

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

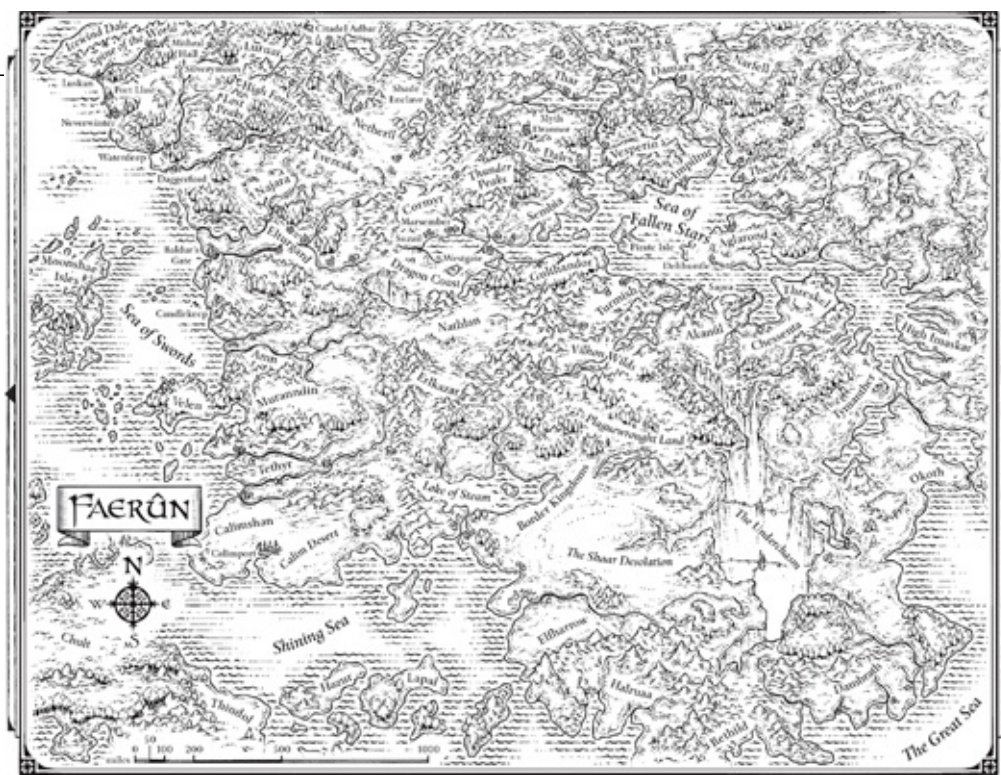
PAUL S. KEMP



FORGOTTEN REALMS®



THE GODBORN



When the trials begin,
in soul-torn solitude despairing,
the hunter waits alone.
The companions emerge
from fast-bound ties of fate
uniting against a common foe.

When the shadows descend,
in Hell-sworn covenant unswerving
the blighted brothers hunt,
and the godborn appears,
in rose-blessed abbey reared,
arising to loose the godly spark.

When the harvest time comes,
in hate-fueled mission grim unbending,
the shadowed reapers search.
The adversary vies
with fiend-wrought enemies,
opposing the twisting schemes of Hell.

When the tempest is born,
as storm-tossed waters rise uncaring,
the promised hope still shines.
And the reaver beholds
the dawn-born chosen's gaze,
transforming the darkness into light.

When the battle is lost,
through quake-tossed battlefields unwitting
the seasoned legions march,
but the sentinel flees
with once-proud royalty,
protecting devotion's fragile heart.

When the ending draws near,
with ice-locked stars unmoving,
the threefold threats await,
and the herald proclaims,
in war-wrecked misery,
announcing the dying of an age.



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December 2013

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FORGOTTEN REALMS

PAUL S. KEMP

THE GODBORN

FORGOTTEN REALMS
THE
SUNDERING
Book
II



THE GODBORN

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PROLOGUE

Marpenoth, the Year of Holy Thunder (1450 DR)

PAIN WRACKED VARRA, KNIFE STABS OF AGONY THAT KEPT TIME WITH HER contractions. She lay on her back in a straw-filled birthing bed in the abbey—the Abbey of the Rose, Derreg had called it—her knees bent, the sheets damp and sticky with sweat and blood. *Her* blood.

Too much of it, she knew.

She saw her fate reflected in the worried eyes of the homely, middle-aged midwife who patted her hand and mouthed soft encouragement, saw it in the furrowed brow and filmy blood-streaked intense gaze of the balding, elderly priest with blood-slicked hands who reached into Varra's womb time and again to no avail.

Varra searched her memory but could not remember their names. The previous hours—had it been just hours?—had passed in a blur. She remembered traveling in a caravan across Sembia, fleeing before a storm of shadows, an ever-growing tenebrous thunderhead that threatened to blanket all of Sembia with its pall. Undead had attacked the caravan, unliving shadows, their keening voices announcing their hunger for souls, and, in a moment of thoughtless bravery, she had led them off into the forest to save the others.

There, terrified and stumbling through the underbrush, she'd happened upon a man, a dark man who had reminded her of Erevis, her child's father. The howls of the undead had filled the woods behind her, all around her, their keens a promise of cold and death and oblivion.

"Who are you?" she'd asked the dark man, panting, her voice tense with growing panic.

"I'm just fiddling around the edges," the man had said, and his narrow, sharply angled face had creased in a mirthless smile. He had touched her pregnant belly—then not yet bulging—and sent a knife stab of pain through her abdomen.

The memory of his touch caused her to squirm on the birthing bed. She moaned with pain. Bloody straw poked into her back. The light from the lanterns put a dancing patchwork of shadows on the vaulted stone ceiling, and she swore she heard the dark man chuckle.

"Be still, woman," the priest said sharply. Sweat greased his pate. Blood spattered his yellow robe.

"He did something to the child!"

"Who?" the midwife asked, her double chins bouncing with the question. "What do you mean?"

"The dark man!" Varra said, screaming as another contraction twisted her guts. "The man in the forest!"

The midwife glanced at the priest knowingly and patted Varra's hand. "It'll be all right," she said, mouthing words they all knew were a lie. "It's fine. You're not in a forest and

there's no dark man here.”

The priest mopped his brow, smearing blood across his scalp, and reached into Varra again. Pain ripped through her, a wave of agony that ran from pelvis to chest. She gasped and the priest pulled his hands back, looked up, and shared a glance with the midwife. Varra read their faces the words they didn't say aloud.

“What's wrong with my child?” she said, and tried to sit up. The bloody sheets clung to her back. The effort caused her more pain, agonizing pulses. The room spun. She feared she would vomit.

“Please be still,” the priest said, and the midwife gently pressed her back down on the birthing bed.

Pain and exhaustion caused Varra's vision to blur. Her mind floated backward into memory, to the forest.

“Run,” the dark man had said to her, and she had, tripping, stumbling, and cursing her way through the brush. The unliving shadows had pursued her, closing, their wails loud in her ears, coming at her from all directions. She had stumbled into a meadow and fallen. She recalled the sweet smell of the purple flowers, the dusting of silver pollen that fogged the night air and glittered in Selûne's light. She remembered curling up among the blooms as the shadows closed in, like a child herself, wrapped in the meadow's womb. She'd put her arms around her belly, around her unborn child, knowing they were both about to die, and wishing and praying that she were somewhere else, somewhere safe, anywhere.

And then, as if in answer to her wish, the motes of pollen had flared bright silver and she recalled a sudden, disconcerting lurch of motion.

“He saved me,” she murmured to the midwife, knowing she wasn't making sense to anyone but herself. “The dark man. He saved me.”

“Of course he did, dear,” the midwife said, caressing her hand, obviously not listening. And he'd also saved Varra's child, from the undead if not the perils of childbirth. She came back fully to the current moment, to the pain.

“Derreg?” she said, blinking tears and sweat from her eyes.

“I'm here,” he said from behind her, and she drifted again.



The magic of the meadow's flowers had ... *moved* her, and Varra had found herself elsewhere, disconcerted, nauseated. A soft rain that smelled faintly of ash fell out of a black sky. She felt drowsy, as if she'd been sleepwalking and had only just awakened.

Sitting low on the horizon, the setting sun tried to poke through a roof of dense dark clouds, but only a few stray rays penetrated the shroud. It was almost night.

The sheer, cracked face of towering mountains hemmed her in. She was in a pass.

Her mind tried to make sense of events. How had she arrived here? Some magic, some miracle of the meadow ...

Her child moved within her. She gasped, her knees went weak, and she nearly fell when she saw the growth of her belly.

“How?” she whispered, and ran her hands over the now-swollen mound of her abdomen. The swell of her stomach seemed more miraculous than her inexplicable translocation. Moments ago, she had been little more than a month pregnant.

Then she remembered. The dark man had touched her belly. He'd done something to the baby; he must have.

Even as the thought registered, the contractions began, like a hand squeezing her womb. Her wonder turned in an instant to fear, and fear to terror.

She was alone in an unknown place, and somehow soon to give birth. Her heart beat so fast she grew lightheaded. She tried to calm herself with long, deep breaths. The rain and the breeze summoned shivers. She had to find shelter, help. Gods, she needed help.

She stumbled through the rocks, picking her way through the boulders, the stands of trees, calling out over the patter of the rain. The unliving shadows appeared to be gone. Perhaps the caravan was nearby? Or perhaps there was a village in the vicinity, a cottage, something anything. She had to risk a shout.

"Help! Anyone! Help, please!"

She realized that she didn't even now where she was. She'd been in a forest. Now she was in a mountain pass.

"Gods," she said, tears falling down her face. "Gods."

She wandered the shadowed landscape, shouting until her voice was hoarse, watching with a sense of dread as the sun sank. At last her legs would bear her no farther and she sagged to the ground under a cluster of pines, exhausted, wrapped in the aroma of pine needles and rain.

She would give birth alone, outside, in the dark. The realization pressed against her chest made it hard to breathe.

"Help!" she called, expiating with a scream the pain of another contraction. "Help! Someone please, help!"

Over the rain she heard voices.

She froze, afraid to let hope nest in her chest. She cocked her head, listened, tried to hear above the thump of her own heart.

Yes, voices!

"Here!" she cried. She tried to stand but another contraction ripped through her and forced her back to the bed of pine needles. "Over here! Help me, please!"

The ground vibrated under her and she soon saw what caused it. A patrol of armed and armored men mounted on warhorses moved through the pass at a rapid trot. A blazing sun and a rose—both incongruous in the bleak, shrouded land—were enameled on their breastplates. They looked about, as if seeking her, their mounts trotting and snorting.

"The call came from around here," one of them said, and pulled his horse around.

"I heard it, too," said a second.

"Where are you?" another shouted.

"Here!" she called, and held up a hand. Relief put more tears in her eyes but gave her voice strength. "I'm here."

Helmed heads turned to her. The men pulled up their horses.

"Here in the pines!"

"It's a woman!" one of them shouted.

Several of them swung out of their saddles, pushed through the pine limbs, and hurried to her side. They smelled of sweat and leather and horse and hope.

"She's with child!" said a young man whose helm seemed too large for his head. Even

under the trees their bodies seemed to attract the last, meager rays of the setting sun, and the fading light limned their armor and shields. She could not take her eyes from the rose. Her memory blurred subsequent events, compressed what must have been close to an hour into moments. The oldest of the men, his long, gray-streaked hair leaking from beneath his helmet, his face seamed with lines and scars that his trimmed beard could not hide, had knelt beside her.

“Rest easy,” he said. He closed his eyes and placed the fingertips of one hand on her arm.

She felt his mind touch hers, as if evaluating her soul. She did not welcome the violation but she was too tired to resist. After a moment he opened his eyes and nodded, seeming satisfied.

“What is your name, goodwoman?” he asked.

His deep voice reminded her of a rolling brook. It calmed her.

“Varra,” she said, and winced as another contraction knotted her abdomen.

“You’ll be cared for, Varra.”

He took a small holy symbol, a stylized rose, in his hand and placed both of his palms—gnarled and scarred from years of battle—on her stomach. He intoned a prayer to Amaunator. A soft glow spread from his palms to her abdomen, warming her, easing her pain, and quelling her fear.

“You need a midwife,” he said. “And a priest skilled in childbirth. I can get you to both. Can you stand?”

She nodded, and he helped her to her feet. He stood almost as tall as Erevis and smelled like the rain.

“Where am I?” she asked.

“You’re with me. And safe.”

The simple words took her by surprise, recalling, as they did, her wish from the meadow. Her eyes welled. The man removed his heavy cloak and draped it around her shoulders.

“How did you come here?” he asked her, guiding her toward his horse.

She felt the eyes of the other riders on her, their gazes heavy with questions. They had already remounted.

“How did you find the pass? Are others with you?”

She swallowed, shook her head. “I was with a caravan, but ... I think I’m alone now. And ... I don’t know how I came here. What ... pass is this?”

“She could be in service to the Shadovar, Derreg,” said a young, squat rider.

“Don’t be a fool,” the older man, Derreg, snapped. “Look at her. She is no servant of the shades.”

“The shades of the desert of Anauroch?” Varra asked, wincing in anticipation of another contraction.

“Desert?” said the young rider, his face pinched in a question. He looked to Derreg. “She babbles.”

“Erwil, ride toward the foothills,” Derreg said. “See if anyone else from her caravan is about.” To Varra, he said, “Do you think you can ride?”

She took stock of her condition, nodded, grunted as another contraction pained her.

“She rides Daybreak with me,” Derreg said to his men. “Nav, Greer, ride for the abbey. Tell the Oracle we found her. And tell the abbot we return with a pilgrim in the midst of labor.”

Then rouse Erdan. He has experience in these matters.”

Two of the riders wheeled their mounts and rode off.

“Abbey?” Varra asked, leaning heavily on Derreg. “Pilgrim? Oracle?”

“The Abbey of the Rose,” Derreg said, as he assisted her toward the warhorse he had called Daybreak. “You’re a pilgrim, yes? Come to see the Oracle?”

She had never heard of the Abbey of the Rose. “I ... don’t know.”

He studied her face, the age lines in his brow deepening with his frown. “Where are you from?”

“Semia. North and west of Ordulin.”

Derreg’s eyes narrowed. He studied her expression as he said, “Ordulin is a wasteland. It was destroyed in the Shadowstorm. And Semia is a vassal state to Netheril and the shades.”

She stared at him uncomprehending.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She felt lightheaded. She shook her head. She must have misheard. “I don’t understand. I just left ...”

A contraction doubled her over. When it passed, strong hands took hold of her and lifted her gently atop Daybreak. She sat sidesaddle as best she could. Derreg mounted behind her and enclosed her in his arms as he whickered at the mount.

She hissed with pain as the horse started to move. She kept one hand on her belly, felt the movement of her child within.

“The abbey isn’t far,” Derreg said. “Tell me if it becomes too much to endure.”

“It’s tolerable,” she said. “But please hurry.”

The rest of the patrol fell in around them as they rode through the pass. The way narrowed as they followed a winding, circuitous path of switchbacks and side openings. A mist formed around them, thick and pale, obscuring vision. Whispers sounded in her ears, sibilant words suggesting a meaning that slipped away just prior to understanding. She thought she heard Erevis’s name in their whispered tones, and another name, too: Erevis’s real name—Vasen.

“Try to ignore the whispers and whatever else you see,” Derreg said to her softly.

She nodded, alone with her pain. “Please hurry.”

Faces formed in the mist, men and women with eyes like holes. They dissipated moments after forming, fading like lost memories. She squeezed her eyes shut, but still the fog tugged at her clothes, pawed at her belly. Still the voices hissed in her ears, speaking of her child.

It’s the child, they said.

He’ll dream of the father.

And the father of him.

“They know me!” she said, terrified.

“No,” Derreg said. “They’re the voices of spirits that serve the Oracle and guard the way, but they’re harmless to us. They only confuse. Don’t heed them.”

Varra swallowed, nodded, and ignored the voices. She soon lost all sense of direction. The pass was a maze, and the voices of the spirits thickened her perception, dulled her mind. The moments passed with agonizing slowness. She tried through force of will to delay the birth of her child.

The birth of Erevis’s child.

The child, the voices said. *The child.*

She squeezed her eyes shut, wondering where Erevis was, if he was safe. He had left her to save his friend and she had reconciled herself to it, but she missed him still, and always would. She hoped he was well, but Derreg's words resounded in her mind—Ordulin is wasteland. Sembia is gone.

How could that have happened so fast?

"Oh, gods," she whispered, as realization broke over her. It seemed impossible, and yet . . .

"What's wrong?" Derreg asked.

"What year is it?" she said, her voice breaking on the rocks of the question. She braced herself for the answer. Her heart pounded in her ears.

"Year?" Derreg said. "By Dalereckoning, 1450."

The child squirmed within her and she cried out.

The child is come, said the voices.

"Are you all right?" Derreg asked.

She nodded as one pain passed, replaced by another.

1450.

How was that possible?

Seventy years had passed in what felt to her like moments. She wrestled with understanding but failed. She could not make sense of it. Her child was seventy years old before he was ever born.

She began to weep, not with pain but with grief for all that she'd lost, all she'd left behind.

"How can this be?" she whispered, and had no answer.

If Derreg heard her, he offered no answer, either.

They emerged from the mist, leaving the voices of the spirits behind. Through tear-filled eyes, she watched the last, glowing sliver of the sun sink behind the western mountain. She watched the long shadows of the peaks stretch across the pass. The already meager light faded to black. They had reached a forested vale. Huge cascades fell from cliffs and a simple stone abbey was nestled in the trees.



The priest's head appeared between her knees. Sweat slicked his thin hair to his pale, aged, spotted scalp. The dim lantern light put shadows in the hollows of his cheeks.

"If I'm to save the child, you must not push until I say."

"Breathe in and out slowly," the midwife said.

Varra swallowed, nodded. The rush of her heart boomed in her ears. A contraction girdled her pelvis in agony. She screamed, and the portly midwife, wincing, sopped up more blood from the bed, cast some of the sheets into the gory pile on the floor.

"I'm thirsty," Varra said.

"Almost," the priest said, not hearing her as he stared into her body and tried to save her child.

"Do something!" said Derreg from somewhere behind Varra. "She's in too much pain." He had refused to leave her since bringing her to the abbey.

"We're doing all we can, Derreg," the priest said, tension putting an edge on his voice.

"Do more!" Derreg said.

Varra focused on her breathing and stared up at the vaulted ceiling. Her entire frame

reference distilled down to an awareness of only her abdomen, the birth canal, the child she was soon to deliver. But there was no ease from the pain. Her vision blurred. She feared she would be too weak to push when the priest told her to do so. She feared she would never see her child.

She screamed again as the priest manipulated the child within her, a dagger in her belly.

“Get the child out!” Derreg said, stress causing his voice to break.

The priest looked up from between Varra’s legs, looked first at her, then past her to Derreg.

“I can’t. It’s dying. The cord is ...”

He trailed off, but his words left Varra hollow.

“No,” she said, and tears wet her cheeks. “No.”

The priest looked at her, his expression soft, sympathetic. “I’m so sorry.”

“You are not trying hard enough, Erdan!” said Derreg, and she heard him move across the room toward the priest, although he remained behind Varra, out of sight.

The priest’s soft voice never lost its calm. “I’ve done all I can, Derreg. We must ... take steps if the woman is to have a chance.”

Varra felt Derreg’s hand on her head, on her hair, a protective gesture that soothed her and warmed her.

How strange, she thought. She realized in the clarity of the moment that in another time, in another place, he was a man she might have loved, despite the difference in their ages.

“Her name is Varra,” Derreg said. “And there must be something—”

“Cut the child out,” Varra said, her voice as soft as rain, its quiet resolve slicing through the room.

Derreg’s hand lifted from her head as if he were recoiling.

The priest looked as if she had spoken in a language he could not understand. “What do you say?”

The midwife squeezed Varra’s hand. “You’re not clearheaded—”

“Cut my child out,” Varra said, louder, her mind made up. Her body tensed, a contraction gripped her, the child moved within her, and she screamed. “Cut it out! I’m already dead! I see it in your face!”

The priest and the midwife stared at her, eyes wide. Neither gainsaid her words.

“I’m already dead,” Varra said, more quietly, the words spiced with her tears, her grief.

The priest swallowed, his tracheal lump bouncing up and down. “I haven’t prepared the correct rituals, and I do have not the needed tools ...”

“A knife will do,” Varra said, and managed to keep her voice from faltering. The room began to spin. She closed her eyes until it subsided.

“A knife?”

“There’s little time,” Varra said.

“Right, of course,” the priest said, looking past her to Derreg, as if for permission.

Derreg’s hand returned to Varra’s head, cradling it as he might an infant, as he might his daughter. His fingers twisted gently in her sweat-dampened hair. She reached up and covered his hand with hers as her tears fell. His skin felt as rough as bark. His bearded face appeared next to hers, his breath warm on her cheek.

“You don’t have to do this,” he said.

“It’s my child,” she said, three words that said everything there was to say about anything. Her eyes went to the sheets piled along the wall, a crimson pile. “I’m dead already. We both know that.”

The priest produced a small knife and held it aloft in a shaking hand. The lantern light flickered on its blade. Stress squeezed sweat from his blood-smeared brow.

The midwife’s clammy fingers clenched Varra’s hand. Varra alone seemed to feel calm. “Derreg, listen to me,” Varra said. “Someone ... did something to the child, changed it. I do not know how, but it’s *my* child. Mine. Do you understand?”

His hand squeezed hers. He buried his forehead in her hair. She breathed in the smell of him—he still smelled of the rain—and wondered how she could have come to care for him so much in mere hours, in mere moments. How cruel that they’d had only hours to share rather than a lifetime.

“I understand,” he said. She swallowed in a throat gone dry, nodded. To the priest, she said, “Do it.”

The priest winced, steeled himself to his work. “This will pain you,” he said, but did not move.

“Do it,” Varra said. “Do it now.” But he didn’t. He couldn’t. His hand shook uncontrollably.

The midwife took the knife from the priest’s hand, stared for a moment into Varra’s eyes and began to cut.

Varra walled off a scream behind gritted teeth as the edge slid across her abdomen and opened her womb, spilling warm fluid down her sides.

The midwife’s resolve spread to the priest and he moved forward to assist. Spots formed before Varra’s eyes. Sparks erupted in her brain. She might have been screaming, she could not be certain. She felt the priest and midwife manipulating the hole they’d made in her, felt them reaching inside her.

She *was* screaming, she realized, swimming in pain, in blood. She focused on Derreg’s hand, its solidity, the gentle way it cradled her own. Warmth radiated from his flesh, dulled the edge of her agony.

He would never leave her, she thought. Never. Something warm and wet pattered on their joined hands. Her fading consciousness mistook it for blood at first, but then she realized it was tears. Derreg’s tears. She felt his mouth near her ear and he whispered words of faith.

“From ends, beginnings, from darkness, light, from tragedy, triumph. Night gives way to dawn, and dawn to noon. Stand in the warmth and purifying light of Amaunator who was Lathander and fear nothing. Fear nothing, Varra.”

She felt herself fading, slipping. The room darkened. “Care for him,” she whispered to Derreg.

“Him?” Derreg said. Varra nodded. She knew the child would be a son, a son for the father, the spirits in the pass had told her. “His name is Vasen. After his father.”

“I will, Varra,” Derreg said. “I promise.”

Varra heard a rush like roaring surf. The room darkened. She could no longer see. She felt herself drifting, floating in warm water, sinking ...

She heard a tiny cough, then a newborn's cry, the defiant call of her son as he entered world of light and darkness.

She smiled, drifted, thought of Erevis, of Derreg, and feared nothing.



Derreg had slain many men in combat, had seen battlefields littered with corpses, but he had to force himself to look on Varra's body, at the blood-soaked bed, at the opening in her abdomen out of which Erdan, the priest, had mined the child. Her face, finally free of pain, looked as pale as a new moon.

He could not release her still-warm hand. He held onto it as if with it he could pull her back to life.

"She is gone," the midwife said. "Gone to light."

Derreg nodded. He'd known Varra perhaps two hours, but he had felt a connection with her, a whispered hint of what might have been had they met under other circumstances. Through sixty winters he had never married, and now he knew why. He was to meet his love only in the twilight of his life, and he was to know her for less than a day.

He thanked Amaunator for that, at least.

"What's wrong with it?" the midwife said, her exclamation pulling Derreg's attention from Varra.

Hand to her mouth, the midwife backed away a step from the birthing bed, a step away from the child. Erdan, eyes as wide as coins, held the baby out at arm's length, as if might something foul.

The child, pinched, dark, and bloody, his legs kicking, cried in sharp gasps. The umbilical cord still connected him to Varra, and a thin vein of shadow twined around the cord's length and slowly snaked toward the child as if the baby—Vasen, Varra had named him—had received nourishment not only from blood but also from darkness. Vasen's eyes flashed yellow with each of his wails.

"It's born of the Shadovar!" said Erdan, and looked as if he might drop the child. "Look at it! The darkness moves toward it!"

Vasen's appearance and the coil of shadow around the umbilical made the claim hard to deny, but deny it Derreg did.

"He's born of this woman, Erdan. And his name is Vasen."

The child kicked, wailed.

"It must be killed, Derreg," Erdan said, although uncertainty colored his tone, and he paled as he spoke. "If the Shadovar learn of the abbey ..."

"Killed?" the midwife said, and put her hand to her mouth. "A child? You cannot!"

"No," Derreg said, his hand still holding Varra's, feeling it cool. "We cannot. You heard me give this woman my word. I'll keep it." He let go of Varra's hand and held out his arms for the child. "Give him to me."

Erdan looked dumbfounded, his mouth half open. His two rotten front teeth looked as dark as Vasen's skin.

"Give him to me, Erdan. It's not a request."

The priest blinked, handed the blood-slicked boy to Derreg, then wiped his bloody hands on his yellow robes.

Vasen stilled in Derreg's hands. His small form felt awkward, fragile. Derreg's hands were accustomed to holding hard steel and worn leather, not a babe. Shadows coiled around the baby, around Derreg's forearms.

"You'd damn us all for the child of a stranger?" Erdan said, his tone as much puzzled as angry.

Derreg did not bother to explain that he did not regard Varra as a stranger. "I gave my word."

"I must take this to the abbot. I take no responsibility—"

"Yes," Derreg snapped, unable to keep the sharpness from his voice. "You take no responsibility. I understand that quite well."

Erdan tried to hold Derreg's gaze, failed.

"Give me the knife," Derreg said.

"What?"

"The knife, man. I can't use a sword on the cord."

Muttering, Erdan handed Derreg the small knife he'd used to cut open Varra's womb. With it, Derreg cut the shadow-veined umbilical, separating boy from mother, then wrapped him in one of the sheets stained with Varra's blood.

"You must find a—" the priest began.

"Shut up, Erdan," Derreg said. "I know he'll require a wet nurse. I'm childless, not a dolt."

"Of course," Erdan said. He stared quizzically at the boy. "The shadows, Derreg. What is he if not a shade?"

"What he is," Derreg said. "Is my son."

Holding the boy against his chest, Derreg stepped to Varra's side and leaned over her so the boy could see his mother's face. Her mouth was frozen in a half smile, her dark eyes open and staring.

"That is your mother, Vasen. Her name was Varra."

"You know the abbot will consult the Oracle," said Erdan. "You risk much."

"Perhaps," Derreg said. He stared down at the tiny, bloody child in his arms—the tiny nose, the strange yellow eyes, the dusky skin, the thin black hair slicked back on his small head. He resolved that he would not turn Vasen over to the abbot, no matter what the Oracle said. "If the Oracle sees danger in the child, I'll take him from here. But I won't abandon him."

Erdan studied him for a moment, then said, "I will see to the woman's—burial. And we will see what the abbot and Oracle say. Perhaps I'm mistaken. I was ... surprised by the boy's appearance and spoke hastily. Harshly, perhaps."

"It's forgotten, Erdan," Derreg said softly. He knew the priest to be a good man.

"I'll prepare her ... body for the rituals," said the midwife. "I, too, was—"

The lantern light dimmed and the shadows deepened. The child uttered a single cry and burrowed his face into Derreg's chest.

Derreg felt pressure on his ears, felt the air grow heavy and found it difficult to draw breath. The shadows in the far corner of the room swirled like a thunderhead, their hypnotic motion giving Derreg an instant headache. He caught a pungent, spicy whiff of smoke, the smell somehow redolent of times old and gone.

"By the light," said the midwife, fear raising her voice an octave.

The shadows coalesced. A presence manifested in the darkness.

“Shadovar,” Erdan hissed. “I told you, Derreg!” Then, to the midwife, “Get aid! Go!”

She ran from the room without looking back, stumbling over the bloody sheets in haste.

The entire room fell deeper into darkness, the lantern’s flame reduced to the light of a distant star.

Cradling Vasen against his chest, Derreg drew his blade and took a step backward, toward the door. “Go, Erdan. Now.”

“You have the child,” Erdan said, taking his holy symbol in his hand. “You go.”

An orange light flared in the darkness—the glowing embers of a pipe bowl. They lit the face of the man who resided in the shadows, a man who *was* the shadows.

Long black hair hung loose around a swarthy, pockmarked visage. A goatee surrounded the sneer he formed around the pipe’s stem. He was missing an eye and the scarred, empty socket looked like a hole that went on forever. The embers in the pipe went dark and the man once more disappeared into the shadows.

“Maybe you should both stay,” the man said, and the lock bolt on the door slid into place.

Erdan looked at the door, at the man, back at the door, his rapid breathing audible.

“You won’t need your blade, knight of Lathander,” the man said to Derreg. “Or is Amaunator these days? I haven’t kept up.”

Erdan intoned the words to a prayer and the pipe flared again, showing the man’s face twisted in a frown.

“Close your mouth,” the man said to Erdan, his voice as sharp-edged as a blade. “Your words are empty.”

Erdan’s mouth audibly shut. His eyes widened and he doubled over and pawed at his face, moaning behind his lips as if they were sealed shut.

“Priests,” the man said contemptuously, shaking his head as the light from the pipe died and the darkness engulfed him.

“Release him,” Derreg said, nodding at Erdan, and advancing a step toward the man. The baby went still in the cradle of Derreg’s arm.

The man took a long drag on his pipe, and the light showed him smiling. “Well enough. He’s released.”

Erdan opened his mouth, gasped. “By the light!”

“Hardly by the light,” the man said. “But you needn’t fear. I’m not here for either of you.” He nodded at Vasen. “I’m here for him.”

Derreg cradled Vasen more tightly to his chest. The boy remained eerily still, his yellow eyes like embers. Derreg recalled Varra’s words to him about a dark man who had changed the boy. He tightened his grip on his blade’s hilt.

“You’re the child’s father?”

The man exhaled smoke and stepped closer to them, shedding some of the darkness that clung to him. He moved with the precision of a skilled combatant. Twin sabers hung from his belt and the hilt of a larger sword—sheathed on his back—peeked over his shoulder. His one good eye fixed not on Derreg but on Vasen, then on Varra. Derreg could read nothing in his expression.

“Are you the father?” Derreg repeated. “The dark man?”

“Oh, I *am* a dark man,” the man said, smiling softly. “But I’m not the father. And I’m not the dark man you mean, at least not exactly.”

He was suddenly standing directly before Derreg. Had he crossed the room?

The man extended a finger toward Vasen—the baby still did not move—but stopped before touching him. A stream of shadow stretched from the man’s fingertip and touched Vasen, for a moment connecting man and child, an umbilical of another sort, perhaps.

“How peculiar,” the man said, and withdrew his finger.

“How so?” Derreg asked, and turned his body to shield the child from the man’s touch.

“His father was Erevis Cale,” the man said, still staring at Vasen. “And I’ve been searching for this child for some ... time.”

Derreg heard the echo of some distant pain in the man’s utterance of Cale’s name. He knew the name, of course. His father, Regg, had spoken of Cale often, had watched Cale destroy a godling at the battle of Sakkors.

“Erevis Cale? Abelar’s traveling companion?”

Shadows spun about the man. His lips curled with contempt.

“*Traveling companion?* Is that how he’s remembered?” He shook his head. “You’ve lost much more than half this world to the Spellplague. And you’ll lose more of it yet if the cycle runs its course.”

“The cycle?” Derreg asked.

“You’re Drasek Riven,” said Erdan, his voice rapid, excited. “By the light, you are!”

The man inclined his head. “Partly.”

Derreg did not understand the cryptic comment. He’d heard Riven’s name in tales, told by the old. “You can’t take the child, Drasek Riven. I gave my word.”

“Do you think you could stop me?” Riven asked.

Derreg blinked and licked his lips, but held his ground. “No. But I’d try.”

Riven leaned in close, studied Derreg’s face. His breath smelled of smoke. “I believe you. That’s good.”

“You haven’t aged,” blurted Erdan, stepping closer to Riven, curiosity pinching his wrinkled face into a question. “You’re not Shadovar?”

Riven turned to face Erdan and the priest blanched, retreated. “My kinship with darkness runs deeper than that of the Shadovar, priest. And I won’t tell you again to keep your mouth closed. You’re a witness to this, nothing more.”

Erdan’s eyes widened even as his mouth closed.

“You knew my father,” Derreg said. “He spoke of you sometimes.”

“Just sometimes, eh?” Riven drew on his pipe, a faint smile on his face, a distant memory in his eye. “I confess I’m not surprised.”

“When he talked about those days he spoke mostly of Dawnlord Abelar.”

“Dawnlord?” Riven looked up and past Derreg. His brow furrowed as he wrestled down some memory. “What is that? Some kind of holy title?”

“Of course it’s holy,” said Erdan, his tone as defiant as he dared. “His tomb is in this abbey. Pilgrims come from across Faerûn to lay eyes on it.”

“You ... question his holiness?” Derreg said.

Riven chuckled. “He was a man to me, and men are never holy.”

“You blaspheme!” Erdan said.

Riven sneered. "Priest, I saw *Dawnlord* Abelar run his blade through an unarmed man trying to surrender. How does that square with your understanding of the man?"

"You lie!" Erdan exclaimed, then, realizing what he had said, backed up a step.

"Often," Riven acknowledged, "But not about that. Maybe you think killing Malkur Forr made him less holy? You might be right. But it made him more of a man. And that murder why you have an Oracle."

Derreg shook his head. "I don't understand. The Oracle is Abelar's son."

"You miss my meaning," Riven said and shook his head. "No matter. Myths sometimes outrun the man."

Riven took a draw on his pipe, blew out a cloud of fragrant smoke. He looked at Derreg, his eye focused on a memory. "I once promised your father that we would share a smoke but ... other things got in the way. How did Regg die? Well, I hope?"

A fist formed in Derreg's throat, old grief blossoming into new pain. He pulled Vasen tighter against his chest. For a moment, he considered refusing to answer, but changed his mind. "He died an old man, in his sleep. The light was in him."

Riven's face did not change expression, although his eye seemed to see something Derreg could not. "It pleases me to hear it."

Voices and shouts carried into the room from the hall outside. Riven drew on his pipe, unconcerned.

"What do you want?" Derreg asked. "Why are you here?"

Riven jerked the large blade from the sheath on his back. Derreg lurched backward, his own blade held before him. Vasen began to cry. Erdan froze, rooted to the spot.

"To see the boy. And to give him his father's weapon." Riven flipped the weapon, took it by the blade, and offered Derreg the hilt. "This is Weaveshear."

The weapon was as black as a starless night. Shadows curled about its length, extending outward from the blade toward Vasen. The child extended a hand, cooed.

"That's a weapon of darkness," Erdan said, and made the sign of the rising sun, the three interior fingers raised like sunbeams. "That it is," answered Riven.

Derreg stared at the blade. "The boy won't need it."

"No?"

"No. He has me."

Riven scowled, shadows swirling around him. He lowered the weapon and advanced. Although short of stature, Riven nevertheless seemed to reach to the ceiling.

Derreg knew he had overstepped and his mouth went dry, his heart pounded.

"You'll take this blade and you'll keep it safe and when that boy is of age, you'll tell him who his father was and you'll give him that weapon. I owe Cale that much. And so do you. All of you."

"I—"

"Nod your godsdamned stubborn head, son of Regg, or I swear I'll remove it from your neck."

Derreg did not care to test whether the threat was earnest. He fought down a prideful impulse and nodded. Riven offered him the blade once more, and Derreg took it. Shadows curled around his wrist. He felt as if the weapon was coated in oil. It seemed to squirm in his grip.

“Well enough,” Riven said, and the shadows about him slowed. He took a step back.
“We’re done here now.”

Riven turned and shadows started to gather around his form. Derreg could barely see him.

“Why don’t you take him?” Erdan blurted.

“Shut up, Erdan,” Derreg said.

Riven did not turn. Shadows curled around him, slow, languid. “Because I’m hunted, and my only safe haven is no place for a child. He’ll be safe here for a time and he should have what peace this life can afford.” He paused, staring at the child. “I fear it won’t be much. I’ll return if I can, but I’m doubtful that will be possible. Meanwhile you keep him. And you prepare him.”

“Prepare him for what?”

“For what’s coming.”

“What do you mean? What’s coming?”

Riven shook his head. “I don’t know for certain. Others will be looking for him.”

“Why?”

“Because of who his father was, because grudges die harder than gods. And because the Cycle of Night is trying to find its end. He’s the key.”

“I ... don’t understand.”

“Nor I, not fully. Not yet. Someone’s scribbling new words in the book of the world, and I was never much of a reader.” He smiled, and it reached his good eye. “Two and two, seems, still sum to four, even in this ruined world. He got that right, at least.”

“What?” Derreg’s head was spinning. “He?”

“Someone I once knew.” Riven shook his head, as if to clear it of an old memory. “I can’t stay any longer. My presence compromises the child’s safety.” He looked around. “Your Oracle has done good work here. This valley is ... peaceful. I especially like the lakes. Tell the Oracle I was here. Tell him to do his part. And ask him if he still enjoys jugglers.”

“What?”

“He’ll know what I mean.”

The darkness gathered, but before it obscured Riven entirely, he turned and looked at Derreg, at Vasen.

“What’s his name? The boy.”

“Vasen,” Derreg said, and felt Vasen’s yellow eyes fix on him when he spoke the word.

“Vasen,” Riven said, testing out the word. “A good name. Well met, Vasen. Welcome to this world. When we meet again, I think you’ll not be pleased to see me.”

Derreg blinked and Riven was gone. The room lightened. Vasen began to cry.

Erdan let out a long breath. “What just happened?”

“I’m not certain.”

“That wasn’t a man.”

“No,” Derreg said. “That was not.”

CHAPTER ONE



Eleint, the Year of the Awakened Sleepers (1484 DR)

GLACIERS AS OLD AS CREATION COLLIDED, VIED, AND SPLINTERED—THE crack of ancient ice like the snap of dry bones. The smell of brimstone and burning souls wafted up from rivers of fire that veined the terrain. Cania's freezing gusts bore the innumerable screams of the damned, spicing the air with their pain. Towering, insectoid gelugons, their white carapaces hard to distinguish from the ice, patrolled the banks of the rivers. Their appetite for agony was insatiable, and with their hooked polearms they ripped and tore at the immolated damned who flailed and shrieked in the flames.

Mephistopheles perched atop an ice-capped crag a quarter-league high and stared down at his realm of ice and fire and pain. Plains of jagged ice stretched away in all directions. Black mountains hazed with smoke scraped a glowing red sky lit by a distant, pale sun.

And he ruled it all. Or almost all.

His gaze fixed on the mound of shadow-shrouded ice, far below, that had defied his will for a century, and his eyes narrowed. His anger stirred the embers of his power, and the air crackled around him, baleful emanations of the divinity he'd stolen from the god, Mask.

Staring at the shadowy cairn, he sensed that events were picking up speed, fates being decided, events determined, but he couldn't see them. Matters were fouled and he suspected the shadowy cairn had something to do with it.

"Permutations," he said, his voice as deep and dark as a chasm. "Endless permutations."

He had schemed for decades to obtain a fraction of the divine power he now held, intending to use the power he'd gained in a coup against Asmodeus, the Lord of Nessus, a coup that would have resulted in Mephistopheles ruling the Nine Hells. But events on one of the worlds of the Prime had made a joke of his plans.

The Spellplague had ripped through the world of Toril, recombining it with its sister world, Abeir, and causing chaos among gods and godlings. A half-murdered god had literally fallen through the Astral Sea and into the Ninth Hell. Asmodeus had finished the murder and absorbed the divinity.

Mephistopheles, who had plotted for decades to become divine, had managed to take on only a fraction of a fraction of a lesser god's power, while the Lord of the Ninth had become a full god through luck. By chance. And Mephistopheles was, once more, second in Hell.

Worst of all, he feared that Asmodeus had recently learned of his plans. Mephistopheles's spies in Nessus's court spoke of mustering legions, of Asmodeus's growing ire. A summons had reached Mephistar, Mephistopheles's iron keep. Asmodeus's words had been carried on the vile, forked tongue of the Lord of Nessus's sometime-messenger, the she-bitch succubus Malcanthet.

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