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#3

THE KINGDOM OF SHADOW

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Kingdom of Shadow

for Chris Metzen and Marco Palmieri

ONE

The horrific scream came from the direction of the river.

Kentril Dumon cursed as he shouted orders to the others. He had warned his men to avoid the waterways as much as possible, but in the dense, steamy jungles of Kehjistan, it sometimes became difficult to keep track of the myriad wanderings of the rivers and streams. Some of the other mercenaries also had a tendency to forget orders when cool water lay just yards away.

The fool who had screamed had just learned the danger of growing complacent—not that he would likely live long enough to appreciate that lesson.

The slim, sunburnt captain battled his way through the lush foliage, following the pleading call. Ahead of him, he saw Gorst, his second, the giant, shirtless fighter ripping through the vines and branches as if they had no substance at all. While most of the other mercenaries, natives of cooler, highland regions in the Western Kingdoms, suffered badly from the heat, bronzed Gorst ever took all in stride. The scraggy mop of hair, dark black compared with Kentril's own light brown, made the giant look like a fleeing lion as he disappeared toward the river.

Following his friend's trail, Captain Dumon made better time. The screaming continued, bringing back graphic memories of the other three men the party had lost since entering the vast jungle that covered most of this land. The second had died a most horrible death, snared in the web of a horde of monstrous spiders, his body so injected with poison that it had become bloated and distorted. Kentril had ordered torches used against the web and its hungry denizens, carefully burning out the creatures. It had not saved his man, but it had avenged the death somewhat.

The third hapless fighter had never been found. He had simply vanished during an arduous trek through an area filled with soft soil that pulled one's boots down with each step. Having nearly sunk to his knees at one point, the weary captain suspected he knew the fate of the lost soldier. The mud could be quick and efficient in its work.

And as he considered the death of the very first mercenary lost to Kehjistan's fearsome jungles, Kentril stepped out into a scene almost identical to that disaster.

A huge, serpentine form rose well above the riverbank, long reptilian orbs narrowed at the small figures below who sought in vain to pry free the struggling form in its tremendous maw. Even with its jaws clamped tight on the frantic mercenary whose screams had alerted Kentril and the others, somehow managed to hiss furiously at the humans. A lance stuck out of its side, but the strike had evidently been a shallow one, for the behemoth appeared in no way even annoyed by it.

Someone loosed an arrow toward the head, likely aiming for the terrible eyes, but the shaft flew high, bouncing off the scaly hide. The tentacle beast—the name their esteemed employer, Quov Tsin, had used for such horrors—swung its prey around and around, giving Kentril at last a glimpse of whom he had seized.

Hargo. Of course, it would be Hargo. The bearded idiot had been much a disappointment on their journey, having shirked many of his duties since their arrival on this side of the Twin Seas. Still, even

Hargo deserved no such fate as this, whatever his shortcomings.

"Get rope ready!" Kentril shouted at his men. The creatures had twin curved horns toward the backs of their heads, the one place on their snakelike bodies that the mercenaries might be able to use to their advantage. "Keep him from returning to deep water!"

As the others followed his instructions, Captain Dumon counted them. Sixteen, including himself and the unfortunate Hargo. That accounted for everyone—except Quov Tsin.

Where was the damned Vizjerei this time? He had a very annoying habit of wandering ahead of the band he had hired, leaving the mercenaries to guess half the time what he wanted of them. Kentril regretted ever taking this offer, but the talk of treasure had been so insistent, so beguiling...

He shook such thoughts from his head. Hargo still had a slim chance for life. The tentacle beast could have easily bitten him in two, but they just as often preferred to drag their prey under and let the water do their work for them. Made their meals soft and manageable, too, so the cursed sorcerer had said with scholarly indifference.

The men had the ropes ready. Kentril ordered them in place. Others still harassed the gargantuan serpent, making it forget that it could have long finished this encounter just by backing away. If the mercenaries could rely on its simple animal mind a little longer—

Gorst had a line set to toss. He did not wait for Kentril to give the order, already understanding what the captain wanted. The giant threw the loop with unerring accuracy, snagging the rope on the right horn.

"Oskal! Try to throw Hargo a line! Benjin! Get that rope on the other horn! You two—give Gorst a hand with that now!"

Stout Oskal tossed his rope toward the weakening, blood—soaked figure in the behemoth's mouth. Hargo tried in vain to grab it, but it fell short. The tentacle beast hissed again and tried to retreat, only to have the line held by Gorst and the other two men keep it from getting very far.

"Benjin! The other horn, damn you!"

"Tell 'im to quit wigglin', and I will, captain!"

Oskal threw the rope again, and this time Hargo managed to grab it. With what strength he had, he looped it around him.

The entire tableau reminded Kentril of some macabre game. Again he cursed himself for accepting this contract, and he cursed Quov Tsin for having offered it in the first place.

Where was the foul sorcerer? Why had he not come running with the rest? Could he be dead?

The captain doubted his luck could be that good. Whatever the Vizjerei's present circumstances, they would have no effect on the desperate situation here. Everything rested on Kentril's already burdened shoulders.

A few of the fighters continued to try to wound the serpentine monster in any way they could. Unfortunately, the tough hide of the tentacle beast prevented those with lances and swords from doing any harm, and the two archers still at work had to watch out for fear of slaying the very man they hoped to save.

A rope caught the left horn. Captain Dumon fought back the swell of hope he felt; it had been one thing to catch the monster, but now they had to bring it in.

"Everyone who can, grab onto the lines! Bring that thing onto shore! It'll be more clumsy, more vulnerable on land!"

He joined with the others, pulling on the line Benjin had tossed. The tentacle beast hissed loudly, and although it clearly understood at some level the danger it faced, it still did not release its captive. Kentril could generally admire such tenacity in any living creature, but not when the life of one of his men was also at stake.

"Pull!" the captain shouted, sweat from the effort making his brown shirt cling to his body. His leather boots—his fine leather boots that he had bought with the pay from his last contract—sank into the muddy ground near the river. Despite four men on each rope, it took all they could give just to inch the aquatic horror onto the shore.

Yet inch it they did, and as the bulk of the beast came onto land, the mercenaries' efforts redoubled. A little more, and surely they could then free their comrade.

With the target much closer, one of the archers took aim.

"Hold your—" was all Kentril got out before the shaft buried itself in the left eye.

The serpentine monster reared back in agony. It opened its mouth, but not enough to enable the gravely—injured Hargo to fall free, even with two men pulling from the ground. Despite having no appreciable limbs, the tentacle beast writhed back and forth so much that it began dragging all of its adversaries toward the dark waters.

One of the men behind Gorst slipped, sending another there also falling. The imbalance threw the rest of the mercenaries off. Benjin lost his grip, nearly stumbling into his captain in the process.

One orb a mass of ichor, the tentacle beast pulled back into the river.

"Hold him! Hold him!" Kentril shouted uselessly. Between the two ropes snaring the horns remained only five men. Gorst, his huge form a mass of taut muscle, made up for the fact that he had only one other mercenary with him, but in the end even his prodigious strength proved ineffective.

The back half of the gigantic reptile vanished under the water.

They had lost the battle; the captain knew that. In no way could they regain enough momentum to turn the tide.

And Hargo, somehow madly clinging onto life and consciousness, obviously knew that as well. Kentril Dumon did. His face a bloody mess, he shouted out hoarse pleas to all.

Kentril would not let this man go the same way the first one had. "Benjin! Grab the line again!"

"It's too late, captain! There's nothin'—"

"Grab hold of it, I said!"

The moment the other fighter had obeyed, Kentril ran over to the nearest archer. The Bowman stood transfixed, watching the unfolding fate of his unfortunate companion with a slack jaw and skin as pale as bone.

"Your bow! Give it to me!"

"Captain?"

"The bow, damn you!" Kentril ripped it out of the uncomprehending archer's hands. Captain Dumond had trained long and hard with the bow himself, and among his motley crew he could still count himself as the second or third best shot.

For what he intended now, Kentril prayed he would have the eye of the best.

Without hesitation, the wiry commander raised the bow, sighting his target as he did. Hargo stared back at him, and the pleas suddenly faltered. A look in the dying man's eyes begged the captain to finish quickly.

Kentril did.

The wooden bolt caught Hargo in the upper chest, burying itself deep.

Hargo slumped in the beast's jaws, dead instantly.

The act caught the other mercenaries completely by surprise. Gorst lost his grip. The others belatedly released theirs, not wanting to be pulled in by accident.

In sullen silence, the survivors watched as the wounded monster sank swiftly into the river, still hissing its rage and pain even as its head vanished below the surface. Hargo's arms briefly floated above the innocent—looking water—then suddenly, they, too, disappeared below.

Letting the bow drop, Kentril turned and started away from the area.

The other fighters nervously gathered their things and followed, keeping much closer to one another. They had grown complacent after the third death, and now one of them had paid for that. Kentril blamed himself most of all, for, as company captain, he should have kept a better watch on his men. Only once before had he ever been forced to resort to slaying one of his own in order to alleviate suffering, and that had been on a good, solid battlefield, not in some insufferable madhouse of the jungle. That first man had been lying on the ground with a belly wound so massive that Captain Dumond had been amazed any life lingered. It had been a simple thing then to put the mortally wounded soldier to rest.

This... this had felt barbaric.

"Kentril," came Gorst's quiet voice. For someone so massive, the tanned giant could speak very softly when he chose. "Kentril. Hargo—"

"Quiet, Gorst."

"Kentril—"

"Enough." Of all those under his command through the past ten years, only Gorst ever called him by his first name. Captain Dumon had never offered that choice; the simplistic titan had just decided to do so. Perhaps that had been why they had become the best of friends, the only true friends among those who had fought under Kentril for money.

Now only fifteen men remained. Fewer with whom to divide the supposed treasure the Vizjerei had offered, but fewer also to defend the party in case of trouble. Kentril would have dearly loved to have brought more, but he had been able to find no more takers of the offer. The seventeen hardened fighters accompanying him and Gorst had been all who would accept this arduous journey. The coin Quov Tsin had given him had barely paid them enough as it was.

And speaking of Tsin— *where* was he?

"Tsin, damn you!" the scarred captain shouted to the jungle. "Unless you've been eaten, I want you to show yourself right now!"

No answer.

Peering through the dense jungle, Kentril searched for the diminutive spellcaster, but nowhere did he see Quov Tsin's bald head.

"Tsin! Show yourself, or I'll have the men start dumping your precious equipment into the river! The way you can go and talk to the beasts if you want to do any more of your incessant calculations!" Since the beginning of thistrek, the Vizjerei had demanded pause after pause in order to set up instruments, draw patterns, and cast minor spells—all supposedly to guide them to their destination. Tsin seemed to know where he headed, but up until now none of the others, not even Kentril, could have said the same.

A high—pitched, rather nasal voice called from the distance. Neither he nor Gorst could make out the words, but both readily recognized their employer's condescending tones.

"That way," the giant said, pointing ahead and slightly to the right of the party.

Knowing that the sorcerer had not only survived but had utterly ignored Hargo's fate ignited a fire within Kentril. Even as he proceeded, his hand slipped to the hilt of his sword. Just because the Vizjerei had purchased their services did not mean in any way that he could be forgiven for neglecting his dubious talent with magic to the desperate hope of rescuing the ill—fated mercenary.

Yes, Kentril would have more than words with Quov Tsin...

"Where are you?" he called out.

"Here, of course!" snapped Tsin from somewhere behind the thick foliage. "Do hurry now! We've wasted so much valuable time!"

Wasted it? Captain Dumon's fury grew. *Wasted it?* As a hired fighter and treasure hunter, he knew that his livelihood meant risking death every day, but Kentril had always prided himself on knowing the value of life nonetheless. It had always been those with the gold, those who offered riches, who least appreciated the cost the mercenary captain and his men suffered.

He drew the sword slowly from the scabbard. With each passing day, this trek had begun to seem more and more like a wild chase. Kentril had had enough. It was time to break the contract.

"That's not good," Gorst murmured. "You should put it back, Kentril."

"Just mind your place." No one, not even Gorst, would deter him.

"Kentril—"

At that moment, the object of the slim captain's ire burst through the jungle foliage. To Kentril, who stood just over six feet in height, Gorst had always seemed an astonishing sight, but as tall as the giant appeared in comparison with his commander, so, too, did Dumon loom over the Vizjerei.

Legend had always made the race of sorcerers seem more than men, tall, hooded figures clad in rumpled—covered, red—orange cloaks called *Turinnash*, or "spirit mantles." The small silver runes covering much of the voluminous garment supposedly protected the mage from lesser magical threats and even to a limited degree, some demonic powers. The Vizjerei wore the *Turinnash* proudly, almost like a badge of office, a mark of superiority. However, although Quov Tsin, too, had such a cloak, on his barely five-foot frame it did little to enhance any image of mystical power. The slight, wrinkled figure with the long gray beard reminded Kentril of nothing more than his elderly grandfather—without any of the sympathetic nature of the latter.

Tsin's slanted, silver—gray eyes peered over his aquiline nose in obvious disdain. The diminutive mage had no patience whatsoever and clearly did not see that his own life hung by a thread. Of course as a Vizjerei, he not only had spells with which to likely defend himself, but the staff he held in his right hand also carried protective magicks designed for countless circumstances.

One quick strike, though, Kentril thought to himself. *One quick strike, and I can put an end to this sanctimonious little toad...*

"It's about time!" snapped the mercenary's employer. He shook one end of the staff in the captain's face. "What took you so long? You know I'm running out of time!"

More than you think, you babbling cur... "While you were wandering off, Master Tsin, I was trying to save a man from one of those water serpents. We could've used your help."

"Yes, well, enough of this babble!" Quov Tsin returned, his gaze slipping back to the jungle behind him. Likely he had not even heard what Kentril had just said. "Come! Come quickly! You must see!"

As the Vizjerei turned away, Captain Dumon's hand rose, the sword at the ready.

Gorst put his own hand on his friend's arm. "Let's go see, Kentril."

The giant casually stepped in front of the captain, effectively coming between Kentril and Tsin unprotected back. The first two moved on, Kentril reluctantly following them.

He could wait a few moments longer.

First Quov Tsin, then Gorst, vanished among the plants. Kentril soon found himself needing to hack his way through, but he took some pleasure in imagining each dismembered branch or vine as the spellcaster's neck.

Then, without any warning, the jungle gave way. The early evening sun lit up the landscape before him as it had not done in two weeks. Kentril found himself staring at a series of high, jagged peaks, the beginnings of the vast chain running up and down the length of Kehjistan and heading even farther east for as far as the eye could see.

And in the distance, just above the eastern base of a particularly tall and ugly peak at the very southern tip of this particular chain, lay the weatherworn, jumbled remains of a once mighty city. The fragments of a great stone wall encircling the entire eastern side could still be made out. A few hard structures maintained precarious stances within the city itself. One, possibly the home of the lost kingdom's ruler, stood perched atop a vast ledge, no doubt having once enabled the master of the realm to gaze down upon his entire domain.

Although the jungle had surrendered in part to this region, lush plants still covered much of the landscape and had, over time, invaded the ruins themselves. What they had not already covered, the elements had battered well. Erosion had ripped away part of the northern section of the wall and taken with it a good portion of the city. Further in, a sizable chunk of the mountain had collapsed onto the interior of the city.

Kentril could not imagine that there would be much left intact anywhere inside. Time had taken its toll on this ancient place.

"That should assuage your anger a bit, Captain Dumon," Quov Tsin suddenly remarked, eyes fixed on the sight before them. "Quite a bit."

"What do you mean?" Lowering his sword, Kentril eyed the ruins with some discomfort. He felt as if he had just intruded upon a place where even ghosts moved with trepidation. "Is that it? Is that—"

"'The Light among Lights'? The most pure of realms in all the history of the world, built upon the very slope of the towering mountain called Nymyr? Aye, captain, there it stands—and, for our needs, just in time, if my calculations hold true!"

Gasps came from behind Kentril. The other men had finally caught up, just in time to hear the sorcerer's words. They all knew the legends of the realm called the Light among Lights by the ancients, a place fabled to be the one kingdom where the darkness of Hell had feared to intrude. They all knew of its story, even as far away as the Western Kingdoms.

Here had been a city revered by those who followed the light. Here had stood a marvel, ruled by reg

and kind lords who had guided the souls of all toward Heaven.

Here had been a kingdom so pure, stories had it that it had at last risen whole above the mortal plane, its inhabitants transcending mortal limitations, rising to join the angels.

"You see a sight worthy of the loss of your men, captain," the Vizjerei whispered, extending one bony hand toward the ruins. "For now you are one of the few fortunate ever to cast your eyes upon one of the wonders of the past—fabulous, lost *Ureh!*"

TWO

She had alabaster skin devoid of even the slightest imperfection, long chestnut—red hair that fell well below her perfectly rounded shoulders, and eyes of the deepest emerald green. If not for the eastern cast of her facial features, he might have taken her for one of the tempestuous maidens of his own highland home.

She was beautiful, everything a weary, war—bitten adventurer like Kentril had dreamed of each night during the innocence of his youth—and still did to this very day.

A pity she had been dead for several hundred years.

Fingering the ancient brooch he had almost literally stumbled upon, Kentril surreptitiously studied his nearby companions. They continued their back—breaking labor in complete ignorance of his fine searching among the crumbled, foliage—enshrouded ruins for anything of value. So far, the treasure hunt had been an utter failure as far as Kentril had been concerned. Here they worked, fifteen men strong, in the midst of the remains of one of the most fabled cities of all, and the sum total for three days of hard effort had been a small sack of rusted, bent, and mostly broken items of dubious value. The intricately detailed brooch represented the greatest find yet, and even it would not pay for more than a fraction of their arduous journey to this bug—infested necropolis.

No one looked his way. Deciding that he had earned at least this one token, Kentril slipped the artifact into his belt pouch. As leader of the mercenaries, he would have been entitled to an extra share of a treasure anyway, so the scarred commander felt no qualms about what he did.

"Kentril?"

The captain bit back his startlement. Turning, he faced the one who had so stealthily approached him. Somehow, Gorst could always manage to move in silence when he chose to, despite his oxlike appearance.

Running one hand through his hair, Kentril tried to pretend that he had done nothing wrong. "Gorst! I thought you'd been helping our esteemed employer with his tools and calculating devices! What brings you here?"

"The magic man... he wants to see you, Kentril." Gorst had a smile on his round face. Magic fascinated him as it did many small children, and while so far the Vizjerei sorcerer had shown little of the way of spells, the brutish mercenary seemed to enjoy the incomprehensible and enigmatic devices and objects Quov Tsin had brought with him.

"Tell him I'll be along in a little bit."

"He wants to see you now," the bronzed figure returned, his tone that of one who could not understand why someone would not want to rush over immediately to find out what the Vizjerei desired. Gorst clearly believed that some wondrous spectacle of sorcery had to be imminent and any delay by his friend in returning to Tsin would only mean prolonging the waiting.

Knowing the futility of holding off and realizing suddenly that he had reason to talk to the Vizjerei

Captain Dumon shrugged. "All right. We'll go see the magic man."

As he started past Gorst, the giant abruptly asked, "Can I see it, Kentril?"

"See what?"

"What you found."

Kentril almost denied having found anything, but Gorst knew him better than anyone. With a slight grimace, he carefully withdrew the brooch and held it in his palm so that only the other mercenaries could see he had anything at all.

Gorst gave him a wide grin. "Pretty."

"Listen—" Kentril began.

But the massive fighter had already started past him, leaving the captain to feel foolish about his attempted subterfuge. He never knew completely what Gorst thought, but it seemed that to his friend the matter of the brooch had been satisfied, and now they needed to move on. Gorst's "magic man" awaited them, obviously a far more interesting subject to the mercenary leader's companion than any picture of a centuries—dead female.

They found Tsin impatiently scurrying around a display of stones, alchemical devices, and other tools of his disreputable trade. Every now and then, the balding sorcerer would scribble notes on parchment atop the makeshift desk his hired crew had put together early on. He seemed especially interested this day in peering through an eyeglass pointed at the very tip of Nymyr, then consulting a tattered scroll. As they approached, Kentril heard him chuckle with glee, then resort to the scroll again.

The Vizjerei reached for a device that most resembled to the mercenary a sextant, save that the sorcerer had clearly made some changes in the design. As his bony fingers touched the object, Quor Tsin noticed the pair.

"Ah! Dumon! About time! And has your latest day's labor born any more fruit than the previous?"

"No... it's just as you said. So far, we've found little more than junk." Kentril chose not to mention the brooch. With his luck, Tsin would have found some relevance in the artifact and therefore confiscated it.

"No matter, no matter! I let you and your band search mostly to keep you out of my way until the final readings could be made. Of course, had you found anything, that would have been a plus, but in the long run, I am not bothered by the lack of success."

Perhaps the sorcerer had not been, but the mercenaries certainly grumbled. Kentril had promised his companions much based on the words of the Vizjerei, and the failure would hang more around his neck than even Tsin's.

"Listen, sorcerer," he muttered. "You paid us enough to get this madness underway, but you also made promises of a lot more. Myself, I could go home right now and be happy just to be out of this place."

but the others expect much. You said that we'd find treasure—ample amounts of it—in this ancient ruin, but so far we've—"

"Yes, yes, yes! I've explained it all before! It is just not the proper time! Soon, though, soon!"

Kentril looked to Gorst, who shrugged. Turning his gaze back to the slight mage, Captain Dumon snarled, "You've told me some wild things, Vizjerei, and they keep getting wilder the longer this goes on! Why don't you explain once more to Gorst and me what you've got in mind, eh? And make it clear for once."

"That would be a waste of my time," the diminutive sorcerer grated. Seeing Kentril's expression darken further, he sighed in exasperation. "Very well, but this is the last I'll speak of it! You already know the legends of the piousness of those who lived in the city, so I'll not bother with retelling that. I'll go straight to the time of troubles—will that do?"

Propping himself against a large chunk of rubble once forming part of the great wall, Kentril folded his arms, then nodded. "Go from there. That's when your story starts getting a little too fantastic for my tastes."

"The mercenary's a critic." Nonetheless, Quov Tsin paused in his tasks and began the tale that Captain Dumon suspected he could hear a hundred times and still not completely fathom. "It began during a time... a time known to those of us versed in the arts and the battle between light and darkness... a time known as the *Sin War*."

Hardened as he had become over the years, Kentril could not help but shudder whenever the shadowy Vizjereimuttered those last two words. Until he had met Tsin, he had never even heard such legends, but something about the mythic war of which his employer spoke filled the mercenary's head with visions of diabolic demons seeking to guide the mortal world down the path of corruption, leading a step closer to Hell.

The Sin War had not been fought as normal wars, for it had been fought by Heaven and Hell themselves. True, the archangels and demons stood opposing one another like two armies, but the battles most often took place behind the scenes, behind the eyes of mortals. The supposed war had already stretched hundreds of years—for what were years to immortal beings? Kingdoms had risen and fallen, fiends such as Bartuc, the Warlord of Blood, had come to power, then been defeated—and still the war had pressed on.

And early on in this struggle, wondrous Ureh had become a central battleground.

"All knew of Ureh's greatness in those days," the bald sorcerer went on. "A fount of light, the guiding force of good in those troubled days—which, of course, meant that it drew the attention not only of the archangels but of the lords of Hell themselves, the *Prime Evils*."

The Prime Evils. Whatever land one had been born in, whether in the jungles of Kehjistan or the cooler, rockier realms of the Western Kingdoms, all knew of the Prime Evils, the three brothers who ruled Hell. Mephisto, Lord of Hatred, master of undead. Baal, Lord of Destruction, bringer of chaos.

Diablo.

Diablo, perhaps the most feared, the ultimate manifestation of terror, the nightmare not only of children but of veteran warriors who had already seen the horrors men themselves could produce. Diablo it had been who had gazed most at bright Ureh from his monstrous domain, who had most been offended by its glorious existence. Order could be brought forth from the chaos created by Baal, and the hatred of Mephisto could be mastered by anyman with strength, but to have no fear of fear itself—such a thing Diablo could not believe and would not stand.

"The lands around Ureh grew darker with each passing year, Captain Dumon. Creatures twisted by evil or born not of this world harried those who would journey to and from the city walls. Sinister magic insinuated themselves where they could, barely driven back by the sorcerers of the kingdom."

And with each defeat by the peoples of Ureh, the Vizjerei added, Diablo grew more determined. He would bring down the wondrous city and make its inhabitants the slaves of Hell. All would see that no power on the mortal plane could withstand the most foul of the Prime Evils.

"It came to the point when no one dared travel to the city and few could escape it. It is said that the lord of the realm, the just and kind Juris Khan, gathered his greatest priests and mages and decreed that they would do what they had to in order to save their people once and for all. Legend has it that Juris Khan had been granted a vision by an archangel, one who had declared to him that the power above had seen the trials of their most honored followers and had felt moved to grant them the greatest of havens, so long as the humans put it upon themselves to reach it." Quov Tsin had an almost enraptured expression on his wizened face. "He offered the people of Ureh the very safety of Heaven itself."

Gorst grunted, his way of expressing his outright awe at these words. Kentril held his peace, but he had trouble imagining such an offer. The archangel had opened the very gates of Heaven to the mortals of Ureh, opened to them a place where not even all three Prime Evils combined could have made the slightest incursion. All the people of Ureh had to do was find their way there.

"Some gesture," the mercenary captain interjected, not without some sarcasm. "Here we are, but you can find your own good way to get to us."

"You asked for the story, Dumon—do you want it or not? I've far more important things to do than entertain you."

"Go ahead, sorcerer. I'll try to keep my awe reined in."

With a disdainful sniff, Tsin said, "The archangel came twice more in Juris Khan's dreams, each time with the same promise and each time with some clues as to how this miracle could come to be..."

Guided by his visions, Lord Khan urged the sorcerers and priests to efforts such as none had ever conjectured before. The archangel had left what hints he could of what needed to be done, but the restrictions by which he existed forbade him from granting the mortals any more than that. Still, with the faith of Heaven behind them, Ureh dedicated its efforts to achieving this wondrous task. They knew what they had been offered, and they knew what fate likely would befall them if they failed.

"What little we know of that period comes from Gregus Mazi, the only inhabitant of Ureh to be found afterward. One of the circle of mages involved in the casting of the great spell, it is assumed by most

scholars that at the last moment he must've faltered in his faith, for when the sorcerers and priests finally opened the way to Heaven—how is never said—Gregus Mazi was not taken with the rest."

"Hardly seems fair."

"From him," Quov Tsin went on, utterly ignoring Kentril, "we know that a tremendous red light enshrouded Ureh at that point, covering everything up to and including the very walls surrounding it. As Gregus—still heart-stricken at being left behind—watched, a second city seemed to rise above the first, an exact if ethereal twin of Ureh..."

Before the wide, unblinking eyes of the unfortunate sorcerer, the vast, phantasmal display hovered above its mortal shell. Even from where he stood, Gregus Mazi could see torchlight, could even see a few figures standing upon the ghostly battlements. To him, it had been as if the soul of Ureh had left the mortal plane, for when he glanced at the abandoned buildings around him, they had already begun to crumble and collapse, as if all they had been had been sucked from their very substance, leaving only swiftly decaying skeletons.

And as the lone figure looked up once more, he saw the shimmering city grow more insubstantial. The crimson aura flared, growing almost as bright as the sun that had set but moments before. Gregus Mazi had shielded his eyes for just a second—and in that second the glorious vision of a floating Ureh had faded away.

"Gregus Mazi was left a broken man, Captain Dumon. He was found by followers of Rathma, the necromancers of the deep jungle, and they cared for him until his mind had healed enough. He left them, then, an obsession already growing in his heart. He would join his family and friends yet. The sorcerer traveled all over the world in search of what he needed, for although he had been a part of the spellwork that had enabled the people of Ureh to ascend to Heaven, he had not known all of it."

"Get to the point, Tsin, the point of our being here at all."

"Cretin." With a scowl, the robed figure continued. "Twelve years after Ureh, Gregus Mazi returned to his abandoned homeland. In his wake he left scrolls and books, all indications of his studies. He left notes here and there, most of which I've tracked down. Twelve years after Ureh, Gregus Mazi came to the ruins... and simply vanished."

Kentril rubbed his mustache. He had a very real answer for the ancient sorcerer's fate. "An animal attacked him, or he had an accident."

"I might have thought the same, my dear captain, if I had not early on in my efforts procured this."

Quov Tsin reached into a massive pouch where he kept his most valued notes and withdrew an old scroll. He held it out to Kentril, who reluctantly took it.

Captain Dumon unrolled it as gently as he could. The parchment was fragile and the script written on it badly faded, but with effort he could make it out. "This was written by a man from Westmarch!"

"Yes... the mercenary captain who journeyed with Gregus Mazi. I found it both ironic and perhaps telling that you approached me when I sent news of my offer to those who might be interested. I see

as fate that we two follow the tracks of my predecessor and this man."

"This man" proved to be one Humbart Wessel, a veteran fighter with a thankfully plain manner of writing. Kentril puzzled through the passages, at first finding nothing.

"Toward the bottom," Tsin offered.

The slim mercenary read over that part of the aged scroll, which Humbart Wessel had clearly written years after the fact.

On the seventh day, near dusk, the passage began, Master Mazi again approached the edge of the ruins. Says I to him, that this quest's seen no good end and we should go, but he says he's certain the time. The shadow will touch at just the right angle. It has to.

Master Mazi promised much gold to us and another offer none there'd take, however worthy any might think themselves. Fly up to Heaven... older now, I still wouldn't have taken it.

The shadow came like he said, Nymyr's hand reaching out for old Ureh. We watched, certain as before that we'd been on a fool's quest.

Aah, what fools we were to believe that!

I recall the shadow. I recall the shimmering. How the ruins suddenly looked alive again. How the lights glowed inside! Swear I still will that I heard the voices of folk, but couldn't see any!

"I'm coming..." Those were Master Mazi's last words, but not to us, though. I remember them still, and I remember how we thought we saw the glitter of the gold that he'd told us about again and again—but not one man would enter. Not one man would follow. Master Mazi went it alone.

We camped there, hearing the voices, hearing some of them call to us, it seemed. None of us would go though. Tomorrow, I say to the others, tomorrow when Master Mazi comes out and shows all's well we'll go in and get our fill. One night, it won't matter.

And in the morning, all we saw were ruins. No lights. No voices.

No Master Mazi.

Lord Hiram, I writ this down like I agreed and it goes to the Zakarum—

Captain Dumon turned the scroll over, looking for more.

"You'll see nothing. What little was left beyond this passage speaks of other matters and was of no concern to me. Only this page."

"A few scribbled lines by an old warrior? This brought us all the way here?" Kentril felt like tossing the parchment back into Tsin's ugly face.

"Cretin," Quov Tsin repeated. "You see words but cannot read past them. Don't you trust one of your own?" He waved a gnarled hand. "Never mind! That was just to show the one point. Gregus Ma

found a way to the Ureh of old, the Ureh he had lost twelve years before—and we can do the very same!"

Kentril recalled the line about gold, the selfsame gold that had lured him into this foolishness in the first place. However, he also recalled how Humbart Wessel and his men had been too frightened to go after it once the opportunity had finally presented itself. "I've no desire to go to Heaven just yet, sorcerer."

The diminutive Tsin snorted. "Nor have I! Gregus Mazi was welcome to that path, but I seek earthly rewards. Once they had ascended, the people of Ureh would not need the items they had collected for their mortal lives. Any valuables, books of spells, talismans... those would have been left behind."

"Then why haven't we found anything?"

"The clues are in the manuscript of Humbart Wessel! For these living mortals to ascend, Juris Kha and his sorcerers had to cast a spell like no other. They had to bridge the gap between this plane and that of Heaven. In doing so, they created a place in between—in the form of this shadow Ureh that Gregus found again years later!"

Captain Dumon tried desperately to follow the mage's reasoning. The gold that he had been promised existed not in these ruins but rather in the floating vision described by the previous mercenary leader of the ghostly city.

He glanced at the rubble, all that remained of physical Ureh. "But how can we possibly reach such a place, even if it does exist? You said it isn't part of our world, but in between ours and—and—"

"And Heaven, yes," finished the Vizjerei. He returned to his devices, peering through one. "It took Gregus Mazi more than a decade to do it, but because of him, my own calculations took but three years once I had the proper information. I know exactly when it will all occur!"

"It's coming back again?"

Tsin's eyes widened, and he gave Kentril an incredulous look. "Of course! Have you not been paying attention to anything I have said?"

"But—"

"I have told you more than enough now, Captain Dumon, and I really must return to my work! Try not to bother me again unless it is absolutely necessary, is that understood?"

Gritting his teeth, Kentril straightened. "You summoned me, Vizjerei."

"Did I? Oh, yes, of course. That's what I wanted to tell you. It is tomorrow evening."

More and more the slim captain began to wonder if he and Quov Tsin actually spoke the same language. "What's tomorrow evening, sorcerer?"

"What we were just speaking of, cretin! The shadow comes tomorrow evening, an hour before nightfall. Tsin glanced again at his notes. "Make that an hour and a quarter to be safe."

"An hour and a quarter..." the captain murmured, dumbstruck.

"Exactly so! Run along now!" The bald Vizjerei became enmeshed in his work once more. Watching him, Kentril realized that the slight figure had already completely forgotten the presence of the two fighters. The only thing that mattered to Quov Tsin, the only thing that *existed* for him, was loss of the legendary Ureh.

Kentril retreated from the vicinity of the wizened mage, thoughts racing. Now he knew that he had indeed followed a madman. All the talk of gold in the past had made the captain assume that Tsin actually meant that the wealth of the city had been secreted in some cache whose whereabouts could be ascertained only by the direction of the shadows at some point of the day. He had never truly understood that the Vizjerei had literally hunted a ghost realm, a place not of this world.

I've brought us here to chase phantoms...

But what if Tsin were right? What if the legend of the city had any grain of truth? Heaven had no need of gold. Perhaps, as the sorcerer had claimed, it had all been left behind, there for the taking.

Yet, Humbart Wessel had been offered the opportunity, and not one man of his had risked the shadowed kingdom.

Kentril Dumon's hand slipped to his belt pouch, removing from it the elegant brooch he had discovered. For the woman it depicted, he would gladly have journeyed into Ureh, but, failing that, some bit of valuable jewelry from her household or that of another wealthy citizen of the fabled realm would satisfy him just as much.

It was not as if any of the owners would still need them.

Zayl watched the band of mercenaries from his position atop the crumbling guard tower with much trepidation. The men below moved about the ruins like a small but determined swarm of ants. They went through every crevice, searched under every boulder, and even though they obviously met with meager success, they pushed on.

Pale of skin and with a studious expression more suited to a clerk in a shipping house than to a well-trained and well-versed necromancer, Zayl had observed the newcomers since their arrival. None of his readings had predicted the coming of these intruders, and at such a critical juncture Zayl felt that no mere coincidence.

Ureh had always been treated most gingerly by the followers of Rathma, who had sensed in it some delicately held balance among the various planes of existence. Zayl knew the legends as well as anyone and knew a little of the true history behind them. Ureh had always drawn him, much to the displeasure and dismay of his mentors. They believed him enchanted by the notion of the astonishing spells utilized and the power one might wield if one learned how to recreate them. After all, the sorcerers of the ancient land had blurred the lines between life and death far more than any necromancer could have ever dreamed. In fact, if the legends spoke true, then the people of Ureh had bypassed death altogether, which went against everything in the teachings of Rathma.

Zayl, however, did not desire to relearn the secrets of those mages—not that he had bothered to tell his

teachers that fact. No, the plain—faced necromancer who now watched the mercenaries through almond—shaped eyes of gray desired something entirely different.

Zayl sought to commune with the archangels themselves—and the power behind them.

"Like rats hunting for garbage," mocked a high—pitched voice from his side.

Without looking at the speaker, the necromancer replied, "I was thinking more of ants."

"Rats is what they are, I say... and I should know, for didn't they gnaw off my legs and arms, the burrow through my chest for good measure? This bunch has the same look to 'em as those beasts did!"

"They should not be here at this time. They should have stayed away. That would have been common sense."

Zayl's companion laughed, a hollow sound. "I didn't have enough sense even though I knew better!"

"You had no choice. Once so touched by Ureh, you had to come back eventually." The hooded necromancer peered beyond the mercenaries, surveying the region from which their apparent captives had just come. "There is a sorcerer with them. He has not stepped out into the open since he came here, but I can sense him."

"Smells that awful, does he? Wish I still had a nose."

"I sense his power... and I know he senses mine, although he may not realize the source." Zayl slipped back a little, then rose. The grave robbers would not be able to see him from their much lower vantage points. "Neither he nor his paid underlings must interfere."

"What do you plan to do?"

The black—clad form did not answer. Instead, he reached for a small array of objects previously positioned by his side. Into a pouch he kept handy at his belt went a dagger carved from ivory, two candles nearly burned down to wax puddles, a small vial containing a thick, crimson liquid—and the human skull, minus jaw, that had been the centerpiece of the display.

"Gently now," mocked the skull. "We're quite a height up! I wouldn't want to be repeating that fall again!"

"Quiet, Humbart." Zayl placed the macabre artifact in the pouch, then strung the latter shut. Finished with his task, he took one last look at the treasure hunters below and pondered their fates.

One way or another, they could not be permitted to be here tomorrow evening—for their sakes as well as his own.

THREE

"*Cap'n Dumon...*"

Kentril rolled over in his sleep, trying to find comfort on the rocky ground beneath his blanket. On Quov Tsin had a tent, the mercenaries more accustomed to dealing with the elements. Yet the area around the ruins of Ureh seemed the most disturbing, most awkward of places to try to rest even for such hardened fighters. Throughout the camp, the captain's tossing and turning were duplicated by every man save Gorst, who most believed could slumber peacefully on a bed of thorns.

"*Cap'n Dumon...*"

"Mmm? Wha—?" Kentril stirred, pushing himself slowly up on one elbow. "Who's there?"

The nearly full moon shone with such brightness that it took little time for his eyes to adjust to the night. Kentril looked around, noted the snoring forms around the low fires. From the sorcerer's tent the snoring sounded particularly loud.

"Darned place..." The mercenary lowered his head again. He would be glad when they abandoned the ruins. Not even the field of battle left him so on edge.

"*Cap'n Dumon...*"

Kentril rolled off his blanket, hand already on the hilt of the dagger he always wore on his belt. The hair on the back of his neck stiffened, and a cold chill washed over the mercenary leader as he focused on a figure only a few feet to his right, a figure who had not been standing there a second before.

Of itself, that discovery might not have bothered the captain, for he himself could move with the utmost stealth. However, what did unnerve him so very much, even to the point where the dagger nearly fell from his shaking fingers, had to do with the fact that the one who faced him could be no other than the hapless *Hargo*.

Faced might have been an inappropriate and unfortunate choice of terms, for Hargo no longer had a good portion of his. The right side of his head had been ripped away, exposing skull and rotting muscle. One eye had been completely lost, a deep red and black crater all that remained. The mercenary's bedraggled beard framed a mouth curled open to reveal death's grin, and the eye that did remain stared almost accusingly at Kentril.

The rest of Hargo had fared no better. The right arm had been gnawed away just below the shoulder and the chest and stomach torn wide open, revealing ribs, guts, and more. Only tatters of clothes still existed, emphasizing even more the horrific fate of the man.

"*Cap'n Dumon...*" rasped the monstrous visitor.

Now the dagger did slip, Kentril's fingers limp. He glanced around, but no one else had been disturbed by this monstrous vision. The others all slumbered away.

"Har—Hargo?" he finally managed.

"Cap'n Dumon..." The corpse shambled forward a couple of steps, water from the river still dripping from the half-devoured form. *"You shouldn't be here..."*

As far as Kentril had suddenly become concerned, he should have been back in Westmarch, drinking himself into a stupor at his favorite tavern. Anywhere in the world but where he now stood.

"You gotta leave, cap'n," Hargo continued, ignorant of the fact that his own throat had a gaping hole the side and therefore should not have let him even speak. *"There's death in this place. It got me, and it'll get you all... all of you..."*

As he warned Kentril, the ravaged figure raised the one good arm he had left, pointing at his captain. The moonaccented the pale, deathly sheen of Hargo's corpse and the rot already taking place even on the otherwise untouched appendage.

"What do you mean?" Dumon managed. "What do you mean?"

But Hargo only repeated his warning. *"It'll kill you all. Just like me, cap'n... Take you all dead just like me..."*

And with that, the corpse raised his face to the moonlit heaven and let out a blood-chilling cry full of regret and fear.

A brave man, Kentril still broke. He fell to his knees, his hands over his ears in a pathetic attempt to keep the heart-jolting sound out. Tears streamed from his eyes, and he looked earthward, no longer able to face the ghastly sight before him.

The cry came to an abrupt halt.

Still holding his ears, the mercenary captain dared to glance up—

— And awoke.

"Aaah!" Kentril scrambled from his bedroll, tossing aside his blanket and stumbling to his feet. Once as he straightened did he realize that all around him his men acted in similar fashion, shouts of dismay and wild looks abounding. Two men had swords free and now swung them madly about, risking injuring their fellows. One hardy fighter sat still, eyes wide and unblinking, body shivering.

From more than one Kentril heard whispered or shouted a single name... the name of *Hargo*.

"I saw 'im!" gasped Oskal. "Standin' before me as big as life!"

"Nuthin' live about him!" snarled another. "Death himself couldn'ta looked worse!"

"It was a warning!" Benjin declared. "He wants us out of here now!" The fighter reached down for his bedroll. "Well, I'm all for that!"

Seeing his men in disarray brought Captain Dumon back to his senses. Whatever fearful message Hargo might or might not have delivered, common sense still dictated certain cautions.

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