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VOLUME THREE

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PROLOGUE ▼

SIXTHMONTH, 961 I.A.

The wind blasted down the canyon, roaring like a mad dragon and raising great curls of dust. Varen turned his head, squeezing his eyes shut just in time to avoid it. Some of the other men did not, and their curses echoed from stone to stone. When the gust passed, half of them doubled over, gasping and spitting and dousing their faces with water to wash away the grit. Around them, their guides—lean, sun-weathered men with beards dyed garish colors—laughed at their expense.

His sharp-featured face contracting into a scowl, Varen walked past the choking men, to the one who was their leader: a stout, oxlike fellow in chain mail, with an opal-encrusted longsword slung across his back. “This is the best you could do, Morias?” he asked in a low voice. “These men are idiots and fools.”

Morias Gall made a face that could have been a grin or a sneer; the old warrior was missing half his nose and part of his upper lip, so it was hard to tell. “They’re strong backs and strong arms,” he hissed—another scar ran across his throat. “You think you can find better, ride back to Jaggana and find ‘em.”

“I need men with wits too,” Varen shot back. “If I wanted

brainless muscle, I'd have bought a herd of minotaurs. The way things are going, we won't have enough of your strong backs left to carry our prize."

This time, there was no mistaking Morias's expression for a smile. A young man with no training at arms, Varen weighed maybe half what the grizzled warrior did, and stood more than a foot shorter. Morias could have broken him in half with one hand. But though the scholar paled slightly, he didn't back down.

"Only I know how to get there," he said. "Kill me, and you'll never find your fortune."

Morias glared at him a long moment, then grunted and turned away, raising a hand to call his men near.

Varen let out his breath. What am I doing here? he wondered, not for the first time. A scholar from Tucuri, far away in Istar's northern reaches, he had spent most of his life poring over tomes in that city's renowned university. He could barely lift a sword, and riding horses left him almost crippled with saddle-sores. Only six months ago, the thought that he would be out here, in the wastes of Dravinaar, would have made him laugh. But here he was, deep in the desert, surrounded by men who would cut his throat—"give you a second smile," as Morias quaintly put it—and leave him for the jackals if he looked at them wrong. Why?

It embarrassed him, how pedestrian the answer was. Riches . . . fame . . . a name others would remember.

Daubas Mishakas, the books called this labyrinth of mesas and gorges, carved out of the stone in the midst of the Sea of Shifting Sands—The Tears of Mishakal. The locals called it, rather more aptly, *Raqqa az Zarqa*: The Sun's Anvil. Few lived here these days, for it was a cursed place, and the Dravinish claimed it was haunted. Once, however, one of Istar's grandest cities had stood in its midst, carved out of the rock itself: Losarcum, the City of Stone. It had been a thriving place, the pearl of the desert, a wonder of the world.

That had all ended in thunder and fire, seventeen years

ago. It had happened during the holy war against wizardry, when the forces of the Istaran church had sought to storm the Towers of High Sorcery. Treacherous to the end, the mages had destroyed two of those Towers. One had leveled a large part of Daltigoth, the capital of faraway Ergoth. The second had been in Losarcum, and it had brought the whole city to ruin, smashing it and burying it beneath countless tons of rubble.

In the years since, many treasure-hunters had come to the Tears in search of Losarcum's ruins. The wealth that must be buried beneath the rubble was enough to tempt many, from itinerant adventurers to the holy church itself. Thus far, however, no one had found more than a few baubles and potsherds. But then, three months ago, Varen—whose discipline at the university had been antiquities—had received a journal, recovered from an ill-fated expedition into the Tears. Its author had written of a passage, a cave that led to a "land of glass," where great riches could be found.

Varen had decided, then and there, that he would be the one to find the lost bones of Losarcum.

The time since was a blur. He'd spent another month in study, piecing together all he could, then quit his post, taken all his silver, and traveled south to Jaggana, a city renowned for its sell-swords. There he'd met Morias, and a week later they'd set out into the desert with fifteen hired mercenaries and a handful of Dravinish guides.

The mercenaries were down to ten now. One had died on the way, overcome by heat poisoning. Three more had fallen to the creatures that lived in these parts: giant, hairy spiders and snakes that could spit deadly venom a dozen paces. The fifth had lost his temper with Varen the day before yesterday—their eighth in the Tears—and had drawn his blade on him. Morias had put a dagger through the man's throat, then hung the body from a cactus as a warning to the rest. The way they looked at Varen—and the way they fingered their swords and maces—they still weren't feeling very friendly.

Fine, he thought. I didn't come here to make friends.

Morias was snapping at his men. Varen eyed them, wondering if they would try to kill him once they found the treasure. He'd lied to them, talking of other caches he'd heard about, in the hope it would stay their hands. Now he looked past them, at the canyon's snaking, ridged walls. He pulled a map from his belt and unfurled it, studying it as the wind tried to snatch it from his hands. They were close now—had to be. According to the map, Losarcum was less than a league away. He prayed the maze of chasms wouldn't betray him.

A sudden shout snapped him out of his contemplation, and he turned in time to see steel flash among the Dravinish guides. His insides lurched before he realized they didn't mean to attack. One had drawn his curved saber and brought it down to stab something on the ground. The man twisted his blade back and forth, then raised it again to reveal a snake impaled upon its tip. The serpent twitched feebly, and the Dravinishman flashed a smile full of white teeth—then stopped, eyes widening, and flung the blade to the ground. He shouted something in Dravinish, backing away. His fellows did the same.

Morias and Varen reached the saber at the same time. The sell-sword bent down to pick it up, then flinched back. "Huma's balls!" he swore.

The snake had legs.

Basilisk! Varen thought, panic surging within him. Dravinhaar had once been rife with the fell beasts whose gaze could turn a man to stone—but men had wiped them out more than a century ago. And at second glance, he knew the creature wasn't one. It was a bonetail, a particularly deadly serpent, but six stubby legs, each ending in a single talon, stuck out of its sides.

"Strange," he said.

"Bloody right," Morias rasped. "What in the Abyss did that?"

"*Sharaz Qunai*," murmured the man who'd killed it.

Morias and Varen looked at him blankly. Neither spoke more than a smattering of Dravinish.

"The Staring Ghost, it means," said Pashim, the leader of the guides. He drew a hand down his swarthy face, a ritual gesture against evil. "He haunted these parts, near the city-that-was. He curses those who come too close, as he cursed old man serpent." He nodded toward the snake, then shook his head. "My men will go no farther."

"What!" Morias's face colored as he stepped forward, towering over Pashim. "That wasn't the bargain. We paid you good silver to take us all the way."

Not intimidated, the Dravinishman rested a hand on his saber. "We will give you back your silver. But we will not offend *Sharaz Qunai*."

Morias held still a moment, then slowly relaxed, rumbling in his chest. The guides withdrew, leaving the saber behind: none would touch it now. The old sell-sword glowered at them, then looked over his shoulder at his men. "All right, lads, form up," he growled. "We're almost there. Let's get moving."

Grumbling, the mercenaries grabbed up shields and shouldered packs. Varen stayed put a moment, staring at the misshapen snake. He'd heard stories about animals warped by the energies that had burst from the Towers when they exploded. According to one, the rats in the sewers beneath Daltigoth were the size of lions, with glowing eyes and stingers on their tails. The snake could only mean he was right: they *were* close to Losarcum now. His heart quickened.

But what about *Sharaz Qunai*, a voice in him wondered. Who is this ghost the Dravinishmen fear?

"Ai! Ink-fingers!" called Morias. "You going to stare at that thing all day, or are you going to join us?"

Varen snapped back to himself, looking up. The mercenaries were ready to leave, looking daggers at him for holding them up. Swallowing, he gave the serpent one last glance, then hurried to follow.

They found more warped animals as they went: a spider with one staring, bloodshot eye; a lizard with three heads; a blue scorpion with iridescent wings. That last cost them another of Morias's men, who turned purple and died thrashing while the others looked on. That wasn't the only sign they were getting close, either: shards of natural glass, translucent and razor-sharp, jutted from sand and stone alike, and the air shimmered with something more than just the desert's heat. Sometimes, Varen thought, it even sparkled for a moment before fading again.

And then there was the feeling. There was a sharpness to the air—nearly a scent, almost a taste. It made his scalp prickle and the hairs on the backs of his arms stand erect. He could tell Morias and his men felt it too: their glances at the cliffs to either side were nervous, and many had drawn their weapons. Small wonder the Dravinish thought this place was haunted, with all the wild magic running loose.

When he finally saw it, his voice failed him. They rounded a bend in the canyon, and there it was: a dark, narrow cleft in the stone, halfway up the canyon wall. Only one who was looking for it would have thought it more than a shallow crevice: the sell-swords paid it no heed. Varen stopped, however, the air leaving his lungs in a rush. He stood very still, staring at the crack.

"What?" Morias asked, striding near. He followed Varen's gaze, and his eyes widened. "God's piss, is that it?" he swore. "It looks so small."

"What were you expecting?" Varen replied. "If it were bigger, everyone would know of it. That's the way to Losarcum."

The old mercenary nodded, then clapped his hands. "Well, then."

The climb was slow going, for Varen was little good at it, and the rest were weighed down with armor and weapons,

but one by one they moved up the cliff. Morias was the first to the cleft, pausing long enough to light a torch before stepping through. Varen listened to him go, half-expecting to hear a bloodcurdling scream. Soon Morias reappeared, frowning with impatience.

"Come on," he snapped. "What're you waiting for?"

Varen followed, the sell-swords at his back. A voice in his mind said this was not a good idea—if they meant to kill him, this would be a good time—but he couldn't wait for the others. His curiosity was aflame, and his heart pounded like a dwarven trip-hammer.

The tunnel was close and difficult, the stone broken on all sides. Deep groans sounded from above, and streams of grit poured out of the cracks. Varen bashed his head on a jutting brow, drawing blood; behind him, the armored mercenaries scraped and clanked and blasphemed. Varen cringed at every noise: if the Staring Ghost was real, they'd given it plenty of chance to hear them. Still, they pushed on, deeper and deeper.

After a while, he piled into Morias from behind. The sell-sword grunted, shoving him back, but he pressed closer again. "What is it?" he asked. "Why are we stopped?"

"Look up ahead."

At first, Varen could see nothing but rock, lit by Morias's flickering torch. But then he spotted something else: a second light, a steady golden glow, on down the hall. He stared at it, bewildered.

"Lamplight," he breathed.

"What I thought," Morias agreed. "But who lit it?"

Sharaz Qunai, said a voice in Varen's head. He thrust it aside. "Someone's been here already."

"Probably still are."

"What do we do? We can't turn back."

Morias chuckled. "This tunnel only goes two ways." He dumped his torch on the floor and stomped it out, leaving the passage dark except for the distant glow. Unseen, his sword scraped out of its scabbard.

"Stay out of the way, if things get sticky," he said.

Varen nodded. Then they were moving again, as quietly as possible. The glow grew brighter and brighter, until it was enough to see by. Morias led with the tip of his blade, every step careful. His breath came quick, and sweat beaded his forehead. Varen noted his fear with surprise.

Finally they reached a bend in the passage and stopped, staring in amazement at what lay beyond. It was a huge cavern of shattered, pinkish stone, its roof a natural dome that had formed when the rest collapsed. Huge chunks of rubble littered the ground, but there were only pieces too big to lift. Near the middle of the cave was a pool of clear water, bubbling up from beneath and trickling in a stream across the floor and out a crack in the wall.

The wall. There was something strange about it. Varen squinted, trying to figure it out. The stone there was smoother than elsewhere . . . as was the floor, now that he looked at it. He froze, sucking in a sharp breath.

"A street," he murmured.

"What?" Morias whispered, glancing back.

Varen gestured ahead. "This place is a street. We're in Losarcum—what's left of it, anyway."

There were several lamps close by, they saw as they moved closer: glimmering brass things on chunks of stone that proved to be fallen pillars and the rim of a shattered fountain. Morias went to one as his men poured out of the tunnel behind Varen, and nudged it with his foot. Brow furrowing, he peered around him.

"There," he said, pointing with his sword. "That opening. It must lead somewhere."

It had been a doorway once, but the door was long gone, and the lintel had cracked. Someone had shored it up with chunks of stone and wood. More light glimmered from within. Varen started toward it, converging with Morias as he drew near. The sell-sword signaled to his men, silently directing six to stand guard and the rest to follow. They did as he ordered,

weapons ready. Varen and Morias went through the doorway side by side—and stopped, their breath failing them.

They stood in what had clearly been the entry hall of some grand manor. Its floor was covered with a glittering mosaic of a Kingpriest with a sapphire crown—Ardosean the Uniter, Varen noted absently. The wall to their left was lined with gilded statuary, porcelain urns, and satin arras with jewels woven into them. Most of it was intact and incredibly valuable; they had found the treasure they sought.

It wasn't what drew their eyes, though.

To the right, things were different. The sandstone there had melted, then fused again, turning to cloudy, rosy-gold glass. It poured down from the ceiling in ripples, and pooled and puddled upon the floor.

"Branchala bite me," swore Morias, staring into its depths. "Are those *people* in there?"

A shudder ran through Varen as he approached the glass. He saw them too, six in all—men, women, and one small child. All of them were frozen, encased, their faces twisted into expressions of horror and agony. They had died afraid, and in horrible pain.

"This side of the building was facing the Tower of High Sorcery," Varen said solemnly. "When it exploded, it must have turned the stone to glass and trapped them inside. They've been here like this for nearly twenty years."

"That's impossible," Morias said. "The heat should have burned them to ash."

Varen shook his head, reaching out to touch the smooth glass. "There was a lot of magic pouring through the city at the time. Somehow, it protected them."

"Not the word I'd choose," the sell-sword retorted. "This stuff would fetch a fair price in the cities, I'd say. Losarcine amber, we might call it." He sneered, avarice gleaming in his eyes. "Or Mishakal's Tears."

He raised his sword.

"Don't!" Varen cried, too late.

The crash of sword striking glass filled the room. A shard of the stuff broke off, clattering at Morias's feet. It glinted in the lamplight, the color of sunrise. People *would* prize it, Varen realized as the sell-sword lifted it up. It was remarkably beautiful, and it existed nowhere else in the world. The riches, the fame he'd craved . . . it was all here, for the taking . . .

"No," he said, stepping back. "It's grave robbery. We'd be selling these people's tomb."

Morias shrugged, regarding the shard in his hand. "They don't need so much of it. If we just take a little for now . . ." He stopped suddenly, his brow furrowing, and cocked an ear.

Varen heard it too. At first, he'd mistaken it for the clang of the mercenary's sword hitting the glass, still echoing out in the street. It wasn't getting any fainter, though—it was growing louder. And then there was a new sound, rising above it: a sharp, pained cry, and the clatter of an armored body hitting the ground.

"What in the Abyss?" Morias grunted, dropping the glass. It clinked on the floor without breaking. His men were already moving toward the doorway, and Varen started to follow, but Morias shoved the scholar aside, hurrying after. The clamor of steel outside grew, fiercer with every heartbeat.

A man stumbled into the room then, and the sell-swords nearly cut him down before they realized it was one of their own, a burly man who fought with twin shortswords. One of the blades was gone now, and his left arm below the elbow as well. Blood washed his armor. He had a second cut across his chin, and his eyes were wide with terror.

Morias caught him as he collapsed, eased him down. "What is it, man?" he demanded. "Speak!"

"It . . . it got them," the mercenary said, staring wildly. "It killed them all!"

The other sell-swords started at this, looking at one another. Varen bit his lip. Five men dead, a sixth cruelly maimed—and the battle, from the sound of it, had lasted less than a minute. A terrible dread settled over him.

"Who?" Morias shook the injured man, who had slipped into incoherent shock. "Who did this?"

"*Sharaz Qunai*," Varen moaned.

The mercenaries stared at him—but only for a moment. Then steel flashed in the doorway, and another of them fell, his head toppling from his shoulders. Blood fountained, and Varen caught a horrible glimpse of the surprise on the man's face before he crumpled into the dust. The other sell-swords stumbled back, crying out in alarm, and something came after them.

The Staring Ghost had come.

"Fall together!" Morias bellowed, waving his blade at his men. He may as well have been trying to guide a flock of sparrows. They tripped over one another, stumbled into pillars, swung wildly at the air.

Varen gaped at the apparition as it swept through their midst, cutting down one man after another as though they were stalks of grain. It wasn't a ghost at all, but an old man—wiry and sun-beaten, his head covered by a white cloth, his beard wild and silvery. He wore a flowing white robe, torn and smudged with use, and in his hand was a glittering blade that danced with expert grace.

Strangest about him, though, were his eyes. They were dead white, with neither iris nor pupil, not clouded like a blind man's, but utterly empty. Varen could meet their stare only for an instant before looking away. It was a strange, awful sight . . . yet there was something familiar about those eyes, something that nagged at his memory.

Sharaz Qunai killed them all, one after another, and not a single grazing blow even touched him. He was a whirlwind of flashing, slashing steel: watching him fight, Varen understood why so few who set out to find Losarcum's ruins had ever returned. How many greedy treasure-seekers had this man killed over the years?

Finally, only Morias remained. He fought bravely, coming on with swift savagery, his sword darting at the old man's

face. The Ghost parried the blow easily, but it stopped him in his tracks long enough for Morias to shove him back. The two of them fell away from each other and paused, sizing each other up. This was a more evenly matched contest, and both men knew it. The Ghost wasn't even breathing hard, though nine men had already died by his blade.

When they fell to again, the clatter of their swords sounded like hail on a copper roof. They were both masters of the blade, and recognized each other as such, giving and taking ground with a rhythm that was as much dance as fight. Every swing was precise, every parry exactly where it needed to be. Each man saw the other's feints, and knew when a riposte was coming. Eyes, throat, stomach, breast . . . quick or slow, every cut and thrust was a potential killing blow, had it landed. But for a long time, none of them did.

Time became meaningless in the clamor of steel. Varen watched as if he were a spectator at a gladiatorial epic. Finally, however, a thought came to him, breaking through his fascination to scream in his ear.

Run!

Startled, he glanced toward the manor's entrance. It was empty, unblocked: the Ghost and Morias had circled away, leaving the dead mercenaries scattered on the ground. Thoughts of riches and glory fled Varen's mind: his quest had failed. The only question left was whether he would live to see the sky again. With a choked cry, he stumbled toward the doorway.

The Ghost saw him, his head turning to follow the movement—a telling mistake. Laughing, Morias lunged, thrusting at the old man's heart.

Steel met steel. It was an impossible parry, the kind of move masters-at-arms strove for years to perfect, and it deflected Morias's blade scarcely an inch from the Ghost's chest, but saved his life. He wasn't spared from harm entirely. Instead of his vitals, Morias's blade slid deep into the flesh of the old warrior's thigh. The old man groaned, his knees buckling.

Then his sword came up hard, its tip punching through the flesh beneath Morias's chin. The sell-sword's helmet flew off as the blade came out the top of his skull, and he stood rigid, his eyes widening. He slumped to the floor. The Ghost jerked his sword free, then staggered and fell as well, one knee hitting the floor hard. He pressed his free hand to his wound, trying to stanch the blood.

Varen stared, paralyzed by shock. His eyes met the empty orbs of the Staring Ghost—and then, in a flash, he knew who this man had to be.

The Ghost grunted, started to rise. Half-mad with terror, Varen turned and fled, and never looked back.



CHAPTER I ▼

TWELFTHMONTH, 961 I.A.

The Lordcity of Istar was drowning in roses. They were everywhere, white and red and golden: draped in blankets from her gleaming, white walls; hung in garlands from her alabaster towers and golden domes; gathered in bunches on the lintels of doors; scattered about plazas and courtyards. Their petals carpeted the streets, drifted up against marble walls, floated on the surfaces of fountains and pools. Their attar ran as thick as smoke in the air, smothering the smells of spices and incense that ordinarily rose from the city.

Another Yule had come. The first festival of winter—a season of rain, rather than the snows that visited the realms to the west—was the grandest in the holy empire. Three days from now, the routines of the Lordcity would cease, and the citizens would give themselves over to drink and feasting in homes and wine-shops. The God’s Eyes, the twin silver lighthouses that guarded the mouth of the city’s port, would burn crimson instead of white, and the School of the Games in the eastern quarter would resound with the clash of steel and the cheers of the crowds. In the west, at the crimson-turreted tower that had once belonged to the Orders of High Sorcery, folk would burn straw effigies dressed in robes

of black and red and white, in defiance of the hated—and long-departed—wizards. To the north, the Hammerhall, the sprawling fortress that was home to the knights of the Divine Hammer, would throw open its mighty doors and the empire’s defenders would parade into town in their mirror-bright armor.

And in the midst of the city, at the heart of the world where all Istar’s roads met, the Great Temple of the Kingpriest would resound with joyful music. Its crystal dome would shine as though a second sun had kindled within. Thousands of worshipers, from all over the city, the empire, and the world beyond, would pack the *Barigon*, the huge, statue-ringed square that stood before the Temple, coming together to receive blessing from the Kingpriest himself. They had done so for thirty-seven years now, since Beldinas the Lightbringer came to the throne. Gods willing, they would continue to do so for years to come.

Today, however, life in the Lordcity went on as it always did. Mighty trading galleys and tiny fishing boats slid across the harbor and the glistening lake beyond, a riot of bright sails billowing on their masts. Folk clad in robes of satin and velvet bustled through the streets, or stood in clusters in the plazas and gardens, talking and laughing and arguing. The markets swarmed with color and noise as merchants sold everything from Tarsian rugs to unguents from Karthay, pearls and ivory from Seldjuk, jugs of fine Taoli wine, even shards of old wood said to date from the lance of Huma Drag-onbane himself. The *Scatas*, the blue-cloaked soldiers who were the backbone of Istar’s armies, marched on patrol, led by white-coated knights on horseback. Priests and monks made processions among the city’s many shrines, chanting hymns of the Kingpriest’s mercy and glory. Pilgrims from all over Krynn prostrated themselves before the Temple’s steps, chanting over and over:

Beldinas Cilenfo . . . Beldinas Pilofiro . . . Beldinas Babo Sod . . .

Beldinas the Healer. Beldinas the Lightbringer. Beldinas, the true Kingpriest.

On the highest balcony of his towering manse, overlooking the mist-shrouded gardens of the Temple, the Kingpriest stood, listening to the chorus murmuring his name. Thirty-eight years ago, he had come to Istar for the first time. Mere months before, he had been known to only a close circle as Brother Beldyn, a monk of scarcely seventeen summers, yet one who could work miracles of healing with his touch. Then Lady Ilista, high priestess of Paladine, had visited his abbey, led by divine visions to find him. His coming to Istar had brought a schism within the empire, and caused Ilista's own death; near open war had ended with the downfall of Kingpriest Kurnos, now called the Deceiver, who had used the darkest of magics in a mad attempt to hold on to his throne. The people of Istar had rejoiced when, wearing the long-lost Crown of Power, Beldinas had taken the throne. They had begun to chant his name that glorious day.

Thirty-eight years, and the people still hadn't stopped. For more than two-thirds of his life, it had been the first thing he heard when he woke in the morning, and the last before he fell asleep. Even when he left the Lordcity, and went on processions throughout the empire's provinces—to the deserts of the south or the jungles of the north, the ports of the east or the highlands of the west—the admirers and chanting followed him. Hearing it now, he leaned forward, setting his hands on the balcony's platinum balustrade, and let out a weary sigh.

"Holiness?" asked a voice behind him—soft, solicitous, polite. "Is something wrong?"

Beldinas turned, though he didn't need to. That voice had been a constant in his life all these thirty-eight years. Other disciples had come and gone, friend and foe, counselor and courtier, but Quarath had always been there close by his side. Though his official title was Emissary of the Silvanesti elves, he had become much more. He was the Kingpriest's

most trusted advisor, and nearly as vital to the empire as Beldinas himself. Nothing happened without the elf knowing it: if Beldinas was Istar's beating heart, Quarath was its sleepless brain.

The elf's face—still youthful, unchanged even after so many years—was set in a frown of concern. A delicate hand rose to push back an errant strand of honey-colored hair. Quarath's silvery robes, embroidered with gold and emeralds, shimmered with the movement.

"You seem tired, *Aulforo*," he said. "Did you sleep poorly?"

Beldinas hesitated. "No, Emissary. I am rested. No ill dreams troubled me."

Quarath nodded. As far as he or anyone else knew, the Kingpriest did not dream at all, good or ill. It drove the imperial soothsayers mad. "What is the matter, then?" the elf asked. "Do not tell me it is nothing."

"I wouldn't think to," the Kingpriest said with a smile so slight it was barely noticeable. "You know my mind as well as I do. Perhaps better—so *you* tell *me*, Emissary. Look, and tell me what troubles me."

The elf made a show of studying Beldinas, his brow furrowed with concentration. A silver lizard—bred, by means since forgotten, to resemble a winged dragon—flew up from the gardens below, inspected the both of them, then swooped away when it determined neither was about to give it food. When it was gone, Quarath raised his eyebrows, pretending to understand only now.

"It is the war," Quarath said sympathetically. "You worry over the struggle against darkness."

Beldinas shrugged. "What else? I have been fighting to drive evil from the world most of my years, and I fear I will not live to see victory."

"Don't say that, Holiness," Quarath said. "You've accomplished a great deal. The Divine Hammer have rooted out the last of the evil gods' worshipers. The goblins and ogres are gone too, and the wizards—"both paused to touch their

foreheads as a ward against sorcery"—are exiled, and will not return."

"I know, Emissary," assented Beldinas. "It is all I hoped for, when I first donned the crown . . . but it isn't enough. Evil is beaten, but it is not destroyed. Even now, the knights still find forbidden cults in the wilderness."

Quarath couldn't help but acknowledge the point with a grim nod. Just yesterday, the court had been stunned to learn that the Divine Hammer had rooted out a hidden sect in Falthana, one which secretly worshiped a many-armed god. The cultists had fought back, but the forces of light had prevailed, smashing the false deity's idol. They had brought the pieces back to Istar as a trophies.

"Evil abides, Quarath," Beldinas declared, and sighed again. "No matter how ruthlessly we strike at it, it will not die. It only appears somewhere else, because there is one place it hides where I cannot reach. The hearts of men."

The elf looked toward the basilica, shining brilliantly in the morning light. "It will be . . . difficult . . . rooting it out from men's hearts, Holiness," he ventured. "The gods made my people for good, just as they made the ogres and their like for evil. But they gave men both, to choose between them. So it is written."

"I know that," the Kingpriest replied somewhat acidly. "I *have* read the holy scriptures, you know. Even so, I must seek a way."

"But how?"

"I don't know," Beldinas said, turning back to look out over the garden. "At least not yet, Quarath."

The elf's eyes narrowed. He bit his lip, uncertain how to reply. Luckily, he didn't have to fret long. As he gazed at the Kingpriest's back, he heard the sound of footsteps, jeweled slippers whispering across the marble floor. Proud as always that his keen elven senses had picked out the noise before Beldinas could hear, he turned to peer through the archway leading back into the manse.

Within was a young woman, not quite thirty, with long hair like polished brass. She dressed in white robes fringed with violet, an amethyst circlet on her head. "*Efisa*," Quarath said in a low voice as she drew near. "What brings you here, away from your order?"

Lady Elsa, First Daughter and highest priestess in the Istaran church, clasped her hands in greeting, bringing her thumbs together to form the god's triangle. "I apologize for the interruption, Emissary, but I bring tidings from First Son Revando."

"You can tell me, Elsa," Quarath said. "The Kingpriest should not be disturbed."

"Nonsense, Emissary," interrupted Beldinas, coming up behind Quarath. "If the First Son and Daughter both feel it is important, then it must be so. Speak, *Efisa*."

Elsa dipped her knee toward the floor as the Kingpriest drew near. "Holiness," she said, "Revando and I were at the front gates of the Temple, performing the morning benediction over the pilgrims, when I chanced to look toward the harbor. There was a commotion there, and then I saw . . . I saw a ship."

One of Quarath's eyebrows climbed. "A ship, you say? In the harbor?"

"Don't be sarcastic, Emissary," Beldinas said to Quarath, an edge in his voice. He turned back to Elsa, whose face had turned red. "What of this ship? Tell me, child."

Elsa regained her composure, smiling gratefully at the Kingpriest. "The ship, Holiness . . . it had an unusual sail."

She trailed off as Beldinas studied her a moment, intently. Then his back straightened, and he took half a step back. "Gray," he said. "The sails were gray, weren't they?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Y-yes, sire. They were. *Are*."

Quarath shot the Kingpriest a sharp glance. "Gray! What is *she* doing here?" he asked.

"I don't know, Emissary," Beldinas replied, frowning. "But

we shall soon find out, I think. Lady Elsa, you did well, coming here. Now I need you to spread the news. Go to the Hammerhall, and tell the Grand Marshal to come here at once."

"Of course, Holiness," said the First Daughter. "What should I say?"

"The truth," the Kingpriest said, and sighed for the third time that morning. "Tell him the Weeping Lady has come."



The Grand Marshal ducked, and just in time he heard the whistle as the sword missed his head, and knew he was lucky it hadn't caught him full in the face. A lesser warrior never would have seen the blow coming, nor recovered fast enough to launch a counterattack before his foe could capitalize on catching him off-balance—but the Marshal had been a knight of the Divine Hammer for nineteen years, and its leader for seven. There were few better swordsmen in the world.

Smiling behind his visor, he spun to his left, rising to full height once more and bashing his opponent's weapon arm with his shield. The other knight—a hotheaded youth named Bron—grunted more with pain than surprise, and stumbled sideways, his sword dropping. Instinct took over, focusing on the momentary vulnerability, and the Marshal swung at Bron's head.

Bron was an untested fighter, but he was also quick. His blade came up again, catching the Marshal's a hand's breadth from his temple. Steel crashed, and the two men stood locked, staring at each other through the eye-slits of their helms.

"Not bad," the Marshal said tersely. "Another ten, fifteen years of this, and I might make a fighter of you."

Sir Bron's eyes flashed. "Another ten years, milord, and you'll be too old to lift your sword."

The Marshal laughed lustily, though the gibe was off the mark. He was only thirty-five; in ten years he would be a little past his prime, but he'd still be a fierce fighter. Lord

Olin, his predecessor, had been nearly seventy when he'd died of heart-burst while sparring in this very yard. With few true enemies left to fight in the world, more of the Divine Hammer's veterans fell to old age than battle these days.

"We'll see, lad," he said, and shoved Bron back. The two of them parted, circling behind their shields, each seeking some opening, some weakness.

Sir Bron's greatest disadvantage, however, was not technique but impatience. The Grand Marshal used it against him, feinting several times but never bringing the fight to a clash. Each time, Bron grew more tense and unsettled, until finally he growled and came on hard, sword spinning in a low backhand cut. Grinning behind his visor, the Marshal caught the swing on the rim of his shield, then slid away, letting momentum carry the young knight past him. Nimble as a Zaladhi fire-dancer, the Marshal wheeled around and slammed his sword home. It hit the back of Bron's neck with a horrible crash.

In a plain fight, it would have been a decapitating blow. Fortunately for Bron, though, the two knights were fighting with blunted swords, and his gorget saved him. Even so, there was enough strength behind the strike to leave the younger knight down on his knees, his sword lying in the dust ten feet away. Retching, Sir Bron fought to pull off his helm.

The Grand Marshal did the same, revealing a fair, youthful face sprayed with freckles. Golden hair, gathered in a long ponytail, spilled out and down his back, and a coppery beard covered his chin, the only aspect of his appearance that made him look older than the sixteen he'd been on his dubbing day. He eyed Sir Bron—now vomiting loudly, his dark hair hanging over his eyes—then turned to look at the young knights and squires ringing the battlefield.

"There's today's lesson, lads," proclaimed Tithian, Lord of the Divine Hammer, with a wry grin. "Keep your head, or you're bound to lose it."

Laughter rang out across the Hammerhall's inner bailey,

echoing off the labyrinth of yellow walls and battlements, turrets and towers. Half the knighthood was less than twenty-five summers old, and most were untested in battle. Tithian and his lieutenants staged these mock fights regularly to keep the art of arms alive. Now the Grand Marshal straightened his tabard—crimson instead of the other knights' white, denoting his rank—and wiped a smudge of grime from the burning-hammer sigil emblazoned on his breast. Raising his blade in salute, he walked to Sir Bron's side and offered his hand to help him up.

Angrily, Bron waved off the knightly courtesy and got up awkwardly on his own. He was a small, lithe man with a face like a horse's. His cheeks burned red as he wiped spittle from his lips. "I should have had you," he grumbled.

"The last words of many men," replied Tithian, clapping his shoulder. "You're a fine strong fighter, but even the best iron needs refining to become steel. Control that temper of yours, or it will cost you."

Giving the barest of nods, Bron sulked off. Tithian sighed—some men just didn't want to learn—then turned to face the rest of his knights.

"All right," he announced, flourishing his blade. "Who's next?"

The others looked away: at the ground, at each other, at the golden, flame-wreathed hammer mounted atop the castle's main keep. None of them were keen to face the Grand Marshal, especially after his thorough trouncing of Bron. Tithian couldn't blame them—he'd hated sparring with his betters when he was young, too—but neither was he going to let them get away that easily.

"Come on, lads," he coaxed. "If one of you doesn't fight me, we'll have a melee instead."

The young knights groaned. Mass melees always meant plenty of work for the knighthood's Mishakite healers afterward. They were good training, though; Tithian remembered many such battles from his youth, and no one-on-one duel

could prepare anybody for having allies and enemies all around. He fixed his men with a steel-blue glare.

"Well?"

Still the others hesitated, and Tithian almost spat out of annoyance. Things hadn't been this in the old days, the days of now-legendary men like Tavarre of Luciel, and Marto of Falthana, and . . . and many, many others. But most of those heroes were dead now, casualties of the war against sorcery, and this was what remained—mostly the younger sons of nobles and merchant lords, sent into service so they wouldn't burden their families. The burning zeal of the Hammer's early days had faded to a flicker.

"Very well," the Grand Marshal said, making no effort to hide his disappointment. "Arm yourselves and form your sides. North and west barracks against south and—now what's the matter?"

A commotion had broken out behind the crowd, in the direction of the castle's main gates. The knights were murmuring and shifting, getting out of someone's way. Tithian caught flashes of white: a priest from the Temple. His annoyance grew—he'd never had a great deal of use for the holy church, even if he *was* the head of its military wing. More often than not, a visit from the clergy meant sending his men to fight, and die, in some far-flung region of the empire.

But then his eyebrows rose as Lady Elsa stepped through the crowd. He tried to remember the last time a First Daughter—or any Revered Daughter—had come to the Hammerhall. He couldn't think of a single occasion.

His men bowed, and Tithian signed the triangle. He knelt to no one, save the Kingpriest himself. "*Efisa*," he said. "What brings you into these hills?"

"Lord Tithian," Elsa replied. "I come at the behest of the Lightbringer."

A mutter ran through the knights. Tithian silenced them with a gesture, though he felt his insides clench. Usually, the

Kingpriest sent summonses with one of the young acolytes who served as the Temple's couriers. This was indeed unusual.

"What does His Holiness wish of me?" he asked.

Two minutes later, he was on horseback, riding out through the Hammerhall's barbican beside the First Daughter's chariot. The melee would have to wait for another time.



CHAPTER 2 ▼

No one knew when gray sails had become a sign of ill luck, or even why. It was a superstition older than the empire itself, its origins lost to history. The fact remained, however, that Istarans believed gray sails brought disaster, and not without good reason; the last time a vessel sailed into the Lordcity's port under such colors, the Kingpriest, Giusecchio the Fat, had perished by an assassin's blade the very same day. That had been nearly a century and a half ago, and in that time no ship—not even those from the western realms, which held no such beliefs—had raised a gray sail within Istar's harbor.

No ship, that is, until today.

The crowds were thick at the wharves by the time the vessel pulled up to the Lordcity's marble jetties. They shouted vituperations and forked their fingers at the sailors who jumped over the gunwales to make fast the mooring lines, and would have rushed out onto the docks had the Divine Hammer not been there to restrain them. Lord Tithian's men locked shields to hold the mob back, swords drawn to warn the more zealous agitators. All around them voices called out curses, or invoked the Lightbringer to protect them from the doom-bringing ship.