

SEEDS OF MALICE



DARK DESCENT
BOOK III

CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES

Suddenly, the two men lunged forward, Druzeel had been ready and barked out the words to his staff. The tip flashed and three more balls of energy burst forth, speeding toward the closest man. He tried to dodge but the balls followed him and surged into his side, making him cry out. The magic and the burns on his face proved to be too much and his sword dropped to the ground. His legs gave out and he started to follow his sword downward, but before he did, his companion grabbed him from behind. He held him up, actually lifting him from the ground, and threw him forward, right at Druzeel. The maneuver took Druzeel by surprise, but he somehow managed to twist to the side and the man fell into the crowd in a mass of tangled arms and legs. Druzeel quickly turned back, to send another round of magic into the approaching thug, but the man was too close. As Druzeel pointed his staff, the man knocked it away with his free hand, moving swiftly for someone with a few broken ribs, and thrust his sword forward.

The blade sunk into Druzeel's shoulder, parting his robes and flesh. It came to a stop only when the sword hit his shoulder blade. Intense pain raced through his body and he cried out. He felt the tip of the weapon grating against his bone and blood started to flow down his arm.

His staff clattered to the ground and his knees buckled. If not for the sword propping him up, he would have fallen to the ground. But the wounded man held him up, a cruel smile on his lips.

"You ain't so tough," he spat, twisting the blade, sending excruciating agony through Druzeel's body. "Even wizards crumble if you get a blade in them."

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PROLOGUE

The blue sky was free of clouds and the sun was shining bright, bathing the land in warm, comforting light. For miles around, long strands of grass danced in the slight breeze that was working its way across the land and the trees were swaying back and forth like waving arms, welcoming the cool air. Squirrels, chipmunks, and other rodents scampered among the brush, searching for a tasty treat, while birds soared through the sky above, riding the currents, basking in Solaris's rays. If there had been anyone traveling over the land at that moment, they surely would have stopped walking and raised their faces toward the sun. Even the most cynical and pessimistic person could not help but smile on a day such as this. It truly was the perfect day.

But for one area of the land, an area that appeared to be filled with nothing but a black cloud, the light of Solaris did not reach the surface or warm the air. No wind penetrated the veil of blackness and no animal, no matter the size, strayed close to the wall of nothingness. They would not even venture into the few hundred yards of land that surrounded the cloud, a land that was devoid of everything but rocks and a few wicked looking weeds. Birds would not fly over the dark mass for they feared what may happen should they do so. The reptiles and other insects that clung to the wall of the cliff that butted up against one long side of the cloud made sure to stay high above it as well. Some even refused to leave their small hovels for more than a few minutes at a time. Even to something as small as a cave gnat, everything about the unnatural mass felt wrong and it would avoid it as much as possible.

Yet for all the fear and avoidance the animals were showing, there were some beings that actually moved toward the large cloud, even seemed to want to be captured by the fog of darkness. Many creatures, be they human, elven,

dwarven, or of a race not often seen by the curious wildlife, would disappear into the fog and rarely be seen or heard from again. Every so often, people *would* emerge, sometimes in large groups or in crude caravans, and travel across the land to destinations unknown, but more often than not, those that went into the cloud never came out again. One such man, dressed in black clothing and shrouded in an aura of malice, moved toward the cloud without care. He did not seem concerned about the unending darkness standing before him or the dead ground he walked across. He paid no attention to the fog as it seemed to expand and reach out to grab him. In fact, he moved with such haste that any watching would say that he and the darkness were acquaintances and were once again meeting for some dark purpose. They would not be wrong.

Mazik walked into the dark cloud without a second thought. As soon as he broke the dark veil, the warmth and light of Solaris disappeared. The wind was also suddenly gone, as if he had walked behind a solid wall. It was replaced by a thick, damp air that seemed to cling to him as soon as he entered, as if welcoming him back. There was a slight chill to it but being dressed as he was, he hardly noticed the change. Indeed, he was used to such a feeling, residing here for most of his life, and the memory of this place was not long forgotten. He briefly turned his gaze toward that sky and saw that it was gone, just like everything else, replaced by a gray fog that expanded as far as his eyes could see. There was no more blue sky or shining sun. The rocky cliff face that hung over the mass of darkness had also been swallowed up by the haze. Even the tall green grass, lush trees, and rolling hills were gone. All that remained was dead ground and a cloud of gray that his sight could hardly penetrate, but the obscurity did not last for long. Less than twenty steps in, the ashen cloak suddenly peeled away, revealing a city shrouded in shadows.

No wall of stone, barrier of rock, or wooden fortification surrounded the city of Shadowfell. Its perimeter just lay open, welcoming those who would dare enter the cloud of darkness. If travelers were brave enough to enter, or foolish enough as the saying goes, then they were welcome to try their hand in the city of thieves. Many questioned whether there should be some type of ditch or moat, to discourage any force from invading the city, but then they realized that they had much more to fear from Shadowfell's own citizens than anyone brazen enough to try to conquer such a place. Indeed, some may even welcome a foreign conqueror. They at least may offer mercy and deal death quickly. Here, death, if it happened, was usually slow and painful.

The streets were paved with pieces of colorless stone and many of the buildings were made from the same stuff. Those that were not built from rock were built of a dark wood. A majority of the buildings were simply built as

squares or rectangles, erected without care of architectural detail or design. They were thrown up for the sole purpose of sheltering what lay inside, though there were many who's owners valued beauty and art, but the visual appeal was a matter of opinion. Some displayed statues of gargoyles and walls carved with screeching skulls, while others held carvings of angels and celestial landscapes. Opinions of each depended on one's disposition and nature.

Regardless of the city's architecture, many of the buildings were strong and looked sturdy enough to last for generations, but others were so poorly constructed that a strong breeze may blow them over. Luckily, strong breezes were rarely felt in the city. If a man or woman felt a rush of wind go by them, they best check their pouches for they had probably just been robbed by a thief. That is, if they were not on the ground bleeding to death.

Most of the city was a jumble of buildings piled one on top of the other, with an occasional tower rising high above the skyline. When first building the dull columns of stone, the owners of each had hoped their new homes would rise above the shadows that covered the city, emerging from the darkness into the world of sun and light. To their dismay, they found there was no escaping the curse that had been brought down upon the city. The higher they built, the higher the fog would climb. It was the same with expansion. Whenever a new building was planned, the fog would expand, preventing anyone with the intent of building a new structure from leaving the boundaries of the cloud. It was as if the shadows knew what was about to happen. The citizens gave up caring soon after they realized there was no way to bring their city from darkness. If they could not deal with it, they left. Those that no longer worried about the fog and shadows surrounding them stayed and dealt with the gloom.

Usually, in the cities that sat under the sun, under the deep blue of the sky, Mazik would keep to the shadows and move through the alleyways to get to his destination, at least during the day. At night, he would skulk anywhere that shadows loomed for they were his allies and partners in crime, but where law and order was the norm, he did his best to avoid guards and others who charged themselves as dispensers of justice. In Shadowfell, where the majority of the law was your own, the assassin walked openly, without threat of apprehension. Here, all he had to worry about was a fellow thief stabbing him in the back, and that was very unlikely to happen.

Over the years, Mazik had built a reputation in Shadowfell, one that sent fear and terror into the hearts of his enemies and rivals. As the lead assassin of the powerful Shadow Stalkers, one of the factions that thrived in the city, he garnered a certain level of respect and fear among the people of Shadowfell. Most, if not all, knew that those who tried their hand against Mazik Shadowedge

usually ended up as bloodless corpse. They also knew that if the Mage Slayer had been sent to see you, a name he received for his expertise at dispatching that particular brand of magic user and the name of his infamous purple blade, the visit was soon followed by your funeral. Because of this fame, this infamy, Mazik walked into the dank and crowded streets of Shadowfell without pause, without fear or concern.

As he neared and the people noticed who it was that was walking toward them, they quickly scrambled to get out of the way. Men knocked over women, women picked up their children, and animals were trampled as the crowd parted before the dark assassin. Those that had the courage to look in his direction did so with wide eyes, eyes filled with fear and trepidation. Even the High Knights, those that were charged with guarding the city, which in this case meant harassing those they wished and ignoring danger when they wanted, never came near Mazik. They let him walk in unhindered. Mazik could not help but grin behind his mask as he noticed their panicked expressions, as they flowed around him like parted water. It was good to be home.

But as much as he wanted to, he could not dawdle. His master was waiting for him and he could not let his presence be known too quickly. Luckily, Shadowfell was a very big city and the gossip this small pocket of gawkers would spread would take a few hours to reach the Shadow Stalkers. By then, he would be back to the faction, giving a full report, but until that time, he had to bring what he had procured to his master.

He stayed on the main avenues for only a few moments longer before ducking into an alleyway. The shadows within swallowed him whole, like a hungry dragon devouring a helpless elf. Anyone watching or peering down the narrow passage would see nothing but darkness for Mazik had long ago learned how to blend into the shadows, to become one with the night. Not even the rats that lived in the unkempt, putrid passageways noticed his passing. They just continued to scurry along the edge of the buildings, searching for food or, perhaps, a dead body to nibble on.

Mazik traveled deep into the city, being careful to stay out of sight. He wanted no one to notice him, even sense his presence, or think that something was amiss. The Crimson Nail, the faction who's compound he was about to enter, were the Shadow Stalkers bitter rivals. Being this close to a competing faction was dangerous and he knew that they would waste no time filling him with arrows or swords should they spot him. Not even his master would have the power to save him should that happen. Beside his lord and Mazik himself, no one knew of their relationship, and it would remain that way even should the threat of death fall upon him. The assassin was fine with this arrangement

for he had no intention of being spotted. He had snuck into the compound hundreds of times and never once raised a single hair on any of the guards' heads. Still, he knew that it only took once, even with the secret entrance his master had provided him, so he was cautious as he approached the deep red wall made of steel plates.

Though the city did not raise a barrier to the outside world, almost every faction in Shadowfell had some type of impediment to prevent undesirables from gaining access to their compounds. Some built walls of brick, others used wooden logs, and one even created small banks made from bones. The Crimson Nail, one of the largest factions in the city, had built walls of metal, composed of hundreds of blood-red plates, bolted together. The head of each bolt was engraved with a single drop of blood and etched with a powerful rune, whose magic added strength to the structure. Runes and odd inscriptions also decorated each plate, making the barrier appear demonic and nefarious. At the top of the ramparts were tall, narrow spires, looking like giant nails. There were hundreds of them, spaced only a few feet apart, and each held a small slit where the guards could hide behind and fire arrows from during a siege or attack. It was an imposing sight and discouraged even the most courageous from coming within twenty feet of the fortifications. Even the guards, who currently patrolled the perimeter of the walls, were daunting. They wore a combination of plate and chain, both dyed red and inscribed with runes, that were decorated with sharp razors and vicious looking nails. Their full-faced helms, containing only a single slit, looked to be made out of layers of sharpened steel plates, bonded together and hollowed out to make room for a head. No eyes or facial features could be seen within each helmet, which helped spread the rumor that the guards were just empty suits of armor, filled with the souls of the Nail's victims. Mazik just smiled as he thought about the other things he had heard about the Crimson Nail and his own faction. Many were true but most were just fabrications, but the leaders of both never did anything to quell such gossip. They just let it continue, which added to each faction's notoriety.

The entrance to the compound consisted of two large gates, which matched the walls. Each gate was fitted with large studs that ended in points, extending over two feet from the surface. When needed, the studs could retract so the gates could slide into the surrounding walls, allowing access for anyone granted entrance. Mazik had no plans to ask for admittance or to try to go through those gates. He worked his way around to the south of the wall, where a small sewer grate sat, which allowed sewage to flow from the compound.

Mazik knew that the leader of the Crimson Nail, a half-orc by the name

of Cruril Stonefist, was not stupid, despite his race. He would not leave such an opening unguarded or without wards. As the assassin neared the grate, he felt powerful magic around the bars, magic that would utterly destroy him should he try to pry it loose, but as he came closer, the amulet that his master had given him suddenly glowed and the wards around the grate dimmed and faded away. They did not disappear completely. They just went dormant. After Mazik had lifted the grate and gone through, the wards sprang back to life, waiting for their next victim.

For the next hour, Mazik navigated the twisting, winding maze that sat underneath the Crimson Nail compound, hiding from patrols, avoiding traps, and dodging the various creatures that had taken up residence in the sewers. Though he had come this way hundreds of times, the patrols never moved the same way twice and Mazik always saw new traps or creatures. Each time he came, it was getting harder and harder to move through without being noticed, but no matter the obstacles, if his master called, he would come.

After avoiding the eighth patrol to come marching through the repugnant tunnels, the assassin came to a small tunnel concealed behind a thick growth of oily vines. Without stopping to check for traps, Mazik entered, crawling on his hands and knees, and came to a small wooden door. Once again, the amulet he carried glowed and the wards faded. He went through and found himself within a small room, empty save for a wall ladder leading up into the darkness.

After getting to his feet and wiping the grime from his clothing, he scaled the ladder and went through the door at the top. Inside was devoid of any light, but Mazik had no need for light to see. To his dark eyes, he saw everything as if a hundred torches lined the walls. Large crates, sacks of grain, and other supplies filled the room. He was grateful his master had given him a direct route to his tower for the grounds were littered with guards and dozens of buildings. To navigate them all and reach his master's home, which was directly in the middle of the compound, would not have been easy, even for someone like Mazik. He would have to be invisible to reach it unnoticed.

Mazik made his way to the only exit, which was a thick wooden door braced by metal rods, and pressed his ear to the wood. When he was sure the hallway beyond was empty, he left the storage room behind and made for the stairs. When he reached them, he started to scale the tower without delay.

It took almost an hour to climb the narrow stairs. He had to duck away at least a half dozen times as guards and other inhabitants of the tower came strolling down the stone steps. It was difficult and annoying, but Mazik took it in stride, leaving nothing but shadows in his wake. He used moments like this to hone his skills and make sure he was still the shadowy, dangerous assassin

Shadowfell thought he was. He knew his master could have easily given him a pathway free of obstacles, but that would be too easy. He wanted to challenge his prized assassin and make sure he was still a valuable asset. The moment Mazik was caught was the moment he was no longer needed.

When he reached the twentieth level of the tower, going through a trapped archway that the amulet dispelled, he stepped from the shadows, knowing he no longer had to fear being discovered. None of his master's subjects were allowed past this point, but he was still on alert should he run into anything unexpected. His master liked to test him every now and then. There were still beings on the higher levels, but none of them would notice. Even if they did, they would hardly be able to raise the alarm for most of them were mindless zombies, slaves to his master's will. He ran into one of them as he came around the next corner.

The thing was human but it no longer held the smooth, creamy skin as with most living humans. Instead, its skin was a pale gray and riddled with rotten flesh. Flaps of skin hung from its body and it wore nothing but a pair of dirty pants. Its eyes were as white as bone and its mouth was stuck open in a wordless scream. A moan emerged every few minutes but it kept quiet as it shuffled through the tower. As it laid eyes on Mazik, it just gave a low grunt and moved by him, intending to finish the menial task it had been given. Mazik let it go, never looking back. He just moved on, heading for his master. After two more levels of wondrous artifacts, amazing objects of power, and dozens of mindless thralls, the assassin reached his master's lair.

The room was dark and smelled of a mixture of incense and burnt copper. Though gloomy and dim, a handful of torches were spread throughout the room, resting in sconces shaped like dagger hilts. The low flames let off just enough light to display the dozens of bookcases and workbenches that lined the walls. The glow also illuminated the hundreds of strange objects that decorated the wooden and stone surfaces. Though the room was large, stretching well over a hundred feet in both width and height, it was crowded with magical artifacts, exotic objects, large books, and hundreds of other trinkets and items of power. Almost every surface was covered, including the walls, which were painted with runes, mystical symbols, tapestries, and other valuable objects of art. Many were quite disturbing to look at but others held beauty and grace. A wizard's chamber was always one filled with mystery and secrets.

The ceiling overhead, no doubt hundreds of feet above, was shrouded in shadow and strange noises echoed from the darkness. Even though he could see in the dark, even his eyes could not fully penetrate the deep black that hung over the room. He could just make out the shapes of what appeared to be

cages that were hanging from the ceiling. Many were small, only big enough to hold a cat or large dog, but a few appeared large enough to imprison a full-grown man or wild beast. Mazik listened carefully and heard a groan and a few growls come from whatever lay inside the steel enclosures, but that was the extent of their cries. Even they realized the futility of asking for mercy.

“Mazik,” came a deep, smooth voice from the center of the room. The power of his master’s voice made his head pound and his body quiver. It had been so long since he had stood in front of his master that he had forgotten what it felt like to be in his presence, but the sensation quickly passed as he looked to his lord and master.

A large red sphere sat hovering in the middle of the room, three feet from the floor. Inside, mists of red and deep purple swirled and moved as if they were thunderclouds caught in a storm. Every so often, a flash of light would form behind the clouds, as if lightning were fighting to break free. Just below the orb was a circle of pulsating runes, painted in red pain. Or was that blood? Mazik could not be certain, nor did he care. He just moved his eyes from the runes and set his gaze on the form standing in front of the magical orb.

His master was a tall man, with skin the color of bone, hair as dark as night, and eyes so black and empty they looked like the end of time. The only hint that the man was alive at all was his irises, which glowed white with power. Along with that power came an aura of evil and corruption. Mazik’s own nature was closely aligned with that of his master so the affects were diminished. Otherwise, he would be cringing in fear.

A mustache lay under his slightly pointed nose and a small patch of short hair sat on his chin. Both were black and well groomed. His hair, which fell almost to his waist, was pulled back into a ponytail and bound with a jewel-encrusted brooch. He was not overly muscular but he was well toned and his arms and legs held a good amount of strength. His body was built more for that of a warrior than a magic user and although Mazik’s master was indeed a powerful wizard, he was also a skilled and dangerous fighter and like any warrior, he dressed the part.

His armor was made from a combination of materials, some of which were abnormal and would make most people cringe. Black chainmail covered his chest, waist, stomach, and the upper half of his arms. Fragments of sharpened bone, all of which appeared bleached by the sun or some other dark art, were fused onto the chain. Many of the sharp points were small and meant for protection, but others, like the large pieces covering his shoulders, elbows, and knees, were as long as daggers and could be used as weapons should someone come too close. The pieces of flexible bone also covered parts of his hands,

feet, and legs. The sharp spikes on his gloves and boots, which were black and appeared to be painted onto his skin, looked especially dangerous for they could rip a man's flesh to pieces.

The bone itself was enough to instill fear into the heart of anyone facing the dark lord, but the strands of dark, red muscle that connected the pieces of bone only added to the man's menacing appearance. The fibrous tissue, almost as red a blood, pulsated with power and seemed to breathe as if it was alive. Mazik knew that the tissue did indeed contain some type of sentience for he had seen his master in battle and watched in amazement as the muscle and bone actually moved and shifted, blocking blades and magic from reaching its wearer.

Finishing the man's ensemble were a handful of daggers that were strapped to his forearms and ankles. Usually, a mace with spikes that were shaped like a bat's wing hung from a loop on the left side of his belt, but it was empty. Also empty was the foot long sheath that sat on the right side of his hip. It usually held something that ended in sharp points on both ends. What that was, Mazik did not know for he had never seen his master use it. The assassin was sure that it was some type of weapon. Whatever the reason for the missing items, Mazik knew his master hardly needed them. He himself was a deadly weapon, one that did not need steel to kill.

"Master," Mazik said as he looked upon his lord and commander. He quickly lowered his gaze and dropped to one knee. He would stay that way until he was ordered to rise.

"You have done well," his master said. Mazik felt a surge of magic and his magical portal sack, the one that held the items he had stolen from the archmage in Atlurul, came away from his belt. He knew that it was slowly floating towards his master's outstretched hand. "It is good to have you back. I trust you have succeeded in all your endeavors."

"Yes, master," Mazik replied.

"Excellent," came his master's voice. "I would hate to hear that Kull was disappointed with you. That would only complicate matters, but once again, my faith in you has been vindicated and you performed as expected."

A few months ago, Mazik had been sent out by the leader of the Shadow Stalkers, a temperamental ogre named Kull Goblineater, to track down and kill a trio of defectors, a group of men that had the audacity to steal from the Stalkers. Kull did not say that he wanted the pilfered items returned. He just wanted the men dead. As a faithful servant of the Stalkers, Mazik set out at once, but before leaving, he had been summoned by his true master. Somehow, coming as no surprise to the dark assassin, his master had found out about the

thieves and decided to send his deadly servant on a side mission.

“The thieves are on their way to Atlurul,” his master had told him. “You are to follow Kull’s orders and kill them, but I have another chore for you, one in which failure will mean death.” It had not been a threat, but Mazik was not concerned. He would not fail his master.

After he had learned the details of his secondary assignment, he had set out from Shadowfell. Once he reached Atlurul, he located the thieves and dispatched them easily. Afterwards, he had gone to the archmage’s tower and retrieved the item his master had described. Now, he was back, with a group of mercenaries on his trail. Once more, that did not matter to the assassin. He had completed his mission. What came next would be decided by his master.

For the next few moments, as Mazik kept his eyes lowered, chanting filled the room. Though his head was bowed, he kept his eyes open, watching the flames and the red glow from the orb dance across the stone floor. As his master began to withdraw the items from the portal sack, he continued to chant, filling the room with magical energy.

Suddenly, a deep, dark purple light filled the room and painted the floor. The powerful glow erased all traces of torchlight and the gleam from the orb was snuffed out, as if it were a simple candle, extinguished by a strong gust of wind. The sound of crackling lightning rose above the chanting and reached Mazik’s ears. He felt the hairs on his skin rise and his flesh tingle as electricity filled the room. Then, a feeling of evil so foul and revolting quickly formed in the chamber, settling over Mazik like a slimy, wet blanket. It made him shiver and filled him with dread. He had felt these affects before, right after he had removed the item his master had sent him to steal from the magical prison the archmage had created. He knew what his master had just removed from the portal sack.

“Finally,” he heard his master say in wicked delight. He sounded as if he was going to say more, like he was going to burst from his skin, but he quickly went silent. After a few more seconds, he spoke a word of power and the purple light and vile sensation that had fallen over the chamber suddenly vanished as if it never was. The room went back to its normal, somber mood.

“Rise, Mazik.”

Mazik did as he was told and got to his feet as his master continued to pull items from the sack. Soon, the dozen or so artifacts Mazik had pillaged from Fount of Knowledge were retrieved from the extradimensional space and floating around the chamber. They bobbed in the air like bubbles, moving with no reason or specific direction. The dark orb, as expected, was not among them.

“An acceptable yield,” his master said, studying the items hovering in the air. He acted as if the past few moments had never happened. Mazik was not about to question his behavior. “I see the archmage is still trying to cleanse the world of disagreeable items of magic. The fool. He does not yet realize that he is struggling against the impossible. No matter. As I have shown him, nothing can stay hidden forever. He is not long for this world. Once he is gone, taking the rest should be easy. Luckily, I have much more time than he does and with what you have brought me, my plans will come to fruition much sooner than I had anticipated.”

He stood still, watching the artifacts above him. Mazik had little doubt that he was seeing the results of his grand scheme in his head. The bright pinpoints of light that were his eyes pulsed with anticipation.

As the glee from his fantasy slowly wore off, Mazik’s master waved his hand toward one of the items. A wand, topped with a green gem, glided down toward him. When it was within reach, the pale man took it and gently ran one of his fingers down the length of the purple handle.

“Speaking of plans,” his master said seconds later, “the Knights have been performing admirably.”

“Yes, master,” Mazik answered. “They have proven to be formidable. The Pillars shall not soon forget them. As I have learned, they have a habit of leaving bodies behind wherever they pass.”

“Don’t we all,” his master said with a smirk.

“I have been leaving a trail as you commanded,” Mazik said. “They have followed, just as you said they would.”

“It is no surprise,” his master replied. “Mercenaries are just like dogs: set out a trail of food and they will follow, even if it is to their doom. Still, Brask and his men have done better than I expected. So far, they have passed every test I have given them. I wonder if I should have made them a little more... challenging. It is good to see what skills they have at their disposal, but I think if I give them a little more motivation they will show their worth. I want to see what they can really do.”

“I set the traps on the gateway,” Mazik said. “Perhaps they will serve to be the challenge you desire.”

“And indeed they were,” the pale man said with a cruel smile. He opened his hand and the wand floated back into the air, rejoining the other artifacts. He turned and placed a hand on the large orb. The clouds inside swirled and danced and a flash of light burst just behind them. Mazik expected to see something take shape inside, but no image came forth though.

“I have been watching them for some time and have continued to watch

them since they entered Barrist,” his master explained. “Unfortunately, even my magic had some trouble piercing the ancient spells that still cover the ruined city. The wards are powerful, stronger than I imagined. I caught only glimpses of their exploits, but as soon as the portal opened, everything became clear. All but one made it through, and I must tell you, my faithful hound, things could not be going better.”

“Master?” Mazik asked, not understanding. He did not know what his master was talking about for he had left for Shadowfell as soon as he went through the portal. He had left an easy trail to follow, but he did not stay to see if the Knights were able to overcome his trap.

“Let’s just say,” his master said, his eyes flashing with malicious delight, “our young wizard finally got in touch with his dark side.”

He let loose a slight laugh that made the creatures trapped above screech and wail in agony. His eyes quickly flashed red and a few painful cries filled the air, but they quickly went silent. When all was calm, he turned back to the orb.

Usually, Mazik would not dare to question his master’s wishes, but the assassin still did not understand his lord’s infatuation with the wizard. The boy was powerful for his age, true, but he could easily be brought down by any number of wizards that were much more powerful. The Knights were also stronger than they had suspected and even Mazik had been surprised by their progress. In his experience, people that were able to surprise you were best dealt with quickly lest they do it again, when you least expect it.

“Master,” he said with a certain amount of trepidation, “though they have lost one, they have proven themselves quite resourceful and problematic. They may be easily duped, but adventurers like the Knights have a habit of destroying well-laid plans. And the boy is much more than he seems.”

“Indeed he is,” his master said with a sly smile, as if he knew something no one else did.

“We should kill them now,” Mazik said, letting his worries be known. His master fixed him with a dangerous glare and for a moment, Mazik thought he had stepped over the line, but the look quickly faded.

“Trust me, Mazik,” his master said without anger or aggression, which sent a small surge of relief through the assassin. “Though I agree with your observation, I am counting on the Knights’ knack for triumphing over adversity to aid me. If they have made it this far, they could actually be essential to my plans in the next coming months. As far as the wizard is concerned, he will serve to draw them to me. He shall also act as the catalyst for what is about to come.”

“War,” Mazik said, knowing only a little of his master’s grand scheme.

“You are very observant,” his master replied with a nod. “War is coming to the factions and I intend to benefit from the fallout. When the dust clears and the bodies have been stacked, I intend to be standing on top of the pile. I have waited far too long for this and it will be glorious.” His eyes flashed red and he ran his hand over the orb. Then he turned his gaze to the space above him. “But, in the meantime...”

He raised his hand toward the ceiling and motioned for a particular object to come to him. It slowly floated down to the ground. When it reached him, he opened the portal sack and it disappeared within. Mazik’s master then closed the sack and gave it back to his assassin.

“Take that to Kull,” the man said, referring to the leader of the Shadow Stalkers and Cruril’s main rival. The ogre was also Mazik’s master, at least, as far as he knew. “Let him know where you procured it. The stupid ogre will not be able to help himself from letting everyone know that he has a new toy that he stole from a powerful archmage. That knowledge, which you will make sure quickly spreads throughout the city, will surely draw the Knights’ attention.” He gave an evil grin. “Like leading lambs to the slaughter.”

“What of Helgrin?” Mazik asked, tucking the sack away. “Kull will have no use for such a weapon. He will surely give it to the faction’s chief wizard.”

“Let him,” Mazik’s lord said without care. “It may even benefit me. Knowing his arrogance, Helgrin will think himself more powerful than me once he has such a weapon and he will waste no time seeking me out when battle begins, to show off his new skills. I will be more than prepared for him. His overconfidence will be his downfall.”

The black-eyed man turned away, indicating that the conversation was over. He walked past the orb to one of his desks, which was covered with parchment and various tools. Though he could not see it, Mazik bowed low and turned to leave. Before he went too far, he stopped and looked to the magical items floating above his head.

“Take what you like,” his master said. “Consider it your reward.”

He snapped his fingers and the items dropped. As fast as lightning, Mazik dashed around the room and caught four of the items before they fell. The rest clattered to the floor. Even he could not catch them all.

Mazik picked up three more items before he left. Those he put in the portal sack. The others, the ones he had caught, he either tucked away or strapped to his belt. They were too valuable to give to Kull and he knew if he left them, they would just sit on the floor until his master was ready to deal with them, which could be months from now. They would get much more use from him.

He did not keep the other items because Kull would become suspicious. The ogre knew that after being gone for so long, Mazik should have more than just a single item to show him. Luckily, the gold and gems he had stolen over his journey would also placate his other lord.

After another bow, Mazik turned and left, fading into the shadows. His master, his true master, did not seem to notice. He never even turned from his studies, but the assassin held little doubt that the being he had just left knew that he was gone.



Though his back was to Mazik, he knew when his assassin had left the room. He felt the shadows open and take him into their cold embrace, an embrace he knew all too well. Where Mazik was only able to use the shadows to conceal his movements and hide him from prying eyes, he could do far more with the patches of darkness. He had learned to use the shadows to his advantage long ago and his mastery over them only grew as his magical powers and energy expanded. They were more than just patches of lightlessness for him. They were weapons and portals, tools he had used over his long life to rain death and destruction upon his enemies. Now, with what his faithful servant had brought him, his power again had increased. His foes had no idea what was about to happen to them. They would do well to avoid the darkness.

Mazik was playing his part well, the dark archmage thought to himself as he started flipping through the tome on his desk. Kull still had no idea that his prized assassin was really a spy for the Crimson Nail, but given that he was an ogre, that came as no surprise. The race of overgrown orcs were not known for their intelligence. Indeed, the leader of the Shadow Stalkers had displayed his lack of wisdom multiple times, using brute strength to try to solve his problems instead of actually thinking of a better solution. Still, Mazik's master and lord knew better than to underestimate the large ogre. One would think that someone with a propensity for physical violence would be quite predictable, but Kull was anything but, and that made him dangerous. He was strong, but at times, it seemed that even he did not know his own strength or what he was going to do, which only added to his unpredictability. He could tear through stone as easily as flesh, and people, many of them his own men, soon discovered that the ogre did not hold back in the slightest when he was angry. He was also damned difficult to injure let alone kill. Rumors said that he had once been stabbed by an assassin over thirty times and still managed to kill the man, with his own dagger no less. The Nail's wizard had no way to confirm

this, but based on what he had seen over the years of conflict with the Stalkers and Cruril's own accounting of the large ogre, he had chosen to believe the rumors. Though the half-orc leader of the Crimson Nail was powerful in his own right, even he was cautious when dealing with his main rival.

Though he was no scholar, Kull employed others that did the thinking for him. He had a powerful wizard named Helgrin advising him and though the man was no match for Mazik's master, he *was* intelligent and had a good head for strategy and deception. Unfortunately, he also had a knack for causing trouble and disrupting plans. Giving the man such a powerful weapon was a gamble, but Mazik's master was sure it would only cause him to become overconfident and more infatuated with himself for he had a very high opinion of his abilities. As Mazik's master had said earlier, that assumption would be his downfall.

Thoughts of conquest flowed through his mind and it made him grin, but he quickly pushed those visions away. There was still much to be done and though he was confident his plans would succeed, he dare not become too arrogant. He had faced many that were and they were all dead, all by his own hand. He needed to stay calm and focused. Destroying Kull and Helgrin were the easy parts. It was what would follow after that would be difficult.

After the leaders of the Stalkers were gone, he would have to absorb what remained of their faction. Though he wanted nothing more than to kill the lot of them, he needed to add them to his own faction to increase their strength and numbers. He expected resistance and perhaps a few small skirmishes, but after giving them the alternative of death, he was sure they would agree to his terms. Once he had joined two of the largest factions in Shadowfell, he would be able to take on the High Knights, the ruling faction of the city. Though Cruril may not agree to this maneuver at first, he could be easily swayed with a well-placed spell. If not, then he would die, just like the others. Mazik's master hoped it would not come to that for the half-orc would be a useful servant in his quest for glory, but the dark-eyed wizard would let no one stand in his way. Many would flock to him, eager to be rid of Jonas Darkhelm and his band of deviants. His power would only grow, as would his legions. The battle was sure to be long and drawn out and many would die, but in the end, he would be victorious. Once Shadowfell was his and all fell under his power, he would expand his territory and add more to his armies. Then he would march over the land, conquering all in his path. He would carve out a kingdom for himself and eventually turn his terror onto the rest of the world, and the new tool that had just been delivered to him would aid in his conquest.

He had been searching for the orb for over fifty years, sparing no expense

and shedding a great deal of blood to find it. He had almost given up hope, thinking it truly was just a rumor or had been destroyed long ago. But then he heard of a great archmage in the city of Atlurul that may have found the Orb of Decay, one of the most powerful artifacts ever created. He had spies in every major city across the land and when the news of it came to him, he was overjoyed and wanted to fly to the distant city and take the orb for himself. Unfortunately, he had been in the middle of a faction war and could not leave without sacrificing a decade's worth of work nor could he send any of his thieves for they were all needed to ensure the Crimson Nail survived. Once the war was over, it had taken many years to rebuild the Nail back to its former glory. After over a decade of waiting, plotting, and planning, he had finally been able to send his most skilled assassin to retrieve the orb.

As soon as Mazik entered the room, he could feel the orb's presence and sense something...otherworldly. It took all he had not to withdraw the orb and start delving into its secrets and powers. The urge to unleash its powers rose even higher when he actually touched the black sphere. The second his fingers met the surface, he felt a surge of unbelievable power and untamed energy flow into his body. It was intoxicating and made him feel indestructible. A voice then suddenly filled his head, promising glory and conquest. Images quickly rushed through his mind of himself standing on the bodies of his enemies and millions of people bowing before him, chanting his name. It was hard to not give himself over to that dark power and start crushing his enemies right away, but he did not give in and he told the orb that soon he would use it to bring chaos to all those that opposed him. He felt a flash of annoyance and disappointment, but what sentience the thing possessed relented and went dormant. He had sent it away then to one of his spell chambers, where it would wait for the bedlam he had promised.

Mazik's master knew that if someone of a more virtuous nature had touched the orb they would have immediately been killed, turned to dust and ashes before they knew what happened. Those with a stronger will may have lasted a few moments longer, but they would have eventually been defeated, unless of course the orb wished otherwise. In cases of resistance, the orb just crushed the mind of the unfortunate soul and made them its vassal of destruction. He did not know how he knew this but assumed the orb had imparted this knowledge when he touched it. Whatever the reason for its actions, the orb had obviously accepted him as its new master. That was good for he needed the orb to complete his plans, plans that would certainly please them both.

Once again, he pushed the thoughts of global conquest from his mind. He may have been given a powerful new weapon, but he could not start eliminating

his rivals just yet. The orb had never been part of his plans for he did not know he would have it at this point. Now that he did, he could start incorporating it into his designs. It would be a powerful asset, but he could not let it be the focal point of his schemes. At least, not yet. Over the last few years, plans had been carefully laid and events had been set in motion to make sure that he would benefit from the coming storm. Altering those plans, no matter how tempting, could destroy everything and he was not willing to take that risk.

“But you are doing that already,” he told himself as he turned from his books. He looked to the orb sitting in the center of his chamber. Inside the sphere of glass, the clouds and light danced and flashed as if sensing his mood. He stood in silent thought, watching the ballet of light and color. The orb was not the only new asset he had that he had to fit into his new world vision. A young wizard had also caught his attention.

The moment he had learned of Graeak’s young apprentice and the power he had displayed while facing Mazik, he had started to work the boy into his plans, thus risking everything. He honestly did not know if the boy could be of use, but he told himself it was well worth the risk. As much as he wanted, he could not do everything by himself and the boy would be an excellent addition to his growing empire. He had many powerful servants and warriors, but only a select few were so highly regarded. If Mazik was his right hand, Druzeel would become his left, doing his bidding just like the assassin and the world would tremble beneath their feet. But first, he had to turn the boy. It would not be easy, but he had never been one to turn from a challenge, especially one so interesting. Thankfully, the men Druzeel traveled with were making his job easier.

The Knights of the Chipped Blade were doing an excellent job of destroying the boy’s sense of honor and virtue. Some of them even seemed to enjoy the process of tearing away everything the archmage had taught him, everything he had ever known. Every moment Druzeel spent in their company was another moment he found that the world was not as noble and virtuous as his witless master had told him. That revelation was the opportunity the dark archmage needed to bring the young apprentice to his way of thinking. Even now, after the death of the half-elf, he could see the boy starting to fight with his inner demons, to try to understand what had happened and how to act and feel. The black-eyed man knew it would slowly break his mind, which would make him easier to control. Druzeel was lost and searching for a path. That path will bring him to me, Mazik’s master thought with a smile. As for the others, they would be included in his plans as well, but they were not nearly as integral as the young wizard.

The Knights had proven that they were resourceful, strong, and quite devious and depraved. In short, they would be perfect for his armies. He had thought about killing them at first, but thought better of it after they continued to surprise him. Not every band of mercenaries could overcome the Pillars like Brask had and the ruins of Barrist was no playground. They had performed wonderfully and come out unscathed. Well, not completely. One of them had died, but then again, it was not the ruins that killed him. It was Druzeel and he had only barely accomplished the task. He would use what remained of the Knights and regardless of the fact that they had been sent to capture his assassin, their skills were something to respect, and use. Once he had Druzeel in his possession, the Knights would soon follow. Then they would be his and do his bidding, whether they wanted to or not.

Mazik's master let the thoughts of the Knights and Druzeel fade away. They were still many days away and he had much to do before they arrived. Besides his plans to capture the boy and bring the others under his rule, he still had to make sure his spies and servants were in place. Instigating a war was simple, but making sure you won and gained the most after it was over was tricky.

For the next few hours, the black-eyed man stood over the crystal sphere, contacting his many spies, assuring that they were performing as ordered. Only one had strayed from his mission. He was found in the bed of a rather unattractive tavern wench, but after a few spells, neither one was going to be a problem again, ever. Mazik's master would have to alter a few things to make sure the dead man's orders were covered, but it was a small inconvenience and easily corrected.

After his spies were set, he checked in on the other members of the Nail. The faction's army was training and the generals and commanders were planning strategy as usual. The numerous assassins and thieves were also out thieving and murdering rivals. Though none of them had any idea that war was about to be upon them, they were always honing their skills and preparing for an invasion from the other factions, specifically from the Shadow Stalkers. There was always some small skirmish or assassination going on between the members of the factions and the leaders of both organizations made sure they were ready should a larger battle break out. Neither one wanted to be caught off guard. That knowledge brought a smile to face of Mazik's master. Everything was performing as planned. Soon, the city would be his.

Before turning away from the orb, the image inside swirled from a dark alley where one of the Nail's assassins was finishing off a pair of Stalker thieves to the main chamber of the faction. Standing inside were a number of

high-ranking officers, gathered around the large throne that sat at the end of the hall. Sitting in the throne, which was built from metal as red as blood, was the leader of the Crimson Nail, Cruril Stonefist.

The half-orc was not really an impressive sight. He stood just under six feet and had the body of a thief, thin and wiry yet muscular and tone. Anyone looking at the man would think he was just a simple assassin, but every member of the Nail, as well as the other factions, knew better.

Cruril was blessed to have the looks of his human side but the strength and power of the orcs. His skin held a light greenish tone, but by most standards, he was handsome with a slim nose, piercing brown eyes, a distinguished chin, and smooth black hair that he kept short. Even his small tusks, practically invisible as long as he kept his mouth closed, added an air of mystery to his persona, which made him all the more attractive and appealing. Those characteristics usually made his opponents think him harmless. He used that to his advantage and those stupid enough to be fooled soon found Cruril's pair of swords, known as Stygian and Starless, embedded into their chest. In a way, the half-orc reminded the dark archmage of Druzeel. The boy's young face and age hid his power well and would cause many of his opponents to underestimate the danger they faced. That was what made Druzeel so appealing, and so dangerous. With a little training and influence, the young wizard would be unstoppable.

Though Cruril looked more human than orc, his temper often reflected his Orcish heritage. He was able to keep it in check most of the time, but sometimes, now being one of those moments, it came out, like a rumble of thunder in a storm.

"They will pay!" he yelled, his deep voice echoing in his chamber as well as the spell chamber of Mazik's master. "Or you will kill them all."

"But my lord," one of the men in the room said. He was dressed in red chainmail and carried an axe painted black. The black-eyed man knew him to be Froserick Norlamic, one of the lesser commanders of the Nail's legions. The man was a little soft-hearted when it came to collecting the dues the merchants that the faction protected owed, and not paying was not something Cruril put up with.

"They will lose their business," Froserick said, "and that will mean—"

Faster than an eye blink, Cruril had one of his swords in hand and jabbed it forward at Froserick. In the next few seconds, the man gasped as a small stream of blood leaked from his chainmail, right over his heart. Then he toppled over, dead before he hit the ground. Some of the other commanders backed away in shock and surprise, but the more experienced ones remained still, a look of

approval on their faces.

“Do I need to explain my orders any further?” Cruril said in a calm, threatening voice. Every man in the room shook their heads, many of them vigorously.

Mazik’s master waved his hand and the image in the orb faded away. It appeared that Cruril had other matters to attend to and would not call on him for some time. No doubt, the commanders would not want to hear from their temperamental leader either after what had happened to poor Froserick. If the man had been a bit more respected, Cruril probably would not have killed him for to do so would lose respect among his generals. Granted, the half-orc really did not need the respect of his subordinates, but upsetting those that commanded his armies was not the most intelligent thing to do and Cruril was smarter than that. Thankfully, since Froserick was universally detested, his death hardly mattered. In fact, it would most likely benefit the faction. Cruril was able to release some pent up anger, the others were relieved of an annoyance, and the merchants would soon pay what they owed or suffer something much worse than a few threatening words. Everyone came out a winner, except for Froserick and the merchants of course.

Knowing he had hours, if not a day, before he had to report or handle anything detrimental, Mazik’s leader tuned toward a dark corner. Free time rarely presented itself while working for the Crimson Nail. He planned to use that time wisely, to start to unveil the mysteries and power of the new toy Mazik had just brought him.

He called out to the shadows cast upon the wall. They answered him willingly, opening a doorway to another section of his tower. He walked through the dark stone as if passing through an open archway. When he came through, the shadows closed, sealing him in a room that seemingly had no exit and was devoid of everything except stone walls. There were no doorways, no windows, no decorations, and no furniture. The only thing in the room was the dark archmage and his new item of power, the Orb of Decay.

It sat in the center of the room, hovering over an opening filled with glowing red light. Strange, Mazik’s master thought to himself. That opening had not been there before. Whatever magics the orb commanded were impressive.

Arcs of purple lighting danced across its surface and a hum of power filled the chamber. The black-eyed man felt the energy and it made him shiver in delight. As he drank in the sensations the artifact emitted, he gazed into its black interior and saw images of glory and conquest, the same he had seen just hours earlier after Mazik had delivered the orb to him. It appeared that the orb had indeed welcomed him as its new master.

Master; a voice said inside his head, as if hearing his thoughts. *Command me and your will shall be done.*

The dark archmage, unsurprised by the voice in his head, smiled and walked closer, taking in all the energy and power the orb was giving him. He was elated that he had finally found such a potent weapon. There was nothing that could stop him now.

“Show me everything,” he commanded, gazing into the black surface.

My lord Bazmal, the orb responded, *as you wish.*

CHAPTER 1

The forest was dark and damp, smelling of moist earth and wet grass, and it was humid, full of clouds of mist and large pockets of warm air. Though no rain fell from the sky, almost every surface was covered in beads of water and was slick with moisture. Leaves were covered with tiny specks that looked like transparent crystals. Vines, many as thick as a tree branch, were lined with slowly falling columns of water. And trees were so saturated with moisture that the bark on their surfaces, the parts that were not covered by moss, looked black and blended almost seamlessly into the darkness of the night. One could barely move without touching a wet surface. Indeed, spending more than a few seconds tromping through the dense, soggy foliage would drench even the most hardened of warriors in sweat.

A slight breeze made its way through the thick growth, which was enough to rustle the delicate leaves and send a shower of droplets to the ground below. The small creatures that hunted during the night paid no heed to the water as it washed over them. This was their time to hunt and a little soaking was not going to deter them from finding their next meal. For those denizens that slept during the night, they were tucked away under large mounds of leaves, hiding within the trees, or buried deep under the ground and hardly noticed the light shower. It seemed that nothing took note of the drizzle for the buzzing, chirping, and other various sounds of the forest continued without pause.

Though Lunaria hung high in the sky, full and shining like a diamond surrounded by flame, most of her light failed to pierce the thick canopy of leaves and branches. Those thin rays of blue that managed to peak through the cracks, faded away to darkness before reaching the ground, which left the creatures of the forest to scurry, forage, and stalk under a blanket of black. Many of them were successful in their ventures, filling their bellies or securing food for when

winter descended upon the lands, but others were not so lucky. They were forced to travel outside of their normal comfort zone to try to find food in order to survive. A few of them would have perished that night if not for five large creatures that had come stomping through the forest only a short while ago. They moved with great swiftness, but they eventually stopped, bringing into being a large, hot light as they settled down for the night. Those rodents and insects that were brave or curious enough to follow them—staying out of the light of course—were surprisingly rewarded with scrapes of food the strange creatures discarded after they had settled down for the night. Apparently, the five beings were not as hungry as they thought they were. They had barely taken a few bites before tossing the food away in anger. Oh well, many of the smaller creatures thought as they dragged the discarded pieces away from the scary light. The large creatures' loss was their gain.

It had been difficult to find wood that was dry enough to start a fire, but after digging around under loose leaves and some thick bushes, the Knights of the Chipped Blade managed to gather just enough to start one that would keep them warm and drive back the darkness that surrounded them. It also served to heat their food, but as they all quickly found out, none of them were hungry. After a few unsatisfying bites, most of them just tossed the food away, not even having the energy or desire to repack it properly. Of course, if Ristil Trueseeker were here, the half-elven ranger of the group, he could have tracked down something that would have tasted much better and probably could have found dry wood that much quicker. They all would have probably had appetites as well and eaten every bit of meat from whatever creature he roasted over the fire, but the half-elf ranger was not here. He was dead, buried under tons of rock and stone.

None of them had spoken since Brask had ordered them to march deeper into the forest, to put some space between them and the portal that had taken them from the ruins of Barrist. The leader of the Knights wanted to get away from the portal in case anything came to investigate what had caused the bright glow, or what was causing the loud noises that sounded like shouting and arguing. When they were far enough away and had finally started a fire, he ordered them to get some sleep. But none of the tired mercenaries would be falling asleep anytime soon. The events of the past few hours were still fresh in their minds, and they were quite painful and disheartening.

Bad luck seemed to be following them ever since they had taken the job from the archmage Graeak Loyalar and left Atlurul, on the trail of a thief and murderer. Not only had their quarry avoided them repeatedly, but the assassin had successfully implicated them in a series of murders in the city of

Pelartis. Three of them had been arrested and thrown in the dungeons while the others were hunted by the Pillars, the guards of the city. Thankfully, they had managed to escape unharmed and once again get on the assassin's trail, but on their way out, they had been forced to kill a handful of guards and would most likely never be able to enter the city again without being arrested or killed on sight. That knowledge did not sit well with Brask Battlebeard, the leader of the Knights, because Pelartis had been filled with past employers, clients he would never be able to work with again. That was a big financial loss for him and his company, but there was nothing he could do about it. The guards had forced his hand.

And their troubles with the city didn't end there for the stubborn High Captain, a dwarf by the name of Xavdak Warstout, was intent to capture them and bring them back to face his version of justice. His pride and ignorance had cost another handful of Pillars their lives and the party was able to escape once more, but it turned out, they had only traded one threat for another.

The thief's trail had led them to the ruins of Barrist, an ancient city that had long ago been deserted and left to decay. Once there, the Knights found themselves quickly traveling underground, pursued by murderous orcs that they were able to avoid, but just barely, and they had only narrowly avoided being caught in a cave-in that had separated them from the ravenous creatures. But things only got worse from there.

After spending countless hours navigating the underground tunnels, avoiding dangerous creatures, warding off multiple attacks from vicious orcs, facing other monsters of the dark, and taking their share of cuts and bruises, the Knights had finally found the portal the assassin they were tracking had taken. It appeared that they had finally gotten a break, but as soon as they tried to enter the portal, the trap the assassin had set went off, causing a miniature earthquake and making the ceiling crack apart. They managed to delay the roof of the chamber from coming down immediately, but not everyone had made it out unscathed. One of their own had been killed and their quick path back to Atlurul was destroyed.

Ever since then, a somber, sorrowful mood had descended over the group. None of them spoke and they hardly took their eyes off the leaf-covered floor of the forest as they walked through the dark, trying to find out where they were. Brask was the only one that offered any words, and that was only when he told them to get some sleep, in a hard, steady tone. Though there was little emotion to his voice, to the men around him, those that knew him well, they heard the sadness and grief in his words. He may have sounded stern and angry, but he was suffering just like the rest of them, though he pushed much of his sadness

to the back of his mind. Ristil would be missed, his blades would be missed, but his problems were over, the mercenary leader told himself, trying to push his pain even further away. They had to focus on what lay ahead. They had to get the assassin and finish their job. That was what was important now and though Ristil's death was hard to swallow, Brask thought, there was nothing he could do to bring the man back. They had to move on.

As the light of the fire slowly died, many of the other Knights lay nearby, focusing on the flames, their eyes wide and full of heartache. Some of them tried to tuck their feelings away knowing what lay ahead of them, but others could not help but think of Ristil and the times they shared. Inside the dying flames, they saw their departed companion and all the times they had spent with him.

To Dex Swifthood, Ristil was a difficult man to work with and many of the memories he held of the ranger were of arguments and small skirmishes he had shared with the pretentious half-elf. They fought more than they got along and came to blows more than once, mainly over strategy and how to handle certain situations, but in the end, Ristil was a Knight and part of the band. He had fought beside them for years and that was not something that could be easily forgotten. Dex did hold some pleasant memories of the man, mostly when they had just finished a job and were sitting around a table, with hardly a worry on their minds. He made himself concentrate on those as sleep crept to the corners of his mind.

Vistalas Daggerkin, the thief of the group and perhaps the one that could be considered Ristil's closest friend, thought only of the battles he and the half-elf had shared. He was not going to allow himself to get emotional or let his grief take too strong of a hold, yet he wasn't just going to forget about what happened like Brask. Though they had a job and important work yet to accomplish, he owed Ristil more than that, so he pictured old battles, narrow escapes, and rough fights the two of them had shared, which brought a small smirk to his face. Together, they were a formidable force and one to be feared, and they had saved each other's lives, and some of the other Knights' lives, on a number of occasions. More than anything, he would miss Ristil's blades and the deadly dance the two of them brought to their enemies.

Much like Brask, Thorstar Doverson pushed his grief and gloom from his mind and tried to focus on what lay ahead of him. Ristil was a good companion, a skilled fighter, and his skills as a ranger would surely be missed, especially in a forest as dense and thick as the one they were in, but he was dead and there was nothing any of them could do to change that. Thorstar had learned long ago to let go of things he could not change, be it the death of a loved one or the

destruction of his home. The only thing to do now was to move forward and do his best to prevent things like this from happening again.

The men of the Knights may be trying to keep their emotions from their faces and their feelings tucked away, but for Jannda Cupsheight, the only female of the group, she let the tears flow freely. Dex had tried to talk to her, to console her and offer a shoulder to cry on, but she just waved him away, wanting to be alone with her thoughts.

She may have been furious with Ristil because of his behavior in the ruins, actions he had taken that had almost gotten her killed, but he had been one of them, a fellow Knight and friend, for many years and she knew he would never do anything to endanger her life. Like Dex, she fought with him constantly, always arguing about the dumbest things, but he was always good to her and treated her with kindness. It was only recently that his behavior started to change, but she attributed that to the events in Pelartis and the ruins. All of them were feeling stressed and exhausted and even she was feeling a little strange lately. Though that did not excuse his behavior, she had forgiven him. Her only regret, the real reason for the tears and heartbreak, was that she had been unable to tell him that before he died. She had not been able to let him know that she was no longer angry. Her last encounter with him had been vicious and hurtful and now that he was gone, she was regretting her actions, and probably would for many years to come. All she could do now was wrap herself in her blanket of sorrow and hope the pain would eventually go away.

Though most of the Knights were staring at the fire, thinking of Ristil and the memories they shared of him, there was one member of the group that was not seeing the flames, the burning wood, or the darkness of the forest. He was not thinking of his experiences with the ranger or the arguments they always seemed to engage in. He was not hearing the constant berating or critiques the half-elf offered for indeed, those are the only memories he had of Ristil. No, he was only seeing a jagged shard of rock, covered in blood, sticking out from Ristil's chest.

Druzeel Sesstar stared at the pitiful flames as they fought to stay alive, much like the way Ristil had fought after he had been thrown onto the shard by Druzeel's spell blast. They reached for the sky, trying to cling to life, to find purchase on the wood just as the ranger did to the stone. Just like Ristil, the flames were fighting a losing battle and their life would soon extinguish, just like the half-elf's had, and all Druzeel could do was watch in helplessness as life faded away for a second time.

What have I done? he asked himself for the hundredth time since escaping the collapse that buried his murder of Ristil in the ruins. What is happening to

me? he thought for at least the hundredth time since his unlikely escape. He still saw Ristil's body impaled on the stone and he could still feel the power, power that felt wonderful, that had surged through him before he blasted the half-elf off of him and to his death. But what else could I have done? Druzeel suddenly thought. He was trying to kill me.

As the ceiling of the chamber cracked and threatened to come down, Druzeel went to go through the portal, only to find Ristil blocking his way, telling him to turn around and leave, to go back home to Graeak. After refusing, Ristil had revealed he had been holding in secret the ring that the archmage had given to Druzeel, the ring Druzeel used to contact Graeak in time of distress. The knowledge that Ristil had been keeping it from him sent a wave of anger and hatred through him and he once again refused to leave. The refusal caused Ristil's own anger to explode and the two soon found themselves engaged in battle. Yet whereas Druzeel was only trying to stop Ristil and get through the portal, Ristil was trying to kill. As the battle escalated, the half-elf gained the upper hand and Druzeel soon found a dagger seeking his heart. Because of fear, panic, or sheer rage, magic coursed through Druzeel and a blast of magic sent Ristil across the room, where he landed on a jagged piece of stone. Before he could fathom what he had done, the ceiling finally broke apart and Druzeel was forced to flee from the room and into the forest, where the others waited. After a vicious questioning from Brask, asking where Ristil was, Druzeel lied and said he was killed by the cave-in. After the disbelief wore off, the party made their way through the forest, away from the portal. Eventually, they settled down, to where they were now, trying to come to grips with the loss of one of their own. Now, Druzeel stared at the flames, trying to pull himself together.

He saw it in his head repeatedly. He watched as Ristil flew through the air and landed on the stone. He heard the bones break and the flesh part and though he was many yards away, he could almost feel the blood splash across his face. The smell of copper suddenly assaulted his nostrils and it took all he had not to jump up and tear his nose off. Instead, he just breathed it in, hoping it would go away. It didn't, but he tried to ignore the scent. Unfortunately, that only made it worse and the vision of Ristil laying dead on the stone came rushing back into his mind. Druzeel squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force the image away, but it remained.

I actually did it, Druzeel said to himself. I killed him, and then I lied about it. He quickly thought back to when he told Brask that Ristil was killed by the cave-in. The deception had been so easy, so simple and he never really hesitated when it came to his mind. They never questioned it either, Druzeel

thought. They believed it because of the shocked expression I wore, thinking I was overwhelmed because I saw Ristil be crushed, never realizing that it was I that killed him.

Gods! Druzeel suddenly thought. What if they find out? What if they realize I killed him?

At first, he never really cared for he had been the only one that knew what happened. He was the only one in the room with Ristil. The others would never think him capable of such an action either, but what happens if the others somehow find out? Would they kill me? Druzeel asked himself. Would they rip me limb from limb or just turn me away? Perhaps there is some way to make sure they never know the truth.

What did I just think!?! the young wizard said to himself, squeezing his eyes shut again. You are talking about covering up a murder! You are thinking of hiding the death of another living being! What is happening to you?

You did what you had to do, a voice suddenly said in his mind.

Druzeel's eyes snapped open, but he saw nothing but the others around him and the darkness of the forest. *He was going to kill you*, the voice then said. *Would you rather it be you in the ruins, with a dagger buried in your heart?*

"No," Druzeel answered without thinking, realizing that the voice he was hearing was the same one he had heard right after Ristil died. He did not think about it when he first heard it because he was still in shock, but now, hearing it in his mind, he wasn't sure what to think. It spoke in his own voice and he could feel that it was coming from deep inside him, but from where? It obviously was not one of the others. But what was it?

I am you, the voice answered, reading his thoughts.

By the gods! Druzeel exclaimed. Am I going insane?

No, the voice answered again.

"I don't understand," Druzeel said in a whisper, looking around the camp, seeking the faces of his nearby companions. None of them were looking his way. They were either asleep or too lost in their own thoughts to notice him.

I am the deepest part of you, the voice said, *the part that all men have but rarely comes to the surface. I am you, and you are me. We are one.*

"If you are," Druzeel said, "then you know I...we...killed someone. We took the life of one of our companions, and then I lied to them about it."

You had no choice. He was trying to kill you. Ristil left you no option. As for the others, the voice said, *they would not believe you and they would not understand.*

"Understand?"

They would think you acted out of anger or hatred, it said. They all know you hated each other and they would never believe that Ristil would try to kill you.

“No,” Druzeel said, sounding desperate. “Jannda and Dex would believe me. They would speak up for me and defend me against the others. They all saw how Ristil treated me and the anger in his eyes. Even in the ruins, the half-elf put us all in mortal danger because of his hatred. They will see the truth.”

They have only known you for less than a few months. Ristil had been with them for years and though they have had their disagreements, they would take his side and turn you away. They may even try to kill you. Your words would fall on deaf ears. Your magic would only damn you further, as would the ring the ranger had kept hidden from you.

Druzeel’s hand slowly slid down to one of the pockets of his robes, to where he had tucked away the ring that Graeak had given him. He did not put it on after going through the portal. He hardly even remembered putting it away. A small part of him knew that one of the Knights would notice the ring should he put it on and that would immediately raise questions, questions he was not yet prepared to answer. Until he knew how to handle what had happened, he would keep it hidden away. Yet another thing he was hiding from his companions.

This is a bad dream, Druzeel thought. This is a nightmare that I have to wake up from. Please, Graeak. Wake me up!

This is real, the voice said with compassion, and you must face it.

“I don’t know if I can.”

You must for you have done nothing but defend yourself, defend your life. You have done nothing that the others would not do, the voice said, this time with confidence and strength. This must be my conscience, Druzeel thought for he had been coming to the same conclusions as he thought about what happened.

You knew this was coming, the voice continued. It was only a matter of time before Ristil acted. You may not have been so lucky should he have acted on his urges in the future. Ristil got exactly what he deserved.

“No,” Druzeel said, shaking his head. “I can’t...I can’t believe that. How can anyone deserve to die? Only evil deserves such condemnation.”

Was he not evil the moment he took up arms against you? the voice asked. Was he not wicked for hiding your ring and keeping you from speaking with your mentor and friend? Was malice not in his heart when he let you fall into that pit, hoping you would perish? Did Jannda not almost die as well? He hated you so much that he was willing to sacrifice one of his friends to dispose

of you. That is the very definition of malice and hatred, which are at the root of all seeds of evil.

Druzeel shook his head, unsure of what to think. Could Ristil have let evil take over his heart when he tried to kill me? Had he truly succumb to his darkest side? Druzeel could see no other explanation. What else could a person call someone trying to kill because of hatred?

You know the truth, the voice said. It did not sound condescending. It only seemed to want to open Druzeel's eyes.

"I know," Druzeel whispered, "but I still killed him. I still took his life. I blasted him with magic and I can't get that out of my head. I can't stop seeing him flying through the air or the look on his face. The fear, the panic, and...oh gods!" Druzeel said, trailing off.

The pleasure, the voice said, finishing his thoughts.

A surge of fear shot through Druzeel and he looked around the camp, making sure no one was watching him. Once again, his companions were ignoring him as he struggled with the feelings that were coursing through his body.

During his fight with Ristil, Druzeel had felt rage, hatred, and fear. Deep down, he knew he was no match for the ranger, but his anger clouded his mind and he fought the half-elf, desperately trying to overpower him and get him into the portal or leave him behind. When Ristil gained the advantage and almost stabbed him, Druzeel felt fear, but a new power must have awoken inside him because just before Ristil plunged his blade in, magic and energy flooded his body, making him feel wonderful. He had never felt something so amazing and he used it to blast Ristil away. When he did, when he saw Ristil's confusion turn to horror, when he saw his elation turn to fear, a sense of satisfaction and pleasure rolled over him. It made him feel strong and powerful, almost invincible, and he soaked it up as the ground soaks up the rain. Those feelings only intensified when Ristil slammed into the rock. It was only after he died, only after all life left his eyes, that the shock set in and Druzeel came back to himself, horrified at what he had done.

How could I feel such...enjoyment at another's pain? Druzeel asked himself. Why had death made me feel so wonderful? The questions and sensations scared him and he tried to push the thoughts from his mind, but he could not stop asking the questions. Why was I feeling so powerful and energetic as Ristil was falling to his death? What was it that flowed through me? It is not right! he shouted into his mind. I am not that type of person. I am not some killer. But, by gods, it felt so good.

Ristil finally understood, the voice began, *that you were not some simpleton*

to be bullied or beaten. You are not some weak-willed man that can be taken advantage of or used. He finally realized, as death took him, that you are powerful, you are strong, and you will not lay down for anyone. He recognized your strength and power and as his life bled from him, as the darkness closed in on him, he finally—

“Respected me,” Druzeel said, finishing the voice’s sentence. He finally respected me, Druzeel thought again. That was why he felt so good after blasting Ristil away. That is what gave him pleasure as the half-elf landed on the shard of stone. He had finally showed the half-elf that he was not going to take his abuse. He was not going to be a whipping blanket anymore.

Yes, the voice said in satisfaction.

It was all he had ever wanted from the others, and the only thing they continuously refused to give him. Only at the moment of death, when he realized that Druzeel was strong and powerful and would fight back, did Ristil come to respect him. Come to think of it, Druzeel thought, the others had showed him respect when he fought back, when he dared to speak for himself or refuse to take the abuse that Brask, Ristil, or Vistalas had tried to give him. Unfortunately, that respect was only temporary, fading from the minds of the Knights faster than ale disappeared from one of their goblets. Would they ever respect him? Not if they found out about Ristil.

“They can never know,” Druzeel said, deciding to keep the real cause of Ristil’s death a secret. Fear and uncertainty crept back into his mind as he thought about what he was saying. What am I doing? he asked himself with uncertainty.

You are surviving, the voice said. You are becoming more than what the others think you to be. Regardless of what you show them, the voice added, sensing his thoughts, they still see you as the weakest member of their party and they will never respect you until they have reason to.

I just don’t know what to do, Druzeel thought with despair. So many confusing thoughts were coursing through his head and his conversation with himself only made him that much more confused. Gods! he thought after thinking of the voice. I *am* going mad, talking to myself. How can I continue after what I have done? How can I walk next to the people whose friend I just killed? Was I truly justified in my actions?

You know the answer to that question.

Druzeel rubbed his face and ran his hands over his head to the base of his skull. He could not make these decisions on his own. They were too big and if he did not get help soon, he was going to start screaming.

Suddenly, an idea entered his mind. Graeak! he thought. He had the ring

back. His mentor was once again within reach. All he had to do was slip the ring on and he could get the answers he needed. Thinking it was a good idea, he reached into the pocket with the ring with the intention of putting it on to contact Graeak. He needed help, he needed guidance, and he needed to hear his teacher's voice again.

That is why they think you weak, came the voice. You must do this on your own or you will never do anything by yourself.

At first, Druzeel became angry. Something like this had never happened before. How was he supposed to handle it on his own? But then his hand stopped just before reaching the ring. I must do this by myself, he thought. The voice is right. If I can't make it without Graeak, I will never be able to anything on my own. Besides, he suddenly thought, what would Graeak think of me after learning of what I've done? Would he condemn me? Would he be disgusted and turn me away? What if he accepts what I have done? That last thought was perhaps the most disturbing.

Druzeel lay in silence for a long time, waiting for the voice to come back, but he heard nothing but the loud chatter of the forest. After a few more moments, he thought that perhaps he had imagined it after all.

I'm just tired, he said to himself as he settled in. It was hard to get comfortable with twigs in his back and concern on his mind, but even with all the questions and concerns troubling him, he managed to close his eyes and dream. Unfortunately, Ristil's corpse was there to greet him.



Solaris broke the horizon and coated everything in bright light, but very little of it broke through the canopy of the forest. It wasn't until it was high in the sky that his glow caused the darkness to peel away, but by then, the Knights were already working their way through the forest, having been awakened by Dex, who had taken the last watch of the night. He noticed that when he woke the others, they were a little slower than normal getting to their feet. Even Brask, who was usually the first to rise and complain that the others were moving too slow was sluggish and said not a word to the others. It appeared that everyone got little sleep the night before and still held the death of Ristil on their minds.

As he gathered his gear and strapped his sword to his hip, Dex looked at Jannda, concerned that she would still be shedding tears. To his relief, her face was clear and she even looked a little more rested than the others. Unfortunately, Dex thought, she had probably cried herself to sleep, but the

sleep seemed to be somewhat restful for she was moving a little faster than the other Knights.

She looked up and caught his eye. It was clear she could see his concern and offered a tiny smile, but it disappeared quickly. Regardless, that small look gave him hope.

After he was sure Jannda would be all right, Dex turned his head and looked at Druzeel, concerned that if anyone was going to break before their journey was complete, it would be him. He was still young and had been suddenly thrown into a cruel world. It was a lot to take in and the mercenary didn't think the young wizard could handle it. Surprisingly, he had done better than they all expected, regardless of Brask's criticisms, but after witnessing what was surely a gruesome death, especially of a traveling companion, Dex was more concerned than ever. It did not matter that Druzeel and Ristil never got along. They were still traveling companions and seeing something like that was sure to have a profound effect on one's mind.

When he looked at Druzeel, he saw a young man that was just as tired and mournful as the rest of the Knights. His face was slack and he looked to be deep in thought, much like the others. There was nothing to indicate that he could not handle what happened. For that, Dex was thankful, but he would keep an eye on him in the coming days. He wanted to walk over and talk to him, but he realized this was not the time. It was too soon. He would wait until they were out of the forest. Perhaps the sun would lift their spirits.

After they were up, Brask set out soon after, searching for signs of the thief's tracks. Even though they knew where he was headed, they still had to find the right direction. The trail would have been much easier to find if Ristil had been with them—another constant reminder of the absence they all felt—but thankfully, after only a short while, Vistalas, partially trained in tracking, found the trail. After careful examination, it seemed that the tracks had been left purposefully. It would have been very easy to pass through this forest, with its crowded floor and thick brush, without leaving a trace, but the assassin appeared to have been sloppy, and as the Knights knew, the man was not sloppy. He knew they were coming, which was another slap in the face. Regardless, Brask and the others followed without pause, intent to find the assassin, beat him to a bloody pulp, and drag his unconscious form back to Atlurul to face justice.

Since they were following the same path as the thief, the journey through went rather quickly. Branches were broken, vines had been cut, and the brush had been moved to the side. It was as if the assassin was inviting them to follow him. That knowledge made Brask growl for he hated being led like

a dog. It also put Vistalas and Thorstar in a foul move. Dex took it in stride. Whatever made their journey easier was fine with him. They were going after the assassin anyway. If the man wanted to make it easy for them, why argue?

Dex looked to Druzeel and Jannda and they appeared to be in agreement with him, though their faces held nothing but blank expressions. Most likely, he thought to himself, they didn't care either way.

It took a little more than three hours to reach the outskirts of the forest. As the brush thinned and the sun's rays grew brighter, the Knights started to show a little more vigor and life. The exhaustion they felt would only be removed by a good night's sleep, but the warm, dry air was a needed boost. Even this close to the edge, they could feel the sweat that drenched them start to dry and recede.

Before them were green hills and rough, rolling plains. Bundles of small trees and large outcroppings of rock dotted the landscape. A large lake sat less than a mile to their right while a small mountain range sat to their left. In front of them, as far as the eye could see, was open land.

"Which way?" Jannda asked, shielding her eyes from the sun.

"Forward," Brask said, getting a feel for the area. Now that he was out of the forest, he knew right where he was. "We're less than four days from the city. Let's get moving. Spread out and keep your eyes open. Though the bastard is leading us, that doesn't mean he hasn't left behind traps for us to fall into. Nor does it mean others won't be watching for us." The Knights took a deep breath and followed Brask into the plains.

"Thorstar," Brask said a few moments later as they descended the first hill. "Watch our flank. Vistalas has the lead while I have his back. I want Dex and Jannda to keep eyes on our side. You," he said, pointing at Druzeel. The young wizard looked up with tired eyes and a barren expression. "You got any magic to warn of us of danger or speed our journey, use it. And when we make camp, I want you to identify what remains of what we took from the ruins. We can't properly use those things until we know what they are. Understand?" Brask said, keeping his eyes locked on Druzeel. Dex watched as Druzeel slowly nodded. Brask gave him a hard look but eventually turned away.

Even if he had any useful spells, Druzeel may not have used them. He looked ready to tip over but he kept moving, staying with the group. Dex noted that he had used much of his magic in the ruins and did not study his spells last night. Instead of casting spells after Brask's words, he took out his spellbook and began to read as they ventured over the plains. He must have practiced reading while he walked for he hardly stumbled. Dex was actually impressed. He would have fallen on his face after the first few steps. Brask seemed to be

impressed as well for he gave Druzeel a nod of approval after the first few miles.

Dex soon looked to Brask and even though he was not looking in his direction, he gave the man a nod. The leader of the Knights had given orders not only to keep them safe, but to keep them busy, to make sure they were occupied to keep their thoughts off Ristil and the events in the ruins. It was a good move, the tactics of a leader, and one that Dex hoped would help boost their moral. The large man was even a little softer on Druzeel, giving him a little more leeway. If Ristil was still with them, Dex had little doubt that Brask would not have put up with Druzeel's zombie-like state. Of course, if the half-elf were here, none of them would be feeling this way. Whatever Brask's reason for his milder tone, Dex was thankful and got busy scanning the plains.

They talked very little during the first day, concentrating on the task that had been assigned. At night, they found an easily defensible outcropping of rock and set up camp. As he was ordered and even though he was tired, Druzeel took half the night and identified the remaining items.

Their treasure consisted of a magical dagger and a necklace that allowed its wearer to easily charm and enspell those they wanted. Jannda took those for everyone knew the necklace would aid in her singing. Vistalas took another magical dagger that carried an enchantment that would make wounds dealt with its blade bleed profusely and a cloak that offered magical protection. He also took a stone that would give off a bright glow upon command. Being a thief and used to going to dark places, he was the one most suited for its use. Dex took the small lantern they had found, which, upon uttering the command word, would float next to him and follow him wherever he went. The brightness was easily controlled by issuing a series of commands.

The rest of the items were suited for a wizard, so Druzeel took them, without any objections from the others. He received a wand that could lift things with a simple wave, a scroll that would protect him from fire, and a small black bag full of glittering dust that, when sprinkled on invisible items, would make them appear. These items, along with the other things they had taken from the ruins, made for an impressive haul. It should have been much better, but given that most of the treasure they had found in the large chamber had been an illusion, they were happy with what they were able to find.

The next day, having slept just a little bit more the night before, the Knights were a little livelier. Everyone save for Druzeel managed to get a few extra hours of sleep. Since he had been up most of the night using his magic on what was left of the treasure, he had less than three hours of real rest, if he rested at all, Dex thought to himself. The mercenary could not imagine what the

boy was seeing in his dreams. During his watch last night, when Druzeel was actually sleeping, he noticed the young wizard tossing and turning, mumbling something under his breath. He could not understand his words but he expected Druzeel to wake up at any moment, screaming in fear. Thankfully, he didn't and eventually stopped thrashing in his sleep. Still, he looked exhausted and he still had not been able to study his spells. Brask almost said something but Dex was able to convince the mercenary leader to give Druzeel a break.

"He's got until the city," Brask said with a hard voice. "We'll actually need his magic then."

Dex only nodded and thanked the gods that Brask had not done more to 'convince' the young wizard to snap out of his daze. The last thing they needed was another fight. Druzeel just needed time, and rest, to recover. And perhaps a little motivation.

"How are you holding up?" Dex asked during the latter half of the day as they walked across an area that was thankfully flat and devoid of any obstacles. Druzeel only shrugged his shoulders. He didn't even look up from his spellbook, which he was once again reading. "Why don't you take a break from that? The area seems deserted and we'll see anything within a few miles if it approaches. Why don't you rest your eyes and mind for a while?"

"I'm fine," Druzeel said softly. Again, he didn't look up and his face remained impassive. It was as if he was purposely trying to avoid eye contact.

"Regardless of what happened," Dex said, acting like he didn't notice Druzeel's lack of emotion, "you did well in the ruins. Your magic saved us some nasty wounds and probably kept some of us alive. You really did a—"

Dex stopped talking as he noticed that Druzeel was no longer walking beside him. He turned and saw that he had stopped and was looking at him, but his face was no longer blank and expressionless. His eyes were narrow and his held a look of anger, anger boarding on rage.

"You don't have to speak to me like a child," Druzeel snapped, his voice no longer soft and low, but rough and filled with annoyance. "I'm not some dog or pet you have to praise."

"Druzeel," Dex said, taken aback by what he was hearing. "I'm sorry. I never meant to—"

"I know what you meant!" Druzeel spat in anger. At this point, all the other Knights had stopped and turned their gazes to Druzeel and Dex. Neither man noticed them and no one said a word.

"I know what I did!" Druzeel continued, his teeth almost clenched. His eyes were almost red and his fingers were white they were clutching his spellbook so hard. "I don't need you or anyone else to tell me what it is I did."

It's my magic. They're my spells. I know exactly what they do and how they aided our quest. Why don't you just go back to the watching the plains and leave me be!"

Dex stared at Druzeel, his mouth hanging open. He had no words. Druzeel's reaction was not what he had expected. He thought by letting him know he did a good job and that he had truly helped the others survive in the ruins would give the young man a much need confidence boost. Instead, it just made him angrier and perhaps rekindled the flame of sadness. Unfortunately, some people were like that, Dex quickly thought. They turned their grief and sorrow to anger when an opportunity arose. In a way, Druzeel acted just like Brask, which disturbed the mercenary more than a little.

The young wizard just gave Dex another hard stare and then shoved past him, almost bowling him over in the process. He thrust his face, painted in annoyance, back in his book and he stomped into the plains.

"What was that about?" Jannda asked as she walked up next to Dex, watching Druzeel march away. The others gave their young wizard a quick glance then continued their journey. None of them said a word. Brask only shook his head.

"Nothing," Dex said, taking a deep breath. "It seems he will need more time than I thought."

"He'll come around," Jannda said, patting Dex on the hip. "We all deal with death in our own way. Just give him some time. He can't stay angry forever."

"I think he feels a little responsible for Ristil's death," Dex said, starting to walk next to Jannda. "Maybe he tried to save him or used more spells to prevent the ceiling from coming down. When they failed, perhaps he feels it was his fault. Maybe he thinks that he did not do enough."

Jannda only shook her head and squeezed Dex's hand. The man looked down and offered his friend a warm smile. It is nice to see she is recovering faster than I expected, Dex said to himself. If only Druzeel could let go. If only he can forgive himself and realize that Ristil's death was not his fault.

The Knight never realized how wrong he was.



Vistalas heard the entire confrontation between Druzeel and Dex. As the young wizard stomped away, he watched him, carefully examining his expression and going over the words in his mind. As the young wizard came closer, he turned away and moved further into the plains, putting some distance

between him and the others, thinking about what he just heard. Later on in the day, he stopped and signaled for the others to hold. Brask, who was not far behind, told the others to be ready and walked to Vistalas's side.

"What is it?" Brask asked as he came up to the thief. He looked out into the plains but saw nothing but open, empty ground.

"Nothing," Vistalas said. "Just wanted to get some room."

"What?" Brask asked, a bit confused. Vistalas turned and eyed the others, specifically Druzeel.

"I think something happened between Ristil and Druzeel," the thief said in a quiet voice. "Before the cave-in."

"What are you talking about?" Brask asked with annoyance. He did not like being delayed. If Vistalas had something on his mind, he needed to let Brask hear it, and he needed to do it quickly.

"There was an incident," Vistalas said.

Over the next few moments, he told Brask what happened while they had been separated, leaving nothing out. He described how Jannda almost fell off the bridge and how Druzeel had caught her. Vistalas then went on to say that Ristil appeared to have a chance to catch them before they were pulled over but didn't. He was not placing blame or making accusation, he was only telling Brask what he saw. Brask wore a slight look of surprise, but it quickly slipped away. After that, Vistalas described the battle and the aftermath. At the mention of Jannda punching Ristil in the groin, Brask finally looked shocked. He glanced back at Jannda as Vistalas spoke. His gaze found Druzeel, who still had his head buried in his spellbook.

"So you think they fought?" Brask asked, turning back to Vistalas.

"I have no doubts," the thief said. "They were the last ones in the ruins and it took some time before Druzeel actually came through. I can't imagine they were having tea together. As for what happened, I only have suspicions."

"And they are?"

"Too ridiculous and disturbing to say," Vistalas said in a serious tone.

"You think *Druzeel* did something to him?" Brask said incredulously. "You can't be serious. The boy doesn't have the stones to try his hand at Ristil, at any of us for that matter. He wouldn't have a chance even if he did. Ristil would cut him to pieces."

By the look on his face, Vistalas could tell that Brask believed his words, that the thought of Ristil actually being killed by the young wizard wasn't even a possibility. He could not fathom Druzeel having the backbone to go after Ristil. The skilled ranger, especially with such a temperament and attitude toward Druzeel, would have made short work of the untested wizard. It would

have been Ristil coming through the portal instead of Druzeel had the two actually come to blows. Vistalas agreed with Brask's words. He also thought Druzeel was too timid to try such a thing, until just recently.

"I agree with you," the thief said, "but he seems...off since coming through the portal and I think it is more than just seeing Ristil die. I thought I was crazy, but after seeing his outburst at Dex, I am more than a little wary."

Brask turned an eye on Druzeel, studying the young man. After a few moments, he turned back to Vistalas.

"You really think he could take Ristil down?" He still spoke in a tone that said the idea was preposterous.

"I don't know," Vistalas said, turning his eyes toward the young wizard. "All I know, and you know this is as well," he said, turning back to Brask, "is that Ristil is not the type of person to let such a slight go and he surely would not blame Jannda for his troubles, even if she did give him a swat to his manhood. Perhaps it was an accident. Maybe Ristil just wanted to even the score a little and got caught by the ceiling. Maybe one of Druzeel's spells went berserk. Whatever the reason, I feel that boy knows something, something he's not telling us."

Brask looked steadily at Vistalas but eventually turned away to look at Druzeel once more. The boy's face had hardly moved from the pages of his spellbook since leaving the forest. It was as if he was trying to avoid the others, but Brask knew it could just be the way he was handling Ristil's death. Everyone dealt with death differently. Avoiding human contact and turning his grief to anger could just be his way. By the way he spoke to Dex, it certainly seemed so. Still, Brask could not help but think on Vistalas's words, however insane they sounded. Could the boy truly have been so brave as to take on Ristil, or had the half-elf finally let his foolish pride get the best of him?

"Let's let it rest for now," Brask said, looking at Vistalas. "The last thing the others need is another confrontation. But," he said, his face looking serious, "keep an eye on the boy and let me know if you notice anything unusual."

Vistalas nodded and turned, moving away from Brask and into the plains. Brask looked back to the others to see Dex and Jannda looking at him in confusion, wondering what was taking so long. Thorstar kept glancing behind him, watching their back, and Druzeel, as usual, kept his face in his book. Brask stared at him for a few seconds then waved to the others to continue. The Knights continued their journey toward Shadowfell.

"Damn it," Brask whispered to himself, thinking of his conversation with Vistalas. "It's always something."