

FORGOTTEN REALMS®




CHAPTER ONE

Commander Accordant Vraith suppressed a shiver of excitement. Everyone was here—her assistants and guards from the Order of Blue Fire, all the carefully chosen pilgrim volunteers, and perhaps even the sharn were watching from their hidden vantages, beyond the veil of the Plaguewrought Land.

Everyone was in place. The ritual could begin shortly—the ritual of borders.

Vraith stood at the edge of the world. On one side, a serene, sunny afternoon bathed a grassy field in bright yellow warmth, broken only by the shadows of a smattering of clouds and floating earth motes. Quiet and peaceful and ordinary.



One the other side, the world was ending. Behind the border veil that marked the edge of the Plaguewrought Land, everything was in upheaval.



The land beyond the veil was one of the few locations where the beloved wild magic—the anarchic, extra planar force that had changed Toril forever when it first tore asunder the rules and ways of magic—was constant and contained. Inside, unstable ground flowed at random up into the sky, or down, or sideways.

An ocean of blue fire—what the unenlightened masses called *spellplague* though it was only the remnant of that glorious event—surged and pulsed behind the border veil. Though no match for the Spellplague that had struck Toril a hundred years ago, the blue fire promised power unbound by the laws of nature. Raw power.

And in between—the border. The veil that separated these two worlds seemed fragile and hardly up to the task of holding in the most powerful force in all Faerûn, but it nonetheless managed. The border stretched up into the sky, like an undulating, prismatic curtain—a translucent sheet blowing in a wind, covered in an oily sheen that reflected a rainbow of light.




Borders existed in all worlds—edges of nature that formed the margins between darkness and light, between heat and cold, between order and chaos.

Between life and death.

And it is time to move this one, Vraith thought. Time to give the blue fire a little more room. Against the backdrop of the Plaguewrought Land, Vraith drew herself up and prepared to address the pilgrims who had been chosen for her first ritual. As an elf of diminutive build, Vraith had to work to maintain the aura of authority she commanded.

Whatever her size, they could not deny her magical prowess. That was her power. That was what she brought to the Order of Blue Fire and its secretive masters. This ritual would be her glorious ascension. Her rapture.

This endeavor's success would not only be a triumph for her, but for all involved. For the volunteers, to be personally




accompanied and baptized in the spellplague by one of the leaders of the Order of Blue Fire was an honor, to be sure. But no exposure to the spellplague was without risks. And when Vraith had explained the risks, these five pilgrims had seemed unconcerned. Perfect.

If all goes well, she thought, their devotion and commitment to the cause will be rewarded. Vraith knew that, for it had been promised by a sharn, a true prophet of the Blue Fire, that had come to Vraith in a dream.

Hadn't it? Vraith was sure it had . . . in its oblique and awe-inspiring way.

"We are ready," she said, raising her voice to an evangelical pitch. "Pilgrims, gather around me." She spread her arms wide as if she would embrace them all.

The pilgrims approached, each garbed in simple white robes. They had been chosen for their devotion as well as their constitution, for this ritual would tax their physical endurance.




Vraith took each pilgrim one by one, placing them in a tight semicircle next to the border veil. She avoided looking at their faces as she arranged them. Their identities didn't matter to Vraith—they were pieces in a game. Pawns, interchangeable and easy to lose for the greater good.

When each of the pilgrims was in position, an arm's length apart, the five of them forming a tight half-circle with end points nearly touching the border veil, Vraith carefully unsheathed a ceremonial dagger from its jeweled scabbard. The dagger's razor-sharp blade shimmered with blue magic. Beyond the semicircle stood the guard contingent, ready to keep the peace or fight any creatures that might appear.

"May the Blue Fire burn inside you, each one," she said as she made a small incision in the palms of their hands, one by one. "May you find your rapture."

Inside the veil, chaos ravaged the land. Outside, the mid-afternoon sun shone warm The sound of the surging



plagueland was a muffled roar behind the veil, and the late-summer smell of the blue fire leaked through: decaying flesh and rotting oranges.

But the blue fire itself remained contained within. Like a caged beast, the spellplague remnants raged inside the Plaguwrought Land, its pale blue and white energy like sheets of gauzy lightning. Wild and alive, that power spoke to Commander Accordant Vraith, urging her to set it free of its bonds, for the blue fire would purge all of Faerûn of its weak and frail. In the wake of the baptism by spellplague, only the chosen survived and were made stronger for it.

“Take the hand of the person next to you,” Vraith said. “Palm to palm so that you become bonded to each other through blood—a single, unifying thread.”


The pilgrims complied, seemingly entranced.

A deep, throbbing ache resounded in Vraith’s sternum as her spellscar activated. The world shifted in front of her eyes, colors fading to red and black as tendrils of magic—invisible to all but herself—snaked forth from Vraith’s chest and touched the threads of the pilgrims’ souls, starkly evident now to her enlightened vision.

Vraith started the ritual, weaving the filaments of these souls into a new curtain, something matching the mesh of the border veil. Her assistants brought forth powdered metals, bottles of swirling residuum, and dangerous salts that burst into flame as they came into contact with Vraith’s magic. It was a delicate and exhausting spell, lasting hours as she painstakingly crafted a new border and tied the souls of the pilgrims into the shifting, prismatic membrane that held back the blue fire.

Vraith rejoiced in her work, nudging the edge of chaos just a tiny bit. The plaguelands surged and crashed like an angry ocean of raw magic behind the veil, and now that raw, blue fire leaped from pilgrim to pilgrim.

Come on, Vraith thought. Hold fast.



But the life force of the pilgrims flared brightly and guttered out. Each unit lasted mere moments. Not enough time to finish the ritual. Not enough time for anything but burning and death.

Vraith felt, more than heard, the screams and terrified cries of agony as the pilgrims came apart, burned from the inside by the chaotic fire. As she came out of her casting trance, Vraith disentangled herself from the frayed threads of the spell she had woven. She recoiled as the border curtain collapsed back to its previous spot.


A wave of exhaustion weakened her knees, and as her spellscar diminished, the wind was knocked out of her. Struggling to breathe, she looked over the aftermath. What a failure!

At her feet, the remains of the pilgrims still smoked and smoldered. Inadequate, she thought, and weak! Vraith stepped away from the bodies and composed herself. After a minute her breath returned, and she yelled, “Get them out of my sight!” The venom in her voice surprised even Vraith.

As Jahin, the genasi wizard who currently served as captain of the guard, moved to obey her, Vraith took a few deep breaths. The noxious aroma of singed flesh coiled in the air, contaminating it. She needed to think. How had the ritual failed? It was the first test; some degree of failure was to be expected. But the deaths of all five pilgrims was catastrophic.

These pilgrims were too frail. The blue fire was discriminating of course—it would not spare just anyone. She couldn’t count, it seemed, on the pilgrims lasting long enough for the ritual to complete. If only there were a way to give them strength so that they could remain exposed to the blue fire a little longer without dying.

Vraith drew herself up and turned away from the remnants of the pilgrims. The entourage of Peacekeepers—the Order of Blue Fire militia—was busy cleaning up the smoking remains,



but she didn't have to oversee that. And as she walked toward her carriage, Vraith's mind was already concentrating on the next test ritual, on how she would change things.

She turned to her assistant, Renfod—an ebony-skinned human cleric in the pale blue robes of a Loremaster Accordant of the Order. His short, graying, black hair receded over his forehead, and cataracts dulled his brown eyes a little.

“We need to pay a visit to the monk,” she said.

Renfod arched his brows. “Brother Gregor?”

Vraith nodded. “He’s been working on something. The pilgrims whisper he has a potion that will grant them safe passage through the Plaguewrought Land.”

“Gregor hasn’t been eager to join the Order,” Renfod said.

Vraith climbed into the coach and sat on the blue silk cushions. At least she was permitted some degree of comfort in this otherwise revolting backwater of a place. “We don’t need him to join the Order,” she said. “We just need enough of his draught to protect our volunteers.” She gestured toward the blackened remains on the ground.

Renfod grimaced. “Quite so,” he said. “And yet, such reliance on an unbeliever is risky.”

“You leave that to me,” Vraith said. “I am all too familiar with such risks.”

Renfod leaned in close, his masculine odor almost palpable as he whispered, “Indeed you are.”

Vraith smiled at the remembrance of their intimacies. He had used her for advancement, and she had been quite willingly used.

Renfod stepped back from the carriage and said, “As you wish, Commander. We shall persuade the monk to join in our cause. I am sure he will be made to understand our need.”



“Duvan?”

From the recesses of his consciousness, Duvan felt someone shake his shoulder.

“You said to wake you when the manticore flew off. It’s gone now.”

Chills from the dream memory shivered across his skin as he came awake, dreams of the Blue Fire fleeing his mind. It had been more than ten years since his village had been hit by the plaguestorm, and still it haunted his dreams. His unfortunate decision to leave Talfani to find food made him shudder with anguish. He missed her still.


Duvan yawned and tried to shake off the remaining images of nightmare death from the cobwebs of his mind. “Thank you, Beaugrat. Get the climbing gear ready.”

Duvan heard the plate mail-clad warrior retreat and begin barking orders to the other hirelings—Seerah and the mage whose name Duvan could never remember. Duvan wasn’t good with people, which was why he’d let Beaugrat pull the team together. Beaugrat was a part of Tyrangal’s security force, and though he was new, he knew to listen to Duvan.

Brushing dirt and jungle insects off his black leather pants and tunic, Duvan stood and stretched. Duvan had tanned all of his leather himself, and he had inlaid the hide with fragments of broken dragon scales, which Tyrangal had managed to obtain for him. The result was remarkably supple for its strength, despite the armor’s current travel-worn state.

Stepping through the jungle undergrowth and out into the bright sunlight, Duvan squinted as he approached the edge of the Underchasm. Even the dense Chondalwood foliage receded slightly from the cliff’s edge as if the thick jungle growth, normally a force of nature so daunting and formidable, knew when it was overmatched.


Shading his dark eyes with his hand, he stared out over




the cliff's edge. The jagged hole in the world was narrow here, the span speckled with motes—the islands of rock that floated in the air like stone clouds. Duvan could see the other side in the misty distance to the north. The bottom, on the other hand, could not be seen. The chasm merely disappeared into darkness far below.

It's not really bottomless, Duvan reminded himself. The chasm ended in the Underdark—the homeland of the vile and truly monstrous, including the cities of the drow. Luckily, he wasn't seeking the bottom. Not nearly. If Tyrangal's maps were accurate—and they always were—there had been a citadel here, just along this edge.

There were telltale signs of an ancient structure along the ground by the cliff edge—mason-cut flagstones and a ruined stone wall pulled apart by years of jungle overgrowth. But the actual citadel had fallen into the Underchasm, landing on a ledge below where they now stood.



Duvan grabbed the rope he'd earlier tied to a sturdy banyan root thicker than his waist. He tested its fastness and, satisfied that it held secure and fast, he leaned out over the cliff edge and looked down. The citadel was still there, clinging to a ledge about two or three hundred feet down. The tower hung precariously on the broad ledge, its top jutting at an angle out over the fall.



Earlier, however, a manticore had been circling nearby, eyeing its territory for intruders and prey.

"Excellent," he said. "Are we all ready to drop down?"

There was murmuring among the hired help behind him.

Duvan pulled himself back from the edge, pushing his long black hair from his face. "Well?"

Seerah, the pale, blonde woman in worn leathers, grinned. She didn't speak much, and when she did, her northern dialect was difficult for Duvan to follow, consisting mostly of curses in a language that he only partly understood. She wore a

crossbow on her back and a short sword at her hip.

As Duvan considered Seerah, the third man asked, “Do we really have to go down into the chasm?”

Duvan stared at the man who had spoken. Black eyes met his for a second before looking away. “Yes,” Duvan said. “I know it sounds crazy, but it’s really not. We’re just going to the ledge to search the citadel tower.”

He regarded the slight and aging man. His deep brown skin was almost as dark as Duvan’s, and he was shorter than the woman next to him. Of the three, Duvan had pegged him as the most dangerous. His robes and the wand lashed to his belt named him a spellcaster even though he hadn’t yet performed any obvious magic.


Beaugrat scowled down at the man as if disgusted by his hesitation. Taller and heavier than Duvan, Beaugrat had a reputation for being quite the brawler in a scrape. His large frame carried plate armor as easily as Duvan wore his leathers. There was a custom-crafted gap in the right pauldron. It allowed the deep and jagged spellscar in Beaugrat’s flesh, which emanated heat, to cool in the air.

Duvan glanced at the spellscar, noting the blue tinge to the semitranslucent muscle there. A spellscar was caused by exposure to spellplague remnants. Only the extremely lucky escaped from the plaguelands with a spellscar. More often it caused another condition: death.

“Very well,” the sorcerer said. “If we’re all going down, I will go too. But just as far as the ledge.”

A few minutes later, Duvan and company were rappelling down the cliff face. Hot wind, laced with moisture, whipped up out of the Underchasm, carrying the smell of decay. Duvan looked up for a second as he let the rope slide under his hands to allow a controlled fall.


Above him, the bodies of his three hirelings descended with various degrees of awkwardness. He just hoped none of them fell on him. Making sure his feet were steady and




solid against the pitted and jagged cliff wall, Duvan pushed off and rappelled down. Then he turned his attention to the approaching ledge below.

Thick wisteria vines covered the pitted black rock of the cliff face, runners from the jungle above seeking to invade the Underdark miles below. Pushing off of the black basalt, Duvan's boots crushed green leaves and fluted purple flowers. Wind cooled sweat on Duvan's neck as he let himself slide deeper into the chasm.

The cliff fell away as far as he could see, disappearing into blackness miles below. Pocks and hollows marred an otherwise sheer wall, but according to the old maps that Duvan had found in Tyrangal's library, the treasure he sought should be in the ruins of the citadel perched on the ledge below.




The citadel below had long ago been part of a larger castle, according to the map—a castle belonging to one Baron Ryseleth at the time of the Spellplague. Built from granite bricks as tall on one side as Duvan, the structure looked only tenuously intact, having since mostly fallen into the chasm.



Slipping down along the rope, Duvan surveyed the ruins. The base of the main tower clung to the cliff face like a mushroom to rotting wood. The top of the tower canted dangerously, jutting away from the cliff wall like a finger sticking out over the chasm.

Duvan touched lightly down on slanted flagstones that used to be a courtyard. Up close, the ledge was much less substantial than he'd assumed from above. He tested his footing on the stone surface. The rock was damp with the windblown spray of the waterfall on the far side of the chasm, but vines and roots interlaced through the flagstones and provided purchase as well as structural support.


“Baron Ryseleth,” Duvan said, “what a charming home you have. I presume you won't mind me taking a souvenir or two.”




It looked to Duvan as though about half of the original citadel had fallen away, but as the central tower remained, he figured their chances were good. He would just have to find Ryseleth's own offices. The rest of the treasure hunters slid to the ledge beside him.

"Come on," Duvan said, creeping across the courtyard to the archway that led into the crumbling tower. Ivy formed a disorganized crisscross weave up the side of the tower, blackening the large blocks where the vines had anchored themselves.

Behind him came the sound of stone grinding against stone. Turning, he saw Beaugrat and Seerah stumble off-balance as the flagstone under them loosened and shifted. Seerah leapt lightly to the side and landed on a more solid flagstone, but there was nothing agile about Beaugrat. He fell to his knees and waited for the rock to stop shifting.



Duvan looked up at the tower, leaning precariously over the abyss. "You'd better hang back here, Beaugrat," he said. "Seerah, you stay with him. The sorcerer and I will explore the tower." To Duvan's disappointment, the other man merely nodded, showing none of his earlier eagerness.




Pausing just outside the entrance, Duvan listened for the sounds of the manticore or other creatures whose intentions would be less than charitable. He also took a moment to check the masonry for the telltale signs of embedded traps. This building hadn't been created as a vault, but checking for snares and triggers had saved him from pain or death on numerous occasions.

Even though Duvan did not fear dying, he *was* afraid of pain. Oblivion was far preferable than torture.

No danger here. Duvan slipped inside and waited in silence and darkness for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. When they had, he and the sorcerer made a quick tour of the four rooms at the base of the citadel.


One of the many things Tyrangal had taught him was how to



make a quick assessment of the value of things. Duvan's mentor and benefactor, Tyrangal was an unusual, copper-skinned woman of remarkable influence in the city of Ormpetarr. It was at her behest he had traveled across the Vilhon Wilds to the Underchasm, in search of Baron Ryseleth's citadel.

"Let's head up," he said, finding nothing of value in these rooms. He sprinted up the spiraling stone steps, coming to an abrupt halt when he came across a hole in the wall where a chunk of the tower had fallen away to reveal a fathomless drop into darkness below.

Duvan made sure the sorcerer had caught up before deftly skirting the opening and showing the man how it could be done. Up and up they went, until they found what must have been the baron's offices. "We must be nearly to the top," he said. "We're looking for anything of value, but particularly any tomes or scrolls."




The remains of purple velvet curtains still hung on the walls, tattered and moth-eaten. A quick scan of the remaining desk revealed nothing more than rusted styli and mold-eaten parchments. No books or scrolls of value here.

A sudden roar from outside sent a shiver up Duvan's back. The manticore, from the sound of it, about two hundred yards to the south and slightly above them, likely riding a thermal out of the Underchasm. Duvan just hoped it wasn't headed for this ledge.

"This place is cleaned out," the sorcerer said. "Ransacked years ago, probably before it fell into the chasm."

"Unfortunately true." Tyrangal had been wrong. Still, if the book was going to be anywhere, this was the room it'd be in.

Duvan decided to make a thorough check for secret compartments and hidden doors the baron might have kept his treasures in. He ran his fingertips along the stone walls, ceiling, and floor, searching by touch and by sight. There was a window that looked toward the cliff face and through




which shone the midday sun. A thorough search would take some time, especially since decay and time had cracked and crumbled the stones and masonry to the point that any unusual feature might just be a product of age and not design.


Outside the manticore roared again, closer this time. Too close.

Abruptly, the sky darkened as the great winged creature filled the window. Immediately, Duvan signaled to the sorcerer to hide, and while the man cast a quick spell, Duvan slid into the shadows of the tilted room.

As the mage faded from sight, Duvan fought against the natural instinct to panic. His heart leaped into his throat, but he focused on calming it and on taking steady, silent breaths. In moments, his calm returned, and he was hidden from sight. Both of them were hidden.



The creature was too large to fit through the opening, even folding its huge batlike wings. Spotted brown and black fur covered its great catlike body. Black spikes protruded from its spine and, most dangerously, from the stinger bulb at the tip of its tail. The creature bent its neck and stuck its head through the window.




Duvan had seen live manticores from a distance before, and Tyrangal had shown him a preserved head once. That one was larger than the one in the window here, but all things equal, Duvan preferred the dead one.

The head was hideous; its vaguely human face and eyes made all the more monstrous by the flat snout and the wide mouth full of dagger-sharp teeth. Head swaying to and fro, it sniffed the air.

Then, just as abruptly as it had appeared, the creature took flight, and with three heavy beats of its dragon wings, was gone. Duvan held perfectly still, his senses alert against the possibility that the creature would return.

Crouching silently in the shadows, straining for any telltale signs of movement, Duvan caught the impression




of a panel in the corner of the long-deposed baron's office. Something odd in the curve of the rock floor, an ever-so-slight deviation in the smoothness of the stone, drew his keen attention.


He ran his fingers over the stone. There was an indentation there—too even to be a product of nature. He probed the edges. Definitely artificial. He pressed down on the small panel.

The panel slid down into a recessed compartment, revealing a hollow space beneath. Duvan peered inside, checking for spring-loaded traps and symbols that would indicate magical warding. There was nothing . . . except a rusting iron handle embedded in the wall of the compartment.

“You had best remain hidden,” he whispered to the still-invisible sorcerer. “Just in case that beast returns.”




He tugged on the handle. In front of Duvan, a large stone shifted from the wall with a horrible screech, leaving about a three-finger-wide opening. He pulled the prybar from his pack and expanded the gap. The stone was on some sort of rail system, but the iron had long been rusted and yielded begrudgingly. But finally, Duvan could see what was behind—a hidden cache, undiscovered and filled with treasures.



Resting on top of a pile of ancient coins rested a heavy tome—a thick book covered in tough leather that looked like wyvern hide. Gilt Elvish script and platinum filigree decorated the cover. It matched Tyrangal's description perfectly.

As he slipped the tome into his pack, the tower shook violently, knocking him over.

Behind him, the manticore slammed into the window arch, sending rocks flying into the room. The floor beneath him lurched as the tower groaned from the extra weight. The sun went dark again as the creature hit the wall once more, trying to dislodge the rocks around the window. Their




chances of killing a creature of such size and power were slim to none.


Most of the time, Duvan preferred to be alone; everything was just better that way. But now he wished he'd brought more help. This was exactly the situation where a group of minions would come in handy. But alas, it was not going to happen. All he and the invisible sorcerer could do now was run and hope to not die.

“Run!” he called out. “Back down.”

With no cleric in sight, death held an uncomfortable degree of finality to it. Never his first choice.



For Slanya, staring into the blazing funeral pyre, death was a doorway to another realm. The flames danced their primal destruction on the pile of dead bodies—pilgrims who'd uprooted their lives to come here to Ormpetarr in search of promise and power, only to end up as fodder for this fire.



Slanya sensed madness lurking in the chaos of the fire, an unbound wildness raging just beyond the veil of flame. Behind the line of stones that clearly marked the edge of the fire pit, Slanya felt the heat coming off the burning bodies. It burned her skin even from this distance.

Despite her strict adherence to an ordered and controlled life, Slanya sometimes felt like a moth attracted to the allure of the fire. She never stepped through that veil into chaos, but some tiny part of her, in the very recesses of her mind, wanted to abandon all caution. The wild dance of the flames tempted her, daring her to approach.

“Sister Slanya?”

Slanya shook her head and stepped away from the fire. She took a deep breath, wrinkling her nose at the smell of charring fat and muscle. What had she been thinking? Death was not a wild and chaotic event. Kelemvor judged

all souls who came through the veil. He balanced all the deeds of their lives and guided them on to the next stage.

“Sister Slanya,” came Kaylinn’s voice again. “Brother Gregor asked to see you.”

Slanya turned to look at her friend and superior. Kaylinn stood a full head shorter than Slanya, although she was not unusually short by any means; Slanya was taller than many human men. Where Slanya was tall and lithe, Kaylinn’s hips were wide and her breasts full.

Both their heads were shaved except for the characteristic sidelock, but while Kaylinn’s was long and auburn, Slanya’s blonde lock barely reached her shoulder. She kept it wrapped with the thinnest of white leather straps.

Kaylinn and Slanya each had a tattoo depicting the sign of Kelemvor—a skeleton hand holding a set of scales—at the base of the skull where it met the spine. Where Kaylinn’s was inked in simple blue, Slanya’s blue outlines had been filled with red and green and extended down her spine to the spot between her shoulder blades.

“Yes, High Priestess?” Slanya asked.

Kaylinn dismissed the formality with a wave of her hand. Even though she was the head of their order here in Ormpe-tarr, she governed more by friendship and example than by dictate. Kaylinn’s nurturing demeanor gave her a comforting manner with the sick and dying, and she had a wealth of healing power granted to her by Kelemvor. While Slanya also prayed to Kelemvor to grant some small powers, her skills were predominately in combat and body control.

Slanya gave Kaylinn a slight head bow. “Thank you for that news, sister,” she said, then turned away from the fire. Already the pile next to the pyre had grown by a few additional corpses. That afternoon’s dead, to be burned tomorrow.

“Brother Gregor is in his study,” Kaylinn said.

“Do you know what he wants?”

Kaylinn exhaled a laugh. “Nay,” she said. “But I do know

that he's meeting with that elf woman from the Order of Blue Fire."

The Order of Blue Fire was a sect devoted to studying the remnants of the Spellplague. Most of the members she'd met seemed likeable enough, but she was the first to admit that she didn't really understand why they were so devoted, so fanatical about the Spellplague and its remaining effects.

"I wonder what that's all about," Slanya said, lowering her voice.


"I'm sure Brother Gregor is just trying to help more pilgrims," Kaylinn said.

Gregor was an alchemist of exceeding skill and power. He was not devoted to Kelemvor as were the majority of the priests and monks in the temple complex of Ormpetarr, but to Oghma, the god of innovation. Though, if Slanya allowed herself the thought, he seemed more devoted to his own ideas than anything else. His laboratory was filled with strange smells and noises at all hours of the day and night as he produced elixirs to test on the waiting pilgrims. Rumor was that one of these elixirs could prevent the changelands from causing illness and death.

That's why they all came, masses of these desperate pilgrims, young and old, rich and poor, living and dying. They all wanted to increase their chances of surviving the exposure, to live through the baptism by blue fire that would give them their scar—and with that scar, their new power.

Sometimes the ability was minor, but most of the time the ability transformed the lives of those who survived. Most of the time, their spellscar gave them access to power and ability that would otherwise take years of training.

And yet, only a tiny fraction of pilgrims survived the journey past the border of the Plaguewrought Land where the spellplague thrived. The vast majority of them simply vanished, consumed by the blue fire, and were never heard





from again. A tiny few survived exposure, and of those many grew sick or were hideously transformed. These ended up under Kaylinn's care, and quite a few found final rest in the funeral pyre.

"I need to tend to the dying," Kaylinn said, then made her way toward the healing tents.

Glancing back at the fire pit, Slanya no longer felt the allure of the flames. Ah well, there were worse places she could be. Here, she could work to better the lives of others and ensure the justice of their passage into the realms beyond the veil of death.


Some people would consider working with the dead and dying to be taxing and heinous duty, but Slanya liked it. People on the edge of death were more real, more immediately themselves as they saw the horizon of their life so close. Many were full of regret; some were consumed by guilt and wanted nothing more than to confess. Few were ready to meet Kelemvor. Slanya liked helping them make peace with their lives and prepare for their journey.



Slanya slipped into the quiet of the monastery. She moved quickly and silently past the central courtyard where a group of monk brothers and sisters sat in a meditation circle. Mind and body are one. That was the first lesson a monk learned, but it was one that needed to be learned and relearned, for it had many levels.

The daily construction work had stopped, and the sun had dipped—nearly time for the evening meal. Slanya loved this time. She liked the quiet, the peace, and above all the precise timing and regularity. Order meant knowing exactly what to expect. Adherence to law was one of the founding principles that defined a monk's being and allowed her to realize unity of mind and body and derive power from it.

Next to the disorder of the city of Ormpetarr and a stone's throw from the untamed wildness of the Plaguewrought




Land, the temple complex of Kelemvor was a sanctuary. The structure and arrangement of the monastery—the *peace*—made this her home.


The bright afternoon gave way to shadows and darkness in the hallway between the small chapel and Gregor’s study. The silent corridor was punctuated only by the muffled sounds of voices. People were talking in urgent tones, and if Slanya concentrated, she could just make out what they were saying.

“I do not want a repeat failure,” a woman’s voice said, possibly the Vraith woman from the Order of Blue Fire whom Kaylinn had spoken of.

“Of course not, Vraith.” That deep voice belonged to Gregor—Kaylinn’s right hand and the man who had intervened when Slanya was just a child. Intervened and saved her.



Slanya approached the door, acutely aware of the empty hall. She lingered for a moment, silent and listening. All her life she’d had the ability to be quiet and unobserved. As a child, before . . . before the accident with her aunt that had left her an orphan, she’d honed the skill to be present without being noticed. Drawing attention often led to pain.



From the other side of the heavy wooden door, Gregor spoke again. “I am committed to the well-being of all pilgrims to the Plaguedwrought Land who seek exposure to spellplague.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” said the other. “We also have our ideals—similar to yours, in fact. Do you think you can help?”

“Perhaps if you gave me more details about the ritual—” Gregor began.

“The ritual is vast and complex,” Vraith said. “And I am not about to reveal the secrets of it. However, I can tell you that the key component involves weaving the life threads of

sentient creatures together and igniting this new pattern with spellplague from the border veil.

“The pilgrims I use are volunteers, of course, and selected based on their health and vigor. The ritual magic weaves the threads of their souls into a combined entity—a tapestry that matches the mesh of the border veil. So far, none of the volunteers have survived long enough to finish the weave.

“Brother Gregor, our plan requires that these volunteers survive this ordeal. I’ve heard rumors that you are passing out a potion to pilgrims seeking exposure to the blue fire. These rumors say the potion guarantees their survival.”

“Well, the elixir doesn’t guarantee anyone will survive.” Slanya could hear the excitement in Gregor’s voice. “But pilgrims do survive exposure longer. I can show you my charts if you’d like. The results of my latest trials have been phenomenal.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I’ll trust you.” Vraith’s voice grew smooth. “So how can we obtain some of this magic elixir?”

“This ritual of yours,” Gregor asked, “it doesn’t kill the pilgrims, does it?”

“No, no. Although during the ritual, the volunteers’ exposure to the blue fire is prolonged. If they can survive that, they can survive the ritual.”

“And,” Gregor continued, “the purpose of this ritual is . . . ?”

“Imagine being able to create barriers to the plaguelands,” Vraith said. “Imagine if we could replicate something like the border veil anywhere we wanted. We could contain the storms and the outbreaks . . .” Her voice trailed off, and there was a scuffling of feet from the room beyond.

Slanya’s eyes had adjusted, and the corridor was much brighter now. She felt more conspicuous, more vulnerable in the open hallway. If somebody were to come in . . .

Calm down, she told herself. Breathe. She took a moment to center herself, anchor her body and mind together.

“You make a powerful argument,” Gregor said.

“Excellent! If this next ritual proves successful,” Vraith said, “we will need thousands more doses. The festival is a few days away. Can you provide that many?”

The festival? Slanya considered for a moment. Vraith must be referring to the Festival of Blue Fire. Thousands of pilgrims were gathering in and around Ormpetarr that tenday to participate. It was one of the reasons the numbers of sick and dead had increased.

Gregor said, “I will need more reagents to produce that much. But I’m already working on getting more.”

“How long will it take?” Vraith’s benevolent tone gave way to one of commanding urgency. “If the next test works, I’ll want the elixir ready to distribute.”

“Several days at least,” Gregor said. “One of the ingredients is very difficult to acquire.”

“Get started right away. This is critical.” The sharpness in Vraith’s voice made Slanya wince.

When Gregor spoke again, there was a warning in his tone. “Let me do my job and you do yours. I am provisionally committed, because this ritual of yours seems to be the key to containing spellplague. That is a worthy goal, and one which can make a profound change in the world. But do not take that tone again with me. I do not take orders from you.”

“Can you create more elixir or not?”

Gregor paused. “Yes, I don’t expect it to be a problem.”

Vraith’s tone was back to sweet and peaceful, “Perfect. I’ll let you get to it then.”

Abruptly there were footsteps and the sounds of movement. They were headed this way, toward the door where Slanya was standing. Getting closer.

Slanya’s heart shot into her throat, and in her panic she

missed the next part of the conversation. She was about to be discovered, and the punishment would no doubt be the switch across her back. Memories threatened to overwhelm her.

Stop it, she told herself. There were no punishments like that in the monastery. That fear came from a long-ago life she hardly remembered. That was in a past that could never hurt her again.

And with that thought, some of the adrenaline fog lifted. She focused and relaxed her breathing, calmed her heart. And she knew what to do.

She knocked on the door. After all, she had been summoned. She was *supposed* to be on the way.

The door opened almost immediately, revealing Gregor with his silver-dusted black hair and neatly trimmed beard. A patch over his left ear where, his spellscar had bleached his hair and skull to the pale, milky blue color of moonstone lay bare.


Gregor gave Slanya a warm smile, "Ah, Sister Slanya, prompt as usual. Thank you for coming."

Slanya's heart warmed slightly at the sight of Gregor's pleasure with her, and then she became aware of how irrational her response to Gregor was. She wanted to please him; she had held a special affinity for him ever since he'd saved her; he'd judged her and found her worthy. She knew that her reaction was less than objective, but it didn't hurt anyone but herself.

"I am just escorting our guests here, including Commander Accordant Vraith of the Order of Blue Fire, to the gates."

Gregor indicated a diminutive elf woman holding a wooden box, who radiated power and confidence. "Just 'Vraith' is fine," she said with a slight nod.

Gregor continued, "Our business has concluded. Please walk with us."



Slanya stood to the side as Gregor and Vraith stepped into the hallway, followed by four others who apparently did not merit introduction. Vraith wore sky-blue wizard's robes, which shimmered in the dim light, the embroidered Order symbol of a flaming blue iris glittering on her heart. Her blonde hair was cropped short in back and straight across her brow in front, giving her an angular look.

Two of the four others, well-muscled human men in plate armor displaying the Order symbol on their chests, flanked Vraith and walked just slightly behind her. Trailing in the rear was a dwarf woman with curly red hair and glowering eyes under bushy red brows. She sported pale blue clerical robes, a faded copy of those worn by Vraith, bound at the waist by a white rope.

Next to the dwarf walked a genasi woman, wearing the bright robes of a wizard, which served to accentuate the aquamarine color of her skin. The genasi looked to be a mage to Slanya's eyes, and considering the hydra-shaped spellscar that seemed to drip like a liquid crystal stain over her left ear, she was bound to be quite a dangerous one.

Slanya brought up the rear, grateful that her anxiety hadn't been noticed. She would wait until she was called upon. Following Gregor and Vraith out into the late afternoon heat of the monastery courtyard, Slanya listened as their conversation shifted from business to superficiality.

"Your orders have accomplished a great deal in the short time you've been here," Vraith said. "You've built the bulk of your temple in such a short time. It's most impressive."

Gregor smiled and nodded, apparently appreciative of her compliments. After a few more moments, they were at last out through the main entrance and standing in the shadow of the billowing black cloud rising from the funeral pyre off to the right.

"Brother Gregor," Vraith said, handing the wooden box

to the dwarf cleric, “thank you again for undertaking such important work.”

Gregor nodded.

“I look forward to your attendance at our ritual tonight, and I am hopeful that with your elixir we shall be successful.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Gregor said.

Vraith smiled. “Perfect.” Then with a slight bow, she said, “May the Blue Fire burn inside you.”


The elf priestess turned and picked a path through the vast disarray of pilgrims’ tents, which filled the fields between the monastery and Ormpetarr’s main gates.

Standing next to Gregor, Slanya looked over the broad plain. The camp outside the monastery sprawled like an infection, and all attempts at establishing organization among the tents had been futile. So many new pilgrims arrived every day.

Slanya glanced across the distance at the wild city into which she rarely set foot. Unlike its ancient namesake, modern Ormpetarr was a frontier city—ruled not by a hierarchical leadership or a figurehead but governed instead by a loose alignment of power brokers.

A blue-brown haze cut a swath through the city. This was the veil—the Plaguewrought Land border that the pilgrims came here to cross, if only briefly. There was a steep drop-off just through the hazy veil, and rumor said that the terrain inside the changelands was as inconstant and volatile as a storm-wracked ocean.

The once-mighty city told of a rough history, of a glorious past now worn down by the ravages of time and the Spellplague. Ormpetarr may have once been a monument to order and to the rule of law, but the monument had shattered, and the only order or law that had arisen from the wreckage was survival of the cunning and the strong. “We are here to help establish order on the edge of chaos,” Kaylinn had told her, “where it is most needed.”



But Slanya, who preferred the quiet and ordered life in the monastery, found it hard to avoid openly gagging from the smells drifting across the fields—the aroma of food cooking mingled with the charred smell of the roasted dead from the funeral pyre. And beneath it all was the summer stench of the Plaguewrought Land itself, like rotting flesh crammed with sour oranges.

The vast encampment was no more than a disorganized jumble of tents and makeshift shelters that served as a refuge for the grotesque plaguechanged who had come for hospice care. It was also a last stop for pilgrims without the means to afford lodging in Ormpetarr.

Pilgrims! To purposefully expose the sanctity and wholeness of their bodies and minds to the destructive chaos of the Plaguewrought Land—it was insanity.

Slanya shook her head, chiding herself for the derision she felt for the pilgrims. These people came from all over the world in search of improvement, and most of them met with death or illness. She should admire their courage.


Still, as much as she tried, the most she could summon for them was pity. The lucky ones walked away alive, with some unforeseen and unearned magical power to counterbalance some physical or emotional deformity. And, she thought, the very lucky ones die quickly and in little pain. They go to Kelemvor.

Gregor sighed. “So very many souls come here looking to better themselves,” he said. “It is part of our mission now to help them accomplish that goal.”

Slanya nodded.

“And in that light, I have an important task for you,” Gregor said. He wasted no time getting to the point. “This task will require you to face chaos beyond anything you’ve ever experienced.”

Slanya felt a chill despite the afternoon sun. Over the years, Gregor had changed from the nurturing father figure




who'd rescued her off the streets when she was a girl. He was no longer the man who had brought her into the fold, who had mentored her, who had treated her like his own daughter for so many years. Was that man still there behind the obsession and the fervor?

She believed he was, for she saw the old Gregor come out sometimes. His frequent acts of kindness and his thoughtfulness for her well-being were evidence, were they not?

Still, he had been altered somehow, and Slanya could pinpoint the exact time it had happened. A little over a year earlier, Gregor had reported that spellplague had manifested in his chambers. They had lived far north of the Vilhon Wilds in Impiltur. Gregor claimed that spellplague had appeared and given him a vision. Then it had marked him with the spellscar he now manifested on his head.

He'd fallen ill for a month. And when he'd recovered, Gregor had told her that the spellplague manifestation had given him a new mission.



Gregor then proceeded to convince Kaylinn, and together they uprooted the temple's clerics and monks and led them south to the Vilhon Wilds and Ormpetarr, to rebuild their monastery and offer aid to those who sought the Plaguewrought Land and those who died in its borders.

In light of his recent conversation with the leaders of the Order of Blue Fire, Slanya worried that Gregor's new mission had become a dangerous obsession—one that was about to involve her. She looked over at him. "What must I do?"

"You must leave the temple complex and travel past the border and into the Plaguewrought Land."