

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

# TROY DENNING



FORGOTTEN REALMS™



# THE SENTINEL

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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.

—As written by *Elliareth of Orishaar*, c. -17,600 DR



**THE COMPANIONS**

*R.A. Salvatore*

**THE GODBORN**

*Paul S. Kemp*

**THE ADVERSARY**

*Erin M. Evans*

**THE REAVER**

*Richard Lee Byers*

**THE SENTINEL**

*Troy Denning*

**THE HERALD**

*Ed Greenwood*

June 2014

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FORGOTTEN REALMS

# TROY DENNING

## THE SENTINEL

FORGOTTEN REALMS®



THE  
SUNDERING

Book  
V

D&D

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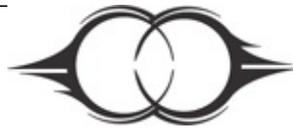
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# CHAPTER 1



*2 Uktar, the Year of the Nether Mountain Scrolls (1486 DR) Marsember, Cormyr*

THE EYES WERE THE FIRST SIGN OF TROUBLE, A PAIR OF STEEL-BLUE ovals staring out from beneath a storefront awning across the street. Focused and intense, they were watching something on the wagon-choked boulevard, fixing on it the way a predator fixes on prey.

“Those priests have to go,” said a hoarse voice down in front of Kleef. “You can see that, can’t you?”

The voice belonged to a ruddy-cheeked cloth merchant. A moment before, Kleef had climbed onto the side of the man’s wagon, trying to see what was clogging Starmouth Way. The merchant had immediately begun to harangue him about removing a group of street-corner priests who were attracting a crowd and blocking the square ahead.

Kleef continued to ignore the fellow and continued to study the steel-blue eyes across the way. So bright they almost seemed to glow, the eyes were set beneath a heavy brow, in a gaunt, gray face that appeared to shift hues with the shadows. The shoulders beneath were broad and sturdy and covered by a dusky cloak that seemed to blur at the edges. Through the press of the crowd, it was difficult to tell much more about the figure—except that he had a commanding presence that seemed to insulate him from the jostling mob.

As a topsword in the Marsember Watch, Kleef Kenric had more experience fighting back alley cutthroats than Shadovar spies—but he was fairly certain he was looking at one now. He had been warned to expect them before the actual assault began, and scouts from the Purple Dragons had been arriving since yesterday with reports of the enemy’s approach.

Hoping to spot the Shadovar’s quarry, Kleef shifted his attention to the middle of the boulevard. It took only a moment to find the likely target: a beautiful woman whose long flame-red hair cascaded down the shoulders of her fine green cloak. She was moving against the traffic, glancing back as though aware she was being stalked. Even from a distance, Kleef could see that her eyes matched the emerald-green hue of her cloak. Following close on her heels was a slovenly little man with a round head and a thin frame, dressed in a drab gray robe that hung on him as though it had been draped over a skeleton. Despite the press of the crowd, people were moving aside to let them pass, smiling and nodding at the woman but scowling and wrinkling their noses at her companion.

Kleef had only been watching the pair for a moment when a mule cart piled high with furniture and children pulled alongside him, blocking his view. Almost instantly, the cart’s progress was blocked by the wall of wagons that had already attempted the same maneuver, and Kleef found himself staring into the wide-eyed faces of three young boys, all sitting upon an overturned table. The youngest was clutching a small white dog that flattened its ears and began to bark at him.

The cloth merchant grew more impatient. “Well, Watchman? Are you going to do your job?”

or not?" He waved the handle of his ox whip in front of Kleef's eyes, then pointed it up the clogged boulevard. "Those charlatan priests are the problem. You have to get rid of them."

Kleef dropped his gaze to the merchant, a ruddy-cheeked man with a slim crescent of chainmail peeking out from the neck of his silken robes. Seated on the bench beside him were a haggard-looking woman and two young, weary-looking girls.

"I see a lot of things," Kleef said. As he spoke, he tried to peer past the mule cart and catch another glimpse of the Shadovar. "I can't fix them all."

"But you *can* remove the priests, can you not?" The merchant slipped a hand beneath his robes and withdrew five gold lions. "Surely you see how they're bringing the entire evacuation to a halt?"

Kleef felt his lip curl at the offer of a bribe. But with an enemy spy already inside the city, now was hardly the time to slap an ordinary merchant in the stocks. Kleef started to step onto the wagon.

"Perhaps you didn't understand me, Watchman." The merchant's voice grew more urgent, and a metallic jingle sounded from his palm. "With the crowds they're drawing, those priests are endangering everyone. You *need* to clear the streets."

Kleef glanced over to find that the palm now held ten gold coins. He stopped mid-descent, one boot still on the wagon's footboard and the other on the boarding step. Despite the insult of the gold, the merchant was right about one thing: Starmouth Way was so choked by too many heavy carts and wagons that it was impossible to see even fifty paces ahead—and it was as much Kleef's duty to keep the evacuation moving as it was to watch the Shadovar spy.

And the merchant was right about the priests, too. Kleef could not actually see them, but they were clearly audible, using the magic of their gods to make their booming voices heard above the din of the evacuation, above the creaking axles and lowing oxen, the shouts of impatient evacuees and the wails of frightened children. From the sound of it, at least one priest stood preaching on each of the four corners of the square ahead, and each priest was heralding the end of the world, swearing that his god alone could offer salvation.

It was no wonder crowds were stopping to listen. There were streaks of greenish-blue flame in the sky, and just that morning, the streets had shaken so hard that an entire neighborhood in the Canal District had slid into the water. People wanted to believe that the right prayer would return their lives to normal—that if they offered a large enough donation to the priests, or made a large enough sacrifice, it would save them from the coming cataclysm.

Fools.

The gods might spare them, but the Shadovar would not. From what Kleef had heard, the entire kingdom of Cormyr was falling. Riders from the Purple Dragons arrived at the King's Tower every day to bring news of a fresh disaster—Myth Drannor was besieged, the Netherese were storming Arabel and marching south toward Suzail, the shadow fiends had escaped their prison in Wheloon and would soon be descending upon Marsember. By some accounts, the fiends might even arrive before the next dawn—news that had not been shared widely, lest the evacuation turn into a riot.

The merchant continued to offer the coins expectantly. Kleef pulled himself higher and craned his neck, trying to catch sight of the Shadovar as he weighed his responsibilities. On the one hand, it was important to stop the spy. On the other, it was his duty to keep the

evacuation moving. Without a doubt, the Law of Service—the law of his god, Helm—prohibited the taking of bribes. But Helm had been silent for a hundred years, and these were unusual times. Kleef was beginning to see how the merchant's gold might allow him to get after the spy *and* clear the priests from the square.

A curtain of sapphire light flashed across the western sky, and Starmouth Way surged a few inches upward, cracking and crunching as cobblestones popped free of the street. In the next instant, the lowing and braying of terrified draft animals was echoing off the swaying storefronts, and the merchant's moon-faced wife began to grow impatient.

"Hantur, this is no time to be cheap!" she said. "With this mob, you're asking the good watchman to take his life into his hands. Give him twenty."

"Twenty gold lions?" Hantur gasped. "That's as much as he earns in a month!"

"And you had me up all night rolling cloth worth a thousand times that," she countered. "With the portals corrupted and the travel-wizards dead or gone, you'll pay him twenty platinum *tricrowns*, if that's what it takes to get us out of this city."

Hantur scowled, but he reached under his robe for more coins. It made Kleef's stomach turn to even consider taking the bribe, but he knew that most of his fellow watchmen would have laughed at his aversion. The Marsember Watch had been founded in a cesspool of corruption nearly a century ago, when the merchant's guild had decided the city needed its own militia to protect its members' interests—and to prevent the local garrison of Purple Dragons from interfering with the way they conducted business. And not much had changed in the last hundred years.

Hantur's hand came out again, filled with more gold. "Twenty lions," he said to Kleef. "If you want more, go rob someone else."

Kleef sighed. "Ten gold lions is enough," he said, putting his hand out. "And offer no more bribes. In this madness, there are too many who will see it as a chance to take your entire purse."

Hantur frowned, clearly insulted. "I know how to conduct my own business, Watchman. The merchant dropped ten gold into Kleef's palm, then tucked the rest back inside his robe. "Just get on with your job—and be quick about it. This wagon should be halfway to Suzail by now."

Kleef felt his jaw clench at the merchant's tone, but he supposed such treatment was to be expected when a watchman opened his hand for gold. He cast one last glance across the boulevard and, finding the mule cart still blocking his view, dropped off the wagon. He moved to the near side of the street, where his small troop of uniformed drunkards and wastrels stood waiting in an alcove, their short swords still sheathed and their halberds resting against their shoulders.

Kleef motioned for his troop to gather around, then said, "We can't have the evacuation choked off like this." He turned to the largest man, a heavy-jawed brute with legs like tree trunks. "Tanner, take the troop and remove those priests from the square."

"And do *what* with them, Topsword?" Tanner gave him a sly grin. "Dump their bodies in the lagoon?"

"If it comes to that, yes." Kleef could see the surprise in the faces of his men, for he had never been one to tolerate the mistreatment of prisoners. "It might be less work to just escort the priests outside the city walls and order them to stay there, but do what you need to do."

we don't get those wagons rolling through Wilhastle Square before the assault begins, we have a riot on our hands."

Kleef held out his hand, displaying the coins the merchant had given him, then added, "Clear the square within a quarter hour, and there's a gold lion for each of you."

His first blade, a young Shou from the now-flooded quarter of Xiousing, scowled in open disapproval. The rest of the troop looked confused and suspicious.

"That's a mean joke," said the oldest man, a gray-stubbed fellow named Rathul. "We're selling our lives cheap as it is. There's no need to rub our noses in—"

"Does it look like I'm joking?" Kleef interrupted. "Clear the square, and the gold is yours." The men continued to look wary.

"Right," scoffed Ardul, a fuzzy-cheeked youth. "So you can flog us for taking a bribe? That must be another one of your tests."

"No test," Kleef said, allowing his frustration to color his voice. "Times are desperate, and I need you to clear that square without Jang and me. *Now.*"

Tanner frowned. "So, we'll all be in the square, while you and Jang are ... doing *what* exactly?"

Normally, Kleef would have rebuffed the question with a curt reminder of who gave the orders. But not much was normal right then. Dozens of senior watchmen had already deserted their posts, and that morning, even the day-watch oversword had failed to report for duty.

Kleef sighed and pointed across the street. "Jang and I will be back there somewhere watching a Shadovar spy."

"The Shadovar are inside the city?" Jang gasped. "Already?"

"I believe I've spotted *one*," Kleef said, hedging a little, since he had not yet confirmed his suspicions, and he did not want his men to panic or rethink their priorities. "Maybe I'm wrong, but Jang and I need to check it out."

Tanner raised his brow, studying Kleef with grudging respect. "Just the two of you? Alone?"

"No choice," Kleef said, knowing that Tanner and the rest of his troop's ready blades would be more hindrance than help against a Netherese shadow warrior. "Someone has to clear the square. Besides, if I bring more men, he'll see us coming."

Tanner's gaze drifted back to the coins in Kleef's palm. "Makes sense," he said. "But maybe you should leave the coins with me, just in case you don't—"

"Sorry," Kleef said, closing his hand. "Clear the square *first*. If I don't return—"

"Don't worry, we'll come and find you." Tanner grinned, displaying a set of broken brown teeth, then added, "Or whatever is left of you. You'll be carrying our gold, remember?"

With that, the big man turned and, using his halberd to shove and poke his way through the crowd, led his companions toward Wilhastle Square. Kleef motioned for Jang, then started down the street in the opposite direction, bulling his way through the pedestrians. It was difficult to see anything on the far side of the wide street, but Kleef knew his best chance of locating the Shadovar again lay in finding the red-haired woman.

Jang seemed to slip through the crowd like an eel, and he easily kept pace with Kleef. "Now *you* are giving bribes?"

"Not really," Kleef said.

Jang was the only man under his command whose respect truly mattered to him. The Shou

wielded a blade almost as well as Kleef did, and he followed a code of honor as strict as Helm's Law. Unlike Kleef, however, Jang hadn't devoted his life to faithful service; he was simply an honorable man, and Kleef both admired and envied him for that.

"I just needed a way to keep the troop from deserting the instant we're out of sight."

"By offering *them* a bribe," Jang insisted. "It is good that you follow Helm. A dead god will not punish you for ignoring his laws."

Kleef winced. He was stretching Helm's Law of Service, but he saw no alternative. He knew his troop too well to think they would clear the square without the promise of gold. Moreover, Helm had been gone so long that even his most devoted worshipers considered his Law more of a guideline than an inviolable code. Under the circumstances, was it wrong of Kleef to think the same way?

After twenty paces, Kleef glanced over the backs of two stamping mules and caught a glimpse of green wool slicing through the crowd near the middle of the street. He tugged Jang's sleeve and stepped into the slender gap in front of the mules' noses. The beasts brayed and balked, but Jang quickly grabbed their halters and calmed them with a few words of whispered Shou.

Kleef located the flash of green again, about ten paces away and still pushing against the traffic. The woman had wisely concealed her hair by raising the hood of her cloak, but the green was so bright and distinctive that it drew almost as much attention.

Still, something seemed wrong to Kleef, and after a moment, he realized the woman was not moving through the press of bodies as easily as she had before. Now she was shouldering her way ahead, not looking back at all, and there was no sign of her short companion.

"Stinking Hells!" Kleef pointed at the green hood. "Fetch the one in the green cloak. I have questions."

Jang acknowledged the order with a curt nod and slipped into the crowd. Shaking his head at his own folly, Kleef shoved through the mob in the opposite direction, until he found a spot where he could view the far side of the street. Here, the river of pedestrians was roughly ten people wide. In the absence of wagons, they were pulling handcarts and carrying heavy rucksacks, creeping toward Wilhastle Square at a tortoise's pace.

Kleef stepped onto another wagon to get a better look. Neither the red-haired woman nor her short companion were anywhere in sight, but a dusky-robed figure was skulking along the walkway, moving against traffic and still keeping a watchful eye on the middle of the street. The man's eyes were not visible, but there was a vague haziness around the edges of his silhouette, a kind of murkiness that suggested shadow magic, and Kleef began to hope that he had found the spy again.

Then the figure looked directly at him, revealing an ashen face with a long chin and brows and faintly glowing eyes. His gaze slid past Kleef without pause, then he turned around and began to move through the crowd again. As the man drifted away from the buildings, his drab robes faded to gray, and he grew indistinguishable from the rest of the mob.

Kleef resisted the impulse to go after him. He had never seen a Shadovar before today, much less hunted one. But he had been told by a member of the Purple Dragons that there were several kinds of Shadovar, and that the ones with the lambent eyes—the *shades*—were the most cunning and dangerous. So, trailing the spy now seemed unlikely to accomplish anything more than leading Kleef into an ambush. It would be much smarter to find the re-

haired woman, then ambush the shade when he attempted to take his quarry.

Jang returned to Kleef's side, engulfed by a cloud of fragrance so sweet and fresh that masked the stench of manure and urine that pervaded the street. The Shou's hand was locked on the elbow of the slender figure wearing the green cloak. Kleef reached out and snatched back the hood, exposing the dirty blond hair and sunken-cheeked face of a teenage street urchin. A boy, no less. No doubt the cloak was the source of the perfume.

Kleef ordered Jang to keep watch for Shadovar, then grabbed the urchin by the back of his neck and pushed him off the street, seeking the privacy of a doorway. Once he felt certain he could question the boy without being observed by the spy, Kleef took the front of the cloak and rubbed the soft green cashmere between his fingers.

"Nice cloak," he said. "How did you come by it?"

The urchin raised his chin. "I didn't steal it, if that's what you mean. It's mine."

"That so?" Kleef knotted his fist into the cloth, then lifted the urchin off the ground and made a show of sniffing around his collar. "Pretty nice perfume for a guttersnipe like you—especially a *boy* guttersnipe."

"I'm no boy," the urchin said. "I'm a man."

"A *boy* ... who smells as sweet as a noblewoman." Kleef lowered the urchin back to the street, but continued to hold the cloth. "You can keep the cloak, but I need to find the lady who gave it to you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the urchin said. "I took this cloak off a cart."

Kleef raised a brow. "You're admitting you stole it?" he asked. "*Confessing* to thievery, just like that?"

The urchin paled. "I mean, it fell off a cart, and I picked it up." He looked away. "If you want my thumb for that, I guess I can't stop you."

"You'd give up a thumb for the red-haired woman?" Kleef was truly surprised. Marsember street urchins were not the kind to make noble sacrifices. "Who is she to you?"

The bewilderment that washed over the urchin's face told Kleef all he needed to know. The boy had no idea who the woman was—or even why he was trying to protect her. She had probably charmed him with magic.

"Look," Kleef continued, "if you truly want to help the lady, you *will* tell me where she went. She's being hunted by a dangerous sort. She'll be much better off if I find her first."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I *expect* you to answer me." Kleef took a deep breath, then switched to a more kindly, fatherly voice. "Since you're a man, I'll tell it to you straight. It's not *me* this woman is running from. It's the Shadovar."

"There are *Shadovar* in the city?"

"At least one—a shade no less—and he's hunting your red-haired lady." Kleef released the urchin. "Now, will you help her or not?"

The urchin looked uncertain for a moment, then finally nodded. "She's so beautiful," he said. "I can't believe she asked *me* for help."

"Go on," Kleef urged. "Everything you remember."

"There isn't much," the urchin said. "She just smiled at me and said she would consider it my kindness if I took her cloak and wore it."

"That's all?" Kleef asked.

“That’s all she *said*,” the urchin replied. “But there was a look in her eyes. It felt like we had known each other forever. I could tell she liked me ... she liked me a *lot*.”

Kleef nodded to himself. Charm magic, for certain. “And I suppose she told you to pull up the hood?”

The urchin shook his head. “That was my idea,” he said. “I knew she was being chased, and I wanted to draw them off.”

“*How* did you know she was being chased?”

The urchin frowned, clearly confused. “I don’t know. I guess it was the way her manservant kept watch,” he said. His face brightened, remembering. “And the servant said something like, ‘There is one of the devils now,’ and then he led her away.”

Kleef felt his belly sinking. “‘*One of the devils?*’ ” he asked. “You’re sure he said that exactly?”

The urchin nodded. “That’s what I heard. And then he grabbed her arm and pulled her into Backstabber Alley, just like I said.”

Actually, the urchin hadn’t said anything about Backstabber Alley, but it seemed an honest mistake. Kleef reached into his belt pouch and removed a Watch flan—a steel meal token the Watch used to buy the cooperation of the hungry—and passed it to the boy.

“Take that to King’s Tower and tell the gatekeeper you’ve been of service to Kleef Kenric,” he said. “Got that? He’ll see that your belly is filled before you leave Marsember.”

The urchin took the flan. “Kleef Kenric. Got it.” He paused, then frowned. “Wait—are you throwing me out of Marsember?”

Kleef frowned. “I’m trying to look out for you, boy. The shadow fiends of Wheloon have escaped their prison, and they’re marching against us. Even the lord marshal doubts we can hold the city, and with the war against Netheril going the way it is, there won’t be any help from the Purple Dragons.”

The urchin shrugged. “What do I care who rules this city—or the Realm?” he asked. “Either way, I sleep in a doorway. But I hope you help the lady. I liked her.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Kleef promised. He thought about trying to persuade the urchin to leave, but then realized a boy alone wouldn’t be much safer on the open road than he was on the familiar ground of the city. He took a few more Watch flans from his belt pouch and gave them to the waif. “I suppose every man has the right to face his doom how he will. The Watch will be looking for bolt-loaders to help man the walls. You could join them, if you decide you want to make your death count for something.”

The urchin looked at Kleef as though he were daft. “Thanks, but I won’t.” He closed his hand around the meal tokens. “Can I go?”

Kleef nodded. Fighting to overcome a rising tide of bitterness and despair, he started back toward Jang. Raised in a household devoted to Helm, Kleef had joined the city Watch as soon as he was of age. Like his father and grandfather before him, he had dedicated his entire life to bringing Helm’s Law of Service to his fellow watchmen. But the corruption of the order’s founders simply ran too deep. After three generations of effort, the Kenric line had nothing to show for its faith but the knowledge that they had stayed true to the teachings of a dead god. If the inhabitants of Marsember had no interest in helping to save their city, the Watch had only itself to blame.

Kleef returned to Jang’s side.

"I have seen no sign of any Shadovar," the Shou said. "I hope you learned something."

"I did." Kleef motioned for Jang to follow him, then started plowing through the crowd angling up Starmouth Way. "It seems the woman and her manservant are headed down Backstabber Alley."

"A bad choice for someone who is fleeing a Shadovar," Jang said. Backstabber Alley was aptly named, for it was a crooked and narrow gauntlet, lined with dark doorways and crannies where trouble invariably lay waiting. "They must not be familiar with the city."

"Probably not," Kleef agreed. "We'll circle around fast and take Rover's Way, then catch them at the other end of the alley. That way, we can take them by surprise—and the Shadovar spies, too, if they've caught up."

"Spies?" Jang asked, slipping to his side. "There is more than one?"

"That's the way it sounds."

They reached High Bridge Road. It was filled with foot traffic, all flowing away from Starmouth. No doubt most of the pedestrians hoped to detour around the jam in Wilhast Square. To make up for lost time, Kleef did his best to run along the edge of the street, shouting, "Make way for the Watch!" while shoving dawdlers aside with well-placed forearms. He and Jang often had to bound over handcarts, and twice, Kleef found it necessary to throw a slow-moving crone over his shoulder and carry her a few paces until he found a safe place to deposit her. By the time they reached Rover's Way, a narrow cross-lane that led to Backstabber Alley, both men were sweating and breathing hard.

Kleef slowed to a walk and slipped his greatsword, *Watcher*, off his back, then unsheathed it and returned the empty scabbard to its place. Jang drew his own blade—a slender Shou katana—off his hip, and together they turned the corner into Rover's Way. Though the lane was nearly ten feet wide, it was so littered with discarded belongings that a donkey cart could not have passed through. Pushing their way past all the paupers picking through the refuse, Kleef and Jang advanced nearly a hundred paces before they finally saw Backstabber Alley opening onto Rover's Way on the right.

As they approached the mouth of the alley, Kleef listened for screams or the sound of running boots, anything to suggest the Shadovar had caught their quarry. He heard only the nervous murmurs of the paupers on Rover's Way, who were quick to shy away from two watchmen with drawn blades. In normal times, Kleef would have also heard the *bang* of slamming shutters overhead and the thud of crossbars falling across doors, but times were not normal. The residents of Rover's Way had already fled, leaving their homes open to the urchins and thieves in hopes of one day returning to find the doors still hanging on their hinges.

The two watchmen were a dozen steps from Backstabber Alley when a small cone of blue radiance flared in front of Kleef. Stunned, he dropped into a fighting crouch, his eyes scanning left and right for the source of the spell.

When he found none, Kleef's blood ran cold.

He removed a hand from *Watcher's* hilt to wave Jang back. As his other hand rebalanced the sword, rolling it slightly downward, the blue cone faded to a glow. It was only then that Kleef realized the blue light was emanating from a decoration on the crossguard of the sword itself: a blue agate surrounded by the etching of a large eye—*Helm's Eye*.

Kleef's jaw dropped. *Watcher* had been in his family since the time of Ildool, and there was

no doubting its magic. In the hands of a true Kenric, it was as light as a dagger, yet no one outside the family had the strength to wield it. A set of runes etched into the blade read *STRONG AND TRUE AND SO WILL YOUR STEEL*, a motto that had proven itself accurate time and again as the greatsword cleaved oak shields and steel armor. But as far as Kleef knew, that was the extent of the sword's power. Never had anyone mentioned a blue light, and Kleef had never seen the agate glow as it did now.

Jang touched his shoulder and whispered. "What does that mean?"

Before Kleef could reply, a trio of dusky figures stepped out of a doorway opposite Backstabber Alley, all three with the lambent eyes of shades gleaming beneath their cowls. The figure in the lead swung a hand, and a scythe of darkness swept across Rover's Way, slicing through a half-dozen paupers who had been scurrying up the lane ahead of Kleef and Jang.

A panicked voice, nasal and male, rang out of Backstabber Alley. "Go back! We're trapped!"

By then, the three shades were springing toward the mouth of the alley, and Kleef and Jang were charging up Rover's Way to attack the trio's flank.

Kleef arrived first, bringing Watcher around in a chest-high strike that took the nearest shade from behind. The blade dragged a bit as it sliced up through the warrior's shoulder. Kleef pivoted, putting all his strength into the attack, and felt the sword drive the rest of the way through. The shade's torso came apart in a spray of blood and darkness.

Jang was already on the second shade, his slender katana hissing and whistling as he attacked high and low, severing first tendons, then limbs, and finally rising toward the neck.

Kleef glimpsed the third warrior spinning to attack Jang from behind. Kleef stepped forward, using a shoulder to bull the shade off balance, then leaned away and brought Watcher up in a one-handed slash. The blade entered beneath the warrior's armpit and did not stop until it was halfway through his chest. Kleef used his free arm to knock the dying shade off his sword, then brought his weapon back around to send the fellow's head tumbling.

Like the rest of the Watch, he had been told to behead a shade every time, that it was the only way to be sure that the shadowstuff would not heal him. He glanced over and found Jang already spinning away from his headless foe, putting his back to the wall on the far side of the alley mouth. Kleef did the same on his side, and by the time the third body had hit the cobblestones, he and Jang were flanking the mouth of Backstabber Alley.

From inside the alley came the sound of running. Two sets of feet—one clumsy and loud, the other light and graceful. Kleef caught Jang's eye and wagged two fingers, then held his palm open and level, indicating they should let both runners pass.

Jang nodded, and the odd little man Kleef had glimpsed earlier burst from the alley. Gaunt and round-headed, with bulging eyes and thick lips, he was clutching a gray satchel to his bony chest. He hopped over the carnage in the street with no hint of revulsion or surprise, then turned right and raced up the lane without a backward glance.

The red-haired woman appeared an instant later, her green eyes going wide at the sight of so many bodies cut into so many pieces. Absent her cloak, she was wearing a silk tunic belted over leather trousers. Her right hand carried a slender short sword. Despite her practical attire, she was lovelier than any woman Kleef had ever seen, and when she glanced over

him, he felt the same sense of warmth and familiarity that the urchin had described.

Kleef pointed up the lane in the direction her manservant had fled, then silently mouthed the word, "Go."

She responded with a smile that made Kleef go even warmer inside, and he began to wonder just what he had gotten himself into.

Then the agate on Watcher's crossguard began to glow more intensely, and Kleef glimpsed a blur of motion across Rover's Way. He turned to find another shade emerging from the same dark doorway as the first three warriors. To Kleef, it seemed the dark figure was not just stepping out of the shadows—he was dividing from them.

The woman's face grew pale, but she flicked a hand in the enemy's direction. A trio of white darts appeared at her fingertips and streaked across the lane. Her target dropped to one knee, crouching behind his arm and raising a shield of swirling shadow.

The first dart hit the shield and sizzled out of existence. The second vanished in a crackling flash that also took down the shield. The third sank into the warrior's ribs, buckling him forward. He sprawled in the lane, writhing in pain and bleeding shadowstuff onto the cobblestones.

By then, the woman was five paces up Rover's Way, and Kleef was leaping across the lane. He beheaded the fallen shade with a single swipe, then stepped into the doorway from which the warrior had emerged. A blazing blue radiance shone from Helm's Eye, dispelling the darkness within. He found himself looking at a small foyer, in which a roopy, half-formed silhouette was being pushed into the far corner by the light of his sword. Kleef glimpsed a gray, grimacing face, then the dark figure melted into the last remnants of shadow and vanished.

Kleef had been warned that Shadovar warriors could sometimes move through shadows, but with Jang's slender sword singing in the lane behind him, he had no time to consider what he had just seen. He whirled out of the doorway with Watcher still aglow and four Jang dancing around in front of him, his slender sword chopping and slashing in a shadow-cleaving blur. Already, a pair of gray limbs lay oozing darkness onto the street, and the warrior who had lost them had dropped to his knees. Jang's blade whistled back around and sent the shade's head flying.

A piercing hiss sounded from the black mouth of the alley. Jang stumbled backward, his sword arm falling limp and his katana flying free.

Kleef leaped forward, snatching the katana on the fly. "Jang, with me!"

He retreated a few paces down Rover's Way, away from the woman, then turned to Jang. Part of the Shou's breastplate had shattered, and his right shoulder and breast were exposed, revealing a patch of flesh that looked bruised, black, and icy. His right arm hung useless, but at least he was keeping up. Kleef held the katana out and was relieved to see Jang take the weapon with his left hand.

"Time for you to withdraw," Kleef said, nodding his friend down the lane. "Report to the King's Tower."

Three more shades spilled from the alley's mouth. The first two turned away, continuing after the woman and her manservant. The last one stepped into the middle of the street and turned to face the two watchmen, studying them with the bright, steel-blue eyes that had first caught Kleef's attention.

“Go.” Kleef pushed Jang behind him, back toward the entrance to Rover’s Way. “Tell the lord marshall we have Shadovar assassins in the city.”

“And leave you behind?” Jang gasped. “Never.”

“It’s not a suggestion, Jang. Someone needs to report.” As Kleef spoke, he continued to watch the last shade—who was merely watching *him*, not yet advancing. “Tell the lord marshall it looks like they’ll end up in the Canal District. Have him send reinforcements down High Bridge Road.”

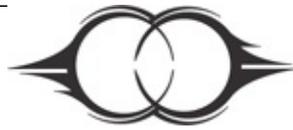
“And that is where we’ll meet?” Jang asked, his voice still reluctant. “High Bridge Road?”

Kleef nodded. “I’m going to keep an eye on the chase,” he said. “But I’ll look for you there.”

As Kleef spoke the words, the agate on Watcher’s crossguard glowed brighter—this time casting its blue beam a dozen paces down the lane. Kleef adjusted his stance so the light fell directly on the steel-eyed warrior.

The Shadovar merely grinned, showing a pair of white fangs as long as fingers. Then he raised his arm and vanished behind a shield of darkness.

## CHAPTER 2



WITH THE RESIDENTS OF MARSEMBER FLEEING THE CITY BY ANY means possible, every noble town should have been out in the streets, bolstering the courage of the people and inspiring them to take arms against the coming invasion. Instead, Lady Arietta Seasilver—Chosen of Siamorphe, the patron goddess of nobility—was trapped on her own balcony, virtual prisoner in her own rooms. Forty feet below, the family servants were scurrying back and forth to House Seasilver’s private quay, loading her father’s galleass with coin chests and serving silver, ceremonial armor, bejeweled weapons ... even crate after crate of fine wine.

The sight set Arietta’s teeth to grinding. When she looked north across Deepwater Canal she could see over the city rooftops far into the northern plain, where churning clouds of dust marked Netheril’s push into Cormyr. When she leaned over her balustrade and looked to the northeast, she could see a curtain of gray smoke on the horizon—the shadow fiends of Wheloon, burning all they passed on their march to Marsembler. If ever the realm had needed every sword it could raise, that time was now.

But instead of rallying the people to the city’s defense, her father was fleeing to Elversult with all his prized possessions. Clearly, it was not for nothing that Grand Duke Farnis Seasilver was known in local taverns as “Farnig the Feckless.” With Myth Drannor under siege and the eladrin doomed, could he truly be fool enough to think he would escape the Shadovar by simply sailing across the Dragonmere? Cormyr was all that remained to stop the Army of Night, and if the kingdom fell, the Netherese would claim all of Faerûn—perhaps all of Toril.

The clack of a turning lock echoed from the interior of Arietta’s chambers. She asked Siamorphe for the strength to be patient and the courage to be direct, then returned to her sitting room. As she had anticipated, a statuesque noblewoman with high cheekbones and a blade-straight nose was arriving from the anteroom. Beyond her, still closing the heavy oak door to the suite, were two burly soldiers in white tabards with wyvern sigils—the same two men who had been standing outside Arietta’s door every day for nearly a month.

Arietta flashed the woman a practiced but joyless smile, then went to greet her.

“Mother, what a pleasant surprise.” She intercepted the Grand Duchess Elira in the center of the room and kissed both cheeks, then motioned to one of the ornate armchairs flanking the fireplace. “Please, sit.”

As they settled opposite each other, Arietta’s lady-in-waiting, Odelia, hurried in from the dressing room.

“Your Grace,” said the girl, curtsying to Arietta’s mother. “Please forgive me for not being at the door to welcome you.” Rosy-cheeked and doe-eyed, she had a joyful beauty, and Elira often complained that the servant drew too many eyes away from Arietta. “I was packing gowns and did not hear you arrive.”

Considering the arrival had not been announced by the guards or preceded by a knock,

was little wonder.

Elira smiled with practiced warmth. “Think nothing of it,” she said. “With those dreadful shadow fiends on the way, we must all be a little forgiving of ourselves. I’m sure you’ll return to your usual behavior soon—once we’ve set up the new household in Elversult.”

Tears welled in Odelia’s eyes, for she would not be going to Elversult. Concerned that he might be overloading his ship, Duke Farnig had decreed just that morning that only servants who could handle an oar or a weapon would be accompanying the family. All others would be left in Marsember to defend the townhouse.

Doing her best to hold her emotions in check, Odelia inclined her head. “Your patience, most kind, Your Grace.” She looked to Arietta, always careful not to usurp her mistress’s role as hostess. “Will you be needing anything, my lady?”

Arietta looked at her mother. “May I offer you something?” she asked. Her tone was sweet, but she was seething inside—her mother’s remark to Odelia had not been innocent. “Some pear cider, perhaps, or apple wine?”

The cider had gone bad, and Elira hated apple *anything*.

Elira replied with a shrewd smile. “I am afraid we haven’t the time.” She waited until Odelia had withdrawn, then finally deigned to comment on her daughter’s attire. “Arietta, really. It’s not as though your father is lacking for guards. Won’t you find that armor rather hot aboard the *Wave Wyvern*?”

“How nice of you to be concerned,” Arietta replied. “But it won’t be a problem, since I won’t be aboard.”

Elira rolled her eyes. “I thought we had finished that conversation.”

“We did,” Arietta replied. “You made it clear that you and Father intend to flee the realm in its time of need. *I* intend to defend it. There is nothing more to discuss.”

Elira sighed and looked to the ceiling. “I could have sworn that Chauntea sent me your daughter.”

“She sent you a Seasilver,” Arietta retorted. “And with that name comes a duty to the realm.”

“A duty that is your *father’s* to observe,” Elira said, narrowing her gaze. “And he is doing precisely that.”

“By fleeing the war?” Arietta scoffed. “I think not.”

“Then we agree—you *don’t* think,” Elira said. “Because if you did, you would remember that your father is in line to the throne.”

“*Twelfth* in line!” Arietta pointed out. “He won’t be ascending anytime soon.”

“Be that as it may,” Elira said, “he must survive. He owes it to the king.”

“He *owes* it to the king to flee the war?”

“Just so,” Elira said. “Arietta, you must consider the larger picture. Your half-uncle Erzoured is undoubtedly scheming with the Shadovar, while anyone with the Obarskyr name is obliged to stay in Cormyr to fight. We must make certain that a legitimate heir remains to claim the throne. And that duty falls to your father.”

Arietta was surprised to see the wisdom of her mother’s argument. She began to wonder if she had judged her father unfairly. “And the king has asked this of him?”

Elira flashed a condescending smile. “The king didn’t *need* to ask, my dear. Your father understands what is required.”

“He *understands* ...” Arietta could only shake her head, too accustomed to her father’s self-serving rationalizations to be shocked. “Has Father at least thought to send word, informing the king of his plans?”

Elira waved a hand dismissively. “The king has other things to worry about. He does not need to concern himself with the safety of your father’s sea-crossing.”

“Of course not,” Arietta said. “And I doubt that he *would*. In fact, if the *Wyvern* were to go down at sea, it would probably be a great relief to His Majesty. There would be one less craven grand-nephew in his line of succession.”

“*That* is most uncalled for,” Elira snapped. She glanced toward both doors to make certain no servants were eavesdropping, then leaned closer and spoke quietly. “Your father is merely looking toward the future. After Cormyr falls—and it will—the people will *need* a king in exile to keep their hopes alive.”

“And do you actually expect the people to find hope in a coward?” Elira glared. “If I were you,” she warned, “I’d be mindful of that tongue of yours. It’s the reason you are still unmarried at four-and-twenty—and it’s why Aubrin has refused to honor your secret understanding.”

“Mother, there *is* no understanding—secret or otherwise,” Arietta said. “I wish you would stop telling people that. He said four words to me, and not one of them implied love.”

“Love? *Pshaw*.” If Elira had noticed the catch in her daughter’s voice, she betrayed no sign of it. “Love is for people who don’t matter. *You*, my daughter, are a Seasilver.”

“Which is why I would never swear a false vow,” Arietta said, “or accept one from anyone else.”

“Vows? *Pshaw!*” Elira threw up her hands in exasperation. “This foolishness has gone on long enough. I’ll see you aboard the *Wyvern*, Arietta.” She rose and started for the door. “We set sail within the half hour.”

“Thank you for the update,” Arietta said, also rising. “But I have decided to stay.”

Elira waved a hand over her shoulder dismissively. “Your father is not giving you the choice.” Upon reaching the anteroom, Elira stopped and turned, cocking her head as if a thought had just occurred to her. Her voice softened. “He says you have enough space in your cabin for ten trunks.” She gave a little smile. “How would he know if one of those trunks held Odelia?”

Arietta’s stomach grew cold. “I know what you’re doing, Mother.” Elira’s suggestion was, of course, a manipulative ploy. If Arietta agreed to come along nicely, her mother would look the other way and allow her to smuggle Odelia aboard. If not ... well, then Odelia’s abandonment would be on Arietta’s shoulders. “It won’t work.”

Elira shrugged. “The girl’s future is yours to decide,” she said. “But tell me, Daughter, have you forgotten the teachings of Siamorphe?”

“You know that I have not.”

“And doesn’t she teach us that it is the duty of all vassals to obey the commands of their liege?”

Arietta began to feel ill. “Of course.”

“Well, there you have it. Farnig is your liege as well as your father. To disobey him is to disobey your goddess.”

“But my *liege* has duties, too,” Arietta objected. “Father should be leading the fight, not

running from it with every bauble he owns.”

“What good would it do for him to throw away his life *and* his treasure? That would only bolster the enemy further. You mustn’t defy your father, Arietta, not in this. He always says that *you* are his greatest treasure—and he won’t lose you to the Shadovar, either.”

Arietta met her mother’s gaze. “It would be better if he treasured the people of Marsember.”

“Better for the Shadovar, I think,” Elira countered. “Thirty minutes, Arietta. I’ll send someone to fetch your trunks.”

Elira strode across the anteroom and struck the door with the heel of her hand, causing a surprisingly loud *boom* for such a thin woman. Again, the lock clacked open. The two guards slowly opened the door and peered inside, as though they feared Arietta might be waiting for an attack or bolt past her mother.

Arietta shook her head in exasperation. Her father had been keeping her a near prisoner for almost a month now, ever since the sergeant of his guards had discovered her in a tavern one night, disguised as a common minstrel and singing onstage. Arietta had tried to bribe the man to keep her secret, but he had pocketed her coin and used it to prove the truth of his story when he told her father. As a reward, her father had tripled the payment.

With the door locked again behind her, Arietta turned and found Odelia holding a seldom-worn gown in her arms. From her hopeful expression, it was obvious she had been eavesdropping. Elira’s plan to make her a stowaway was the girl’s best hope of survival.

“So, you’ve heard?” Arietta asked, knowing that Odelia would never be so bold as to bring up the subject herself. “My father says we have room for ten trunks.”

“Then ... you may have some difficult choices to make,” Odelia said carefully. “I have already packed fifteen.”

“You may choose which trunks will stay and which will go,” Arietta said. “Just make certain you can hide inside one of them.”

“Are you sure?” Odelia asked, her face brightening. “I know it’s your mother’s idea, but your father learns that you have defied him yet again—”

“We don’t have much time,” Arietta interrupted. The last thing she wanted to discuss was obedience to her father. “You *do* want to go to Elversult, do you not?”

Odelia was quick to nod. “Of course, my lady,” she said. “My place is at your side.”

“Then you worry about the trunks, and let me worry about the grand duke,” Arietta said, ignoring the question of whether *she* would be going to Elversult. She was a Chosen Siamorphe, which made it her duty to inspire her people *and* obey her liege. It was not clear to her yet how she could do both, but she was determined to find a way. “Just be sure you can open your trunk from the inside.”

Odelia looked surprised. “Won’t you be able to let me out?”

“Best to play it safe, I think,” Arietta said with a shrug.

A muffled clamor sounded from somewhere down in the streets, and a man’s voice called for the crowd to make way.

“Finish the packing,” Arietta said, heading to the balcony to investigate. A man was charging along the opposite side of Deepwater Canal, heading east toward the bridge. He looked like a typical thug of the Marsember Watch, carrying a greatsword in a single hand and bellowing for people to clear his path. Arietta saw no one fleeing directly ahead of him.

But on High Bridge Road, a red-haired woman and a short disheveled man had just emerged from a narrow footlane to the north, and they were headed south toward the canal. As they appeared the big watchman was rushing to intercept the pair before they reached the bridge.

The two citizens were clearly in a hurry; in fact, the man looked utterly panicked. But the red-haired woman had an air of refinement, and she was dressed in a silk tunic that appeared to be both finely tailored and cinched by a silver belt. The watchman, on the other hand, belonged to an organization filled with notorious brutes who often abused their power. If there was a criminal below, Arietta suspected it was the man wearing the armor and cape.

Remaining at the balustrade, she called over her shoulder. "Odelia! Bring my bow and quiver!"

Odelia stepped out of the dressing room, looking confused and harried. "My apologies, but what did you ask for—"

"Bow and quiver!" Arietta pointed toward the bedchamber, where she kept her most precious possessions—her weapons and her lyre. "Quickly!" she commanded. "The gentlewoman's life may depend on it."

When Arietta looked back to the streets, the woman and her slovenly companion were already racing onto Deepwater Bridge. The watchman was quickly closing in from the side, still bellowing and knocking people out of his way. He vaulted over a mule cart and landed near the foot of the bridge. But instead of turning to cross the canal, he stopped and looked up the footlane from which the woman and strange little man had come.

For an instant, Arietta thought the watchman might be waiting for the rest of his troop. But then he brought the giant sword around in a middle guard and stood at the foot of the bridge, turning his back on the fleeing pair. Arietta began to wonder if she had misjudged the situation. Could he possibly be *protecting* the woman?

A blue aura shone around the hilt of the watchman's sword, and he sank into a defensive stance, as if bracing to meet a charge. For a moment, none came, then two dark silhouettes emerged from the footlane, their forms swaddled in shadow. When they saw the watchman, they paused, and a third figure emerged from the footlane to join them. This one had two dots of steel-blue light shining out from beneath his hood.

A shade of Netheril, if one of Arietta's former suitors was to be believed. A Purple Dragon, the fellow had been fond of trying to impress her with his experiences fighting off Netherese border raids, and he had told her that shades could always be identified by their lambeaux eyes. He had even named the eye color of several of the princes, but Arietta had already grown weary of his bragging and stopped paying attention.

"Odelia!" Arietta called, swinging her hand behind her. "My—"

Arietta felt a shaft of polished yew slapping into her palm, and she brought the bow to the front of her to string it. The trio of shades had started to advance again, moving cautiously. By the time she had flipped the bow and slipped the string over the opposite tip, the leader was whipping one hand forward in the air, his blue-gray eyes fixed on the watchman.

A crescent-shaped blade of shadow materialized in front of the shadow warriors and came spinning, past half a dozen people on High Bridge Road. One unfortunate man dropped to his knees, clutching his side. Unimpeded, the dark disc continued toward the watchman, who whipped his heavy sword downward to block. When the disc hit his blade, the shadow divided into two pieces that wobbled past on either side, then dissipated against the stone

railing of the bridge. The few people remaining on the street screamed and scattered.

Arietta reached back again with her hand. Before she could even say “arrow,” she felt a thick shaft slap into her palm. She quickly nocked the heavy boar-arrow Odelia had given her, but instead of taking aim, Arietta held her bow low, so it would be hidden by the balustrade. Firing too soon would be a mistake. Her weapon was a hunting bow, not a longbow, and despite the flattery of her retainers, she understood that she was not truly a master archer—not yet. The shades were still too far away, and even the watchman was near the limits of her accuracy.

The shades advanced slowly, the leader’s blue-gray eyes enlarging from dots of light to larger disks. His companions remained two paces behind him.

Odelia crouched behind her and whispered. “Are those ... are those the shadow fiends of Wheloon?”

Arietta shook her head. “They don’t look monstrous enough. I think those are just normal shades.”

“That is normal?” Odelia gasped. “We are doomed!”

“Not if we keep our heads,” Arietta said. “The Shadovar are not the only ones with magic at their fingertips.”

Two more shades emerged from the footlane and started toward the bridge. The watchman held his ground, as if determined to deny passage to all five of his foes. The red-haired woman had stopped halfway across the bridge and was looking back toward her protector—until her slovenly companion rushed back to tug at her sleeve.

“There’s going to be a battle,” Arietta said. “Odelia, leave my quiver and sound the alarm. Tell the guards at my door that there are Shadovar on the bridge. Then go to the Bridge Gate and tell the guards they must open our house to the woman and her companion—and to the watchman, too, if he reaches us.”

Odelia hung the heavy quiver from its hook on Arietta’s belt, then hesitated. “Shouldn’t the orders come from your father?”

As Odelia spoke, the Shadovar leader drew a scimitar with a blade that looked like black glass and charged toward the bridge.

“No time!” Arietta fixed her gaze on the pair of gleaming eyes, trying to gauge her target’s speed by counting her own breaths. “Tell them the gentlewoman is a friend of my mother’s.”

“You wish me to *lie*, my lady?”

Arietta exhaled in exasperation. “Yes, Odelia. I insist!”

The Netherese warriors moved at a speed Arietta could scarcely believe. She raised her bow and drew the string back to her cheek.

By then, the shade’s leader was only two strides from the watchman.

Arietta set her aim on the empty space just above the watchman’s shoulder and, exhaling, let the bowstring sing. The arrow streaked away in a yellow blur, flashing across the canal in less time than it took her to finish emptying her lungs.

The shaft caught the leader high in the torso, piercing his black armor and sinking a hand-length into his chest. The impact was enough to stop his charge and send him sprawling back into the street.

If the watchman was surprised, he showed no sign of it, instantly stepping forward to finish his foe. His attack was intercepted on the way down by a pair of dark blades, both of which

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