

Dragons of a Fallen Sun

The War of Souls, Volume One

By Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman

Mina's Song

The day has passed beyond our power.
The petals close upon the flower.
The light is failing in this hour
Of day's last waning breath.

The blackness of the night surrounds
The distant souls of stars now found,
Far from this world to which we're bound,
Of sorrow, fear and death.

Sleep, love; forever sleep.
Your soul the night will keep.
Embrace the darkness deep.
Sleep, love; forever sleep.

The gathering darkness takes our souls,
Embracing us in chilling folds,
Deep in a Mistress's void that holds
Our fate within her hands.

Dream, warriors, of the dark above
And feel the sweet redemption of
The Night's Consort, and of her love
For those within her bands.

Sleep, love; forever sleep.
Your soul the night will keep.
Embrace the darkness deep.
Sleep, love; forever sleep.

We close our eyes, our minds at rest,
Submit our wills to her behest,
Our weaknesses to her confessed,
And to her will we bend.

The strength of silence fills the sky,
Its depth beyond both you and I.
Into its arms our souls will fly,
Where fear and sorrows end.

Sleep, love; forever sleep.
Your soul the night will keep.
Embrace the darkness deep.
Sleep, love; forever sleep.

CHAPTER ONE

The Song of Death

The dwarves named the valley Gamashinoch—the Song of Death. None of the living walked here of their own free will. Those who entered did so out of desperation, dire need, or because they had been ordered to do so by their commanding officer.

They had been listening to the “song” for several hours as their advance brought them nearer and nearer the desolate valley. The song was eerie, terrible. Its words, which were never clearly heard, never quite distinguishable—at least not with the ears—spoke of death and worse than death. The song spoke of entrapment, bitter frustration, unending torment. The song was a lament, a song of longing for a place the soul remembered, a haven of peace and bliss now unattainable.

On first hearing the mournful song, the knights had reined in their steeds, hands reaching for their swords as they stared about them in unease, crying “what is that?” and “who goes there?”

But no one went there. No one of the living. The knights looked at their commander, who stood up in his stirrups, inspecting the cliffs that soared above them on their right and the left.

“It is nothing,” he said at last. “The wind among the rocks. Proceed.”

He urged his horse forward along the road which ran, turning and twisting, through the mountains known as the Lords of Doom. The men under his command followed single-file, the pass was too narrow for the mounted patrol to ride abreast.

“I have heard the wind before, my lord,” said one man gruffly, “and it has yet to have a human voice. It warns us to stay away. We would do well to heed it.”

“Nonsense!” Talon leader Ernst Magit swung around in his saddle to glare at his scout and second-in-command, who walked behind him. “Superstitious clap trap! But then you minotaurs are noted for clinging to old, outmoded ways and ideas. It is time you entered the modern era. The gods are gone and good riddance, I say. We humans rule the world.”

A single voice, a woman's voice, had first sung the Song of Death. Now her voice was joined by a fearful chorus, a chorus of men, women and children, raised in a dreadful chant of hopeless loss and misery that echoed among the mountains.

At the doleful sound, several of the horses balked, refused to go farther, and, truth told, their masters did little to urge them.

Magit's horse shied and danced. He dug his spurs into the horse's flanks, leaving great bloody gouges, and the horse sulked forward, head lowered, ears twitching. Talon Leader Magit rode about half a mile when it occurred to him that he did not hear other hoof beats. Glancing around, he saw that he was proceeding alone. None of his men had followed.

Furious, Magit turned and galloped back to his command. He found half of his patrol dismounted, the other half looking very ill-at-ease, sitting astride horses that stood shivering on the road.

"The dumb beasts have more brains than their masters," said the minotaur, from his place on the ground. Few horses will allow a minotaur to sit upon their backs and fewer still have the strength and girth to carry one of the huge minotaur. Galdar was seven-foot-tall, counting his horns. He kept up with the patrol, running easily alongside the stirrup of his commander.

Magit sat upon his horse, his hands on the pommel, facing his men. He was a tall, excessively thin man, the type whose bones seem to be strung together with steel wire, for he was far stronger than he looked. His eyes were flat and watery blue, without intelligence, without depth. He was noted for his cruelty, his inflexible—many would say mindless—discipline, and his complete and total devotion to a single cause—Ernst Magit.

"You will mount your horses and you will ride after me," said Talon Leader Magit coldly, "or I will report each and every one of you to the group commander. I will accuse you of cowardice and betrayal of the vision and mutiny. As you know, the penalty for each and every one of those counts is death."

"Can he do that?" whispered one of the men, a newly made knight on his first assignment.

"He can," returned one of the veterans grimly. "And he will."

The knights remounted, urged their steeds forward, using their spurs. They were forced to circle around the minotaur Galdar, who remained standing in the center of the road.

"Do you refuse to obey my command, Minotaur?" demanded Magit angrily. "Think well before you do so. You may be the protégé of the Protector of the Skull, but I doubt if even he could save you if I denounce you to the Council as a coward and an oath-breaker."

Leaning over his horse's neck, Magit spoke in mock confidentiality. "And from what I hear, Galdar, your master might not be too keen on protecting you anymore. A one-armed minotaur. A minotaur whose own kind view him with pity and with scorn. A minotaur who has been reduced to the position of 'scout'. And we all know that they assigned you to that post only because they had to do something with you. Although I did hear it suggested that they turn you out to pasture with the rest of the cows."

Galdar clenched his fist, his remaining fist, driving the sharp nails into his flesh. He knew very well that Magit was baiting him, goading him into a fight. Here, where there would be few witnesses. Here where Magit could kill the crippled minotaur and return home to claim that the fight had been a fair and glorious one. Galdar was not particularly attached to life, not since the loss of his sword arm had transformed him from fearsome warrior to plodding scout. But he'd be damned if he was going to die at the hands of Ernst Magit. Galdar wouldn't give his commander the satisfaction.

The minotaur shouldered his way past Ernst Magit, who watched him with a sneer of contempt upon his thin lips.

The patrol continued toward their destination, hoping to reach it while there was yet sunlight—if one could term the chill gray light that warmed nothing it touched sunlight. The Song of Death wailed and mourned. One of the new recruits rode with tears streaming down his cheeks. The veterans rode hunkered down, shoulders hunched up around their ears, as if they would block out the sound. But even if they had stuffed their ears with tow, even if they had blown out their ear drums, they would have still heard the terrible song.

The Song of Death sang in the heart.

The patrol rode into the valley that was called Neraka.

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In a time past memory, the goddess Takhisis, Queen of Darkness, laid in the southern end of the valley a foundation stone, rescued from the blasted temple of the Kingpriest of Istar. The foundation stone began to grow, drawing upon the evil in the world to give it life. The stone grew into a temple, vast and awful, a temple of magnificent, hideous darkness.

Takhisis planned to use this temple to return to the world from which she'd been driven by Huma Dragonbane, but her way was blocked by love and self-sacrifice. Nevertheless she had great power and she launched a war upon the world which came near to destroying it. Her evil commanders, like a pack of wild dogs, fell to fighting among themselves. A band of heroes rose up. Looking into their hearts, they found the power to thwart her, defeat her, and cast her down. Her temple at Neraka was destroyed, blasted apart in her rage at her downfall.

The temple's walls exploded and rained down from the skies on that terrible day, huge black boulders that crushed the city of Neraka. Cleansing fires destroyed the buildings of the cursed city, burned down its markets and its slave pens, its numerous guard houses, filling its twisted, maze-like streets with ash.

Over fifty years later, no trace of the original city remained. The splinters of the temple's bones littered the floor of the southern portion of valley of Neraka. The ash had long since blown away. Nothing would grow in this part of the valley. All sign of life had long been covered up by the swirling sands.

Only the black boulders, remnants of the temple, remained in the valley. They were an awful sight and even Talon Leader Magit, gazing upon them for the first time,

wondered privately if his decision to ride into this part of the valley had been a smart one. He could have taken the long route around, but that would have added two days to his travel and he was late as it was, having spent a few extra nights with a new whore who had arrived at his favorite bawdy house. He needed to make up time and he'd chosen as his shortcut this route through the southern end of the valley.

Perhaps due to the force of the explosion, the black rock that had formed the outer walls of the temple had taken on a crystalline structure. Jutting up from the sand, the boulders were not craggy, not lumpy. They were smooth-sided, with sharply defined planes culminating in faceted points. Imagine black quartz crystals jutting up from gray sand, some as tall as four times the height of a man. A man could see his reflection in those glossy black planes, a reflection that was distorted, twisted, yet completely recognizable as being a reflection of himself.

These men had willingly joined up with the army of the knights of Takhisis, tempted by the promises of loot and slaves won in battle, by their own delight in killing and bullying, by their hatred of elves or kender or dwarves or anyone different from themselves. These men, long since hardened against every good feeling, looked into the shining black plane of the crystals and were appalled by the faces that looked back. For on those faces they could see their mouths opening to sing the terrible song.

Most looked and shuddered and quickly averted their gaze. Galdar took care not to look. At first sight of the black crystals rising from the ground, he had lowered his eyes and he kept them lowered out of reverence and respect. Call it superstition, as Ernst Magit most certainly would. The gods themselves were not in this valley. Galdar knew that to be impossible; the gods had been driven from Krynn more than thirty years ago. But the ghosts of the gods lingered here, of that Galdar was certain.

Ernst Magit looked at his reflection in the rocks and, simply because he shrank from it inwardly, he forced himself to stare at it until he had stared it down.

"I will not be *cowed* by the sight of my own shadow!" he said with a meaningful glance at Galdar. Magit had only recently thought up this bovine humor. He considered it extremely funny and highly original and he lost no opportunity to use it. "Cowed. Do you get it, minotaur?" Ernst Magit laughed.

The death song swept up the man's laughter and gave it melody and tone—dark, off-key, discordant, opposing the rhythm of the other voices of the song. The sound was so horrible that Ernst was shaken. He coughed, swallowed his laughter, much to the relief of his men.

"You have brought us here, Talon Leader," said Galdar. "We have seen that this part of the valley is uninhabited, that no force of Solamnics hides here, prepared to sweep down on us. You have seen that we may proceed toward our objective safe in the knowledge that we have nothing to fear from this direction. Let us now leave this place and swiftly. Let us turn back and make our report."

The horses who had entered the southern valley with such reluctance that in some cases their riders had been forced to dismount and cover their eyes and guide them, as if from a burning building, were clearly eager to be gone. They edged their way back toward the road by which they'd arrived, their riders edging along with them.

Ernst Magit wanted to leave this place as much as any of them. And it was for precisely that reason he decided that they would stay. He was a coward at heart. He knew he was a coward. All his life, he'd done deeds to prove to himself that he wasn't. Nothing truly heroic. Magit avoided danger when at all possible, one reason he was riding patrol duty and not joining with the other Knights of Neraka to lay siege to the Solamnic-controlled city of Sanction. He undertook to perform cheap, petty actions and deeds that involved no risk to himself but which would prove to himself and to his men that he wasn't afraid. A deed like spending the night in this cursed valley.

Magit made a show of squinting up at the sky, which was a pale and unwholesome yellow, a peculiar shade, such as none of the knights had ever before seen.

"It is now twilight," he announced sententiously. "I do not want to find myself benighted in the mountains. We will make camp here and ride out in the morning."

The knights stared at their commander incredulously, appalled. The wind had ceased to blow. The song no longer sang in their hearts. Silence settled over the valley, a silence that was at first a welcome change, but which they were growing to loathe the longer it lasted. The silence weighed on them, oppressed them, smothered them. None spoke. They waited for their commander to tell them he'd been playing a little joke on them.

Talon Leader Magit dismounted his horse. "We will set up camp here. Pitch my command tent near the tallest of those monoliths. Galdar, you're in charge of setting up camp. I trust that you can handle that simple task?"

His words seemed unnaturally loud, his voice shrill and raucous. A breath of air, cold and sharp, hissed through the valley, swept the sand into dust devils that swirled across the barren ground and whispered away.

"You are making a mistake, sir," said Galdar in a soft undertone, to disturb the silence as little as possible. "We are not wanted here."

"Who does not want us, Galdar?" Talon Leader Magit sneered. "These rocks?" He slapped the side of the black crystal monolith. "Ha! What a thick-skulled, superstitious cow!" Magit's gaze hardened. "You men. Dismount and begin setting up camp. That is an order."

Ernst Magit stretched his limbs, making a show of being relaxed. He bent double at the waist, did a few limbering exercises. The knights, sullen and unhappy, did as he commanded. They unpacked their saddle rolls, began setting up the small, two-man tents carried by half the patrol. The others unpacked the food and water.

The tents were a failure. No amount of hammering could drive the iron spikes into the hard ground. Every blow of the hammer reverberated among the mountains, came back to them amplified a hundred times, until it seemed as if the mountains were hammering on them.

Galdar threw down his mallet, which he had been awkwardly wielding with his remaining hand.

"What's the matter, minotaur?" Magit demanded. "Are you so weak you can't drive a tent stake?"

"Try it yourself, sir," said Galdar.

The other men tossed down their mallets, stood staring at their commander in sullen defiance.

Magit was pale with anger. “You men can sleep in the open if you are so stupid as to be unable to pitch a simple tent!”

He did not, however, choose to try to hammer the tent stakes into the rocky floor. He searched around until he located four of the black, crystal monoliths which formed a rough, irregular square.

“Tie my tent to four of these boulders,” he ordered. “At least I will sleep well this night.”

Galdar did as he was commanded. He wrapped the ropes around the bases of the monoliths, all the while muttering a minotaur incantation meant to propitiate the spirits of the restless dead.

The men also endeavored to tie their horses to the monoliths, but the beasts plunged and bucked in panicked terror. Finally, the knights strung a line between two of the monoliths and tied the horses up there. The horses huddled together, restive and nervous, rolling their eyes and keeping as far from the black rocks as possible.

While the men worked, Ernst Magit drew a map from his saddle bags and, with a final glare around to remind them of their duty, he spread the map open and began studying it with a studious and unconcerned air that fooled no one. He was sweating and he'd done no work.

Long shadows were stealing over the valley of Neraka, making the valley far darker than the sky, which was lit with a flame-yellow afterglow. The air was hot, hotter than when they'd entered, but sometimes eddies of cold wind would swirl down from the west, chilling the bones to the marrow. The knights had brought no wood with them. They ate cold rations or tried to eat them. Every mouthful was polluted with sand, everything they ate tasted of ashes. They eventually threw most of their food away. Seated upon the hard ground, they were constantly looking over their shoulders, peering intently into the shadows. Each man had his sword drawn. No need to set the watch. No man intended to sleep.

“Ho! Look at this!” Ernst Magit called out with triumph. “I have made an important discovery! It is well that we spent some time here.” He pointed at his map and then to the west. “See that mountain range there. It is not marked upon the map. It must be newly formed. I shall certainly bring this to the attention of the Protector. Perhaps the range will be named in my honor.”

Galdar looked at the mountain range, rose slowly to his feet, staring hard into the western sky. Certainly at first glance the formation of iron gray and sullen blue looked very much like a new mountain had thrust up from the ground. But as Galdar watched, he noticed something which the talon leader, in his eagerness, had missed. This mountain was growing, expanding, at an alarming rate.

“Sir!” Galdar cried. “That is no mountain! Those are storm clouds!”

“You are already a cow, don't be an ass as well,” Magit said. He had picked up a bit of black rock, was using it like to chalk to add Mount Magit to the wonders of the world.

“Sir, I spent ten years at sea when I was a youth,” said Galdar. “I know a storm when I see one. Yet even I have never seen anything like that!”

Now the cloud bank reared up with incredible speed, solid black at its heart, roiling and churning like some many-headed, devouring monster, biting off the tops of the mountains as it overtook them, crawling over them to consume them whole. The chill wind strengthened, whipping the sand from the ground into eyes and mouths, tearing at the command tent, which flapped wildly and strained against its bonds.

The wind sang a terrible song, keening, wailing in despair, shrieking in anguished torment.

Buffeted by the wind, the men struggled to their feet. “Commander! We should leave!” Galdar roared. “Now! Before the storm breaks!”

“Yes,” said Ernst Magit, pale and shaken. He licked his lips, spit out sand. “Yes, you are right. We should leave immediately. Never mind the tent! Bring me my horse!”

A bolt of lightning flashed out from the blackness, speared the ground near where the horses were tethered. Thunder exploded. The concussion knocked some of the men flat. The horses screamed, reared, lashed out with their hooves. The men who were still standing tried to calm them, but the horses would have none of it. Tearing free of the rope that held them, the horses galloped away in mad panic.

“Catch them!” Ernst screamed, but the men had all they could do to stand upright against the pummeling wind. One or two took a few staggering steps after the horses, but it was obvious that the chase was a futile one.

The storm clouds raced across the sky, battling the sunlight, defeating it handily. The sun fell, overcome by darkness.

Night was upon them, a night thick with swirling sand. Galdar could see nothing at all, not even his own single hand and then the next second all around him was illuminated by another devastating lightning bolt.

“Lie down!” he bellowed, flinging himself to the ground. “Lie flat! Keep away from the monoliths!”

Rain slashed sideways, coming at them like arrows fired from a million bowstrings. Hail pounded on them like iron-tipped flails, cutting and bruising. Galdar’s hide was tough, the hail was like stinging ant bites to him. The other men were crying out in pain and terror. Lightning walked among them, casting its flaming spears. Thunder shook the ground and boomed and roared.

Galdar lay sprawled on his stomach, fighting against the impulse to tear at the ground with his hand, to burrow into the depths of the world. He was astounded to see, in the next lightning flash, his commander trying to stand up.

“Sir, keep down!” Galdar roared and even made a grab for him.

Magit snarled a curse and kicked at Galdar’s hand. Head down against the wind, the talon leader lurched over to one of the monoliths. He crouched behind it, used its great bulk to shield him from the lancing rain and the hammering hail. Laughing at the rest of his men, he sat on the ground, placed his back against the stone and stretched out his legs.

The lightning flash blinded Galdar. The blast deafened him. The force of the thunderbolt lifted him up off the ground, slammed him back down. The bolt had struck so

close that he had heard it sizzle the air, could smell the phosphorous and the sulfur. He could also smell something else—burned flesh. He rubbed his eyes to try to see through the jagged glare. When his sight was restored, he looked in the direction of the commander. In the next lightning flash, he saw a misshapen mass huddled at the foot of the monolith.

Magit's flesh glowed red beneath a black crust, like a hunk of overcooked meat. Smoke rose from it; the wind whipped it away, along with flecks of charred flesh. The skin of the man's face had burned away, revealing a mouthful of hideously grinning teeth.

"Glad to see you're still laughing, Talon Leader," Galdar muttered. "You were warned."

Galdar scrunched down even closer to the ground, cursed his ribs for being in the way.

The rain fell harder, if that were possible. He wondered how long the raging storm could last. It seemed to have lasted a lifetime, seemed to him that he had been born into this storm and that he would grow old and die in this storm. A hand grabbed hold of his arm, shook him.

"Sir! Look there!" One of the knights had crawled across the ground, was right next to him. "Sir!" The knight put his mouth to Galdar's ear, shouted hoarsely to make himself heard over the lashing rain and pounding hail, the constant thunder and, worse than rain or hail or thunder, the song of death. "I saw something move out there!"

Galdar lifted his head, peered in the direction the knight pointed, peered into the very heart of the valley of Neraka.

"Wait until the next lightning flash!" the knight yelled. "There! There it is!"

The next lightning flash was not a bolt but a sheet of flame that lit the sky and the ground and the mountains with a purple white radiance. Silhouetted against the awful glow was a figure moving toward them, walking calmly through the raging storm, seeming untouched by the gale, unmoved by the lightning, unafraid of the thunder.

"Is it one of ours?" Galdar asked, thinking at first that one of the men might have gone mad and bolted like the horses.

But he knew the moment he asked the question that this was not the case. The figure was walking, not running. The figure was not fleeing, the figure was approaching.

The lightning flared out. Darkness fell and the figure was lost. Galdar waited impatiently for the next lightning flash to show him this insane being, who braved the fury of the storm. The next flash lit the ground, the mountains, the sky. The person was still there, still moving toward them. And it seemed to Galdar that the song of death had transformed into a paean of celebration.

Darkness again. The wind died. The rain softened to a steady downpour. The hail ceased altogether. Thunder rumbled a drum roll that seemed to mark time with the pace of the strange figure of darkness who drew steadily nearer with each illuminating flare. The storm carried the battle to the other side of the mountains, to other parts of the world. Galdar rose to his feet.

Soaking wet, the knights wiped water and muck from their eyes, looked ruefully at sodden blankets. The wind was cold and crisp and chill and they were shivering except Galdar, whose thick hide and fur pelt protected him from all but the most severe cold. He

shook the rain water from his horns and waited for the figure to come within hailing distance.

Stars, glittering cold and deadly as spear points, appeared in the west. The ragged edges of the storm's rear echelon seemed to uncover the stars as they passed. The single moon had risen in defiance of the thunder. The figure was no more than twenty feet away now, and by the moon's argent light Galdar could see the person clearly.

Human, a youth, to judge by the slender, well-knit body and the smooth skin of the face. Dark hair had been shaved close to the skull, leaving only a red stubble. The absence of hair accentuated the features of the face, thrust into prominence the high cheekbones, the sharp chin, the mouth in its bow curve. The youth wore the shirt and tunic of a common foot knight and leather boots, carried no sword upon his hip, nor any sort of weapon that Galdar could see.

"Halt and be recognized!" he shouted harshly. "Stop right there. At the edge of camp."

The youth obligingly halted, his hands raised, palms outward to show that they were empty.

Galdar drew his sword. In this strange night, he was taking no chances. He held the sword awkwardly in his left hand. The weapon was almost useless to him. Unlike some other amputees, he had never learned to fight with his opposite hand. He had been a skilled swordsman before his injury, now he was clumsy and inept, as much likely to do damage to himself as to a foe. Many were the times Ernst Magit had watched Galdar practice, watched him fumble, and laughed uproariously.

Magit wouldn't be doing much laughing now.

Galdar advanced, sword in hand. The hilt was wet and slippery, he hoped he wouldn't drop it. The youth could not know that Galdar was a washed-up warrior, a has-been. The minotaur looked intimidating and Galdar was somewhat surprised that the youth did not quail before him, did not even really look all that impressed.

"I am unarmed," said the youth in a deep voice that did not match the youthful appearance. The voice had an odd timbre to it, sweet, musical, reminding Galdar strangely of one of the voices he'd heard in the song, the song which was now hushed and murmuring, as if in reverence. The voice was not the voice of a man.

Galdar looked very closely at the youth, at the slender neck that was like the long stem of a lily, supporting the skull which was perfectly smooth beneath its red down of hair, marvelously formed. The minotaur looked closely at the lithe body. The arms were muscular, as were the legs in their woolen stockings. The wet shirt, which was too big, hung loosely from the slender shoulders. Galdar could see nothing beneath its wet folds, could not ascertain yet whether this human was male or female.

The other knights gathered around him, all of them staring at the wet youth; wet and glistening as a newborn child. The men were frowning, uneasy, wary. Small blame to them. Everyone was asking the same question as Galdar. What in the name of the great horned god who had died and left his people bereft was this human doing in this accursed valley on this accursed night?

"What are you called?" Galdar demanded.

“My name is Mina.”

A girl. A slip of a girl. She could be no more than seventeen . . . if that. Yet even though she had spoken her name, a feminine name, popular among humans, even though he could trace her sex in the smooth lines of her neck and the grace of her movements, he still doubted. There was something very unwomanly about her.

Mina smiled slightly, as if she could hear his unspoken doubts and said, “I *am* female.” She shrugged. “Though it makes little difference.”

“Come closer,” Galdar ordered harshly.

The girl obeyed, took a step forward.

Galdar looked into her eyes and his breath very nearly stopped. He had seen humans of all shapes and sizes during his lifetime, but he’d never seen one, never seen any living being with eyes like these.

Unnaturally large, deep-set, the eyes were the color of amber, the pupil black, the iris encircled by a ring of shadow. The absence of hair made the eyes appear larger still. Mina seemed all eyes and those eyes absorbed Galdar and imprisoned him, as golden amber holds imprisoned the carcasses of small insects.

“Are you the commander?” she asked.

Galdar flicked a glance in the direction of the charred body lying at the base of the monolith. “I am now,” he said.

Mina followed his gaze, regarded the corpse with cool detachment. She turned the amber eyes back to Galdar, who could have sworn he saw the body of Magit locked inside.

“What are you doing here, girl?” the minotaur asked harshly. “Did you lose your way in the storm?”

“No. I found my way in the storm,” said Mina. The amber eyes were luminous, unblinking. “I found you. I have been called and I have answered. You are Knights of Takhisis, are you not?”

“We were once,” said Galdar dryly. “We waited long for Takhisis’s return, but now the commanders admit what most of us knew long before. She is not coming back. Therefore we have come to term ourselves Knights of Neraka.”

Mina listened, considered this. She seemed to like it, for she nodded gravely. “I understand. I have come to join the Knights of Neraka.”

At any other time, in any other place, the knights might have snickered or made rude remarks. But the men were in no mood for levity. Neither was Galdar. The storm had been terrifying, unlike any he’d ever experienced and he had lived in this world forty years. Their talon leader was dead. They had a long walk ahead of them, unless by some miracle they could recover the horses. They had no food—the horses had run away with their supplies, no water except what they could wring out of their sodden blankets.

“Tell the silly chit to run back home to mama,” said one knight impatiently. “What do *we* do, Subcommander?”

“I say we get out of here,” said another. “I’ll walk all night if I have to.”

The other muttered their assent.

Galdar looked to the heavens. The sky was clear, thunder rumbled but in the distance. Far away, lightning flashed purple on the western horizon. The moon gave light enough to travel. Galdar was tired, unusually tired, the men were hollow-cheeked and gaunt, all of them near exhaustion. Yet he knew how they felt.

“We’re moving out,” he said. “But first we need to do something with that.” He jerked a thumb at the smoldering body of Ernst Magit.

“Leave it,” said one of the knights.

Galdar shook his horned head. He was conscious, all the while, of the girl watching him intently with those strange eyes of hers.

“Do you want to be haunted by his spirit the rest of your days?” Galdar demanded.

The others eyed each other, eyed the body. They would have guffawed at the thought of Magit’s ghost haunting them the day before. Not now.

“What do we do with him?” demanded one plaintively. “We can’t bury the bastard. The ground’s too hard. We don’t have any wood for a fire.”

“Wrap the body in that tent,” said Mina. “Take those rocks and build a cairn over him. He is not the first to die in the valley of Neraka,” she added coolly, “nor will he be the last.”

Galdar glanced over his shoulder. The tent which they had strung between the monoliths remained intact, though it sagged with an accumulation of rain water.

“The girl’s idea is a good one,” he said. “Cut down the tent and use it for a shroud. And be quick about it. The quicker we’re finished, the quicker we’re away. Strip off his armor,” he added. “We’re required to take it back to headquarters, as proof of his death.”

“How?” asked one of the knights, grimacing. “His flesh is stuck to the metal, like a steak seared on a gridiron.”

“Cut it off,” said Galdar. “And clean it up as best you can. I wasn’t that fond of him that I want to be hauling bits of him around.”

The men went about their grisly task with a will, eager to be done and away.

Galdar turned back to Mina, found those amber eyes, large, intent upon him.

“You had best go back to your family, girl,” he said gruffly. “We’ll be traveling hard and fast. We won’t have time to coddle you. Besides, you’re a female. These men are no very great respecter of women’s virtues. You run along home.”

“I am home,” said Mina with a glance around the valley. The black monoliths reflected the cold light of the stars, summoned the stars to shine pale and chill among them. “And I have found my family. I will become a knight. That is my calling.”

Galdar was exasperated, uncertain what to say. The last thing he wanted was this fey woman-child traveling with them. But she was so self-possessed, so completely in control of herself and in control of the situation that he could not come up with any rational argument.

Thinking the matter over, he made to return his sword to its sheath. The hilt was wet and slippery, his grip on it awkward. He fumbled, nearly dropped the sword. Managing to hang onto it by a desperate effort, he looked up fiercely, glowering, daring her to so much as smile with either derision or pity.

She watched his struggles, said nothing, her face expressionless.

Galdar shoved the sword into the sheath. “As to joining the knighthood, the best thing to do is go to your local headquarters and put in your name.”

He continued with a recitation of the recruitment policies, the training involved. He launched into a spiel about the years of dedication and self-sacrifice, all the while thinking of Ernst Magit, who had bought his way into the knighthood, and suddenly Galdar realized that he’d lost her.

The girl was not listening to him. She seemed to be listening to another voice, a voice he could not hear. Her gaze was abstracted, her face smooth, without expression.

His words trailed off.

“Do you not find it difficult to fight one-handed?” she asked.

He regarded her grimly. “I may be awkward,” he said caustically, “but I can handle a sword well enough to strike your shorn head from your body!”

She smiled. “What are you called?”

He turned away. This conversation was at an end. He looked to see that the men had managed to separate Magit from his armor, were rolling the still-smoking lump of a corpse onto the tent.

“Galdar, I believe,” Mina continued.

He turned back to stare at her in astonishment, wondering how she knew his name.

Of course, he thought, one of the men must have spoken it. But he could not recall any of them having done so.

“Give me your hand, Galdar,” Mina said to him.

He glowered at her. “Leave this place while you have a chance, girl! We are in no mood for silly games. My commander’s dead. These men are my responsibility. We have no mounts, no food.”

“Give me your hand, Galdar,” said Mina softly.

At the sound of her voice, rough, sweet, he heard again the song singing among the rocks. He felt his hackles rise. A shudder went through him, a thrill flashed along his spine. He meant to turn away from her, but he found himself raising his left hand.

“No, Galdar,” said Mina. “Your right hand. Give me your right hand.”

“I have no right hand!” Galdar cried out in rage and anguish.

The cry rattled in his throat. The men turned, alarmed, at the strangled sound.

Galdar stared in disbelief. The arm had been cut off at the shoulder. Extending outward from the stump was a ghostly image of what had once been his right arm. The image wavered in the wind, as if his arm were made of smoke and ash, yet he could see it clearly, could see it reflected in the smooth black plane of the monolith. He could feel the phantom arm, but then he’d always felt the arm even when it wasn’t there. Now he watched his arm, his right arm, lift; watched his hand, his right hand, reach out trembling fingers.

Mina extended her hand, touched the phantom hand of the minotaur.

“Your sword arm is restored,” she said to him.

Galdar stared in boundless astoundment.

His arm. His right arm was once again . . .

His right arm.

No longer a phantom arm. No longer an arm of smoke and ash, an arm of dreams to be lost in the despair of waking. Galdar closed his eyes, closed them tight, and then opened them.

The arm remained.

The other knights were struck dumb and motionless. Their faces dead white in the moonlight, they stared at Galdar, stared at the arm, stared at Mina.

Galdar ordered his fingers to open and clench and they obeyed. He reached out with his left hand, trembling, and touched the arm.

The skin was warm, the fur was soft, the arm was flesh and bone and blood. The arm was real.

Galdar reached down the hand and drew his sword. His fingers closed over the hilt lovingly. He was suddenly blinded by tears.

Weak and shivering, Galdar sank to his knees. “Lady,” he said, his voice shaking with awe and wonder. “I do not know what you did or how you did it, but I am in your debt for the rest of my days. Whatever you want of me, I grant you.”

“Swear to me by your sword arm that you will grant me what I ask,” Mina said.

“I swear!” Galdar said harshly.

“Make me your commander,” said Mina.

Galdar’s jaw sagged. His mouth opened and closed. He swallowed. “I . . . I will recommend you to my superiors . . .”

“Make me your commander,” she said, her voice hard as the ground, dark as the monoliths. “I do not fight for greed. I do not fight for gain. I do not fight for power. I fight for one cause and that is glory. Not for myself, but for my god.”

“Who is your god?” Galdar asked, awed.

Mina smiled, a fell smile, pale and cold. “The name may not be spoken. My god is the One God. The One who rides the storm, the One who rules the night. My god is the One God who made your flesh whole. Swear your loyalty to me, Galdar. Follow me to victory.”

Galdar thought of all the commanders under whom he’d served. Commanders like Ernst Magit, who rolled their eyes when the Vision of Neraka was mentioned. The Vision was fake, phony, most of the upper echelon knew it. Commanders like the Master of the Lily, Galdar’s patron, who yawned openly during the recitation of the Blood Oath, who had brought the minotaur into the knighthood as a joke. Commanders like the current Lord of the Night, Targonne, whom everyone knew was skimming funds from the knightly coffers to enrich himself.

Galdar raised his head, looked into the amber eyes. “You are my commander, Mina,” he said. “I swear fealty to you and to no other.”

Mina touched his hand again. Her touch was painful, scalded his blood. He reveled in the sensation. The pain was welcome. For too long now, he’d felt the pain of an arm that wasn’t there.

“You will be my second in command, Galdar.” Mina turned the amber gaze upon the other knights. “Will the rest of you follow me?”

Some of the men had been with Galdar when he lost his arm, had seen the blood spurt from the shattered limb. Four of these men had held him down when the surgeon cut off his arm. They had heard his pleas for death, a death they’d refused to grant him, a death which he could not, in honor, grant himself. These men looked at the new arm, saw Galdar holding a sword again. They had seen the girl walk through the murderous, unnatural storm, walk unscathed.

These men were in their thirties, some of them. Veterans of brutal wars and tough campaigns. It was all very well for Galdar to swear allegiance to this strange woman-child. She had made him whole. But for themselves . . .

Mina did not press them, she did not cajole or argue. She appeared to take their agreement for granted. Walking over to where the corpse of the talon leader lay on the ground beneath the monolith, the body partially wrapped in the tent, Mina picked up Magit’s breastplate. She looked at it, studied it, and then sliding her arms through the straps, she put the breastplate on over her wet shirt. The breastplate was too big for her and heavy. Galdar expected to see her bowed down under the weight.

He gaped to see instead the metal glow red, reform, mold itself to her slender body, embrace her like a lover.

The breastplate had been black with the image of a skull upon it. The armor had been hit by the lightning strike, apparently, though the damage the strike had done was exceedingly strange. The skull adorning the breastplate was split in twain. A lightning bolt of steel sliced through it.

“This will be my standard,” said Mina, touching the skull.

She put on the rest of Magit’s accoutrements, sliding the bracers over her arms, buckling the shin guards over her legs. Each piece of armor glowed red when it touched her as if newly come from the forge. Each piece, when cooled, fit her as if it had been fashioned for her.

She lifted the helm, but did not put it on her head. She handed the helm to Galdar. “Hold that for me, Subcommander,” she said.

He received the helm proudly, reverently, as if it were an artifact for which he had quested all his life.

Mina knelt down beside the body of Ernst Magit. Lifting the dead, charred hand in her own, she bowed her head and began to pray.

None could hear her words, none could hear what she said or to whom she said it. The song of death keened among the stones. The stars vanished, the moon disappeared. Darkness enveloped them. She prayed, her whispered words bringing comfort.

Mina arose from her prayers to find all the knights on their knees before her. In the darkness, they could see nothing, not each other, not even themselves. They saw only her.

“You are my commander, Mina,” said one, gazing upon her as the starving gaze upon bread, the thirsty gaze upon cool water. “I pledge my life to you.”

“Not to me,” she said. “To the One God.”

“The One God!” Their voices lifted and were swept up in the song that was no longer frightening but was exalting, stirring, a call to arms. “Mina and the One God!”

The stars shone in the monoliths. The moonlight gleamed in the jagged lightning bolt of Mina’s armor. Thunder rumbled again, but this time it was not from the sky.

“The horses!” shouted one of the knights. “The horses have returned.”

Leading the horses was a steed the likes of which none had ever seen. Red as wine, red as blood, the horse left the others far behind. The horse came straight to Mina and nuzzled her, rested its head over her shoulder.

“I sent Foxfire for the mounts. We will have need of them,” said Mina, stroking the black mane of the blood-colored roan. “We ride south this night and ride hard. We must be in Sanction in three days time.”

“Sanction!” Galdar gaped. “But, girl—I mean, Talon Leader—the Solamnics control Sanction! The city is under siege. Our posting is in Khur. Our orders—”

“We ride this night to Sanction,” said Mina. Her gaze turned southward and never looked back.

“But, why, Talon Leader?” Galdar asked.

“Because we are called,” Mina answered.