



SHADOW
TALADAS OF THE TRILOGY
FLAME
VOLUME THREE
CHRIS PIERSON



Prologue



AURIM, CITY OF SONGS

The city sparkled like a jewel on the banks of the River Ush. It was a sprawl of marble and lapis, adorned with domes and statues and bridges of shining gold. Flowers of crimson and flame spilled across its gardens, and soldiers riding hippogriffs wheeled above its bustling streets and markets, where men and dwarves and elves from all over Taladas thronged. The rain had just stopped, and steam rose from the rooftops as the sun baked them dry.

Beyond the city's walls, for league upon league, spread green fields and golden hills, ripe with rice and grapes and olives, food enough to sate a continent. The Ush wound its way across the swelling land, a broad silver rope that flowed west toward the shining Indanalis Sea. Away to the north, the river stretched toward an arm of mountains that loomed purple in the morning mist. Cool breezes blew from that direction, rustling leaves and men's cloaks.

Nowhere else in Taladas was there such a city as Aurim—perhaps nowhere on Krynn, though the priests of Istar, far across the sea, might have argued the point. This was the pinnacle of civilization, of learning, of art and music, in all the world. But Maladar an-Desh, its rightful ruler, looked down on his city from the highest tower of his

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palace and saw only swine rooting through rubbish. It could be greater, more glorious, than this. It *should* be. He needed only time—time he did not have.

Today, he thought as the wind billowed his robes. He reached up to touch the hem of his hood, the hood that never fell unless he desired it. Today they will come to kill me.

One could rightly say he deserved to die. Even Maladar, in his black heart, had to admit that truth. Had he not done terrible things? Had he not made powerful enemies? How many thousands had perished in the Square of Spears before the palace and on battlefields far away for the glory of the City of Songs and its emperor? He could not count, not anymore. But they were many, and men remembered. Over time the memories of his enemies had cooled into hate. Assassins had tried to kill him more than a dozen times in the century since he'd wrested control of the empire. They had always failed. But this time . . . today . . . they would succeed.

He foresaw his death—first in dreams, then later confirmed in a scrying-pool filled with the blood of his servants, a hundred men whose throats he'd cut for that one spell. He'd seen his own body, lying twisted in agony on the floor of his throne room as the midday sun shone through its high, sapphire windows, his kicking legs tangled in the folds of his blue and golden robes. He'd watched his hands clench like claws, his back arch, then the slow, smooth relaxation, the breath letting out. Then there was nothing.

That had been a year ago. The dreams had stopped after a while, and he could divine no more, no matter how much blood he spilled into the pool. He did not know who would kill him, or why, or how. But he knew where and when. He might have tried to run, to hide in one of the other cities in the far-flung provinces of his empire, but Maladar was not

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that kind of man. He had gained his power by facing his problems. He would not run.

He *had* made plans, however.

Someone stirred behind him. He turned, a dozen spells flashing through his mind. Maladar was the mightiest archmage Taladas had ever known, and though Nuvis, the black moon, was waning, he still had the power to kill an army if he must. It was no army that stood behind him, though, only a boy of eight summers, a barbarian slave who served him.

The boy kept his almond eyes downcast, never gazing directly at Maladar. He was deeply tanned, his head shaven except for a lone braid that trailed down from its crown—the mark of the Uigan, a tribe that dwelt on Aurim's edges, with whom the empire had warred for millennia. This boy was the son of the Boyla, the Uigan's ruler, whom Maladar had captured in battle five years ago. The Boyla and his elder sons had died screaming, in pits deep beneath the City of Songs. He had sent their heads back to the Uigan, their braids cut off and stuffed in their mouths as a mark of shame. But this one he had kept as his cupbearer and hostage, both to stay any thoughts of vengeance the steppe-riders might harbor, and for his own . . . amusement.

"Shai," Maladar murmured, his voice a low and unpleasant gargle. "I did not summon you."

The boy bowed his head further, never looking up—never. "Even so, Majesty," he said, "the Seven Swords await you below. They seek audience."

Had he been capable, Maladar might have raised an eyebrow. "The Seven? Here?"

Shai nodded. "Caspa sent me to fetch you. She felt it better that she keep watch over them."

"Caspa is wise," Maladar said, his mind rushing. So it

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was the *Seven* who would seek to slay him today, and they would succeed if the blood-vision were to be believed.

The Seven made a kind of sense. They were the mightiest warriors in all of Aurim, ruthless men who commanded its armies and governed its border marches, keeping safe the rich, well-fed provinces at the empire's heart. He had thought them among his allies, for he always made sure to give them what they wanted, whether it was gold or slaves or land. He'd once drowned an entire city—Am Durn, it was called—and given the undamaged surrounding fiefs as a gift to Iadro, the mightiest of the Seven. But such men were ambitious and surely coveted the throne.

“Majesty?” asked Shai. “Shall I have Caspa bid them leave?”

Maladar shook his head. “No, boy. I will be down in a moment.”

The boy touched his forehead, a show of deference, then left. When he was gone, Maladar turned to look out across the city once more. He felt a chill that had nothing to do with the wind: a feeling that he would not gaze upon Aurim again . . . not in this life, anyway.

The wind tugged at his robes again, and he pulled down his hood. Then he whirled and stalked back into the halls of his palace to meet his death.



They were waiting for him in the throne room, a vast, vaulted hall with a floor of tiled moonstone and golden pillars the size of trees. They stood at its far end, beyond the play of light through jeweled windows, beyond the burbling silver fountains and Neroni feathered serpents, coiled in hanging cages of crystal. Maladar emerged from the tower stair behind his throne of carved dragon horn, which stood

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upon a dais amid a wide pool filled with glowing, golden fish. He walked forward to stand by his seat, resting his hand upon its arm. He tried to look untroubled as Caspa, his chamberlain—an aged elf woman who had served Aurim’s emperors for five centuries—crossed the floor. Her spider-silk slippers made no sound.

“Shai tells me I have guests,” Maladar said. He nodded toward the boy, who stood on the far side of the pool. “Bring wine, lad—the Chakani green. We should drink to welcome such august company.”

“The Seven, Majesty,” Caspa said as Shai withdrew to do his master’s bidding. “I asked them to give up their weapons, but they refused.”

“And so they should,” said Maladar, stepping forward. He crossed an invisible bridge, hidden just beneath the pool’s surface, which made him seem for a moment to be walking on water. “These are not common foot soldiers, Caspa; they are the right arm of the empire! Let them keep their blades and come forward.”

The throne room was two hundred paces across, so Maladar had time to think as Caspa went to fetch the Seven. He watched them approach: Iadro, in his enameled crimson armor; Bann the Lofty, seven and a half feet tall with a sword just as big slung across his back; Dreskith of Eöl, whose long beard was dyed the blue of deep water; Farashi Ogrebane, who had a golden left hand and was said to be half dwarf; Ettam and Ettor, twin brothers who fought with knives only; and a whip-thin, veiled warrior simply called Whisper, who never spoke. Maladar watched them come, wondering which would land the killing blow. He doubted it would be Iadro; he was the cleverest general of the lot but not the quickest blade. If he had to lay gold on any of them, it would be Dreskith . . . or possibly Whisper. With that one, it was always hard to tell.

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He hoped to send a few to the Abyss before he fell. If Hith were merciful, he would manage all seven.

“How, then, have you come here?” he asked as the Seven drew near. “Long has it been since all of you have graced my halls together. Is there trouble in the marches? I had hoped for a summer free of war, but if the armies must march . . .”

“War does not bring us, Majesty,” said Iadro. He was smiling; Iadro always smiled, though his eyes glinted like diamond daggers. “Strange tidings have reached our ears, and we have come to parley with you about them.”

The men stopped, standing side by side, far enough apart from each other that he couldn’t hope to kill them all with a single spell, not without bringing down the palace in the bargain. They knew what they were doing today. None had laid a hand near his weapon yet, but they were ready.

“Tidings?” asked Maladar. “Of what sort?”

“A secret army,” said Bann, folding massive arms across his massive chest. “A force you have gathered in the eastern provinces, far from our lands.”

There was a moment’s silence in the throne room as Maladar thought: so, they know. Then he spread his hands. “Please, brothers. I know of no secret army. And why would I gather forces in the east, where peace has reigned since the Dynasty of Nûr?”

“Yes,” said Ettam, frowning, “why, indeed?”

“We were hoping you would tell us,” said Ettor, matching his brother’s glower.

Dreskith, ever the voice of reason among the Seven, held up a hand to stay the hot-headed twins. “Do not play us for fools, Majesty,” he said, stroking his beard. “We know you are smarter than that. We have sent spies to the east. All returned with the same tale: you *are* raising an army. We may not have learned where or who these

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warriors are to our satisfaction, but the news is true.”

“We have ways of making sure those we question do not lie,” added Farashi with an evil grin.

Whisper said nothing, only stood there, cracking his knuckles one at a time.

Maladar looked at them, from one to the next. “I had hoped you wouldn’t learn of this,” he murmured. “Not yet, at least.”

“I bet you did,” said Ettor.

Iadro shook his head. “Majesty, you must understand what we have to think about this army. There is only one reason to muster such a thing in the east when we command so many thousands of men on your western borders.”

“You mean to make war on *us*,” said Bann.

Then Maladar began to laugh.

The Seven bristled at that, for it was not scornful laughter that growled from beneath the Faceless Emperor’s hood, but a gust of genuine mirth. Maladar shook his head. “Oh, my friends,” he said. “Do not be angry when I tell you that you have ridden all this way for nothing! My eastern army is no threat to you . . . or to any living man.”

Ettor snorted at that while the others exchanged glances.

“What do you mean, Majesty?” asked Dreskith. “How can an army be of no threat? What good would such a force be?”

Maladar stepped back, folding his hands into the sleeves of his robe. “I can show you if you wish.”

The Seven were silent. They looked at one another. Ettor and Ettam shook their heads. Farashi made a forked sign with his fingers, a ward against evil, which was laughable considering how many vile things he had done to his enemies. Bann shrugged. Whisper, of course, said nothing. Dreskith leaned close to Iadro and murmured in his ear.

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Finally, the leader of the Seven nodded and took a single step forward, smiling his cold smile.

“I presume,” he said, “that you mean to use magic to do this.”

Maladar inclined his head.

“Know that you will rue any trickery, Majesty,” Iadro replied, “but not for long.”

“I do not doubt it,” Maladar purred. “But come now, my friends. We have done this before, many times, at your war councils. Have I not shown you our enemies and how they would array themselves? Have I not revealed the weaknesses of their keeps and cities? How, then, is this time different?”

Another silence answered him. Armor rattled as the Seven shifted from foot to foot. They looked to Iadro now, and he sighed, for the first time showing the burden of being the leader of such a band.

“So, then,” he said, gesturing for Maladar to begin.

The spell came easily to mind; Maladar had cast it hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times over the course of his reign. Even with the black moon’s power flowing sluggishly, he shaped it with ease, his silken robes fluttering as his hands danced in the air and he spoke the spidery words. The air shimmered around him, as the plains did on hot summer days. Most of the warriors rested their hands on their weapons, ready to draw them the moment anything went awry. Maladar paid them no mind, throwing himself into the magic instead.

He had cast the spell before, hundreds of times, but never quite like this. Today there was other magic, hidden within the weave of the first, magic that might save him . . . if the Seven did not sense it, if Hith willed it, if he was lucky.

Images of his twitching body, rippling in the bloody

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scrying pool, flashed through his mind. He knew his luck would run bad. Fate was fate; it could not be denied.

There was no more time for such thoughts, however; the end of the spell had come. He swept his hands around him, and black, smoky mist trailed from his fingers. The mist hung in the air, then seemed to come alive, swirling and eddying and finally coalescing into shapes. The Seven watched it happen. Dreskith had half-drawn his scimitar, and the twins had their knives in hand, but they all relaxed once the spell took shape. They settled back, sheathing their weapons as the smoke grew solid and the hall around them changed.

The throne room was no more; the moonstone tiles, the pillars and pools and fountains all had vanished. Instead, they stood in a cave of dark, reddish stone—a cave carved by sorcery, not flowing water or the hands of men. They were on a promontory, an outcrop that looked out over a wide, flat floor beneath a dome-shaped ceiling.

“Behold my secret army,” said Maladar.

And yes, there *was* an army in this room. Tens of thousands of soldiers stood arrayed in rows, clad in full armor and bearing swords, bows, and spears. Each of the soldiers was as tall as Bann, perhaps even taller. Full helmets, shaped into the visages of dragons, covered their faces.

But the soldiers were not made of flesh.

“Statues?” murmured Farashi.

Maladar nodded. The soldiers were hewn from dark gray stone—like the cave, made by magic, not mortal hands.

“What is this?” Iadro asked. “Where is this place?”

“I will not tell you where,” Maladar said. “I keep this vault secret from all. I would not have anyone know the whereabouts of my tomb.”

“Tomb?” Ettore echoed.

“Thinking of dying soon?” asked Ettam.

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Maladar shrugged. "All men die," he said. "I have ruled Aurim a long time. It would be foolish not to prepare for the day when my reign ends."

That was only a partial truth. Maladar had not delved this cave, had not sculpted the statues, until after the blood-vision. It had taken two months of spell-casting, months that had left him exhausted. And the last stage had taken as long as all the rest combined. He stepped aside, letting the Seven see what he had wrought.

Standing upon the promontory, looking down on the stone army, was the final statue of shining black rock. It was only slightly larger than a man, but it seemed to swell with power, to suck the light and warmth out of the cave. It was the exact image of Maladar himself, cloaked and hooded as always.

"My resting place," he murmured, reaching out a gloved hand to touch the statue's surface.

The Seven stared in awe. If he could, Maladar would have smiled; instead, he nodded his head and wriggled the fingers of his right hand, just slightly, and let the second spell break free of the weave.

Dreskith was the first; Maladar had chosen him, as the best swordsman, to die before the others. He had no time to speak, no time to move, before the magic took hold. His eyes simply widened, and he fell to his knees with an awful *crack*. Then his skin split open, like a hundred whips had struck him at once, and he was screaming, covered in blood as his body flayed itself open, right down to the bone. His hands clawed the air. His bright blue beard turned deep violet. He fell face-first onto the floor in tatters.

The rest of the Seven reacted as Maladar knew they would; Bann, Iadro, and Farashi were momentarily stunned by what had happened to their sword-brother. Whisper and the twins, however, moved quicker. Ettor and Ettam

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had already drawn their daggers again: long, curved blades etched with glowing runes, the better to cut through armor and magic alike. They leaped forward, their faces alive with feral glee.

Had they been two steps closer, they might have accomplished their goal. Instead, Maladar extended a hand and the twins burst, their skin ripping and sloughing away like Dreskith's had. Their enchanted knives clattered to the floor; then they followed, howling in agony and clutching at their hideous wounds.

Maladar cast about, looking for Whisper, but the veiled warrior was nowhere to be seen, and the others were moving, recovered from their shock. Swords in hand, Iadro and Bann and Farashi swept toward him. Again, the stupid fools were too far away. He killed each of them, Bann last of all as the giant's greatsword was sweeping upward to deliver a blow that would have cut him in half. Maladar had to step aside to keep Bann's shrieking, skinless body from falling on him. It hit the stones with a wet smack.

Only Whisper remained, and still Maladar couldn't see the elusive one. It was the darkness of the cave: Whisper could vanish in shadows, such that not even an elf's sight could find him. He had used his talent in the empire's service many times, to assassinate enemies both within Aurim and without. Maladar felt his heart race, knowing the most dangerous of the Seven was stalking him.

His fear lasted only a moment, though, because he remembered something Whisper hadn't, perhaps: the cave wasn't real, and neither were the shadows. Maladar wriggled his fingers again and let the illusion dissolve.

All at once, vault and statues vanished, turning back to smoke and dissipating into the air. In their place, Maladar stood once more in the sunlit throne room. He spun, looking for Whisper.

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The veiled killer had been right behind him . . . and close. Maladar brought up his hand to kill him, but Whisper sprang an eye's blink before he could release the spell, a punch-dagger flashing in his hand. Hot pain raced through Maladar's side as the blade cut through his flesh. He reached up and tore Whisper's veil away, then wheeled with the impact of the blow. The momentum carried Whisper past him, sent him staggering, the punch-dagger trailing drops of blood . . . *Maladar's* blood. Whisper got his balance back then turned to attack again.

That is no man, Maladar thought as he cast the killing spell again. It hit Whisper as the punch-dagger was darting forward again, but the blade missed, snagging in Maladar's robes. Then Whisper joined the rest of them, howling and writhing, a shredded mess on the floor that fell still after a moment of horrid suffering. In the instant before the skin tore away, though, Maladar understood why Whisper had never revealed his face. It had been the face of a woman.

When they were all dead, the pain hit him at last. Maladar staggered, pressing a hand to his side. He had come so close, so damned *close* to surviving. But one had slipped through, as he'd known would happen. The Seven had killed him. He sighed, waiting for his vision to dim, his body to grow heavy and cold.

It did not.

Maladar felt the wound again. There was blood, yes, but not much. He stared at Whisper's blade on the floor; there was no venom on it. He took a deep breath, then another. It hurt—but again, not as much as he'd feared. The blow he'd thought lethal had been only a graze.

I survived, he thought, barely believing it. I denied fate!

He turned, looking for Caspa, thinking to send her for

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a healer. When he saw her body, torn on the floor, he felt a moment's regret. He had liked his chamberlain. But she had been in the wrong place, and the rending spell had caught her too. A pity. Maladar shrugged and turned back toward his throne.

Shai stood before it, eyes wide, gaping at the blood pooling on the moonstones. In his hands he held a silver tray with eight goblets: seven of jeweled gold and one hewn from a single, enormous diamond. Maladar looked at the boy, whose face was pale. This was far from the first slaughter that had taken place in this room, but it *was* the first in Shai's memory.

"Be easy, lad," he said. "All is well, though dear Caspa is lost. They came to kill me, but I was too quick for them."

"I brought . . ." the boy murmured, still staring at all the flayed bodies. "I brought the wine."

Maladar nodded. "Eight cups, I see. Well, there is only need for one now." He walked to Shai and lifted the diamond goblet—the emperor's cup—from the tray. "A pity to waste so much fine grape and so many good swords on the same day . . . but there it is."

He turned, raising the cup to salute his fallen enemies. His wound was already feeling better. Then he drew the cup into his hood and made a horrible, wet, sucking sound. Shai didn't flinch; he'd long since grown used to the strange noises the emperor made when he drank.

Maladar relished the flavor of the Chakani green. It was a subtle wine, made from grapes grown on a hillside where two wizards had fought long ago. Their magic lingered in the vintage, giving it a taste unlike any other in Aurim: sweet and herbal and velvety, with a strange but not unpleasant burn beneath. He let it wash down his throat.

Right away, he knew something was wrong. The wine's burn changed as he swallowed. It grew stronger, harsher, and

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his throat started to twist and swell. In moments Maladar was wheezing, then gasping. The strength went out of his fingers, and the diamond goblet clattered to the floor, spilling green wine across the tiles to mix with the Seven's blood.

He stared at the goblet and knew.

Maladar whirled, staring at Shai in shock. The boy was looking straight at him, for the first time since the slavers brought him to the City of Songs. Furious, Maladar tried to cast the rending spell one more time, to tear the boy apart, but he couldn't move his fingers, could only raise his arm a little. Nor could he draw in enough air to speak the necessary words of enchantment. The poison was closing his lungs. Shai watched, a cruel smile curling his lips.

The strength left Maladar's legs, and as he fell, he knew how he would end up: in the same curled pose of agony he'd seen in the blood-filled pool. He hadn't cheated fate after all.

He heard a crash—Shai dropping the tray and the other seven cups—then the boy was standing over him, still smiling, his eyes looking much older than his eight years and smoldering with hatred. Maladar could do nothing to stop him as he bent down and yanked the hood from his head.

What Shai beheld should have horrified him, but he gave no sign. Maladar's face wasn't a face at all, for the flesh was long gone, sacrificed for his magic many years ago. What remained was a skull surrounded by gnarled gristle with a jawless, gaping hole where his mouth should be. Maladar seldom revealed his visage, and then only to shock his enemies.

Shai only sneered.

"You *are* a monster, after all," he said, rising again. "But you are also a fool, emperor of emperors. Did you forget who I was? I am a prince of my people, Majesty! I swore

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vengeance the moment I was brought here—for the honor of the Uigan, for my father and brothers when they died in your dungeons . . . and for myself, for all you have done to me.” His face darkened with memory; he shook his head. “Now it is done. You are slain, Majesty . . . and by the hand of a child. Thus shall your reign be remembered . . . and the Uigan will still ride upon the steppes when Aurim is nothing but ashes. Farewell, Maladar.”

Then the boy was gone, without a look back. Maladar listened to his footfalls recede. He couldn’t breathe at all anymore, not even the slightest trickle of air. The cold and the darkness, which he’d thought he’d eluded, came all the same.

His last thought, before they swallowed him, was that one day, the Uigan would pay.



Silence. Darkness.

No smells, no tastes, no feeling. Only thought.

This was not the Abyss.

Maladar was a powerful wizard. Using his magic, he had prolonged his life for more than two centuries. He had hoped to live for many more. The thought of his death was terrible, and he had delved deep into his grimoires, seeking answers. He had made plans, in case fate proved as unavoidable as the philosophers said. Fate had. But his plans had worked.

He wasn’t still alive—not truly, anyway—though neither was he dead. They would find his body in the throne room, would burn it and cast the ashes out over the River Ush, as the Aurish did with all their emperors. Yet his soul would endure. He had bound his soul to this mortal world, sealed it within stone, within the black statue in its vault, deep beneath Aurim’s eastern provinces. He would stay with his

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army, in silence and darkness, until *new* flesh came for him to claim. He had sown the seeds, planning for that day. It might be centuries in coming, but Maladar the Faceless was patient. He would wait . . . and one day he would be free.

He would rule Aurim again.

Chapter



1

The Burning Sea

He felt the blade go in. He felt it with each step his body took. Barreth Forlo thought he would feel it forever—every day, every moment, until he died.

And when would that be? Soon, perhaps. Before his next breath, if he had any say. But he didn't, of course. He hadn't since that day, that awful day, at Akh-tazi.

Forlo had never considered life to be fair; few soldiers did, and certainly not officers. He'd seen too many good men die untimely, too many cowards escape, too many battles lost to sheer stupid chance. The gods, if indeed there *were* gods, were a capricious lot at best: vain and detached, if not outright cruel. That could be the only explanation for all the suffering he'd seen in his many years.

It was the only thing that could account for *that*.

Gods, he'd come so close—chasing halfway across Tala-das and back again after the bastards who'd taken his wife. It had been a long road, beginning with the damned statue, the Hooded One, which had come into his possession by chance. He'd thought the statue was simply a valuable relic left over from the long-dead empire of Aurim. He'd hoped to sell it for a fortune, so he could enjoy his recent retirement from the

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armies of the Minotaur League. But he'd learned different: an elf thief, Shedara of Armach, had come to steal the statue and told him the truth. It was more than just an artifact of an ancient realm, for within it slumbered the soul of Maladar the Faceless, the most wicked of Aurim's rulers.

Then the horde had come: thousands of horse-riding barbarians, the whole of the people known as the Uigan. Forlo had forgotten the Hooded One for a time, leaving it behind with his wife in his castle of Coldhope, to fight the savages when they crossed the straits of the Tiderun. Against all hope and odds, he'd won that battle, and—even stranger—he had found a true friend in Hult, the bodyguard of Chovuk Boyla, the prince of the Uigan.

It had all been a ruse, though, as he discovered far too late. The horde was a distraction, one that left cities smoldering in its wake, true, but only a small piece on the *shivis* board . . . as, he supposed, was he. He'd returned to Coldhope to find it emptied, its few defenders slain, except for Shedara. The Hooded One was gone . . . and with it his wife, Essana, and the unborn child she carried. It was their first. A black dragon had taken her, and the only clue it left behind was one of its scales, torn off in the fighting.

From there, it had been a race against time. He, Hult, and Shedara, joined by a wild elf named Eldako, had set out on the Hooded One's trail. Their journeys had taken them to the mighty city of Kristophan, where he'd killed the emperor of the minotaurs, then north to the snowy wastes of Panak, where they learned the black dragon's name—Gloomwing—from the Wyrm-namer, the oldest dragon in the world. From there they picked up Gloomwing's trail, following him first to the kender valleys of Marak, then to the dank jungles of Neron. They had fought shadows and tentacle-mouthed creatures born of madness, and they slew Gloomwing himself. In the end, they had found the Hooded

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One and Essana, atop the ancient alien temple known as Akh-tazi, deep in the jungles of Neron. Her captors, the Faceless Brethren, had killed Eldako, and ensorceled Hult and Shedara. They hadn't been able to stop Forlo, though, not even with all their magic and trickery. He'd found her, Essana, his Starlight.

But she was not alone.

He vividly remembered the young man who wielded the knife. The memory of his face was as hard a wound as the blade itself; it had been his *own* face, twenty years younger, beardless, the hair still full and dark, only with his mother's eyes. Their son, still in Essana's womb when last he saw her before riding off to battle. Perhaps half a year had passed since then, but the boy had been grown supernaturally and was already a man whose face lit with the fervor of a fanatic. He'd raised the dagger to sacrifice his own mother. If Forlo had had his sword in hand, he would have struck his son down. It would have broken his mind, but he knew it, in his heart: he would have killed his son to save Essana.

He'd lost his sword in the fighting, though. He had only his body to block his son's blow.

The blade had gone in, and the moment it did, he'd known the blow was lethal. He'd been cut in battle too many times, dealt too many killing strokes himself, to believe any different. He'd found his Starlight, maybe even saved her; maybe Hult and Shedara could get to the boy before he tried a second time to kill Essana. Then it all would have been worth it. He'd let out his last breath—it felt like a sigh—and waited for death to claim him.

Only it hadn't.

At first, lying there motionless atop his wife's unconscious form, he hadn't understood why he wasn't dead. Then he'd felt it, the presence hanging above him, and he'd known. There had been another waiting near the altar, a

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ghost bound to a statue that bore its likeness, a horrible creature with a skull for a face, a mad tyrant who should have been dust a thousand years ago. It was Maladar, freed at last from his prison of stone. The sacrifice had been for him: Essana was to have died upon the altar, and her blood would have broken the binding spells, let the hideous specter claim his son as his new body. Forlo had been allowed to reach the temple so he could watch it happen; his grief, his rage, would have given Maladar, once the ruler of Aurim, new power in his son's body.

Forlo had thwarted that and spared his son as well as Essana. But blood had been spilled upon the altar of Akh-tazi regardless, and the magic Maladar's ghost had set in motion would not be stopped. Forlo had felt the darkness surround him, suffuse him. It was as if every drop of blood in his body were turning to ice—only this ice *burned*. If his body had let him, he would have screamed, but he'd only lain there, helpless, as Maladar claimed *him* instead of his son.

The pain went away. But things only got worse after that.

The ancient sorcerer's spirit, swelling with power as it found itself in a body of flesh once more, had shoved Forlo aside without a moment's hesitation, burying him deep within his own mind as it took control of his flesh. He'd only been able to look on from the edges of his own consciousness, like a spectator at a gladiatorial match, as Maladar made him stand and face his friends. He could only listen as the black wizard gloated over his victory. Maladar's words were spoken in a voice that was at once Forlo's own and something far darker. Maladar had cast a spell, and Akh-tazi vanished.

The next thing he'd known, Forlo was in an inexact place.

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Forlo knew the tales, had learned them when he was a child. Everyone in Taladas knew a version of the story. Four hundred years ago, the continent had been whole, unbroken, most of it covered by a single vast empire, a realm of riches and splendor, a land called Aurim. Maladar had been only one of Aurim's rulers and far from its last, and while he was certainly the most evil man ever to sit upon the dragon-horn throne, that darkness had not abated after his death. Finally, the gods had tired of the cruelty that lay at Aurim's heart, and they had sent their punishment: a massive, fiery stone that struck the fabled City of Songs, smashing it into oblivion and shattering Taladas forever.

The survivors of the Great Destruction—and they were few and wretched—had fled from Aurim's outer provinces, in time establishing new realms on the continent's fringes. At its heart, however, the wound the gods had dealt did not heal. In Aurim's place roiled a new sea, not of water, but of molten rock. Hith's Cauldron, men called it: an ocean of lava and flame that raged beneath a sky black with ash and poisonous fumes. It was said that the gnomes had found a way to survive on its shores and even ply its currents in their mad tinkers' boats, but no other mortal had ever set out across it and lived.

And Forlo was crossing Hith's Cauldron—or rather, Maladar was. The wizard's spirit remained within his body, working it like a grotesque puppet while Forlo could do nothing to stop him. Under the control of the Faceless Emperor, he, Forlo, walked over the Burning Sea.

True, he didn't actually *touch* the ocean of magma, but still, what he was doing should have been impossible. He moved along a narrow iron bridge, the metal cool to the touch even though it hung barely an arm's length above the sea's surface. Great geysers of flame erupted to either

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side, and hurricane winds blew cinders and the stinging reek of brimstone into his face. By rights, he should have burst into flame and died screaming, but Maladar's magic was as strong as whatever kept the bridge from melting, and it protected him from the inferno. To Forlo, the air above the Cauldron seemed no hotter than a midsummer's day back home.

He hadn't eaten, drunk, or slept for days or weeks. Time was difficult, with no sun or stars visible beyond the smoke-laden sky, but he guessed about a fortnight had passed since he'd stood on solid ground. Maladar's magic was sustaining him, he supposed, for he didn't feel any hunger, thirst, or weariness. He had no doubt that the wizard would cast his body aside like a child's forgotten toy if the opportunity presented itself—he'd heard the sorcerer say so, in his own voice—but for now, the Faceless Emperor's spirit was treating him well.

Two weeks of walking, and his journey was barely half done. The Cauldron was vast, perhaps two hundred leagues across. He was bound for its center, the heart of the maelstrom, where the gods' wrath had fallen upon the City of Songs. There, the legends said, a tower of living flame had once stood, rising high above the sea. *Chaldar*, scholars called this tower, which meant *flame-spire* in the minotaur tongue. In the years after the Destruction, it had been visible from the Cauldron's farthest shores, but when the gods fled the world after the Dread Winter, some forty years ago, they had taken all magic with them. The enchantments that kept the *Chaldar* aloft failed, and it came crashing down.

As far as anyone knew, it had not returned.

"I will rebuild it," Forlo murmured; only it wasn't him, not really. Yes, it was his voice, but Forlo had no more control over his voice than his legs. It was Maladar who worked his lungs, his tongue, his lips. "It will rise again . . . and

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Aurim with it. The old glories will return, and all will bow before the might of the City of Songs. The minotaurs, the elves, the men of Thenol and the Tamire . . . they will bow, or they will burn.”

Forlo’s spirit groaned, trying to push against the bonds that gripped him. If he could just shove Maladar aside, wrest control for even a moment, he could end this travesty. He could leap off the bridge, into the fire. But he couldn’t. He was a hostage in his own body.

Together, Forlo and the dark being who controlled him marched on.



Maladar felt the warrior’s struggles and did not care. Indeed, they pleased him. Barreth Forlo was only one more life, after all. Maladar had ended thousands of lives, most them after great suffering. And, after all, *he* had been imprisoned for so long—trapped in the Hooded One, well beyond the time his disciples ought to have freed him. His plans had called for his release after only five hundred years, but something had gone wrong, and twice that span had passed instead. And his imprisonment had been far worse than Barreth Forlo’s: no sight, no sound, no senses at all . . . for ten centuries.

Besides, Forlo had tried to thwart Maladar and nearly succeeded. All of Maladar’s plans had come within a heartbeat of collapsing, his soul a razor’s breadth from falling, howling, into the Abyss. For that, Forlo deserved suffering far worse than being trapped deep within his own body.

There would be time enough for punishing Forlo, though. Maladar forgot about him for the moment and focused on the journey ahead.

He had known these lands when last he lived. Once,

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the land beneath his feet had been the province of Yush, an ancient mountain realm that had been one of Aurim's earliest conquests. From its ore-rich mines had come gold and iron, star opals and the blue gems called Manith's Tears, prized by jewelers all over the empire. Its wealth, mined by dwarf and goblin slaves, had filled the imperial coffers. Yush's riches alone had financed most of the wars that led to Aurim overrunning Taladas.

Yush was gone, though, like the rest of Aurim. The Master, mightiest of the unlamented Faceless Brethren, had told him of the Destruction and the Cauldron. The tale had unnerved Maladar: Aurim had been the only thing he truly loved, and the place was destroyed, melted away into chaos. Hearing the tale was easy, however, compared with witnessing the devastation firsthand. That the gods would do that, would go so far to cheat him of his destiny, infuriated him.

He understood why his imprisonment had lasted so long. Only fortune had spared him at all, for the easternmost reaches of Aurim were among the few parts of the empire that endured, though even they were mostly dead lands, ashes and dust haunted by hobgoblins and worse. The only habitable parts were the Rainward Isles, far from here, broken off from the mainland by the force of the Destruction.

Other than that, Aurim was gone, lost forever—or so the gods had hoped. They had forgotten Maladar, though . . . all of them but Hith the Cowled, the Dark One. Hith had dominion over the Burning Sea, and Maladar's soul had made a bargain with Hith, during the long, sleepless years of his imprisonment. In return for destroying certain realms—the Imperial League of the minotaurs, for one, and also the Rainwards—Hith would let the Faceless Emperor raise the *Chaldar* once more from the Cauldron. And in the

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shadow of that blazing tower, the fallen empire would rise anew, first the City of Songs then the lands beyond. Aurim would be reborn, and Maladar would rule over Taladas, as he'd planned all along. All he had to do was cross the Cauldron.

His destination was close. At last, it was so close.

Maladar's gaze seldom shifted from the bridge ahead of him, stretching on toward the dark and distant horizon. It ran arrow-straight, its black, fire-pitted surface a thread of darkness through the Cauldron's fire. It continued to the center of the sea, to the place where the *Chaldar* had once stood and one day would stand again. His eyes flicked up now and again as if he might glimpse the span's end, but of course there was no sign. He still had fifty leagues to go—two more weeks' travel in Barreth Forlo's body. The journey might have been quicker in the younger, stronger body of Forlo's son, the man-child whom the Brethren had dubbed the Taker. His body was less troubled by the onset of middle age. But fate and ill fortune had kept him from claiming the son, so he'd settled for what he could get. Forlo was not an ideal vessel, but he would have to do.

So intent was Maladar on the road before him that it was some time before he realized he was no longer alone. It was, in fact, Forlo's own instincts that alerted him—a prickling at the nape of his neck, the itch to reach for the empty scabbard that hung by his side. Maladar hesitated at the unfamiliar sensation but did not stop. He felt no fear; he hadn't felt fear since he was a child, long ago. He simply relaxed Forlo's body, flexing its fingers, pressing its tongue against its upper teeth to begin the incantation of a spell. Then, one eyebrow rising, he looked to his left.

Tall walls of flame danced above the Cauldron, ever-shifting, gold and crimson and faint wisps of blue. It was a dizzying sight, curtains of fire parting and closing again,

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rising into tall whirlwinds or rippling like water across the magma's surface. There was something different about them now, though: a presence that lurked deep in their heart. No, it was not just one presence; there were a multitude hidden among the flames, flickers of movement that were more than random conflagration. It was hard to count them, so deeply did the fires conceal them, but he thought there might be scores, perhaps hundreds. And they were on the other side of the bridge as well, in a waiting throng.

Maladar moved Forlo's fingers again, shifting them into a different pose. His tongue dropped back to press against his palate as he chose a unique spell from the thousands he had learned—or created—over his long life. He didn't delay; stopping in his tracks, he threw up his hands and began to cast.

The black moon, Nuvis, was close to full that day. Its power raced through him, bringing more joy than any wine or dream-smoke or pleasures of the flesh. Forlo's battle-scarred hands danced in the air; his deep voice intoned words in a language he had never spoken before Maladar took him. The sounds were like the scuttling of creatures across the seafloor. He raised his arms, and the magic burst from him in a blue wave that raced across the Cauldron's surface and high into the air.

Rain began to fall.

The first drops were small and scattered, hissing away to steam before they struck the Burning Sea. They quickly built to a shower, however, and then to a downpour so powerful that the flames began to hiss and flicker. Great gouts of vapor shrieked into the air as the fire died, leaving his stalkers nowhere to hide.

They were beings of living flame, white at their hearts, hotter than the fires he had just doused. They shrugged off the rainstorm, surrounding him, watching with eyes of

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green witch-light. They had the shapes of men, more or less, and each stood ten feet high, hovering above the Cauldron's churning surface. Each held a sword, also made of flame.

The fire minions regarded Maladar without making a sound. He felt their hunger and hate and savored their enmity. These, he thought, might be useful . . . if I don't have to destroy them.

"I have quenched the fires that cloaked you," he said, steepling his fingers before him. "Do not doubt that, should I choose, I can do the same to you. Speak now."

The minions said nothing, only continued to stare, shifting and sizzling beneath the deluge. So Maladar killed one of them.

It was quick, the movement so sudden the minions had no time to react. He simply spoke one word, rippling his fingers in a motion that took less than a heartbeat, and ending by pointing at the nearest of the minions. A white ray of frost, colder than the winds of Panak, lanced from his fingertip and struck the minion in its left eye. The creature let out a *whump*, as of igniting oil, then flickered out, fading away to nothing.

Maladar glared at the minions, folding his hands before him once more. They looked at where their fellow had been, then back at him.

"Speak," he said again.

They reacted that time. One of their number, who looked no different than any of the rest, glided forward and stepped onto the bridge. The iron glowed red where its feet touched; the scent of hot metal stung Maladar's nostrils. The minion approached him, sword held low, and stopped three paces away. Its heat baked his skin, making sweat trickle down his face. He did not brush the sweat away, did not make any move.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Why do you trouble me?"

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The minion's eyes bored into his. Its mouth opened, and the fire within was deep scarlet. The rest of them did the same, speaking in perfect chorus. Their voices were the roaring of forge flames, the crackle of forests burning. The words came from all around.

"We do not trouble you," they said. "*You* are the one who intrudes upon *our* home."

He smiled—a strange feeling, to do such a thing again. He hadn't had a face since his first years upon the throne. "Ah," he said, "but you are mistaken. These lands belong to me, by right of crown and conquest. I am Maladar, once emperor of Aurim."

The minions glanced at one another. At first he thought they were impressed, but instead they made a strange sound, a thunder of explosions all around. After a moment, Maladar realized they were laughing.

"Aurim?" they asked. "Aurim is no more. It has been cleansed from the world, drowned beneath this molten rock."

Maladar allowed himself another small, slight smile. "Oh? Then what lies at the bottom of this sea? You know the truth as well as I do, you who have swum its depths. Hith safeguards the City of Songs, awaiting my return."

There was no sound for ten beats of Barreth Forlo's stolen heart save the whisper of boiling rain. The minions regarded him without emotion, their mirth gone.

"You are the one whose coming was foretold, then? The Sleeper in the Stone?"

Maladar nodded, saying nothing. Again there was silence, that time for twenty heartbeats.

"No," the minions said, "you are not. Else, where is your army?"

It might have been his imagination, but Maladar thought there was amusement in those blank, green eyes. Were the fire minions mocking him? He considered killing another—

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perhaps the one who stood upon the bridge—then decided against it. He'd made that point already. Instead, his brow furrowed.

“My army?”

The minions answered him, but their voices were different. They had taken on a deeper, more sonorous tone, one he recognized at once. It had been his own voice, his old voice in his old body, cremated and scattered long ago. The voice spoke in verse, in an ancient meter:

*For an age I shall sleep, though dream shall I never,
Save of returning to the city of gold.
When the guards at her gates shall hark and behold,
The Faceless returns—may his reign last forever.
I slumber in stone, in the dark, quiet chill,
But when I awake, my wrath shall be vast.
At my heels, a dire host of might unsurpassed,
And both beggar and king shall bow to my will.*

With that, the rain ended, not a slow draining away, as it ought to have, but all at once, the suddenness of it taking Maladar aback. The flames leaped anew from the Cauldron's surface, swallowing the minions, all save the one who stood upon the bridge. Now the flame creature *was* ridiculing him, of that there was no doubt. It rose up off the iron, floating on gusts of scalding wind.

“It is not your time,” the minion said, and its words echoed all around, as before. Its kin were still out there, hidden, waiting. “You may not pass. Try, and we will feast upon your ashes.”

Anger swelled inside Maladar, a cold and glittering stone in his heart. “I am the Faceless Emperor! This is my destiny.”

“Not without your army,” the minions replied. “It

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was foretold. Now go, and return when the prophecy is fulfilled.”

A shriek tore across the sky, high above. Maladar looked up and saw a shape moving through the fume: a huge, serpentine form made of flowing fire, gone almost as soon as he had glimpsed it. He saw enough to know what the shape was: a dragon, born of the Cauldron, larger and mightier than any mortal wyrm Taladas had ever seen. And he knew the moment he beheld it that it could destroy him. At last, he felt fear grip his stomach. He loathed himself for it.

The fire minions laughed, the flames rising higher.



He was walking again, several hours later, when he felt another presence beside him. He did not need to look to see who it was: the feeling of awe and dread that swept over him was unmistakable. Gliding along beside him was an empty, billowing black shroud: the foul god Hith's form in the mortal world.

“You have turned around,” said the god. “The *Chaldar* is behind you.”

Maladar glowered at him. “The *Chaldar* is beyond my reach . . . as you well knew.”

The shroud's shoulders moved, indicative of a shrug. “Perhaps. But if I had told you when you stood upon the shore that it was not yet time to cross the Cauldron, would you have believed me? No. You had a thousand years of hunger boiling in you, Maladar. A millennium of dreams and madness within your prison.”

Maladar considered that. Hith was a liar and a cheat—the tales of the god's trickery were beyond counting—but here he spoke plainly. There could have been no dissuading Maladar, for his mind had been set when he embarked on

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his journey. Now though, he had time to reflect, time to plan.

He needed an army, and he knew where to find it.

“I will return to this place,” he said. “And my soldiers will be marching at my back. Those fiery wretches will bow before me . . . them and their dragon.”

He glanced sideways, expecting an answer. But Hith was gone, vanished into nothingness once more.