

## THE RAGE

Book 1 The Year of Rogue Dragons

By Richard Lee Byers

### Prologue

12 Flamerule, the Year of Moonfall (1344 DR)

The world changed in an instant.

Before that moment, it seemed to Dorn Graybrook that life was perfect. The nine-year-old boy rarely escaped his round of chores in the master's cheerless house, and it was only to run errands through the city with its surly crowds and high gray walls that blocked the sun. Today, though...

Open expanses of tall grass, shimmering in the summer heat, rolled away on either side of the dusty road. The snow-crowned Dragonspine Mountains rose far ahead, and sometimes Dorn caught a glimpse of the purple-blue waters of the Moonsea to the north. He was outside, truly outside, and he loved it.

The best thing of all, though, was the change the journey evoked in his parents. At home, they often seemed sad and weary, worn down by their years of servitude.

Mother, who'd opted to walk for a time among the half dozen guards, sang songs. As Father drove the wagon, he joked with the boy seated beside him and told him things about the countryside. Sometimes the balding bondsman with the wry, intelligent face even let Dorn take the reins and guide the two dappled horses himself.

Priam said, "Look!"

He pointed up at the western sky. The leader of the guards, Priam was a lanky mercenary with a fierce trap of a mouth. He'd slain many a bandit and goblin in defense of the master's trade goods, and everyone admired his courage. But his voice was subtly different, as if he had to struggle to keep it steady.

Dorn peered upward. At first he couldn't see what the fuss was all about. Then he spotted the specks streaking along against the blue. When he squinted, he could make out the long tails, serpentine necks, and beating wings.

"Are they dragons?" Father asked, reining in the team. His voice was different, too, quavering, higher-pitched, and though he was a clerk, not a warrior like Priam, somehow his fear alarmed Dorn even more than the mercenary's had.

"Yes," Priam said.

The other guards startled babbling all at once.

"Weeping Ilmater," Father said. "What do we do?"

"Get off the road," Mother suggested, her braided red hair glowing like flame. She seemed a little calmer than the men. "Hide in the tall grass, and keep quiet."

"The grass isn't likely to hide us from something soaring overhead," Priam replied. "Still, it's worth a try. The Storm Lord knows, we can't outrun the things." He cast about, then gestured with the broad steel head of his spear. "That spot looks as good as any. Everybody, move!"

They moved, and Dorn saw that Priam was right. It was a bad hiding place. People could crouch down in the grass, but the horses and wagon stuck up over the top.

Father applied the brake, then climbed down to stand with the team. He stroked them and crooned to them, trying to keep them calm. Every few seconds, he fingered the hilt of the broadsword hanging at his side. He always wore it when he traveled, but Dorn had never seen him practice with it or even draw it from its bronze scabbard.

Mother led Dorn away from the wagon to hunker down on the ground.

"Now," she said to Dorn, "you just have to be very still."

The boy's heart pounded in his chest, and his mouth was dry. He had to swallow before he

could speak.

"Are we going to die?"

"No," she said. "The dragons may not come this way. Even if they do, they probably won't notice us or take any interest in us. We're just being safe."

"All right," he said, though he could tell she was acting more confident than she felt.

"One of them's swinging this way," said a black-bearded spearman.

"Bugger this," said another guard, a sharp-featured young man named Janx. "Let's scatter. It can't catch all of us."

"Yes, it can," Priam said. "It's fast enough. So, would you rather fight it by yourself or with your comrades beside you?"

"I'll wind up just as dead either way," said Janx, but he stayed put.

The next minute or two crawled by, and everything started happening very fast, or at least it felt that way. The approaching dragon changed course again to fly directly at the travelers. It swooped lower. Shivering despite the hot sun, Dorn could make out the color of its glinting scales—red like blood.

"When I tell you," Mother said, "I want you to run away through the grass, and whatever happens, don't look back."

"Priam said—"

"That we mustn't scatter. But you're small, and you'll have a head start. The creature could easily overlook you."

"What about you and Father?"

"We'll be fine," she lied. He thought she'd never lied to him before that day, and suddenly she was doing it over and over. "We'll find you when the trouble's over."

"You aren't guards. You could run, too."

"Just do what I tell you."

Like some terrible shooting star, the dragon plunged down to just a few yards above the ground.

Until then, Dorn hadn't been able to tell how huge it actually was—huge enough to make the humans before it look like mice scurrying about below a scarlet lion. Its amber eyes shone like molten lava, and its neck frills and wings were ash blue at the edges. It stank of sulfur and burning.

Despite Father's efforts, the horses went mad. They wrenched themselves free of his hold and nearly knocked him over as they wheeled to flee, dragging the wagon with its locked front wheels jolting along behind them. He let them go and unsheathed his sword.

A couple of the guards panicked and likewise tried to run. The red dragon turned its wedge-shaped head almost lazily, regarded them, then puffed out a jet of yellow flame at them. They dropped instantly, without so much as a scream, to lie withered and black among the beginnings of a crackling grass fire.

Priam threw his spear. It bounced off the scales on the wyrm's neck.

"Bring it down!" he shouted to the other guards, and they started casting their own lances.

"Now!" Mother said. "Run!"

She gave Dorn a shove, and he obeyed her. He was too scared to do anything else.

Yet he didn't run far. Perhaps he didn't have it in him to abandon the only people he loved in the whole world, the only people who loved him. In any event, after a few strides, panting and shaking, he turned back around to see what was happening.

The scarlet dragon was on the ground, but not, as best Dorn could tell, because anyone had "brought it down." No one had yet succeeded in hurting it at all. It had simply chosen to land. It slashed with its claws and pulled Janx's insides out of his belly. Its gigantic jaws bit Priam's head off.

After that, there weren't any more guards. Just Father, holding his sword in an awkward two-handed grip, and Mother, sprinting to join him without any weapon at all— spending their lives to buy their son another moment to run.

Dorn couldn't bear such a sacrifice on his behalf. He had to stand with them, die with them.

He ran back toward his parents and the dragon.

He was a fast runner, but not fast enough. Before he could close the distance, the wyrm caught Father in its fangs. It chewed him up and swallowed him down, spitting out the broadsword a moment later, the blade bent from the pressure of its jaws.

Mother snatched up the ruined weapon and hacked at the dragon with it. The reptile puffed malodorous flame into her face. She staggered a step and collapsed, her hair burning, the flesh of her head and shoulders running like melted candle wax.

Fists clenched, Dorn hurled himself at the wyrm. He never got a chance to hit it. It met him with a flick of its talons and hurled him to the ground.

To his surprise, he wasn't dead, but when he tried to get up, he couldn't. The throbbing pain started a second later.

He'd fallen with his face pointed toward his mother. He watched the dragon eat her, not gobbling her all at once as it had his father, but rather picking her apart and devouring her a piece at a time.

He could have shut his eyes. He still had that much control over his damaged body. But he chose to watch.

Something had changed in him. Agony and grief wracked him, but he wasn't afraid of the dragon anymore. Terror had given way to hatred, and he glared at it as if in the hope that his malice alone could kill it.

When it finished with his mother, it pivoted toward him.

## Chapter One

### 16 Hammer, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR)

Kara jerked upright, and her wounded arm and shoulder throbbed. How long had she dozed? Long enough for the air to grow cold despite the miserly fire dying in the fieldstone hearth. Or perhaps it was the bleeding that made her feel a chill. Blood had soaked her tattered velvet sleeve and dripped down to spatter the sawdust strewn around the floor. The smell of it mixed with the ambient odors of eye-stinging smoke and stale beer.

Hoping to discover some sign of imminent assistance, the willowy woman with the flowing silver-blond hair peered around the taproom. No one was there but the same six surly-looking men she'd observed before, sipping their ale and watching her from the shadows. Alarmed, she raised a numb, trembling hand. Mandal, the taverner, a gaunt man with spiky, grizzled hair, ambled to her table. He gave her a smile that didn't quite reach his shifty eyes.

"Patience, maid," he said. "The healer is surely on his way."

Well, he ought to be, Kara thought.

She'd promised Mandal a ruby brooch from her pouch if he would find help for her. Still, she was starting to wonder.

"Are you certain?" she asked.

"You saw the messenger leave to fetch him."

"But it's been a long while. Perhaps I should seek the temple myself."

She tried to rise, and dizziness assailed her. She might not have made it to her feet even if Mandal hadn't gripped her shoulder and held her down.

"You're too weak to walk anywhere," he said, "you don't know your way around Ylraphon, and these dark streets are freezing cold. Just wait. It will be all right."

"Very well."

In her dazed, depleted condition, acquiescence was easier than resistance, and in any case, maybe he'd offered good advice. Perhaps it was simply fear that made her feel it was folly to stay there. Though she'd suffered serious injury before, she had little experience of dread and the way it could unsettle one's judgment. Many things were changing, and none of

them for the better.

"More mulled wine?" he asked.

She shook her head. The drink might warm her and ease her pain, but she was reluctant to dull her senses any further. Mandal shrugged and wandered off to huddle and whisper with his friends.

Then, at last, the door creaked open.

Kara wrenched herself around so quickly it gave her torn flesh an excruciating twinge. An instant later, she felt an even cruder pang of disappointment.

Two strangers stood framed in the doorway. The halfling, no larger than a human child, his heart-shaped face framed by curly black lovelocks, wore leather armor and carried a warbling and a curved, broad-bladed hunting sword. The tall and brawny man behind him sported what amounted to half a suit of iron plate armor affixed to the left side of his body. The uppermost portion conformed to the contours of his head, but lower down, the sleeves of metal encasing his arm and leg were so massive it was a wonder even such a giant could bear the weight. It made him look lopsided, with the knuckle spikes and claws jutting from his gauntlet further contributing to the appearance of grotesque asymmetry.

They looked around the grubby, cheerless tavern as if inclined to turn up their noses and go elsewhere. Then, however, the halfling noticed Kara, and frowning, hurried toward her.

"What happened?" he asked, concern evident in his clear tenor voice.

"I was attacked on the road just outside of town," she said.

She hoped he wouldn't press for details. She felt too weak and muddled to weave any more lies.

"You need help," he said, "and right now."

"We already took care of it," said the taverner. "A priest is on the way."

"You're sure? I have a friend—"

"We're sure," Mandal said.

"Well, even so, it will do no harm to fetch Pavel, also."

"I told you," the taverner said, "she's going to be fine, so why don't you run along and let her rest?"

"I'm not keen on being told to 'run along,'" the small stranger replied as his hand eased toward the staghorn hilt of his sword.

"What I'm telling you is this place is closed, to give the poor injured maid some peace and quiet."

Chairs scraped and squeaked as the tavern's other patrons pushed back from their tables. Plainly, if the halfling opted to defy the host, he'd have to reckon with the rest of the men as well.

The halfling looked to his companion and asked, "What do you think?"

"Plainly, they're lying," the man in the iron armor said. "They mean the lass ill. Which is none of our affair, but I reckon you want to make it so."

"Well, up to now it's been a dull night." The halfling turned back to the denizens of the tavern and said, "If you choose, you can turn the lass, along with her coin and belongings, over to us and live."

For a moment the knaves were silent then they whooped with laughter—and why not? The huge man presented a bizarre, daunting appearance, but it didn't change the fact that the outlaws outnumbered the intruders seven to two.

"You really should think about it," the halfling said. "My friend is Dorn Graybrook, and I'm Will Turnstone."

Mandal sneered and said, "Never heard of you."

Will glanced at Dorn.

"I told you we should have bribed a few bards to spread tales of our exploits," said the halfling.

"If you insist on doing this," Dorn rasped, "let's do it."

Dorn yanked his bastard sword from its pewter scabbard. The blade was long and heavy,

designed so a strong warrior could wield it with two hands or one. Dorn opted for the latter tactic, using the arm that merely wore leather to cock the weapon behind him. The one sheathed in iron he extended toward his foes.

Meanwhile, Will pulled his warsling from his belt. It seemed a poor weapon with which to fight long odds at close quarters, just as the halfling himself looked puny compared to the human scoundrels, but if Will was frightened, Kara couldn't tell it. He grinned as if relishing the chance to prove his mettle.

"Kill them," Mandal said.

The outlaws charged, and as they scrambled forward, they changed.

The transformation happened fast. Still, Kara glimpsed thin, black-gray fur spreading over skin, faces jutting into bestial snouts, front teeth swelling into chisel-like incisors, whiskers and thin, hairless tails springing into being. In an instant, her captors, though still scuttling on two legs and capable of gripping weapons, had cast off a goodly portion of their humanity to become a mix of man and rodent.

The transformation from man to wererat dispelled any lingering doubts Kara might have had as to whether Mandal and his cronies truly did mean to hurt her. She had to help the strangers fight on her behalf. She groggily heaved herself to her feet, called a spell to mind, and an earthen jug smashed against her forehead.

One of the ratmen had seen her rise and had thrown the missile at her. She collapsed to the floor in a shower of shards and pungent spirit. Stunned, she tried to flounder onto all fours, but her limbs wouldn't obey her. She could only lie and watch the fight unfold.

Her would-be rescuers looked unfazed by the ratmen's metamorphosis. Dorn stood motionless as the shapeshifters rushed him, then, just as they were about to close, he sprang forward. It was remarkable that such a hulking, heavily-armored man could pounce so quickly, and it caught the wererats by surprise. He swung his fist in a backhand blow, and the knuckle spikes on the gauntlet crunched into a lycanthrope's skull. Evidently the iron glove was enchanted, for the creature's normal resistance to any but silver weapons did nothing to protect it. Flung backward, it sprawled inert, its head bloody and battered out of shape.

Three more shapeshifters hacked and stabbed at Dorn. It seemed inevitable that one of them would penetrate the big man's guard, but he swept the gauntlet back and forth, blocking and parrying the attacks, for as long as it took to bull his way out of the center of his remaining foes. That accomplished, he came back on guard as he had before, armored hand extended before him, sword poised behind.

Kara peered to see if Will was faring as well. For a moment, she failed to spot the little halfling himself, just the three ratmen scrambling in pursuit. That was because he was taking evasive action, dodging behind or ducking under furniture, using his size to his advantage, making it difficult for his screeching, chattering, manifestly frustrated foes to close with him. Indeed, he was so adept at the tactic that for a moment, they lost track of him all together. As they crouched to look under one table, he leaped on top of another, then gave a piercing whistle. They lifted their heads, and he spun the warsling. Kara didn't see the stone fly, but it was obvious from the way two of the lycanthropes jerked that the missile had hit one, then skipped to strike the other.

Swords raised, beady scarlet eyes blazing, the ratmen rushed forward. Will stood his ground long enough to hurl another rock, which made a double crack as it impacted not just one skull but two. Evidently, like Dorn's gauntlet, the stones were enchanted, for one shapeshifter swayed and crumpled sideways, overturning a rickety chair as it fell.

Alas, that still left two assailants who finally lunged close enough to strike. Will, however, somersaulted off the edge of the table before the leaping blades could touch him. He landed on the floor as neatly as a tumbler in a carnival, then ran. Tails dragging through the sawdust, the ratmen scuttled after.

By then, Dorn's gauntlet was bloody from claw-tips to wrist, evidence of the vicious efficiency with which he employed it. He snatched, and a ratman with a gashed, gory chest

frantically sidestepped, only to discover that the mauling grab had merely been a feint. The human swung his hand-and-a-half sword at the creature's shoulder and sheared its long, skinny arm off. The ratman went down, gore pumping from the stump.

One of its comrades pounced, desperate to drive its dagger into Dorn's back, before the human could come back on guard. Dorn somehow sensed the attack coming and snapped his elbow backward into the creature's ribs. Weighted with iron, the blow caved in the wererat's chest. That left the biggest of the pack, who snarled and drove in hard, foam flying from its gaping jaws.

Will was down to a single opponent, too, but that one had finally managed to push him into a corner. Still smiling, the halfling drew his hunting sword. The weapon seemed sized for a human, and Kara assumed a smaller fighter would have to wield it two-handed, but it wasn't so. Apparently the sword was one of the small folk's enchanted "hornblades," so light and exquisitely balanced that its relative largeness was no impediment.

But the ratman's broadsword was longer still, as were its limbs. It poised itself at just the proper distance to exploit its advantage in reach, then began rather cautiously cutting and slashing. Will parried but couldn't reach the shapeshifter with a riposte. After a moment, he darted forward.

It was what the wererat wanted him to do. The creature hopped backward and swung its blade in a low, murderous stop cut. Will dived under the blow, rolled back to his feet, and raced on into striking range before his amazed opponent could recover. The hornblade ripped open the shapechanger's belly.

At almost the same instant, Dorn caught his remaining opponent's blade in his armored fingers, gave it a cunning squeeze and twist, and snapped it in two. Disarmed, the lycanthrope recoiled. Dorn bounded after it and gripped the long, wire-wrapped hilt of his sword with both hands. His final stroke flung the wererat's severed head tumbling through the air.

Both Dorn and Will took a look around, evidently making sure all their foes were dead or incapacitated. Then they came to check on Kara, and she goggled in amazement.

She recognized that Dorn wasn't really wearing plate on the left side of his body. Rather, someone had replaced his limbs of flesh and bone with appendages of iron, cast all in a single piece and granted mobility by enchantment. Below the neck, it was impossible to tell precisely where artifice ended and nature began. His dun leather brigandine and breeches hid the joins. But his square, heavy-jawed, green-eyed face displayed the vaguely sickening dividing line where metal fused to skin.

Noticing Kara's astonishment, he scowled. Or maybe that was simply his habitual expression.

Will knelt beside her and asked, "How are you holding up?"

She tried to answer but slid into darkness instead.

As Gorstag Helder stepped out into the night, freshly fallen snow crunched beneath his soles. Soon enough, his feet would be cold, for his thin, cheap boots wouldn't keep out the chill. He hadn't possessed enough silver to pay for both warmth and the latest style.

He wouldn't mind chilled feet if he could finally slip out of town. His report was more than a tenday overdue. He let the sally door swing shut behind him, sealing in the clatter of practice blades, the babble of conversation, the music of glaur, longhorn, and hand drum, and the shrill laughter of a whore, and surveyed the benighted street. His heart sank, because Firvimdol Eastmere was sitting on the edge of a frozen horse trough, awaiting him. Gorstag couldn't figure out whether his "brothers" thought they needed to keep an eye on him or were simply making an effort to bring the newest initiate fully into the fold. Either way, the effect was the same. They sought him out so relentlessly he could scarcely visit the jakes unsupervised, let alone sneak out into the countryside.

Well, he mustn't let his frustration show. He arranged his narrow, long-nosed features into a smile and hurried toward his comrade, who rose and met him with a mushy hand clasp. Both men were young and wore their capes thrown back, defying the cold to display their fashionable slashed doublets, and their equally modish rapiers canted at just the proper angle, but in other ways, they made a contrast. Firvimdol had a plump frame, waxed, curling mustachios, and flaunted genuine velvets and gems. Gorstag was thin—he hoped it made him look athletic, rather than like someone who periodically starved for want of funds—clean-shaven, and a creature of cheaply woven tripe and paste.

"Well met," Gorstag said.

"How was the fencing?" Firvimdol replied.

"Fine."

"Did you and Taegan Nightwind have a chance to talk?"

"Yes." They'd spoken at some length, in fact, but Gorstag would rather have cut out his own tongue than attempt to entice his teacher into the same corruption he himself had seemingly embraced. "I felt him out again, and I must tell you, he simply isn't interested. Why should he be? He's already prosperous and renowned."

"Notorious, anyway."

Inwardly, Gorstag bristled, even though he had to concede that Firvimdol had a point. In recent years, a new breed of fencing master had sprung up in Impiltur to teach swordplay to anyone with coin, and a good many commoners proved eager to learn and to lionize their instructors. The knights and paladins who constituted the kingdom's traditional martial elite, however, disdained the maestros as a source of public disorder, fomenters of duels, brawls, and blood feuds. It perhaps didn't help that a good many of the salles shared space with taverns, gambling halls, rapping pits, or, as in Taegan's case, bawdyhouses.

"Still," Firvimdol continued, "why wouldn't he jump at the chance to be a lord in the Impiltur to come? Are you sure there's no hope of him joining us?"

"I'm sure."

Firvimdol's mouth tightened and he said, "So be it, then. Stroll with me, why don't you?"

They set off wandering the broad, cobbled, elm-lined avenues of Lyrabar, Queen Sambryl's city. Though it was late, many a shop shone bright with lamplight to lure customers. Laughing and singing, sometimes racing one another, revelers traveled from one entertainment to the next in ornately carved, brilliantly painted carriages and sleighs. Signs of wealth and bustling commerce abounded on every side, as if in mockery of those who lived in need.

"I fear," said Firvimdol, while fat snowflakes started drifting down, just as they had in fits and starts all day, "that you aren't making a very impressive start."

"I can't reach inside Maestro Taegan's head and change the way his brain works. By the Nine Hells, I've accomplished every other task you gave me."

Firvimdol shrugged and said, "Routine chores. Not really enough to prove your commitment or usefulness."

Gorstag felt a pang of anxiety, drew a calming breath, and replied, "I have the feeling you're about to set me a test."

"Not me—the Wearer of Purple. She said that if you could make no headway with your mentor, I was to give you a different errand."

"Whatever the job is, if it will prove my loyalty, I welcome it. I'm tired of being the new man, mistrusted and kept in the dark."

"Good. You know Hezza, the pawnbroker on Lutemaker Street?"

"Vaguely."

In truth, he knew Hezza, and others like him, depressingly well. He'd often pawned one or another of his meager belongings to put bread on his table.

"We've learned he took possession of an emerald pendant just a few hours ago," said Firvimdol. "The stone's of the highest quality."

Gorstag saw where Firvimdol was going. The cult had been procuring jewels "of the highest quality" for some ten-days.

"You want me to steal it," Gorstag said.

"Yes, we do. It's rare luck that such a prize is sitting in Hezza's shop. The place isn't nearly as secure as it ought to be to protect such a treasure."

"It's surely locked, though, and I'm no burglar."

"With a light and a crowbar, you'll do fine."

"What does the brotherhood need with all these gems anyway?"

"You'll find out at the proper time. Will you do it?"

The spy nodded and said, "Anything for the cause."

So it was that Gorstag made his way to a neighborhood displaying little sign of Lyrabar's general affluence, a district of crumbling brick tenements and rookeries like the one where he'd grown up, and where, to his shame, he still resided. Nearing the scene of his intended misdeed, he abandoned the customary swagger of a rake to skulk through the shadows. He had a certain practiced knack for it. Over the years, as legitimate ways of bettering himself had eluded him, he'd occasionally resorted to petty thieving to make ends meet. He suspected his employer somehow knew, and that was why he'd sought him out to be his agent.

Grateful to find it deserted, Gorstag crept down a narrow, twisting alleyway to the rear entrance of the pawnshop. He pulled his hood up to shadow his features, took another look around, then brought the hooked iron pry bar Firvimdol had provided out from under his cloak. He stuck the end between door and jamb then threw his weight against it.

The lock held for a moment then broke with a snap. To Gorstag, the noise seemed hellishly loud, and when he pushed the door open he half expected to hear Hezza rushing to investigate. But the dark space beyond the threshold was silent.

Gorstag slipped through the door, pushed it shut behind him, and removed Firvimdol's other gift from its black cloth bag. Strung on a leather thong, it was a wooden bead enchanted to shed a pale luminescence, and Gorstag couldn't help thinking that by itself, it was a niggardly sort of help for the cultists to provide, in view of the potent magic they claimed to command. But apparently it was all an unproven recruit could expect.

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The ghostly light revealed a large room cluttered with tools, furniture, flutes, porcelain dolls, display cases full of cameos, bracelets, and tortoiseshell combs, and countless other dusty objects. The pawnshop took up the entire first floor of the house. Hezza lived upstairs.

Holding the bead aloft like a lantern, Gorstag cast about. Where would Hezza stow a valuable emerald? Surely he wouldn't leave it sitting out with the junk. He'd stash it somewhere safer.

Gorstag found a strongbox under the counter. It was harder to pry open than the door had been, because his crowbar was too big for the job. Finally he managed to open it, to discover only an assortment of coins.

At that, it was coin that could feed and clothe him and pay his rent, and for a second he considering pocketing it. But he was better than that, or at least he aspired to be, and he left the gold and silver where it lay.

Where was the emerald? It occurred him to that Hezza might have taken such a valuable item upstairs with him, but he flinched at the prospect of looking for it in such close proximity to its keeper. He'd conduct a thorough search of the shop first.

He found the second strongbox built into the wall behind a grubby hanging. The steel hatch yielded grudgingly, bending a fraction of an inch at a time. Every metallic rasp and groan jangled his nerves and made him glance over his shoulder. But still Hezza failed to appear, and finally Gorstag widened the gap enough to work his hand inside. He groped about, found something that felt like a pendant, and drew it forth. Even in the dim illumination, the emerald seemed brilliant. Flawless.

It was far more enticing than the coins had been, but that temptation, too, he would resist.

He'd keep faith with his employer, hand the gem over to Firvimdol, and better himself in an honorable way.

He turned, and Hezza was there. Barrel-chested, tufts of his curly brown hair sticking up every which way, the pawnbroker was still in his nightshirt, but had taken the time to equip himself with a falchion. He used it to chop at Gorstag's head.

Gorstag avoided the stroke by leaping backward. Irrationally, perhaps, in that moment, he was less worried about the threat of the curved sword than that Hezza would recognize him. But the pawnbroker didn't seem to. Evidently Gorstag's hood provided sufficient disguise in the feeble light.

He tossed the bead away and dodged around a display case, interposing it between Hezza and himself. That gave him time to draw his rapier, though the gods knew he didn't want to use it. He couldn't use it as it was meant to be used, not against a tradesman who was only trying to protect what was rightfully his.

"Please stop," he said. "You don't understand." ;

"No?" Hezza grunted as he kept maneuvering, trying to work in close enough for another attack.

Gorstag wasn't supposed to babble his employer's private business, but it would be better than killing an innocent man, wouldn't it?

"I serve the Harpers." He didn't actually know for a fact that his contact was a member of that altruistic secret society, but he suspected it. "They set me the task of infiltrating a nest of traitors to the queen. I have to borrow the emerald to do that. I swear, you'll get it back."

"Oh," said Hezza, "that's fine, then. Would you like me to wrap it up for you? Or give it a polish?"

He faked a shift to the right, dodged left instead, and there was nothing between him and Gorstag. He rushed in cutting and slashing.

Hezza was no expert swordsman like Maestro Taegan, but he was competent. Gorstag had to parry and retreat frantically to preserve himself from harm. He saw openings for ripostes and counterattacks, but he couldn't bring himself to exploit them.

He had to do something. Hezza was rapidly taking his measure. Figuring out how to penetrate his defense. The pawnbroker's cuts only fell short by a finger breadth, or else Gorstag only managed to block them at the last possible moment. If he didn't do something soon, Hezza would surely cut him down.

He waited for Hezza to lift the falchion for a head cut, then sprang forward. It was a risky to plunge straight into an opponent's attack, but he proved quick enough to leap safely inside the arc of the stroke. He bashed his surprised opponent in the jaw with the rapier's bell guard, then hammered his forehead with the pommel. The pawnbroker fell, unconscious.

"I'm sorry," Gorstag panted, "but it was necessary." Maybe the Wearer of Purple, Firvimdol, and the other madmen, Gorstag thought, will finally tell me about their grand design.

Pavel Shemov fanned out his cards to see what the dealer had wrought. When he found the Sun, the King and Queen of Staves, and the Knights of Staves, Coins, and Blades, it was a struggle to keep his tawny, handsome, brown-eyed face from breaking into a grin.

Ever since he'd sat down at the table, he'd drawn one dismal hand after another and watched his stakes dwindle until he could almost have wished he was a priest of Tymora, goddess of luck, instead of his own beloved Lathander. The cards he held, however, constituted an excellent hand headed, moreover, by the Morninglord's own emblem. It was inconceivable that he could lose.

The trick was to make the most of it. It wouldn't do to scare the other gamblers out. When the dour, shaggy-bearded ruffian on his right opened for ten gold pieces, Sembian nobles and Cormyrean lions mostly, the cleric made a show of pondering, then contented himself with a modest raise.

At which point, Will burst through the inn door, admitting a gust of frigid air in the process. He spotted his comrade and shouted, "Pretty boy! I need you."

"I'm busy," Pavel replied.

The halfling strode across the hard-packed earthen floor, peered at his comrade's cards, and announced, "He's got a royal marriage under favorable aspect, with a full honor guard."

The other players threw in their hands.

Pavel rounded on Will and grumbled, "You poxy son of a—" Then he registered the honest urgency in the halfling's face. It wasn't just the usual game of insults and pranks they played with one another. "What's wrong?"

"A human lass, wounded and in need of healing. Dorn's standing watch over her, in case any more ratmen show up."

"Wererats wounded her?" Pavel asked. "If so, she might have contracted lycanthropy herself."

"No. At least, I don't think so. Just get off your festering arse and come with me, all right?"

"Very well."

He raked what remained of his coin off the table, then picked up his mace. By the time he finished, Raryn Snow-stealer had come to join them.

As far as superficial appearances were concerned, Will and Pavel were the "normal" members of their small fellowship. Raryn, like Dorn, turned heads wherever they went, for in the lands surrounding the Moonsea, arctic dwarves were as rare as half-golems. Scarcely taller than the halfling, Raryn was squat and burly, almost as broad as he was tall. His goatee and unbound, waist-length hair were white, and it was hard for the eye to separate them from the polar bear fur of his tunic. In contrast, the sun had burned his exposed skin to what, for a human, would have been an excruciating red. He carried his ice-axe in one stubby-fingered hand.

"Let's go," the dwarf said.

Will led them out into the muddy streets of a town that, even in the dark, presented the raw, unfinished appearance of an outpost newly carved from the wilderness. A good many settlements in the region had the same air. It was, in a sense, misleading. Civilized folk—humans, mostly—had dwelled around the Moonsea for untold centuries, as countless weathered standing stones and crumbling ruins attested. Unfortunately, wars and rampaging beasts had time and again obliterated the works of man, requiring him to erect new habitations on the rubble of the old.

Of course, Ylraphon was rough even by local standards. Standing on the eastern shore of the Dragon Reach, the channel linking the Moonsea with the Sea of Fallen Stars, it was an important way station for freighters and caravans moving in either direction, but also notorious as a haunt of brigands and pirates. A number of knavish-looking characters were prowling about in the dark, but none who cared to give Pavel, Will, and Raryn any trouble. The slim, long-legged priest supposed they looked too formidable, himself included.

When he'd left Damara, he'd naturally worn his red and yellow priestly vestments, but piece by piece, they'd worn out over the years, until only the gold-plated sun amulet set with garnets remained. He'd come to affect the sturdy wool and leather garments of one who roamed the wild. He thought he'd changed in other ways, too. He moved like the hunter he'd become, wary and confident at the same time, with his weapons always ready to hand.

As they hurried along, Will explained what was afoot in more coherent fashion.

"I don't understand" said Pavel at the story's end. "If the wererats meant her harm, why not just stick a knife in her? Why sit around waiting for her to bleed out?"

"My guess," said Will, "is they really did send for someone, but it wasn't a priest. It was their leader. They were waiting on him to decide whether to kill and rob her and be done with it, ransom her, or sell her into slavery."

The three companions came to a disreputable-looking tavern at the edge of inhabited Ylraphon. Beyond stood only charred, gutted shells of buildings—destroyed in whatever calamity had last befallen the port—that no one had yet bothered to raze or restore. When

Pavel stepped inside, he found more or less what he'd expected: dead wererats; a wounded and unconscious young woman, uncommonly lovely even with her face ashen and her gown soaked with blood; and Dorn, glowering at him.

"What kept you?" the big man snapped.

"I set forth as soon as the halfwit bothered to come and tell me I was needed," Pavel replied.

He crouched over his patient, tore away her shredded sleeve, then winced. The gashes were even deeper than he'd expected. Still, by Lathander's grace, he could save her, though it was likely to take the most potent healing magic at his command. He recited the incantation, and his hands glowed golden. He pressed them to the lass's gory wounds. His own flesh seemed to burn, albeit painlessly, as the spell did its work. When the sensation ebbed, the wounds had closed, halting the flow of blood. Indeed, they'd dwindled to mere pink lines on her ivory skin, as if they'd been healing for tendays, and a blush of color had returned to her lips and cheeks.

"She'll be all right," he said. "So you were finally good for something," said Will. Given their perpetual mock feud, it was as close as he could come to commendation.

The woman's eyes fluttered open. Large, lustrous, and a unique shade of violet, they were as striking as the rest of her. They gazed up at Pavel's face for a moment, then shifted to the sacred pendant dangling from his neck.

"Did you heal me?" she asked. Even after her travail, when her throat must have been dry as dust, her soprano voice was clear and sweet. "Thank you, and Lathander too."

Will grinned and said, "Don't bother thanking the charlatan there. Generally he botches the curing and kills the sick folk, and anyway, Dorn and I did the real work. You remember, I'm Will Turnstone. Well, Wilimac, really, but Will to my friends." "Thank you, too, Will Turnstone," she said. Pavel helped her up off the floor and into a chair. "And you, Goodman Graybrook."

As Pavel might have predicted, Dorn merely grunted and averted his eyes. The stranger looked puzzled at the seeming rebuff, but didn't question it.

She said, "My name is Kara... well, that will do. It's been a while and many a mile since I bothered with the rest of it."

Raryn and Pavel completed the round of introductions, and the cleric moved to investigate the stock behind the bar and fetch Kara a restorative drink.

The dwarf said, "Good to meet you, lass. How, may I ask, did you fall among vermin such as these?"

He tipped his bone-handled axe toward a couple of the dead shapeshifters.

"I was attacked on the road just outside of town," Kara replied. "Wounded, I fled to the first place that seemed to offer refuge. I imagine Will told you the rest of it."

"More or less," Raryn said, clambering up to perch atop a stool, his stubby legs in their knee-high deerskin boots dangling. "But he didn't know who attacked you."

"I don't either, really. Men with spears and swords. Bandits, I suppose."

Pavel felt a pang of mingled surprise and curiosity. He appropriated a bottle of what appeared to be the best vintage the tavern had to offer—something red from Sembia—an armful of dusty pewter goblets, a rag to wipe them, and headed back toward Kara and his friends.

"Did the outlaws kill your companions?" Raryn asked.

"No. I mean, I was traveling alone."

The dwarf arched a shaggy white eyebrow and asked, "In these lands, in the dead of winter? You're brave. And lucky, to have escaped those who waylaid you."

"I'm a bard," she said. "I have my songs to protect me, as they would have saved me from the robbers if they hadn't taken me by surprise. As it was, I still drove them off, but not before they hurt me. I wanted to use magic to help Dorn and Will against the ratmen, but once I took that final blow to the head...."

"It's all right," the halfling said. He plainly liked her. Well, Pavel could sympathize. He too found her charming, despite what he knew. "I've seen the toughest warriors fall helpless after

taking the wrong sort of wound. It's no reflection on your courage."

"Enough chitchat," Dorn growled. "Maid, if you're up to it, we can all clear out of here. My friends and I should go to the council of merchants and explain what happened before somebody else stumbles on all these bodies. Especially since they look to be melting back into human shape. We'll take you as far as a safe inn."

"Easy," Pavel said. "The lass was injured nigh unto death a moment ago." He set his burden on the table between Kara and Raryn, then drew his knife to dig the cork out of the bottle. "Give her a little time to recover."

"I'm sure she needs it," Will said, "considering that we didn't have a real healer to tend her."

"I do need it," Kara said. She straightened her arm and hissed in pain. "It's far better than it was. I'm sure it will be all right eventually, but it's still weak and sore."

"Most likely," Pavel said, "it will remain so for a while."

"Well, perhaps it's no worse than I deserve. For you're right, Goodman Snowstealer, even if you were too tactful to state your opinion in so many words. I was a fool to travel alone. Yet it's urgent I reach Lyrabar as soon as possible, and so I wonder: You four have the look of wandering sellswords. Could I hire you to escort me?"

"No," said Dorn.

"I can pay," she said.

She opened the pouch on her belt and removed a slim silver bracelet set with pearls. After a moment of silence, Will whistled. Once again, Pavel understood how his comrade felt. The exquisitely crafted ornament was plainly worth hundreds if not thousands of gold pieces, and he glimpsed more gems and pieces of precious metal glittering in her purse, so many that he surmised the pouch was one of those enchanted receptacles larger inside than out.

"Is this enough?" Kara asked.

"I told you," said the half-golem, "we're not interested."

"Speak for yourself," Will said.

"We're hunters," said Dorn, "not bodyguards."

The halfling snorted and said, "We've done all kinds of work when times were tough."

"They aren't tough now. We have a job. The one the council of merchants hired us to do."

"Accompanying the lass on her journey strikes me as pleasanter work than slogging around in a frozen swamp looking to get our heads bitten off."

"I gave my word," said Dorn, "that we'd help Ylraphon."

Pavel handed him a goblet. The half-golem took a token sip then set the cup aside. He often pushed pleasure away, as if it might somehow weaken him.

"What about afterward?" Kara asked.

"We're not bodyguards," Dorn reiterated, "nor inclined to journey all the way to Impiltur under winter skies. We resolved to spend the season in Thentia."

"Yet you left there to come here," said the bard.

Dorn shrugged.

Had he so chosen, Pavel could have explained. They'd forsaken their winter quarters because the city fathers of Ylraphon wanted them to kill a dragon. And Dorn would have crawled ten thousand miles naked through incessant blizzards for that.

Raryn tossed back a mouthful of wine, then smacked his lips in appreciation and said, "It's all right, maid, you don't need us anyway. Even at this time of year, ships and caravans occasionally travel east. Find one with an honest reputation, book passage, and you'll be fine."

"I might do that," Kara said, "but I'd still prefer to make the journey with protectors who've already proved their courage and integrity."

"We're sorry," Pavel said, "we're simply not at liberty to say yes."

Will looked up at the faces of his comrades then sighed, shook his head, and grumbled, "You're a trio of idiots, stupid as stones in a ditch."

Pavel was certain he'd hear variations on the same theme for days to come.

