

DEAD OR ALIVE

A NOVELLA OF SHADRAK THE UNSEEN

D.P. PRIOR

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WANTED!!!

In connection with the assassination of First Senator Mal Vatès and for the trafficking of husks across the Farfall Mountains:

SHADRAK THE UNSEEN

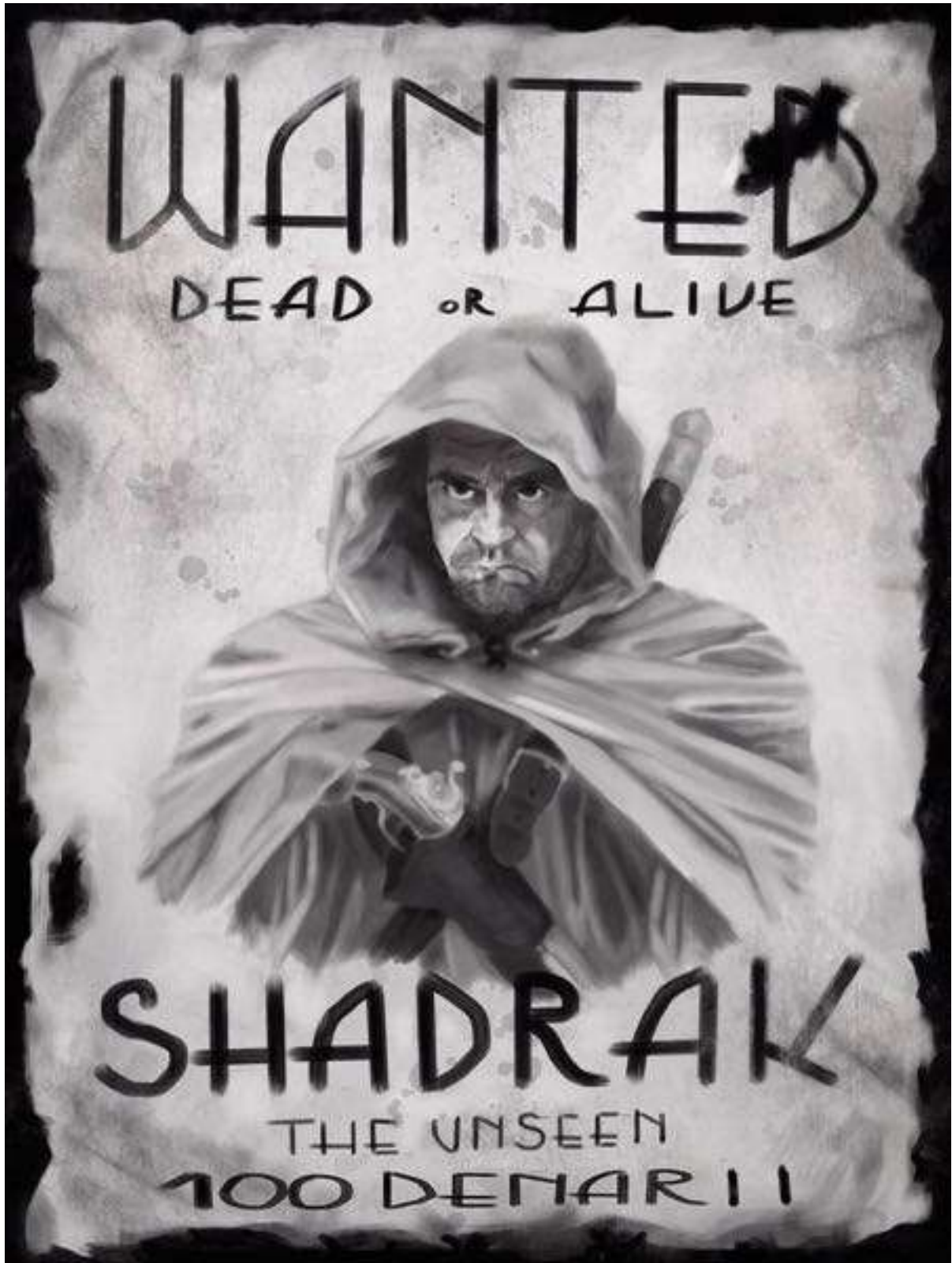
(former guildmaster of the Night Hawks)

Appearance: Approximately three feet tall. Pale skin. Pink eyes. Shaven white hair and clipped box beard. Last seen wearing a hooded cloak and sporting two baldrics, numerous blades, and “blasting sticks” that are believed to be relics from the time of the Ancients on Urddynoor.

This man is extremely dangerous. Do not approach him.

Any sightings should immediately be reported to the Senate of New Londdyr.

Should a tip-off lead to the capture of the suspect, a reward of one hundred golden denarii has been authorized (subject to clause 4, paragraph 25b of the Rule of Malfen, pertaining to, but not exclusive to, the Order of Maresmen). Tax will be applied at a rate determined by a select committee of the Senate at the time of apprehension.



INTRODUCTION

A brief and potted history of Shadrak the Unseen

(Or, what has gone before in the *Shader Trilogy* and *Legends of the Nameless Dwarf*)

*****Spoiler Alert!!!*****

On his home world of Urddynoor, Shadrak the Unseen was among the elite of the Sicarii, the most feared guild of assassins. Injured during what was supposed to be a routine murder, he is shot with his own pistol, an Ancient tech weapon he found in the metal corridors of the Maze beneath the city of Sarum.

Patched up by the disguised lich Dr. Cadman, Shadrak's payment is to learn all he can about a mysterious artifact known as the Statue of Eingana, and in so doing, he becomes embroiled in the battle against the Technocrat Sektis Gandaw, who plots the end of all things.

Shadrak travels by plane ship to the dream world of Aethir with the knight Deacon Shader and is instrumental in preventing the cataclysm known as the Unweaving.

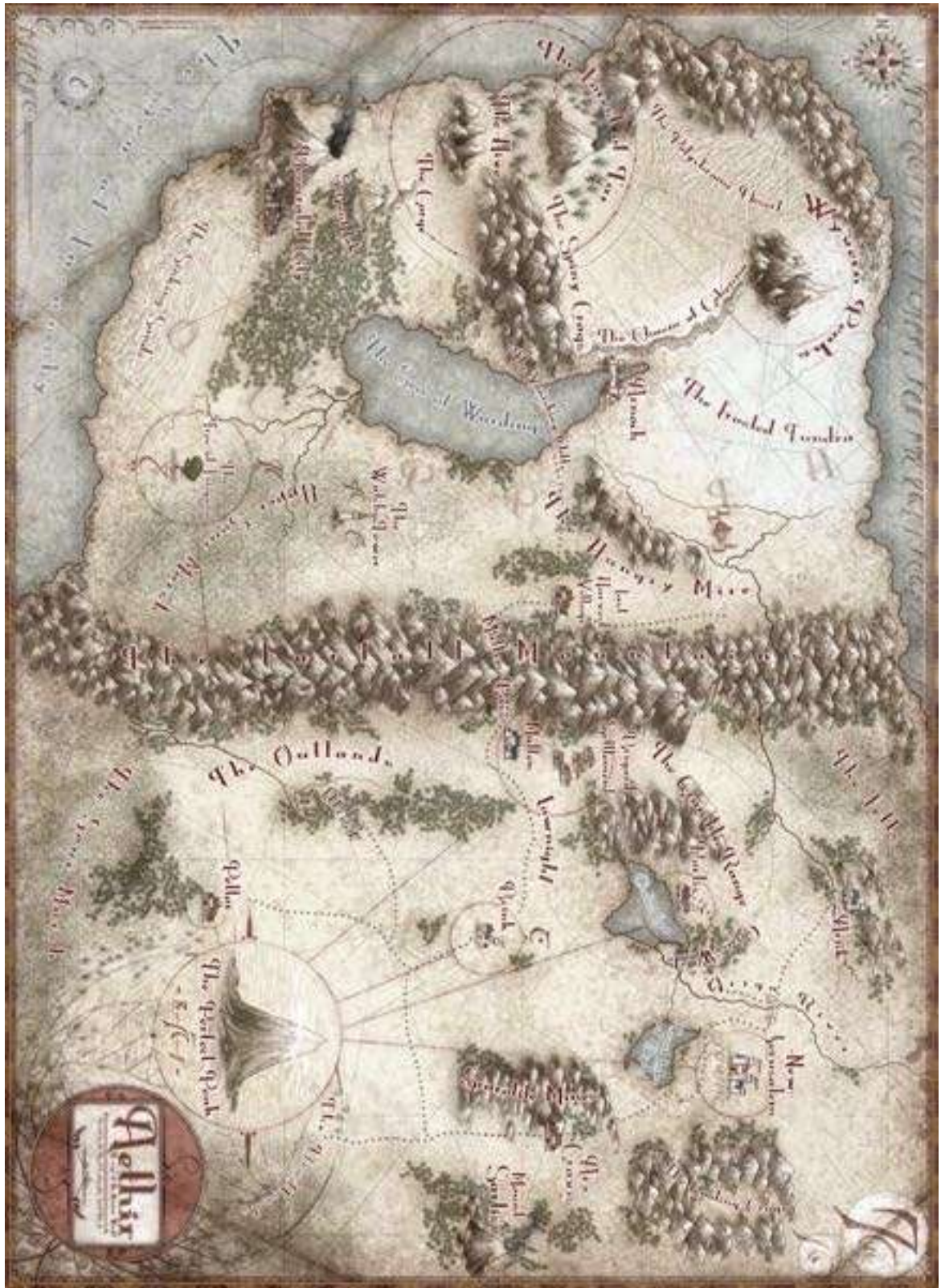
During the last stages of the battle against Sektis Gandaw, Shadrak is badly injured beneath the Technocrat's mountain. He returns to the city of New Londdyr with his fellow Sicarii, Albert the Poisoner. After Shadrak's convalescence, they systematically take over all the guilds of the city, and Shadrak rules as lord of the underworld.

On the orders of a powerful being known as the Archon, Shadrak assassinates the First Senator, Mal Vatès. With the help of the Nameless Dwarf, he flees the city and subsequently aids the dwarf in his quest to free himself from the curse of the black axe that caused him to massacre his own people.

A sorcerer named Bird reveals to Shadrak the truth of who he is: a homunculus from Aethir, spawn of the Demiurgos. As a baby, Shadrak had been threatened with death by the homunculi due to his imperfections: the pink eyes and pale skin of an albino. Bird rescued the infant Shadrak and arranged for him to be taken by planeship to the world of Urddynoor, where he was given into the care of an old Dreamer woman, Kadee.

The Nameless Dwarf is tricked by the Demiurgos, and returns to the ravine city of Arx Gravis to commit even greater atrocities than before, until Shadrak finds a way to stop him.

Shadrak later travels with the Nameless Dwarf to the death world of Thanatos in a desperate attempt to save the dwarf city of Arnoch from the attack of a five-headed dragon. Shadrak is reunited with his dead foster mother, Kadee, mysteriously kept alive on Thanatos. When Kadee sacrifices herself to save the companions, Shadrak is devastated, and bit by bit his world begins to unravel.



THE WITCH QUEEN'S RING

A job well done had turned into a scut of a day, and Shadrak hadn't seen the last of it. Six of Jankson Brau's thugs lay sprawled in the dirt twenty feet below his ledge on the mesa. If only it had taken just six shots to kill them. One of Shadrak's Ancient-tech flintlocks was clean out of bullets, and the other can't have been far off. He reached behind to reassure himself his old "thundershot" pistol was still tucked in the back of his belt. It didn't hold as many rounds as the *faux* flintlocks, and it wasn't half as powerful, but it had gotten him out of many a tight spot over the years, and he was in one right now. He'd lost sight of the wizard and the last of the thugs. At this point, they could be anywhere.

He pressed his back to the rock wall beneath an overhang. One of the suns chose that moment to pitch into its haphazard descent. It didn't matter how long Shadrak remained on Aethir, he'd never get used to the frenetic sequences of its twin suns, the phases of its three moons. He shielded his eyes against the sun's glare, and when it was safe to open them again he could see nothing but white spots.

A boot scuffed the ledge above him. Shadrak blinked rapidly to clear his vision then raised his flintlock and waited. One heartbeat. Two. Voices from up top, muffled, arguing. A man swore, then a pair of boots dangled over the edge. Shadrak shot one, and blood spurted. The owner screamed. He shot the other, and a man fell, flailing and wailing, till a thud from below shut him the shog up.

"Move and I'll fry you."—The wizard's voice, from behind.

The scut had been a pain in the arse all the way from the Grinning Skull Tavern just outside of Malfen. It was his wards and cantrips that had cost Shadrak so many bullets, and

he had a wand that spewed fireballs that threw up clods of earth and rocky shrapnel when they detonated.

The boots had been bait. Obvious bait. Hindsight was a hundred percent.

Shadrak started to turn, but the wizard said, “Uh uh. As you are. Just reach into your pocket very slowly and remove the ring.”

Brau’s ring. The relic. Supposedly crafted by the Witch Queen of Thogani. The thing gave him the creeps so much, Shadrak would have gladly handed it over, only there was a Stygian in Pellor expecting him to deliver it. Not only was Xultak Setis a formidable sorcerer, he had a reputation for eating those who failed him. And besides which, he paid extremely well.

Shadrak slipped his free hand into the pocket of his jerkin, willing himself to relax, bide his time. He’d no desire to touch the ring again; when he’d stolen it from under Jankson Brau’s nose he’d worn gloves, but the contact had still made his skin crawl.

“Did I fail to mention the tech-weapon?” the wizard said. “What do you call it?”

“Gun,” Shadrak said, slowly withdrawing his hand from his pocket. As he did, he noticed the wizard’s shadow on the ledge. And then he realized: The shadow started in front of Shadrak’s position, and lacked the length of his own. It was an odd thing when you considered his height. Shadrak was a smidgen under three feet tall, the wizard almost six. It could only mean the scut was not just behind, he was above. Given the angle of the shadow, the position of the second sun that cast it, that was impossible... unless

—*Of course!*

The scut could levitate.

“Drop it,” the wizard said. “Now.”

The flintlock clattered as it hit the ledge, and like Shadrak knew it would, it discharged. Thunder boomed, rocks cascaded down from the overhang, the wizard squealed, and Shadrak spun, snatching a razor star from his baldric and flinging it higher than a man was tall.

The wizard's wand went spinning below. The man himself clutched his throat while he gurgled and frothed at the mouth. He was suspended in midair beside the sheer wall at the end of Shadrak's ledge. No mean feat by any stretch of the imagination, but even meaner when you considered the shogger was in his death throes, blood seeping between his fingers.

A bit too mean.

With a frantic wave of his arms, the wizard plummeted to the ground.

And that was that, as far as Shadrak was concerned: an aggravation he could have done without, but when all was said and—

Something tugged at his pocket. On instinct he felt for the ring, but it wasn't there. He swung round, pulling the thundershot from the back of his belt.

Nothing. No one. Just the empty ledge.

But the ring was definitely gone.

He crouched down to peer over the side. Still nothing. Held his breath, listened. A squawk from up high. Vultures circling the bodies on the ground, clustered together in a tidy pile, the wizard on top, robe hitched up exposing his arse. Filthy bastard. What was the world coming to when a man wore nothing to cover his knackers?

Shadrak backed away from the edge, stood, and drew his cloak tight.

He didn't know how he knew, but he knew. The prickling of the hairs on the back of his neck was warning enough. Something was on the ledge with him, and yet when he looked, there was nothing there.

He was prone to jumping at shadows these days. No surprise there, after the life he'd led. But this was no phantom. What if the Witch Queen had sent one of her minions to reclaim—

Shadrak's shadow wavered.

No, not his: another shadow crossing it.

He leveled the thundershot and fired. Someone gasped. The scuff of a boot on stone, the flap and flutter of a cloak...

Shadrak glanced up then down, waited for another sound, but whoever it was, they were good. He rifled through a belt pouch for his Ancient-tech goggles, fitted the strap around his head, adjusted the lenses, and looked again.

At first the landscape was limned in stark green, but with a further adjustment, he began to see smudges of red and orange overlaying his vision, dashing, scampering, one coiled beneath a rock. All living, all hidden from normal sight; but there was nothing that could conceivably have stolen the ring.

He scanned the surrounding area for a minute, then another. Finally, he shook his head, suppressing the urge to swear. Whatever magic concealed the pickpocket was apparently shielding him in other ways, blocking the heat the goggles detected.

He snatched the goggles off and stowed them back in their pouch, all the while letting his eyes rove the ground below, hopping from body to body. Then he saw something and squinted to get a better look. There, weaving between the corpses: footprints in the sand.

He tucked the thundershot back in his belt, re-holstered the flintlock he'd dropped, and lowered himself over the edge.

At the bottom of the mesa, he stooped to inspect the prints. Human, judging by the size. Booted. Light on their feet. He began to follow the trail, sticking to the shade of the rock face, trusting his stealth would be a match for the invisible thief's.

The thief who'd come out of nowhere.

Jankson Brau hadn't shown his entire hand, it seemed. He'd kept an ace up his sleeve.

Or had he?

Shadrak stopped a moment to consider.

The footprints weren't heading back toward the brigand settlements outlying Malfen. If anything, they were going in the opposite direction, skirting the base of the mesa toward Lownight, maybe even Brink. Then again, that was also the way to the Chalice Sea and Portis. But who in their right mind would go to Portis? All they had there was fish. Well, fish and connections...

The twist of Shadrak's guts told him intuition had just happened upon a truth, and an unpalatable one at that. Connections with the guilds of New Llonddyr, and with Shadrak's old guild more than most, the Night Hawks.

He shut his eyes and uttered a swift prayer to his foster mother, Kadee. He'd been doing that a lot lately, since he'd lost her. He never heard her answer, but she was at work somewhere, because he kept growing softer, less vicious; and it wasn't through choice.

When he opened his eyes, nothing had changed. Nothing ever did. It was still the same pile of shit he was stuck in: a year's worth of pay taken from right under his nose, and a Stygian sorcerer likely to turn him into a turnip for shogging up.

But maybe something had changed, albeit something subtle. His sense of certainty, for one thing. His gut was right, no doubt about it, and not on account of anything superstitious. It was merely his mind drawing inferences before he'd had chance to sift through all the evidence.

He knew with unshakeable certainty where the thief was from, and where he was heading. Assuming, of course, it was a he.

New Llonddyr.

The last place on Aethir Shadrak wanted to return to.

His scut of a day was set to grow a whole lot scuttier. Not only was Aethir's major city the site of old wounds, old losses, but it was the place he'd assassinated the First Senator, Mal Vatès.

And ever since, the Senate had wanted him hanged.

AN INVISIBLE THIEF

The thief wasn't just invisible, he was crafty with it. After the initial flight from the mesa, he'd made a good show of covering his tracks, or at least keeping to firmer ground when he could, so as not to leave any impressions.

Shadrak lost the trail more than he'd care to admit, but as he came upon the sparkling waters of the Chalice Sea, the ground grew soft and sandy, and the footprints were the kind a blind man could follow.

The only surprise was, the tracks went nowhere near the jetties and the boats that ferried people over to Portis. The scut had looped around the inland sea, bypassing the fishing town, rather than making a stopover. Either he had the stamina of a dwarf, or he was too scared to stop and rest. And if the latter, that made him wise as well as canny. He ought to be scared, with what Shadrak was planning on doing to him.

Still, it was a blessing, in one way. The stink of fish was rank, even from this side of the water, and the chances of running into the past were just as strong in Portis as they were in New Londdyr. Only, in Portis Shadrak ran the risk of being knifed in the back by some goon who thought he'd been ripped off, or by an ex-Night Hawk who blamed him for abandoning the guild and leaving a shogwit like Buck Fargin in charge. He couldn't blame them for that. That dumb twat Fargin was the beginning of the end for the unified guilds. But there'd been no choice. Sometimes events moved too quickly, took on a life of their own. Some things just refused to be controlled. Apparently, Buck Fargin hadn't made it through the last guild war. It would have been a miracle if he had. Most likely scenario: one of his own had garroted him while he was taking a piss.

Shadrak took the opportunity to wolf down some jerky, and then he was back on the trail, assuming, when there were no signs, that the thief would take the shortest route to New Londdyr.

At the first sight of Raphoe, largest of the moons, Shadrak made camp a stone's throw from the road to Brink. He busied himself with setting a fire, adding deadfall to the kindling from his tinderbox. He'd ceased caring if it gave his position away; he doubted the thief would be looking back.

Truth be told, he'd ceased caring about the Witch Queen's ring, too, but he knew that was on account of the tiredness that had set in from hours on the road. Come morning, he'd be fired up and ready to take back what was his—until he brought it to Pellor and sold it for a tidy profit. Who was he to question what a Stygian wanted with a dubious artifact crafted by the Witch Queen? A mummified hag, so they said. The last ruler of Thogani, the Desecrated City, somewhere within the nightmare realm of Qlippoth.

Shadrak shuddered and reached into one of his belt pouches for a weedstick he'd laced with *somnificus*. He'd not smoked before losing Kadee, and he'd scorned anyone who chewed or puffed on the drug. But Kadee had used it till she was black-eyed and vacant, like the rest of her kind, the Barraiya people back home on Urddynoor. Just another part of her he'd inherited, he guessed.

With the fire keeping off the bite of the night air, he sat back against the trunk of a spindly tree and took a long draw on the weedstick, letting the *somnificus* muddy his thoughts then slowly turn them to mist.

Next morning Shadrak was up before dawn, with only Ennoi, smallest of the moons, still in attendance. Stars were scattered in unobscured constellations, some of them winking, all of them sharp and cut clear as diamonds. It was going to be a cloudless day, which meant it would be stifling when the suns came up.

His cloak was damp with dew and something else that stank like the Abyss. The rustle of leaves in the treetop above where he'd slept told him it was squirrel piss. Sure enough, after he waited a while, one of the critters showed its twitchy little face, and Shadrak took a pop at it with a flintlock. It hit the ground, a bloody splatter where its head had been.

He skinned the squirrel and baked it on the embers of the fire. When he'd washed it down with a slug of water from his costrel, he kicked dirt over the charred wood and ashes, then set back out on the trail.

An hour later he was standing over the remains of another campfire. A flaccid wineskin lay discarded on the ground, and the air was redolent with dung. A quick survey showed him someone had done their business in too much of a hurry to bury it. The briefest of stopovers, then, but the thief was growing careless. He must have assumed Shadrak had given up the chase, but he was still keeping up a good pace.

Presumably there was a buyer waiting impatiently in New Londdyr, maybe the promise of a bonus if the ring was delivered in a timely fashion. Either that, or the thief was as uncomfortable around the Witch Queen's handiwork as Shadrak was, and couldn't wait to be shot of it.

Of course, a third possibility was that the thief wanted it for himself, that he was some crazed sorcerer who'd caught a whiff of the precious relic when it dropped into the hands of Jankson Brau. Fool if he was. Wizard or no wizard, he didn't want to be messing with anything out of Thogani. If the Witch Queen left things lying around, it was as bait. Shadrak

had said as much to the Stygian who'd hired him, but Stygians were a law unto themselves. The man had merely shrugged, and there had been a malicious glint in his eye.

Shadrak was about to move on when he noticed a crumpled scrap of parchment close to the fire. He crouched down and straightened it out. There was writing on it, stylish and cursive, but he only recognized one or two words. It was in Ancient Urddynoorian, the language used in official documents by the Senate. Other than that, the only types who had use for it were academics and sorcerers.

On instinct, he dropped it, in case it was some kind of magical trap or a page fallen from a spellbook; but when he looked again, picking out the few words he could read, he decided it was part of an essay, perhaps even a story.

The title was *Nanus Domini*. He knew *dominus* meant lord or ruler—he'd been told that's where the common word "dominate" came from, so it had stuck in his mind. But was *domini* related? Some letters were only half formed, as if they had been rubbed away. In other places, entire lines were missing, with only a faded smudge to indicate where they had been.

A more pressing question was whether the parchment was worth anything. If by some chance he didn't recover the ring, he stood to lose out on a wagon-load of denarii. He'd only taken the job because he was desperate. Destitute might have been a better word. All the real work was in the city, but with a price on his head, he'd avoided New Londdyr like the plague.

Until now.

Now, it was either risk everything, or starve to death within a month. Unless of course he made a habit out of eating squirrels. But even then, the bullets would soon run out, and there was no way of replenishing them. One flintlock was empty, the other almost, and the thundershot's sole remaining cartridge was a long way from being full. Once that was used up, it was back to crossbows, if he could raise the money to buy one.

He shoved the parchment in his pocket and cut across country, parallel to the New Londdyr road. If he could shave off a few corners, maybe he'd get there ahead of the thief and watch the gates till he arrived. No one got in or out of the city save through its barbicans, and the guards wouldn't open up for someone they couldn't see. If the thief was going to reveal himself, that would be the time.

Of course, Shadrak had once escaped New Londdyr on an air-raft of Magwitch the Meddler's making, but unless the thief could fly, he'd never get over the Cyclopean Walls. They were unscalable. Mortared tighter than a virgin's crack, Big Jake used to say. Not that Shadrak would know, and not that he was ever likely to. Any half-decent woman wouldn't look twice at an albino midget, and even the whores turned him away.

ONE-TRICK PONY

Shadrak was in the shadow of New Londdyr's Cyclopean Walls even a half mile out from the city. No matter how many times he'd seen them, he'd never grown used to the scale, the size of each individual block, the seamless masonry. The walls were Maldark the Fallen's last gift to the human settlers from Urddynoor, his way of making up for the devastation he'd almost brought upon them and his own people, the dwarves.

Shadrak's goggles whirred and clicked as he brought them into focus on the gatehouse. What if he was too late? What if the thief was already inside? How could he find someone he'd never even clapped eyes on?

The gates were closed. It was an odd thing about New Londdyr: the Senate were so paranoid, they only allowed people in and out of the city at set times throughout the day. Arrive in between those times, and you were in for a long wait. Then, of course, was the even longer wait inside as they herded you through checkpoints and administration. But the thief would be fast-tracked, so long as he belonged to one of the guilds. It was a longstanding arrangement with the Senate, unless they'd revoked it following the death of Mal Våtès.

Sunlight glinted from atop the barbican. Shadrak trained his goggles on the spot, adjusted the lenses till it seemed he was mere feet from the battlements. A *galea*—the plumed helm worn by the city's legionaries, an affectation of the Senate's that harked back to a pre-Ancient culture on Urddynoor.

A soldier scanned the grassland skirting the walls, looked out over the fields being plowed by teams of oxen, and those lying fallow. Same routine, day in, day out. The sort of thing that bred carelessness. They needed to change things up from time to time, keep the

men on their feet. That's what Shadrak would have done, if he was in charge. Little details like that were what won him the guild war and made him top dog in New Londdyr's underworld. Back in the day.

As the soldier ducked out of sight, Shadrak reset the goggles to pick out heat, but before he turned his attention back to the gatehouse he saw a blur of red high above the curtain walls. It just hung there, a shimmering oval. It must have been burning up inside to give off such radiance. He adjusted the goggles again, reset them to normal vision, but the oval winked out of existence. Back to heat mode, and it was there once more, suspended from nothing, invisible to the naked eye.

Magic.

He'd seen this sort of thing before, made use of it himself from time to time. A wizard eye.

Question was, why was there a wizard eye in the sky above the walls? Added security? The Senate were wary, but a permanent spell was a bit extravagant, even for them. And it seemed redundant, given the impregnable walls and the vetting of everyone who entered the gates.

So why, then? Or rather, who? Who had set the eye to keep watch over the entrance? Did someone know the thief was returning with a priceless artifact? You had to think so. Unless the eye was a fixed feature, it was too much of a coincidence, and Shadrak believed in coincidence as much as he did the Wayist god of peace and mercy.

The eye would see him approaching the walls when the time came. A dimwit might assume he was a child, but after Mal Vatès the Senate knew just what he looked like, how small he was. They might even have worked out that he wasn't human at all, that he was a homunculus.

With practiced discipline Shadrak severed the train of thought. Knowledge of what he was hadn't grown easier with the passage of time. It was a bad dream he wished he could wake up from. How could he go from being the foster son of a Barraiya Dreamer to a creature formed from the very stuff of deception? How could he reconcile himself with being the spawn of the Demiurgos, Lord of the Abyss?

He let his eyes return to the gatehouse, scouring the area for any sign the thief was about to show himself; because judging by the height of the suns, the gates were due to open any minute—if, and only if, there was someone outside requesting permission to enter.

Shadrak's mind was still preoccupied with what he was going to do, how he was going to apprehend the thief, or enter the city without the wizard eye seeing him, but before he could fret any longer the air in front of the gates shimmered, and a cloaked figure appeared.

He knew it. Knew the shogger was a one-trick pony. A wizard worth his salt would have flown here, or used some other means to enter the city unseen. But this one, this scrawny-looking pickpocket, had played his hand with the invisibility, and now he'd had to drop it in order to persuade the guards to let him in. If he was a mage, he was a piss poor one. No, he was likely just a thief who'd been loaned a spell, or a trinket more likely, to give him the power. Which meant he'd either stolen it, or he was in the employ of a wizard.

Shadrak focused the goggles on the thief: threadbare cloak fluttering in the breeze, crimson rather than the black or brown you'd have expected from a guildsman. The sort of thing you'd expect to see on one of those egg-head sorcerers at the Academy. There was something about the awkward gait, the stooped shoulders... If he could only get a look at the face... But even without it, he was getting the feeling he knew this man from somewhere.

Before the name reached his brain, a bird swooped down from the barbican, straight at the shogger's back. Big bird, too. A hawk, maybe.

The thief started to turn at the flutter of wings, but the bird was already on him. Only, it wasn't a bird any longer. It was a woman in black leather, legs wrapped around his waist, one arm around his throat, the other applying pressure to the back of his head. The thief flailed weakly with both arms, stumbled in a tight circle, then toppled to the ground.

The woman rolled lithely aside, got down on one knee, and rifled through his pockets.

And Shadrak was running then. Running like the clappers toward the gate. No shapeshifting bitch was taking his ring, and especially not an ex-Dybbuk.

Because he knew her, even more certainly than he knew the man. He'd only seen her the once, as he gunned down her guild boss, Master Plaguewind. But once was enough with a memory like his.

He'd crossed barely half the distance between them, when Ilesa Fana glanced up at the eye in the sky she shouldn't have been able to see. She nodded once, and then her black hair turned to feathers, along with the rest of her. A raven now, she soared into the air and disappeared over the top of the curtain wall.

UNSCALABLE

When Shadrak reached the thief's crumpled form, he glanced up at the wizard eye. It juddered as it swiveled this way and that, relaying all it observed to whoever controlled it. With a curse he lifted his goggles and set them atop his head. It was too late for stealth now. He'd already been seen.

The thief had fallen on his back, but his cowl still covered half his face. A narrow chin tufted with soft stubble had the ring of familiarity to it, and coupled with the gait and the height, Shadrak was only surprised he'd not come up with a name. Maybe the *somnificus* had rotted his brain, ruined his perfect memory. It wasn't till he yanked the hood up and over the face that he saw who it was, and kicked himself for not putting it all together earlier.

"Nils scutting Fargin. Son of the lousiest, whiniest dirtbag ever to disgrace the Night Hawks."

He half drew a dagger to slit the unconscious lad's throat, hesitated. Nils was barely out of boyhood, a man but not quite, if that made any sense. Shadrak cursed. He was growing as soft as Big Jake's belly, and not for the first time he wondered if that was due to Kadee's absence from his life. He used to hear her voice in his head, chastising him, more often than not; but these days, nothing. Maybe she didn't need to speak any longer. Maybe he carried her with him now, in his desiccated heart.

Bollocks! Who was he kidding? Kadee didn't speak because she was dead, dissolved into oblivion, gone. You had to face facts, be realistic. The recognition filled his veins with fire, and stinging tears welled at the corners of his eyes.

Nils Fargin had just run out of luck.

A kick to the ribs, and the scut grunted, rolled to his side. One to the arse, and he whined like a petulant four-year-old. But when Shadrak crouched beside his head and poked him in the eye, Nils came to with a yelp.

“Tell me she didn’t take my ring,” Shadrak growled.

Nils didn’t seem to know whether to rub his eye or his throat, where Ilesa had choked him. He coughed and spluttered, tried to sit up, but Shadrak slammed him back down again.

“My ring.”

Tears spilled down Nils’s face from his poked eye. He tried desperately to blink the other into focus, even as he rummaged about in his pockets, voice shrill with panic. “Oh, shog, I’m dead. Shogging dead.”

“Shrewd of you to realize.”

Nils froze, hand still jammed in his pocket. A few more rapid blinks, and he was staring Shadrak in the face, one eye bloodshot and streaming, the other wide with horror.

“You followed me? How’d you—”

Shadrak whipped his dagger fully out, pressed it to Nils’s throat, atop the welt left by Ilesa’s arm.

“For the third and last time, my ring. I can’t count to four.”

Nils licked his lips, removed his hand slowly from his pocket. “Gone.”

Shadrak glanced up at the top of the wall, where he’d seen the bitch fly. “Scutting, shogging bollocks.”

“It weren’t you? Weren’t you that got my back?” Nils said.

“Are you a complete pillock?”

Nils frowned, concentrating, trying to remember. “They was bigger, and there was this smell, kind of musky. I’ve smelled it somewhere before.”

“In your shogging dreams. So, if you were her, where would you take it? Who’s buying crotch-creeping relics from the Desecrated City these days? Some reclusive scut in the Wizards’ Quarter? A noble with perverse tastes? An Academy wizard gone over to the dark side?”

Nils visibly blanched, tried to disguise it by sticking out his bottom lip and giving a shrug.

“Something you want to tell me, Fargin?”

“Me? Nope,” Nils said.

“No point stringing this out, then.”

Shadrak put pressure on the knife at Nils’s throat. The skin popped and blood trickled onto the blade.

“No, wait!” Nils squealed. “You know me, Shadrak. You knew my dad.”

“You really think that’s gonna make a difference?” Shadrak grabbed a fistful of Nils’s hair, then took the knife from his throat, and instead aimed its tip at the eye he’d poked earlier. His blood was on fire for the first time in ages. He’d forgotten how much he enjoyed this kind of thing. How much he used to crave it.

“Last I saw of you,” Shadrak said, “you were a scholar, teaching kids at the Academy.”

“I am. I was.”

“Oh?”

“I can’t say no more. I’m dead if I do.”

“You’re dead if you don’t.” Shadrak touched the tip of his knife just beneath the eyeball.

Nils squirmed and whimpered, but Shadrak held him firmly by the hair.

“All right,” Nils said. “I don’t teach no more. I was told not to.”

“You were fired? That why you went back to thieving?”

“I weren’t fired,” Nils said. “Other duties. I was gave other duties.”

“By whom?”

Nils's chin began to tremble. "I can't say. I can't—"

"Stab!" Shadrak yelled.

Nils screamed.

"Skewered eyeball. I know a Stygian in Pellor who'd pay a shogging shitload for a delicacy like that."

"Arecagen!" Nils blurted out. "Master Arecagen."

"The Principal?"—The most powerful mage at the Academy.

"He's gone crazy, I tell you. Obsessed."

Shadrak released the pressure from the knife. "So, he got a sniff of the ring Jankson Brau unearthed and sent you to steal it?"

"I didn't know you was after it, honest I didn't."

Shadrak waved him quiet. He was trying to think. The Stygian had detected the ring's discovery, but he'd chosen not to say how. If it had lain hidden all this time, it figured something had to have changed. Maybe Brau had tried using it and given off the scent. Shog knows. Shadrak didn't know the first thing about magic. If the Stygian had sensed the ring, it stood to reason the head of the Academy could too. But that didn't explain the third interested party.

"How do you suppose Ilesa Fana knew about the ring?"

"Ilesa?"

"You know her, right?"

That brought the color flooding back to Nils's cheeks. There was a moment's pause as he dealt with whatever he was dealing with, then he put it all together.

"After Mal Vatès... when you left my dad in charge of the guilds, there was chaos. They was at war with the Senate, but mostly with each other. Dad... well you know what he was like. He didn't last long. Big Jake ran things for a while after that, but—"

“He got out as soon as he could. Moved to Brink,” Shadrak said. That much he’d discovered when he fled to the shithole of a town with a posse of Maresmen on his tail, all because of a little husk trafficking incident.

“Guild lords came and went,” Nils continued, “most of them bobbing down the sewers before they could get anything done. No one had your gift for unifying the guilds, Shadrak, not until—”

“Ilesa? She’s running my Night Hawks?”

“What’s left of them. She took them out in a single night, they say. Claimed she was with the Dybbuks, even though they was supposed to have been wiped out. And that’s how it’s been since: the Dybbuks controlling everything, bringing the other guilds onside one by one, same as you did, only...”

“Only what?”

“Only, she’s better at it.”

Shadrak slammed the knife back in his baldric before he slammed it into Nils’s face. He could almost feel Kadee’s approval. Her voice in his head had been bad enough, but this was worse. She was yeast, permeating every aspect of his character and making it her own. But that was all right by him; he’d do anything for Kadee, even if it meant growing soft in her memory. Even if it got him killed.

“What I mean,” Nils swiftly said, “is no one’s got a clue where the Dybbuks have their headquarters, and she’s got eyes and ears everywhere.”

Shadrak threw a look up above the curtain walls. “In the sky?”

Nils frowned. Clearly he couldn’t see the wizard eye. “Everywhere, I says. Even at the Academy. She approached me once, about getting some dirt on Master Arecagen. She was angry as the Abyss when I turned her down.”

“Turned her down, why? You were scared?”

“Shogging right I was. Arecagen keeps threatening to turn me into all manner of things. I ain’t risking what he’d do if I betrayed him.”

“Like now.”

“Eh?” Then Nils’s expression grew alarmed. He’d cottoned on to the fact he was divulging his master’s secrets at this very moment, albeit under duress.

“How’s he gonna take to you returning without the ring?”

Nils dropped his chin to his chest. “I’m shogged.”

“I’d say,” Shadrak said. “But you help me find the shapeshifting slapper, and maybe I’ll take care of your little problem.”

“It ain’t little. Arecagen’s the greatest wizard in the city.”

“Good for him. How’s that gonna help when I blow his brains out?”

Nils looked up, a glimmer of hope in his good eye, the other too red to tell. “So, I help you, you’ll fix things with Arecagen? We have a deal?”

Shadrak offered his hand, and Nils took it. Not that such gestures meant anything among assassins and thieves, but it was the expected thing to do.

“Ho below!” came a holler from atop the barbican. “Prepare for inspection. Follow instructions at all times. The gates are about to open.”

Shadrak cursed. “They still have the street markets in the shade of the walls?”

Nils nodded.

“Meet me there. I’m shogging starving.” All he’d had to eat was the squirrel he’d shot on the trail. “I need to grab a turkey leg or something.”

“You’re not coming with me?”

Shadrak glanced up. “Over the top. I ain’t going through their checkpoints and bullshit ever again.”

“Over the walls?” Nils said, as the barbican gates began to grind open. “You can fly?”

“Climb,” Shadrak said.

“Yeah, right. That’s impossible.” Nils puffed out his pigeon chest. “Even I couldn’t do that, and I’m the best there is.”

Shadrak had heard the same thing a thousand times, how the Cyclopean Walls were unscalable, but he no longer believed that. He’d once climbed down the walls of the dwarven city of Arnoch, which made New Londdyr’s seem like a rugged rock face in comparison.

He set off at a jog around the side of the barbican and made for the buttress at the base of the curtain walls, angling a call back at Nils.

“Last one to the grub stall is a scut-sucking shogwit.”

BACK IN TOWN

It wasn't the first time Shadrak's size had worked to his advantage. The mockers could say what they liked, but at three-feet tall he had more options for entrance and egress, better chances of hiding, and slender, childlike fingers that could find a hold on even the tightest mortared walls.

The chief problem with New Londdyr's Cyclopean Walls was the size of the blocks they were comprised of, each as tall as a regular man and just as wide. Shadrak's solution was the pair of punch daggers he'd picked up in Sarum back home on Urddynoor: stiffer than steel, unbendable, and possessed of a sheen that never tarnished.

He'd not thought of it at the time, but ever since he'd found the thundershot in the tunnels beneath Sarum, he'd had a notion the daggers were also leftovers from the world of the Ancients, antiques that had passed from collector to collector until Shadrak broke the chain.

He remembered dropping down a disused chimney, startling the fat scut of a merchant just sitting down to dinner, and catching him with a razor star before the man could reach whatever "equalizer" he was dashing across the room to get to. Turned out it was the punch daggers, encased in glass and mounted on the wall.

The twin blades penetrated the mortar of the Cyclopean Walls as easily as they did flesh. Hand over hand he went up one vertical seam, before strafing across to another. An itch on the back of his neck told him the feat wasn't unobserved, though. Without the goggles on, he couldn't see the wizard eye, but he'd no doubt it could see him, and that it relayed every last detail to whoever put it there.

Something told him the eye wasn't an aid to the soldiers manning the walls. If it was, they'd have been calling down to him now, threatening to dislodge him with spears, or taking

pot-shots at him with crossbows. But the battlements remained empty. Even the barbican roof was devoid of activity; no one had moved there since the soldier had called down to him and Nils. Either New Londdyr was growing complacent, or the Senate had made cutbacks.

It was the same when Shadrak rolled over the top of the curtain wall and crouched low on the parapet. Nothing.

The scent of spiced beef and cider wafted up from the market stalls hundreds of feet below, nestled in the shade of the walls. There wasn't much crowd noise—it was still early, but he knew from experience it wouldn't be long before the place was teeming with smiths and smelters on their way to work in the industrial district. Not that he had a problem with that: the bigger the crowd, the easier it was to slip in among them and pass unnoticed. No, it was more a case of getting to a sausage stand while there were still sausages to be had.

Fifty yards along the parapet he came to an open door set into the turret of a guard tower. Maybe the soldier who was supposed to be on patrol had popped in for a piss and would be back any moment. Maybe he was taking an unofficial nap inside and had forgotten to close the door. Thing was, in the old days the towers had been hives of activity, the wall-tops perpetually patrolled.

Shadrak returned the punch daggers to his baldric and slipped through the doorway. A guttering torch spewed black smoke from its sconce a little way down the spiral stairs. He covered his nose and mouth and crept through the smog till he passed beneath it.

There were closed doors leading off the stairs at every level, but he saw no point opening them. Instead, he continued silently level after level till his knees burned with the effort.

At the bottom he came into a round chamber with a wide open door leading onto the street. A lone guard was leaning against the jamb, watching the the trickle of workers passing through the market stalls, spear propped against a chopping-block table, upon which were the

remains of a meal and a pitcher of water. At least it should have been water, but with Shadrak's sense of smell he couldn't miss the scent of malted barley and hops.

He was halfway across the floor before some sixth sense made the guard turn. Shadrak lunged at him, grabbed both legs beneath the knees, and took him to the ground. The guard hit with a thud, but before he could cry out Shadrak rolled him, took his back, and choked him out with an arm round the neck, same as Ilesa had done to Nils.

It was only when he slipped out of the tower and kept pace with a group of workmen heading for the stalls that Shadrak realized what he'd done, or rather, what he hadn't. He hadn't killed the guard, cut his throat, ensured he couldn't describe his assailant. That was the secret to being unseen: you couldn't rely on stealth alone getting the job done; more often than not someone had to pay for your failure to go unnoticed. But this time he'd not even thought about it.

Kadee again, it had to be, worming her way into his psyche, changing him before he even knew it. He consoled himself with the fact that it didn't really matter; the wizard eye had already observed him entering the city. Would it really make that much difference if anyone else knew he was back?

Nils was waiting for him in front of a food stall, half-eaten bread roll stuffed with sausage and dripping grease in one hand, untouched one in the other.

"How much do I owe you?" Shadrak said, snatching what he assumed was his and biting into it. He couldn't suppress the shuddering sigh of satisfaction as the grease hit his palate.

"On me," Nils said.

Shadrak paused in his chewing. "Oh?" A thief giving out freebies? That was never good.

"I ain't lost it," Nils said, glancing nervously back down the street at a food stall he'd presumably nabbed the grub from.

Shadrak grunted and resumed chewing as he headed across the road to a narrow thoroughfare between two rows of crumbling brick buildings. Funny thing was, they were new-builds, compared with the original parts of the city that had been constructed by Maldark the Fallen and his dwarves.

“Where we going?” Nils asked, following with big awkward gangly strides.

It was a shogging embarrassment, being robbed by an idiot with the grace of a hobbled cow. Shadrak glanced up at Nils, almost said something about how tall the lad had grown since the guild days, when Nils’s father, Buck, was just some lowlife who washed the dishes and took the garbage out; but that would have been one stage too familiar. Last thing he wanted was Nils thinking they were friends.

And as to where they were going... “That’s for me to know and you to discover when we get there.”

“Thought you wanted my help.” Nils stopped walking. “Look, I don’t have to come, you know.”

Shadrak slammed him against a boarded-up shopfront, held him there while he took another bite of his roll and sausage. After a second or two, he let go. There was no need to say, “Yes, you do.” Nils knew it. Shadrak could tell by the way the lad dusted himself down and continued to follow him like a puppy. There was no way he was letting Nils out of his sight till he had the ring in his possession once more. And if he didn’t find the ring, he’d take Nils back to Pellor with him and offer him to the Stygian by way of compensation.

They emerged from the alley onto an avenue teeming with carts and wagons and workers. There was still a fair glow coming from street lights topped with radiant balls of crystal, despite the suns already kicking out a steely light. Most of the city used oil lamps or torches, but they were within a half mile of the Wizards’ Quarter, and the Academy’s sorcerers had created a demand for this sort of thing.

Shadrak slung the last of his roll onto the cobbles. Instantly, a scrawny-looking dog darted out of a hole in the wall and dragged it from sight.

Nils ripped a poster from a shop window. It was browned over with age, curled at the edges, but the likeness sketched on it had weathered the handful of years that had passed since Shadrak last set foot in New Londdyr. Actually, it was a pretty good likeness, which was even more reason why he should never have come back.

“Wanted,” Nils said, like he was having a laugh. “Shadrak the Unseen.” He held the picture up beside Shadrak’s face for a comparison. “One-hundred denarii reward. That’s got to be tempting.”

Shadrak snatched the poster from him and tore it into pieces. “I’d find you, Nils. I always do.”

Nils licked his lips. “I was only joshing. You know I’d never shop you. We was both Night Hawks. Thicker’n blood.”

“Thick as two short planks, you mean.”

Shadrak set off along the avenue and crossed over to another alley, looking out for landmarks that had etched themselves permanently into his memory.

“They put the posters up as soon as you left,” Nils said. “Soon as you killed the First Senator.”

Shadrak shot him a glare. “One more word out of you...”

Nils covered his mouth, looked around to see if anyone had overheard, but there was no one else in the alley. “Sorry. I ain’t done this sort of thing for a while. Ain’t no need for secrecy at the Academy. Well, there is: academic jealousy and all that, but no rules like what we had in the guild. Shog, it’s only been a few years, and I’ve already lost it.”

“Not when it comes to sausages,” Shadrak said. “Not when it comes to picking pockets, either.”

“No. Suppose not. Just need to learn to keep my gob shut from now on.”

“That would be good. Oh, and Nils...”

“What?”

“How’d you do that invisibility thing?”

Shadrak stopped them where the alley intersected with a street.

Nils slipped his hands in his pockets, shrugged his shoulders like it was nothing. “Spell. A spell. Master Arcagen taught me it.”

“Words, physical buffers, that sort of thing?”

Nils nodded vigorously. “Yes, that’s about it.”

“What words?”

“Eh?”

“Tell me the words of the spell.”

Nils’s mouth worked, as if he were chewing gristle.

“Let me guess,” Shadrak said. “You’ve forgotten?”

“Uh...”

“He inscribed it in your memory, just one use, and then puff?”

“Yes,” Nils said. “How’d you know?”

“Just a hunch.”

“You calling me a liar?”

“You’re a Fargin, aren’t you?”

“I can do magic. Wanna see?”

“Not really.”

The lad was lying, and no demonstration of party tricks was going to convince Shadrak otherwise. Nevertheless, Nils pulled a crumpled piece of parchment from his pocket and straightened it out.

“I’m impressed,” Shadrak said.

“What? No, you plonker, that ain’t the spell. Look closely.”

There were handwritten words all over the paper. Shadrak took from his own pocket the page he’d found by the abandoned campfire when he’d been trailing the “invisible thief”, held it up beside Nils’s for a comparison.

“You’ve been writing out the same thing over and over. I’m in awe of your sorcerous power.”

Nils snatched Shadrak’s parchment, scrunched it up, and threw it into the gutter. “That was an old draft. This is the newest one. Now, watch.”

He muttered some incomprehensible words while he ran the flat of his hand over the page. When he’d finished, the writing had gone. Save for a few faint smudges, it was a virgin piece of parchment.”

“What else?” Shadrak asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What else can you do? ”

“I’m still learning.”

“That’s it? You’ve been at the Academy how long? And that’s all you can do? Erase ink from paper. I don’t like having to break it to you, Fargin, but you’ve been sold a bill of goods. You ain’t nothing but a dogsbody to those scholars. Arcagen’s been feeding you scraps just to keep you compliant. Eraser spell! No more than a cantrip. I take it you can reverse the effect, bring the words back again? I’d hate for you to have lost your story.”

Nils’s mouth fell open.

“You can’t? You’re not telling me that was your only copy?”

“Shogging bloody bollocks!” Nils said, ripping the parchment to shreds. “Do you know how long it took to write that?”

“Maybe you should have told me the story before you cast your poxy spell.” Shadrak tapped the side of his head. “One of the advantages of a perfect memory.”

He gave a smug smile and continued on out into the street, chuckling to himself as Nils cursed and grumbled behind.

THE WIZARDS' QUARTER

The Wizard's Quarter hadn't changed since Shadrak had last been there. It was still a hodgepodge of teetering townhouses buttressed like fortresses, and with precarious-looking jetties forming a misaligned canopy over the street. There were cones and minarets, saw-toothed crenellations, flags sporting pictures of animals or geometric designs. Windows were of stained glass or frosted, or blistered with whorls that refracted sunlight in prismatic bursts. The whole thing was an overgrowth from the Academy, a creeping contagion that warped whatever it reached, giving the impression the district was made of wax and melting.

The winding streets were empty, save for darting shadows that Shadrak kept his eye on, just in case they were more than a trick of the light.

"Don't like it," Nils grumbled. If he dragged his heels any more, he'd end up walking backwards. "Where is everyone?"

"Thought you worked at the Academy," Shadrak said. "When have you known wizards to be up and about before the crack of noon?"

"Yeah, well I ain't stupid enough to walk the streets at this time in the morning," Nils said. "Normally, it's bustling. I tell you, I don't like it. Not that there's ever anything to like about this district. Always makes me giddy, like I'm gonna be sick."

He had a point there. The buildings looked distorted, twisted at unnatural angles. Just giving them more than a glance made Shadrak's head swim. Anywhere else, they'd have collapsed into heaps of rubble, but not here. In the Wizards' Quarter, things obeyed different laws, or if they didn't, they had the appearance of doing so. That was the thing about magic:

it was hard to tell the real stuff from smoke and mirrors. Often, the only way to know was when the illusory fist broke your jaw, or the phantom fire roasted your arse to a cinder.

He led Nils down a back alley just like any other: shaded, dank, and piled high with refuse. The fact that there were rats was just testimony that the wizards who lived there were too immersed in their work to notice. Either that, or they felt it added to the aesthetic.

When he reached the switchback iron staircase that led to Magwitch's third-story apartment, he trod as silently as he could on the steps. Last thing he wanted was to give the meddling mage warning and have him slip away on his flying air-raft. Once they were face to face, Magwitch would be all smiles and offers of tea and truffles, but they both knew: the only reason Shadrak hadn't already knifed the scut was because he was sometimes useful; and the only reason Magwitch hadn't cursed him or rotted him or blasted him to the Abyss was that he was as incompetent as he was ingenious; the margin of failure was too great, and he knew what he could expect if he didn't succeed the first time.

"You gotta be having a laugh," Nils said, clanging up the steps behind him. "Magwitch the Meddler? You really think that old coot's going to help you find Ilesa?"

"I don't think it, I know it," Shadrak said. He frowned down at Nils. "Thought you were a thief."

"Yeah? So?"

"Then keep the shogging noise down."

"Sorry."

When they got to the top, Nils was wittering on about Magwitch owing him money for a sheet of scarolite his dad had smuggled in from Arx Gravis, the ravine city of the dwarves.

"Shut it," Shadrak said. He was confronted with an iron door that looked like it could weather a blast from a hundred kegs of black powder. No doubt that was the point. Last time

Shadrak had come calling, he'd blown the old door to smithereens and taken the mage by surprise.

"I was just saying—"

"Well don't."

Nils puffed his cheeks out and tried to look nonchalant. "What we got here, then? Last time I was here, the door was green-painted wood." Before Shadrak could stop him, he knocked.

The resultant clang resonated like a gong that had been struck in a cathedral cavern. Shadrak covered his ringing ears and kicked Nils in the shin.

"Did I tell you to knock?"

"Eh?" Nils had his fingers in his ears.

Shadrak kicked him again.

The surface of the door rippled. First, an eye the size of a saucer appeared out of the metal, then beneath it, a mouth. The eye blinked rapidly, and in that moment Shadrak slipped to one side, where he hoped it couldn't see. Nils, though, was too slow, and it locked him in its gaze.

"You knocked?"—A convivial voice, male, softly-spoken. Presumably the mouth.

"Uhm..." Nils said.

Shadrak rolled his eyes and signaled to Nils to say something before Magwitch got spooked and made a run for it.

"Magwitch," Nils said.

There was an uncomfortable pause, Shadrak staring at Nils, wishing he could see through the lad's eyes, know what was going on.

"No," the mouth said. "I'm fairly certain you are not."

"Not me, you plonker," Nils said. "Inside. I've come to see him."

“You have?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” the mouth said. “Excellent. And may I enquire as to who you are, Mr. ...?”

“Tell him it’s Nils. Nils Fargin.”

“Mills?”

“Nils.”

“Could you please spell that for me?”

Shadrak tried to get Nils’s attention, but apparently the idiot couldn’t do two things at once.

“N-I-L-S.”

“N for nitwit?” the mouth said.

“Just ‘N’.”

“As in ‘numbskull’?”

Yes, Shadrak signed using the guild’s secret hand gestures. Nils glanced at him, and Shadrak mouthed, “Just shogging say ‘yes’.”

“N’,” Nils said testily. “As in ‘no’.”

“You mean, no it’s not ‘N’? So, it is ‘M’, then?”

Shadrak sighed through gritted teeth.

“N-I-L-S,” Nils repeated.

“Mills,” the mouth said.

And then Shadrak heard a creak from the roof, followed by a thud.

“You stay here,” he whispered to Nils. “I’m going up top. If Magwitch comes out, punch him in the face and hold him down till I get there. You can do that, can’t you? Punch without breaking your dainty little scholar’s hands?”

“Hello?” the mouth said. “Is there somebody with you?”

“What you saying?” Nils whispered back to Shadrak. “Writing ain’t all I use these hands for.”

“Yeah, I heard,” Shadrak said, grabbing hold of a cast-iron drainpipe and shimmying up toward the roof.

“Mills who?” the mouth said.

“Nils!”

The last thing Shadrak heard as the talking receded was the voice saying, “Bear with me one moment. I won’t keep you long.” And then came the sound of soothing music.

MAGWITCH THE MEDDLER

After the Cyclopean Walls, Magwitch's drainpipe was a cinch. At the top, Shadrak rolled lightly to the flat roof.

The mad mage had his back to him, over by the lone chimney, struggling to untie the rope that held his air-raft tethered. The air-raft swayed and bobbed in the breeze coming in from the Sea of Insanity a few score miles to the east of the city. It was little more than a door-sized sheet of scarolite impregnated with witchery and controlled, apparently, by Magwitch's thoughts. Shadrak had ridden it once, when he'd fled New Londdyr after killing the First Senator. Never again.

There were sacks and satchels, boxes and crates piled around the base of the chimney. Clearly Magwitch was going somewhere. No doubt he'd seen Shadrak noticing the wizard eye and put two and two together. Thing was, what did he think he had to fear from Shadrak? It was common knowledge Magwitch was the main supplier of arcane surveillance and security in the city, and the guilds under Shadrak had used him all the time. Maybe something else had spooked him. Maybe something about the ring. Or perhaps he'd booked a vacation, and this was just a coincidence.

Shadrak inched toward the mage in a lizard crawl.

Magwitch was muttering ten to the dozen, irritable, scared out of his wits. He let out an explosive curse and gave up trying to unknit the tether. When he reached into his pocket, Shadrak drew still. With wizards you could never be too careful.

Magwitch's frustration grew as his hand got caught in his pocket, then, with a litany of cussing, he wrenched it free. Dark beads sprayed across the rooftop, the tattered remains of a

paper bag all that remained in the mage's hand. His cursing turned into panicked whimpers as he got down on his hands and knees and started to gather the beads up, shoving them in his pocket, popping the odd one in his mouth and chewing ravenously.

Not beads, then. Chocolate truffles. It was a longstanding addiction.

Shadrak came up into a crouch then sprinted straight at him. Magwitch turned, eyes agape, mouth crammed full of truffles. Before he could react, he was on his back, Shadrak on top of him, the keen edge of a knife covering his throat.

"Grrmph," Magwitch said amid a brown spray, jaw working overtime to clear enough room to speak.

Shadrak hit him in the face with an elbow, a glancing blow to get his attention. Next one would break his glasses, crush his nose. Magwitch went rigid, not even daring to breathe. They'd played this game a hundred times, and he might have been a lunatic, but he was no fool.

"You saw me, didn't you?" Shadrak said. "At the city gates. That eye in the sky, that was you."

Magwitch blinked, chewed once, and returned to staring dumbly back at Shadrak.

"That why you're packed up and ready to go?"

Another chew. Chocolate oozed from the side of Magwitch's mouth, streaking his white beard brown.

"Get up." Shadrak climbed off of the mage and made him stand. "Spit that crap out."

Magwitch gave a hapless shrug, chewed harder, then swallowed with a gulp. He began to choke, thumped his chest, grunted and belched. But it was all a sham, a diversion. At his side, his hand was starting to glow. Before he could waggle his fingers or gesture or whatever it was wizards had to do to cast a spell, Shadrak jumped to get the height and delivered that

second elbow with a crunching impact. Magwitch reeled away, blood gushing from his broken nose, glasses clattering to the rooftop, frames twisted, lenses cracked.

“It was a cleaning spell,” Magwitch whined. “My hands were sticky with chocolate.”

“Course,” Shadrak said. “And mine was an anti-bullshit elbow.”

Magwitch cupped his hands around his bloody nose. “Hitting me like that, it’s unconscious-able.”

And there it was: the first malapropism of the day. Shadrak would have laughed if the stakes weren’t so high, if some scut-shogging Stygian in Portis wasn’t going to suck on his liver for losing the Witch Queen’s ring.

“So, you leaving because Nils Fargin’s knocking at your door?”

Magwitch blinked again. “Nils, yes, that’s right.” His voice came out muffled through his cupped hands. “Says I owe him for that.” He glanced up at the air-raft. “The idea! It’s abstentious. I paid his father what we agreed, and now Fargin junior has decided it wasn’t enough.”

“Bollocks,” Shadrak said, grabbing Magwitch by the coat collar and pulling a dagger, aiming its point at the mage’s crotch. “You telling me you just happened to have all this crap packed and ready to go?”

“Uhm...”

“It was me, wasn’t it? Like I said, you saw me outside the city through that eye in the sky.”

Magwitch lowered his blood-soaked hands from his ruined nose. He was still blinking, but Shadrak realized that was because he couldn’t see clearly without his glasses.

“I take it that’s a yes,” Shadrak said. “Problem is, why would you be afraid of me returning to New Londdyr? What’s it got to do with you? Unless...” He prodded with the dagger, and Magwitch winced.

“She made me do it!” Magwitch blurted out.

“The bitch?”

“What bitch?”

“Ilesa,” Shadrak said. “Ilesa Fana.”

Magwitch gave a miserable nod. No doubt he’d been threatened with what would happen if he gave her secrets away. That was normal, though. Shadrak would have done the same.

“Who else?”

Magwitch shrugged. “What do you mean?”

“You telling me that wizard eye is just for her benefit? Who else you spying for?”

“No one.”

Shadrak pressed the dagger a little harder.

“What’s going on up there?” Nils hollered from below. “Is someone gonna let me in. I’ve had it up to here with this shogging door!”

Shadrak spun Magwitch around and shoved him toward the trapdoor in the roof. The mage put his hands out in front of him, feeling about like a blind man.

“You got spare glasses?”

“Inside,” Magwitch said. “Old design. The lenses are much thicker, but I suppose they’ll do.”

“Put these on for now,” Shadrak said, handing him the goggles.

Magwitch slipped them over his head, cried out as they pressed on his nose. Shadrak showed him how to rotate the lenses to focus them, and the mage’s demeanor went from crestfallen to awed in an instant.

“I say! Now where on Aethir did you get these? This is Ancient tech, is it not? A reliquary or arty-fad of the rarest aquaciousness.”

Shadrak followed the mage down the stepladder into a back room of the house, where the floor was strewn with discarded clothing and junk, shelves ransacked, drawers open and emptied of their contents.

“My, you were in a hurry,” Shadrak said. “I still can’t figure why you’d be running from me. There something you want to tell me?”

Magwitch shook his head.

“Let me put it another way,” Shadrak said, but before he could finish the threat there came a terrific banging and clanging from the front door.

“Get that,” Shadrak said, and followed the mage out of the room and down the hall.

The interior had been altered since Shadrak had last been here; the vestibule housing the door was wider, deeper, one wall set with complex gears and levers that Magwitch pulled in sequence to set the door grinding open. Shadrak had seen something similar on Urddynoor, at the Tower of Glass, the Ancient-world building his original guild, the Sicarii, used for their headquarters. They’d had a steel chamber they used for stashing the guild’s most valuable assets, and it had a door setup just like this. Magwitch had a whole library of Ancient-world books that had somehow survived the Reckoning on Urddynoor and made the journey to Aethir along with the first settlers. Apparently, he’d been putting the knowledge to good use.

As the door inched open outwards, Shadrak could hear the wizard mouth complaining that Nils had kicked it. As soon as the gap was wide enough, Nils squeezed through, nursing a limp.

“Shogging piece of shite,” he said, cocking a thumb over his shoulder. “Is it deaf or just stupid?”

“Admission granted,” Magwitch called to the door.

“Ah,” the voice of the mouth replied, “then allow me to present Mr. Mills Farting—have I got that right, or would you like to spell it for me again?”

MARESMAN

Magwitch took Shadrak and Nils into his library, which was also his laboratory, dining room, and—judging by the stained and frayed mattress shoved under a work bench—bedroom. It stank of sweat and sulfur. Around the walls, floor-to-ceiling book cases were obscured by trestle tables piled with junk: retorts, alembics, crucibles—all of them smeared and stained, blackened with soot. There were melted-down candles, half-eaten cakes, stale wedges of cheese and crusts of bread. The ceiling was plastered with yellowish paper upon which had been drawn symbols and diagrams. There was writing, too, most of it Ancient Urddynoorian.

“What a dump,” Nils said, nose wrinkling in disdain. “No wonder you never used to let me in.”

Shadrak had been here before, but if it was possible, things had actually deteriorated. The same could be said for Magwitch himself, whose dandruff was a perpetual snowfall, and whose skin was raw in places, scaled with flakes in others. It didn't help that the blood from his broken nose smeared the lower half his face.

“A mage and technician needs a lavatory,” Magwitch said. “An incubated envelopment.” He began to rummage through the clutter on the long table that ran down the center of the room—a dining table at one time, judging by the ornate claw-feet and the two padded chairs either side and one at each end. In among some colored glass bottles he located a spare pair of spectacles and handed Shadrak the goggles back.

“Bit blurry,” he said as he gingerly settled the glasses on his nose and blinked through the lenses. “Last year's vision. Out of step, out of kilter. It's quite invertebrating, as if I've salvaged a lost year of life.”

Magwitch took down a jar from a shelf and daubed some kind of poultice on his nose. When he'd finished, it looked like a growth of moss had sprouted in the middle of his face.

"That help?" Nils said.

"Indubiously." Magwitch ran a finger over the furry green mass.

"All right," Shadrak said. "Sit down and start talking."

Magwitch began to pull out the chair at the head of the table then hesitated. "I'm being remorseful of my hospital. Nutrients, anyone? I have cake, Stygian tea..."

"Cake," Nils said.

Shadrak rolled his eyes. Was Fargin really that stupid? Even if it wasn't riddled with weevils and as hard as rock, there was no way he was eating anything Magwitch had to offer. Wizards were as tricky as poisoners: You never knew what ingredients they added, but you did know they were seldom good.

"Stygian?" Shadrak said. "You trying to be funny?"

"Ah, your employist," Magwitch said. "I must say, I wept a little to learn you had fallen so far. Only a man disparate or devolved would treat with a Stygian. But alas, the tea is medicusinal. I've been taking it for years. Keeps the mind astringent, the body in prostititional health."

"I'll just take the cake," Nils said.

Magwitch grabbed a half-eaten muffin from a bookcase and passed it to him. Nils held it between thumb and forefinger, as if it were a soiled arse-rag.

"How'd you know?" Shadrak said. "About the Stygian. You got wizard eyes in Pellor?"

Magwitch scoffed. "Don't be ribalderous. Do you have any idea of the force required for such a feat? Magic may well be the dream stuff of a sleeping god, but it's not free access, you know. I mean, for one thing—"

"Ilesa?"

Magwitch sighed. “She has a phalange in every pie from here to the Perfect Peak. One advantage of being a shifter, I suppose: she can cover a lot of ground; but more than that, she put the Dybbuks back together, her original guild under Master Plaguewind—who was himself a Stygian. Did you know that?”

Shadrak had heard the rumor more times than he cared to remember. But it hadn’t stopped the bullets he’d riddled Plaguewind’s body with, nor the one he’d put through his skull.

The thing about the Dybbuks, why they’d been the toughest of the Night Hawks’ rivals to take down, was that they were rogue sorcerers as much as they were thieves and assassins. Plaguewind had been blindsided by his own lust for power and his willingness to trust just about anyone in his bid to control the guilds, even a triple-crossing scut-bucket like Albert the Poisoner. But with the right leadership, the Dybbuks could have been unstoppable. After the Night of the Guilds, when Shadrak had finally taken control, the Dybbuks who’d survived vanished. Ilesa must have known where to find them.

“So, what, they using magic to spy on the provinces?”

“Pah,” Magwitch said. “If I can’t do a thing, do you seriously think rogue sorcerers can?”

“Thought that’s what you were,” Nils said, staring wide-eyed with horror at the muffin as something wriggled out of it and plopped onto the floor.

“Not eating?” Magwitch said, snatching the muffin back and biting into it. In between chews he said, “I am not a rogue. A maverick, yes, but a rogue, definitively not. Just because the Academy and I have certain dispopopitizations about the rhapsody woven from Ancient tech and Cynocephalus seepage does not make me a rogue. Furthermore, I am a mage not a sorcerer. There is a difference, you know.”

Magwitch chewed on sullenly until he remembered to swallow. Licking his lips, he said, “Ilesa uses her shifting ability and her crew’s sorcery to gain loyalty.”

“Told you she’s good at what she does,” Nils said.

“Any twat could do what she’s done with the help of magic,” Shadrak said.

“Maybe it ain’t just magic,” Nils said. “I tell you, she’s got brains.”

“That what you call them?” Shadrak said. “Please don’t tell me you’ve got the hots for the bitch.”

The flush of Nils’s cheeks gave that one away. “Shog off,” he said. “What, you think I’m desperate?”

“Thought never even occurred to me.” Turning to Magwitch, Shadrak said, “Now, let me get this straight: your wizard eye is feeding information to Ilesa, who has the run of the unified guilds, right?”

Magwitch took another bite of muffin and nodded.

“And?”

“A mage needs multiple streams of residue, you know. Components don’t come cheap, and then there’s food and, uh, food.”

“Who else? The Senate?”

“No,” Nils said. “You really think he’s stupid enough to work for both the guilds and the Senate?”

“He used to,” Shadrak said. “Mind you, back then the guilds had an agreement with the politicians.”

“Till you killed the First Senator,” Magwitch said. “See, it isn’t my fault. I’m just maintaining an old tradition.”

“All right,” Shadrak said. “So, Ilesa knew I was going after Jankson Brau’s ring, but why’d she not send someone after it herself?” He looked at Nils.

“Not me,” Nils said. “I was sent by the Academy. Master Arcagen.”

Shadrak held his gaze for a long while, until he was sure the cretin wasn't lying. You could always tell with a Fargin, by the quiver of the chin, the damp patch blooming over the crotch. He was just about to look away, when the realization hit him.

"No, no, no," Shadrak said. He wasn't thinking straight. It made no sense Ilesa knowing he was going after the ring and then doing nothing to stop him. He'd never planned on coming to New Londdyr. If Nils hadn't stolen the ring from him, he'd have been back in Pellor, picking up a tidy sack of gold. Arcagen knew about the ring, and likely he knew by magical detection, because Jankson Brau had started trying to use it. But if Ilesa had eyes and ears at the Academy, like Nil suggested, it made sense she knew what Arcagen was after, and who he had sent. She obviously had no doubt Nils would be returning to his master once the job was done, and so she just sat back and waited till the eye alerted her. Thing was, had she got everything she wanted? Now that she knew Shadrak was back, would she come after him? The bitch had vowed to kill him, after what he'd done to Master Plaguewind.

Magwitch surreptitiously peeked at something up his coat sleeve. Shadrak didn't miss it.

"What's that?"

"Hmm?"

"What did you just look at?"

"What, this?" Magwitch pulled back his sleeve to reveal a leather bracelet with some kind of oval gem set into it. "Just jewelry. An affectation."

Nils rubbed at his forearm, saw Shadrak noticing, and dropped his hand.

"You're into jewelry now?" Shadrak said. He grabbed Magwitch's wrist, took a closer look. The oval was a glass cover, beneath which was a circle of white with numbers around its diameter. There were two slender pointers attached to a central hub, one shorter than the other." He raised an eyebrow at the mage. "Think carefully before your next words, Magwitch. What the shog is this thing? Magic?"

Magwitch's eyes focused inward, as if he were hedging his bets. Finally, he said, "It's a time piece. Ancient tech."

A thump sounded from the rooftop.

Nils jumped. Still no wet patch on the front of his britches. "What was that?"

Shadrak already had a flintlock in hand as he backed toward the entrance hall. "Who are you expecting?"

"It wasn't me," Magwitch whined. "I'm just the provider. It's not up to me how they use the information."

"Who?" Shadrak said. "The Senate?" Last time they'd come for him, they'd sent psychers, creatures that locked on to your mind and never let go.

"I don't think so," Magwitch said. He rummaged through the junk on a trestle table till he found what he was looking for: a sphere of glass or crystal. "I furnished them each with one of these, a viewing crystal linked to the eye. There's a delay before they see what mine sees." He indicated a larger crystal sphere sticking up out of a pile of papers and scraps of food on the adjacent bench.

"So, you control the information?" Nils said.

"Mostly I just determine who sees it first. It's all on account of how much they're willing to pay. The Senate's orb has the biggest delay—necessary fiscal cuts, so they'd have you believe. Ilesa's is next. She thinks threats make up the shortfall."

Another thud on the rooftop, followed by another. Footfalls. Extremely heavy.

"Who else?" Shadrak said, changing his mind about the front door and scanning the room for exits. He should have done that when he entered; that's what he'd always done, an ingrained habit that had served him well. Change and you die, he'd always said. Well, for whatever reason—age or complacency or Kadee—he'd changed. The only thing was, it was a mystery how much, and how much it would cost him.

“There’s just the trap on the roof and the front door,” Magwitch said. “Any more modes of entrance and egrets and it would be hard to contain... certain things.” He glanced about, and Shadrak followed his gaze, expecting to see shadowy forms lurking in the corners, but there was nothing.

“It can’t be Ilesa,” Nils said. “She’s got the ring already.”

“If she knows I’m here,” Shadrak said, “she might send someone, maybe even come herself.”

“Maresmen,” Magwitch said.

“What?” The hunters of husks, the creatures of nightmare that crossed over the Farfall Mountains. “But they work for the Senate,” Shadrak said. “And besides, they’re based in Malfen.” He should know. He’d run afoul of them when he was trafficking husks across the border from Qlippoth.

“Yes and no,” Magwitch said.

Another thud on the roof, then silence. Magwitch waited a moment, then proceeded in a whisper.

“There’s a secret faction of Maresmen here in the city, answerable only to the Senate, but not entirely honest with them. Ostentatiously, their remit is to apprehend rogue Maresmen, like the one who’s shackled up with Ilesa.”

“Ilesa?”

“No time,” Magwitch said, glancing at his wrist again. “When they asked me for access to the eye a few years back, there was no mention of using it to spy on their own. They still have links to the Order in Malfen. They were looking for someone specific.”

“The trafficking,” Shadrak said. “They still haven’t forgotten.” And not only that, he’d killed more than a few Maresmen in the process of getting away.

Something dark and wispy began to seep through the ceiling.

“Oh, this is bad,” Magwitch said. “They obviously don’t like you.”

The problem with Maresmen was that you never knew what you were getting. They were half-husk, half-human, hybrids of nightmare and flesh. It’s what made them so effective at hunting the demons that came over from Qlippoth. It’s what made them such dangerous foes, each one different, each with their own unique gifts and powers.

The wisps started to form into two booted feet. Above them, gaseous legs emerged into the room.

“The Ghost!” Magwitch said. “No blade can harm him, nor even your guns.”

Magwitch pulled open a cupboard under one of his work benches and climbed inside. “Flee!” he whispered. “The sequence to open the front door—”

“I know,” Shadrak said, already sprinting for the hallway. He’d seen Magwitch pull the levers, and that was all he needed. The *somnificus* clearly hadn’t damaged his perfect memory as much as he’d feared, which was all the excuse he needed not to quit smoking it.

He raced through the sequence, even as thundering footfalls came from the laboratory. “Ready,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at Nils as he pulled the last lever and the door inched open.

A dark shape loomed behind the lad: long coat, tall hat, features swirling in and out of reality. Eyes of piercing amber roved from Nils to Shadrak, locked on.

Nils touched his forearm again... and vanished into thin air.

The Maresman charged—

And Shadrak squeezed through the widening gap in the door then vaulted over the stair railing, cloak splaying out behind him, flapping and snapping in the wind. He rolled as he hit the ground, came up running, and never looked back.

THE INFORMANT

The Ghost swirled rather than walked up the alleyway. He was fast for a big man, and heavy-footed for someone who could walk through walls. And that's exactly what he did: vanish through the side of a building, only to emerge seconds later a dozen yards farther along.

Shadrak watched him from behind a chimney stack atop a precariously tilting turret, glad his survival instinct remained so strong, despite the rest of him going soft at the edges. And he could still run like the clappers, not to mention shimmy up drainpipes even easier than he'd done in his youth. It wasn't just fear that lent him speed and strength, it was years of disciplined training, a lifetime of practice. Muscle, it seemed, had a perfect memory all of its own.

For all his spooky ability to be both solid and not, the Ghost conducted his hunt like a blind dog with no sense of smell. Not once had he looked to the rooftops. The only shame was, Magwitch had said the Ghost was invulnerable to weapons, presumably because they would pass through him the same as he passed through walls. Even from so high up, Shadrak had no doubt he could have hit the scut with a flintlock. Time and again, the Ancient-tech guns had surpassed his expectations, both in range and power. Pity was, one was out of bullets, and the other wasn't far behind. The thought of one day discarding them as useless brought a sour taste to his mouth. Maybe he'd find more ammunition somewhere, or maybe he'd look up a collector and sell them. At least that might tide him over for a month or so, should he fail to salvage the Witch Queen's ring and collect his pay.

The Ghost made his way to where the alley met the street, looked both left and right, then sank through the cobblestones as if they were water.

Shadrak gritted his teeth and tried not to think about it—about a dangerous enemy stalking him through the sewers that ran beneath the city. One thing he'd learned over the years was not to waste time and energy worrying about things he couldn't control. If the Ghost were suddenly to pounce out of nowhere, he had to trust his reflexes. But that didn't mean he couldn't rack his brains for ways to kill an opponent who was impervious to physical attack.

First things first, though: he had to find the ring, and that meant finding Ilesa. Magwitch might have been able to tell him where the Dybbuks had their headquarters, but Shadrak was starting to suspect the mage's house was magically rigged to alert the Maresmen and shog knows who else. And besides, Magwitch always said all the right things when confronted, but he was a shifty opportunist every bit as much as Nils Fargin.

And speaking of Fargin, Shadrak suspected the lad had some kind of device—a bracelet most likely—that enabled him to turn invisible. And just like you'd expect from a Fargin, he'd made good use of it when the Ghost appeared. Like they always said, no honor among thieves. It didn't matter that Nils said he'd turned his life around by joining the Academy. Deep down, people didn't really change. It was in the blood, the true measure of your character, and Nils had inherited his from the scuttiest most cowardly toe-rag of them all, his father, Buck.

Still, Nils wouldn't go far. It ran contrary to the law of self-preservation for him to return to the Academy empty-handed. Master Arcagen would turn him into a toad. Not that it would make much difference. No, Nils would show up when he sensed an opportunity. He was still in the game, only now his usefulness to Shadrak was even less apparent. Chances were, Nils was still hoping to get his hands on the ring. If he had balls, he'd be going after Ilesa, but the sad fact of the matter was, a eunuch had bigger fruits than Nils Fargin. You had to be realistic about these things. Nils would leave the hard work to Shadrak then try to slink

off with the prize when no one was looking. Only, it would be different this time. A stab in the eye and a gash across the throat different.

Shadrak gave it a few minutes, just in case the Ghost re-emerged, then climbed down to street level and headed for the nearest tavern. Not to drink. He seldom did that. And it wasn't his stomach he was thinking of either. Now he was in the thick of things, he probably wouldn't eat again till it was all over, at least not till nightfall. There were some less than salubrious taverns in the city that were little more than information exchanges, or places you could go to hire a cutthroat who'd fallen foul of the guilds. Some lowlife scumbag was bound to have a grudge against the new queen of the underworld, maybe even someone Shadrak knew from his days as king. If not, he'd twist a few arms, threaten and intimidate till he had the location of Ilesa's base. What else could he do? With an empty purse, he could hardly resort to bribery.

The first two taverns he tried were dead-ends, both in terms of the moral lives of the punters he found there, lost in their cups or squabbling over whose round it was, and in terms of the information he sought. By the time he reached the third, the streets were starting to fill up with traders and workers, early-bird sells-loves desperate for customers, and kids on their way to the district schoolhouse. He spotted a patrol of legionaries decked out in their bronze galeas and leather kilts, stopping passersby and questioning them. This wasn't just the regular City Watch; their scarlet cloaks marked them out as veterans of the Senatorial Cohort: troubleshooters, riot control, rooters out of sedition.

They'd got the news, finally, Shadrak assumed, as he slipped into the shelter of the tavern's porch. The Senate had received its magical communication from Magwitch's wizard eye. They knew he was back in town, and they'd no doubt already shut down the city tighter than a banker's rectum.

Either that, or he was a paranoid twat, jumping at his own shadow. But he'd learnt from bitter experience it was always better to trust his instincts. He'd rather act like a tosser than be taken into custody. The Senate didn't take kindly to one of their own being murdered, even a man with as many political enemies as Vatès. In a case like Shadrak's, they'd throw away the rule book before they threw away the key.

It didn't take a genius to realize a midget in a cloak would stand out from the crowd. He could tell from the animated gestures of a laborer the soldiers were questioning that he'd already been recognized. When the soldier enquiring pointed down the road the way Shadrak had come, and the man nodded, it was time to leave.

Shadrak slipped through the tavern's swing doors. Instantly, he was in another world, one filled with weedstick smoke, the stench of sweat and stale beer. It was heaving inside, yet no one was there for breakfast by the looks of it. It was mostly men—hard men, drinking men, the kind he was looking for—but on a stool by the bar he caught sight of a woman sipping at a steaming mug of kaffa. If not for the size of her breasts, he'd have taken her for a child, she was so small. She glanced up from her drink, as if she sensed him looking. Pale of face. Lips moist from the kaffa, parted slightly, a flash of white teeth. But it was her eyes that were most arresting. They were pink, same as his were. An albino and a homunculus? Because that's what it looked like to him. And if the former, she was an outcast, lucky to be alive, lucky to have survived the loathing of her people for being anything less than perfect.

He started toward her, but she looked away, raising her drink to her lips. A group of men filled the space between, ribbing one another, laughing at their own jokes, jeering and toasting. Shadrak was already backing toward the entrance. It was all a bit too staged.

A heavy hand clamped down on his shoulder. He spun round, fingers clutching the hilt of a punch dagger.

“Bolos?”

A broad face grinned down at him. A face more scar than skin. One-eyed, with a nose that had been broken any number of times. He'd changed a lot in the years since Shadrak had last seen him, but it was definitely Bolos Rancy, the nastiest, most brutal, conniving, murdering, rapist scumbag this side of Malfen. And a very useful man to know, if you needed a job done outside of the guilds, and if you had the small fortune necessary to pay him.

"Nice patch," Shadrak said, relaxing his grip on the dagger, but reminding himself of the thundershot tucked into the back of his belt. It was a silver eye-patch, somehow stuck to his flesh and looking very much as if it had grown there, like a scab.

"Magwitch done it," Bolos said. "Told him you sent me, that you'd be back if he didn't fix my eye right. Scutting bounty hunter skewered it." He tapped the patch. "Said he was hired by the Senate, but I reckon it was the guilds. Never did like me pissing on their territory, save for you."

"A bounty hunter told you that? That he was working for the Senate?"

"Took some persuasion to loosen his tongue," Bolos said with a brown-toothed grin. "Between you and me, I don't think he'll ever work again. Know what I mean? Likely won't have babies, neither. So, me ol' mate, who else knows you're in town?"

He might just as well have asked who didn't know; who would pay for the information.

Shadrak cast a nervous look toward the swing doors. "There somewhere we can talk?"

"Got me a nice little snug over by the fire." Bolos nodded across the room. "Like to think of it as my office."

He led the way through the punters to a partitioned alcove on one side of the hearth. It even had a door, which Bolos pulled shut as he gestured for Shadrak to take one of the two chairs at a pedestal table. Dirty light spilled down from a grime-covered clerestory window. The air within was musty, pungent with old weedstick smoke. There were little piles of burnt

tobacco one side of the table—the side Bolos moved to and sat down at—where someone had tapped out a pipe and not bothered to clean up after.

Bolos pulled a clay pipe from the pocket of his patched leather jerkin and stuffed it with some rum-smelling shag, tamped it down and lit it with a match, which was a rare commodity, another remnant of the Ancients' civilization on Urddynoor that had made the trip with the first settlers. Looked to be a new box, as well. Too new. Someone in New Londdyr must have worked out the secret of making matches and started producing a line of their own.

“You seen the posters around town?” Bolos said, striking a second match and running it around the bowl as he drew on the stem three times. He shook the match out and flicked it to the floor. “Been there since you left. Doubt anyone notices them now, but...”

He didn't need to say the reward was probably still good.

“I've seen them.”

“All I mean is, you want to be careful, Shadrak. Now your image is out there, you ain't exactly hard to spot. You and me, we're old friends, but I bet there's a ton of scumbags who don't feel the same way I do.”

“Thanks for the warning.” It was more of a threat.

“Those Ancient-tech weapons still good?” Bolos jabbed the stem of his pipe toward the flintlocks. He didn't waste any time. He'd named his price.

Shadrak set the empty pistol on the table. “This one's yours.” There was no need to say more. They both knew what was being negotiated.

Bolos pulled it across the table, turned it over, inspected the gold filigree. He jammed his pipe in the corner of his mouth and lifted the flintlock, shook it, fiddled with the butt till he got the cartridge free. He raised an eyebrow.

“No bullets.”

“But still worth a fortune to any collector.”

Bolos shrugged. That seemed to satisfy him. He shoved the gun into his jacket pocket.

“The other’s yours, too,” Shadrak said. “If you can help me out with a bit of information.”

“If?” Bolos puffed out a cloud of smoke, coughed, and pulled his pipe from his mouth, using it to make elaborate gestures. “Ask, and I’ll tell.”

“Assuming it’s in your best interests,” Shadrak added.

Bolos didn’t look offended, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t. “So, what do you want to know?”

“Ilesa Fana.”

Bolos stiffened, glanced at the door, then leaned across the table. “What about her?”

“Where’s her headquarters?”

Bolos sat back in his chair, closed his eyes, and took a couple of long draws on his pipe. When he opened his eyes, he said, “That other weapon... it has bullets?”

“A few.”

Bolos nodded slowly. “The right craftsman could reproduce them, no?”

“I imagine.” If he’d had the money, Shadrak would have explored that avenue himself.

Bolos snapped his fingers, made a “give it me” gesture with his hand.

Shadrak passed him the second flintlock. Bolos sighted it across the table, took aim at Shadrak’s face. But he hadn’t cocked it. There was no need reaching for the thundershot.

After a long pause, Bolos twirled the flintlock on his finger and pocketed it. “The Dominion,” he said.

“The theater? The one Dame Consilia used to perform at?”

“The same. Now there was a trollop I’d have loved to have bent over and shogged in the—”

“Thanks,” Shadrak said.

“We done?”

“We’re done. As usual, Bolos, you’ve been more than helpful.”

Bolos chewed on the stem of his pipe, thinking something over. “Well, that’s good, then.”

Shadrak stood and opened the door.

“We all right, Shadrak?” There was no warmth in Bolos’s voice.

Shadrak met his eyes, careful not to blink, not to betray the slightest hesitation. “Yeah, we’re good.”

He slipped out into the tavern, but before he could shut the door, someone caught hold of it and held it open, and three thugs slipped inside. Not waiting to see what was going on, Shadrak wormed his way through the crowd. Before he reached the swing doors, someone screamed. Bolos? A second scream followed, then a gurgling cry of “Shadrak!”

And then he was out in the street, looking both ways and seeing no sign of the patrol. He ran over his mental map of the city till he was sure which way to go, and was about to set off for The Dominion when the homunculus woman appeared at his side. There was no way she could have snuck up on him. No way, unless he really was losing it.

“You trust the word of Bolos Rancy?” she said in a lilting voice that hinted at mischief and maybe something else.

Shadrak’s heart started trying to kick its way out of his ribcage. He found he couldn’t meet her gaze.

“There something you want to tell me?”

“Lots,” she said, stepping close, brushing her cheek against his. “If you are willing to listen.”

A commotion started from inside the tavern—tables being turned, angry protests, the ringing scrape of swords being drawn.

“Bolos is dead,” she said. “We should leave.”

LUCKY DAY.

“This is it,” the homunculus woman said, leading Shadrak through the side door of a warehouse.

The ground floor was stacked with crates, many of them marked with guild symbols now obsolete since the Night of the Guilds. Some were labeled in Ancient Urddynoorian.

She took him along a narrow channel between the crates and up a ladder to the second floor, where there was a writing desk, a pallet bed with satin sheets, and an oil lamp on a shoddy-looking nightstand.

“You live here?”

She smirked and pulled out the chair from the writing desk for him to sit on. Shadrak remained standing. The woman shrugged and seated herself on the edge of the bed.

“Thought a guildsman of your experience would know better than to deal with Bolos, Shadrak.”

“Did I tell you my name?”

“No need,” she said, lying back on the bed and plumping up the pillows.

There was nothing alluring about the way she was dressed: leather jacket fastened to the neck, matching britches, well-worn boots; but all the same, heat bloomed in Shadrak’s groin. It was a feeling he wasn’t familiar with; he’d never had much use for it. He turned away from her, made a pretense of studying the grain of the wooden walls, because there wasn’t much else to look at.

“Do I make you uncomfortable?” she asked.

He heard her shift on the bed. When he looked round, she was on her belly, arching her back so she could watch him. He was captivated by her pink eyes, pale skin, hair as white as snow. Still, something pricked at his awareness, filled him with suspicion.

“How’d you know Bolos was dead?”

Her focus withdrew inwards, as if she hadn’t been ready for the question. Finally, she cocked her head, saying, “Wizard ear. That’s what I meant about you not dealing with him. Bolos was an amateur. We let him go on believing his ‘snug’ by the hearth was private. Made him feel important, meeting with clients there.”

“We?” Shadrak asked. Out of habit, his fingers dropped to one of the knives in his baldric.

The homunculus noticed, gave a little shrug. “The Dybbuks,” she said.

Shadrak was across the room in an instant, pulling the knife clear.

“Former,” the woman said, scrambling to a kneeling position and raising her hands. “I used to be a Dybbuk.” She gave a conspiratorial wink. “But not anymore.”

“So how’d you know about the wizard ear?”

She grinned and reached into her jacket pocket. Shadrak lunged, caught her by the wrist, pressed the knife to her throat.

That got her attention. She swallowed thickly. Fear—or anger—flashed in her eyes, turned them the hue of blood.

“I was just going to show you...” she said.

Shadrak nodded and stepped back.

“It was me that planted the wizard ear.” She withdrew a seashell from her pocket, held it to her ear. Her head bobbed while she listened, then she tossed the shell to Shadrak. “They’re still cleaning up,” she said. “Lots of blood, apparently.”

Tentatively, Shadrak pressed the shell to his ear, and sure enough the background hubbub of the tavern filled his skull, along with a woman bitching and moaning about getting all the shit jobs. He wondered where the homunculus had acquired the ear. Magwitch seemed the most likely candidate, unless it was some witchery she'd brought with her from Gehenna.

He passed the shell back, and the woman pocketed it.

"I take it there are more of these shells?"

"Ilesa Fana has one, and there are three others among the Dybbuks."

Shadrak nodded slowly. So, they'd been listening in on everything he and Bolos had talked about. They knew he was coming after Ilesa, that he'd been told the location of her base.

"Name?" he demanded.

Again, a slight hesitation, before she answered, "Talitha."

"That a homunculus name?"

She nodded.

"From Gehenna?"

Another nod.

"So, what's it like, Gehenna?"

She frowned. "Don't you remember?"

"Oh, I remember." He was lying, testing her. Truth was, he'd been taken from Gehenna as a baby, saved from being culled due to his sickly skin and pink eyes. He'd been back once, but that was on a quest, fleeting and filled with horror. He'd been too busy staying alive to pay much attention to his surroundings. "Thing is, do you?"

"I recall the darkness," she said, looking down, as if she could see the underworld of the homunculi through the bed. "Shifting walls, bridges of scarolite over bottomless chasms. Cities of lights in the depths, our people riding on silver disks that floated through the air."

Shadrak waved her quiet. “When were you last there?”

“Long time ago,” she said, looking up at him, wiping a moist eye. “Long time.”

“Hmm,” Shadrak said. He was inclined to believe her. She’d described far more of Gehenna than he’d seen for himself, so he had no way of knowing for sure. “What I’d like to know is how a homunculus got mixed up with the Dybbuks, and what your interest is in me.”

“The first is easy,” she said, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed and sweeping her hair out of her face. “The Dybbuks are sorcerers as much as they are thieves and assassins. They heard about me and came looking, with the offer of a job and bucket-loads of money.”

“And that swayed you, did it? Money?” Homunculi were many things, but they weren’t known for their avarice. Trickery, maybe. Betrayal. After all, they were begotten of the very stuff of deception.

“I had my reasons for accepting.”

“And when you got what you wanted, you left, or they kicked you out?”

“You know how we are, Shadrak, how we can’t help ourselves.”

Shadrak didn’t exactly. He knew it was in their nature to play tricks, but maybe his upbringing by Kadee had made him different. Or maybe it hadn’t. He’d used disguise and misdirection most of his life. He’d always assumed it was part of the trade, what every assassin did. From what he’d seen, he was right, but being a homunculus might explain why he was so good at it.

“So, you screwed the Dybbuks over, one way or another.”

She smiled and raised her eyebrows.

“What else?”

“What else did I want to tell you? Like I said outside the tavern, lots of things. That is, if you can spare the time.”

“I can’t. Five minutes, no more.”

Talitha let out a long, mournful sigh. “Fine. I had hoped to find common ground: two homunculi, both outcasts, both albinos, both enemies of Ilesa and the Dybbuks.”

“And you just happened to hear I was back in town.”

“Not just me. Everyone. It’s the talk of the taverns. Ilesa’s paying for any snippets of information about you.”

“That makes no sense. Why not just have them kill me? That’s what she wants, isn’t it? Revenge for the guild war, for what I did to Master Plaguewind.”

Talitha’s cheek twitched. She looked down at the bed, chewed her bottom lip. “When I was with the Dybbuks, she went on about it all the time. At some point every day she’d fly into a rage about you, vow to track you down and kill you. She wanted to do it herself, but you’re a difficult man to find.”

“Until I came back to the city.”

She half-laughed, half-grunted.

Shadrak edged closer to the bed, leaned in to her. “How’d you fall out with the Dybbuks? What did you do?”

“Me? Don’t you mean what did they do?”

“Something happened,” Shadrak said, though the chances of hearing the truth from a homunculus were slim to none.

“Does it matter?” She reached up and stroked his face.

Shadrak tried to pull away, but she stood and pressed up close to him. When he raised the dagger without any conviction, she pried his fingers from the handle, letting it clatter to the floor.

“Forgive me,” she breathed, turning her back to him. “It’s been so long since I saw one of our kind. Don’t you ever wonder why our father made us incapable of reproducing, yet with the same organs the humans mate with, and an insatiable desire to use them.”

“Never thought about it.” Any passion he might have felt in the past had swiftly been choked by rejection. But now, with Talitha so close, so desperately willing...

“What purpose could there be in such feelings?” Talitha said, starting to unbutton her leather jacket. “Maybe our father intended for us to wreak mischief among the surface dwellers, like the incubi and succubi of Qlippoth do. Or maybe he just wanted us to suffer with the need to scratch an itch. Or maybe he does care for us, after all, and gifted us these desires so we might find pleasure.”

She dropped her hand to his crotch, rubbed him through his britches.

Shadrak’s instinct was to get out of there before things went too far, before he lost control. This wasn’t right. It wasn’t natural. Women didn’t throw themselves at him, but more than that, homunculi didn’t roam about above ground openly. The ones he’d met were always in disguise. And what were the chances of another albino surviving the culls back in Gehenna? His own rescue had been a freak occurrence, a one off deed by that rarest of rare things: a homunculus with a conscience.

But when Talitha broke away and threw herself face-down on the bed and started to sob, he was frozen in place, pulled one way by his good sense, tugged another by... by what? Pity? That didn’t seem likely, unless Kadee was infecting him more than he’d realized. A feeling of sameness, a bond with a female of his kind? Or was it just the desire she had spoken about, ingrained, or rather implanted by the Demiurgos?

“Talitha...”

Her sobbing intensified to the point he knew she wasn’t faking it. He came round the side of the bed, perched on the edge, reached out to grip her shoulder.

She turned and pushed herself up on her knees, cheeks streaked with tears, red veins radiating out from her pink irises. She looked him in the face, lost, abandoned, miserable. With a suddenness that should have shocked him, she threw her arms around him. Her hair

gave off a cloying scent that only inflamed him further. He moved his lips to her neck, began to suck and bite. She responded with a moan, raised her head, kissed him fiercely as she shrugged out of her jacket.

The rattle of the ladder they'd come up stopped them both dead. Shadrak craned his neck for a look, but there was nothing. When Talitha started to say something, he waved her quiet. Nothing. Nothing save her panting breaths, the pounding of his heart.

"Rats," she said. "I think there might be food in one of the crates—salted jerky or the like."

"You think?"

"I lose track."

She grabbed him by the baldrics and pulled him down beside her on the bed, placed his hand on one of her pert white breasts. She worked at his belt, got it undone, unlaced the front of his britches. Her fingers enclosing him were soft and cool. A moan escaped his lips.

"Too many clothes." She rolled him away so they could get naked. "I'm impressed," she said, ogling his chiseled chest and stomach. Her eyes dropped to his crotch. "More than impressed."

And he was too. He drank in her naked beauty from top to toe, then realized she still had her boots on.

That was it. Too much for Shadrak. He pushed her down on the bed and got on top of her, but she swept him to his back and mounted him instead. He closed his eyes and gasped as she lowered herself onto him, then gasped again when he felt her weight atop him massively increase, and the touch of cold steel at his throat. He snapped his eyes open and blinked with shock. No longer a homunculus. A human, full grown. Raven hair halfway down her back, and the most unnerving cat's eyes of green.

"Ilesa!"

RENEGADE

“Didn’t see that coming, did y—”

Before Ilesa could get the words out, a cracking thud rocked her head to one side and sent her toppling off of Shadrak. She fell face down on the bed, drawl trickling from her mouth, a vicious lump already forming on her temple.

“Shog!” Shadrak said, rolling off the bed the other way and struggling to get his britches on.

“Yeah, well I bet *you* didn’t see *that* coming,” Nils Fargin said, appearing out of thin air, brandishing a length of wood, which he then tossed aside.

“Fargin!” Shadrak said, fastening his belt. “What the shog are you doing?”

“Saving your neck, that’s what,” Nils said. His face bloomed red. “More to the point, what did you think you were doing shogging a shifter?”

“Mmmpf,” Ilesa moaned into the sheets.

“I didn’t know it was her,” Shadrak said. He snatched up his shirt and pulled it over his head. “I thought...” He stopped himself. Had he really been so dumb? A female homunculus? An albino just like him? Practically begging for it? Right. Because that happened all the time. He put on his baldrics, tugged on his boots, and fastened his cloak around his neck.

“One word out of you, Fargin, and you’re dead.”

“Oh, that’s nice! If it weren’t for—”

Ilesa rolled onto the floor the other side of the bed. Shadrak pushed roughly past Nils and pulled the thundershot from the back of his belt. He caught a glimpse of a black boot sticking out from the end of the bed, but even as he cocked the pistol and came round the side, it shimmered and started to change.

Shadrak leapt on top of Ilesa and shoved the barrel of the thundershot into her... maw. She was scaled head to foot. A sinuous tail whiplashed up and knocked the gun from his hand. He punched her in the face, winced as he cut his knuckles on a fang.

“Nils, the tail!” he yelled. He caught her with a sharp elbow to the snout, eliciting a grunt.

She tried to sweep him, even as Nils grabbed hold of the tail. Shadrak forced her head down with his shoulder. Nils cried out, then went corkscrewing into the air with the tail wrapped around his waist. Shadrak slipped a razor star from his baldric, slashed it across the scales just beneath Ilesa’s eye. That got her attention, and she ceased struggling. Nils hit the floor like a sack of potatoes.

“Now, bitch,” Shadrak said, leaning down on her, holding the tip of the razor star a hair’s breadth from her eye, “where’s my shogging ring?”

“I don’t have it,” Ilesa said.

He cut her again, this time on the cheek.

“One of my sorcerers has it. Says she should be able to work out what it is.”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“I know what it’s worth to those scuts at the Academy.”

“Then you’ll know what they’ll do to you when they find out you stole it from me,” Nils said.

“Shog you, Fargin, you sad little wanker. Still having wet dreams about me, are you?”

“Shut up.”

“Did he tell you that?” she said to Shadrak, “how he thinks of me when he’s—”

Shadrak cut her again, on the forehead this time, just because he could.

“So, that’s what the flushed face was about,” he said to Nils. “Nothing to be ashamed of. Or were you just jealous?”

Blood welled in each of Ilesa's cuts, started to paint her face red. "So, what now? It's your move, midget."

"A sorcerer of yours, you say? What's his name?"

"Her. Bekra. Bekra Cy."

"Never heard of her."

"She's new," Ilesa said. "Been with us a few months, but she's good. Really knows her magic."

"And this..." Shadrak nodded at the bed. "Your way of getting my guard down? Too scared to face me in a fair fight?"

"Like you did with Plaguewind?" Ilesa's voice cracked as she said her former master's name.

"I knew it," Shadrak said to Nils. "The bitch wants revenge." He touched the razor star to her throat. "Then you leave me no—"

A crash sounded from the other side of the room. Shadrak jumped up, slamming a foot into Ilesa's throat to hold her down. Under his weight, she shimmered and changed back into her human form, fully clothed in leather boots and britches and a black satin blouse. Oddly, the discarded clothes the homunculus woman had been wearing had all disappeared.

A panel on the far wall had slammed open—a concealed door—and in the space it left stood a man, aiming a gun at Shadrak. A hefty gun, much like the flintlocks, only bigger, and a lot nastier looking. He wore a broad-brimmed hat and a long black coat, and his face was covered with a piebald mask, patches of black on white. What could be seen of his eyes were yellow and veined with red. Flies surrounded him in a cloud, and the stench of rot rolled off him into the room.

All Shadrak needed: another scutting Maresman.

“Sorry to interrupt your fun,” the Maresman drawled. His diseased eyes flicked from Shadrak to Ilesa to Nils. “Ooh, a threesome. Honey, you remind me of my of mother more and more each day.”

“What is it, Jeb?” Ilesa said, climbing to her feet and dabbing at the blood beneath her eye. It was a superficial cut, but it would scar her for life. “Couldn’t you get off just watching? Had to come and join in? Well, I’ve got news for you, pus boy.”

Jeb made a wanking motion with the hand not holding the gun. “Oh, my eyes were popping out of my head: couple of pale-skinned midgets going at it...” He shot Shadrak a nod of respect. “For a little guy, you sure have a—”

“So?” Ilesa said. “Why’d you burst in. I can handle these twats.”

“Yeah, right,” Nils said.

“Trouble,” Jeb said. “Heading our way.”

“Militia?”

“There’s a Maresman outside. Big scut, too.”

“They’re not still after you?”

Jeb shrugged. “It’s been a while. I kinda thought they’d given up.”

“Maresmen hunting Maresmen?” Nils said. He glanced at Shadrak.

“You’d be surprised.” Jeb shot a knowing look at Ilesa.

“Yeah, well this one’s after me,” Shadrak said.

“Oh? And why’s—”

Before Jeb could say more, a black hat rose up through the center of the bed, followed by a head and body.

“Go!” Jeb shouted, gun bucking in his hand and a deafening boom filling the room. The bullet passed straight through the emerging Ghost and put a hole in the wall opposite.

Ilesa vanished. Where she'd been standing, a hornet took to the air and shot out the way Jeb had come in.

Nils touched his wrist, and he was gone, too.

The Ghost came all the way up through the bed till he stood on it.

"Bollocks," Shadrak said. The Ghost blocked all the exits. For all the good it it would do, he flung his razor star. It skimmed straight through the Ghost and only missed Jeb because he swayed out of the way so fast Shadrak almost didn't see him move.

"Shadrak the Unseen," the Ghost said, a cold smile breaking out on his pallid face. "You are charged with smuggling husks across the border from Qlippoth."

"That was a long time ago," Shadrak said, backing toward where the thundershot had fallen, even though he knew it would do no good.

"Don't waste your breath," Jeb said. "Crime's a crime, no matter when it was committed, and yours is about as bad as it gets as far as the Maresmen are concerned."

The Ghost turned to face Jeb. "And Jebediah Skayne, renegade Maresman. You know the penalty for failing to do your duty."

"She was my mother," Jeb said. "Did you really think I could kill her?"

"A husk is a husk," the Ghost said. "It's no different for the rest of us."

"And a scut's a scut," Shadrak said, diving for the thundershot and coming up blasting.

The boom startled the Ghost, giving Shadrak the distraction he was looking for. He tumbled past the end of the bed and kept rolling till he reached the ladder.

Last thing he saw was the Ghost leaping toward him, Jebediah Skayne stepping in the way, fumes the color of bruises spilling from the mouthpiece of his mask and stinking like the Abyss.

Shadrak leapt from the top of the ladder, cloak splaying out behind him, and rolled as he landed. He came up in a crouch, cursing the jolt of pain in his knee. A couple of years ago, he wouldn't have felt a thing.

Up above, a roiling brume of filthy muck obscured Jeb and the Ghost from view. Just looking at the smog made Shadrak want to puke, and the thought of it touching him set his skin crawling.

Without waiting to see the result of whatever sick battle was taking place between the Maresmen, Shadrak raced past the stacked crates in the warehouse and back out onto the street.

And there, leaning against the wall outside was Nils shogging Fargin.

“Knew you didn't need my help,” Nils said with a smug grin.

And Shadrak couldn't help but punch him.

THE THEATER

It was hard to believe the suns were already starting their zigzagging descent. The longer Shadrak lived, the quicker the days went by. It was all some capricious trick of the Demiurgos, he was sure of it; once you got past a certain age, it was a well-greased chute all the way to an eternity in the Abyss.

Funny thing was, he didn't feel any older with each passing year. If anything he still felt in his prime, save for the accumulating injuries he'd picked up from pushing himself too hard. But even they healed quicker than they should have, except for his knees, which seemed all out of healing.

And yet the people around him were aging. Even Nils, who ran on ahead with long easy strides, as if he wanted to make a point at Shadrak's expense; he'd been a boy when Shadrak had first come to New Londdyr, and now he was as close as he'd ever get to being a man.

At first Shadrak thought it was just because he kept in shape, but since learning he was a homunculus, he'd started to wonder if he was even capable of growing older anymore. He'd been a child once, that much he remembered, but as soon as he became a man it was like the forces of growth and decay no longer applied to him.

For the dozenth time, he checked over his shoulder. Of the Ghost, there was no sign, and while stallholders and their customers frowned and muttered as he and Nils rushed past, the city militia were conspicuous by their absence. Probably, they were off harassing Wayist priests and old ladies or taking an extended break in a brothel or whatever it was they got up to. Scuts, the lot of them. Ilesa could have been anywhere, a bird, a face in the crowd, an ant on the wall. There was shog-all point worrying about it. It was what it was, and he'd just have

to trust his instincts if she tried anything else. Just in case, though, he went out of his way to squash any insects that happened across his path.

As they cut through alleys and crossed strip malls, making a beeline for the theater, Shadrak felt a rare twinge of nostalgia. This was his part of the city, the heart of his domain when he'd lorded it over the guilds. He'd told himself he didn't miss it, the power and the control, but deep down a part of him did. It was what he was made for, and he'd been bloody good at it. But regret was a tool of the Father of Lies. While you were looking back and remembering, the present moment would sneak up and stab you from behind.

The theater had gone to wrack and ruin since Shadrak had last been there. Dame Consilia would have burst out of her corset at the sight of it. He'd seen her perform here: *The Demiurgos's Disciple*. Shit play, even shittier performance. About the only part of her that could act was her tits, with her arse a pretty decent understudy.

Fissures cut jagged lines through the facade. The wooden sign was rotting at the edges, lettering so far faded only those who remembered could discern the name "The Dominion" that had once stood out in vibrant gold paint. The windows were boarded up, but no one had bothered to clear away the shards of glass from when they had been broken at one time or another. Thieves, probably, Shadrak thought, alive to the fact that him complaining about it was the pot calling the kettle black. More than likely it was Ilesa's mob, when they took up residence in the abandoned building.

"What now?" Nils asked, puffed up and full of bluster, like a legionary at the back of a phalanx—the kind who pissed his pants and ran when the advance was sounded.

Shadrak ignored him and strode for the broad steps rising to the entrance. He expected a challenge and was almost disappointed when there wasn't one. Probably, he should have found some other way in—an upper-story window, loose roof tiles, or any of the other

options open to a seasoned burglar, but he was past that. He'd had enough of this job already. By now he should have been collecting his pay from the Stygian. Would have been, if it hadn't been for Nils. And if not Nils, Ilesa.

"What you doing?" Nils said, scurrying up beside him. "We can't just walk in."

"No? Why's that, then?"

"They're thieves, rogues, assassins."

"Exactly," Shadrak said. "So they'll know all the best places to break in, and probably have them covered."

That wiped the smug look off Nils's face. "I hadn't thought of that."

Shadrak shoved through one of the double doors. It tilted as it swung inwards, hanging from one rusty hinge. With any luck, some of the rogues inside would recognize him. In this game, reputation was everything. And those that didn't know him would be impressed by his balls. At least he hoped so. That was how things worked in his day, how they'd always worked. Guildsmen had a way of backing down from a show of power, then disposing of you with poison, a garrote, a knife in the back when you least expected it.

The vestibule was as he remembered it, save for the rat droppings and carpet of dust. The kiosk window was fractured with a spiderweb of cracks, but the counter still displayed programs with Dame Consilia's sketched image on the cover.

"I don't like it," Nils said.

"Oh, I don't know," Shadrak said. They tended to exaggerate a bit, these theater artists, puffing up certain features and diminishing others. Still, it was a recognizable likeness. He ripped the cover from the program and crammed it in his pocket. There was no shame in looking.

"Not the picture, you plonker. Fact that it's so quiet."

“Oh, that.” Shadrak turned toward the curtain covering the entrance to the auditorium.

“Let’s go introduce ourselves.”

He held back the curtain and gestured for Nils to go first. The second the idiot was through, Shadrak dropped the curtain behind him. From the other side, Nils gasped, and then Shadrak heard the rattle of crossbows being raised.

The advantage of sitting through a piss-poor rendition of *The Demiurgos’s Disciple* was that Shadrak knew the layout of the theater. He’d watched the performance from a loge to the right of the stage, overhanging the ground-level seats, and accessed via a network of passageways that ran behind the auditorium.

Thin walls meant he could hear everything going on inside. The theater might have looked of decent construction, but in reality it was shoddily-built gilded crap, like so much else of New Londdyr’s pretentious culture. Rough voices, full of threat. The scrape of weapons being drawn. A whimpering whine that could only have come from Nils.

“Who was that with you?” a gruff man said. Shadrak knew the voice from somewhere. Ricard Shank, if he didn’t miss his guess. Shank the Scorcher. The sound of a match being struck only served to confirm it.

“What do you mean?” Nils said. Lame, but at least he was trying.

“We heard,” a woman said. Could have been Doma Hettish, formerly of the Toecutters. Jumped ship during the guild war and came over to the Night Hawks. Nicknamed “the Horse”, on account of her love of being ridden. “So don’t get clever.”

Fat chance of that.

Shadrak worked his way along a twisting corridor, through a door marked “Staff Only”, and up a flight of rickety steps to the fly floor. Passing between lines and blocks and

counterweights, he found a spot high above the stage from where he could see what was going on in the auditorium.

Nils had been cornered at the top of the central aisle between the seats. Three thugs either side of him, brandishing knives, and one with a burning match shoved up close to Nils's face. Shadrak had been right: Doma Hettish and Ricard Shank. Neither known for their patience.

He scanned both ways. There was a crossbowman in every box—two either side of the stage, and on the edge of the stage itself, a clutch of robe types, sorcerer-assassins, no doubt the original members of the Dybbuks. Seven, he counted, but that didn't mean there weren't more hidden in the wings, or behind the curtains hemming the auditorium that supposedly dampened sound.

Bekra. Bekra Cy, Ilesa had said: the sorcerer she'd left the Witch Queen's ring with. Problem was, all the robes were men; all the other rogues, too, save for Doma. That rather shogged on Shadrak's plan. He'd been looking forward to dropping down behind Bekra on a rope meant for scenery, cloak flowing behind him, thundershot in one hand. Nothing like a dramatic entrance to put the fear of shog in a victim. Only, with no obvious target, he'd end up looking a prat, porcupined with crossbow bolts. Nothing else for it, then. Wait, watch, and see what opportunities presented themselves.

Nils screamed. Slightly muffled by the curtains, but it still carried. One thing the designer got right. Shank the Scorcher must have singed one of the lad's eyebrows—always a man to start gently. Looked like he was going for the other.

Nils flickered out of reality. Winked back into it again. Doma had hold of his wrist, ripped a vambrace from his forearm and slung it aside. Well, that was Nils shogged, then. Another scream. Another charred eyebrow. The match was half burned down, and Ricard seemed keen to make the most of it. This time, he made little circular motions with it as he brought the flame toward Nils's eye.

Ah, shog it, Shadrak muttered, taking aim for a long shot. What would Kadee have said if he just stood there and watched. He squinted at the back of Ricard's head and squeezed the trigger.

Missed.

But Doma went down, crimson spraying from beneath her hair. Ricard dropped his match and dove for cover. The other four scattered. In the loges, crossbowmen turned this way and that, seeking a target. One of the sorcerers on the stage craned his neck to look up, and Shadrak threw himself from the fly floor, cloak fluttering behind him as he dropped like a stone.

STANDOFF

The stage rushing toward him. The whip and snap of his cloak. Stomach in mouth. Then Shadrak's feet hammered into the sorcerer's head, which slammed sideways as the neck cracked. He clung to the crumpling body to break his fall, then tumbled clear as it hit the stage.

The flare of magic. Sulfur. Sparks. Shadrak rolled and fired on instinct, and a sorcerer's face exploded. Rising in a crouch, he found another target, but the five other sorcerers were frozen in place, wide-eyed with shock. Spells visibly bled away from their fingertips. None of them wanted to risk it. Their hesitation gave Shadrak time to kick one in the back of the legs and drop him to his knees. He wrapped an arm around the sorcerer's neck and dragged him upstage, a shield against the crossbows in the loges.

"Fargin!" Shadrak yelled out into the auditorium. "Get your arse up here."

"My vambrace..." Nils whined.

"Now!"

The sorcerer tried to wriggle free, but Shadrak sunk the choke deeper, eliciting a whimper.

As Nils ran for the stage, Ricard sprung at him from behind a seat. Shadrak fired.

"Shog!" Ricard cried as he flipped onto his back with a sickening thud. Splinters erupted from the wall beside the entrance curtain, where the bullet had struck. It took Shadrak a second to process what had happened: He'd missed, but Ricard had slipped in Doma's blood.

Rattles sounded from the loges as crossbows took aim at Nils.

“Enough!” Shadrak yelled, jamming the barrel of the thundershot against the sorcerer’s temple. As if on cue, the man went limp and slumped to the floor. “Shog,” Shadrak muttered. He’d been a bit over-zealous with the choke.

As Nils reached the steps to the stage, the remaining sorcerers seemed to recover their wits. The words of a cant rolled from one man’s lips. The other three advanced on Shadrak, sparkling motes swirling around them, telltale signs of magical shields. He fired, but his bullet ricocheted off into the fly floor. A painted flat crashed to the stage in response, and the sorcerers’ shields vanished along with their concentration.

Nils barreled into the man uttering the cant, and rebounded as if he’d been struck by lightning. A crossbow bolt thudded into the stage at Shadrak’s feet. He dove for the cover of the wings, rolled, and looked straight down the barrel of a much bigger gun than his own.

The masked ex-Maresman.

Jeb.

“I’m jealous,” Shadrak said, setting the thundershot on the floor and standing slowly.

“As I should be of you lying with my woman.”

“Ilesa? You’re screwing—”

Jeb scoffed. “Would have been once, and she’d not have been able to help herself. But things ain’t what they were. Flesh of a putrid corpse would be putting it mildly. Hence the mask.”

“I’m sure it has its advantages,” Shadrak said. “I take it the Ghost didn’t enjoy your breath.”

Jeb chuckled. “Careful. Some people might take that as an insult. But no, he weren’t keen, but all it did was slow him down. Reckon he’s on his way here. I think he likes you.”

Footsteps behind. Shadrak raised an eyebrow for permission to look. Jeb granted it with a wave of his gun.

Shadrak turned.

“Ilesa.” She had hold of Nils by the earlobe, and he was doing a good impression of a sniveling four-year-old. The lad’s eyebrows were singed raw.

“Where’s Bekra?” Ilesa asked.

“I already told you—” Nils started.

Ilesa cuffed him on the side of the head. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

“I was only saying—”

“Well don’t.”

Ricard came up behind her. He shot a glare at Shadrak then dipped his head and spoke like an arse-kisser to Ilesa. “Said she had to go somewhere.” He rolled his eyes and shrugged. “Be out of town for a few days.”

Ilesa’s brow knitted as she turned to face him. Her hand strayed to the hilt of the sword at her hip, hesitated.

“I told her you wouldn’t be happy,” Ricard said.

The air shimmered around Ilesa. She shuddered, then streaked forward in a blur of scales. Ricard’s scream died on his lips as serpent’s fangs ripped into his throat. The snake recoiled, black hair sprouting from its scaly head, and then Ilesa was there once more, arms folded across her chest, watching dispassionately as Ricard frothed at the mouth and keeled over.

“Guess you made your mind up about him, then,” Jeb said.

“Thought he could play Bekra off against me,” Ilesa said with a glance at Shadrak.

He nodded. He’d seen this sort of thing before. On many occasions. The subtle plays for power that defined a guild. Bit by bit, scum like Ricard would build an alliance of the needy and the greedy, then at the slightest opportunity stick the knife in the boss’s back.

Ilesa walked back out onto the stage. Jeb wagged his gun at Nils, who followed her.

“Mind if I grab my thundershot?” Shadrak asked.

“Be my guest.” Jeb holstered his own gun, as if daring Shadrak to try something. His self-assurance was unnerving.

Shadrak scooped up the thundershot and checked it. “Empty,” he said with a sigh. And no way to reload it. For a fleeting moment he shut his eyes, mourning the loss of an old and trusted friend. He was about to sling it away, but something stopped him. A hope, maybe, that he’d find more bullets one day, or perhaps he just needed a memento of better times. He thrust it into the back of his belt.

Jeb followed him onto the stage. The four remaining sorcerers formed an attentive semicircle in front of Ilesa and Nils. From the loges, crossbowmen watched with narrowed eyes. The guild members who’d taken cover in the auditorium were perched on the edge of the stage, talking in whispers.

“Restrain them,” Ilesa said, nodding to a couple of them, who immediately jumped up and approached Shadrak and Nils, pulling leather straps from their pockets.

“Now wait a minute!” Nils said.

Ignoring him, one of the henchmen roughly fastened his wrists behind his back. Shadrak didn’t even bother protesting as the other man did the same to him.

“No struggle?” Ilesa said. With a smirk she added, “That’s twice in one day you’ve disappointed me. Got to face facts, Shadrak: you’re a midget in more ways than one.”

“But Jeb said...” Shadrak clamped his mouth shut as heat flooded his cheeks. She’d baited and hooked him, made him look a right scut. Well, she wasn’t getting the last laugh. He told her so with a narrow-eyed glare. She was going to suffer for this, and he told himself Kadee wouldn’t mind this once.

“Now,” Ilesa said, pressing a finger to Nils’s lips and cocking her head to make it clear she was talking to Shadrak, “convince me why I need to delay killing you both.”

“Me?” Nils howled.

Ilesa slapped him upside of the face. “Quiet, boy. Let the grown-ups talk.”

“But—”

She kneed him in the fruits and he dropped to his knees with a grunt. Tears spilled down his cheeks.

“Because you need me to find this Bekra bitch?” Shadrak said.

Ilesa shook her head. “Nope.”

Shadrak glanced at Jeb. “Because Mr. Mold here can’t get the job done anymore, and you were lying about being disappointed?”

Now it was Ilesa’s turn to look angry. She took a step toward him and Shadrak flinched. After the snake thing he’d just witnessed, there was no telling what she would do.

“I have no problem watching,” Jeb said nonchalantly.

“Sicko,” Ilesa said.

“I don’t deny it.”

The man who’d bound Shadrak’s wrists chuckled.

“What’s so funny, Barrin?” Ilesa asked.

“Jeb,” Barrin said. “What you said about him.”

“Sicko?” Ilesa said, stern as a Wayist matriarch.

Barrin licked his lips. “And what he said after. Well funny that. Nice one.”

“I wasn’t joking,” Jeb said.

“Uh,” Barrin stammered. “No, you see, what I mean is—”

“Where’s Doma?” Ilesa said, peering out into the auditorium.

Barrin swallowed thickly and glanced at the man standing behind Nils. “Nikos?”

Nikos winced and mouthed, “Thanks, mate.”

“Well, Nikos?” Ilesa said, spinning to face him.

“Dead.” Both Nikos and Barrin looked at Shadrak.

“I was aiming for Ricard,” Shadrak said.

Ilesa held his gaze for a long moment, her warring thoughts written on her face. Finally she said, “Good. Saved me the trouble.”

Barrin chuckled again but quickly stopped when Ilesa flashed him a glare.

“Anyone else in cahoots with Ricard? You, Barrin? Didn’t you used to play seven-card together?”

“Hated the scut,” Barrin said.

“No you...” Nikos started, then trailed off. “Yeah, he was a tosser. Well rid of him we are.”

“And that cow Doma,” Barrin said.

Nikos nodded, but there was no disguising the flush of his cheeks, the furtive looks he flicked between Ilesa and Jeb.

“So,” Ilesa said, gaze taking in the assassins in the loges, her henchmen dotted about the auditorium, the sorcerers on the stage, “does anyone want to tell me where this ‘somewhere’ is that Bekra has gone to?”

“She has the ring,” one of the sorcerers said.

“That is not what I asked.”

The man stepped back and lowered his eyes.

Ilesa raised a hand, fingers stretching into dagger-like talons. “I’ll ask again: Where the shog is Bekra?”

“Why don’t you try the wizard eye?” Shadrak said.

“Because, of course, I never thought of that,” Ilesa said. “It’s not all-seeing, you know.”

Light spilled in from the top of the auditorium as the entrance curtain parted.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?”—A voice like thunder.

A tall man stepped through, staff clutched in one be-ringed hand. He was robed in scarlet, salt and pepper beard braided into a trident, hair wound into spikes.

“Oh, shog,” Nils muttered.

He didn't need to say more. Shadrak never forgot a face: Arecagen, Principal of the Academy, and the most dangerous sorcerer in New Londdyr.

IN THE FACE OF MAGIC

Half a dozen men and women in black academic gowns and silver skullcaps entered the auditorium behind Arecagen, all of them gray-haired and wrinkled. In any other profession they'd have been washed up, one foot in the grave, but scholars improved with age, and sorcerers even more so. Shadrak had never seen so many gaudy rings, oversized medallions, and crystal-tipped wands. They looked like a chorus line from one of Dame Consilia's productions.

Striding for the stage as if he owned the place, Arecagen leveled his staff at Nils. "I'll deal with you later. As for you," he said to Ilesa, "I've been keeping a close eye on your movements." He tossed a crystal sphere into the air and deftly caught it. "Though there's been some kind of time lag, and I keep losing the image, otherwise I'd have caught up with you sooner. My ring, if you please." He pocketed the sphere and held out his hand expectantly.

"Since when was it yours?" Shadrak asked. He strained at the straps binding his wrists, but all that did was tighten them more till they chafed his skin.

"Quiet," Nils hissed. "I'm already neck deep in shite."

"That explains the smell," Ilesa said, then to Arecagen, "The midget's right. You've no claim on the ring."

"Neither do you," Shadrak said. "It's me that stole it."

"And I stole it from you," Nils said.

"And I stole it from you," Ilesa said with a smug grin. "So that makes it mine."

Arecagen levitated above the ground and arced through the air a good twenty yards, landing on the stage light as a feather, right in front of Ilesa. Black flames erupted from the top of his staff.

“And now you will surrender it to me.”

Clattering came from the loges as crossbows swung toward Arecagen. Jeb stepped forward, gun raised, noxious gas already trickling from the mouth slit of his mask. The rogues dotted about the auditorium stalked toward the academy sorcerers, who turned to face them.

“Can’t,” Ilesa said. Grey fur sprouted from the backs of her hands. Her ears began to elongate, and her face stretched into a snout. Her next words were growled through yellow fangs. “It’s not here.” And then she was a wolf springing for Arecagen’s throat.

Silver motes sparkled in a sphere around the sorcerer, and the wolf that was Ilesa bounced off, then flew toward the fly floor in the form of a bat.

The goons who’d bound Nils and Shadrak lunged for Arecagen, but fists of emerald energy soared from the auditorium and punched them from their feet. The academics! Barrin lifted his head to stare at the smoke pluming from his chest, then groaned and slumped back down. Nikos couldn’t even do that; his head was a melted mess that oozed down over his shoulders. That was the cue for the rogues who’d been gossiping on the edge of the stage to flee to the wings like startled rats.

Those stalking the scholars were greeted with a shower of fizzing sparks, and, like the heroes they were, scattered for the side exits.

Jeb’s gun bucked in his hand and thunder boomed. This time the sphere surrounding Arecagen flared golden, and when it died down he was gone, leaving behind the stench of sulfur.

“Fargin, back toward me,” Shadrak said, even as Arecagen’s academics fanned out across the auditorium, the air about their wands warping and buckling. Ilesa’s four remaining ex-Dybbuks stepped forward to meet the threat, palms raised and effusing crimson light.

“What for?” Nils said, even though he’d already started to comply.

“Just do as you’re told.”

Pressure built from the direction of the Academy sorcerers. A quick glance revealed inky tendrils projecting from their wands and weaving a dark and gaseous web that inched toward the stage. One of the ex-Dybbuks discharged a bolt of sizzling red lightning at the creeping magic; it sputtered and dispersed with a pathetic *phwat*.

“One more step... and stop,” Shadrak said, just before Nils bumped into him. “Feel behind with your fingers.”

“I ain’t feeling nothing I can’t see,” Nils said, but he’d already started probing the ridges of one of Shadrak’s baldrics.

A succession of clacks sounded from the loges, and crossbow bolts streaked in silvery blurs toward the Academy sorcerers. Most of the quarrels lodged in the ghostly web as it continued its inexorable advance. One got through, and a scholarly old woman keeled over with the shaft protruding from her eye. She hit the floor hard, and a patch of the web vanished.

“Up a bit,” Shadrak said. “To the left.”

“Ouch!” Nils hissed. “Cut my bleedin’ finger!”

“Pull it free of the baldric. It’s a razor star. Good, now pass it to me. Careful!”

The sorcerous web brushed the edge of the stage, started to roil over it. The ex-Dybbuks joined their crimson streams into one then sent it scything through the nebulous mass. Where it cut, the web dispersed, only to re-form as the scholars redoubled their efforts.

Shadrak took a pinch grip on the razor star then bent his wrists so he could see at the leather binding them. The instant he was free he returned the razor star to his baldric and ran for the wings.

“Oi!” Nils yelled. “What about me?”

Jeb grabbed the lad by the collar and dragged him toward the other side of the stage.

The flash and flicker of sorcerous battle followed Shadrak into the darkness of the wings. Up above, he glimpsed a large bat hanging from the eaves, watching everything happening below and doing nothing—at least nothing that would involve any degree of risk.

Shadrak pushed through a black drape and ran blind along a dark corridor. He heard the scuff and scamper of Ilesa’s rogues fleeing left and right, presumably along the theater’s labyrinth of tributary passages. But Shadrak kept to the main artery until up ahead he saw light limning a pitch black door. Slowing to a walk, he cast a quick look behind, then kicked the door open.

The burst of sudden daylight blinded him for a second. He covered his face with his cloak, vision a succession of white flashes.

Bekra Cy. That’s who they said had the ring now. Someone in the taverns was bound to have heard of her, and if not, then Magwitch would know something, surely. A moment more, and he’d be on his way. No sorcerous bitch was doing him out of his commission.

Dropping the cloak, he blinked a few times till the alley he’d exited onto came into focus, then he blinked again as his eyes came to rest on the black coat of a huge figure blocking the way.

The Ghost.

Shadrak stumbled back a step and hit wood. The door had closed behind him. The Ghost took one heavy step toward him, then another.

Shadrak turned, rattled the doorknob. Locked. Another step from behind him. Cold fingers touched his shoulder, passed through his cloak. He spun back to see the Ghost leering down at him, hand disappearing to the wrist beneath Shadrak's shirt. Ice entered his chest, formed a fist around his heart. He started to shake, clamped his jaw shut, refusing to scream.

Silver erupted behind the Ghost. A fizz and a flash, a muffled boom. A vise clamped down on Shadrak's skull. Darkness pressed in from every side, narrowed to a strip, a sliver, a pinprick, and then nothing.

A NEW MASTER

Fumes—sickly, pungent, corrosive. An itch in his nostrils that started to sting, then burned as if his nose were swarming with fire ants.

Shadrak came to with a sneeze. His eyes spilled acid tears. He went to wipe them, but his hands wouldn't move. Panicked, he tried to sit up, but he was held flat against a hard surface, something cold and firm securing his wrists and ankles. He tried turning his head to see, but some kind of collar secured his neck to whatever he was lying on.

A dark smudge passed in front of his vision. He blinked furiously to clear his eyes. Not a smudge, a beard. A broad face, blurry and indistinct, gazing down at him. A few more blinks, and the face came into focus.

Arecagen.

In the background all Shadrak could see was the ceiling, rough and grey and glistening with moisture. Underground was his guess. Away from prying eyes.

"I once vivisected a husk child on this very slab," the sorcerer said. "Not strictly true: it was several husk children over a long period of time. I have traffickers like you to thank for the opportunity. Good specimens are so hard to come by, what with the Maresmen being so diligent. I assume that one outside the theater was intending to punish you for past deeds. Well, don't worry: all those years of experimentation have taught me a few tricks, as far as husks are concerned. He'll not trouble you again."

"You killed the Ghost?" Shadrak said. "How?" His throat was dry, and he coughed.

Arecagen ignored the question. "The effect of the tincture I daubed on your nostrils to rouse you." He held up a vial containing a yellowish liquid. "Unpleasant in the extreme, but when time is of the essence... And it is of the essence. My ring, you understand."

“Mine,” Shadrak said. “Till I deliver it to my client.”

Arecagen nodded, as if he understood. “You need the money. Of course you do. It’s a long way down from the lord of the guilds to the most wanted man in New Londdyr. Must be hard to make ends meet. What if I were to pay you more?”

“A deal’s a deal.” Shadrak pulled against his wrist bonds, but they were unyielding.

“Scarolite,” Arecagen said. “I’m sure you know, but it absorbs force, physical and magical. All you are doing is expending valuable energy. Energy you are going to need to find this Bekra Cy and retrieve my ring.”

“Like I said...”

“Yes, a deal’s a deal. You don’t strike me as a man of honor. Why the moral stance? You’ve worked for me before. You were my top supplier of husks back in the day. Are you afraid of something? Something that might happen if you renege on your agreement?”

He was clever. Only an idiot would double-cross a Stygian, particularly one as connected and as powerful as Xultak Setis, who was considered depraved even among his own kind.

“Not saying?” Arecagen said. He sighed and wandered away from Shadrak’s field of vision. There was a clink as he must have set the vial down on a table, then the rustle of papers. “You know, of course, what the ring is?”

“I know it’s not good, that it comes from Thogani.”

“The Desecrated City, yes. One of the Witch Queen’s rather dubious artifacts. You know much about the Witch Queen?”

“Don’t need to. Not part of the job.”

“Very focused of you. Commendable, even. Well, let me tell you a thing or two about her.”

Footsteps approached, and then Arecagen was staring down at Shadrak once more.

“Hekata N’gat, the Witch Queen, has been dead for a very long time. Centuries. Aeons. But dead for some people does not mean an end to existence. She is still active in her sphere

of influence to the far north of Qlippoth. Knowledge of her artifacts is restricted to the elite among my kind: master sorcerers, and so I have to assume whoever employed you is such. To my mind, this is a good thing. In the past, when the knowledge was not so carefully restricted, lesser mages went after the artifacts and never returned. Anything made by the Witch Queen that is not currently in her possession is almost certainly a lure, a hook to snag sorcerers so that Hekata N'Gat can reel them in and drain them dry.”

“She’s a vampire?”

“Nothing so crude,” Arecagen said. “From what I have read, she imbibes essence by some kind of process like osmosis. It’s all speculation. No one really knows. No one has been to Thogani and come back to tell the tale.”

“So,” Shadrak said, “let me get this straight: you want this ‘lure’, even though it’s likely to be a trap? You believe you’re one step ahead of the game, or too powerful to succumb? Am I right?”

“Surprisingly, yes. To those of us who have swum for a lifetime in the currents of the Cynocephalus’s dreams, magic is more of a science than an art. The harnessing and manipulation of the god of Aethir’s nightmares seems at first full of mystery, happenstance, and chaos, but once a certain level of proficiency is achieved—”

“Yeah, you think you’re in control. Believe me, it was the same with the guilds, but shit still happens. And anyhow, what makes you think you’re more advanced than the Witch Queen? She’s been around a whole lot longer than you, or am I missing something?”

“You are not. Age is no indicator of skill. Practice something badly for a thousand years, and you will still be bad at it.”

“Why do you assume she’s bad at sorcery?”

“Because she’s constrained. All the books agree, the Witch Queen cannot leave the Desecrated City. That has to be due to certain limitations of her undead condition, otherwise

it is a magical restriction imposed upon her. Either way, a sorcerer worth their salt would have overcome it after so much time.”

“Maybe she just likes to stay at home.”

“Pah! There’s really no point discussing this with the ignorant. Do you know how many tomes I’ve read on the subject? Before we can have a meaningful conversation, might I suggest you start by reading—”

“So, this Bekra Cy who’s run off with the ring,” Shadrak said. “You think it will reel her in, lead her to Thogani to be drained?”

“If she’s a half-decent sorcerer, for nothing less would interest the Witch Queen. But that must not happen. Who knows when the ring might be released back into the world again? It could be centuries. It could be never. We must act, and act now.”

“Answer me this,” Shadrak said. “You consider your magic superior to the Witch Queen’s?”

“I do,” Arecagen said.

“Then why do you need her ring? Why not make one yourself? What does it even do, besides lead sorcerers to their doom?”

“That remains to be seen,” Arecagen said, somewhat testily. “But skill with sorcery does not necessarily grant the ability to craft artifacts of power. A certain kind of recklessness is needed for that. Sacrifices I am unwilling to make. Pacts with dark forces. You, as a homunculus, should know all about that sort of thing.”

“The Demiurgos?”

Arecagen shrugged, but his cage was definitely rattled. “Or one of the other Supernal beings. But back to the point in question: will you help me get the ring?”

“No.”

Arecagen sucked in a sharp breath. If Shadrak could have lifted his head to see, he wouldn't have been surprised if the sorcerer's hands clenched into fists.

"Whatever your employer is paying you, I'll double."

"No you won't, unless the Academy's had a change of fortune that would be nothing short of miraculous. Last I heard, it had gone to the dogs, which is no doubt why you employed Fargin as a tutor. Talk about scraping the bottom of the barrel. How much did he cost you? A crust of bread and a glass of stagnant rain water from the overgrown gutters?"

Rather than the eruption Shadrak had expected, Arecagen merely smiled. That was troubling.

"Let me put it another way," the sorcerer said.

Deeply troubling.

Again, Arecagen moved out of Shadrak's field of vision. Again, the rustle of papers.

"You are familiar with Dr. Otto Blightey, the Lich Lord of Verusia?"

Shadrak stiffened. All too familiar. He'd once been to Verusia, once trod the dank and crumbling hallways of Wolfmalen Castle. Once been forced to watch the Lich Lord at work with a victim on the rack, bound hand and foot, just as he was now.

"Oh, don't worry," Arecagen said, coming back into sight, holding up a page of vellum webbed with what looked like veins. There were sigils drawn upon it in a flaking, brownish ink, handwritten notes in the margins, and arrangements of letters and numbers in tidy squares. Shadrak had stolen from enough sorcerers in his time to recognize them as magical permutations, though he had no idea what these ones were for.

Arecagen seemed to read his mind. "Like I said, magic is a science, not an art. It's quite logical when you have the know how. These marks here describe what is to be summoned—or rather, what is to be made manifest from the atmospheric dream stuff that permeates Aethir

from where the Cynocephalus sleeps in Gehenna. Some wizards use the word ‘apport’, but I find it so pretentious.”

Shadrak found himself staring at the sigils in question, desperately trying to work out what they resembled.

“Bore-grubs,” Arecagen said. “You know, the kind that can eat their way through bone just as easily as flesh. The numbers in the squares stipulate the energy expenditure—mine, that is. The letters define the locus of manifestation—in this case, your intestines. Now, where did I put my staff?”

As the sorcerer turned away to look, Shadrak blurted out, “Two hundred denarii. That’s how much he’s paying me.”

“Your employer? Well, it seems you were right: I can’t stretch to four hundred. I wouldn’t go above twenty, and even then I’d take them back once the job was done.”

At least he was honest.

“In any case, didn’t you say a deal’s a deal? You are a man of iron-clad principles, Shadrak. It’s a disappointment, but I shall have to console myself with using you as a test case for a trial of the Lich Lord’s magic. Just think: you’ll be aiding the advance of magical science.”

“No,” Shadrak cried, hoping he sounded convincing. He’d never been much of an actor. “I’ll do anything. Just don’t put bugs in my guts.”

“I’m sorry,” Arecagen said, “but I’m rather set on the idea now.”

“Please!” Shadrak squealed—he sounded a lot like Fargin, and though he was putting it on, he was starting to feel desperate. More than that, he had to admit he was scared.

“Please what?” Arecagen said.

“I’ll get the ring. I promise! I’ll bring it straight to you.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s true!” Shadrak sniveled. He even managed to force tears to spill down his cheeks. Dame Consilia would have been proud of him. “You said it yourself: I’m a man of iron-clad principles. I won’t betray you.”

“Spoken like a true homunculus. Ah, there it is.” Arecagen moved out of sight again, this time returning with his staff in one hand and the vellum page in the other.

Now Shadrak was sobbing like a jilted damsel in an Aeternam tragedy. “What can I do to convince you?”

“Oh, you’ve already convinced me... that you can’t be trusted. There’s no need to use a truth detection spell; for a homunculus you really are a terrible liar. Aren’t you supposed to be so convincing that you end up believing your own lies? At least that’s what I was told about your kind. I had hoped you might see the sense of a partnership in this matter, but you know what they say: hope for the best, plan for the worst. Let me tell you what I’m prepared to do. I’ll go ahead with the spell as planned—”

Shadrak started to protest, and this time he wasn’t acting.

“But,” Arecagen said, cutting across him, “I will render the bore-grubs dormant for one week. Return with the ring during that time and I will dispel the magic. Fail to do so and you’ll experience cramps initially, then excruciating pain, and then...” He squinted at the handwritten notes. “It’s the original,” Arecagen enthused. “Blightey’s own handwriting. Ah, here it is: cramps, pain, internal bleeding, chills, spasms, and then the skin of your abdomen will begin to pucker. At that point paralysis usually sets in, and you’ll watch passively as the bore-grubs eat their way out of your stomach and start to consume you from the outside. It’s funny, but Blightey is so enthusiastic in his descriptions that I get quite caught up in them. What I would ordinarily find horrific, I now positively salivate over.”

“You don’t need to do this,” Shadrak said. “You can trust me.” And this time he meant it, although that made no sense, as all he really wanted to do was slice the shogger’s fruits off

and feed them to him. Was that what Arecagen meant: that a homunculus intending to betray someone could believe in their own innocence, until the precise moment of the betrayal? Shadrak had never heard such a thing before, but then he'd spent most of his life not even knowing he was the spawn of the Demiurgos.

“Perhaps,” Arecagen said, “but I don't need to.”

Powerless to move, Shadrak clamped his jaw shut and refused to cry out as the sorcerer rapped his staff three times on the floor and the air thrummed with unnatural energy.

THE HUNT FOR BEKRA CY

With his belly full of cold sludge, which might have been imaginary, might have been the dormant bore-grubs, Shadrak left the grounds of the Academy, where Arecagen had held him in a concealed sub-basement. One week he had. One week to find Bekra Cy and return with the Witch Queen's ring. And even if he succeeded, even if he gave Arecagen what he wanted, and assuming the sorcerer kept his word about removing the bore-grubs, he was still neck-deep in shite: the Stygian would not take kindly to someone else taking what he'd paid for. It was unlikely Xultak Setis would come after such a high-profile and powerful mage as Arecagen. He'd vent his ire on Shadrak.

Just thinking about what the Stygian would do to him put a twist in his guts, or was it the bore-grubs already active? Had Arecagen lied to him? He clapped his hands to his belly and waited for something to happen: a writhing beneath his skin, mandibles bursting forth amid a spray of blood. But there was nothing. Nothing but a twinge of very natural anxiety about his predicament. Just the acknowledgement that he was scared hardened the anxiety into anger. He was going to find this Bekra bitch, all right, and when he did...

But there was the thing: where to start looking? The taverns? With Bolos dead, that was bound to be a waste of time; virtually every other rogue in New Londdyr would shop him to the Senate, and those that wouldn't were probably working for Ilesa. Now there was a thought. What if he went back to the theater, teamed up with Ilesa and her goons? She had to have some idea where Bekra could have gone, but the shame of asking for her help was almost as bad as the thought of insects eating him from the inside out. And then he had it: Magwitch. The meddling mage might be able to find Bekra using his wizard eye, with a bit of persuasion.

“How can I find her if neither of us knows what she looks like?” Magwitch said, whipping off his spectacles in a show of frustration. He winced and gingerly touched his broken nose. The furry poultice had done wonders for the redness but nothing to set the nose straight again. He’d been sending the wizard eye all about town and observing through his viewing crystal for the better part of an hour, but besides an accidental look inside the brothel on 62nd Street, there was nothing of interest to see. “I must say, I find this all rather tendentious. You’d have been better off mending bridges with Ilesa and having the guilds track this Bekra. It’s probably too late now. Ilesa’s hardly the sort to sit around and do nothing. Chances are, she has the ring once more and is working out who to sell it to.”

Shadrak was inclined to agree with him. “Wait,” he said, an idea suddenly thrusting its way into his mind. “Ilesa has a crystal like yours, for viewing what the wizard eye sees?”

“Obversely,” Magwitch said, before popping a chocolate truffle in his mouth.

“So, the crystals and the eye are linked somehow.”

The mage grunted as he chewed.

“Can you move the eye to the location of Ilesa’s crystal?” Shadrak asked.

Magwitch looked momentarily stunned. He raised a trembling finger, and his cheeks turned scarlet. A weak choking sound escaped from his lips. Shadrak started toward him, fearing the mage had been poisoned, that someone was determined to prevent him from helping find the ring. Ilesa? Bekra? Someone yet to reveal themselves?

But then Magwitch swallowed. Thumping his chest, he said, “Went down the wrong way.”

Shadrak almost hit him then. In an instant, anger gave way to relief, and relief to inspiration.

He felt about in a belt pouch till he found the last remaining vial of deadly “sausage poison”, the greatest achievement of his erstwhile partner, Albert. Irony was, the very same poison had been Albert’s undoing. Shadrak felt no shame about being the one to administer it. Their working relationship had broken down to the extent that it was kill or be killed.

He rolled the vial between thumb and forefinger but didn’t remove it from his pouch. Could it prove an equalizer in his spat with Arcagen? It was a long shot. Arcagen was no fool. He was hardly likely to drink anything Shadrak offered him, and he’d already indicated he had sorcery that could detect lies. It made Shadrak wish he’d explored his homunculus nature rather than continued to act as if it weren’t true, as if he really was a human freak rather than a creature of deception begotten by the Demiurgos.

Arcagen had said something about homunculi having an innate ability to deceive not only their victims but themselves as well, and yet, when the moment presented itself, they would slip innocently into whatever betrayal they had initially planned. That would be a hard form of trickery to detect with magic or any other way. Presumably why the homunculi had been so devastatingly successful with their schemes over the centuries.

Magwitch was watching him, one eyebrow raised. He reset his spectacles on the bridge of his nose and asked, “What is it?”

Shadrak was about to tell him to mind his own business, when it struck him he had nothing to lose asking the mage’s advice. After all, Shadrak was the only one maintaining the pretense that he wasn’t a homunculus. Everyone else had assumed it for a very long time.

“If you... If you had a friend who was something by nature but who’d become something else—”

“You’re talking about shifters, like Ilesa?”

“No,” Shadrak said. “I’m not. Say this friend was, I don’t know, a dwarf, but he’d never lived with other dwarves. Say humans brought him up.”

“The height would be a dead give away,” the mage said. “Not to mention the infant facial hair. And he’d cry incessantly till his wet-nurse’s breast milk was augmented by her drinking a gallon of mead every day.”

“Just hear me out,” Shadrak said. “If this dwarf grew to manhood believing he was a human freak, but then someone revealed the truth of what he was, how could he undo all the human behaviors and customs he’d learned over the years? How could he get in touch with the essence of his dwarven nature?”

Magwitch chewed it over for a moment before saying, “Get drunk?”

Shadrak sighed and was about to give up, when the mage said, “I’m not being feces-itious. The alcohol would relax him, perhaps to the point any socially learned inebriations—or is that inhibitions?—sloughed away. We are what we are when free of the tyranny of thought and custom.”

“So, all I’d—he’d—have to do is get drunk?”

“Or take certain medicusinal herbs that calm the nerves and muddy constipation—I mean, cons... thought.”

“Like *somnificus*?”

“Indeed.”

If that was the case, Shadrak must have been acting like a homunculus for months now. Years, even. Ever since Kadee’s death. And yet when he’d tried convincing Arcagen of his trustworthiness, he’d failed, even without the sorcerer using magic to detect the lie. Maybe he wasn’t smoking enough *somnificus*.

But he was getting ahead of himself. First things first: he needed to get the ring back. If he didn’t stop acting like an amateur and start to focus, he was going to be a bore-grubs’ banquet by this time next week.

“Well?” he said, referring to the question he’d asked just before Magwitch nearly choked on a truffle.

“Very, thank you,” the mage replied. “Except for my nose.”

Shadrak gritted his teeth and asked again. “Can you move the wizard eye to the location of Ilesa’s crystal?”

“Of course I can.”

Magwitch gestured with his hands and muttered some cants, then sat back so Shadrak could see the image that formed within the viewing crystal.

Nils and Jeb running across overgrown grass in between cracked and weatherworn sarcophagi, winged statues, and ancient crypts surrounded by rusted iron fences. They were seen from above, a bird’s-eye view.

“The Wayist Graveyard at Templeton,” Magwitch said, “from the time of the earliest settlers, before the religion was suppressed by the Senate.”

Shadrak squinted at the crystal. “Where’s Ilesa?”

Magwitch pointed to a blur of movement ahead of Jeb and Nils—a cat, by the looks of it, prowling through the long grass as if it had picked up a scent. Suddenly, it darted forward, and the wizard eye shifted position to keep her in view.

And there it was, the thing she was chasing: a woman in a sleeveless robe of black velvet running lithely toward one of the crypts, shaven scalp covered with swirling tattoos, same as her exposed arms. As she passed down the moss-covered steps and disappeared into the darkness inside, the air around the cat shimmered, until Ilesa stood in its place. Jeb and Nils caught up with her, and the three of them followed the woman into the crypt.

TEMPLETON GRAVEYARD

Once he left the Wizards' Quarter, Shadrak took to the rooftops, the fastest way to get across town without being seen. At least it had been back in the day, but he'd only made it as far as Thirty-Second Street in the Pioneers' Mall District when he ran into scaffolding on the building he was heading toward, and upon the scaffolding, workmen. They were repointing chimneys and replacing the terra-cotta tiles the district was famous for. It seemed only yesterday they'd done the same thing, but he guessed it must have been years since he'd last come this way, back before he'd taken over the guilds.

Shadrak waited until the workmen were absorbed in their tasks, then made the leap from the rooftop he was on. He caught an upright of scaffold and swung onto the planked walkway—where someone had left a bucket filled with tools. He swore as it pitched over the edge and tumbled to the sidewalk. Tools rained down with a fearsome clatter.

“Oi!” a workman yelled from his perch beside a chimney breast.

Shadrak gave him the finger, then realized the commotion had drawn more attention than a troupe of naked dancers processing down the high street.

“You there!” a soldier in a galea and red cloak called up from below. He was talking to the workman, and Shadrak chose that moment to run across the walkway and fling himself across to the adjacent rooftop.

“Weren't me,” he heard the workman reply. “There was this pasty-faced midget...”

Then someone blew a whistle, which was answered by barked orders and the stomp of dozens of boots, or more likely sandals. Shadrak didn't stop to take a look. He didn't need to. One stupid misstep, and now the Senatorial Cohort were on his tail.

By the time Shadrak reached the wrought iron gates of the graveyard, the whistles and cries had fallen far behind.

The gates were already open a crack, and so Shadrak slipped through without a sound. He left the gravel pathway for the cover of a nearby gravestone and hunkered down there for a moment. Methodically, he went through the ritual of touching the blades in his baldrics and patting the handles of his three guns. He almost cursed then. He'd given the flintlocks to Bolos Rancy, and the thundershot was out of bullets. It wasn't so much a lapse of memory as a failure to break an unconscious pattern and plant a new one.

Having satisfied the compulsion to check his weapons, Shadrak poked his head out and scanned the graveyard. A couple of the statues he recognized from Magwitch's viewing crystal. From there, it was an easy matter to plot a course to the crypt Ilesa, Jeb, and Nils had followed Bekra into.

A tingling sensation crept along his spine, and he froze, scarcely daring to breathe. Someone was watching him, but as he turned a slow circle he saw only broken statues and dilapidated sarcophagi. He knew the shadows, and he was an old-hand at reading the lay of the land, identifying the best places to hide and spy from. Either he was getting jittery, or it was something else... He suppressed a wry smile as he glanced up at the sky: Magwitch, most likely, and his scuttling wizard eye.

He strained his ears as he reached the crypt, but there was no sound of fighting from within. The steps leading down were carpeted with moss, and the iron railings either side were brown with rust. Depressions in the moss marked the passage of booted feet. He crouched down to feel it: slick with dew. Rather than risk slipping and giving away his position, he got down on his belly and lizard-crawled to the bottom.

The crypt door was ajar, revealing a strip of absolute dark within. Carvings on the front of the door gave a name and a date, neither of which he could read, they were so far eroded. Icy

sludge crawled through his guts, as if his body remembered things he seldom allowed his mind to dwell on: the Lich Lord's castle in Verusia, the despairing screams, the torture chamber, and the cloying stench of blood.

He paused at the entrance to put on his Ancient-tech goggles, adjusted them to the dark, then breathed deeply to steady his nerves. Dank air, thick with loam. Mustiness, rot, and something else... Sulfur.

Again he listened, and again he heard no sound, other than the thudding of his heart in his chest. Pulling a dagger from his baldric, he slipped through the opening.

Everything within was limned in green by the goggles: stone-block walls, scrawled with graffiti and sweating moisture. Cobwebs thick with dust draped from the ceiling. To one side, a mural in faded pastels depicted a naked man nailed to a tree, and winged beings surrounding him. In the center, an ornate sarcophagus carved with interwoven thorns that surrounded a vignette of a pelican piercing its breast with its beak, a robed woman with a blazing sun behind her head and a crescent moon beneath her feet, and a seven-headed dragon with flaming wings.

Nils was seated on the floor, back against the sarcophagus, knees pulled up to his chest. He was pale-faced and vacant-eyed, and it was hard to tell if he was breathing. Jeb was off to one side, sprawled face down, gun in a death grip. Ilesa lay next to him, curled into a ball, hands covering her head.

Ignoring them for the moment, Shadrak moved silently around the sarcophagus to where there was an open trapdoor on the floor behind it. He peered into a pit with the mouth of a tunnel low down on one of its walls. Presumably another way out of the crypt.

Shadrak was left considering what to do next: tend to the others or press on alone? The latter was tempting, especially if it meant he got the ring back and could leave New Londdyr with no one getting in his way. Nine times out of ten, that's exactly what he'd have done.

When you were as stealthy as he was, it was a rare opponent who could avoid a knife in the back. But something gave him pause: the thought of what Bekra Cy had done to take out Ilesa and Jeb, neither of whom was any kind of slouch. Nils didn't count: a good sneeze would have done for him.

"You don't want to go down there after her," Ilesa said from behind him. "Not without a plan."

Shadrak hadn't heard her move. Either she was as good as he was, or he was getting careless. He sat back on his haunches and faced her. Unharmed, it seemed, but dislodged strands of hair were in her face, and she was unsteady on her feet.

"Bekra hit us hard with sorcery, a kind I've not seen before," she said.

Jeb groaned as he came round the side of the sarcophagus, holstering his gun. "Me neither, and I thought I'd seen it all. One thing I'm sure of, though: she ain't no husk. They have a kind of scent we Maresmen are attuned to."

Shadrak bit his tongue. It was hard not to label them amateurs and go after Bekra Cy by himself. Thing was, he had no idea what he was up against, and it had never been his style to take chances.

"A plan, you say? You got one in mind?"

Ilesa shrugged. "Let's go up for air, put our heads together."

Nils was still staring at nothing when they came back round the other side of the sarcophagus. To Shadrak's surprise, Ilesa got down on one knee and stroked the lad's face.

"Nils," she said. "Are you in there?"

Groggily, he shook his head, and a whimper escaped his lips.

"Looks like shock to me," Jeb said.

Ilesa stood. "Carry him."

With a mock salute, Jeb bent down and scooped Nils into his arms. A wisp of gas trickled from the mouth-slit of his mask with the effort, and Shadrak took a step back.

“A man could easily take offense at that,” Jeb said. “But don’t worry, I ain’t a man anymore.”

Ilesa shook her head and slapped him lightly on the shoulder before slipping outside.

Jeb followed, carrying Nils, and Shadrak brought up the rear. Unable to see what was happening past Jeb’s back, he heard a clatter of weapons, Ilesa curse, then the flutter of wings.

Nils came tumbling back down the steps as Jeb dropped him and sprinted away so fast he was little more than a blur.

Four red-cloaked soldiers came into sight at the top of the steps, panting heavily from where they’d been running. Behind them, a sea of red as the Senatorial Cohort closed in.

Shadrak hopped over Nils’s limp body and leapt for the stair railings, swinging one foot to the top then backflipping to the roof of the crypt. An eagle circled overhead then soared away—Ilesa.

“Stop where you are!” someone yelled.

But Shadrak was already tumbling off the far end of the crypt and sprinting toward the back of the graveyard. He zipped in and out of tombstones then vaulted over the perimeter wall and lost himself in the tangle of overgrown woodland.

For a brief moment he felt bad about leaving Nils behind.

But it was a very brief moment.

NATURE OF THE FOE

It was Kadee's influence, it had to be, because the moment Shadrak arrived at Magwitch's place and the sorcerous mouth on the front door asked if Mister Mills Farting would be joining him later, guilt struck him like a fist in the face. A very large fist with knuckle-dusters.

Inside, the mad mage wasted no time using his viewing crystal to track the movements of the Senatorial Cohort who'd captured Nils, while Shadrak took out every single blade from his baldrics, belt, and boots and proceeded to give them a quick spit and polish.

"They usually take prisoners to that deleterious new-fondle jailhouse outside the basilica," Magwitch said.

He meant the Senate Building, which had been appropriated from the Wayist priesthood during the years of persecution. Oddly, no one had thought to give it back once the persecution ended, and the Wayists were too meek and mild to mention it.

"Won't be the first time I've broke in there," Shadrak said.

"Broken," Magwitch said, popping a truffle in his mouth.

Shadrak looked up from the stiletto blade he was giving a shine to. "Like your nose will be if you correct me again. Oh, wait, I already did that."

Magwitch chewed slowly then gulped the truffle down. "Well, if you ask me, you've far bigger problems than rescuing Nils Fargin. While you were off gallivanting, I did a little research." He patted an enormous book that lay open on the workbench in front of him.

"Those tattoos on Bekra Cy's scalp: I knew I'd seen the like before. Oh," he said, peering into the viewing crystal, "they've gone the wrong way. The Cohort are dragging Nils into the Merchants' Quarter."

Shadrak set the stiletto down and rose to look over Magwitch's shoulder. "That's the Brenitch and Cawdor Bank," he said, pointing to the vast building they were taking Nils toward. It boasted a marble facade and was flanked by fluted pillars. The windows were tall and narrow, covered with iron bars. "And that's the tradesman's entrance," he said as the soldiers bundled Nils through an iron-banded side door.

"You think he owes them money?" Magwitch said.

"Doubt it. They wouldn't be stupid enough to lend him any in the first place. No, there's something dodgy going on. The Cohort were after me. Nils is just collateral. But why bring him to the bank? If they're planning on using him to get to me, why..."

"The Senate is supposed to have amended its ways," Magwitch said with a shrug. "Maybe they don't want to be irrigated in whatever is about to happen to poor Nils."

"Torture, most likely," Shadrak said. "Amended how?"

"After the Technocrat was defecated, there was a move to clean things up. The Wayists were legalized, senators agreed to curb their expenses, and they pledged to be transmogrificant in all their dealings."

"Save the shady kind," Shadrak said, frowning at the image of the bank within the viewing crystal.

"Well, you know what they say," Magwitch said. "Behind every politician there's a plutocratic puppetmaster. Either the Senate have special privileges at the bank, which grant them access—"

"Or I pissed off someone very rich and powerful when I took out Mal Vatès," Shadrak finished.

"Well, there were rumors," Magwitch said. "And not just about Vatès being somewhat different to the savior of the plebeians that he made himself out to be. Years ago, the Senate opened an inquisition into the practices of Brenitch and Cawdor. Snippets of information

were... leaked.” He gave a little cough. “Vatès was apparently the one who shut the inquisition down. The owners of the bank are slobbered in mystery. Foreigners, they say. Maybe even from Urddynoor.”

That didn’t seem likely. Shadrak had traveled from Urddynoor in one of the Technocrat’s discarded planeships, possibly the last of its kind. It had later been destroyed outside the dwarf city of Arnoch.

“Well, it don’t matter who’s behind it or why. I’ll rescue Fargin then get my ring back. I ain’t getting into nothing deeper.”

“I don’t think you could,” Magwitch said. “You’re already in up to your cranium.” He hefted the book and jabbed a dirty finger at a page aswirl with complex sigils and patterns. “These designs are similar to the tattoos on Bekra’s head; they are sorcerous links and buffers. She’s a minion, Shadrak, the creation of a very puissant sorcerer.”

“The Witch Queen?” Shadrak wondered out loud. But that made no sense; if the ring was a lure for sorcerers, why would a minion of Hekata N’Gat take it back?

“I think not,” Magwitch said. “Look at the text. You can read Ancient Urddynoorian, can’t you?”

Shadrak scowled but looked at the letters on the page anyway.

“It’s a description of how to prepare the subject, ink the designs, and an exposition of each sigil’s meaning,” Magwitch said.

“What’s this?” Shadrak pointed at a block of cuneiform writing in the margins that was anything but Ancient Urddynoorian.

“An invocation.” Magwitch peered over the top of his spectacles. “In the old tongue of Verusia.”

Shadrak swallowed thickly. “Blightey?”

A slow nod. “She’s a creature of the Lich Lord’s.”

Shadrak pulled his never-full bag from a belt pouch, unfolded it and drew out a weedstick laced with *somnificus*. He was too late, though: the memories had already begun to surface, but maybe he could take the edge off.

Magwitch shook his head and got up from the workbench. “All that’s going to do is put you in touch with your true nature.”

“So?” Shadrak said, lighting the weedstick with a single strike of a match. He seated himself in the chair Magwitch had just vacated and put his feet on the workbench. As he stared into the crystal, wishing the wizard eye could show him what was going on inside the bank, he took a long drag on the weedstick and let the horrors he’d witnessed in Verusia play out as if they were someone else’s memories.

He was vaguely aware of Magwitch leaving the room, muttering something about having better things to do. Slowly, the import of what the mad mage had just said seeped into Shadrak’s awareness. Better things to do... Same as he had. He stubbed out the weedstick and returned it to the never-full bag, then stood. He was going to rescue Nils and then go after Bekra Cy. No boogey man from the past was going to deter him from completing his mission.

He was about to leave when his eyes fell upon the open book with the sigils and the Verusian writing. Something told him it might come in handy. Something else told him Magwitch wouldn’t miss it, and even if he did, what was he going to do about it? He shut the book and stuffed it inside the never-full bag, then folded the bag and returned it to his belt pouch.

As he pulled the sequence of levers in the entrance hall and slipped outside the front door, the sorcerous mouth called after him, “Do you have permission to take that book with you?”

Shadrak gave the door the finger and proceeded down the steps to the street.

Two figures stepped from an alleyway, and it took his *somnificus*-dazed mind a whole second to react—a second that could have cost him his life.

“Ilesa?” he said, shaking his head to clear it. “Jeb?”

“Thought we’d find you here,” Ilesa said.

“Let me guess,” Shadrak said. “You need my help taking down Bekra Cy?”

“You can keep the ring,” Ilesa said. “For me, it’s just personal now.”

Shadrak nodded. “All right, but first I’m going after Fargin.”

Jeb drew a pistol and twirled it on his finger before slamming it back in the holster. “Then you’ve got yourself a posse.”

BRENITCH AND CAWDOR

Shadrak ducked down behind a crate filled with empty bottles. The scuff, slap, stomp of dozens of sandaled feet crossed the mouth of the alley in front of him, a long chain of unbroken noise that slowly receded. Ilesa had told him the city was on lockdown because of what he'd done to the First Senator a lifetime ago. She'd gone on ahead with Jeb. The Senatorial Cohort had no interest in them, or if they did, it paled into insignificance compared to the prize of capturing Shadrak. The troubling thing was, if they wanted him so badly, what were they prepared to do to Nils to find him? Shadrak knew he shouldn't have cared; should have gotten out of the city any way he could and written off this ring business as a waste of time and effort. But he'd given up questioning the silent voice of Kadee that pulled his strings and finally submitted to the yeast of her softening.

He found Ilesa and Jeb staking out the Brenitch and Cawdor Bank from the verandah of the whorehouse across the street. The masked Maresman cast longing looks at the establishment's frosted glass windows, seemingly more interested in whatever was going on inside, whatever he was missing out on, than in how they were going to rescue Nils from the bank.

"Ignore him," Ilesa said. "He's not been getting any lately, what with the festering."

"Don't worry yourself on my account," Jeb shot back. "I still got hands, and I got a picture of you in my head anytime I need inspiration."

Ilesa chuckled and slapped the Maresman on the shoulder.

"You got a plan?" Shadrak asked.

Ilesa sobered instantly and stared out at the facade of the bank. It was a big building, four stories high and constructed of blocks of what looked like granite. A steady stream of

customers went in and out of the double doors, most of them wealthy merchants by the way they dressed: velvet cloaks, foppish hats, heavy coin purses dangling from their belts. It was a thieves' paradise, but it also had a reputation for being a thieves' graveyard. Whatever security Brenitch and Cawdor employed, it was certainly effective. So effective, some whispered it was magical. The painted sign above the door could have been brand new, it was so pristine, yet it looked the same sign that had always been there to Shadrak.

"I counted nine Cohort leave via the side door they took Nils through," Ilesa said.

"Which means there's only three inside with him," Shadrak said.

"Maybe they don't need any more," Jeb said, wrenching his eyes away from the bawdy house and crossing his arms over his chest. "Nothing to do with the lad, but I reckon they got ways of keeping hold of what they take. The Cohort was just the means of delivery."

He had a point, and Shadrak was liking the situation less and less. He was a planner, an observer. He'd built his successes on meticulous preparation and caution. But they didn't have the luxury here. If they didn't act, and act soon, Nils was going to suffer. The chances of him getting out of this alive were slim to none. Actually, considering the Senate's obsession with popularity polls, and the fact they wouldn't risk news of this being leaked, you could drop the "slim". Fargin was a dead man.

"Leave it to me," Ilesa said. "You guys go have some fun." She nodded to the whorehouse. "Oh, sorry, you can't." She pretended to read a notice on the door: "No lepers and no pale-faced midgets. Just stay put, and don't be bored."

The air around her shimmered and she disappeared.

A whining buzz shot past Shadrak's ear. He went to slap at a mosquito, but Jeb caught his wrist.

"Don't know about you, Shadrak, but I ain't good at being a spare part. Reckon I'll go cover that side door, in case they come out."

As Shadrak watched the Maresman saunter across the street, the door of the whorehouse opened behind him.

“You can come in lads,” a woman said. “We’re open for—”

Shadrak turned straight into a waft of perfume and looked up at a corseted bosom. It was a fleeting glimpse only, for next thing he knew, the door was slammed shut in his face.

When he turned back toward the bank, he saw two slender figures step from an adjacent building and follow Jeb. They were both dressed in charcoal grey tunics and britches, their shoes black and shiny. Women. Hair bound up in severe buns. Dressed like bankers, but moving on the balls of their feet like seasoned warriors. Or assassins.

One of them drew a knife, the other a garrote.

And then Shadrak was running, hand flying to his baldric. He called out, but before Jeb could turn, the assassin’s knife slashed across the back of the Maresman’s thigh and he dropped to his knees.

The one with the garrote backflipped once, twice, and with the third came down behind Shadrak. He spun round, at the same time pulling out a punch dagger, bringing it between the garrote and his throat. In the same motion, he drew the second punch dagger and rammed it into the woman’s ribs. Only, she flowed around the strike like water, let go of the garrote, and open-palmed toward Shadrak’s face. He twisted and slashed, corkscrewed over his shoulder, landed in a crouch, thrusting with the other dagger. The woman somersaulted over him. Shadrak turned—straight into an axe-kick. He rolled under it. She came on, a flurry of kicks and punches, and now it was Shadrak’s turn to backflip, one, twice, three times, to create space. He came up standing, and the woman started to circle, eyes of gleaming violet never leaving his.

She fainted, and Shadrak took a step back. She was fast. Too fast. And highly skilled. On instinct, he reached for his thundershot, remembered it was empty. The woman raised her

lead knee, lowered it again. She switched stance, back heel coming off the floor. Too late, Shadrak realized it was another feint. She launched herself forward, but rather than kicking, she delivered an overhand right. Shadrak grunted as it connected with his cheek. His skull filled with noise and his vision blurred.

He staggered away to his right, sweeping his blades before him in a defensive arc. When the woman lunged, Shadrak was too dazed to react in time. A punch to the sternum, a kick to the meat of his thigh. He stabbed wildly, hitting only air. He felt the rush of her fist once more, winced against the impact—

But it never found his face.

Thunder boomed—a gunshot—and the woman crumpled to her knees, hissing and spitting. A second shot, and she keeled over, dead.

Jeb limped toward him, leaving a trail of blood in his wake. The other assassin lay prone in the street, a cloud of noxious vapor slowly pluming from her and dissipating on the breeze.

It was then that Shadrak realized there were people screaming outside the bank, calling for the City Watch. Others were pouring out of buildings up and down the street, coming to see what the noise was about. From inside the bank, a fierce tolling of bells and a wailing, unnatural alarm so shrill that it hurt Shadrak's ears.

The side door of the bank flew open, and Ilesa staggered out carrying Nils in her arms.

“Triggered some magical alarm,” she yelled.

Nils looked limp and lifeless, his face swollen with fresh bruises. The sight of the lad this way sent acid rage coursing through Shadrak's veins. It should have been him... No, it should have been whoever did this to Nils. But there wasn't time. Vengeance, as he well knew, would keep. “We need to go,” he said.

“Back to the Wizards' Quarter?” Ilesa asked. She frowned as she caught sight of Jeb's hobbled leg.

“The crypt,” Shadrak said. “They’ll have cottoned on to Magwitch by now. We need to get out of the city—the same way Bekra Cy left.”

“Go on without me,” Jeb said, dirty fumes already spilling from the mouth-slit of his mask. “I’ll meet you outside the city walls. The gate guards won’t dare stop a Maresman.”

“Unless they’ve been told you’re rogue,” Ilesa said.

Jeb twirled his gun on his finger. “Then I’ll have to persuade them otherwise. Now go!”

Ilesa swelled until she was the size of an ogre. With Nils slung over her shoulder, she barreled toward an alleyway.

Shadrak glanced at Jeb, who was rapidly disappearing behind a roiling cloud of gas that began to creep out across the street like a fog bank. And then he was off after Ilesa.

SHADOW FROM THE PAST

“I didn’t tell them nothing,” Nils mumbled as Ilesa lowered him to the top of the sarcophagus and shrank back to her regular size. “Shadrak...” The lad pushed himself up on one elbow. “I tell you, I didn’t say nothing.”

Shadrak nodded, still trying to catch his breath. Ilesa had set a break-neck pace from the Brenitch and Cawdor Bank to the Templeton Graveyard, and she’d not slowed till they entered the crypt. All well and good for her in her giantess form, but Shadrak’s legs were only a third of the size, which meant he’d had to run three times as fast. *Cow.*

Nils looked a mess: puffy circles of purpling yellow around both eyes, welts on his wrists and neck, and a bluish tinge to his lips.

“You did well, Nils,” Ilesa said, ruffling his hair.

He wrinkled his nose at that, but when she leaned in to kiss him on the forehead, he grinned from ear to ear.

Ilesa rolled her eyes and moved away to examine the opening to the tunnel Bekra Cy had taken.

Shadrak became aware of Nils’s eyes on him. The lad clearly needed more than a nod in response to his heroics. Judging by his condition, they’d made a pretty decent start to the torture, but Shadrak knew from past experience, both giving and receiving, that there were levels to these things. Nils had been lucky—lucky to have people stupid enough to give a damn about what happened to him.

“Your dad would have been proud,” Shadrak said.

“Shog off!” Nils jumped down from the top of the sarcophagus.

“Sorry.” Impressing a scut like Buck Fargin was the worst kind of insult. “Ilesa’s proud of you, then.”

“You think?” Nils puffed out his pigeon chest. “And you?”

“Uhm...”

“I’m not proud,” Ilesa said, coming back round the sarcophagus. “Any idiot can keep his mouth shut.”

Nils looked liked she’d slapped him. “Why? Why’d you come for me?”

“Past failures,” she said simply. “Someone I should have protected a long time ago.”

Nils shook his head. This time when he caught Shadrak’s eye, he smiled. “Thanks, Shadrak. Thank you both.”

Shadrak felt a tic start up beneath his eye. “So, who was it, then? Some scut of a senator?”

“Senator? Don’t think so. He asked about you, Shadrak, and the Cohort took notes. All nonsense. Stuff I made up. But he was more interested in the ring.”

“Who’s he?” Ilesa asked. “And how’d he know about the ring?”

“Same way everyone else apparently does,” Shadrak said, giving her a pointed look.

“Didn’t give no name,” Nils said, “and when I asked for it, he gave me this.” He pointed to one of his blackening eyes. “Not with a fist, neither. Magic it was, and it was magic that chafed my wrists and neck.”

“Describe him,” Shadrak said.

Nils shrugged. “Dressed like a banker: grey tunic and britches, shiny shoes. He had them half-moon spectacles, some kind of poncey neck-tie. Slicked back hair—oily. Face looked like it ain’t never seen the sun, and he had this thin smile and eyes the color of piss.”

“Brenitch,” Ilesa said. “One half of Brenitch and Cawdor. I only know what he looks like due to some dodgy dealings one of the Dybbuks had with the bank. Before you ask, no idea

what it was about. Poor bastard died within hours of making it back to the theater. Loss of blood, they said, only... no wounds.”

Nils looked like he was about to be sick. “He did this thing to me...” He curled his fingers into a claw and held his hand up. “Made me feel queasy. You think he got my blood?”

“Rumor on the streets is that Cawdor’s worse,” Ilesa said.

“Oh?” Nils said.

“Just a rumor. Don’t worry, you’re not likely to run into him in the city. Silent partner, they say. Prefers a life of anonymity in the provinces, maybe even further afield.”

The important thing for Shadrak was that now there was another party after the ring, one with the resources and reach of the Brenitch and Cawdor Bank, who clearly had some kind of shady connection with the Senate. The sooner this was over and done with, the better.

“Come on,” Ilesa said. “Enough talk. Jeb’s probably outside the city already, waiting for us with horses.”

Nils frowned, but Shadrak chose to ignore the lad’s unspoken question and ask one of his own.

“We got Nils back,” he said to Ilesa, “so what makes you think we’re still working together?”

“You’re a killer, Shadrak,” Ilesa said. “Maybe the best there is. Me, Jeb, and Nils, we couldn’t take Bekra down—”

“I see. So you need me to kill the bitch, then you think you can run off with my ring, is that it? You know what she is? You want to know who’s really after the ring?”

“Besides Master Arcagen?” Nils said. “And the Brenitch and Cawdor Bank. And some nasty Stygian you know from Pellor.”

Shadrak opened his pouch, slid his hand into the never-full bag, and pulled out Magwitch’s book. He opened it to the page with the tattoo designs and passed it to Nils.

“You’re some kind of scholar, ain’t you? Scholarize this. Let me know what you learn.”

Nils grunted as he studied the drawings on the page. “Bekra Cy’s made from sorcery?”

Ilesa pressed in close to him, tried to read over his shoulder. “My Ancient Urddynoorian’s crap. What’s it say?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Shadrak said. “What I wanted you scuts to see is this.” He jabbed a finger at the cuneiform writing in the margins.

“Verusian,” Nils said, all color leaving his face.

Ilesa stepped back from the book, as if she feared she might catch something.

“Blightey,” Shadrak said. “The Lich Lord’s after the ring, and he sent Bekra to get it for him. Still want in on this?”

Ilesa licked her lips. “Shog the ring. If that creep’s after it, you’re welcome to it. But I’m still going with you. Bekra double-crossed me.”

“And you?” Shadrak asked Nils.

The lad looked miserable. “No choice. If I don’t get the ring, Arcagen will kill me.”

Well, at least they had that in common.

“As will I, if you try taking it from me again,” Shadrak said. “But don’t worry: work with me and don’t get in my way, and I’ll take care of Arcagen for you. That’s a promise.”

Nils didn’t look convinced.

“I mean it,” Shadrak said. And he did. Not for Nils’s benefit, but he’d already decided no scutting wizard was going to get away with putting bugs in his guts and threatening to have them eat their way out. Just the thought of it sent his hands to his stomach.

Nils saw and turned his nose up. “Silent but deadly, eh? Shogging disgusting!”

THE TUNNEL

Ilesa must have been really pissed at Bekra Cy, because she was the first one down into the pit. She'd never before struck Shadrak as the type to put herself in harm's way, especially not when she could have sent him or Nils ahead of her. When she hesitated at the mouth of the tunnel to wait for Nils to jump down next, it looked like her instinct for self-preservation had reasserted itself.

"Don't let me stop you," Shadrak said, dropping lightly to the floor of the pit.

Ilesa bit her lip then shot him a look of fury. "Fine," she said, as she ducked her head into the opening.

A spike of warning stabbed at the base of Shadrak's skull. "Wait!" he cried, and Ilesa froze.

"What is it?" Nils asked.

Shadrak held up a hand for silence. He needed to concentrate. He'd had warning feelings before, but nothing like this. It was as if the stabbing pain in his head had pierced him to the core, beyond the repository of his perfect memory, and tapped into something buried deeper. Deeper than his earliest experiences, he began to suspect. Something in his blood. Something innate.

"It's a trap," he said.

Ilesa pulled back from the opening. "How do you know?"

"No idea," Shadrak said. "I just do."

"What kind of trap?" Nils asked.

"Trickery. Deception."

“Homunculus stuff?” Ilesa gave Shadrak a knowing look, as if she thought they shared a common heritage, just because she’d shape-shifted into a homunculus woman in order to dupe him.

But she’d guessed right. Something in the tunnel had the feel of Gehenna about it. There was a whiff of homunculi lore, possibly stolen, likely unleashed by Bekra Cy—a creature of Blightey’s. It was common knowledge the Lich Lord had terrorized Gehenna on more than one occasion, and he’d no doubt picked up a few tricks along the way.

“What should we do?” Nils asked.

Shadrak pointed at the book the cretin was carrying under one arm. “You wait here and read like your life depends on it. I want anything we can use against Bekra Cy when we catch up with her. Anything, you understand?”

Nils couldn’t have looked more relieved. He sat cross-legged on the floor of the pit and began to leaf through the pages.

“And me?” Ilesa said.

“Just wait here.” Shadrak took out his Ancient-tech goggles and slipped them on. “Make sure idiot boy doesn’t slack.”

Starting with the night vision setting, he peered into the mouth of the tunnel. He could make out rubble limned in green, and bones—rodents and pigeons by the looks of them. There was a hairline crack in the ceiling, through which moisture seeped. Other than that, nothing.

He adjusted the lenses until they picked out heat, made out the blurry red haze of a rat scurrying about. He continued to rotate the lenses, passing through their whole array of settings. A violet sheen fell over his vision, then golden, and finally silver. And it was then that he saw something he’d never seen before, yet felt deep down in his bones was intimately familiar: wispy threads of darkness crisscrossing the length and breadth of the tunnel. There

were gaps between them a child could have passed through, if they were extremely agile and careful. A child or a homunculus.

He thought about offering Ilesa the goggles and seeing if she'd be able to use them if she changed into something small, like an insect. Maybe the goggles would shrink with her. Maybe they wouldn't. He decided there was no point in asking. This wasn't about what she could do, it was about what she *would* do, what she had the guts to do.

"There's a network of sorcerous strands we need to pass through," he said.

"Strands?" Nils looked up from the book. Ilesa slapped him on the back of the head and he went back to his reading.

"What happens if we touch them?" Ilesa asked.

Shadrak gestured toward the tunnel. "Why don't you find out?"

In that instant, one of the scampering rats ran into a strand. The entire web of tendrils blinked out of existence. On the ground twenty feet along the tunnel, a multi-faceted gemstone appeared, ghosting in and out of reality. Nebulous strands like those that had just disappeared extended from the faces of the gemstone, detached themselves, and bounced from the ceiling, walls, and floor at different angles. Within seconds, they stabilized in a new pattern, and the gemstone shimmered and vanished, leaving the rat just another rodent skeleton littering the tunnel floor.

"No need," Shadrak said. "I've had my demonstration."

Now he just had a couple of questions to answer before he went and did something he'd live to regret—or not. How much did he want the Witch Queen's ring? How badly did he need the Stygian's money?

He thought of the flintlocks he'd given to Bolos, the empty cartridge rammed into the handle of the thundershot. Thought of the crossbow he needed to replace his guns, the months and months of scraping out a living taking jobs a journeyman would have turned his nose up

at, just so he could eat. He thought of the contract the Senate had out on him, and of being kept from the city and his only real chance of making a decent living. Last of all, and most persuasively, he thought of the bore-grubs Arecagen had implanted in his belly, and of the fact he had just under a week left until they ate their way out. It didn't seem like he had all that much choice.

He needed to reach the gemstone, some innate sense told him. In spite of it no longer being visible, he'd seen enough: his perfect memory could easily plot the course through the tendrils. Then what? What would he do when he reached it? No answer this time, but something told him he'd know once he got there. Maybe. It all depended on how much his homunculus nature was prepared to reveal, not to mention how much it could be trusted.

He took out a weedstick laced with *somnificus*, lit it with a match, and took a long drag.

"That's it?" Ilesa said. "You've given up? You're just going to get stoned and do nothing?"

Shadrak took another draw on the weedstick, taking the smoke deep into his lungs. Anxiety drained away from him in an instant, and at the same time the sorcerous network in the tunnel felt even more familiar to him, an overused trick even a child could disarm.

He held up the still-burning weedstick, half-tempted to stub it out in Ilesa's face. Only, he couldn't reach. He dropped it on the floor and trod it underfoot. Then he removed his cloak, his baldrics, and his belt with its pouches—anything that might accidentally touch one of the tendrils. He removed his never-full bag and placed all his possessions inside it then crammed it into the top of his boot. There was no way he was leaving his stuff for Ilesa and Nils to rifle through. And with that, guided by the vision of the goggles, he moved gingerly into the tunnel.

The first tendril was easy—head height to a homunculus and running from wall to wall. He ducked under it then stepped over the next, which was half a foot above the floor. He had

to crawl beneath the base of a cross formed by two diagonals. As he inched his way forward, the obstacles formed by the tendrils grew more difficult, the spaces between them narrower. He contorted his body into awkward positions, posting on one hand, twisting his torso, scissoring his legs, always careful to land in perfect balance. One slip, and he'd never get another chance.

A little further along and his heart sank. A succession of six horizontal tendrils stacked one on top of the other—a fence of deadly sorcery as high as Shadrak was tall, and with gaps between them even a rat would have trouble passing through. The pile of bones on the floor was testament to just how many had tried. Beyond the fence, only a few more feet of tendrils before he reached the heart of the network and the invisible gemstone that projected it.

He ran through the goggles' settings once more until he could see the tunnel walls clearly, limned in green. He could have climbed a wall easily, they were so rough and poorly mortared, but when he altered the goggles' vision again, he noticed three more tendrils crossing the tunnel just beneath the ceiling, leaving a gap of barely two feet between them and the stacked tendrils rising from the floor.

A part of him just wanted to lay down and give up in despair, but another part—the part unleashed by the weedstick—urged him into a new and unfamiliar recklessness. He fought against it with his old safeguards, the obsessive carefulness that had kept him alive all this time. But it was a losing battle when he knew that doing nothing, not taking a risk, would lead even more certainly to a painful death at the hands of Arecagen and his bore-grubs.

He sprinted at the tunnel wall, hit it running, and launched himself into a corkscrewing flip over the fence of tendrils. He winced as chill air touched his back—from where he must have passed within a hair's breadth of the strands above. He landed on the balls of his feet, rolled beneath a horizontal thread, and hopped over another.

He froze, at the eye of the trap, surrounded by tendrils at different heights and angles. And without knowing why, he chuckled.

Slowly, he crouched down and pulled his never-full bag from the top of his boot. Even this mysterious bag, which he'd carried with him for so long, seemed suddenly familiar, a plaything for children. He'd found it in the planeship he'd used to cross the worlds from Urddynoor to Aethir. The bag had been perfect for smuggling—he'd even trafficked a dozen husks across the border by shoving them inside. It was bottomless. Infinite in its capacity, or so it seemed. There was nothing it couldn't hold, and to his mind nothing that could harm it. Whatever fabric it was made from was unnatural; it belonged neither to Urddynoor nor Aethir. For all he knew, it could have been woven from the very stuff of the Abyss.

He opened up the bag and carefully removed his cloak, belt, and baldrics, setting them on the floor. He reached around inside the bag's depths for a while longer, in case there was something he'd left inside, then he inside-outed the fabric, drawing it over his hand and arm like a glove. He chuckled again: it wasn't infinite, as he might have expected: only its capacity was. As if anything he placed inside were stored someplace else, and the bag itself was only a conduit or a doorway.

With his hand covered by the dark and almost liquid material of the bag's interior, Shadrak got down on his knees and reached for the empty space he'd seen the tendrils extend from. Where bag met tendril, the tendril snuffed out. One after the other, the strands disappeared, swallowed by whatever Void-stuff comprised the bag. And then Shadrak felt through the fabric the hard-edged solidity of the gemstone. He made a fist around it, and the entire network of tendrils winked out. With a sigh of relief, he turned the bag right side out and removed his hand, leaving the gemstone inside. He took off the goggles and added them to the unfathomable depths.

“You can come on in now,” he called down the tunnel.

He folded the bag and put it back in its pouch, then put on his belt, baldrics, and cloak.

Ilesa and Nils were a long time coming, as if they still feared a trap. Nils was wittering on about how Bekra Cy's power was in her tattoos—he'd obviously read the bit Magwitch had pointed out.

"Thing is, how'd you remove tattoos?" Nils asked.

"You don't," Ilesa said. "So you're barking up the wrong tree."

"No, you're wrong," Nils said. "I got a notion—"

"Course you have."

"You two scuts finished?" Shadrak said. "Thought your boyfriend was waiting outside the city walls with horses."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Yeah, right!" Nils said.

They followed the tunnel for another hundred yards or so until it began to angle upwards at a steady gradient, finally ending in a wall of solid granite.

"Shogging great," Nils grumbled. "Must be the inside of one of the buttresses. Now what?"

Ilesa looked at Shadrak, who couldn't help chuckling again. The oldest trick in the book, it suddenly seemed to him. And it wasn't just his intuition this time: he'd seen the same sort of thing before, in the tunnels beneath the dwarf city of Arx Gravis. Ghost Wall, they called it.

With a swagger, Shadrak walked straight through the buttress and out into the shadow of the Cyclopean Walls. The suns were high in the sky, doing their erratic dance above the crop fields outlying the city. In the near distance, leaning against a boundary fence, blood-stained bandage around his wounded leg, horse either side of him chewing up the grass, was Jebediah Skayne.

“Well, at least one of you ain’t a complete waste of space,” Shadrak said.

The Maresman saluted as the trio left the shelter of the walls and ran toward him.

“You there!” a guard yelled down from the battlements, but the challenge lacked conviction. “Ah, shog it,” the man cursed. He might just as well have added, “Not my problem.” Cutbacks had a direct effect on caliber, it seemed. For once Shadrak owed the Senate a debt of gratitude.

“You see anything?” Ilesa asked breathlessly as she reached Jeb.

“Bekra was long gone by the time I got here. Not even a footprint to follow. What we need’s a bird’s-eye view.”

Ilesa nodded, then flew off in the form of an eagle. After a matter of minutes she returned, and with a flutter of wings resumed her human form.

“She’s traveling alone and on foot, but at one hell of a pace. We’re going to need those horses.”

“Which way?” Shadrak asked.

Ilesa turned and pointed north, where a haze was coming off the Origo River.

“Carys Woods?” Nils asked. A well-known drop-off point for smugglers.

“I don’t think so,” Ilesa said. She glanced at Jeb, a barely concealed grimace on her face.

“I think she’s heading for my home town. I think she’s going to Portis.”

THE CRAWFISH

After only a few hours' ride, Jeb insisted on stopping midway through Carys Wood to rest and water the horses. It was an irritation to Shadrak, who just wanted to get this over with. More than that, the delay made him imagine all manner of writhing and skittering in his guts that tightened his lungs and made it hard to breathe. He soon took care of that, though, with a hastily rolled weedstick.

Nils spent the time studying Magwitch's book and practicing the few cantrips his insect brain had been able to memorize from his Academy training. It was a pathetic showing: sparks that failed to set bone-dry tinder ablaze; squeezing a single drop of water from an already moist stone; and his trusty erasing spell, with which he managed to accidentally wipe out a whole paragraph of Otto Blightey's margin notes. The only plus side was that meant they didn't have to listen to any more of Nils's stuttering attempts at translating from the Verusian.

Ilesa used the time to scout ahead in her eagle form. Bekra Cy, she said, had reached Portis and entered the Crawfish, a dubious sounding establishment that Jeb seemed all too familiar with. The knowledge that Bekra had reached her destination, and that the ring was one step closer to the Lich Lord, had Shadrak cursing the others as amateurs. If they disagreed with him, they kept it to themselves as they saddled up and got underway again.

The stench of fish grew stronger the nearer they came to Portis, and a pall of silence settled over the group. Jeb, Nils, and Ilesa had faced Bekra Cy before and been lucky to survive. Maybe they needed some quiet time to process that, to review what had gone wrong, to plan for what they could do differently.

Shadrak, though, had very little to work with. All he knew was what they had told him, and the glimpses he'd observed through Magwitch's viewing crystal. But he'd killed unstoppable foes before. He'd made a reputation from it. All he needed to do, he reminded himself, was stay loose and trust in his instincts, which had been honed from obsessive adherence to daily training, not to mention his years of hard-earned experience.

Once or twice he reached for another weedstick then stopped himself. While smoking might put him more in touch with his homunculus nature, it would slow his reflexes, and he had a feeling he was going to need them.

At Jeb's suggestion, they avoided the main road into Portis that led over a bridge and onto the Hight Street. Everyone came and went that way, he said. Sight of a Maresman would cause unrest; usually when one of the husk hunters was in town, blood followed. But a Maresman accompanied by an albino midget was likely to plunge the populace into wholesale panic. Not only that, but Ilesa had grown up in Portis. There were those who still remembered why she'd left and had been relieved to see the back of her.

Ilesa, Shadrak, and Nils dismounted, but Jeb's bound and bleeding leg meant he was better off remaining in the saddle. He controlled his horse with one hand and led the spare by the reins with the other.

"I say we send Fargin in as bait," Shadrak said as they took a detour along the coastline of the Chalice Sea.

"Oi!" Nils said from behind, still reading as he walked. Say one thing for the lad: he was as diligent as he was stupid. The only wonder was that he hadn't tripped over his own feet.

"No one's being used as bait," Ilesa said, striding on ahead.

Jeb leaned out of the saddle toward Shadrak and whispered, "She's protective of the lad. Lost her brother here a while back." He checked to see Ilesa was still walking then tugged on

the reins and brought his horse and the one he was leading to a halt. “Blamed me for it at first, and boy was she angry.”

“What happened to change her mind?” Shadrak said.

“Persuaded her of the truth.”

“And that was?”

“Someone else did it. Mortis it was who shot the boy.” He raised a hand to his mask. “The Maresman who used to wear this.”

Jeb kicked his heels into his horse’s flanks, setting it and the spare into a slow plod.

Even so, Shadrak had to walk briskly to keep up. A succession of questions sprang to mind, but the one that really intrigued him concerned the Maresman’s relationship with Ilesa. He couldn’t help asking, “So, are you two...”

“A work in progress,” Jeb said. “Time was, folk cursed me as a rake, but things ain’t been quite the same since I started festering.” A trickle of dirty smoke spilled from his mouth-slit, as if to illustrate the point. Both horses shook their manes and whinnied. “Got Mortis to thank for that, too. They used to call him the Plague Demon. I killed him. The affliction passed to me.”

“And the moniker?”

Jeb shrugged but chose not to answer. He leaned down over his mount’s head, whispering soft words, then urged both horses into a canter that left Shadrak in their wake and swiftly closed the gap with Ilesa.

Something bumped into Shadrak from behind. He spun round, dagger in hand—

“Fargin! Look where you’re shogging going, will you?”

“I’ve got an idea,” Nils said excitedly, glancing up from the book.

“Good for you.”

“No, seriously, I have. My magic—”

Shadrak snorted out a laugh and kept walking.

Jeb and Ilesa waited for them on an escarpment overlooking the back-end of Portis. The overturned hulls of dozens of fishing boats littered the scrubland ahead, discarded, rotting, caked in barnacles and streaked white with guano. Seagulls perched atop the wrecks, squawking with irritating persistence. Torn and weathered nets were strewn across the ground, some wrapped about the carcasses of gulls that had snagged a wing or a leg. Brine was thick in the air, mingled with the sour odor of seaweed.

“That’s the back of the Sea Bed.” Jeb pointed out a tall building in the near distance, atop the ridge of the Hight Street. An assortment of tenements fell away from it both sides of the street. On the edge of a plaza between the fishing boat graveyard and the High Street was a squat stone building with barred windows. “Sheriff’s office,” Jeb said. “Last incumbent ended up dead in the basement. Don’t even know if they’ve replaced him.”

“And the Crawfish?” Shadrak asked.

Jeb pointed to the far end of the Hight Street, where the main road came into town. “It’s where most of Portis’s business is done, official and otherwise.”

“We have to assume Bekra has connections here,” Ilesa said. “People keeping an eye out for us.”

“She knew she was followed?” Nils asked, finally shutting Magwitch’s book and tucking it under his arm.

Ilesa shrugged.

“I’ll wait here,” Jeb said, drawing his gun and spinning it on his finger. “First sign of trouble, I’ll ride into town with this bad boy blazing.”

“Shame you went and lost that vambrace,” Shadrak said to Nils. “You could have snuck in and taken the ring from Bekra, just like you did from me.”

“Yeah, well I lost it at the theater, didn’t I?”

“So, what do we do, then?” Ilesa said. “Going head to head with Bekra didn’t work out last time.”

“You need to get close to her without her knowing,” Jeb said. “A disguise, maybe.”

“No,” Shadrak said. “Not just a disguise: a distraction. Catch her off guard.” He reached into his pocket, drew out the picture of Dame Consilia he’d taken from the theater and uncrumpled it.

“Who’s that, a whore that took pity on you?” Ilesa said.

“An actress,” Shadrak said. “And a famous one, too.” Infamous might have been a better word.

Jeb gave a nervous cough. “They know her here. It’ll certainly grab the locals’ attention. The dame’s a star for more reasons than one.”

“Something you’re not telling me?” Ilesa said.

“Not really. We met. That’s all there is to it.”

“Liar.”

Ilesa snatched the picture from Shadrak. As she looked at it, the air around her shimmered, and there in her place stood a perfect likeness of the dame herself, hair wound up in a platinum beehive, satin dress cinched tightly around her narrow waist, breasts plumped up like pillows above her laced corset.

“Bigger...” Jeb suggested, indicating her chest.

Ilesa feigned a swipe at him and then obliged. “Now what?” she said.

“Well, the arse...” Jeb started.

“Not my disguise. Now what do we do?”

“Nils,” Shadrak said, “will walk ahead of you announcing the return of a legend. Make a lot of noise. Shithole like this, the peasants likely don’t get much excitement. Everyone will want to see what’s going on.”

“Careful,” Ilesa said, her voice jarring with the dame’s appearance. “I grew up here.”

“I rest my case,” Shadrak said. “By the way, you need to work on the voice. Try pinching your nose and imagining a pole up your—”

Jeb guffawed, and Ilesa shot him an indignant glare. Then she was off across the wasteland, hitching up her skirts. Nils jogged to get ahead of her, and when they reached the High Street he began to yell in the manner of a town crier, announcing the return of the most illustrious star the world had ever known. That was Shadrak’s cue to set off at a run in the direction of the Crawfish.

Just shy of the High Street, he passed a whorehouse and received dirty looks from the tarts smoking on the verandah. Second time in one day he’d been disparaged by prostitutes. If he’d had more time, he’d have taught them a lesson they’d never forget. From there, he found himself a narrow alley that looked out across the street at an establishment with a swinging sign depicting a painted crustacean.

People were emerging from houses, taverns, and stores to investigate the noise coming from further up the street. Not only Nils now: there were dozens of cheering locals in overalls processing down the incline behind the lad, and they had hoisted Dame Consilia—Ilesa—onto their shoulders. Within moments the Hight Street was teeming.

Shadrak weaved in among the crowd and sidled up to the swing doors of the Crawfish. He kept to one side and peered through the slats.

There were two women talking within. From what he could make out, the place was empty other than that. He could see animal heads mounted on the walls—deer, wolves, hog. There were stuffed falcons leering down from the rafters, a couple of huge turkeys opposite where he was standing, also stuffed. Along with the animal heads, someone had hung fishing rods, saws, metal shin guards, a harpoon. There was even a sizable alligator high up by the ceiling.

Shadrak had to cross to the other side of the swing doors to see where the voices were coming from. Behind a rough-hewn bar, a crooked-toothed crone with hair dyed an unnatural shade of red spat into a rag and used to it clean a beer glass. On a stool in front of the bar, Bekra Cy, back to Shadrak, leaning across to the landlady with barely disguised impatience.

“Like I said when you first got here, love,” the landlady said, “I can’t help you if you won’t say who you’re meeting.” A furtive glance toward the closed door of an office at the back. “Thing is, Boss likes to know what business visitors have in town, so I have to ask.” Again that look toward the office.

“Is this normal?” Bekra Cy said, gesturing through a window toward the street, where the noise of the crowd was growing riotous.

“Dame Consilia, I heard them cry,” the landlady said. “Though what that trollop wants to come back here for is anyone’s guess. Maybe she’s come to steal away your man friend, because that’s what she’s known for. It is a man you’re meeting, isn’t it? Between you and me, love, it could be the tattoos frightening him off.”

Bekra touched a hand to her scalp, as if only just realizing it was inked with swirls and sigils.

“Just kidding with you, love,” the landlady said. She spat into the rag again and used it to polish a wine glass.

Bekra’s hand dropped to a pouch attached to her belt, gave it a reassuring tap. Shadrak’s fingers itched in anticipation. If a pickpocket like Nils could steal the ring from him, maybe he could do the same to Bekra. That way, it wouldn’t matter that no one had come up with a plan for fighting the bitch. Screw the others. He could just take off with the ring and head straight to Pellor.

There was movement across the room from the bar. The office door opened and a stocky man stood there with one hand on the jamb. He wore a breastplate of boiled leather above a

threadbare cotton shirt. His stained and creased britches were tucked into the tops of scuffed-up boots, the sort you might find on a soldier—a regular soldier, not like the sandal-wearing clowns back in New Londdyr.

“Boss wants a word,” the man said around a wad of tobacco he was chewing.

“With me, Trav?” the landlady said, putting her gob-soaked rag down.

“Not you, you stupid cow. Her.” Trav jabbed a brown-stained finger at Bekra.

“I’m waiting for someone,” Bekra said, without bothering to look round.

Trav took a step out of the office doorway. “That so? Well, now Boss is waiting for you, and Boss don’t like waiting for nothing.”

“Better do as he says, love,” the landlady said.

This time, Bekra simply raised her middle finger at Trav.

His cheeks reddened at that—an angry red. The red of blood. “Right, you shogging little bitch!” With lumbering strides, he surged toward her.

Bekra rose from her seat and flung out an arm. Tongues of black flame shot from her fingertips and struck Trav in the face. He screamed as the skin sloughed away, revealing bone beneath. Without pause, Bekra stormed toward him, a cant spilling from her lips—

And Shadrak saw his opportunity.

He burst through the swing doors, flinging razor stars that he plucked from his baldric with effortless ease. The first embedded itself between Bekra’s shoulder blades. The second grazed the top of her head. The third struck her in the arse. No blood from any of them: just a puff of ash where the razor stars had broken the skin.

Bekra whirled in fury, even as Trav collapsed to his knees and keeled over, head no more than a bleached skull. Her eyes were swirling vortices of flame, lips a writhing blur as she changed her cant to something far more onerous.

Too late to back down now, Shadrak leapt at her, a punch dagger in each hand—

As Bekra threw her head back and howled, Shadrak knew he'd made a mistake.

THE REAL MISTER CAWDOR

Shadrak didn't see what hit him, but it hit him hard. What felt like an invisible fist the size of a boulder slammed into his ribs and sent him flying through the swing doors and out into the street. He rolled over and over as he struck the ground and came to a stop flat on his back.

The sensation of indescribable wrongness crept through his skull, stabbing sharp barbs into his brain. In response, a fissure opened within his mind, and he felt the release of potent yet ineffable qualities that were at the same time old and intimately familiar. Something intangible deep inside dissolved into tiny particles then clumped back together in chaotic patterns that smothered Bekra's attack. Shadrak knew he should have been dead, like Trav. Would have been, if not for whatever had just happened.

The sudden silence of the crowd made him think he'd hit his head and gone deaf. He pushed himself up on one elbow, looking around blearily at the massed locals, who had only seconds ago been cheering the arrival of Dame Consilia. He saw Nils at the fore, mouth hanging open. Saw Ilesa disguised as the dame, held aloft by half a dozen greasy fishmongers. Followed their gazes to the Crawfish, as Bekra Cy burst through the still swinging doors, any last vestiges of patience incinerated by rage. She showed no awareness of the crowd that had irked her while she sat at the bar, no care for discretion.

"What's this, a husk? A husk?" a man demanded to know, pushing through the onlookers. He wore a wide-brimmed hat like Jeb's and the Senatorial badge of provincial law enforcement on the lapel of his coat. The Sheriff, then.

Two deputies followed him, swords drawn. The sheriff held an oversized crossbow... and it was pointing straight at Shadrak.

"A homunculus," Bekra Cy said, striding toward Shadrak. "Else he'd already be dead."

The sheriff glanced from her to Shadrak, a look of “Oh shog” on his face. If he hadn’t already realized he’d picked the wrong target, he was starting to second guess himself.

“Your innate resistance to the sorcery of the Abyss won’t save you from this,” Bekra said, as she drew a slender black blade from beneath her robe.

She leapt through the air—almost flew. Came down with force, knife a flashing blur. Shadrak switched his hips and up-kicked her in the face. The blade grazed the side of his neck. Bekra slid past his legs and mounted him in one fluid motion. She grabbed his throat with her free hand and stabbed again. Shadrak parried with a punch dagger he hadn’t realized he was still holding. He turned her blade and rammed his own into her chest. Again ash, not blood.

Shadrak bridged, tried to roll her off him, but she lowered her hips and wrapped her legs around his. She drew back for another strike, but Shadrak skewered her wrist with his second punch dagger. When she pulled back, he yanked the first punch dagger from her chest and rammed it home beside the other.

The more Bekra struggled, the more ash spilled from her wrist wounds. Shadrak worked the daggers in deeper then scissored them. Bekra’s black blade clattered to the road. Her hand came away and flopped down beside it amid a cloud of ash. She stared at the shredded stump of her wrist, and in that instant, Shadrak bucked her off and rolled out from underneath.

The tattoos on Bekra’s arm writhed like serpents, then they began to pulse. Shadrak circled her as five nubs sprouted from her truncated wrist and began to grow, until within seconds she had another fully-formed hand.

The crowd once more found its voice—awed muttering, cursing, sharp intakes of breath. And then they scattered in every direction.

Bekra lunged at Shadrak, and on instinct he slipped what he thought was a punch. But it was a feint, and she grabbed him by the cloak and pulled him into a clinch. He stabbed both

punch daggers into her ribs, one on either side, then released his grips on the hilts. What was the point? He went for a trip, but she was too poised, too balanced. Then she fastened her fingers around his neck and started to squeeze.

A crossbow bolt thudded into her head, and Bekra let out a world-weary sigh. She craned her neck and barked a barbarous curse at the sheriff. With a yelp he flung down his crossbow as if it were suddenly molten. His deputies backed away a step, then another, then turned tail and ran.

“Get back here!” the sheriff yelled, but when Bekra opened her mouth and started to chant, he backed off, tripped over his own feet, then got up and fled.

With a malign grin, Bekra turned back to face Shadrak. Effortlessly, she lifted him into the air by his throat and continued to squeeze. His lungs burned with the need to breathe, and heat flooded his face. He could feel the throb of his jugular, knew he only had seconds left. He kicked out, but she may as well have been a brick wall.

A Rush of air, a blur of movement, and a gigantic wolf barreled into Bekra. Shadrak hit the ground hard as Bekra went down, the wolf’s jaws clamped around her slender waist.

Ilesa! Now there was a surprise.

Dimly, Shadrak could hear Nils mutter something behind him, curse, and start over again. A cant: the lad was stammering one of his useless spells.

“Run, you moron!” Shadrak yelled at him as he climbed to his feet.

He heard Nils take a couple of steps back and then gasp.

Shadrak turned.

At the top of the High Street, a lone man. The only person coming towards the fight, not fleeing it. Grey hair, charcoal tunic and britches, shiny shoes. And he was running. Really running. Like a man possessed. Like a demon.

Behind Shadrak, the wolf growled, and there was a ripping sound. He craned his neck to see Bekra bitten in two at the waist. The scars on her arms and head blurred into motion, pulsed with energy, and her legs started to inch back toward her torso. Ilesa—the wolf—gnashed at them, but Bekra pushed herself up on one elbow and spat words of power. Black vapor poured from her mouth toward the wolf—

And Nils rushed forward, moving his hands as if he were cleaning a window. He stammered out a cant in what sounded like Ancient Urddynoorian.

Bekra stiffened. A flesh-colored streak smudged across her head tattoos. Then another. Nils moved his hands wildly, rubbing, wiping, erasing. First one side of Bekra's scalp was cleared of its inkings, then the other. She fell back onto the road, legs inches from her torso and no longer moving.

Nils stepped in close, swept his hands over each of her arms in turn, and the rest of her tattoos melted away. Bekra gave a shuddering sigh and rolled onto her side. Her eyes widened as they latched onto the man running towards them.

"Mister Cawdor..." she rasped. "Sorry... Failed..." And then she was still.

Shadrak moved in like a jackal, taking out his never-full bag and reversing it once more. He reached inside Bekra's pouch, using the bag's fabric as a glove, and just as he'd expected, he felt the contours of the Witch Queen's ring. He pulled the bag over it, scrunched it up, and tucked it away again.

"See," Nils said. He was sweating and looked ready to drop. "My eraser spell. Told you I had a notion."

"Not now!" Shadrak said. He whirled round to face the oncoming banker. Cawdor, Bekra had called him. Brenitch and Cawdor. The silent partner.

He was still fifty yards off but closing rapidly. There were dirty yellow streaks in his grey hair. Long, aquiline nose. Thin lips, sardonic, open only a crack, as if he didn't need to

draw breath even at such a murderous pace. And the eyes, blazing across the closing distance: burning coals. It was a face that had long ago been branded into Shadrak's memory.

Cawdor, my arse!

Cawdor was a disguise, an alias among many, many others...

Nils was looking too, now. Beside him, the wolf reverted to Ilesa. She gasped. Shadrak could tell they both knew who this was hurtling toward them. He had to break the spell, stop them all from being frozen with dread.

"Let's go!" he shouted, tugging Ilesa's arm, kicking Nils in the rump.

They backed away slowly, not daring to take their eyes off the man, so close now Shadrak could see the triumph in that bloodless face, feel the evil radiating from him. Already, invisible tentacles of fear were worming their way into his mind, telling him not to move. Paralysis seeped into his limbs, and Otto Blightey, Lich Lord of Verusia, slowed to a jog, then to a gentle stroll.

He knew he had them. And he liked nothing better than to take his time.

But that sound...

Blightey turned as the clop and clatter of hooves came from the direction of the warehouse across the way. Shadrak tried to look, but invisible chains held him locked in place. He heard Nils whimper. Ilesa cursed under her breath. But then the hoofbeats grew louder, more urgent. Thunder boomed. Blightey raised his hand, and a bullet clattered to the ground in front of him. And then a horse slammed into him and ran right over him.

Instantly, the Lich Lord's spell was broken. Invisible plaster cracked free of Shadrak's limbs and he turned his head to see the rider.

Jeb let out a hoot of joy and discharged his gun into the air. He wheeled his mount, leading the spare horse by the reins. The Maresman held out a hand and helped Nils up behind him, then they were off at a canter.

Ilesa leapt to the saddle of the second horse and leaned down to Shadrak.

“You’re with me.”

Already, the Lich Lord was climbing to his feet, brushing himself down. He was completely unharmed. His eyes were swirling vortices of flame. Pressure rolled off of him in waves, and there was a rising stench of sulfur.

Shadrak vaulted up behind Ilesa, and she kicked the horse into a gallop. As they reached the end of the High Street, he could see Jeb and Nils had already crossed the bridge that marked the border of town. He glanced behind to see Blightey running at an alarming speed, almost gliding over the ground in pursuit.

And then they were across the bridge and racing along the dirt-packed road, churning up clouds of dust in their wake.

Blightey stopped the Portis side of the bridge, eyes molten pools of crimson. But he came no closer, and within moments he was a speck in the receding distance.

SELF-DECEPTION

Nils was a bag of nerves as he led Shadrak through the moonlit gardens and in through the main entrance of the Academy.

“You sure this will work? Arecagen’s no plonker. What if he don’t touch the ring?”

“He will,” Shadrak said.

He’d taken the liberty of coating the Witch Queen’s ring with a deadly contact poison and placing it in an oilskin pouch attached to his belt. The idea had struck him during their getaway celebrations back at Ilesa’s theater base, after they re-entered New Londdyr through the tunnel beneath the crypt. It had been a wild party, and Shadrak had smoked way too much *somnificus*. Jeb and Ilesa had left early with business to attend to. Maybe sight of the Lich Lord and all his vileness had lowered Ilesa’s standards when it came to Jeb’s disease-rotted body. But at least she’d been true to her word; she’d dropped her claim on the ring, even if her motivation was self-preservation. Shadrak could hardly blame her; if the Lich Lord didn’t come for the ring, the Witch Queen was still there, lurking in the shadows of the Desecrated City. Far better for scut-buckets like Arecagen to deal with the consequences of possessing the ring, and if not Arecagen, then the Stygian, Xultak Setis, who’d set this whole stinking affair in motion.

The entrance hall was in darkness, save for the overspill of soft light from chambers to the left and right: the circular, multi-tiered reading room with muted glowstones hanging from the high ceiling on silver chains, and the exhibit room, in which Shadrak could just about make out the fossilized remains of monstrous beasts, many of which had been brought over the Farfall Mountains from Qlippoth at one time or another.

There was no one behind the reception desk. In fact, the entire building was eerily empty, silent save for their own echoing footfalls on the marble floor. These matters were best dealt with after hours, Arecagen had said in response to Nils's handwritten missive.

Stark light spilled from an open door midway along the corridor beyond the desk. And there was a figure in the doorway, silhouetted yet still recognizable from the spiked hair atop his head, the bat-winged tip of his staff. With a gesture that they should follow him, Arecagen retreated inside the room.

The walls were plastered with charts of sigils, linear diagrams, and geometric designs of bewildering complexity. There were books open atop tables all around the walls. A chandelier without candles cast a circle of stark light around a leather-topped desk.

Arecagen seated himself behind the desk and rapped his staff three times on the ground. It shrunk to the size of his pinkie, and he secreted it inside the sleeve of his robe. There was nowhere for his visitors to sit.

"You brought the ring?" the sorcerer said, getting straight to the point.

"First the bugs you put in my guts," Shadrak said.

"No." A smug smile cut across Arecagen's face. "I call the shots. Ring first."

"You think I'd be stupid enough to bring it?" Shadrak countered.

Nils glanced at him. The idiot was giving the game away... as he was meant to, even if he didn't know it himself. He mouthed at Shadrak: "But I thought—"

"Spoken like a true homunculus," Arecagen said, cutting across the lad. "Though without the subtlety. Are you sure you're a pure blood?"

The sorcerer made a swift gesture with his hand. In response, invisible fingers undid the string fastening the oilskin pouch to Shadrak's belt. Shadrak feigned shock as Arecagen made a clutching motion, and the pouch floated through the air toward him.

"How—?" Shadrak said, trusting his acting was better than Dame Consilia's.

Nils, on the other hand, looked genuinely shocked, but at the same time he gave an almost imperceptible nod. Probably not how he had envisaged it, but the plan, as far as he was concerned, was working.

“You’re a little slow on the uptake,” Arecagen said to Shadrak, as he plucked the pouch from midair and reached inside for the Witch Queen’s ring. “Judging by your pupils, I’d say you’ve been indulging in narcotics. What was it, *somnificus*?”

When the sorcerer placed the ring on his finger and held it up, Nils gave Shadrak a sideways glance and barely suppressed a smirk.

“What’s this?” Arecagen said, immediately pulling the ring from his finger and dropping it back inside the pouch. He vigorously rubbed his hands on his robe. “You’ve coated it with something!”

“Don’t worry,” Shadrak said. “I have an antidote, and there’s plenty of time—an hour at least—until your organs collapse and your insides liquefy.”

The blood drained from Arecagen’s face. “Kill me, and those bore-grubs in your stomach will eat their way out. Only I can stop them.”

“And only I know where I hid the antidote.”

Stalemate.

“You’re lying,” Arecagen said.

“No,” Nils said. “He’s not. Sausage poison, it is, blended with olive oil.”

“Courtesy of a former colleague of mine,” Shadrak said.

“I don’t believe you,” Arecagen said. He plucked his staff from his sleeve and it rapidly grew to its normal size. He pointed the tip at Nils and muttered words in Ancient Urddynoorian. “Interesting,” he said. “You believe the ring is poisoned. It must be that the homunculus has duped you.”

“Or because he’s telling the truth,” Nils said.

“Which means you were in on this.” Arecagen’s eyes narrowed to slits. “In which case you’d better hope it works, because you and I will be having words if it doesn’t. Sorcerous words, not the kind you use in polite conversation.”

He turned the staff on Shadrak. More muttered Ancient Urddynoorian. This time, Arecagen’s eyes widened in surprise. “Idiot boy’s right. You did apply poison to the ring.” He slumped back in his chair, defeated.

“Just dispel the bug magic,” Shadrak said, touching his belly, “and I’ll fetch the antidote.”

“How do I know?” Arecagen said. “How do I know you’ll keep your end of the bargain?”

“Use your truth detection spell again?”

“No, you plonker!” Nils hissed at Shadrak.

Arecagen noticed and chuckled. He repeated the truth spell then nodded, apparently satisfied.

“Very well.” The sorcerer stood and approached one of the tables set against the walls. He flicked through an open book till he found what he was looking for. Casually, as if he did this sort of thing all the time, he uttered a cant and turned to make grasping motions with his hand.

In response, Shadrak’s stomach knotted. His back arched, and he cried out as wispy plumes of dirty vapor passed through his jerkin. They sank slowly to the floor, where they coalesced into the steaming, malformed bodies of grubs, which bubbled and boiled then melted into pools of brownish liquid.

“Satisfied?” Arecagen said.

Shadrak gingerly felt his stomach through his jerkin, then nodded. He reached into the hidden pocket stitched into the lining of his cloak and drew out the vial containing the antidote.

“No,” Nils said. “We agreed. You said you’d sort him out for me, if I helped you get the ring.”

Shadrak shrugged. “You really are a prat, then, aren’t you?”

He flipped the vial through the air to Arecagen, who deftly caught it. Without a moment’s hesitation, the sorcerer unstopped it and drank the contents.

And then Shadrak remembered.

Under the influence of the *somnificus*, he’d tapped into his true homunculus nature, and while there he’d hatched his plan. And the thing about homunculus deception—the thing Arecagen had first put him onto—was that, to make it perfectly effective, the trickster had to believe his own lies. Absolutely. It was an innate ability unique to the homunculi, who after all were formed from the very stuff of the Demiurgos, the Father of Lies himself. Not only had Nils believed every word Shadrak had told him—about the harmless oil coating the ring being contact poison—but Shadrak had fallen victim to his own deception.

Until the trap was sprung.

Arecagen coughed and thumped his chest. “A potent blend. What was in it?”

Nils crossed his arms over his chest and pouted.

“Remember the sausage poison that coated the ring?” Shadrak asked.

Arecagen nodded.

“Well, that was olive oil.”

Another nod, followed by an alarmed raise of one eyebrow.

“The sausage poison was in the antidote.”

Arecagen swallowed thickly. The veins stood out on either side of his neck. He coughed again, and this time there was a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth. He belched, doubled up, clutched his guts.

“Yes!” Nils said, slapping Shadrak on the shoulder.

Arecagen collapsed to his knees. Black vitriol poured from his mouth in a vile and putrid-smelling stream. And then he keeled over onto his side and lay still.

“You did it!” Nils said. “But how? You lied to him and he didn’t know?”

Shadrak held his nose as he approached the sorcerer’s body and reclaimed the pouch containing the Witch Queen’s ring. “Trade secret.”

Nils stuck out his bottom lip and shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“So, I’m a man of my word,” Shadrak said. “Your problem is sorted.”

“I wonder who will replace him as principal of the Academy,” Nils mused out loud. He looked up sharply as Shadrak headed for the open doorway. “What you doing?”

Shadrak pulled up the hood of his cloak and gave Nils a parting nod. “Honoring my contract with a certain Stygian in Pellor.” He paused in the doorway and looked back at the young man. “You did all right, Fargin. For a tosser.”

Nils smiled. “You too. And thank you for taking out Master Arecagen for me.”

“I didn’t do it for you.”

“I don’t believe you,” Nils said.

“That’s because you’re a fat-headed twat.”

Shadrak tugged his cloak around him and swept from the room.

But did the lad have a point? Would he have come here with the ring, tricked Arecagen, if he’d not had the bugs in his stomach? Would he really have kept his word to Nils and saved the lad from the sorcerer’s ire?

Nah, he told himself as he reached the end of the corridor and headed for the front door.

But the irritating thing was, he couldn’t be sure.

EPILOGUE

The Stygian, Xultak Setis, turned a slow circle and took in the full horror of the Desecrated City of Thogani. It was... exhilarating. And here he was, right in the center of it after days of travel all the way from Pellor, across the Farfall Mountains, and through the unpredictable, ever-shifting landscape of Qlippoth. It was a journey that would have cowed even the hardiest of adventurers, but not Xultak. He'd been spawned in Qlippoth. His people were attuned to its ways.

Carcasses littered the ground for miles in every direction—birds, rodents, things with two heads, some with three. Those that weren't already skeletons were stiff and moldering, rank with decay, save for the few that looked fresh. No indication of what had killed them. It gave the impression that mere contact with the city's buildings had been enough to snuff out whatever life they had once enjoyed.

And what buildings they were: vast structures of obsidian fronted with intricately carved bas-reliefs depicting pain and suffering in all its multifarious guises. There were shaded cloisters, colonnaded walkways, aqueducts long since dried up that had once fed every section of Thogani—not water, he'd been led to believe. Blood. An endless supply that had still not been enough to sate the appetite of the Witch Queen, Hekata N'Gat, who had ruled the city in life and still did so long after death.

Xultak raised his hand to gaze once more at the Witch Queen's ring upon his finger. It glinted red in the light of the setting suns. He still couldn't believe he'd actually paid the homunculus Shadrak for delivering it. Usually, Xultak saw no point keeping his end of the bargain. Indeed, it was part of the fun watching the look of betrayal on his accomplices' faces, followed by shock when he made clear his intentions to eat them. The thought of

homunculus flesh washed down with a bottle of two thousand year-old Arnochian mead still made him salivate, but there had been something about Shadrak the Unseen that had given Xultak pause. Something dangerous.

It was of no matter. He had what he wanted, and the few hundred denarii he'd paid for the job seemed suddenly trivial now that he had arrived at his destination. He knew Hekata N'Gat would be here, waiting for him. His blood tingled with the desire to embrace her and enter into her eternal dominion over Thogani, where he would be king to her queen.

The ring had shown him as much each night he'd worn it to his bed. Such dreams it had bestowed upon him, of lying with the Witch Queen in all her exotic beauty. How they'd taken pleasure in each other's bodies, then after each coupling they had supped on each other's blood.

They had become one in his dreams, for all eternity, and now they were to become one in reality. Xultak could barely suppress the urge to howl for her, to scream her name until she came running. So strong was the lingering scent of her from his dreams, she could have been standing beside him right now: roses and musk and something else delightfully sweet. As he remembered her satin skin pressed against his, relived each sensuous touch, each brush of her luscious lips, he became aware that her perfumed scent wasn't just a memory: it was here in the Desecrated City, rising above the pervading stench of decay. His nostrils flared as he drew it in, and he began to follow it to its source.

Xultak passed in near delirium along a broad avenue flanked by statues of winged beasts and gigantic skeletons carved from obsidian. At its far end he climbed gleaming black steps all the way to a dark pyramid. Ebon pillars stood either side of the gaping entrance. Set back a way inside was the statue of a beautiful woman upon a throne—a human, long hair bound up into horns, a jagged crown upon her head. It was her, Hekata N'Gat, just as she'd appeared in his dreams!

Unable to contain himself, Xultak ran to the statue and flung himself at its feet. He felt certain that if he prayed hard enough, if he pleaded and begged, the obsidian it was cast from would crack and the Witch Queen would rise from the throne to smother him with hot kisses. So much did he desire her, did he need to feel her in the flesh, that Xultak was drenched with sweat, and his limbs began to tremble. He raised his eyes to check, but the statue was still just a statue. He let out a long and anguished groan then stood.

A heady rush of scent came from deeper inside the pyramid. Xultak followed it along a shadow-black passageway until he reached the first of many flights of rough-cut steps. He ascended them interminably as they twisted and turned through level after level, until finally, bone-weary but still driven, he emerged into a chamber that must have been close to the apex.

There was no other way in or out that he could see. It was a plain room, box-shaped, walls of green-veined black stone lit by some hidden radiance. At the center of the chamber sat a four-poster bed with closed drapes the consistency of cobwebs. They might even have been cobwebs, thick and dusty with age. Through them, seated on the bed, facing him, he could see the silhouette of a woman.

Xultak gasped. His heart pounded a fierce tattoo in his chest. He raised his be-ringed hand—his claim on her—as he crossed to the bed and parted the drapes. Strands of web clung to his fingers, but he barely noticed. He had already envisioned the beauty he was about to behold, and nothing was going to distract him.

Only...

It took long seconds for Xultak's mind to register what it was seated on the bed, and when it did, the disconnect unmanned him. It was Hekata N'Gat, he was sure of it, though her face was desiccated, leathery, flaking away. From the neck down she was mummified in mildewed wrappings that smelled as rank as they looked. Gone was the cloying scent that had summoned him, replaced by the odor of the grave.

He wanted to back away, but invisible hooks snagged him deep in the guts. When he tried to avert his gaze he found he could not move his head. In desperation, he reached into his mind for his sorcery, but it slipped like sand through his fingers.

The Witch Queen's eyes flared into sudden life—burning emeralds that seared deep into his soul. Sorcerous energy fled through the pores of Xultak's skin, drawn to those unnatural eyes like iron filings to a magnet. He felt diminished as she drank upon the essence that defined him as a Stygian, his innate magical abilities that had granted him such dominance in Pellor. Again he tried to back away, but she held him locked in some kind of paralysis.

As the last of Xultak's sorcery left him, the Witch Queen stood from the bed. The emerald glow of her eyes now suffused her mummified body; somehow it seemed to animate her.

Xultak's skull was close to bursting with the need to scream as Hekata N'Gat wrapped him in a chill embrace. Insects crawled across Xultak's skin. The Witch Queen lifted his hand and worked her ring from his finger, slipped it on her own.

And then she pressed her face up to his. Bile rose in Xultak's throat at the suffocating closeness of her stench. She opened cracked lips. Something writhed within her stub-toothed mouth—a black tongue furred with yellowish mold.

No! Xultak screamed inside his head. No, no, no!

And then the Witch Queen kissed him...

Shadrak the Unseen features in books 2 and 4 of the series *LEGENDS OF THE NAMELESS DWARF*. If you enjoyed *DEAD OR ALIVE*, please check out the series, starting with...

CARNIFEX

LEGENDS OF THE NAMELESS DWARF BOOK 1

For more than a thousand years, the dwarves have hidden away from the world in their ravine city of Arx Gravis.

Governed by an inflexible council whose sole aim is to avoid the errors of the past, the defining virtue of their society is that nothing should ever change.

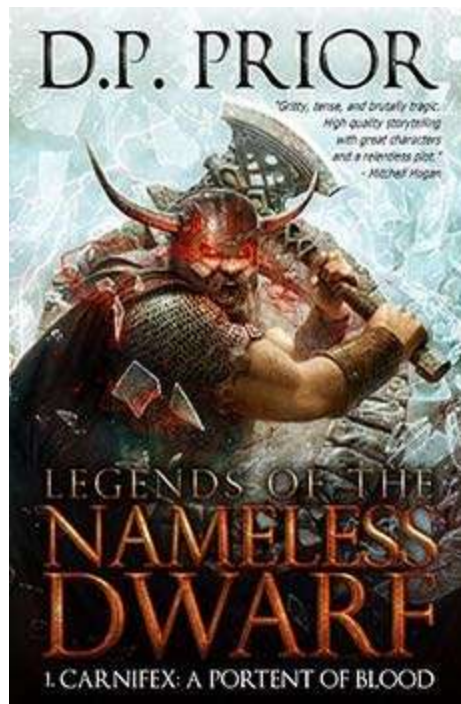
But when the Scriptorium is broken into, and Ravine Guard Carnifex Thane sees a homunculus fleeing the scene of the crime, events are set in motion that will ensure nothing will ever be the same again.

Deception and death are coming to Arx Gravis.

The riddles that preceded Carnifex's birth crystalize into a horrifying fate that inexorably closes in.

But it is in blood that legends are born, and redemption is sometimes seeded in the gravest of sins.

For Carnifex is destined to become the Ravine Butcher, before even that grim appellation is forever lost, along with everything that once defined him.



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