief had clearly shaken him. "What...What are you doing here? I thought our meeting...wasn't...wasn't for a few more days."

"It's not," the man in black said, his voice deep and foreboding, "but as you well know, certain events have caused me to elevate our meeting time."

About seven years ago, Ricus had been turned down yet again for a promotion he felt he rightly deserved. His commander at the time had berated him for his apathy toward work, his attitude with his peers, and his complete lack of respect for his fellow Pillars. Not only had he verbally bashed him, but he had done it in front of fellow Pillars, further adding to the humiliation. A younger Ricus didn't know what the man was talking about. He accused him of jealousy and the two quickly came to blows. His brash actions had gotten him a week's suspension from the Pillars and a verbal lashing from a then Ninth Pillar Tilgramin. A day after the less than pleasant admonishment, he was in the Dryad's Kiss, drinking away his anger and complaining about his unfair treatment. He must have said something unpleasant about the Pillars for the next thing he knew, a group of nearby Pillars was picking him up and tossing him out into the streets.

"Damn you all!" he had screamed once he found his feet. "I'll...I'm better than all of ya!" He staggered away after that and soon found himself on the ground in an alleyway. It was there that Silzezar found him.

The thief had promised him riches and the respect of his peers. All he needed to do was give Silzezar a report of the activities of the Pillars every week or two. In return, the thief promised to watch his back and give him the pay he so rightly deserved. Ricus, still partially drunk, jumped at the opportunity and suddenly found a dingy copper coin in one hand and a bag of gold in the other. His eyes lit up and ever since that day, he had been giving Silzezar exactly what he asked for. Every time the thief wanted a report, the dirty copper coin would grow warm, telling Ricus that Silzezar would soon be fining him. Though the revenge and respect he had wanted never came to fruition, he had risen among the ranks of Pillars and had control over a fair amount of men. As long as the gold kept coming, he was content to give his silent benefactor what he wanted.

"What is it..." Ricus stammered, trying to regain his composure. "What is it you want?"

"The usual," he replied. "Begin with the archmage."

"The archmage?" Ricus said, not understanding.

"Piyus," Silzezar said, trying to remove the haze that had apparently taken over Ricus's mind.

"Piyus," he began, realizing what the thief was taking about. "Right. Well, your plan worked perfectly. The halfling, that kid, and the other man were arrested for Piyus's murder. They were taken to the dungeons where they wait for trial, a few days from now. Xavdak doesn't even want to look for someone else. He's convinced he has the real assassins. He has the Pillars still combing

over the archmage's home, but only to gather more evidence to present at the trial."

"And what of the wizards?" Silzezar asked.

"The spells on Piyus's body are coming up blank," Ricus replied, "just like you said they would. They're baffled and confused. As you ordered, I said the kid could have cast a spell that prevented them from speaking with the archmage's soul. They seemed to take it at face value."

"I'm glad they listened to your words, *this* time," the thief said.

Ricus nodded awkwardly and let loose a nervous laugh. After his failed attempt to have Jannda and Dex arrested at the Dryad's Kiss, upon Silzezar's orders, he had tried to convince Xavdak and Captain Tilgramin that they were responsible for the jewelry merchant's death. Despite his words, both men found it highly unlikely. He had continued to push the issue and Xavdak had finally agreed to bring them in for questioning, but it was very different from getting them put in manacles. Luckily, it all worked out in the end.

Silzezar let the comment drop and peered into the alleyway, thinking on what Ricus had just told him. He stood in silence for many moments.

"How..." Ricus began, drawing the thief's eyes. The gaze made him lose his words, but he quickly found them again. After what he had seen in The Eye, all the blood and gore, he had to know something about the murder. "What... happened to the others? Did...Did *he* do that to those bodies?"

Silzezar cast a dangerous glare at Ricus, a look so malicious that the Eighth Pillar actually took a step away from the thief. If Ricus did not know Silzezar the way he did, he knew he would probably be dead right now, most likely with a dagger in his chest.

"What *he* does," Silzezar said in a slow, deliberate voice, referring to his and therefore Ricus's employer, "is none of your concern. You only need concern yourself with the responsibilities I have assigned you."

"I...I know," Ricus said. "Sorry. I just...I've just never seen so much..." His voice trailed off as Silzezar's stare continued to bore into him.

"What of the others?" Silzezar asked, telling Ricus that the brief discussion about their employer was at an end. "What happened to the young wizard's other associates?"

"They...They are still on the loose," Ricus replied, albeit reluctantly. Though he had not been responsible for them, he did not like reporting bad news. He had already upset his contact by asking a question he should have known better than to ask. Now he just wanted to get back into his good graces. "But based on what I heard from the others, there are dozens of patrols on the lookout. They shall not stay hidden for long."

“See that they don’t,” Silzezar said, even though he knew Ricus was not solely responsible for watching Brask Battlebeard and his band of mercenaries. He had other Pillars, other guards in his pocket, men much more able than Ricus, watching for them. “They must be caught just like their companions and thrown into the dungeons. We have many pressing matters to attend to and the last thing we need are these mercenaries stepping on our toes. Hired swords have a habit of doing such things. Once they are captured, their involvement in the murder shall be proven at trial. After that, the execution.”

“Are you so sure they will be proven guilty?” Ricus asked. Though the wizard, halfling, and other man had been caught at the crime scene, he knew they were smart enough to give the Colonnade reason to doubt their involvement. The Justicars, the men and women who served as judges on the Colonnade, would only pass a sentence of death if there were no doubt that the accused had committed the crime. Master Justicar Glendorake Strongvein, the head judge of the Colonnade and the one who the others looked to when making decisions, was an unpredictable man. One day he may be ruthless and rule without emotion while on another he may show compassion. If the Knights were seen as victims, they may be able to pull at the man’s heartstrings. It may not be much, but if five of the nine justices ruled in their favor, they would be freed and that was not something Silzezar wanted, especially after they had gone through so much trouble to frame them.

Silzezar just gave a small smile. “Quite certain,” he said. “Coin can buy much more than just information.”

Ricus took in a deep breath. He knew that Silzezar and those like him had an extensive network of informants and spies, but the fact that they had bought off judges was a little unnerving. What would stop them from framing *him* for murder when his usefulness was over? He just had to try to keep himself useful.

“What do you want me to do now?” he asked, wanting Silzezar to know that he was still their man and still willing to do whatever was needed.

“When the trail begins,” the thief explained, “you will be called to testify against the Knights. Just tell them everything you know, everything we talked about. That will help seal their fate.”

“After they are dead and gone,” Ricus said, suddenly feeling a worried, “then what? What should I do after that?”

“Then nothing,” Silzezar said plainly. “You will continue to do what you are being paid to do, which is supply us with information. Just because he comes to Pelartis only once or twice a year does not mean we are shutting down our operation. The gold must continue to flow, regardless of his plans

to leave.”

“He’s...He’s leaving?” Ricus asked. He felt a surge of relief that his services were still desired and an even bigger sense of comfort that Silzezar’s employer would soon be departing the city. Though he had never met the man, what he had heard about him was enough to give him the chills, even more so than the man that stood before him.

“Yes,” Silzezar said, apparently uncaring that Ricus would know this. “We have other operations across the lands that require his attention. When he leaves here, he will be going to Shadowfell, via a magical gateway in the ruins of Barrist. It is unclear when or if he will return.”

Shadowfell? Ricus asked himself. He had heard of the city before but could not remember any details. He knew of the ruins of Barrist for they resided about a five-day ride to the south, near the base of the Heavenreach Mountains. It was rumored that a large tribe of orcs was living in the ancient city but that had never been confirmed. If Silzezar’s employer was going to be heading there after this, he could have his hands full. Oh well, Ricus said to himself. That was not his problem.

The Eighth Pillar leaned against the wall, looking to the sky. It seemed that every time Silzezar’s employer came into town, things went crazy for a few weeks and Ricus’s life was upended for the entire time. Last time he had come to Pelartis, a few nobles and prominent merchants had been assassinated. The Pillars went crazy looking for the killers. Ricus had hardly slept the entire time. Between reporting to his superiors and meeting with Silzezar, giving him information on the guards’ investigation, he had been run ragged. After a trio of men—framed of course—had been caught and executed for the murders, things calmed down and went back to normal. Now, the same thing was about to happen. Once this whole ordeal with the Knights was over, once Silzezar’s employer left, he would return to his normal routines, just like last time. He was looking forward to the slower pace.

“Do you have anything else to report?” Silzezar asked. Ricus gave him some basic information of the Pillars’ other activities, but none of it was pressing at this time. Xavdak had all the Pillars too involved with the murders.

“Until this is over,” Ricus said, “everything else is receiving only the smallest amount of attention.”

“Good,” the thief replied, seemingly satisfied. “Continue on with what you were doing. I will contact you when you are needed.”

Ricus nodded and walked down the alley, moving faster and faster as he got further away. Though Silzezar said they still wanted him to keep doing what he had been doing, the man was fickle and he didn’t want to test his patience.

Those that did usually ended up with a dagger in their back. The sooner he got away from the thief, the more comfortable he would feel. Unfortunately, the meeting had done little to calm his nerves about the upcoming trial and everything in between. He no longer had any desire to delay his reassignment from Captain Tilgramin. He tended to think a lot when he had free time and he didn't want to think about Silzezar or the man he reported to. That would just unsettle him. He wanted to get back to work and focus his mind on that, not lying to the Colonnade or the killer in black.

“What have I gotten myself into?” he whispered to himself. He quickly stopped and looked around, making sure he was alone. Silzezar wasn't only good at sneaking up on him, but he also had phenomenal hearing.

Without any more thought, he sped away to the barracks with nothing but work on his mind and silence on his lips.



As Ricus walked away, gaining speed as he went, Silzezar watched him go. The man had done exactly as ordered and by the way he spoke and moved Silzezar knew he would continue to do so. The Eighth Pillar had no desire to upset him for he knew what would happen if he let them down. Fear kept Ricus in check. The gold that he was being paid was a good motivator, but the real thing keeping him under their thumb was the knowledge that those who were paying him would kill him without the slightest hesitation should he step out of line. The dozens of other guards that Silzezar were paying knew the same, though many of them were much less cowardly than Ricus. Unfortunately, that courage and lack of distress had cost more than one of those Pillars their lives. Those men that Silzezar had to kill thought they could take his coin without doing their jobs. They had sorely been mistaken. Luckily for Ricus, though the man was less than intelligent, he was not *that* stupid.

When Ricus disappeared from the alleyway, Silzezar turned and, as easily as a spider, scaled the stone wall behind him and climbed to the roof. He pulled himself up and strode to the edge of the building. His eyes quickly spotted Ricus running down the streets. The man paused only once, scanning the alleyway behind him, no doubt looking for Silzezar. Confident the thief had left him alone, he continued on his way, quicker than before.

“Is he performing as expected?” came a smooth voice. Silzezar didn't bother to turn. He knew his employer had been on the rooftop when he had first reached the top. He had felt the man's presence, but that was only because he had wanted him to.

“So far,” he replied as the man walked up beside him.

Mazik was dressed like before, in black studded leather, a cloak just as dark, and a black mask that covered half his face. A sheathed sword hung from the left side of his hip, which appeared to be the only weapon he carried, but Silzezar knew better. If one looked closely at the assassin, they would see that his body was covered with dozens of straps, buckles, belts, pouches, and sheaths filled with daggers, but there was hardly a soul that was allowed to get that close. If they did, they usually did not live long. Their deaths would come quickly, so swift they wouldn't know they were dead until a few moments after he had struck the fatal blow. That was why those that knew him kept their distance, but even gazing upon him from afar was unsettling.

From a distance, Mazik looked like a figure of darkness and his features melded together, making identifying him impossible. If anyone managed to catch a glimpse of him, he or she would see nothing but a moving shadow. He certainly moved in a way that suggested he was made of the insubstantial darkness. He had moved across the roof without making a sound. Even the air around him was silent, as if it was afraid to make noise when he was nearby. The roof on which they stood was made of old wood and stone, materials that should squeak and groan when stepped upon, but the assassin was silent. The surface could have been covered in sand and glass and Silzezar knew that his employer would still leave nothing in his wake. He was like a shadow. No, he was like a ghost for shadows could actually be seen. The man, if that truly what he was, could conceal himself in an open room, with nothing around him but air.

Though sunrise was only a few moments away and the sky was getting brighter by the second, an aura of darkness hung around the black-eyed assassin, which seemed to turn away all light coming toward him. Even his pale skin was shrouded in darkness.

“Ricus has served us well over the years,” Silzezar said, “and I think he will continue to do so. He may be lazy, cowardly, and less intelligent than some of our other agents, but he is smart enough not to cross us. He is much cheaper than the others as well.”

Silzezar turned and regarded his employer. The man's all black eyes, orbs so dark they would make a man insane if he stared at them too long, were locked onto the back of Ricus as the Eighth Pillar walked down the street. Silzezar tried to guess what the man could be thinking, but the mask he wore and the lifelessness in his eyes made it impossible. Even the skin around his eyes, flesh as white as bleached bone, remained impassive.

“Will he perform at their trial?” Mazik finally asked, referring to the

upcoming trial of the halfling, fighter, and young wizard.

“Yes,” Silzezar responded without doubt. “If there is one thing that Ricus enjoys more than the feeling of gold in his hands, it is watching the misery of others. He will gladly lay guilt upon the Knights.”

“And what of the others?”

“They are still unaccounted for,” Silzezar answered. “They have disappeared from the eyes of the Pillars, as well as our associates. They are proving to be more resourceful than we originally thought, but the trial should bring them out. If not, they will surely try to free their friends from the guards. They will not let them be harmed.”

“Either way,” Mazik said, finally turning to face Silzezar. His look was nonthreatening, but Silzezar felt uncomfortable under the dead gaze. “Make sure they are found and caught. Though our present engagements are almost completed, the Knights have proven themselves resourceful and unpredictable. I do not need them disrupting our plans.”

“Your activities will go unnoticed,” Silzezar assured him. The Knights had much more pressing matters than worrying about their illusive assassin. Three of their companions were in the dungeons and they would no doubt be looking for a way to free them. In addition to *that* unforeseen hassle, the Pillars were looking for them as well, as were a good number of Night Hounds. Brask and his small group had gone to the small thieves guild for help only to find that the leader of the guild had been paid, by Mazik, to kill them. Unfortunately, the Hounds’ leader was less than capable and was killed, as were a handful of others. Along with the Pillars, the Hounds were out looking for the small group, but they weren’t planning to arrest the Knights. They were seeking revenge for the death of their leader. All of the Knights’ problems made Silzezar confident that Brask would be concentrating on staying alive, and keeping his companions that way as well. He would have no time to search for Mazik.

Still, Silzezar knew better than to underestimate the mercenary, to underestimate anyone for that matter. He had dealt with too many mercenaries to think that Brask was incapable of surprising him. The man was intelligent and skilled, as were his crew. That was why that along with the Pillars they were paying, he had his many other contacts scouring the city for the mercenaries. It would only be a matter of time before they too were in the dungeons and facing an executioner’s axe.

“I trust the city’s wizards are still ignorant as to the real cause of death of the archmage and his servants,” Mazik said, wanting a full accounting of what Ricus had seen and heard within The Eye of All Things.

Silzezar knew his employer trusted in the magic of his sword, magic that



had completely destroyed Piyus and his soul, making it impossible to raise his spirit to answer questions, but he wanted an accounting of all that had occurred. Even though the young wizard and his friends had been arrested for the murders, the investigation would continue up until the trial, perhaps even after and he wanted nothing left to chance. The demons he had summoned to kill the others *had* left a mess after all. The scene was not easily forgettable.

“Yes,” Silzezar said. “The wizards cannot overcome the magic that destroyed the archmage and the other spells you cast prevent them from revealing what had killed the others. Even if they do manage to discern that a summoning took place, there is nothing to connect the spell to you, to anyone for that matter. All they will know is that *someone* summoned *something*. Since our young wizard is the only magic user in their group, the blame will lie solely with him.”

“Excellent,” Mazik said, seeing the pieces of their plan falling into place. “The wizard’s very nature will be their undoing. That, along with Ricus, our other contacts’ testimonies, and the Knights previous behaviors, should all but seal their fate. Did you mention my journey to Shadowfell to Ricus?” Mazik asked, turning the topic back to the cowardly guard.

“Yes,” Silzezar replied. “Just as you instructed.” Silzezar wondered why the assassin had wanted him to tell Ricus about his intended departure, but he knew better than to ask questions. Mazik had his reasons and if he chose not to share, Silzezar let it go. He wasn’t about to speculate either. That led to more questions and in his business, questions could get a man killed.

“Did he ask any questions?” Mazik asked, echoing Silzezar’s thoughts.

“No,” Silzezar said. “He knows better.” As do I, the man thought to himself.

Mazik only nodded in response, seemingly content with the way their plans were going. His eyes drifted back to where Ricus had gone. The Eighth Pillar was probably halfway to the barracks by now, but the assassin stared at the corner the Pillar had disappeared around as if he could still see him. Though he appeared pleased with Ricus, Silzezar couldn’t know for sure. That stone cold expression had returned to his eyes.

Silzezar told Mazik about some of the news concerning their other operations and activities. He had some concerns but nothing was pressing. The ordeal with the Knights had taken a lot of the pressure off their other enterprises. The Pillars were so intent on catching the remaining Knights that everything else on their plate had been pushed to the side, which only served to benefit them and their associates. Things were going well, but the pressure could return once the mercenaries had been dealt with. Fortunately, they still had a few days to tie up loose ends before the Pillars returned to their normal

routines. By then, Silzezar will have addressed his concerns, the Knights would be dead, and Mazik will have left. Things were looking up indeed.

Throughout his entire explanation, Mazik never said a word. He just stared out into the city, watching the buildings lighten as the sun continued to rise. It would only be a few more minutes before it broke the horizon. Though he made no expression, Silzezar knew he was listening. Hardly anything escaped his mysterious employer.

“Continue on,” he finally said when Silzezar finished, indicating that their meeting was at an end.

Silzezar nodded then started to climb down the wall. As he went, he kept his head down, concentrating on staying attached to the wall. Unfortunately, he felt Mazik’s gaze upon his back all the way down. It was unsettling and made him move faster than usual. When he reached the bottom, he looked up toward the roofline but saw nothing but open sky. The imposing feeling was gone, which told him that Mazik was as well.

“Now I know how Ricus feels,” he said to himself. Without offering his employer a second thought, he made his way deeper into the city.



Mazik watched Silzezar climb down the wall. The thief was skilled for his fingers easily found purchase in the rough stone and he moved swiftly down the uneven surface. Even if the wall had half as many bumps and crevices as it did, Mazik knew the proficient thief would have no problems making it safely to the ground. His fingers would find even the smallest depression, ledges so tiny that even a buttle beetle, which was no larger than the tip of a sword, would have trouble staying upright. The man was skilled, resourceful, and did as he was told, which was why Mazik had yet to kill him. It was hard to find thieves that followed orders and even harder to keep them under control. So far, Silzezar had stayed in line and performed as desired. He was but one of only a handful of men that Mazik felt comfortable leaving in charge of Pelartis. The assassin hoped the man would continue to please him. If not, he held no qualms about slitting the man’s throat, as he had done to countless others over the years.

The assassin had confidence in his underling and knew he would do his best to capture the remaining members of the Knights of the Chipped Blade. He also believed that Ricus and the others would perform well and give the Colonnade enough information, but the assassin left nothing to chance. He may have killed Piyus and made it impossible for the city’s wizards to question

the dead he had left in the archmage's home, but a guilty verdict was not a sure thing. He wanted to make absolutely sure that the Knights were thrown into the dungeons.

A few inches before Silzezar reached the ground, Mazik turned and ran across the roof, moving so swiftly that he was but a blur of black. When he reached the edge, he stopped and jumped. He did not climb or grab for a handhold. He did not scream or yell as he dropped over fifty feet to the ground. He just fell, looking to any that may be watching that he was falling to his death, but before he landed, his cloak fanned out and became stiff, allowing him to gently glide to the ground. As soon as his feet found purchase, the black fabric relaxed and went back to hanging lifelessly behind him. Before it settled, he was off and running, into the darkness of a nearby alley.

Mazik had an extensive knowledge of the city, so he was able to move between the buildings of stone and metal without setting a single foot on the main avenues. He ran down the dark and dank alleyways, using the shadows to cover his movements. Though they concealed him now and would stay dark for hours yet to come, they would brighten considerable in the next few moments. The sun had just broke over the city and light was slowly flooding all of Pelartis. In less than an hour, the streets would be full of citizens and it would be much more difficult to move throughout the city. He wanted to finish his current business before that happened. Unfortunately, what he planned to do could only be done in the morning, but it should only take a few moments, then he could get back to preparing his departure.

Because he was traveling through the wealthier part of the city, no one but a few stray animals was present in the unseemly passageways. Even if the narrow lanes of filth and garbage had been occupied, like they were in the slums, not a single soul would have seen or heard him run by. Even the cats, dogs, and rats he passed remained undisturbed by his movements. The only thing they felt was a slight breeze, which they ignored, thinking it was the wind. If they *had* managed to look up and see the figure of black running toward them, they surely would have fled in terror.

As he was closing in on his destination, just a few more yards from the large mansion that held a particular Pelartian, he felt a sudden tingling sensation in the back of his skull. He immediately came to a stop, knowing exactly what the feeling was. After looking around to make sure he was alone, he ducked behind a bundle of old wooden doors. When he was safely hidden, he leaned back, closed his eyes, and opened his mind.

*Mazik*, came a voice thick with malice and laced with corruption. It was deep and echoed in his mind. His head throbbed as the sound traveled through

his brain, but it was painless. All he felt was a slight pressure behind his eyes.

*Master*; Mazik mentally replied. Though his eyes were closed, he saw nothing but darkness. If he so desired, he could bring an image of his master forth, but he found no reason for such visions at the current time. If his master really wanted, he could appear in his head with or without Mazik's consent. Because he had not, the assassin surmised this conversation was just to give him a status update. Allowing Mazik to have his mind clear also made the physic connection stronger, assuring that his master's words would be heard clearly.

*You have not yet left the city*, his master said, sounding slightly annoyed. It did not surprise Mazik that his master knew exactly where he was.

*My apologies, my lord. The men that Graeak sent after me have proven to be more resourceful than I gave them credit for. They have caused a slight delay*, Mazik said. He had hoped to be on his way already but the Knights had indeed caused him to stay behind and make sure they were taken care of. He planned to leave as soon as he was done with his current appointment.

*I trust you are handling the situation*, his master said, his voice still annoyed but not nearly as much.

*Yes, my master*; Mazik replied. *I shall be away from Pelartis within the hour. Just assuring a preferable outcome.*

*What of the boy? I do not want him harmed.*

*I have made the necessary arraignments*, Mazik assured. *As soon as the trial is over, the boy shall be removed from the dungeon before the scheduled execution. I cannot say the same of his companions. They will have their chance to show their strength and resourcefulness.*

*You left a trail they can follow just in case?* his master asked.

*Yes*, Mazik said, once again assuring his master he had everything under control.

*Excellent*, the voice replied, clearly pleased. *If the Knights should die, then so be it, but if they manage to escape captivity and the city, it will show them to be strong. I may have use of them if they prove to be so skilled. As for the boy*, the voice said with maniacal glee, *his fate was sealed the moment Graeak foolishly decided to send him along on this futile mission.*

*You still think he can be of use?* Mazik asked, still not completely convinced that the young wizard was worth the hassle he and his master had gone to to assure his freedom.

*Trust me*, Mazik, the voice said in a tone that told Mazik he should not be doubting his master's wisdom. *The boy is worth his weight in gold.*

Those were his master's final words. When his voice faded, the tingling

feeling in Mazik's mind faded away and the pressure behind his eyes disappeared. He rose from his hiding place and stepped back into the alley. It took a moment for the throbbing in his brain to pass, but it faded away in a few moments. When his mind was his own once more, he started down the alleyway to complete his final mission in the city.

Mazik thought nothing more on the words of his master. He had given his report and received his orders. There was no more thinking required, so he concentrated on the path before him.

He ran down the alley, which transitioned into a narrow pathway that led behind a series of large homes. Though he could not see them, Mazik knew that each one was an elegantly designed mansion, with thick columns of marble, large panes of stained glass, thick walls of stone, and large panels of bronze and copper. Though they were only homes, most of which housed only one family or in some cases, one person, they held similar design elements as the towers that made up most of the city.

On the outside, each mansion was an amazing masterpiece of architectural beauty, with lush gardens, tall trees, and carefully trimmed grass and hedges. But behind each yard, sitting unwanted and protected by a twenty foot wall, was an alleyway that was reserved for each resident's garbage and filth. Mazik traveled down this alley. None of the arrogant, pampered residents of each home would waste their time watching such a disgusting corridor of refuse and waste, so the assassin moved without threat of discovery.

When he reached the home he was searching for, he easily scaled the twenty-foot wall and slowly glided down to the bright green grass. When he landed, he slipped behind a tree and surveyed the area. He had visited this particular home dozens of times and he knew exactly where to step to avoid any eye that may be watching. Since Solaris had yet to shine his rays of warmth on this surrounding area, Mazik quickly and easily traveled across the yard without being noticed by the gardeners and house servants that were just beginning their daily chores. When he reached the desired wall, a wall made of deep blue stone, he climbed up and silently stepped onto the large balcony, which was lined with decorative iron posts.

Directly in front of him was a pair of sliding glass doors, each etched with strange symbols that no doubt imbued the doors with protective magic, preventing anyone from breaking in. Mazik knew that, despite the wards that were set on the doors, each pane of glass was at least six inches thick and practically unbreakable. If he wanted, he could have picked up one of the handful of decorative planters that sat on the balcony and attempted to shatter the glass, but that would be noisy and useless and he really didn't need to

worry about the glass barring his way. He had other methods of entering the house.

He walked up to the door, not bothering to hide his appearance. Though the doors were transparent, thick red drapes covered the glass, hiding the room beyond from view. Regardless of the drapes, Mazik knew what the room held, which was why he was here.

He moved to his left and knelt next to the handle. Before opening the lock, he reached into one of his many belt pouches and retrieved a small ceramic container. He unscrewed the lid, displaying a shiny, purple liquid within. Without thinking, he dipped two fingers into the velvety substance and smeared a liberal amount on the glass, right next to the lock. When he thought he had enough, he replaced the top and returned the container to his pouch. After that, he reached into another pouch and withdrew two small rods, about the length of his finger and a little thicker than a piece of parchment. Again, with barely a thought, he placed the rods into the lock. In less than a breath, the latch clicked.

As soon as the latch came loose, the paste that Mazik had spread on the glass flashed bright purple and faded from sight. A low hum ran over the glass but faded away in a few seconds. Mazik knew that if he had not used the magical paste, the wards on the door would have activated and surged into him. Because he did not know what type of trap had been placed upon the door, he did not know what the effects would have been. He would probably be on the ground, writhing in pain. He may even be dead or have been thrown from the balcony. Whatever the trap, he had succeeded in countering the magic.

Mazik calmly stood and opened the door. He slowly and silently slid the door back and slipped inside, being careful not to disturb the drapes. It wouldn't do to have the room's inhabitant knowing he was there, but at this time of morning, Mazik knew, the man was probably still sound asleep. When he was inside, he closed the door. He gently eased the drapes back and peered inside.

The room was big, large enough to hold even the largest home he had seen in the slums. Colorful rugs decorated the floor, dark cherry wood furniture rested against the walls, a golden chandelier hung from the ceiling, and a giant bed, big enough to hold four, sat to his left, against a wall holding two large mirrors framed in bright copper. And still lying in that bed was the room's inhabitant and the current owner of the mansion.

Mazik walked over to the bed and looked down upon the man sleeping within. He was a large man, with thick gray hair, a scruffy beard, bushy eyebrows, and very pronounced features. His nose was large and round, and

his mouth was wide. Dozens of wrinkles decorated his face and he snored loudly, sounding like a dying cow. The noise was so loud that Mazik knew he could have broken the window and walked in screaming and the man never would have heard.

The large man rolled onto his side. His tremendous girth almost pulled the covers from the far side of the bed, but they remained in place. Mazik leaned over and came within a few inches of the man's face.

"Wake up," he said, almost in a whisper. Shattered glass and painful screaming may not have woken the man up, but the sound of Mazik's voice, a voice the man knew well and one he rightly feared might as well have been a trumpet set against his ear.

The man's eyes opened wide. When he saw the orbs of black within inches of his own face, eyes that seemed to pierce his soul, he opened his mouth to scream, but the words failed to come as the tip of dagger was lightly pushed against his throat. The weapon had come out so fast that the man never even saw Mazik move.

"Screaming would be unwise," Mazik said.

"Mazik!" the man whispered in terror, his voice still thick with slumber. The man's eyes returned to normal as Mazik withdrew the dagger from his throat. He then sat up, revealing a red nightshirt made of rich silk. "What... What are you doing here?"

Mazik just fixed the man with a dead stare, making him squirm with discomfort. Sweat started to bead on the man's head, telling Mazik that he was scared for his life. For a few moments, he held the man in his thrall, making him sweat even more, but after a few moments, he finally relented and leaned back. He walked to the end of the bed and crossed his arms.

"By the gods man," the man said, rubbing the back of his neck and pulling his shirt away from his body, which was covered in sweat. "I suppose if you had come to kill me, you would not have bothered to wake me."

"I have not come to kill you," Mazik said, though his tone was flat. "Not yet," he added, bringing another look of distress from the large man. The man just rubbed his neck again and shivered as a surge of cold flowed through his body. He let out a deep, thunderous yawn, a yawn he had tried hard to suppress. Mazik just waited patiently by the foot of his bed, his arms crossed and his face expressionless.

"Why can't you make an appointment like everyone else?" the man asked in agony. When Mazik failed to answer, the man went to get out of bed.

"You can stay where you are," Mazik said, his words freezing the man in place. He fixed the assassin with a look of nervousness and anxiety. "What I

need will only take a few moments,” Mazik continued, “then you can get back to your pleasant dreams.”

“Not so pleasant anymore,” the man said, rubbing his face. “So, what... what is it that you want?”

“Your services are required,” Mazik said.

“Well,” the man said in a shaky voice, “I am more than happy to lend them. I suppose you want the usual, which means my usual payment is required.”

Mazik sent a look at the man that froze his blood cold. He swallowed hard and swept his hand across his forehead, removing the sweat from his brow. Damn it all! he thought to himself. It was cold in here.

“Not the usual then?” the man asked.

“A little more will be required this time,” Mazik said, “but do not fret, Master Justicar Strongvein. It is nothing you cannot handle.”



# CHAPTER 1

The floor was painfully hard and cold and the unevenness of it sent needles of pain racing up his spine every time he shifted. Sleep tried to claim him but every movement jolted him awake. He managed to catch a few hours of rest but the sound of water dripping to the ground was like a rumble of thunder in the large, silent room and it prevented him from staying asleep for more than two or three hours. No one knew where the water came from, or even saw it for that matter, but it was annoying and the cause of anguish for many that sat in the dungeons of Pelartis.

The narrow room was a hundred feet long and lined with prison cells, most of which sat empty, but some were occupied with petty criminals, murderers, and a few unlucky drunks that had thought they needed to show off the night before. The moans and cries of these imprisoned souls sometimes echoed down the hallway, but more often than not, the chamber was as silent as death. The Pillars would only tolerate so much before silencing the disorderly. If not for the handful of torches that sat in sconces between each cell, the troublesome inmates would never see the guards that came in to quiet them. They would see only darkness for there were no windows in the walls. Instead, the orange light from the flames made it possible to make out their grim surroundings. Some said they preferred the dark instead of the bleak gray that made up their cells, but they did not have a choice in the matter. They could only sit in their cell, silently if they were smart, and await judgment.

Each cell was roughly the size of a small room one would find at any of the inns located throughout the city, yet they were devoid of any of the amenities. There were no beds, no dressers, no covers, and no pillows. All there was were cold gray stone, hard iron bars, and a small mound of hay that look filthy and

ridden with lice. Many of the dungeon's occupants used the hay as a makeshift bed, to cushion the ground and pad their backs, but others refused to go near the stuff. Some did it out of disgust for the yellow reeds looked decades old and smelled of mold. Others refused to touch the dried grass for fear of being eaten alive by the bugs that nested inside. Even in the darkness, one could see beetles and other small insects crawling along the thin strands. Druzeel Sesstar refused to sleep on the hay for a mixture of both reasons.

Though his pristine robes had been taken from him and all he had was tattered clothing, he didn't like the idea of sleeping in filth or having bugs crawl all over him. He lay on the ground, doing his best to make it comfortable, but failed miserably. Luckily, except for the floor, which his body helped to warm when he managed to stay still for a few moments, the room was warm, which was a good thing for there were no blankets to shield his flesh from the cold. His clothing, clothing that he had to be dressed in for he was unconscious when the guards brought him here, was thin and would do nothing to keep out the chill. If only I had my spellbook, Druzeel thought to himself. Hot and cold would no longer be an issue. Neither would the bars for that matter, he quickly mused. Or the guards. Or the walls. Or anything else he was thinking of. He was surprised that the tiny bugs that seemed to inhabit this entire level of prison cells had not yet climbed into his clothing. Either they naturally shied away from people or they figured they had a better home inside the pile of hay. Thinking of the disgusting heap of yellow grass made Druzeel turn his head and look at the other two occupants of his cell, who were also staying clear of the pile of filth.

Dex Swifthood sat against the back corner of the cell, his head leaning against the hard stone. The fighter managed to find sleep a little easier than his young companion for he was a mercenary and was used to sleeping on hard surfaces and in awkward positions. Still, he only slept a few hours more than Druzeel. His current predicament weighed heavily on his mind and made it hard for him to slip into the world of dreams. A man like Dex, someone who was constantly thinking about strategy and trying to find the best advantage in any given situation, was combing over what had happened over the last few days, trying to find a way out. His obvious lack of sleep told Druzeel that he was not finding the answers he desired. That did not bode well for he was supposed to be the strategist of the Knights of the Chipped Blade, the mercenary group in which he belonged, and the one his companions could turn to to discover a way out of a difficult situation. If Dex was coming to a dead end, then Druzeel, and the other, smaller person that shared his cell, knew they were in trouble.

Jannda Cupsheight, the halfling bard that was also a member of the Knights, sat in the other corner located at the back of the dark space, her knees tucked tight against her chest. Like her fellow mercenary, their imprisonment was at the forefront of her mind, but she looked to be taking her incarceration a little harder than the others. She had slept less than a total of two hours and had dark circles under her eyes. They were bloodshot as well and every time she moved, she looked like she was in pain. Druzeel wondered why she was looking so haggard for the guards had handled him much rougher than her, but he kept his questions to himself. In fact, he hadn't said a word to her since Xavdak's first visit. Druzeel knew that she blamed him for being thrown in jail and her anger was high when they were first imprisoned. He thought it best to leave her alone until her anger fled. Looking at her now, he could see that she was still angry and the fact that he was stuck in the same cell as she was, with very little space to move around, was not helping the situation.

Little did he know that Dex knew exactly what was wearing his fellow Knight down and keeping her anxious. Jannda did not like enclosed spaces, especially those in which she could not escape. Being surrounded by thick stone and a wall of iron bars made her feel enclosed and restricted, which she was, but it was more a mental discomfort than a physical one with the halfling. She was a bard, a singer and musician, and needed to be free to express herself in song or dance. She needed to run and breathe in fresh air. Jannda needed to feel the breeze against her skin and see the sky above her head. Without those, depression was spreading throughout her body. Being in such a harsh and gloomy environment drained all the creativeness and life from her body, and it was only going to get worse.

It had only been twenty-three hours since they had been thrown in the dungeons, but to the three in the dark cell, it felt more like a week. Druzeel had been arrested for the murder of Piyus the Magnificent, a powerful archmage that lived in the city. He had been caught kneeling over the man's body, a bloodied dagger clutched in his hands. Even though he had pulled the blade from Piyus's body and the dagger was indeed his—the F carved into the pommel labeled it as a dagger from Fount of Knowledge, or The Fount as Druzeel called his home—he had not killed the archmage. Dex and Jannda were accused of killing a jewelry merchant by the name of Brend Hillsborrow. The Pillars had little actual evidence against them for Brend was found at his jewelry shop with daggers embedded into his chest, but the two Knights had been the last to see him alive. The fact that the weapons that had apparently killed the man were built for halflings did not help their case either. It also did not help that they were found with Druzeel in the home of the archmage. All three of them

tried to tell the Pillars that they were innocent and were being framed by the assassin they had been sent to hunt down, but unfortunately, the High Captain of Pelartis, a hardened dwarf by the name of Xavdak Warstout, had seen all he needed to see and had them thrown behind bars for the assassinations. He would hear none of their pleas, none of their cries of conspiracies or innocence. The dwarf had just said they would get their day in court, to plead their case. Talking in front of strangers and guards that wanted to see them hanged was not the type of place they wanted to tell their side of the story. Apparently, it was the only option they had.

Since the conversation with Xavdak, Druzeel had been laying in his cell, lost in his thoughts and awaiting a trial that the High Captain said would take place a day from now. That trial, the death of the archmage, and the knowledge that he would be executed should he be proven guilty, had almost brought the young wizard to tears. The close quarters, dank surroundings, moans of his fellow prisoners, and the lack of natural light also almost made him break down, but he remained calm and kept his eyes dry, trying his best to concentrate on his defense. He told himself that he had to be strong and courageous, that he had to hold on to hope. He poured over the facts and the events that had led them here, just as Dex was surely doing, trying his best to come up with something that would convince the Colonnade, the collection of justices that would decide their fate, that they were innocent of the charges leveled against them. Even he had to admit that the evidence they had looked damning, but Druzeel could not believe that they would be proven guilty. He believed in the law and justice and had faith in the system. With magic and his mentor's help, everything should be revealed and the assassin would be shown as the true murderer.

Druzeel whispered a curse as he thought about the assassin, the man that had set them up, the man they had been sent to capture. He played them all and managed to dispose of his enemies without even lifting a finger. His plan, though horrible, was brilliant and Druzeel couldn't help but admire the man's cunning and intelligence.

Graeak Loyalar, the archmage that had been his mentor and teacher since he was five, had sent him and the Knights of the Chipped Blade after an assassin that had broken into his tower. Over a week ago, in the city of Atlurul, the thief had broken into The Fount, Graeak's tower and Druzeel's home, had killed a young girl and stolen a handful of powerful artifacts. Graeak, wanting his stolen property returned and the murderer brought to justice, had hired the band of mercenaries and, along with Druzeel, sent them after the assassin. Though they had yet to find their intended target, the assassin somehow knew

they were following him and set up a series of obstacles to stop their pursuit. Since then, everything had gone from bad to worse.

The first sign they had that the assassin knew of the Knights were the shadow stalkers he had sent to kill them. The stalkers, creatures of shadow brought into existence by a powerful spell, had almost cornered and killed Druzeel, but with the mercenaries help, they had managed to defeat them. The next tragedy they had run into was a caravan that had been set upon by more shadow stalkers. Everyone in the group had been killed and left for the party to find. They didn't know it at the time, but the assassin had destroyed the caravan had given the guards of Pelartis an anonymous tip that the mercenaries were the ones that killed those in the caravan. When they encountered a group of Pillars, almost a day after leaving the massacre behind, they were immediately accused of murder. They would have been able to convince the guards of their innocence if Brask Battlebeard, the leader of the Knights and a man that had nothing but disdain for Druzeel, had listened to Druzeel and not looted the bodies of the dead. The guards found items from the caravan on them and placed them under arrest on suspicion of murder.

After being taken to Pelartis and interrogated by High Captain Warstout, they were cleared of all wrong doing and released into the city, but the Pillars had promised them that they would be watched. Since that unpleasant encounter, the group split up, separating to cover more ground. They had also split up because of Brask's anger at Druzeel. During the interrogation, Druzeel had actually told the guards the truth, which the mercenary leader did not look kindly upon. Brask, Vistalas, Ristil, and Thorstar went to meet a thief that Vistalas knew about while Dex, Jannda, and Druzeel went to see one of Dex's contacts, the jewelry merchant Brend. Unfortunately, Jannda had voiced her disapproval of Druzeel's actions and, after a heated argument, Druzeel left them in anger. While they went to the merchant, Druzeel went to go see Piyus. That was when all hells had broken loose.

Dex and Jannda were attacked by more shadow stalkers, barely surviving the encounter. Brend had survived as well but was followed and killed after his meeting with the two Knights. Piyus was also killed, just after meeting with Druzeel. After meeting up with Dex and Jannda, Druzeel found out that the assassin wasn't just targeting them, but he was also going after those they had been meeting. After learning of the assassin's intention, he had raced back to Piyus, only to find the archmage had already been killed. It was then, just after they had found him, that Xavdak and the Pillars had discovered them in the archmage's home and arrested them for murder. The assassin had set them up perfectly, implicating them in every death by planting items that the

group would usually use, the most incriminating being Druzeel's own dagger, which he had somehow lost. Even now, sitting in the dark with nothing but his thoughts, the young wizard still did not know how he had lost the blade.

As for Brask and the others, they were somewhere in the city, apparently hiding. They had also been caught up in some type of skirmish with the thieves they had gone to meet with. After being imprisoned, Dex had overheard the guards talking about a dozen or so thieves being killed in the slums of the city. They spoke of the gruesome scene left behind, including the discovery of a man that had been practically chopped in half by a large blade of some kind. That description, a death no doubt caused by Thorstar and his giant sword, told Druzeel and the others that the Knights had indeed been involved. Luckily, it sounded as if they had escaped the battle unscathed, but the Pillars were still searching for them, wanting to arrest them as well, for those deaths as well as their association with the others. With a little luck, Druzeel thought, perhaps they can stay hidden and gather evidence to help get them free. If that *was* what they were doing, they had better hurry. They only had a day left before the trial and though he had faith, Druzeel would take all the help he could get. He still found it ludicrous that they only had two days before their trial. No one, not even the smartest of men, could prepare an adequate defense in that time. Druzeel knew that they were being treated so harshly because of their alleged crimes, but still, everyone accused of a crime, no matter how heinous, should be treated the same until their guilt was proven. That's how it was in Atlurul and the hundreds of other cities he had read about, and that is how it should be in Pelartis.

But complaining and worrying about the time was not going to help or change their situation, Druzeel had told himself a dozen times. No amount of begging and pleading would change the fact that in just over a day, they would be before the Colonnade, arguing for their lives. He had to use the time he *did* have wisely and concentrate on what he was going to do.

At trial, he would speak the truth, just as he had when first coming to the city. He would tell them everything that happened, from the moment the thief broke into The Fount until his arrest at Piyus's home, The Eye of All Things. He would then tell them what the assassin had planned and his role in the murders. After hearing that, it should be easy for the Colonnade to clear them of all charges. If not, he would demand that they put him and the others under a truth spell and contact Graeak. Magic and the word of a renowned archmage would clear them. It had to. Until that time, Druzeel would continue to announce his innocence to the guards that came to check on him. They may be called to testify at trial and he wanted them to know that he professed his

innocence the entire time. Any little bit may help, he told himself.

It was hard for him to gauge what affect his words were having on the guards that patrolled this level of the dungeons. In the time he had been in his cell, he had only seen the guards three times, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and the last time he saw them they were completely different men, but he kept on, relentless in his cries. He wished that Dex and Jannda would add their voices to his, but they seemed to want to do nothing but sit in the corner and brood. So be it, he told himself. He would leave them to their misery. He would continue to defend them, even if they chose not to. Their lack of action was frustrating but he decided not to push the issue. They all had a lot on their mind and had to stay calm. Well, as calm as possible under the current conditions, Druzeel told himself.

The doors at the end of the hallway opened, the squeak of the hinges carrying all the way to Druzeel's ears. Was it breakfast again? he asked himself. Or was it dinner? Without windows, it was hard to keep track of time. For all he knew, the guards were coming for some reason other than to give him food. They could be coming for one of the other prisoners, dragging him away to the gallows. Stop thinking about it! he yelled in his mind. Regardless of the reason for their visit, Druzeel readied his voice should they come to his cell.

As the sound of footsteps came closer, Druzeel leaned against the bars, getting a better view of the hallway. Sure enough, there were three guards, passing trays of food through the wide openings located at the bottom of each prison cell. Each man was dressed in orange platemail that was edged in blue, which looked almost black in the dim light. Their armor was form fitted and allowed them to move with relative ease while still providing adequate protection. Their faces were impassive and they went about their duties swiftly, just like all the other times. The only thing they said to the inmates was to back away if they were standing next to the bars when they came by. They took no chances that a deranged prisoner may attempt to grab them. If someone should ignore the order, they didn't eat. Everyone quickly learned to do as they were told.

The trays they were giving to the prisoners held a piece of bread, some cheese, and a dried piece of meat. Along with that was a small cup of water. The food was actually a lot better than what Druzeel had expected. He had heard tales of prisons serving only spoiled food and warm water to those imprisoned. Despite the filthy hay and the lack of a bed or light, the Pillars gave those they arrested enough food to provide adequate nourishment.

"We're innocent!" he exclaimed when the guards were only a few cells away. His voice carried urgency but he managed to keep it low. He did not

want to yell at the guards for that would only anger them and lead to something unpleasant. Instead, he spoke calmly, with just enough force so they had no choice but to hear him.

“We’re not murderers!” he added to his cries. “We have done nothing wrong!” The only response was a few moans and groans from the other prisoners.

When the guard finally reached his cell, Druzeel backed away before the man had a chance to say anything. He would speak his mind but he would also be respectful. Arguing and being defiant to the Pillars would accomplish nothing, so he backed away, further than was necessary. The guard looked at him only once. Then the man leaned over and slipped in a single tray of food. On it, there was three pieces of bread, three pieces of cheese, and three pieces of dried meat. Next to the food were three cups of clear water.

“I want to speak with Xavdak,” Druzeel said as the man carefully pushed the cups inside. He went slowly, as to not spill any of the water. He knew he had nothing to fear from Druzeel or his two companions.

“I want to talk to the High Captain!” the young wizard said again, looking at the guard in the eye. The man, as usual, said nothing. When he was finished, he just stood up and walked to the next occupied cell, the impassive look on his face never once faltering. “Did you hear me?” Druzeel said. “I want to—”

“Everybody heard you!” came an angry voice from behind Druzeel. “But no one’s listening, so shut up already.”

Druzeel’s words caught in his throat as he turned around. He looked to the corner of the cell, to where Jannda had been sitting. Now she was standing, an angry and annoyed look on her face. She still carried dark circles under her eyes and her body was clearly showing signs of exhaustion, but the way she stood, her hands balled up into fists, told Druzeel that her anger was giving her renewed strength and energy.

“What?” Druzeel said, perplexed and confused at her words.

“I said shut up,” she said. “Just give it a rest already. Do you honestly think they give a horse’s ass about what you want? I’m tired of hearing your voice.”

“Jannda,” Dex said, turning to look at her.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” she said, ignoring Dex. Her face scrunched up into a sneer. “Your cooperation is going to mean squat as soon as you get in front of the Colonnade. They’re not going to care about how you acted while imprisoned or that you acted civil while in the dungeons. The only thing that is going to matter to them is the evidence that the High Captain and the rest of the Pillars have gathered against you. *These* damn men,” she said, motioning to the guards, “aren’t even going to be at the trial.”



“They have their evidence,” Druzeel said, seemingly unshaken by her harsh words, “but they have also yet to hear our side of the story, what *really* happened. When they do, they—”

“They’ll what?!” Jannda said loudly, almost yelling at him. “They’ll just say ‘Sorry, our mistake. You can go now?’ Is that what you think? Do you really think they expect to hear anything from you but ‘I didn’t do it?’ Can you honestly believe that they have never heard criminals professing their innocence? Are you really that naïve?”

“I am not a criminal,” Druzeel said, a little anger in his voice.

“You are to them,” she responded. “Believe me, in their eyes, you were guilty the second they burst into Piyus’s chambers and saw you with that stupid dagger in your hand.”

When Xavdak and his men had come into Piyus’s casting chambers, they found Druzeel kneeling over his body, with a bloody dagger, his dagger in fact, in hand. Druzeel had not stabbed the archmage, but had found him with the weapon embedded into his chest. Thinking that Graeak’s friend deserved better than having cold steel in his body, Druzeel grabbed the dagger and took it out. That was when the Pillars came into the room. Thinking back on it now, Druzeel knew that touching the weapon had not been the brightest of ideas. Jannda had told him as much when they first got to the dungeons, but the mistake was over. There was nothing they could do to change what he had done.

“We are *not* guilty,” Druzeel proclaimed, his voice sounding strong. “And we will prove it at our trial.”

“How?” Jannda said incredulously. “How exactly are you going to do that? What proof do you have that we didn’t kill Brend? What proof can you possibly show the Colonnade that you didn’t kill Piyus?”

“I didn’t kill Piyus!” Druzeel said in defense. “And you didn’t kill Brend.”

“We know that, but the Justicars don’t,” Jannda shot back. “All they know is what the Pillars tell them and what the evidence shows, and I have to say, even to me, it looks like we will soon be heading to the gallows. And that’s just based on the evidence alone! There’s no telling what the assassin has done to seal our fates.”

“What are you talking about?” Druzeel asked.

“Jannda, please,” Dex pleaded, still sitting on the floor, but she ignored him once again.

“The assassin has been a step ahead of us since we took on this quest,” she said in anger. This time her fury wasn’t directed at him, but at the assassin, who had outwitted them at every turn. “Who knows whose pockets he’s filled

or what bribes he's divvied out?"

"That's absurd!" Druzeel responded with a voice filled with shock. "The Colonnade serves the law and justice and would not—"

"By the gods!" Jannda said, throwing up her hands. "You really are as stupid and ignorant as Brask says you are! I gave you the benefit of the doubt, I went along with Dex when he said give you a chance, but there really is no helping you. You are absolutely hopeless!"

"Jannda!" Dex said, finally coming to his feet. "That was uncalled for and you know it. We are all on edge and worried about what may happen to us and the others, but we can't fight amongst ourselves. We have to stick together in this if we have any chance of survival. If they see us fighting each other when we are brought before the Colonnade, then we really *will* have no chance."

"Come on," she said, turning to Dex. "You can't possibly think that we have a chance? You know they won't believe anything we have to say."

Dex remained silent and just stared at Jannda. He couldn't bring himself to dispute her words for he knew that the chance of them being found innocent was slim to none. He wanted to argue with her, but knew she was right.

"Dex?" came Druzeel's surprised voice. He turned and faced the young wizard. Sadness was the only thing Druzeel saw.

"I'm sorry," Dex said. "They may listen to our words, but even if the Colonnade is truly free of corruption, we have little chance of being found innocent. The assassin's plot was just too perfect. He has thought of everything and planned it so well that we never knew what hit us until it was too late." His expression turned angry but like Jannda, it wasn't directed at him. "We walked right into it without knowing. We acted like untrained novices," he spat. "Our only chance is the others. We have to hope that they are trying to find a way to free us."

Druzeel just stared at the man in amazement. He could not believe the words that he had just heard. Before Dex had spoken, he was confident that they would succeed and the Colonnade would clear them of all wrongdoing. He was *certain* that they would be found innocent. But now, after seeing the look on Dex's face and hearing the hopelessness in his words, Druzeel's confidence started to crack, his courage and determination began to crumble. How could they hope to prevail when *both* Dex and Jannda didn't even believe in themselves? And what of the Colonnade? Could the Justicars really be bought off? Could the system of law and justice he so adamantly believed in be so easily corruptible? Could men of the law, people who had sworn to protect and serve the citizens of Pelartis, really throw away their morals and ethics just for a few extra gold coins? Can the world truly be this dishonest and tainted?

No, he told himself forcefully. Dex and Jannda had just lost hope, had just forgotten who they were. They had worked and lived in a world of crime and dishonesty for too long. The Knights had been involved with too many unseemly criminals and greedy characters. They had been overexposed to the horrors of the world and forgotten how it truly was, how it was full of beauty and hope, goodwill and joy. They no longer saw the valor or kindness that was on display in every city and in the hearts of every person on the face of Terrial. They may have forgotten about all these things, but he hadn't and he would not let their lack of faith, their lack of trust, bring him down. He would not let their hopelessness and the darkness of the dungeons crush his spirit or destroy his faith. He would hold onto these things for they made him the person he was today.

"If you wish to rely on the others," Druzeel said, taking a few deep breaths and calming himself, "then that is your choice, but I choose to believe in justice and in the truth. I put my faith in the law and in the Justicars of the Colonnade."

"Delusional," Jannda said.

"I choose to believe in myself," Druzeel continued, ignoring Jannda's words. "I know that my words will be heard and the truth will be seen. If they still have doubts, I will submit to spells that see the truth of my words."

"And if that should fail to convince them?" Dex asked, actually admiring the young wizard's bravado.

"Then I will submit myself to spells of truth and—"

"Yes, because truth spells have never been faked," Jannda said sarcastically.

"And I will demand," Druzeel continued, acting as if Jannda had never spoken, "that they contact Graeak. He will speak for us and defend us, even if you two choose not to."

He spat the last words with anger, letting them know that he was disgusted with their willingness to give up on themselves. They may want to give up, but he wasn't and he wasn't going to give up on them either, no matter what they wanted. He was not that type of person. The others may still be free and planning something to help them escape, but he would not rely on them. He could not rely on them. He would only rely on the truth, the law, justice, and on himself.

"Druzeel," Dex began, but Druzeel only held up his hand.

"Let's eat," he said, his voice strong and passionate. "Then we need to get some sleep. Our trial is tomorrow and we need to be at our best. All of us," he added, looking at Jannda. The halfling only rolled her eyes and sat back down in the corner.

Druzeel turned away from her and walked to the tray. He gathered Jannda's portion and brought it over to her. She just looked at the wall, refusing to meet his eyes, so he laid her things at her feet. Then he gathered Dex's portion. The fighter took his food from the young wizard's hands, looking at Druzeel in a new light. He couldn't help but smile as Druzeel turned away and began eating. The young man had certainly changed in the past day and his recent show of courage and strength had Dex believing that they actually *did* have a chance of being set free.

But that elation only lasted for a few seconds. He was too experienced and he had seen and heard too many things to know that their case was a hopeless one. The Colonnade would never believe them over the Pillars, especially the High Captain, no matter what the evidence showed or what they said. Though he knew what lay ahead, he kept his words to himself. Let Druzeel hold onto hope, he told himself. It seemed to be the only thing keeping the young man going and he wasn't about to take that away from him.

No, their only hope sat with Brask and the others. He just hoped they were still out there, thinking of a way to get them free.



The room was musty and dirty and the shabby wooden walls provided little protection against the winds that blew outside. The streams of air easily made it through the broken, decaying slats and filled the room with air that smelled of wet dog and garbage. If the building had been located in a nicer part of Pelartis, the scent of flowers and freshly baked goods would be permeating the room. Then again, the room would probably not smell of anything at all for it would have been better built and sealed tight against the outside elements. Instead, it was placed squarely in the center of the poor section of the city and had been left to rot for almost a decade. Luckily, it was spring and the air was at least warm enough to make the room livable. In another two months, fall would be closing in on the world and the broken down warehouse would be much less hospitable, but by then, the Knights of the Chipped Blade would be long gone. Or so the leader of the small mercenary band hoped.

Brask Battlebeard stood at a large rickety table, which was covered with pieces of parchment of all sizes. His eyes carefully scanned the intricate drawings and dark text, all illuminated by a handful of candles, the only source of light in the room. Maps of various buildings located throughout the city were drawn on some of the parchment while others held general information, including lists of supplies they would soon need and names of prominent figures

that they may be visiting. Nobles, merchants, Pillars, and even the names of a few Justicars were written down, and it had all been gathered within a single day. It was an incredible feat to gain so much knowledge in such little time, but Brask had expected nothing less from Vistalas and Ristil. Both men had done exactly as ordered and given them a needed moral boost since. As he stood there, angry and being in such a situation, pouring over the information in front of him, his mind wondered back to when this whole debacle had started.

After Brask, Thorstar, Ristil, and Vistalas had witnessed the arrest of their three companions at the home of the archmage Piyus the Magnificent, Brask had given them orders to find out where Druzeel, Dex, and Jannda were being taken and what exactly had led to the situation they saw. Though it should have been relatively easy to accomplish these tasks, they had to be careful to avoid detection by the Pillars. They were now most assuredly considered criminals and would be arrested upon sight.

Before even knowing what went on at the archmage's home, Brask and the others were wanted for questioning in the deaths of Drisk Solidhilt, leader of the Night Hounds thieves guild, and a dozen of his men. Though High Captain Warstout had no evidence of their involvement in the deaths of the thieves, he wanted Brask and his men found to question them about the battle. They were not to be arrested, only questioned, but after the High Captain had arrested three of Brask's companions for the murder of such a respected Pelartian, the annoying dwarf had ordered them taken into custody as well. In Xavdak's mind, Brask surmised, they were all guilty by association.

Since the scene at the archmage's home, though the time following had been fruitful, it had not been easy. After Brask had issued his orders, Ristil followed the prison carriage that carried Dex and the others. Much to his chagrin, the guards had taken his companions to the same building they had been brought to when they had first arrived in the city. Being in the tall, swirl-like tower once before, Ristil knew it would not be easy breaking the others out, if it was even possible. Hundreds of Pillars had been in the foyer when they were there, not to mention the dozens more that he had seen on the other levels on his way out. He didn't know if the large presence was abnormal or if that was how the building was always occupied. He could never know for sure and it looked as though only Pillars were allowed entrance, unless you were a prisoner of course. To get inside, they would need to be disguised as guards, but Ristil highly doubted he would be able to get his hands on a uniform. It may be possible, and expensive, but he wasn't betting on being successful. Even if he was, the tower looked to contain hundreds of levels and there was no telling where Dex and the others were located. That information could be

found out easily enough, but there was so much more he would need to know. Did the guards have code words? When were the shift changes? Did they keep a log of visitors? What was protocol while in the prison? Were only a select few allowed to have keys? If given enough time, he could find answers to all of his questions, but he felt he only had a few days to work with, and that wasn't nearly enough. Something like this would take weeks.

Feeling frustrated, Ristil watched as the guards escorted Dex, Jannda, and Druzeel into the building. He silently cursed their young companion for he knew his stupidity had somehow gotten them into this mess. He couldn't care less about freeing Druzeel, but he would not leave Dex and Jannda to rot, no matter how frustrating their support of the wizard was, so he mentally marked where the guards had taken them in. He counted the number of guards, their locations, and the general layout of the area. He made a few other observations about the Pillars and the building, then left to see if he could get an illustration of the dungeon layout. He hoped that whatever maps he happened to procure would instill a little more hope than what he had seen. Luckily, he was able to get dozens of maps, not just of the tower, but of the courthouse and the surrounding barracks as well. He had not been so lucky with the price, but he paid it and delivered what he received to Brask.

While Ristil was studying the prison, Vistalas was busy gathering information on who they may be able to bribe or coerce into helping them rescue their friends from a dreadful end. Though he was uncertain of their fate, Vistalas had a good idea of what would happen to Dex, Jannda, and Druzeel should they be found guilty of the crimes of which they were accused. He had been in dozens of cities, had witnessed hundreds of trials and executions, and knew what to expect if his fellow Knights were found guilty. Based on what he had seen at the archmage's home, he guessed that charge would be murder. The guards of any city did not usually make such a fuss for simply thievery. Somehow, the archmage had been killed and his murder had been pinned on his fellow Knights. Regardless of what they had been accused of, Vistalas knew they had to get them free. To do that, they needed information and a few helping hands, be they willing or not.

Given the short timeframe he had—three hours was not a long time to gather information and contact those he knew—Vistalas was able to accomplish quite a bit. Though he was run ragged, what he learned and what he was able to do benefited them greatly.

In the first hour, he learned a little about his companions' arrest. Disguised as a common citizen, he had visited a trio of taverns that were frequented by the Pillars. He had sat and listened, learning that his assumption that his

companions had been arrested for murder was correct. He also found out that their trial would be just two days from now, which gave him little time to secure aid and plan a rescue. After gaining a few more tidbits of information, small details of the arrest and gossip about the crime scene, he left, spending the second hour searching for his various contacts. He found only a handful, but they gave him the names of some Pillars, many of them Fifth Pillar or higher, that would be more than willing to talk given the proper monetary motivation. After hearing that the actual guards were so easily seduced, Vistalas could not help but laugh. Xavdak had so been adamant about his men's nobility. Not so noble, the rogue thought to himself. He was also able to pry the names of a few nobles and merchants that may have some useful information. One man may even be willing to lend his aid to help Dex and the other escape, but, once again, for the right price. Vistalas knew they had adequate gold and riches, but nobles, especially one so unscrupulous, were known to be greedy.

During his last hour, Vistalas determined that they would need somewhere secure to plan and go over what they had learned. They could only use the taverns for so long before being discovered, so he sought out one of the few people he knew who could provide them with a place to hide. Though he was reluctant to ask the thief for help for he was oftentimes unreliable and sometimes wild with his behavior, he knew that they had little time and even less of a choice. Thankfully, Vistalas was able to find him rather quickly. It wasn't difficult for the elf was known to visit Karris's Kiss, one of the many unrefined taverns located throughout the city, one that made its coin by highlighting nude women. Sure enough, as soon as he entered, he found the thief known as Silduer Darkcloak located in a dark corner, being entertained by a human female wearing nothing but a thin gold chain around her waist.

Vistalas wasted no time on small talk or gazing at the sultry women that danced on tables or poles scattered throughout the dimly lit tavern. He hurried over and explained his need to Silduer. The elf, having instantly seen through the disguise Vistalas wore, spoke only a dozen or so words, stating price and conditions. Once he was paid—at a very exorbitant price—he gave Vistalas the location and key to an old rundown warehouse located in the slums. The Knight, angered at the outrageous price but having no other option, took the key without another word and went to meet up with the others. Vistalas wasn't at all thrilled about their new domicile, neither was Brask, but their choices were limited and it was somewhere to work.

Before the arranged meeting time at the Wilted Rose, a tavern that the Knights found to be relatively safe for a short meeting and before Brask had found out about their new hideout, he and Thorstar had a task of their own.

After leaving the others, they went in search for information on what exactly happened that had led to the arrest of Dex, Jannda, and Druzeel. Brask honestly couldn't care less about the young wizard that had become such a pain in his side, but since he had obviously been arrested with the others—and the way Brask was thinking, the cause of their imprisonment—he wanted to know everything he could. The problem was, the Pillars were looking for them, and he was not exactly easily forgettable. Neither was Thorstar. An almost seven-foot tall giant of a man usually stuck out, especially on an empty street. To find what they were searching for, they needed to move in secret.

For the first hour, they used their coin to get their questions answered. Unfortunately, since it had still been night, not even considered early morning, those they spoke with were of the less than honorable stock and being so soon after the arrest, the news had not yet traveled to the ordinary citizens. After gaining very little knowledge, they altered their strategy and spent the second hour staying close to those taverns that the Pillars frequented. When anyone would leave the taverns, they would promise a few coins to any patron leaving that they thought had overheard some gossip. Luckily, it also appeared that Brask and Thorstar's description was not yet widely known.

The first bit of information they heard was of the death of some Night Hounds in the slums. Brask wasn't interested in that for he had been there and knew what happened, but he *was* interested to learn that a wealthy jewelry merchant had been assassinated, apparently by a pair of mercenaries. One of them was a human male, dressed as a fighter. That in itself wasn't odd for there were hundreds of mercenaries in the city fitting that description. What had really caught Brask's attention was that the second assassin was a halfling. He knew right then that the men he had spoken with were describing Dex and Jannda. Questions immediately came to his mind.

Who was the merchant? Was it the same man Dex was going to see about the assassin? There had been no mention of Druzeel from the men he had spoken to, so where was the wizard during the meeting? Was there a fight beforehand? Where had this all taken place? Brask had a dozen more questions but no one seemed to know anything other than what he had just learned and none of them said anything about what had happened at the archmage's home. Time was running out and he needed to know more.

Since they were already wanted men, Brask decided to take more extreme measures to get the answers he needed. He assumed he was already wanted for murder and figured adding assault to the charges would be no big deal, so he no longer offered coin to normal citizens as they exited the taverns. Instead, he went right to the Pillars.



Brask waited in the shadows of the alley until a lone guard would walk by. Not wanting to take any chances, he waited patiently, looking for those men who appeared tired or who had a little too much to drink. When they spotted an unsuspecting Pillar, they would grab him and pull him into the alley. With Thorstar beside him, it was relatively easy to subdue the guard after they had pulled him into the alley. Unfortunately, not everyone they abducted knew about his Knights. It took three before they found one that had the answers they were looking for.

Brask learned all about the assassination of the merchant and the death of Piyus. Under threat of death, the young Pillar, who had been present during both investigations, told them everything he knew. He spoke of the supposed battle at Druid's Kiss between Dex, Jannda, and the shadow creatures. He told Brask about the small daggers they had found in the merchant and how High Captain Warstout had issued arrest orders soon after. Then he talked about how they had found a young wizard and the two accused of the merchant's death in the home of Piyus, standing over his dead body. He also spoke of the massacre they found afterward. Everyone in the building had been killed, brutally ripped to pieces. Hardly a stone had been left free of blood.

After the young guard told Brask that it was Druzeel's own dagger that was found embedded into the wizard's body, the mercenary leader decided he had heard enough. After giving Thorstar a nod, the large man knocked the Pillar out with a sharp punch to the head. The two then left to meet up with the others. In that short trip to the Wilted Rose, Brask had come to a conclusion, a simple explanation to this entire mess.

Though Druzeel had been caught with the dagger in his hand, their imprisonment and troubles were not the young wizard's doing. His ignorant actions did not help the situation, but he was not the cause of their predicament. No, Brask seethed in anger. It was the assassin. That damn assassin, who had been ahead of them every step of the way, had set them up. First, he had set Drisk and his Night Hounds upon them. Then he had successfully framed Dex and the others for murder. Now, all he had to do was sit back and let the Pillars do the rest of the work. If Brask didn't want to kill the man, he would have congratulated him. His plan had worked perfectly.

The leader of the Knights stayed angry all the way to the Wilted Rose. His rage only increased as Ristil and Vistalas told him what they had learned, though it abated somewhat when Vistalas told him the names of the people they may be able to bribe or pay into helping them. Still, that meant more coin out of their pockets, something they had not expected and now that their attention was off the assassin, the thief could do whatever he wanted. Brask

wouldn't be surprised if the man were already gone. Now that his enemies were taken care of, what did he have to stick around for?

As Brask came back to the present, to the table covered with maps and documents, the anger he felt toward the assassin came with him. Not only was he mad at the assassin, but he was furious at being forced into such a situation. He was now doing extra work, work that made him delay what he had been paid to do, and nothing enraged Brask Battlebeard more than not doing what he had been paid to do. It wasted his time and delayed the next job that may be waiting for him and his men. That meant gold from his pocket, ale from his gut, food from his stomach, and another woman from his bed. Just thinking about it made him want to slam his fists down on the table, to break it in half and throw the pieces around the room. He wanted to yell and scream and slam his axe into everything around him. He wanted to grab someone, anyone—preferably the assassin—and pound them into the ground until there was nothing left but blood and bone ground into powder.

But Brask calmed himself and pushed his anger away. He cleared his mind of the assassin and the Pillars that were even now surely searching for them. Now was not the time to be frustrated and angry. When people let their emotions go, they made mistakes, and mistakes could be fatal, so he calmed himself and concentrated on the information in front of him and the plan that they had come up with to assure their companions' freedom.

After their meeting at the Wilted Rose, the Knights had quickly gone to the warehouse Silduer had allowed them to use. Once they made sure it was indeed safe and the area around it was secure, they took some time to rest and regain their strength. Though Brask hated wasting what precious time they had, he knew his men had been run ragged and needed to rest and eat to recover their energy. Once they awoke, they began to plan.

They went over maps, names, streets, alleyways, and all the areas between the prisons and the courthouse, trying to find the best course of action. After an exhaustive scan of the dungeons, it was clear they would have no chance of breaking in and getting out clean, so they decided that they would act after the trail, when the Pillars were escorting Dex and the others back. Security should be more lax then and it gave them the best opportunity for success. They located a few narrow streets that would give them an advantage in the battle to come, allowing them to minimize the guards' reaction. Unfortunately, they still had no idea how many Pillars to expect. They hadn't the time to watch an actual escort to the courthouse, so they intended to seek help, to find people that would be willing to make a diversion to draw the guards' attention, but that meant they needed to seek a little more information.

The next part of that day was spent in the city, trying to find out what guards were on what shifts, who exactly had access to the prison and courthouse, who they could safely ask for aid, and about a dozen other details that would help in the jailbreak. Vistalas had briefly considered asking Silduer for aid again for the thief had hundreds of contacts, but the elf had already stuck his neck out with the warehouse and his generosity only went so far. Vistalas decided not to push.

Once they had gathered what they needed, they met back at the warehouse and discussed the specifics. After many more hours of talking, arguing, and plotting, Ristil and Vistalas went back out into the streets, to spread their gold around and assure they would have the needed aid when the time came. Brask and Thorstar stayed behind and continued to go over what they planned. They also stayed at the warehouse because they had discovered, during their previous outing, that the guards were adamantly searching for two men matching their description. It seemed that their earlier roughhousing of the guards had finally been noticed, so they stayed in hiding and waited. While he waited, Brask kept going over what they planned in his head, and what they would do after they freed the others.

After they succeeded, they planned to seek out the assassin once again. To do that, they had to make a few more contacts and spread some more coin around. They already had a few leads and planned to speak with them once Dex, Jannda, and Druzeel were free, but it would be much harder to operate after the jailbreak. Brask was sure that Xavdak would turn the entire city upside down to find them, but they had little choice. They had to find the assassin and get back on the trail.

As Brask stood in silence, he heard the stairs creak and groan under the weight of someone approaching. He was surprised that anyone of them could even walk on the rotted wood without falling through. Seconds later, Vistalas walked through the narrow door.

“Were you successful?” Brask asked.

“Yes,” the thief said, “on all counts, but it is not getting any easier. The Pillars have only stepped up their patrols since last time. I think it best if we stayed here until the last possible moment.”

“Agreed,” Brask said. “You still managed to secure the noble’s aid?”

“Yes,” Vistalas replied. “He has men working in the courthouse and assured me that Dex, Jannda, and even Druzeel’s possessions will be ours soon after the trial. He cannot act sooner for their items may be presented as evidence, but we shall have them. As for the others, they will be in place when the time comes.”

“Good,” Brask said, feeling a little sliver of relief that one part of the plan had been set up and assured. He was confident of their success, but he liked to actually hear that everything was ready.

Just then, the stairs creaked. Brask and Vistalas turned to see Ristil walk into the room with Thorstar right behind him. Though he was moving normally, the half-elf looked as though he had just run a hundred miles without stopping. His hair was ruffled, sweat covered his brow, and he was breathing deeply. A few scratch marks decorated his left cheek and shoulder. He walked up to the table and leaned against it for support.

“What happened?” Brask asked with concern.

“Damn Pillars!” Ristil exclaimed in anger. “I was spotted just after my last meeting. Thought they had missed me but turned out I was wrong. Still managed to lose them. Wasn’t easy though.”

“What happened to your face?” Vistalas asked.

“Tripped on a beggar while running through an alleyway and hit the wall,” he said while rubbing the side of his face. Vistalas couldn’t suppress a grin. “Shut up,” Ristil said when he saw his companion’s look.

“Was everyone agreeable?” Brask asked, still a little concerned.

“Yeah,” Ristil answered, taking a deep breath. “They’re ready to go, though it cost a little more than we wanted.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Brask said, surprising them all. Usually he would be the first to get angry at spending extra coin. It appeared he just wanted all this to be over with.

“The Pillars I met with are also ready to go,” Ristil said. “It’s funny,” he said with a smile, “they were the easiest to convince.”

“Perhaps Xavdak should pay them more,” Vistalas suggested. Thorstar nodded in agreement.

“The High Captain’s ignorance will be our gain,” Brask said. He couldn’t help but be amused that Xavdak’s stupidity, his own men, so easily corruptible, would only be aiding them. He wished he could see the dwarf again and rub it in his ugly face, but with a little bit of luck, he would never see the High Captain again.

“Everything’s in place,” the leader of the Knights said. He looked at his men. Though the plan was set, he saw weariness and concern in their eyes. Ristil and Vistalas looked exhausted and even though Thorstar had only kept watch at the warehouse, he was looking worn down as well. Brask himself felt the aches and pains that came from the lack of restful sleep.

“I suggest you all take the time we have and get some rest. We have a hard day’s work ahead of us.” They all nodded in agreement.