



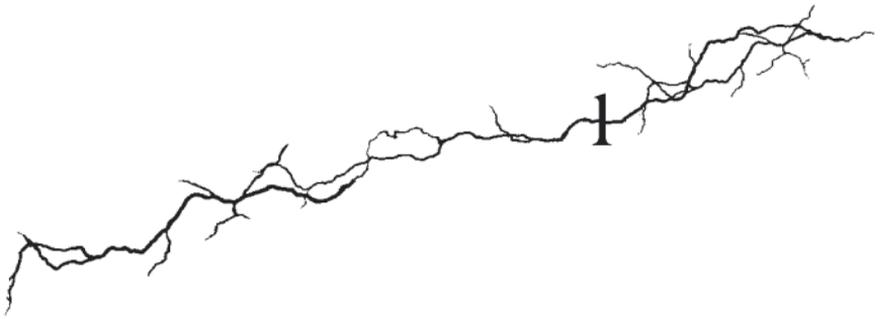
AMBER AND BLOOD

the Dark Disciple

Volume 3

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A storm raged on the Blood Sea. A strange storm, of heavenly make, it swirled above a castle that stood high atop a cliff. Clouds boiled around the castle walls. Thunder crackled, and the lightning dazzled and blinded the mortal onlookers—a monk, a kender, and a dog—who were struggling to walk among the sand dunes on the shore far below. The three stood braced against the whipping wind that flung sand into their eyes. They were all three soaked from the spray of salt water, flung up by the waves that came crashing headlong onto the shore. Once there, the waves clutched at the sand with grasping fingers, trying to hold on, but were forced to let go as the motion of the world dragged them back.

Whenever the lightning flared, the monk could see a tower far out to sea. The tower had not been there yesterday. It had appeared in the night, wrenched up out of the depths of the ocean by some catastrophic force, and now it stood with water dripping from its eaves, looking lost, as though wondering, along with men and gods, how it had come to be here.

The monk, Rhys, was almost bent double, his robes

plastered against him, his spare, muscular body fighting for every step against the buffeting wind. He was making headway, but just barely. Nightshade, being a kender and built slighter and smaller than his human friend, was having a more difficult time. He had been bowled over twice and was managing to remain on his feet only by hanging onto Rhys's arm. Atta, the dog, was lower to the ground and therefore was somewhat sheltered by the dunes, but she was having difficulty as well. When the next gust nearly plucked Nightshade from Rhys's grasp and threw Atta into a pile of driftwood, Rhys decided they should return to the grotto they'd just left.

The smallish cave was cheerless and still awash in sea water, but at least they were sheltered from the wind and deadly lightning.

Nightshade sat down beside his friend on the wet rocks and gave a great *whoosh* of relief. He wrung water from his topknot, then tried the same with his shirt, which was considerably worn, its color so faded from the rigors of his travels that he could no longer tell what it had been. Atta did not lie down, but paced nervously, her furry black and white body flinching whenever a loud crack of thunder shook the ground.

"Rhys," Nightshade said, wiping sea water from his eyes, "was that Chemosh's castle we could see up there on the top of the cliff?"

Rhys nodded.

A lightning bolt sizzled nearby and thunder came rolling down the cliff face. Atta quivered and barked at the rumbling. Nightshade huddled closer to Rhys.

"I can hear voices in the thunder," the kender said, "but I can't understand what the voices are saying or make out who is talking. Can you?"

Rhys shook his head. He petted Atta, trying to calm the dog.

“Rhys,” said Nightshade after a moment, “I think those must be gods up there. Chemosh is a god, after all, and maybe he’s throwing a party for his fellow gods. Though I have to say he didn’t strike me as the type to go dancing, what with him being the God of Death and all. Still, maybe he has a fun side.”

Rhys watched the dazzling light flash outside the grotto and listened to the voices and thought of the old saying, “When the gods rage, man trembles.”

“So many things are happening—so many *strange* things,” Nightshade emphasized, “that I’m feeling sort of muddled. I’d like to talk it over, just to make sure that you think happened what *I* think happened. And, to be honest, talking makes the howling wind and lightning seem not so bad. You don’t mind if I talk, do you?”

Rhys did not mind.

“I guess I’ll start with us being chained up in the cave,” said Nightshade. “No, wait. I have to say how we got chained up in the cave, so we should start with the minotaur. Except the minotaur didn’t come along until after you fought with your dead brother the Beloved and the little boy killed him—”

“Start with the minotaur,” Rhys suggested. “Unless you want to go all the way back to the time I met you in the graveyard.”

Nightshade thought that over. “No, I don’t think my voice will last long enough for going back *that* far. I’ll start with the minotaur. We were walking down the street, and you were really, really angry at Majere and said you were going to quit serving him or any god, when suddenly all these minotaurs came out of nowhere and took us prisoner.

“I cast a spell on one,” Nightshade added proudly. “I made him fall down and flop around on the street like a fish. The minotaur captain said I was a ‘kender with horns’. Do you remember that, Rhys?”

"I do," Rhys returned. "The captain was right. You were very brave."

"Then the minotaur picked me up and put me in a sack and took us both on board his ship, only it wasn't an ordinary ship. It was a ship that belonged to the Sea Goddess, and it sailed through the air, not the water, and I told you then that you couldn't quit a god . . ."

"And you were right," said Rhys.

Thirty years old, he had been a monk dedicated to Majere for what seemed most of his life. And though not long ago he had lost faith in Majere, the god had refused to lose faith in him. This knowledge humbled Rhys and filled him with thankfulness and joy. He had stumbled and groped through the darkness, taken many wrong turns, ended up in a few blind alleys, but he had found his way back to his god, and Majere had welcomed him with loving arms.

"The minotaur ship brought us here to the other side of the continent where Chemosh built his castle. And the minotaur chained us up in the cave—see, I came to that part."

Rhys nodded again, continuing to pet Atta, who seemed calmer, listening to the kender talk.

"Then we had lots of visitors—a lot more than you'd expect for people chained up in a cave. First Mina came." Nightshade shivered. "That was truly awful. She walked up to you and asked you to tell her who she was. She claimed that the first time she saw you, you recognized her—"

Except I didn't, Rhys thought, troubled. He still did not understand that part of the story.

"—and when you couldn't tell her who she was, Mina got angry. She thought you were lying, and she said if you didn't tell she was going to come back to the cave and kill me and Atta. We would die in torment," Nightshade finished with relish.

"After Mina left, Zeboim popped by. You see what I mean,

Rhys? We never had so much company when we were staying in Solace as we did chained up in that cave. Zeboim said for you to tell *her* who Mina was because all the gods were in an uproar over it, and you said you couldn't, and then she got mad and said she would watch with pleasure while Mina killed me and Atta and we died in torment." Nightshade paused for breath and to spit out some sea water. "And after that, you sent me and Atta off to seek help from the monks of Majere in Flotsam, except we never got that far. We only managed to reach the road up there, and that proved very difficult, due to the sand dunes, and I had a talk with your god. I was pretty harsh with him, I can tell you. I told Majere you were going to die because you were being faithful to him and why wasn't he being faithful to you for a change. I asked him to help Atta and me save you. And then two of the Beloved saw us and decided they wanted to kill me."

Nightshade sighed. "It was quite a night for people wanting to kill me. Anyway Atta and I ran for it, but we both have short legs, and the Beloved had long legs and even though Atta has two more legs than I do we were falling behind when I bumped into Majere. Blam. Ran right smack into him. He saw that we were in trouble and he sent grasshoppers after the Beloved and drove them off. I reminded him about you sacrificing your life for him, and he said he couldn't help because there was this strange amber glow in the sky and he had to go do god stuff somewhere else—"

"I don't think Majere said *that*." Rhys was glad the darkness hid his smile.

"Well, maybe not," Nightshade conceded. "Only that's what he meant. Then he gave me his blessing. Me. A kender. Who had spoken quite harshly to him. So Atta and I ran back to the cave where you were still chained up, only to find Chemosh was there. He wanted you to tell him who Mina was, and he said *he* was going to kill you, and he probably would have, only

Atta bit him on the anklebone. And then the world shook and knocked us all down—even the god.”

Nightshade cocked an eye at Rhys. “Is that right? ‘Cause it’s here that things start getting strange. Or rather—stranger. Chemosh was extremely angry. He started yelling at the other gods, wanting to know what was going on. Turns out the shaking was caused by that tower being yanked up out of the Blood Sea which caused huge waves to start rolling onto the shore, and these waves flooded the cave, and you were unconscious and chained to the wall and the water was rising up around you, and it was up to me and Atta to save you.”

Nightshade paused for breath.

“Which you did,” said Rhys, and he embraced the kender.

“I picked the lock on the manacles,” Nightshade said. “The first and only lock I ever picked in my life! My father would have been so proud. Majere helped me pick the lock, you know.”

A sudden thought struck Nightshade. “Say, do you think Majere would help me again if I wanted to pick another lock? ‘Cause there’s a baker in Solace who makes these wonderful meat pies, only he closes up shop right after supper, and sometimes I’m hungry in the night and I wouldn’t want to wake him and—”

“No,” said Rhys.

“No what?” asked Nightshade.

“No, I do *not* think Majere would help you pick the lock on the baker’s back door.”

“Not even to keep from waking the baker up in the middle of the night?”

“No,” Rhys said firmly.

“Ah, well.” Nightshade sighed again, this time quite deeply. “I suppose you’re right. Though I’ll bet if Majere ever tasted those meat pies he might reconsider. Where was I?”

“You had just picked the lock on my manacles,” said Rhys.

“Oh, yes! The water was getting deeper and I was afraid you were going to drown. I tried to drag you out of the cave, but you were too heavy—no offense.”

“None taken,” Rhys said.

“And then six monks of Majere came running into the cave and they picked you up and carried you out. And I guess they healed the bump on your head because here you are and here I am and here’s Atta and we’re all fine. So,” Nightshade said in conclusion, “your brother the Beloved is at peace now. The story’s over and we can go home to your monastery, and Atta can guard sheep, and I’ll visit my friends in the graveyard, and we’ll live happily ever after.”

Rhys realized that this was true. The tale was told, the last chapter written.

The night was dark and the storm was wild and ferocious and strange things were happening, but the storm and the night would soon come to an end, as nights and storms always do. That was the promise of the gods. When day dawned, Rhys and Nightshade and Atta would start back home, back to his monastery. The journey would be a long one, for the monastery was located north of the city of Staughton, which was on the west coast, and they were on the east coast of the vast continent of Ansalon and would have to travel on foot. He was not concerned at the distance. Every step would be devoted to the god. He thought of the work he would do to earn his bread, of the people he would meet, of the good he would try to do along the way, and the journey did not seem long at all.

“Did you hear that?” Nightshade asked suddenly. “It sounded like a yell.”

Rhys hadn’t heard anything except roaring thunder and howling wind and crashing waves. The kender had sharp senses, however, and Rhys had learned not to discount them. He was further convinced by the fact that Atta also heard something.

Her head was up, her ears pricked. The dog stared intently out into storm.

“Wait here,” said Rhys.

He walked out of the grotto and the wind smote him with such force that even standing upright was difficult.

The wind blew his long dark hair back from his face, whipped his orange robes around his thin body. The salt spray stung his eyes, the sand tore at his flesh. Shielding his eyes with his hand, he peered about. The lightning flashes were almost constant. He saw the black waves with their white, foaming tops and the seaweed being blow along the empty beach and that was all. He was about to return to the shelter of the grotto when he heard a cry, this time sounding behind him.

A gust of wind caught hold of Nightshade, sending him staggering backward for a few feet, then knocking him flat.

Rhys braced himself against the gale and, reaching down his hand, grabbed hold of Nightshade and hoisted the kender to his feet.

“I told you to wait inside!” Rhys shouted.

“I thought you were talking to Atta!” Nightshade yelled back. The kender turned around to the dog, whose ears were flat against her head from the force of the wind. He shook his finger at her. “Atta, stay inside!”

Rhys was hanging on to Nightshade, who was trying to stand against the wind and not having much luck, when he heard the cry.

“There it is again!” shouted Nightshade.

“Yes, but where?” Rhys returned.

He looked at Atta. She was standing at alert, her ears forward, her tail motionless. She was staring out to sea.

The cry came again, shrill and clear, cutting through the howling wind. Squinting his eyes against the spray and sand, Rhys again peered into the night.

“Blessed Majere!” he gasped. “Wait here!” he ordered Nightshade, who didn’t have much choice in the matter, since every time he stood up the wind knocked him down again.

In the last flash of lightning, Rhys had seen a child, a little girl, to judge by the two long braids whipping out in front of her, floundering waist-deep in the wind-tossed sea. He lost her momentarily in the darkness and prayed for another lightning strike. A sheet of white-purple light flared across the sky and there was the girl, waving her arms and crying out for help. She was desperately trying to make it to shore, fighting the vicious rip current trying to drag her back out to sea.

Rhys fought against the wind, wiping his eyes free of the spray, keeping his gaze fixed on the child, who continued to struggle toward the shore. She was almost there when a foaming wave crashed over the girl’s head and she vanished. Rhys stared at the boiling froth, praying for the child to emerge, but he saw nothing.

He tried to increase his speed, but the wind was blowing off the sea, driving him backward a step for every two he took forward. He struggled on, continuing to search for the child as he fought his way toward the water. He saw no one, and he began to fear the sea had claimed its victim, when suddenly he saw the girl’s body, black in the silver moonlight, lying on the shore. The child lay face down in the shallow water, her long braids floating around her.

The wind ceased to blow so suddenly that Rhys, pushing against it, overbalanced and pitched forward onto the wet sand. He looked about in wonder. The lightning had flickered and gone out. The thunder had fallen silent. The storm clouds had vanished, as though sucked in by a giant breath. The red light of dawn glimmered on the horizon. In the dark sky above him, the two moons, Lunitari and Solinari, still kept watch.

He didn’t like this sudden calm. It was like being in the eye of

the hurricane. Though this storm had abated and blue sky could be seen above, it was as if the gods were waiting for the back end of the storm to slam into him.

Recovering from his fall, Rhys ran along the wet shore toward the child, who lay unmoving in the surf.

He rolled her over onto her back. Her eyes were closed. She was not breathing. Rhys remembered with vivid clarity the time he'd nearly drowned after jumping off the cliffs of Storm's Keep. Zeboim had saved him then, and he used her technique now to try to save the child. He pumped the little girl's arms, all the while praying to Majere. The child gave a cough and a gasp. Spewing sea water out of her mouth, she sat up, still coughing.

Rhys pounded her on the back. More sea water came up. The girl caught her breath.

"Thanks, mister," she gasped, then she fainted.

"Rhys!" Nightshade was yelling, running across the sand, with Atta racing ahead of him. "Did you save her? Is she dead? I hope not. Wasn't that funny the way the storm stopped—"

Nightshade came dashing up to Rhys's side, just as the sun cleared the horizon and shone full on the little girl's face. The kender gave a strangled gasp and skidded to a halt. He stood, staring.

"Rhys, do you know who—" he began.

"No time for talking, Nightshade!" Rhys said sharply.

The girl's lips were blue. Her breathing was ragged. She was wearing nothing except a plain cotton shift, no shoes or stockings. Rhys had to find some means to warm her or she would die of exposure. He rose to his feet, the limp child in his arms.

"I'll take her back to the cave. I need to build a fire to warm her. You might find some dry wood behind the dunes—"

"But, Rhys, listen—"

"I will in a minute," Rhys said, striving to be patient. "Right now, you need to find dry wood. I have to warm her—"

“Rhys, look at her!” Nightshade said, floundering along behind him. “Don’t you recognize her? It’s her! Mina!”

“Don’t be ridiculous—”

“I’m not,” Nightshade said solemnly. “Believe me, I wish I was. I know this must sound crazy, since the last time we saw Mina she was a grown-up and now she’s grown down, but I’m pretty sure it’s her. I know because I feel the same way when I look at this little girl that I felt when I first saw Mina. I feel sad.”

“Nightshade,” said Rhys wearily, “firewood.”

“If you don’t believe me,” Nightshade added, “look at Atta. She knows her, too.”

Rhys had to admit that Atta was acting strangely. Ordinarily, the dog would have come leaping to him, eager to help, ready to lick the child’s cold cheek or nudge her limp hand—healing remedies known and trusted by all dogs. But Atta was keeping her distance. She stood braced on stiff legs, her hackles raised, her upper lip curled back over her teeth. Her brown eyes, fixed on the girl, were not friendly. She growled, low in her throat.

“Atta! Stop that!” Rhys reprimanded.

Atta quit growling, but she did not relax her defensive stance. She gazed at Rhys with a hurt and exasperated expression; hurt that he didn’t trust her and exasperated, as though she’d like to nip some sense into him.

Rhys looked down at the child he held in his arms, took a good, long look at her. She was a girl of about six years of age. A pretty child with long red braids that dangled down over his arm. Her face was pale, and she had a light smattering of freckles over her nose. Thus far, he had no reason to think either the dog or the kender were right. And then she stirred and moaned in his arms. Her eyes, which had been closed, partially opened, and he could see, beneath the half-closed lids, glints of amber.

A cold qualm shook Rhys, and he gasped softly.

"Told you so," Nightshade said. "Didn't we, Atta?"

The dog growled again.

"If want my advice, you'll dump her back into the ocean," Nightshade said. "Only last night she was going to torture you because you wouldn't tell her who she was when you told her you didn't know the answer and she was going to make me and Atta die in torment. Remember?"

Rhys recovered from his initial shock. "I'm not going to dump her in the ocean. A lot of people have red hair."

He continued toward the grotto.

Nightshade sighed. "I didn't think he'd listen. I'll go find firewood. C'mon, Atta."

The kender set off, not very enthusiastically. Atta cast a worried glance at Rhys, then trotted along after the kender.

Rhys carried the child inside the grotto, which wasn't very comfortable and certainly not very dry; the rock-strewn floor was still wet, and there were puddles here and there. But at least they were out of the wind. A blazing fire would soon warm the chill cavern.

The girl stirred and moaned again. Rhys chaffed her cold hands and smoothed back her wet, auburn hair.

"Child," he said gently. "Don't be frightened. You are safe."

The girl opened her eyes, amber eyes, clear amber, like honey, golden and pure. The same eyes as Mina's, except no trapped souls, as he had seen in Mina's eyes.

"I'm cold," the girl complained, shivering.

"My friend has gone to get wood for a fire. You'll soon be warm."

The girl stared at him, at his orange robes. "You're a monk." She frowned, as though trying to remember something. "Monks go around helping people, don't they? Will you help me?"

"Gladly, child," Rhys said. "What do you want of me?"

The girl's face grew pinched. She was now fully awake and

shivering so that her teeth chattered. Her grip on his hand tightened.

"I'm lost," she said. Her lower lip quivered. Her eyes filled with tears. "I ran away from home and now I can't find my way back."

Rhys was relieved. Nightshade was wrong. The girl was likely some fisherman's child who'd been caught out in the storm, been swept out to sea. She could not have walked far. Her village must close by. He pitied her parents. They must be frantic with worry.

"Once you are warm, I will take you, child," Rhys promised. "Where do you live?"

The girl curled up in a shivering ball. Her eyes closed and she yawned. "You've probably never heard of it," she said sleepily. "It's a place called . . ."

Rhys had to lean close to her hear her drowsy whisper. "Godshome."