



TRAIL  
TALADAS OF THE TRILOGY  
BLACK WYRM  
VOLUME TWO  
CHRIS PIERSON



# Prologue



## THE TEMPLE OF AKH-TAZI, NERON

She awoke to darkness, to silence. She awoke to it every morning—if morning it was. It could be the middle of the night. There was no way to know.

Light came twice every day: the cold, white glimmer of magic, shining from the hall when her captors brought her food. That was it. With this light, she had defined the boundaries of her cell. It was small, three paces on a side, with a high ceiling that caused every cough, every groan, to echo horribly. Its walls and floor were dark stone, graven with images she did not recognize—awful images. Eagles with serpents' heads. Men with the heads of hunting cats. Corpses with their chests flayed open. She tried not to look at them when the light came, but it was hard. They were all around and never seemed to be in the same place twice.

There was a bed, reeds stretched over a wooden frame, with a blanket of some woven plant fiber that itched horribly. There was a clay pot for waste. There was nothing else.

She had yet to see her captors. The food simply appeared; the scraps vanished. The waste pot was emptied, replaced by a fresh one. She could sense them when the door

## CHRIS PIERSON

opened—mocking eyes in the shadows—but they did not reveal themselves.

Essana Forlo, Baroness of Coldhope, had never felt so desolate in her life.

Sleep brought terror, dark dreams she could barely remember when she woke. The glisten of black scales, the creak of leathery wings, the chanting of many growling voices. Shadows that walked like men, whose touch was like knives of ice. The dreams had no coherence, made no sense. She tried to untangle them, but they frayed, fell apart. Every time. She wept with frustration.

Where in the Abyss was she?

The door opened. Cold light spilled in. No one there. Food came. It was almost always the same meal: a roasted game bird of some sort, the skin crackling, the meat succulent. A porridge of something close to mashed turnip. A mound of little, round fruits, red-fleshed and sour. A cup of bitter, steaming tea that must be drugged. There was plenty of it . . . which was good, for she had another to feed, growing inside her. Her son, by her husband, Barreth—Barreth, who had left to fight a battle both of them knew he couldn't survive. He must be dead now, slaughtered by barbarians. How long until their son was born? Three months? Four? It was impossible to tell; time in this place meant nothing.

After the door slammed shut, she wolfed her food. It could have tasted like ashes, and she would have gobbled it down—her unborn child made her hungry beyond reasoning—but it was delicious. That only made her imprisonment worse, somehow. Still, she needed the food for strength. Today she would try to escape.

It had taken a long time to make the decision, longer still to find the courage. But Essana knew there was no hope if she stayed here. What her captors had in mind, she didn't know . . . but she had to get out. So she decided as she sat in the dark, stuffing porridge in her mouth, that she would leave her cell the next chance she got.

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

And if they caught her? If they killed her?  
She didn't care anymore.

She was still half awake when the door opened again, well after supper. She hadn't drunk the drugged tea today; had poured it into the waste pot instead. She feigned grogginess, moaning as the light spilled in. The platter holding the scraps of her meal quivered, then rose off the floor. So did the waste pot. Nothing held them up; they simply floated into the air and slid out of the room. She bit her lip, gathered her strength, tensed herself to follow. She would have a second, maybe two, to heave her pregnant body out the door. The door would probably crush her if it shut on her. Had to be quick.

Wait . . . wait . . . now.

Something appeared in the doorway, just as she was leaping forward: a shape. It was tall, maybe seven feet, slender, and not human. The thing was an abomination: its flesh a mottled mess of moss green and ruddy brown; its hands three-fingered, with long, slender talons; its head a bulbous, hairless orb with dead-white eyes and four writhing tentacles where its mouth should be. A stink rose from it, like skunk spray mixed with rotting fish. It burned her nose, made her eyes water. It wore a filthy gray cassock, cinched with rope, like a monk's habit.

Essana let out a near-voiceless scream and fell back. The thing watched her, its gaze devoid of emotion. Its tentacles twitched, moving as if each had a mind of its own. When it spoke, it made no sound: the words simply formed in her mind, toneless and scratchy.

*We know what you were going to do. If you try, this will be your fate.*

An image blazed in her mind, as clear as if she were seeing it with open eyes. Essana beheld herself from above. She was naked, chained to the floor of this very cell, her body a ruin. Her arms were broken; so were her legs. Her eyes were hollow pits. Her tongue was gone. But her belly was

## CHRIS PIERSON

large, round and hard: the baby, almost ready to emerge. And she knew what she'd suspected since she first awoke here:

Her captors cared nothing for her. They wanted only the child.

"Why?" she screamed. "What are you going to do with him?"

The tentacled horror stared at her without emotion. More words came.

*Do nothing to thwart us, and you will not suffer. Betray us, and you will know pain, for the rest of your life. Soon the Brethren will send for you.*

Essana stared at the wretched creature, hate boiling inside her. She wanted to crush it, smash its awful, glistening head against the wall until it cracked open. But she held herself in check, backed against the wall, slid down to the floor. The creature watched her a moment longer, then vanished into the shadows. A clean waste pot glided into the room and settled to the floor. The door rumbled shut.

Darkness again. Essana sat in the gloom, shaking. In time, sleep came—and with it new dreams, of tentacles and blank, white eyes.



She woke. She slept. Inside her, the new life grew.

Essana lay on the bed, her hand on her belly. She knew the baby was still alive, but sometimes, in the stillness, she prayed the gods would claim him. It would be easier if she miscarried . . . but she did not. For many years, she and Barreth had struggled to conceive a child. Now her body would not give it up.

"They won't have you," she whispered. "I will not give you to those . . . those. . ."

Creatures. Things.

She was lying there, aching, when the door opened again. A figure stood framed against the light. She shrank

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

back against the wall, then realized it wasn't the monster that had confronted her before. This was a man, clad in a dark cloak, a deep hood drawn low over his face. He watched her from the doorway, framed by the light.

"Who . . ." she croaked.

"I am called the Keeper," he replied. His voice was strange, with a thick, rasping quality. It was the voice of a strangled man, or one whose throat has been cut.

Essana swallowed painfully. "What do you want with me? With the child?"

"You will learn the answers," said the Keeper, "if you come with me."

"And if I refuse?"

His head tilted, his shoulders shaking. The man was laughing—not mockery, but genuine mirth.

"Spirited," he said. "I knew one like you, once. Before I came to this place. But you cannot refuse—you will come of your own accord, or . . . by their command."

He stepped aside. There was movement behind him. Two of the things came in. One was green and brown, the other fish-belly grey. They stared at her, unfeeling, tentacles waving. Essana felt a prickling in her mind, like a name she wanted to remember, but couldn't. She put a hand to her forehead. The feeling grew, became a thought.

*Get up.*

Her eyes locked on the creatures. They are doing this to me, she thought. I must resist.

*Stand.*

She bunched her hands into fists. She bit her tongue. She thought of songs, memories, making love to Barreth. She fought the command, but the suggestion kept growing in her mind, growing so strong her legs burned to move.

*STAND.*

It was too much. Groaning, she swung her legs off the bed and lurched to her feet. Tears of frustration crawled down her cheeks.

## CHRIS PIERSON

“Gods damn you,” she growled, her teeth grinding.

The Keeper had watched it all happen, not saying a word. Now he raised a hand. “Enough,” he murmured. “Leave us.”

The creatures glanced at him, and at once their minds were gone from Essana’s. She nearly collapsed as they withdrew from the cell. She staggered against the wall, glowering at the cloaked figure.

“What are they?” she asked.

“They are called yaggol,” he replied. “An ancient race. They built this temple. Once they ruled a mighty empire, but now they serve the Brethren.”

Essana wiped her face with the back of her hand. “And who do you serve?”

“You will see. Now come.”

She still wanted to tell him to rot in the Abyss, but the thought of the yaggol compelling her again sickened her. Defeated, she gestured for him to lead on.

He did, and she followed. The yaggol walked behind, silent. The Keeper strode down the cramped stone passage, his black cloak billowing behind him. They came to a stairway, leading up. The Keeper climbed, and Essana and the yaggol followed. He never glanced back.

Scents came to her: fresh air. Trees. Strange flowers. She heard wind through leaves. She glimpsed moonlight, red and silver, upon the stone. They emerged into an open courtyard, at night, a clear sky above: Solis and Lunis and stars. The plaza was ringed with pillars of black stone, crumbling and vine-throttled, some broken, some toppled. The floor was stone as well, huge blocks between which grew white flowers surrounded by blue-glowing fireflies. Beyond, on three sides, stood dense walls of jungle. The trees were huge, rising high above. Strange animals called from within. The air sweltered, humid and hot even at night.

She knew where she was now—Neron, the southernmost reaches of Taladas. A thousand miles from home.

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

Despair clawed at her—even if someone were looking, how could they ever find her? How would they even start?

On the fourth side of the courtyard rose a tall, stepped pyramid, a ziggurat hewn of the same black rock as everything else. A broad, steep stair rose up the pyramid's side, awful gargoyles of animal-men perched on each step. More cloaked figures loomed at the top.

"The Brethren await," said the Keeper, and he walked on. Essana glanced at the yaggol, who stared back. She followed him.

The stairs were hard going, especially in her condition. She moved slowly, using her hands to brace herself against the steps above. Not far from the top she faltered, slipping. The Keeper reached down and caught her wrist before she could fall. His grip was firm but gentle. He helped her the rest of the way up.

There were five more like him atop the ziggurat. All wore cloaks. They watched from the shadows of their hoods as the Keeper led her forward. There was an altar, old and worn, with grinning skulls carved on its sides. Dried blood crusted its top. Essana froze at the sight.

The Keeper glanced at her. "Do not fear, lady. That is not for you."

A mad impulse came to her, then—she should turn and run. Throw herself down the stairs. The fall would almost certainly kill her. It would definitely kill the baby. But when she looked behind, the yaggol were there, watching. They saw what was in her mind. She wouldn't be able to take two steps before they seized control of her again. She hated them, more than anything she'd ever hated in her life.

Another of the cloaked figures exchanged hushed words with the Keeper, then turned toward her. She felt her knees buckle. This one had no humanity left in him; there was only malice, and burning zeal. She could feel his evil gaze, and it made her shudder.

"You have questions," he said. "You will have answers

## CHRIS PIERSON

soon. I am the Master; the Keeper you already know. The others are the Watcher, the Speaker, the Teacher, and the Slayer. We are the Faceless Brethren.”

As one, the six figures cast back their hoods, and Essana let out a gasp of horror. What they revealed weren't faces at all, but leering skulls, the flesh stripped away by blade and flame to lay bare the bone beneath. Black tongues worked behind long teeth. Bloodshot eyes glistened in their sockets. They had been human once; now they were something else. Essana tasted bile. She wanted to look away but realized she couldn't.

“You wish to know who we are,” said the Master, the tendons of his jaw working. “We are heralds, disciples. We prepare for the return of a great power—one who once slept, but is now awoken.”

A shriek pierced the night: a furious, skirling cry that awakened a memory buried deep in her. She looked up, and saw it—the vision from her nightmares.

The black dragon.

It slid between the stars, long and sinuous, almost invisible. Its wings eclipsed the moons as it swept over the trees. Its scales glittered. Its eyes were coals of burning red. Venom dripped from its fangs. In its claws it held two things: the limp, dark-skinned form of a person, and a statue carved of dark stone.

A statue she knew too well.

A moan escaped Essana's lips, and she fell painfully to her knees. Barreth had brought the statue to the castle of Coldhope, their home, several months ago. It was said to be an ancient relic from the lost empire of Aurim—worth a small fortune to the right people. They'd both hated the thing, but had kept it, hoping to sell it to sages in the city of Kristophan. They had hidden it beneath the castle, out of sight.

Not long after, the elf had come. Shedara had been seeking the statue for months. She called it the Hooded One and told them its tale: hewn in the image of Maladar,

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

a mad sorcerer-king who once ruled Aurim, it was said to house his spirit, trapped within. The Hooded One was dangerous beyond reckoning, and Shedara had come to see that it was destroyed. But before they could do anything about it, Barreth had been drawn away, to fight the Uigan barbarians as they crossed the straits of Tiderun. He rode out, giving the statue into Shedara's keeping.

Then Essana's memories ended, and her nightmares began. The dragon had come for her. It and other fiends—little, shadowy creatures that killed with knives that spilled no blood—overran Coldhope. They brought her here. And they also brought the Hooded One.

The dragon circled the pyramid . . . once, twice . . . then spread its wings and swooped down. It set down the statue, and dropped the other shape onto the altar. Looking closer, Essana saw it was an elf—small, naked save for a loincloth of woven leaves and a necklace of red and yellow stones. His face was painted with white lines, and his head was shaved, save for a tight, black knot of hair at the crown of his head. He was battered, blood leaking from his nose. He groaned, blinking, then saw the Brethren and cried out, trying to rise.

He couldn't: his legs wouldn't work. The dragon had broken his back.

The great wurm settled on the far end of the roof, tucking in its wings and lowering its head. Its eyes fixed on Essana as the largest of the Brethren strode toward the altar. In his hand he held a long, sickle-bladed knife. Essana knew he was the one called the Slayer. The elf's struggles grew more frantic.

The Faceless turned toward the statue, and Essana saw that it had changed. When she'd last seen it, it had been shrouded; now, somehow, its stone cowl had fallen back to reveal a ruined, fleshless face, much like the Brethren's. One of them, the Speaker, raised his hands to it and intoned in a deep, mellifluous voice.

## CHRIS PIERSON

“Hail, the Faceless Emperor! Maladar an-Desh, lord of wizards, reaver of cities, sleeper within the stone!”

“Hail, the Faceless!” echoed the Brethren.

“We give you the blood of the innocent. Let his life sustain yours until the time of your return.”

The elf’s shrieks were not in a language Essana knew, but she understood nonetheless. He called to his ancestors, to the gods. The Slayer seized the knot of his hair, jerked his head back, and with the practiced movement of a butcher, cut his throat.

The cries ended in an awful drowning sound. The elf’s struggles ceased. Blood flowed thick. The Slayer put away his knife and produced a bowl, made from an empty skull. He held it under the killing wound until it was full to the brim. Then he walked to the Hooded One, raised it in salute, and poured the blood at the statue’s feet.

“Blood for the Faceless!” he shouted.

“Blood!” the Brethren repeated.

The Master seized Essana by the shoulders, dragging her to her feet. Roughly he thrust her forward, toward the statue. She stumbled again, light-headed with shock.

“Be careful!” said the Keeper. “The child must not be harmed.”

The Master waved him off, then strode forward and hauled Essana up before the Hooded One. “Behold, sleeper!” he called. “Behold your vessel, and know your time is nigh. The child will come, as the Watcher proclaimed. The child will come, and be yours.”

Essana looked up at the Master, horror robbing her of speech. He stared down at her, and though his face was incapable of emotion, his eyes burned with scorn. The last piece of the puzzle fell into place. She knew why the dragon had brought her here. Why they wanted her son.

“Yes, my dear,” rasped the Master. “You see, don’t you? Maladar’s spirit stirs. It longs to quit its prison of stone.

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

But it cannot. Not yet. He needs flesh to house him. The Faceless seeks a body.”

Finally, it was too much. The sheer awfulness of it overwhelmed her. With a despairing sigh, Essana Forlo collapsed.

# Chapter



## COLDHOPE, THE IMPERIAL LEAGUE

The wind whipped in off the Tiderun, raising foamy caps on the surface of the water. It was a chill breeze, the first sign of the coming autumn. Gulls fought it, flapping hard to try to get out to sea but barely moving at all. No ships plied the waves. Surf exploded against the rocky shore, sending tall billows of spray streaming inland.

Barreth Forlo faced the wind and the spray and cared about neither. He leaned against the rail of the balcony known as the Northwatch, the largest overlook of Coldhope Keep. This place had been his home, once, but it no longer felt like it. The castle had not fallen—was still intact, in truth. But it had been overthrown, by an enemy no walls could stop. They had come, in secret and in silence, and they had taken away all he had left to care for in this world.

And he had no idea what to do about it.

It was because of the statue, the damned Aurish statue. He cursed the day the Hooded One had fallen into his possession. He cursed Harlad, the pirate—dead now, with his crew, amid the isles of Mislaxa's Necklace—who had given the artifact to him, as ransom for violating Coldhope's waters. Most of all, though, he cursed himself, for not dumping the gods-be-cursed thing into the sea when he

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

found out how evil it was. He'd been greedy—had seen only the gold the statue would bring among the scholars of the capital—and now he paid for his avarice.

He beat his fist against the balustrade, skinned a knuckle, stuck a stinging finger in his mouth. The tang of blood washed over his tongue. He barely tasted it. He was lost in memory, reliving the days just past. It seemed a lifetime since he'd ridden out of Coldhope. He'd gone to fight the Uigan, a barbarian horde who had gathered under a mighty prince and ridden south for plunder. They had crossed the Tiderun—a shallow gap between their lands and his—when the three moons brought the tides so low that the waters fled. They were thousands strong. His men had numbered a few hundred. Not one of them had thought they had a chance.

And yet, by a miracle, they had persevered. A mighty wave, conjured by magic, had come raging down the Run and swept most of the horde away. Though many good men had died in the fighting—including Forlo's best friend, the minotaur Grath—the Imperial League's defenders had prevailed. The Uigan were broken, and their leader, a warrior who could take the form of a steppe-tiger, was slain. Against all expectation, Forlo had hurried home from the battlefield victorious—only to find utter defeat awaiting him.

It was clear to him now: the fight against the Uigan had been a ruse, nothing more—a distraction to pull Coldhope's warriors away. When they were gone, the shadow-fiends had struck. Twisted, wicked creatures that once had been living kender, the shadows had overrun the keep, killed its few defenders, and taken three things beyond price:

The statue. His wife. His unborn son.

He'd returned six days ago, dust-caked and road-weary. He'd come on foot, his horse slain by the shadows upon the road. And he hadn't come alone. He turned now, to look back over his shoulder.

## CHRIS PIERSON

Hult stood still, watching him without seeming to. A youth of not yet twenty summers, he had been the Uigan prince's protector. It had been his duty to avenge his fallen master on the battlefield. And yet, he had not done that duty. Forlo still didn't know why. They didn't speak each other's language. But Hult hadn't been far from him since that day, and he stayed close now, trying not to look directly at the sea. The water had devoured his people, on the verge of their greatest victory. Forlo could sense the boy's fear, his hatred of the heaving waves. He understood; there were things he feared and hated too.

Six days. He still didn't know where his family was. Or where to begin looking.

"I won't learn anything here," he muttered to himself. "I don't know how I'll find them again, but the answer isn't in Coldhope."

Hult said nothing. He seldom did, and then only in the strange, harsh tongue of the Uigan. He simply stood, one hand on the hilt of his saber, the curved blade his people called a shuk. His tanned face betrayed no emotion. The lone braid he wore atop his head—the rest of his scalp was bald—flapped like a pennant in the wind.

"We have to go," Forlo insisted. "We've got to leave this castle. There are places we can seek help, people who can give us answers. Somewhere. We'll find them. We must pick up the trail, somehow."

Hult said nothing. Forlo grunted, turned to cast one last look out to sea, then turned his back on the waters and strode down the Northwatch to an open doorway into the keep. Quietly, the Uigan followed.

Coldhope was dark within, the shutters closed against the gale, except for one that banged ceaselessly, off in the servants' wing. Forlo had lit only a handful of lamps and candles, keeping a lone fire on the hearth of the greatroom. Darkness gnawed at the vaulted ceiling; the banners and weapons and animal heads upon the halls stood dark

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

and foreboding. Once, this had been a vibrant place, alive. Now it felt like a tomb. Forlo knew he could not spend a seventh day within its walls.

For all the stillness and gloom, though, the greatroom wasn't empty. A lone figure, a woman, sat at the far end of a long banquet table in its midst. She sat with her head bowed, an empty wine cup before her. There was something else, too: something on which she focused all her attention, so strongly she didn't hear Forlo and Hult approach. Only when they were a few paces from her did Shedara of Armach look up.

The elf was tired and haggard, her face so pale it looked almost blue. Streaks of white ran through her coppery hair, a strange sight in one whose people stayed young for centuries. Those marks were new, signs of struggle against darkness and despair. Shedara had been at Coldhope when the shadows came; they had cornered her in the master bedchamber, where she had tried in vain to keep them from grabbing Essana. She had barely slept since then. Now she met Forlo's gaze, and her shoulders slumped. Dejected, she tossed the object she had been studying down onto the table. It landed with a thud, knocking the cup over.

It was large and round, the size of a buckler, the color of polished obsidian. It was harder than iron, glistening in the firelight. A scale from the hide of a black dragon, the only token left from the raid on Coldhope. Shedara had barely let it out of her possession, these past six days: she was magi after all, and had spent all her energy trying to divine something—anything—about it.

"I give up," she said. "Dragons are magical creatures. I can't see anything, no matter how hard I look."

Forlo nodded, reaching out to touch her shoulder. "Thank you for trying."

"There has to be something," she said, shaking him off. She refused to be comforted. "Some way to find out where the statue went."

## CHRIS PIERSON

Forlo drew back as if she'd stung him. Anger flashed through him—how dare she worry first about the statue when his wife was missing?—but it quickly passed. Shedara's people had sent her to find the Hooded One. She'd followed its trail halfway across Taladas, only to lose it. Of course it would be first in her thoughts.

He heard a scrape and glanced back to see that Hult had drawn his shuk halfway out of its sheath. He shook his head, gesturing for the barbarian to back down. Not for the first time, he wondered why Hult chose to protect the man who had slain his master. The Uigan were certainly a strange folk.

At the same time, Shedara had also pushed back from the table, reaching to her belt for one of her many knives. Now she, too, relaxed.

"Tell him if he ever draws that sword the whole way, I'll put a blade in his eye," she muttered.

"I could tell him you love him dearly and wish to wed him next Springrise," Forlo said. "He'd understand it just as well."

Shedara chuckled, then laughed out loud. Hult's face darkened, but he made no move, said no word. He simply glowered at the elf as she wiped a tear from her cheek. When she was done, she looked up at Forlo, her eyes narrowed.

"We're leaving, aren't we?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Where are we bound?"

Forlo shrugged. "First, we should find the soldiers who survived the battle. They should be done hunting down the last of the horde by now. After that . . . Kristophan, I think. We might find answers there. Or perhaps your people, in Armach-nesti, if they'll have us."

She considered this. "It would be . . . difficult. Humans aren't welcome in our woods. There are laws against their presence. But a lot's changed, these past months, so maybe they'll make an exception. Maybe. When do we leave?"

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

“Today. As soon as we can.” Forlo glanced around, then shook his head. “I can’t look at this place anymore. I need a road beneath my feet.”

“Suits me,” Shedara said. “I’m ready now, if we travel light. We don’t need to carry much.”

Forlo nodded. “It’s settled, then. Let’s gather what we can carry from the pantries, and we’ll be gone before the sun starts to fall.”



An hour later, they stepped out the front door of the manor into the courtyard. Forlo looked to the stables and felt a pang of regret: there had been a few old horses left at Coldhope, but the shadows had killed them too. They’d have to travel on foot, at least until they caught up with his men.

The sky had turned gray, and a fine rain had begun to fall. The raindrops pinged on his helmet as he made his way across the bailey. With Hult’s help, he lifted the bar from the inside of the gates and pulled them open. Finally, swallowing, he turned and looked back at the keep. It looked cold, forlorn, dead. The last time he’d left Coldhope, he’d thought he would never see the place again . . . but he’d been wrong.

This time, though, he was sure.

“Forlo,” whispered Shedara on his left.

He stiffened. Something in her voice wasn’t right. A tightness. A heartbeat later, he heard the ring of her daggers leaving their sheaths—and then the hiss of Hult drawing his saber. He whirled, clapping a hand to his sword.

Beyond the gates stood a crowd of dark shapes . . . half a dozen at least. They were small, less than four feet from head to foot, and as insubstantial as mist. Blackness sloughed off them in waves, caught the wind, and writhed away. Each held two hooked blades, one in either hand. It

## CHRIS PIERSON

was impossible, at this distance, to see their faces, aside from the glint of hungry, hateful eyes.

Rage exploded inside Forlo at the sight of them: the shadow-fiends, the things that had been kender, once, but now were ruined, murderous monsters. They had taken his Essana, his Starlight. He jerked his blade from its scabbard.

The sky had grown darker, taking on the color of slate. The rain fell in fat drops, turning the courtyard to mud. The three of them stared at the shadow-fiends. The shadow-fiends stared back. Time stretched.

“What in Hith’s Cauldron are they doing?” Forlo growled. “Why are they still here?”

“I think they’re after me,” Shedara replied. “Their masters must know that I used the statue, that I forced the Hooded One to summon the wave. The dragon probably told them.”

Forlo’s lips pursed. “Then they may know where Essana is. We should try to take one alive. Question it.”

“And how do you propose to do that, exactly?”

He glanced at her, his mouth opening to reply, then realized he didn’t know. They could not be subdued, and they would never surrender. “Don’t you know any spells to capture them?” he asked.

“No more than you do,” Shedara answered. “Let’s just concentrate on surviving, shall we?”

Hult had been listening to their conversation, annoyance creasing his brow. Now he stepped forward, sword raised, and yelled something at the shadows.

“Yagrut!”

The word was in the Uigan tongue, so Forlo didn’t understand, but he got the idea. He’d been a soldier most of his life, and knew profanity when he heard it. So, apparently, did the shadows. They fell back at first, surprised by the barbarian’s challenge, then started creeping forward. Their blades twirled in their hands, weaving silently through the air.

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

Six. Two each. Forlo thought they could handle those odds. He'd never seen Shedara fight, but she seemed to know what she was doing. And Hult was capable enough with his saber. Six shouldn't be much of a problem.

And then there were twelve.

The second wave seemed to come out of nowhere, seeping out of the darkening rain curtain. They glided forward, just behind their fellows. A dozen, now.

"Khot," Forlo swore.

Shedara nodded, her face grim. "Make a circle," she murmured. "If those things outflank us, we're dead."

*We're dead anyway* was the first thought that came to Forlo's mind. He thrust it aside, forced himself not to believe the worst. He couldn't afford to fail now, not after all he'd been through. Not with what he still had to do.

"Hurry," Shedara said. The shadows were nearly upon them.

Forlo grabbed Hult's arm, pulled him to them. The barbarian looked confused, but only for a moment. Forlo and Shedara stood back-to-back, and he joined them. Together they formed a triangle in the mouth of the courtyard, blades extended before them. The creatures hesitated, studying this new tactic—but not for long.

The first wave broke over the three of them, sweeping around on either side. Forlo, Shedara, and Hult met them with their blades, sword and shuk and knives slashing through the rain. Two of the creatures died in that first rush. A third parried Forlo's sword with one of its sickles then snapped the second around, aiming for his eyes. Forlo jerked his head back, the wind of the weapon's passing making him blink. His throat tightened: he had seen what those knives did when they struck flesh. There never was any blood from the wounds they cut—but they were more lethal than any mortal blade.

Yelling an Imperial battlecry, he reversed his blade's arc, slicing high, then spinning low at the last moment. The

## CHRIS PIERSON

feint worked: the shadow moved to block where it thought the sword would come and screamed when steel sliced through its midsection. The blade went right through without even slowing—it was like dueling the wind. A streamer of shadowstuff trailed in the sword's wake, then the whole wretched creature unraveled before Forlo's eyes, blowing away like so much black smoke.

The rain worsened. The sky grew darker still. The remaining three shadows from the first wave fell back, letting their fellows step up. Then they came on all at once, swarming around Hult, Shedara, and Forlo. Shadow-knives danced, met blades of steel, and glanced away. Hult's shuk found one fiend, tearing it apart. Forlo grazed another, and darkness leaked from it like blood, though it didn't die. The shadows ringed them round, darted in then back again, like striking serpents. They came from two directions at once, or from three. A sickle caught Shedara across her left wrist, and she gasped, her dagger dropping from a hand gone white and nerveless. Her flesh parted like a pair of lips, black at the edges. It looked, to Forlo's eyes, like frostbite. The wound didn't bleed.

"Help me!" she cried, her voice cracking with the pain.

Forlo and Hult both moved at the same time, their swords leaping toward the shadows before the elf. Forlo's found its mark, jabbing right through one of the fiends' faces. It shrieked—the sound was like the cry of an injured child, trapped at the bottom of a deep tunnel—and collapsed into inky shreds. Hult missed, his target shrinking away. His move bought Shedara time, though, and she dropped her second knife and drew a shortsword from her belt. She brought it around in a looping arc that clove through the neck of another shadow. The head came free, turning to smoke as it toppled off its shoulders. The creature's body did the same.

Six left. It was too many, and Forlo knew it: the three of them were tiring, and the fiends were not. The shadow-

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

creatures blocked killing blows with ease. They coordinated their attacks, moving as if one mind controlled them. If anything, they were getting faster. Hult grunted in pain as a sickle scored his side, ripping through his leather vest to open a gash across his ribs. The edges of the wound shriveled, turning black. It was bad, Forlo could see, but it could have been worse: it had just missed his vitals. Another inch deeper, and he might be dead.

Forlo cut down another shadow. Shedara did too. Hult barely held his own, weakening with every breath. His blade moved sluggishly. Forlo wondered if the wound had been deep enough, after all. Was the barbarian slowly dying? If he went down, they would have to leave him and fight on alone. If he or Shedara fell as well, it would be all over in an instant.

Hot pain creased his thigh, then turned chill . . . then colder still, until it seemed to burn again. He felt his knee buckle, willed his leg not to give way, and barely kept from stumbling. Furiously he flailed with his sword, driving off the shadow that had cut him while he got his balance back. Shedara saw his trouble and helped him force the fiend back. The pain was incredible . . . and now they were all hurt, with four shadows left.

Too many.

He didn't glance at his wound, didn't want to see his own flesh puckered and dark and bloodless. He made a low, animal sound—the closest he could come to speech, with agony lancing straight up his leg, right into his spine. He stumbled, nearly fell, and righted himself—just in time to dodge a blur-quick sickle that sought to tear open his throat.

And six more shadows appeared out of the gloom.

The sky was as dark as a moonless night. The rain pounded. Their enemies faded in the murk, hard to see. The ground turned to sludge, stuck to their boots, weighed them down. The shadows surrounded them, fighting on, quicker

## CHRIS PIERSON

every moment. The shadows would never tire—but Hult was breathing hard now, and Shedara moaned from the pain in her wrist. Forlo's sword seemed like it was made of lead; he couldn't feel anything below his knee. A shadow dived at him from the side; he turned to catch the blow with his shield, and missed. One of its sickles ripped through his stomach, cutting deep. A blossom of pain unfurled in his gut. With a bellow of defeat, he crashed down into the muck.

"No!" Shedara cried.

She tried to turn toward him, but a shadow stepped between them. A second slid in to block Hult. The barbarian raised his shuk high, brought it down, clove the fiend in two. Another took its place. Cursing, Hult fell back, pressing his back against Shedara. They left Forlo lying there, at the shadows' mercy. They had little choice.

A shadow loomed over Forlo. He could see its face now, hidden beneath its hood: a death mask of gray, shriveled flesh stretched taut over bone. It leered at him, its eyes pools of black, as he raised his sword abjectly, to defend himself. He couldn't get back up. The pain and nausea of his wound were too great. The shadow held its sickles poised, like a scorpion's stingers.

No, damn it! he thought. Not like this. Not like this!

The sickles came down, lightning quick, one-two. He got his sword in the way, somehow. The force of the blows made his whole arm ache. The blade got even heavier. It fell from his hand, landed awkwardly on his chest, and rolled into the mud. The shadow's grin widened. He spat at the thing, swallowing the urge to look away, to close his eyes. Barreth Forlo had sworn, long ago, to meet death face-to-face.

He glimpsed the arrow, in the corner of his vision, without realizing what it was at first. It was diving down, darting through the rain without a sound. The shadow never knew: one moment it was drawing back its knives to finish him, and the next it was screaming and ripping apart,

## TRAIL OF THE BLACK WYRM

the shaft plunging into the back of its neck. The arrow tore right through it, struck the ground a hand's breadth from Forlo, and stuck there in the mud, quivering. It was fletched with black feathers, its nock carved into the image of a snarling dragon.

“Where did that come from?” he murmured.

He heard Hult and Shedara, still fighting, off to his right. He reached for his sword, managed to pick it up, and started to rise—then collapsed, the agony too great to endure any more. With one last, vile oath, he slipped into darkness.