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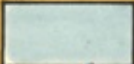

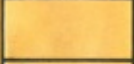


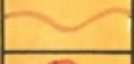

PRINCE OF LIES

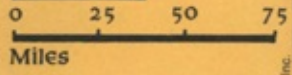
JAMES LOWDER

THE AVATAR SERIES
BOOK IV

DAVITA
2007

Zhentil Keep AND SURROUNDINGS

	Sea
	River
	Plain
	Forest
	Mountain
	Road
	City



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The Prince of Lies called into the dark and silent prison: “I am Cyric, Lord of the Dead and God of Strife. I am here to bind you to my service, Kezef.”

A rumbling growl rolled out of the shadows.

“No god of Faerun would loose the Chaos Hound of his own free will.” The inhuman voice was low and full of malevolence. “So you must be no god.”

“If you lavish godhood on the pretenders who chained you here, then you’re right. I am no god,” Cyric countered snidely. “I’m very much more than that.”

The Chaos Hound moved into the light. The beast resembled a huge mastiff, as large as an draft horse Cyric had seen in the streets of Zhentil Keep. Teeming maggots were his fur, the coat shifting incessantly over barely covered sinews and bones. His pointed teeth glittered like daggers of jet. A tongue oozing tatters of corruption lolled to the Hound’s chin, poisonous spittle dripping in sizzling drops to the ground.

A short length of chain, forged by the God of Craft himself, held the beast in place. The links clattered sullenly as Kezef settled onto his haunches and looked the Prince of Lies in the face. “What dark task would you have me complete?”

A wicked smile creased Cyric’s lips. “I want you to find the soul of Kelemvor Lyonsbane.”



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FORGOTTEN REALMS®

PRINCE OF LIES



JAMES LOWDER

THE
AVATAR SERIES

IV



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**To J. F. Marcolini,
for two decades of friendship.**

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Author's Note

Five years ago, I was handed my first big assignment as an editor for TSR's book department: the Avatar Trilogy. Little did I suspect at the time that my office would soon become home to something game designer Jeff Grubb liked to call the Avatar Vortex. Anyone who crossed my threshold from July 1988 to October 1989 ran the risk of spiraling down into that maelstrom of Avatar products: novels, game modules, and comic books. Some folks made the descent willingly, others shouted a bit as they went under, but from its inception the Avatar Project owed its vitality to a large team of creative people.

With all that history in mind, it shouldn't be surprising that this Avatar-related novel owes much to the work of others:

To Scott Ciencin and Troy Denning, the better parts of Richard Awlinson, who penned the original trilogy and broke me in as an editor.

To Jeff Grubb, Karen Boomgarden, Ed Greenwood, and all the creatives who worked on the game department side of Avatar. The vortex would have been pretty lonely without your cheerful company.

To Mary Kirchoff, who assigned the Avatar Trilogy to a green editor, then taught him enough as a writer that he could add a chapter or two (or twenty) of his own.

To J. Robert King, who showed astounding grace under fire in the editing of this manuscript.

And most especially to my wife, Debbie, who has weathered the five-year-long Avatar maelstrom with good cheer. I doubt this is the last we'll see of Cyric, but it's nice to know you'll be around to keep him quiet during *Jonny Quest* the next time he drops by for a lengthy stay.

PROLOGUE

Gwydion was doomed, but he kept running anyway.

Dubbed “the Quick” by the sergeant of his company in Cormyr’s vaunted Purple Dragon Guard, Gwydion had bested everyone who’d ever challenged him in a footrace. He could dash from one end of Suzail’s expansive Promenade to the other without breathing hard, while the pretenders to his title fell to panting long before they’d reached Vangerdahast’s Tower, less than halfway along the course. As a scout during the crusade, he outran three Tuigan cavalymen to deliver a report to King Azoun. So unassailable was his reputation that none of Gwydion’s otherwise skeptical fellows had thought to question him, even though no one else had witnessed the amazing feat.

Yet, even Gwydion doubted his fleetness of foot could save him now—no more than Lady Cardea’s priceless elf-crafted bow had kept her alive; no more than the myriad enchantments of Aram Scragglebeard had whisked him out of harm’s way. No, the carrion crows filling the iron-gray sky were there as much for him as for his fallen companions.

As he scrambled to the foot of the cliff, Gwydion looked back up to the plateau. Twilight shadows draped the rocky face, the cloak of darkness broken now and then by long, glinting icicles or patches of snow. And at the trail’s start, haloed by the sun setting at his back, stood the giant. He resembled nothing so much as a tower perched on the high ledge—his booby-shaped small gatehouses, his hands thick balconies, his horned helmet the peaked and merloned roof. He stood unmoving, staring at Gwydion with frost-blue eyes. Then the giant leaped forward.

“Torm’s heart!” Gwydion gasped, sprinting away at top speed.

The falling goliath seemed to fill the sky, and his shadow engulfed the fleeing man. With surprising agility, the giant bounded once, twice, and finally a third time as he ran down the steep rock face. His iron-shod boots sent boulders cascading around the petrified sell-sword. Billows of powdery snow swirled into the air as the rocks hit the clearing. The carrion crows flapped to a safer vantage, black spots moving in the glittering mist of snow.

As the giant landed, the ground trembled for miles around, and many darksome creatures in the Great Gray Lands of Thar were shaken from their unquiet slumbers. “You cannot run from Thrym!” the titan bellowed, brandishing a battle-axe adorned with the feathers of griffons and giant eagles.

Gwydion charged across the open ground, heading for the fast-flowing river a few hundred yards away. If he could make the boat they’d secreted there, he might be able to lose Thrym. If not ...

Gwydion gritted his teeth and ran.

The clearing sloped away from the cliff, its blanket of new-fallen snow broken only by scattered boulders, clusters of gnarled yew shrubs, and the churned tracks left hours ago by Gwydion and his two fellow treasure-hunters. He stayed in those tracks as much as possible, hoping to avoid the deep drifts and sinkholes hidden beneath the snow. On her way to the giant’s lair, Cardea had stumbled into one such hole—a particularly deep fissure. She’d have blamed the sprained ankle for her poor showing against Thrym, Gwydion thought grimly, if she weren’t lying in two halves up on the plateau.

He risked a glance over his shoulder. Thrym lumbered after him, surrounded by a haze of snow. For every five of Gwydion’s steps, the giant took only one. And he was still gaining

ground.

By the time Gwydion spotted the fissure that had done Cardea so much harm, he could smell the stench of the uncured hides Thrym wore beneath his breastplate. The sell-sword lost his knees buckle beneath him, and he tumbled painfully into the fissure. Then, clutching his bruised ribs, he tried his best to shrink into the hole.

Running too fast to stop quickly, Thrym leaped over the scar. He swung his axe as he passed, but the awkward slash did little more than fan another thin cloud of snow into the air—that and frighten all thoughts of the river and the boat from Gwydion's mind.

As the blade hissed close to the mercenary's face, he saw only the blood coloring the chipped head. The gore's from Cardea and probably Aram, too, Gwydion thought, though he hadn't stayed long enough to witness the old mage's grisly end. The next blow will probably end this sorry adventure and my career as a sword-for-hire.

"Anything, Torm," Gwydion shrieked. "I'll do anything if you let me live to see Cormy again." The sell-sword's plea to the God of Duty was utterly insincere, as were all the oaths he'd sworn in times of desperation, but it did not go unheard.

Come to me, Gwydion.

No more than a whisper, the words echoed insistently inside his head. Then a warm flickering light appeared before the man's tearing eyes. It beckoned the sell-sword wordlessly ordering him to tunnel into the snow that filled the fissure. Gwydion did so without hesitation, without doubting for an instant that some greater power had taken pity on him. Such things weren't uncommon in Faerun, a land where the gods took on mortal avatars from time to time, and miracles were limited only by faith and imagination.

After scraping forward a dwarf's height, Gwydion felt the packed snow beneath him shift.

Go deeper, the voice instructed. The words banished the chill from his trembling limbs and masked the pain in his raw and bleeding hands.

Through the cold blanket overhead came Thrym's bellowed curses. The footsteps were getting close again, the ground trembling beneath the giant's iron-booted gait. Gulping his breath, Gwydion tore into the packed snow beneath him like a vole burrowing away from a ravenous fox. Then, quite suddenly, the shroud of snow covering him was gone, brushed away with one swipe of Thrym's callused hand.

"Ha! You think you can fool me with an old trick like this?" Thrym mocked. His voice was as cold as the icicles hanging from his dirty blond beard.

Gwydion looked up at the giant. Thrym's iron boots stood like prison walls to either side of the fissure. Legs clad in motley furs led up to a battered breastplate that had once been the front door of a Vaasan palace. The giant's face, three stories above Gwydion, was mostly hidden by his unkempt beard and huge helmet, but his blue eyes glittered through the tangle. Those eyes narrowed as Thrym lifted the axe high above his head.

Have no fear, the voice purred in Gwydion's mind. *I have heard your plea.*

The snow beneath the sell-sword fell away. With a shout of surprise, Gwydion slipped into the hole and careened down a worn chute of marble. Above him, the giant's axe struck the ground, sending a shower of snow and dirt clattering down the chute after him.

Gwydion tumbled and slid just long enough to right himself. No sooner had he done that than the chute deposited him into a small, man-made chamber. He sat there for a time, stunned, bloodied, covered with dirt and dripping wet from the snow. He noticed none of

those discomforts. Neither did he hear Thrym's shouted promises of horrible tortures, dirites of pain, and suffering perfected by frost giant shamans over the centuries.

"It is your duty to bow before your god."

It took a moment for the command to seep through the mist of fear and awe floating over Gwydion's thoughts. Then he blinked, mouthed a wordless prayer, and dropped his forehead to the smooth marble floor. The god let Gwydion stay in that uncomfortable position for quite a long time.

"You may look upon me, Gwydion," the god said at last, and the sell-sword meekly raised his head.

It took some time for Gwydion's eyes to adjust to the wonder-bright radiance filling the chamber, but when they did, he saw that the stranger was tall, at least twice the height of a man. Waves of power, of steel-fisted authority, radiated from the armored figure like heat from a raging fire. He held up a gauntleted hand, and Gwydion's wounds were healed. Fear and confusion fled the sell-sword's mind as divine knowledge engulfed him. A cool clarity of thought settled over Gwydion, and this new understanding trumpeted one seemingly undeniable fact until it shook the core of his being: He was in the presence of Torm the True God of Duty, Patron of Loyalty. Of that Gwydion had no doubt.

Torm's ornate armor, more ancient than any preserved in Faerun, was hued dusky purple, mirroring the customs of the greatest warriors dedicated to his cause. Spikes carved from the bones of the first evil dragon slain in his name jutted from the cops at his elbows and knees. Points of light scintillated like a thousand tiny stars on the twilight canvas of his breastplate. Eyes like twin suns shone from Torm's helmet as he held a rose-red short sword toward Gwydion, point leveled at his chest. The blade pulsed with the rhythm of a beating heart.

"Men call me Torm the True because I value loyalty above all else. They call me Torm the Brave because I will face any danger to prove my respect of duty." The god touched the sell-sword's shoulder with the rosy blade. "Any who would call himself my follower must do the same."

"Of c-course, Your H-H-Holiness," Gwydion stammered. A frisson of fear tingled down his spine. "I understand."

"Once you understood," Torm said flatly. "But you have strayed far from the path of obedience and duty."

The words echoed from the god's helmet like a ghastly warning sent from inside a coffin.

"When you fought under King Azoun's banner, you knew honor. You did me great glory in your battles against the Tuigan barbarians and shone as a true knight of my church. But then you left the Purple Dragons, refused your duty to strive for law and justice. And for what—become a mercenary, an adventurer hunting the land for profit?"

When Gwydion merely bowed his head in shame, Torm continued. "You came to Tharbad seeking the treasure of the frost giants, but you have discovered the only reward they offer greedy fools is a quick death. For your allies it is too late. For you, there is still a chance, still a way for you to regain your honor."

"Anything, Your Holiness," Gwydion said. Tears of contrition streamed down his cheeks as he struggled to his feet.

"Then behold the final resting place of Alban Onire, Holy Knight of Duty, known in his day as a foe of all evil giants."

Torm floated to one side, revealing a handsome young man lying in state upon a stone bier. He was clad in armor much like the god's. The plate mail looked newly polished. The smell of fresh oil came from the armor's straps and the leather belt holding the gem-encrusted scabbard.

Gwydion licked his lips nervously. "I've heard stories of Alban Onire, but—" He glanced at the sparkling armor, the peaceful expression on the corpse's features. "But he died centuries ago."

"This place has been made holy in honor of Alban's great deeds," Torm said. He turned to gaze on the fallen knight. "His soul is at rest, but his body will not return to duty until someone worthy comes forward to take his place as bane to giants and dragons." Slowly, he held a hand out to Gwydion. "Once you were blessed in my sight. You can be again, but only if you shake off your cowardice and take up the burden of Alban's legacy."

The sell-sword tried futilely to keep his surprise from his face. At first he couldn't imagine why Torm would choose him. His mind raced, searching for some reason for this great honor. He'd fought bravely as a Purple Dragon, facing death a dozen times on the crusade alone. Perhaps that was enough. Stories of other blessed warriors flooded his mind, tales of men and women empowered by the gods to be their agents in Faerun. It didn't take long for those visions of glory to overwhelm his doubts.

"Lord, I am not worthy," Gwydion said, though he was now certain he deserved whatever honors Torm might heap upon him. He solemnly fell to one knee in a show of humility.

Torm gestured with his own rose-hued short sword. "Rise, heir to Alban's greatness, and claim your blade. Some bards call it Titanslayer, and with good reason. No giant may harm you so long as you wield this sword. One touch of its enchanted steel will topple the mightiest titan. Use it well."

Gwydion moved to the edge of the bier, lifted the scabbard, and drew the sword. The weapon was weighted perfectly, its grip solid and reassuring in his hand. He slashed the air. The blade moved like an extension of his arm or even his very soul. He smiled and held Titanslayer up so he could watch the light dance up and down the keen edges of the silver-white blade. With this sword, he could carve a wide place for himself—for Torm, he corrected hastily—in the history of Faerun.

"Thank you, O holiest—" He swallowed the remaining words and looked around in shock.

Torm was gone. So was the body of Alban Onire. Gwydion stood alone in a small dark cavern, the only light in the place coming from the chute to the surface. He reached out with chill fingers for the bier, finding a rough outcropping of stone that held a few ancient bones and some rusted pieces of armor. I've allowed Alban to go to his rest at last, the mercenary thought proudly.

He gripped the sword and, feeling reassured by its weight, strode to the chute. A circle of dim light marked the top—sunlight, the sell-sword realized with a start. The God of Duty and the sharp blade of Titanslayer had captivated him far longer than he'd imagined.

Bracing his legs against one wall, his back against the other, Gwydion struggled up the incline. Trickle of water slicked the stone, making the climb perilous. He slipped twice. Both times the accident sent him back a few feet before he managed to stop his descent. Once Titanslayer slid from its scabbard, but he caught the hilt before the weapon tumbled back into the darkness. As he gently replaced Titanslayer in the scabbard, the sell-sword had

fleeting vision of Torm's wrath. It took him a long time before he could still his trembling enough to continue.

Finally he scrambled out of the chute, into the fissure that had first sheltered him from Thrym. Gwydion felt fatigued from the long climb, but anticipation of the fight to come gave him renewed strength. He peered out of the rocky scar and spotted his foe.

Thrym lazed against the cliff, dozing in the early morning sunshine. The few crows left in the clearing hopped along his arms and legs, feeding on the insects in his filthy clothing. A mouse peeked out from under the giant's breastplate, causing a flurry of activity. The crow darted after the rodent, but Thrym started awake at the hungry cawing. He swatted at the birds, and they scattered into the sky. Only when Thrym's rumbling snores once again shocked the yew shrubs and drowned out the murmuring river did the crows land and renew the feast.

"In the name of Torm, stand and face me!"

Slowly the giant opened his ice-blue eyes and stared down at the little man standing before him. After a moment, he rubbed his entire face with one beefy hand. When Thrym looked again, much to his surprise, the thief was still there.

"It is my duty as a knight of Torm to allow you the chance to surrender," Gwydion said.

The giant lurched to his feet, and the sell-sword had to fight the urge to flee back to the hole in the ground. Instead, Gwydion tapped the long-unused well of his courage. He felt the cold waters of resolve still his trembling soul, douse the ember of panic burning in his breast.

"I should warn you," Gwydion announced grandly, "I wield Titanslayer, bane of all evil giants. You cannot harm me while I have this sword." He held the weapon high, marveling how the sunlight played off the blade.

Thrym narrowed his eyes in confusion. He reached for his axe, which lay against the cliff like a toppled tree, and hefted it to strike. "Mad as a tarrasque," he muttered and brought the axe down.

Gwydion saw his sword arm hit the ground an instant before he felt the giant's axe cleave his shoulder. The limb convulsed, and the fingers released the long, blackened bone they held so desperately. There was no Titanslayer, no gift from the gods. Then the pain shrieked through the sell-sword's chest, along with the dim realization that he was lying in the snow covered in his own blood.

"Torm," Gwydion whispered as the giant brought his axe down for the killing blow.



LIFE UNDERGROUND

Wherein an unexpected journey leads Gwydion the Quick to the maker of his doom, and the mighty Torm dutifully attempts a defense of the dead man's honor.

Fervent voices filled the air. Cries of joy, hopeful whispers, and murmurs thick with desperate longing for salvation merged to become a blanket of sound over the Fugue Plain. The tangled weave of voices held a certain weird power, soothing in its constancy, exciting in its boundless optimism. Such were the prayers of the recently dead.

“Silvanus, mighty Oak Father! Gather me into the great circle of trees that is the heart of your home in Concordant!”

“We are the Morninglord’s children, born again into his eternal care. Let us rise, Lathander, like the sun in spring dawning, to renew our spirits at your side!”

“O Mystra, divine Lady of Mysteries, this servant of your great church asks humbly to be shown the secrets of magic, to be taken into the weave of sorcerous power that enfolds the world!”

In the clear sky over the endless, chalk-white plain, a burst of light announced the arrival of a god’s herald. The hulking, golemlike creature was a marut, carved from a block of onyx as large as any castle in Cormyr, ensorcelled to do the bidding of its divine creator. It hovered above the throng and studied the assembled souls with a pair of eyes that burned like sapphires in its round, stony face. Wide plates of armor and intricately carved bands of hammered gold could not hide the marut’s broad shoulders or thick-muscled arms. Its aura of resolute power, of unyielding strength, likewise could not mask the glint of wisdom in its steady gaze.

The souls crowding the endless plain looked expectantly up at the marut. The herald presented one massive hand in a sign of benediction. As it spread its blunt fingers wide, a blue-white nimbus appeared against the marut’s dark palm. The soft glow grew, forming a circle of stars. Red mist flowed in a thin stream from the circle’s center.

The shades recognized the holy symbol. From all parts of the Fugue Plain, a cry went up. “Mystra!”

Jagged shafts of light erupted from each of the thousand stars and seared the plain in a sudden hail of lightning. The bolts struck the worshipers of the Goddess of Magic, blasting away the cares and concerns that had hardened like shells around their souls in their years of mortal life. The servants of Mystra cried out joyously. Bathed in the power and love of the Lady of Mysteries, they stretched their arms wide and floated up toward the circle of light. One by one, Mystra’s faithful became like glittering stars. When all had been lifted from the

crowd, the herald closed its hand and disappeared.

As one voice, the souls on the Fugue Plain resumed their chants: “Hear my sword upon my shield! I summon you, O Lord of Battles, and demand my commission into your great army in Limbo. My victories in your name are legend, the host sent to this field of the dead before me without number. Astolpho of Highpeak fell to my ever-sharp blade, and Frode Silverbear, Mages, son of Edryn, and Hemah, foul knight of Talos....”

Gwydion the Quick stared at the armor-clad man as he hammered his sword against his riven shield. The warrior bellowed a seemingly endless list of names, pausing only to shout for Tempus to rescue him from this dull place. Gwydion had stumbled across other worshipers of the war god on the Fugue Plain. They were all the same—boastful of their victories and anxious to join the god’s army, where they could spend the rest of eternity in glorious, unending combat.

The sell-sword mournfully shook his head and shuffled away. On every side, men and women sent up prayers to their patron gods. Bards and rangers dedicated to Milil formed huge choruses, chanting their praise of the Lord of All Songs. A solitary devotee of Loviat moved through the throng, scourging himself with a barbed whip, oblivious to all around him. The bards momentarily parted for this frenzied shade, discord overwhelming their song. The interruption soon passed, however, and the praise of Milil floated once more into the air, born aloft on harmonies so perfect they soothed even the savage minions of Malar the Beastlord.

And in the midst of this tapestry of sound, Gwydion the Quick found himself mute.

He’d appeared on the Fugue Plain some time ago, though he found it hard now to tell how long. At first the sell-sword dared to hope he’d dreamed his death. After all, his body seemed solid enough. His sword arm was attached to his shoulder again, the other fatal wound miraculously healed. The fur-lined cloak he’d bought for the trip to frigid Thar was free of bloodstains. Tunic and breeches and high leather boots all seemed perfectly new.

But images of his severed arm lying on the frozen ground and Thrym’s bloody axe descending for another blow still dominated his memory. Gwydion need only call these vivid scenes to mind to know his fate had been sealed. He had passed beyond the realms of the living, into the lands of the dead.

The notion neither frightened the sell-sword nor awed him. From the instant he’d found himself standing in the midst of the teeming throng, a thick shroud of indifference had clouded his thoughts. He moved in a fog, taking in the strange sights and sounds as if they were no more unusual than those to be found in any marketplace in Suzail.

Gwydion understood just enough theology to identify the crowded expanse around him as the Fugue Plain. Long ago, in his days as a Purple Dragon, he’d guarded a diplomatic caravan to Bruenor Battlehammer, dwarven lord of Mithril Hall. A traveling priest of Oghma had bored him witless during the trek north with complicated explanations of the route a soul took on the way to eternal peace. Now, Gwydion would have given almost anything for a lecture on what lay in store for him beyond the Fugue Plain.

Turning his back on the worshipers of Milil, the shade tried once more to call on Torm. The words came out as a horrible croak, just as they had each time he’d attempted to pray—to Torm the True or any other god. He couldn’t even form the litany in his mind. In vain he fought to remember the prayers, but the words simply vanished from his thoughts before he

could focus on them.

One of Milil's bards paused in her song to stare at Gwydion. When the sell-sword met her gaze, she looked away, but not before he noted the terror clouding her eyes.

That fear proved contagious. A softly glowing ember, it flared in Gwydion's mind and burned away the shroud of uncaring still fogging his senses. What if Torm has taken my voice as the price of failure? A chill ran down Gwydion's spine. No, he reminded himself. I was tricked. Some mage—some very powerful illusionist—led me to my doom.

He shrieked and whimpered, but not a single word escaped his lips. The ember of fear burst, showering fragments of panic across his thoughts. He was cursed. Whoever had cast the illusion had stolen part of his soul....

Gwydion felt burning tears well up in his eyes, but when he tried to blink them away, he found he couldn't close his eyelids.

The shades of the Faithful jostled Gwydion as he broke into an aimless run, their souls as tangible as his own strangely physical form. Some prayed more fervently as the gibbering sell-sword shambled by. Others turned their unblinking eyes on the lost soul. They were struck by the sorrow etched on Gwydion's face, but fearful to cease their own murmured prayers to comfort him, lest they, too, be cut off from their gods.

Gwydion stumbled through the milling crowd. The faces blurred before his eyes, and the prayers became a meaningless cacophony. He grabbed a young woman wearing a silver dress of Tymora and shook her roughly. Someone had to lift the curse! In reply to his gurgled plea the woman knocked Gwydion's legs out from beneath him with a sweep-kick, then backed away.

"He looks like one of ours," came an inhuman voice.

"Nah. Just another of them cracked doommasters. Beshaba attracts that sort of trash."

The coarse, profane voices jarred against the sacred prayers, startling Gwydion out of his frenzy. He leaped to his feet and spun around, only to come nose to stomach with the most horrifying creature he'd ever seen. Its head had belonged to a huge wolf at one time, but the rest of its grotesque form had been patched together from a dozen other animals. Striped fur bristled in a mane that ran from between its pointed ears down its hunched ogre's back. Bright red scales plated the rest of the thing's body. It had a pair of human arms ending in hands that were little more than claws. These the creature rubbed together nervously. Four enormous spider legs waved and clutched the air beneath the other arms. Serpentine coils supported the monstrous torso, writhing and twisting beneath its bulk.

"You're cracked, Perdix," the beast said, saliva drooling from his wolfish jaws. "This one is for the city. It's obvious! Look at his face. He's been crying."

Perdix folded his leathery wings and hopped closer to Gwydion on a pair of skinny legs that bent backward at the knees. Rubbery yellow skin covered his body, which was as thin and wasted as that of a drought-starved child. With the single blue eye in the center of his wide face, Perdix looked up at Gwydion. "Well?" he asked impatiently, thin tongue flickering over gleaming white teeth. "Get praying, slug."

Frantically Gwydion tried to shove the little creature out of the way, but two sets of spider legs closed around his chest and pulled him backward. The wolf-headed thing glowered down at the sell-sword and placed clawed hands to either side of his head. "You heard Perdix," he hissed. "Let's hear your best holy day shout"

As before, a pitiful croak escaped Gwydion's lips when he tried to call on Torm.

Perdix shook his head. "For once you're right, Af. I was certain he was a doommaster. They're always getting into rows with Tymora's lot." He held out a set of night-black manacles. The iron rings clicked open, revealing sharp spikes pointed inward. "Now let's not have any trouble from you, slug."

One glance at the shades nearby told Gwydion he was alone in this. The others had turned their backs on him, leaving him to his two hideous captors. The Faithful close by formed a wide circle. They had their faces turned to the sky, their hands clenched together in white-knuckled devotion or crossed devoutly over their unbeating hearts.

Gwydion cursed them wordlessly and struggled against Af's implacable grip. His panic had subsided to a slow-burning dread, allowing him to think a bit more clearly. The endless hours of drill on Suzail's parade grounds came back to him then, his training in hand-to-hand combat. He laced his fingers together and pounded Af in the jaw. At the same time, he drove both heels down on the creature's snaking coils.

Af growled in annoyance at the blows, but silently reminded himself there would be no trouble if he twisted the prisoner's head off. Instead, the denizen bit down on Gwydion's hands as he raised them to strike again, clamping his jaws just hard enough to pierce the flesh.

In that instant, Gwydion realized the giant's axe hadn't liberated him from pain.

"Tsk. Isn't that always the way?" Perdix sighed. "No matter what I say, you slugs try to fight anyway." He hopped high off the ground and clamped the manacles onto Gwydion's wrists.

As the iron rings clanked shut, their spiked interiors bit into flesh. Then, as if the taste of the shade's essence had suddenly woken them from rusting slumber, the spikes twitched to life and burrowed deeper still. They dug into bones, twisted sharply, and shot straight up into Gwydion's arms. Blinded by the pain, the shade screamed a long, yowling wail of agony.

For the first time since Gwydion's arrival on the Fugue Plain, the sounds from his throat rang clear and true.

* * * * *

When the haze of pain cleared from his eyes, Gwydion found himself in a noisy crowd gathered outside a great walled necropolis. His whole body ached terribly, but the manacles' spikes seemed to have stopped driving into his arms. Af had a clawed hand clamped on one of Gwydion's elbows. Perdix held the other in cool, webbed fingers. A charnel house stench hung over everything. Gwydion found tears streaking down his cheeks, not from the pain on his wrists, but from the choking smell of death and decay seeping into his nose and mouth.

The gates towering before him would have dwarfed Thrym or any other giant in Faerûn. Dark and foreboding, they reached up into a sky swirling with red mist. To either side, past the hulking gatehouses, high, pale walls stretched to the horizon. He was too far away to be certain, but Gwydion thought the walls were moving. It was almost as if each brick were shifting constantly, writhing as though it were alive.

All around the sell-sword, the crowd of whimpering, bawling shades pushed closer to him. Each had been bound at the wrists by manacles, and, like a reluctant steer before a slaughterhouse, every damned soul was herded along by a pair of monstrous denizens. The

creatures were kin to Perdix and Af, but only in their sheer grotesqueness. They'd been formed by insane mixings of animals and men, plants, or even gems and metals. They flew, slithered, and crawled along, prodding their prisoners with suckered fingers or jabbing them with sharp spines.

The crowd surged forward, pressing Gwydion up against the closest of the twin gatehouses. The tower's surface was hard and dark, and it felt oddly warm against the sell-sword's face. He pushed away to get a better look at the small, roundish blocks. They weren't stones, he decided, but fist-sized lumps of ... *something*. He peered closer, then recoiled in horror.

"Hearts!" he shrieked. "The tower's made of human hearts!"

Af snorted. "Bright boy. The gates are, too." He lowered his snout and stared into Gwydion's terror-filled eyes. "Bet you can't tell me what kind."

"Oh, leave him be," Perdix said. "He doesn't look like a priest to me. They're the only ones who care about such trivia."

"Cowards' hearts," Af gloated, ignoring Perdix completely. "They don't make as good a wall as heroes' hearts, but then, we don't get many heroes here."

Perdix shook his head in disgust. "Tsk. You're so proud of the blasted things, you'd think you built them yourself."

"I did!" Af bellowed. "At least, I was around here when they was first put up!"

Gwydion finally found his voice. "Torm, save me!" he shrieked.

Every denizen in earshot turned to Gwydion, and a webbed hand clamped over his mouth. "None of that, slug," Perdix hissed. "There's one god in the City of Strife, and he don't like his subjects calling out to any of the others. We don't care if you get in deep with him the first day you're on your own, but right now you're our charge. This reflects bad on Af and me."

"And we certainly don't need the grief," the wolf-headed denizen grumbled. He balled one taloned hand into a fist and brought it hard against Gwydion's jaw. Bones shattered. Teeth spilled from the shade's mouth like marbles from a torn bag.

Perdix frowned. "You're our own worst enemy, Af," he sighed, wrapping one leathery wing around Gwydion to shield him from further blows. "If he can't speak, they'll be really miffed at the castle. Remember what happened last time, when you twisted that shade's head off?"

Af slithered sideways on his coils. "Aw, this'll heal before he gets in to see him. 'Sides, he was calling on another power. You know the rules about that"

Reluctantly Perdix agreed but was careful to impose himself between Gwydion and Af until the gates opened.

Horns sounded from high in the gatehouses, and the dark doors creaked apart just wide enough for three men to pass through, shoulder to shoulder. Denizens shoved their war through the gap, then followed close behind. The shades tried their futile best to resist their last few steps into the City of Strife. The matter was always decided by the steady push from the thousands of damned souls milling behind the reluctant prisoners.

A straight boulevard led away from the gates, lined on both sides by hundreds of skeletal guardians wielding pikes and spears. The undead soldiers existed solely to abuse the newly damned and their captors. With their razor-sharp weapons, they sliced off chunks of flesh that were quickly ground into paste beneath the mob's feet. Along the boulevard, hungry things with haunted eyes waited impatiently in the shadows, hoping to recover some morsel.

Had anyone passing through the gates needed to breathe, the press would have suffocated

him before he'd gone a dozen steps. A constant drone filled the air. This wasn't a tapestry of prayers, as on the Fugue Plain, but a shrill curtain of vile curses and anguished cries. Near the gates, the noise was so great no one bothered to speak below a shout. Thankfully, the twisted, scarred, ten-story brown-stones that made up the skyline muted the sound as the mob approached the city's center.

Time blurred for Gwydion as he made his way with countless others to the heart of the City of Strife. Only the steady healing of his jaw marked the passing of the hours. He could feel the bones knit, the new teeth pushing through the raw gums. The pain still plagued him, blurring his vision and scattering his thoughts, but it had lessened to a continuous, throbbing ache. Gwydion wondered dully if his capacity to feel such mundane agony had been stunted. After all, the pain from the spikes buried in his wrists had diminished, too. In his heart of hearts, though, the sell-sword knew better than to hope he'd be immune to torture after this. The denizens would invent new kinds of pain for him if the old ones wore thin.

Finally the mob crossed the living bridge that spanned the gurgling black ooze of the River Slith, then dashed through the open gates of the great palace at the center of the necropolis. Hemmed in by defensive walls newly built of the purest diamonds, the shades were allowed to rest. Most of the damned collapsed, exhausted by the run. Not Gwydion the Quick. He stood, unfazed by the marathon, staring up at the shadowy heights of Bone Castle.

The keep reached high into the red sky. Its lowest floors were wrought of skulls that looked out sightlessly on the courtyard. Higher up, other bones found their way into the architecture, forming fantastically spiraling frames around windows, sturdy braces for balconies. Winged denizens used these balconies to enter the palace or launch themselves into the mist swirling around the upper stories. Higher still, the tower's jagged peak disappeared into a thick miasma of smoke and fog.

"Awright," Af barked. "Time to go."

The keep's front door had opened, and the denizens were scrambling around the bailey, roughly rousing the shades. Gwydion was still on his feet, so he was the first to be ushered forward.

"Please," the sell-sword said miserably. "I think there's been a mistake." His jaw clicked painfully with each syllable, and his teeth felt loose, but at least he could talk again.

"See," Af chimed. "I told you his jaw would heal before we got in to see the prince."

Scowling, Perdix grabbed the chain between Gwydion's manacles and yanked him toward the keep. "What kind of mistake? You think you don't belong here, slug?"

"I don't even know where here is!" Gwydion shouted.

"Ho ho! One of the Faithless, eh?" Af rubbed his spider legs together gleefully as he slithered alongside Gwydion. "Then it's into the wall for you."

"He isn't one of the Faithless," Perdix scoffed. "He cried out for the Fool outside the gates. That's why you busted him in the jaw, remember?" The denizen turned his lone blue eye on Gwydion. "You believe in the gods?"

"Of—of course," he stammered. "Someone cast an illusion that caused my death. I was a warrior of—"

"Don't you learn?" Perdix snapped. "Isn't one crack in the jaw enough? You can't say any of the gods' names down here—excepting Lord Cyric's, of course." He pulled Gwydion to the threshold of Bone Castle. "You're in Hades, in the City of Strife. Since you couldn't pray"

any of the other powers out on the Fugue Plain, you get sent here, to be judged by the Lord of the Dead himself. If you're smart, you'll keep quiet. Sometimes Cyric goes easy on the first soul of a new lot, but only if he isn't a whiner."

"You're getting soft," Af snorted. "I say we crack his spine so he ain't got no choice but to whine at the prince."

Perdix shrugged. "Be my guest, but don't forget who has to see the slug's punishment carried out. If he gets off easy, we dump him in the boroughs and be done with him."

Gwydion opened his mouth to speak, but Af silenced him with a vicious snarl. "I guess you're right," the denizen grumbled through wolfish teeth. "But it sure woulda been nice to see this slug take a bit of the old man's wrath."

Af and Perdix hustled their charge past the massive slab of carved onyx serving as the main door, into an entry hall built upon a floor of seamless crystal. Colored glass fibers spun by the dwarf of Menzoberranzan had been woven into beautiful tapestries that covered the bordering walls. The hangings depicted the atrocities the dark elves regularly visited on the peace-loving people of the North. Yet those scenes were but a child's dark fancy compared to the things Gwydion glimpsed through the floor.

"In here, slug," Perdix said, his rasping voice lowered to a respectful whisper.

The room beyond the ghastly entry hall was large, but sparsely furnished. A podium stood in the center, a wide ribbon of parchment hanging from its top and curling down its single leg. To its right sat a bulky chair. The ancient throne had been weirdly beautiful long ago, with scrollwork carved in hypnotic patterns over much of the night-black wood. In recent years, some vandal had chipped away at the arms and legs with a blade. Rubies had once formed a circle on the back that would appear as a crystalline halo to anyone looking at the man seated there. Half the gems were missing now, the crimson circle broken and ragged.

Light bleeding in through the room's stained glass windows painted everything the brown of dried blood. Thousands of skulls lined the walls, their mouths open in perpetual, silent screams. Thick rolls of parchment had been stuffed into each maw. Spider webs hung from the skulls like banners in a dining hall, and tiny white eyes peered out from between the decaying skulls in every part of the room. Somehow Gwydion knew these weren't rats, but something far more malevolent.

The denizens brought their captive to the podium and forced him to his knees. Af and Perdix followed suit, prostrating themselves as much as their twisted forms would allow.

No sooner had the creatures touched their foreheads to the floor than the seneschal of Borin Castle appeared at the podium. The monstrous scribe's smooth, gray face held no features other than a pair of bulging yellow eyes. His body was nothing more than a shadow-filled cloak, which rose and fell upon a wind Gwydion could not feel. With white gloves supported by unseen arms and hands, the creature produced a quill pen and positioned it steadily over the scrolled parchment.

From every corner of the library, every skull and roll of parchment, cockroaches skittered into the light. The insects dropped to the floor with a patter like a hard autumn rain. Large and small, black and brown and white as bone they scrambled toward the empty chair. Gwydion felt the roaches racing over his legs, across his back, but the denizens grabbed his hands when he tried to swat them away.

The insects scaled the chair's battered legs, heaped themselves into a hissing pile upon the

seat. And then the cockroaches were gone, melted together into the form of a rather mundane-seeming man, lean and hawk-nosed and apparently quite bored. He slouched low in his seat, his legs crossed at the ankles, his arms draped loosely at his sides. His clothes were hardly regal—high boots, drab black trousers, leather scabbard, and a shapeless crimson tunic bearing the emblem of a black sunburst and skull. Only his short sword and his circlet of white gold marked him as someone important in Bone Castle, though the crown seemed to be intended less as a show of power than as a device to hold the man's long brown hair back from his eyes. Yet for all this apparent ennui, an air of tension hung around him like a pestilent cloud. No matter how far he slouched in the chair, he was still a coiled serpent ready to strike at the slightest provocation.

“Hail, Cyric, Lord of the Dead, greatest of all the powers of Faerun,” Perdix said, kowtowing.

Af repeated the gesture. “Hail, Cyric, Prince of Lies, slayer of three gods.”

The Lord of the Dead fidgeted, as if he were anxious to be elsewhere. Whether the impatience was purely for show or merely the echo of some habit of Cyric's from his mortal life was unclear, but like all the greater powers, the Prince of Lies wasn't limited to a single physical incarnation. Even as he held court in Bone Castle, his divine consciousness manifested in dozens of avatars across the universe, answering the prayers of his faithful, sowing strife and discord wherever it would take root.

“Let's get this over with, Jergal,” the Lord of the Dead murmured.

The seneschal leveled his gaze at Gwydion, and the shade felt something cold and inhuman slither across his mind. It burrowed into his memories, rooting through his life like a rat in search of much refuse. Gwydion tried to look away from Jergal's lifeless eyes, but he found himself paralyzed. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the interrogation was over.

You are Gwydion, son of Gareth the blacksmith. The disembodied voice was as chilling as Jergal's mental probe. Born in Suzail thirty winters ago, as time is reckoned there. In your life you have been a soldier and a sell-sword, though your only true gift was your fleetness of foot. This you used mostly to win petty wagers. No great happiness touched your life, nor any great pain.

“Wait a minute,” Gwydion sputtered. “What about Cardea or Eri? I loved—”

You believed in the gods of Faerun, but worshiped them only in times of danger. You named them Fool your patron, but displayed neither great courage nor any loyalty to his causes throughout the last years of your lifetime.

Cyric yawned. “Your deeds have branded you one of the False,” the Lord of the Dead said without thought. “No god will accept you into his paradise, so you are my ward. As such—”

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