

# WALISLANIA

Tales of the Rogue Magician



By Stephen Michael Sechi

**TALISLANTA:**  
Tales of the Rogue Magician

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## CHAPTER 1

**WEST ACROSS THE** Sea of Sorrow stood the city of Zantium, a bustling seaport that served as a nexus for buyers and sellers from across the continent of Talislanta. Through the gates of the city passed diverse people from across the continent. There were green-skinned adepts from Cymril, Farad slavers in chains and leathers, and blue Aeriad from the forests of Vardune. Here, Zandir nobles passed by in sequined palanquins, oblivious to the plaintive cries of beggars, harlots, and others of low circumstances. There, conjurors and exhibitionists displayed their respective talents, while charlatans in garish silks and bangles created illusory panoramas of fanciful aspect.

In the marketplace of Zantium stood a platform of rough-hewn beams, thirty feet in height and draped with heavy black curtains. Public executions were held here each day at noon for the edification of the local populace. Such spectacles never failed to draw large crowds of onlookers, and with good reason. The master executioners of Zantium were renowned far and wide for the subtlety and ingenuity of their methods.

The executioner scheduled to appear on this day was Grimal, an individual generally deemed to be unparalleled in his field, and notable for his dramatic flourishes. Tall and spare of limb, attired in the traditional black hood and robes of his guild, he cut a splendidly ominous figure.

Striding the great platform like a master thespian, his presence commanded the audience's rapt attention. Under his direction, each execution became a virtuoso performance, combining precise proportions of pathos, suspense, tension, and tragic denouement. Fiendish devices and machinations were his props; his victims, dispatched like actors in a tragic play.

For today's occasion, Grimal had developed a simple yet intriguing contraption. The primary component was a common trapdoor built into the center of the platform, which could be activated by means of an ornate wooden lever. Directly below, in full view of the crowd, was a large glass tank filled with water. Into this Grimal had placed a pair of captive sea scorpions – voracious creatures eight feet in length, their segmented bodies covered with iridescent scales, spines, and barbs.

High above, the twin suns climbed to their zenith, signifying the arrival of the noon hour. Grimal and his assistants, attired all in black, mounted the platform to the cheers of the onlookers. Behind them, bound hand and foot with chains, came the accused — a darkly handsome young man by the name of Crystabal.

In contrast to the Executioners, Crystabal cut a colorful and even flamboyant figure. He was dressed all in velvet and sported a jaunty beret and silver ear bangle. Despite having spent a week in the dungeon of Zantium, his mustache and goatee were impeccably groomed. He was said to possess the soul of a hopeless romantic and the keen eyes and practiced hand of a born thief.

By dint of numerous intrigues and indiscretions, Crystabal had come to be known as the “Rogue Magician” – a fitting sobriquet, given the scope of his reputed talents. For a time, Crystabal's ample charms and wiles made him a popular figure among the nobility of Zantium, and he prospered. Unfortunately, a scandal involving the twin daughters of the alchemist, Bazel, had finally led to his downfall, and brought him to his current condition.

Now the city Magistrate ascended the stairs, a pompous figure attired in an overlarge turban, baggy pantaloons, and a cloak of fine brocade. With mincing steps he walked to the center of the platform and faced the crowd, whereupon he unfurled a long scroll inscribed with calligraphic figures and began to read aloud in a strident voice.

“Citizens of Zandu, inhabitants of Zantium, and visitors from foreign lands, hear my words. The prisoner Crystabal is hereby accused of the following crimes: of Larceny in the First through Fourth Degrees; of Licentious Conduct and Philandary in the First Degree, of several counts; of Public Insobriety; of similar charges brought against him in the cities of Zadian and Zanth, and of related offenses too numerous to list in their entirety.”

The crowd applauded in appreciation of the breadth and scope of the accused’s accomplishments. Crystabal bowed in acknowledgement of the compliment.

With a look of contempt, the Magistrate rolled up the scroll and tucked it under his arm. “Have you any last words to say in your defense?”

Crystabal cleared his throat. “Indeed, First and foremost, I am innocent of all charges. The women whom I am accused of seducing accompanied me of their own volition. As to the stolen articles found in my possession, all can be explained. To begin ...”

The Magistrate cut Crystabal short. “Your plea is hereby noted. The honorable Grimal, serving in the capacity of judge and executioner, will now render his verdict.”

Grimal waited for the crowd to fall silent before replying. “The accused has been found guilty of all charges, and is hereby sentenced to death.”

“This trial is a travesty of justice!” stated an outraged Crystabal. “I hereby petition for an appeal.”

At a signal from Grimal, one of his black-hooded assistants stepped forth to apply a gag to Crystabal’s mouth. The rogue magician responded with a stream of complaints, now muffled so as to be incomprehensible.

The Magistrate bowed stiffly at the waist. “The request for an appeal is hereby denied. Executioner, you may fulfill your function.”

In response, Grimal strode across the platform and motioned to his subordinates. The hooded figures positioned the accused above the trapdoor, then judiciously backed away. With a show of gallantry Grimal offered Crystabal a blindfold. The rogue magician declined with a proud shake of his head.

The formalities having been dispensed with, Grimal threw back his cloak and placed a gloved hand upon the lever. In the tank below, the sea

scorpions stirred, hungrily gnashing their fangs. The crowd held its breath in anticipation.

Grimal paused a moment for dramatic effect. Then, with a sudden gesture, he pulled the lever. The trapdoor swung open, and Crystabal plummeted downwards.

The crowd gasped in unison. A second passed, then cries of anger and alarm were heard throughout the audience. Grimal looked about, puzzled by the nature of the crowd's response. One of his assistants stepped forward to examine the open trapdoor, and clapped a hand to his head in amazement.

Grimal pushed him aside in order to see for himself what had transpired. He looked downwards: in the water-filled tank he saw the two sea scorpions, the gag and shackles that had once bound the prisoner, and nothing else. Crystabal was gone, as if he had vanished into thin air.

The crowd, furious at having been denied their sport, began to pelt the platform with rubbish and offal. The city Magistrate shouted obscenities at Grimal and his confederates, but his words were drowned out by the cries of the unruly mob. Once more Grimal examined the trapdoor and scratched his head in puzzlement. Then all beat a hasty retreat, anxious to escape the wrath of the local populace.

## CHAPTER 2

**CRYSTABAL FELT HIMSELF** falling, and prepared for the worst: the cold slap as he struck the surface of the water, the deadly embrace of the sea scorpions, the agony of being eaten alive; and finally, nothingness. He wished that he had lived to see the crystal city of Cymril, and longed to hold a woman in his arms one last time.

Then there was a flash of light, and Crystabal felt the inexplicable sensation of falling not in one direction, but in several directions at once.

He materialized as if from thin air, to land in a heap on a cold stone floor. Dazed and disoriented, he looked about, attempting to determine the nature of his whereabouts. No longer was he bound and gagged. The executioner's platform was gone, as were Grimal, the Magistrate, and the crowds of onlookers.

Instead, he found himself in a septagonal chamber, the walls of which were covered with mirrors. A soft green glow illuminated the room, its source not readily apparent. The air tingled with the unmistakable presence of magic.

Crystabal rose and brushed the dust from his garments, taking care to smooth the wrinkles caused by the manacles. He looked into the glass.

Instead of his own reflection, he saw the image of a tall, green-skinned figure reflected seven-fold in the mirrored walls of the chamber. The

features were uncommonly animated in appearance. The eyes sparkled like pools of green fire, and the narrow lips curved upwards at the corners in a subtle smile. The oval face was framed by a high-collared cloak of jade green damask, which furled and unfurled as if wafted by the breeze.

“Greetings, Crystabal,” said the seven images, speaking in unison.

“Greetings, Miriad,” replied Crystabal without enthusiasm. “It has been some time since last we met.”

“All too true,” replied the seven reflections. “Know, however, that I have been keeping an eye on you in the interim. News of your achievements comes from far and wide.”

Crystabal dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand. “My reputation is perhaps exaggerated in certain locales.”

Miriad’s images affected identical sardonic grins: “You are far too modest. Even I, a virtual recluse, have heard the stories of the rogue magician’s daring escapades!”

The image nearest to Crystabal winked. “I speak here of a series of indiscretions involving a quantity of stolen aphrodisiac elixir and the twin daughters of the alchemist, Bazel.”

“The recent scandal involving the nine wives of sheik, Najil, likewise comes to mind,” added another of the images.

“To say nothing of the incident of Coromir the conjuror and the purloined familiar,” said yet another. “In fact, Coromir speaks of you often, and would like nothing better than to meet you in person.”

“That is a flattering thought,” remarked Crystabal. “I travel often, however, and have little time to maintain close friendships. In fact, even now I must be on my way, as I am expected elsewhere.”

The seven faces of Miriad the magician faded from green to powder blue, each adopting a different expression of dismay. “What a pity. I had hoped that you would have time to perform a small favor for an old friend.”

Crystabal winced, recalling previous encounters with Miriad. “I am reluctant to ask what sort of favor you have in mind.”

Again the seven images spoke in unison. “Past the junction of the Wilderlands and Hajan Roads lies an ancient concourse, unused since the time of The Great Disaster. At its terminus stands the domus of the necromage, Shonos, an individual of peculiar and obsessive habits. Among

the many strange and wondrous artifacts in his possession is an orb of sky-blue crystal, an item that he acquired from me by devious means. I want you to retrieve the orb, and bring it to me.”

“The use of the term, ‘retrieve’, seems overly delicate,” noted Crystabal. “I believe ‘steal’ or ‘rob’ would be more accurate.”

The images each made a flippant gesture. “I prefer not to quibble over semantics. Suffice it to say that I desire the orb, and would like you to obtain it for me.”

“Is there not some other person better qualified for this task?”

“Undoubtedly,” answered Miriad’s reflections. “But in truth, there is a scarcity of applicants for positions of this sort. “

“And if I refuse?”

“Your remarks cut me to the quick,” said the images, a pained expression on their features. “Have you so soon forgotten our long friendship, and the many times that I have offered you my assistance?”

Crystabal uttered a bitter laugh. “Assistance, yes. But always at a price.”

“Such is the nature of business dealings in general. However, I do not seek to compel you to do anything against your will. If you would rather not accept my offer, I will return you to the exact place and time from whence you came, and bother you no more.”

One of Miriad’s images spoke independently of the others. “Optionally, you may prefer to visit the laboratory of the alchemist, Bazel, who of late has taken an interest in the alchemical causes of criminality. He is said to be in need of volunteers for his experiments, and no doubt would be pleased to have you as a subject.”

A second image spoke: “The estimable Najil has expressed the desire to renew his acquaintance with you, though I doubt that his intentions are very friendly after the troubles you caused him.”

“And let us not forget Coromir the conjuror,” added another.

“To name just a few,” said another.

Crystabal’s mouth drooped at the corners. From past experience he had learned the folly of getting involved in a feud between rival magicians, which he considered a foolhardy and reckless endeavor.

As if this were not bad enough, there was the location of Shonos’ sanctum to consider. The Wilderlands of Zaran was a vast wasteland, inhabited

primarily by vicious predators and tribes of savage sub-men, avoided by most sensible individuals.

In summation, Miriad's proposal had little to recommend it. The alternatives, on the other hand, were even less appealing.

Crystabal swallowed. "I accept," he said, with great distaste.

Miriad's images grinned, and took on a golden coloration.

"Excellent! There remain only a few legalisms to iron out, strictly as a matter of formality. To wit: you must hereby agree to indemnify me from all responsibility for your physical, mental, and spiritual well being; from material losses, real or imagined; and from all claims, now or in the future."

"Secondly, it should be stated that this verbal contract shall be binding unto perpetuity or until such time as the terms of this agreement are met."

"Lastly, you shall hereby agree to take an unbreakable oath, with the understanding that any attempt to renege upon the terms of this agreement shall result in your instantaneous return to Zantium, under the conditions previously stipulated."

Crystabal rolled his eyes. "I agree, on the condition that this is the last time I shall be required to perform any such undertakings on your behalf. After this, our accounts are even!"

Miriad's images smiled contentedly. "It shall be as you say."

Suddenly the glass directly in front of Crystabal became like liquid, and a pair of mirrored hands emerged from its surface, holding a leather satchel.

"Take this," said Miriad. "It contains items that you will find useful on your long journey."

"Journey?" inquired Crystabal incredulously. "The place you describe lies half a continent away! Why not simply use your magics to transport me to Shonos's sanctum, as you brought me here from Zantium?"

"Shonos is suspicious by nature, and is sensitive to the overt use of magic within his domains. The use of so potent a spell could well be traced back to me, a situation that I would prefer to avoid. Better that you employ more mundane methods to arrive at your destination."

Crystabal grudgingly took possession of the satchel, and the mirrored hands withdrew back into the glass. The rogue magician opened the flap. Inside was a purse containing a small quantity of gold coins, a map of the

Wilderlands region, a pendant in the shape of a miniature horn, and a hooded cloak.

“The map indicates the location of Shonos’ home,” explained Miriad. “The purse contains sufficient funds to cover such essentials as you will require while on your voyage. When you have retrieved the orb from Shonos, you need only speak my name into the magical horn and you will be transported to my abode.”

Miriad’s semblances suddenly expanded in size, adopting a threatening scarlet hue. “By no means are you to employ this device while in the vicinity of Shonos, for to do so would result in consequences of the most unpleasant sort. Is this clear?”

Crystabal sighed. “Abundantly so. However, I must object to this cloak, which is both drab and unappealing. Could you not have made arrangements for something a bit more fashionable? Also, a few more coins would not be remiss. I am accustomed to traveling in a style that befits individuals of discerning tastes.”

Miriad’s images remained impassive. “I am afraid you must adjust your expectations and make do with what you have. And now, time is wasting, and it is best that you be on your way. To exit the chamber, pass through the wall immediately to your right.”

The seven images of Miriad the magician began to fade.

“Be advised, I will look in on you from time to time, in order to monitor your progress. And now, farewell.”

With that, the enchanted images dissolved into hundreds of sparkling motes.

In their place Crystabal saw seven reflections of himself, each from a different angle. Through habit he spent a moment admiring himself, and making a few minor adjustments to his costume. Then he stepped towards the wall immediately to his right, one hand cautiously extended in front of him. His fingers met no resistance, but passed through the surface as if it did not exist. Satisfied that this was not another of Miriad’s tricks, the rogue magician exited the chamber.

To his dismay he discovered that he stood at the entrance of an alley located just a few yards from the executioner’s gibbet. Fearful of being discovered, the rogue magician ducked into the shadows and quickly

donned the plain hooded cloak provided him by Miriad. Then, attired in the manner of a common traveler, he slipped unnoticed into the milling crowds.

## CHAPTER 3

**CRYSTABAL MADE HIS** way through the mercantile district of Zantium, keeping to the back streets and alleyways. Along the way he kept a keen eye out for members of the Executioner's Guild. Having narrowly escaped the jaws of the sea scorpions, he had no desire to once again fall victim to the perverse machinations of Grimal.

It was his intention to depart from Zantium without delay, if only to be freed of his odious indenture to Miriad as soon as possible. The only impediment to his goal was an insufficiency of funds, a situation that the rogue magician planned to remedy as soon as possible.

The Street of Merchants loomed just ahead, around the next corner. Crystabal pressed deeper into the shadows, and whispered the syllables of the spell known as the Veil of Stealth. In response a confluence of magical energies manifested about him, enveloping the rogue magician in a mantle of enchantment that rendered him invisible to the naked eye.

Crystabal emerged from the shadows to appraise the various passers-by, confident that none could detect his presence. A gnomekin crystal trader passed the alleyway, accompanied by a pair of bodyguards outfitted in suits of shining scale mail. Crystabal noted the alert look on their faces, and turned his attentions elsewhere.

A courtesan in bright face paints sauntered down the street, her silver ankle and wrist bracelets jingling like chimes. Crystabal felt compelled to follow after her, but forced himself to keep his mind focused on the task at hand.

From across the square came a trio of Zandir wine merchants, laughing among themselves as they weaved their way through the crowds. Crystabal studied them closely; their unsteady gait and slurred speech suggested that the three had imbibed a bit too freely of their wares.

Crystabal fell in step with the group, the Veil of Stealth preventing him from making any sound that would betray his presence. An artful dodge, a swift cut of purse strings, a gentle rifling of pockets, and Crystabal emerged from the throng and slipped into an alley on the opposite side of the street.

Once hidden again among the shadows, Crystabal caused the spell to lapse, and examined the results of his efforts. A silk purse opened to reveal a quantity of gold and silver coins; a pouch yielded a dozen small gemstones. Here was a ring, ten gold pentacles, a handful of coppers, and a few trinkets of little worth.

Nodding in satisfaction at a job well done, Crystabal tucked the coins and gems into his satchel and concealed the rest of his take in a nearby pile of trash. Then, drawing the hooded cloak about himself, he merged again into the crowds and proceeded to the shop of a local clothier. Here, he purchased splendid garments of the finest quality: a hooded cloak and beret of blue velveteen, knee-high boots of soft leather, and a shirt and breeches of purple plush.

Arranging the hood of his cloak so that it partially concealed his features, the rogue magician proceeded to the south end of the market, where beasts of various sorts were sold at auction. Here, a band of Djaffir merchants held sway, their flowing robes still covered with the dust of travel, their features concealed behind fetish masks of lacquered animal hide, as was their custom.

Believing that ‘the face mirrors the soul,’ the Djaffir claimed to use these devices to ward against evil enchantments. Individuals of a more skeptical bent claimed that the masks had a more practical purpose, citing as evidence the uncanny similarities exhibited by the Djaffir merchant and bandit tribes.

A proponent of the latter theory, Crystabal approached warily, examining the Djaffir's animals with an air of indifference calculated to dispel any impression of overt interest. After allowing an appropriate interval of time to elapse, he motioned authoritatively to one of the nomads.

"I wish to procure a beast suitable for travel," he said without urgency. "A steed of good quality, swift and reliable."

The nomad nodded, his features inscrutable behind the lacquered mask. "Then you have come to the right place. These are fine creatures possessed of noble attributes."

The nomad proceeded to point out to Crystabal the different species of beasts and their particular qualities.

"Here we have the one-humped ontra, bred for speed... the batra, with two humps, is both swift and durable. Then there is the three-humped tatra, notable as a burden beast of tireless endurance. For the sum of four hundred gold lumens, any of these can be yours."

Crystabal cleared his throat. "Strictly for purposes of comparison, what might a steed of somewhat lesser quality cost?"

The Djaffir consulted briefly with his associates, then replied. "It is possible that we have been misled by your apparel, which, though somewhat grandiose, is of a cut and quality indicative of an individual of wealth and high standing. Your demeanor, on the other hand, suggests frugality or perhaps even parsimony. Therefore, I shall be direct: the cheapest of these animals cannot be purchased for less than two hundred gold lumens."

"These fees are ludicrous," complained Crystabal. "Have you nothing less extravagant for sale?"

The nomad disdained comment, turning once more to confer with his fellows. An animated debate ensued, during which Crystabal thought to discern certain disparaging remarks directed towards his person. When the nomad returned he brought with him an animal of unexceptional appearance.

"In accordance with your wishes, I offer the least expensive of our beasts: a stout brown charger, formerly owned by an old Sarista fortune-teller, who employed the steed only to carry her meager belongings to and from the marketplace."

Crystabal cast a dubious eye at the creature, which seemed to be some sort of strange hybrid of greymane and durge. “The beast appears somewhat the worse for wear.”

“It is as sturdy a mount as fifty gold lumens can buy,” remarked the Djaffir. “If even this sum is beyond your means, you must resort to the more economical expedient of pedal ambulation.”

A period of negotiation followed, with the rogue magician matching wits with the nomad trader. After much haggling, Crystabal convinced the Djaffir to part with his beast for the sum of just twenty gold lumens. Additional fees for tariffs, tack and harness, and import duties inflated the price considerably, however, to the point where a hopelessly confused Crystabal found his purse lightened to the tune of sixty-three gold lumens.

At last the deal was done and the rogue magician rode across the plaza, mounted on the back of his newly acquired steed. With what remained of his money, he purchased a quantity of provisions and a Zandir blade of good quality. Then he passed through the gates of Zantium and rode east for the capital of Zanth.

## CHAPTER 4

**THE MASTER EXECUTIONER**, Grimal, sat in his sanctum, feeling depressed and out of sorts. Arranged about him were the tools of his grisly trade: a two-handed axe, the pommel of which was decorated with a leering skull; a fearsome-looking contraption that resembled an elaborate guillotine, with blades positioned to sever the victim's feet, hands, legs, or arms; a glass coffin inlaid with iron spikes of varying length, chests filled with leather straps, and bolts of the ubiquitous black cloth that members of his profession used to drape the stage, their props, and ultimately, the remains of their victims.

Grimal took a swallow of bitter green arrack and spat on the floor. He had been in a foul mood ever since the abortive execution, an event ruined by the mysterious disappearance of the intended victim, the rogue magician, Crystabal. The public humiliation had brought an onus down upon his head, tarnishing a reputation built over many years. Where once the local populace had regarded him as Zantium's greatest executioner, some had now begun to whisper that he was past his prime, and that others had eclipsed him in stature.

A knock on the outer door roused Grimal from his morbid musings. "Enter," grumbled the executioner.

The door opened to reveal a swarthy skinned man with a hatchet-like countenance and a drooping black mustache. He was dressed in a night grey cloak, riding boots, and garments of coarse grey linen, a costume identifying him as a representative of the Thief Chasers guild.

“Vadmir, at your service,” said he, bowing stiffly at the waist. “I have come as you requested. What is it that you require?”

Grimal poured another glass of arrack and motioned for the thief chaser to be seated. Vadmir accepted the glass but remained standing.

Grimal ignored the sleight. “I seek the return of a notorious felon who escaped prior to his scheduled execution.”

“So I have heard,” remarked Vadmir. “That would be the rogue magician, Crystabal if I am not mistaken.”

“Do not speak that cursed name in my presence!” shouted Grimal, his features contorted in anger.

Vadmir bowed his head. “Please accept my deepest condolences for your misfortune. The burden of failure is one not easily borne.”

“The culprit evaded his fate only through the intercession of magic, of this I am certain!” said Grimal, the veins in his temples standing out like cords. “I want him found and returned to Zantium, at once!”

“On this account, you need have no fear,” said Vadmir confidently. “The onus that now hangs over your head is as good as gone.”

Vadmir consulted a small iron-bound ledger that he withdrew from the pocket of his cloak, running a finger across the page. “Yes, I believe the individual best suited to the task is Xan.”

“Who is this Xan? asked Grimal. “I have never heard of him.”

“Xan is a Chana witchman, who hails from the junglelands of eastern Talislanta. He has been in our employ for several months, during which time he has never failed to fulfill expectations. In short, I believe that you will find him well suited to your needs.”

“I shall be the judge of that,” muttered Grimal. “Bring him here. I wish to see who it is I am hiring before I part with my gold.”

Vadmir nodded in the affirmative. “I have anticipated your needs.”

The thief chaser turned to the door. “Xan, please come forth. Your presence is requested.”

Into the chamber stepped a savage looking figure with leathery, grey-green skin, wearing a cloak and loincloth of werebeast-hide. His teeth were blackened and filed to sharp points. His hair, pulled back in a lacquered topknot, thrust upwards from the back of his skull in a mass of stiff bristles. Slung over one shoulder was a crude pouch fashioned from the skull of a small hominid, from which dangled a fringe of knotted thongs and claws. Over the other was a blowgun, and at his waist, a flat bladed long-knife over two feet in length. Suspended from his neck by a leather thong was a shrunken and withered head, the very sight of which made Grimal's skin crawl.

"Do not be deceived by appearances," explained Vadmir, observing Grimal's reaction. "Xan is an individual of rare qualities. He is adept in the use of a dozen weapons, including those employed to capture, maim, or kill. He feels neither mercy, sympathy, nor remorse for his victims. Like all witchmen he is proficient in certain primitive but highly effective magics, and he is a relentless tracker. No matter where the felon may be, Xan will hunt him down and bring him to justice."

"As to that, we shall see," said Grimal. "First, I must know how the rogue magician escaped his fate."

"A minor detail, which can be addressed at once." Vadmir turned to the witchman. "Xan, attend my words. Yesterday, a prisoner named Crystabal escaped from the executioner's gibbet. How was this possible, and where is the escaped felon now?"

Xan regarded Vadmir with dull black eyes. "To obtain this information, I must consult with my familiar."

"Please do so at once," said Vadmir.

The witchman made a sign acknowledging that he had heard the thief chaser's request. Taking a seat on the floor, he removed the shrunken head from its thong and set it before him.

"Ako; answer my summons."

The shriveled eyelids opened slowly, revealing a set of empty sockets. The corners of the mouth twitched, and the lips parted.

"I hear and respond," said the shrunken head, speaking in a croaking voice. "What is it that you wish to know?."

Grimal recoiled, an expression of stark terror etched into his features. Vadmir watched impassively, concealing his own secret fears.

“I seek information about a thief named Crystabal, who was to have been executed in Zantium two days ago,” said Xan. “Look into the spirit realm, and tell me: how did he escape, and where is he now?”

“Two questions have you asked, and two answers shall you receive,” replied Ako. “The prisoner was rescued through the intercession of a magician. He is now some miles from this spot, headed east along the old Phadran Causeway in the direction of Zanth.”

Grimal stepped forward, livid with anger. “Who is this magician? By the Ten Thousand, tell me his name, and I will have him rend it into a thousand pieces!”

The shrunken head emitted a low hissing sound and turned to face the executioner with eyes like two bottomless pits. “This noisome entity offends my sensibilities. Shall I send a phasm to enter his dreams and slay him?”

Grimal stood rigid, paralyzed with fear. The hairs on the back of his neck stood erect. Vadmir likewise felt ill at ease, and withdrew to a far corner of the chamber.

“That will not be necessary,” replied Xan. “Now be silent, until such time as I have need for your services once more.”

The witchman waved a hand: the hollow eyes and lips of the shrunken head closed, and the fetish resumed its previously lifeless appearance.

Vadmir turned to face the Master Executioner, who now affected a sickly pallor. “I trust that Xan meets with your approval?”

Grimal nodded, clearly shaken by the performance of the witchman and his grisly totem. “The rogue magician must be brought back alive, or I will pay nothing. Is this understood?”

“I will stipulate as much in the contract,” replied Vadmir confidently. “Be advised, however, that there is an additional charge for this service.”

“Yes, yes,” grumbled Grimal. “How soon can the witchman begin?”

Vadmir smiled for the first time since entering Grimal’s chambers. “I am prepared to accept your payment at once.”

After a period of negotiation and compromise, Grimal paid over the sum indicated by the representative of the thief chasers guild. Vadmir took the

money into his possession and presented the executioner with a contract stipulating the terms of their agreement, after which he and the witchman left the executioner's chambers.

When he was alone again, Grimal unlocked a nearby cabinet and produced a globe of translucent crystal, which rested upon a tripod of black iron. Setting the seeing stone on his desk, he spoke.

"Remar, are you present?"

The image of a figure in a black hood appeared on the surface of the sphere. "I am here. What is it that you desire?"

"I have just learned that the escaped felon, Crystabal, is headed in your direction, towards the city of Zanth. A thief chaser has been contracted to follow after him, but I wish to ensure that there will be no mistakes. Under no circumstances must the rogue magician be allowed to leave Zanth. Is this clear?"

"In all respects," responded Remar. "I will make the necessary arrangements at once."

Grimal waved a hand over the seeing stone, and the image disappeared. He poured himself another draught of green arrack and sat back in his chair, his mind seething. His failure to execute the rogue magician rankled like a burr; the very name, Crystabal, pained him like an open sore. The scoundrel must be made to pay, and dearly, for his crimes!

Grimal swallowed the cup of arrack, savoring its bitter taste. In his mind, he saw a vision of the rogue magician, bound hand and foot to a fiendish contraption of rotating spikes, wheels, and barbs. The thought set his creative juices flowing; taking quill pen and parchment in hand, he set to work creating a detailed schematic of the deadly machine that he had envisioned.

Three hours later the drawing remained unfinished. Disgusted, Grimal crumpled up the sheet of parchment and tossed it in a nearby trash receptacle. It was no use; with the cursed onus hanging over his head, he could not concentrate, and all his work was for naught.

Grimal raised the bottle of green arrack to his lips, emptied the rest of it, and cast it aside. The rogue magician must be captured and brought to justice. Until then, he would not rest.



## CHAPTER 5

**CRYSTABAL RODE EAST** along the Phaedran Causeway, an ancient thoroughfare that wound its way through a bright woodland of gall oak, blue pomegranate, and speckled larch. The time was mid-afternoon. The twin suns crept lazily across the sky, casting dappled shadows across the road.

Seated astride the lumbering charger, he'd ridden for four days, crossing the bridge that spanned the Sascasm River and spending the nights in roadside inns. Now, with Zantium many miles behind him, the rogue magician felt that it was safe to proceed at a more leisurely pace.

Given the nature of the circumstances surrounding his hasty departure from Zantium, events were proceeding about as well as could be expected. The steed he's purchased had proven to be a beast of serviceable quality if not great beauty. Under ideal conditions Crystabal would have preferred to obtain the services of a carriage and driver, but he had expected to endure a certain amount of inconvenience while on this journey.

In any event, he viewed the situation as a temporary annoyance. For once he arrived in Zanth, he planned to find some means of acquiring sufficient funds to book passage on a windship and complete the remainder of the voyage in comfort and style.

Suddenly, a flash of light caught his eye; a glimmer emanating from the woods at the road's edge. His curiosity piqued, Crystabal reigned in his

mount and dismounted, tethering the creature to a bush at the road's edge. Then he made his way towards a grove of waterwillows, seeking the source of the sparkling light.

Crystabal parted the foliage. Just beyond the line of trees, he spotted a trio of nymphlike creatures bathing in a pond, their sapphire-blue forms glistening wetly in the sun's light. The three wore garlands of white lotus blossoms about their necks, this being the full extent of their costumes.

Crystabal surveyed the scene from his place of hiding, careful lest the slightest movement betray his presence. Here were creatures of heart-rending beauty, graceful beyond compare! He found himself entranced by the sinuous motion of their bodies, and could barely restrain the urge to join them in their frolics. He was about to creep cautiously through the underbrush towards them when a voice called out to him from somewhere close by.

"Crystabal, take heed."

Crystabal looked about. "Who speaks?" he whispered.

An insect alighted upon the rogue magician's shoulder. "It is I, Miriad," said the tiny creature, speaking in the magician's voice.

Crystabal started; the insect's face was identical to that of Miriad's own semblance, save for the addition of a pair of antennae and compound eyes. The overall effect was bizarre, and not a little unsettling.

"Why do you linger here while there is work to be done?" said Miriad, in an incriminating tone. "Have you forgotten our agreement?"

Crystabal squirmed, the thought of the oath weighing heavily on his mind. "Not at all. I was headed for Zanth as planned, when I noticed this appealing sight."

Crystabal pointed in the direction of the lithe-limbed creatures. "Observe how they splash each other, and the way that their comely forms sparkle in the light! It is not every day that one sees forest nymphs cavort with such uninhibited abandon."

Miriad's insect-face frowned in disapproval. "Indeed not. The race of forest nymphs has been extinct for centuries, since the time of The Great Disaster. That which you see before you is no more than an illusion. These three are witches, who hope to ensnare you with their false images. Though

lovely to the eye, in reality they are toothless old crones, with bodies as shriveled as dried apples.”

Crystabal gazed longingly at the three nymphs. “Witches they may be, but these creatures are lovely beyond compare, particularly the one on the left. Besides, you should be the last one to criticize someone for using a semblance other than their own. “

Miriad’s insect head twitched irritably from side to side. “There is no time to tarry! You must cease your voyeuristic antics and quit this place at once, before it is too late.”

Crystabal emitted a wistful sigh “Yes, yes. As you wish.”

With a heavy heart Crystabal retreated from the thicket and climbed back upon his steed. Then he rode off to the east, images of blue-skinned nymphs still dancing before his eyes.



## CHAPTER 6

**THE LATE AFTERNOON** suns hung low in the west, sending streamers of burnt orange, magenta, and fiery crimson across the sky. Copses of spider oak and withergall cast shadowy fingers upon the land, and Crystabal became eager to find a place to spend the night. He pressed on through shaded vales and wooded hills until he came upon a row of stone dolmens that denoted the outermost districts of the capital of Zanth.

Surmounting a ridge, the rogue magician reined in his steed and paused to survey the surroundings. Low-lying woodlands stretched to the north and south — both favored haunts of dire exomorphs and bandit clans. To the west lay the open road and territories already traversed and found lacking in suitable campsites.

Crystabal looked to the east. A half-mile distant, a ruined tower stood atop a high, grassy knoll, silhouetted against the evening sky — a potential source of shelter, in the rogue magician's estimation. Cautiously leading his mount down the far side of the ridge, Crystabal set off to investigate his find.

The ascent up the face of the knoll proved more difficult than he had imagined, this due to the many shards of cracked stone and patches of coarse sedge that littered the approach to the ruined tower. Arriving at last at the summit, Crystabal examined the ancient edifice.

The structure's outer walls were overgrown with mosses and creepers, but appeared sound. Crystabal peered through an archway. Part of the opposite wall had fallen away from the building, leaving the remnants of a rotted wooden roof hanging overhead. There was no sign of life within the ruins.

With darkness now descending upon the woods, the rogue magician hastened to make camp. He tethered the slope-shouldered charger to the trunk of a dead withergall just beyond the outer walls, then gathered soft ferns and grasses for his bed. After building a fire of fallen deadwood limbs, he sat down to a meal of black bread and hard cheese, made somewhat more palatable by the ingestion of generous quantities of aquavit.

With an eerie suddenness, dusk gave way to night. Leaden clouds blotted out the Talislantan moons, extinguishing the stars from view. Trails of mist rose from the ruins. Beyond the small hemisphere illuminated by the campfire, all was darkness.

Crystabal tossed more wood on the fire, and the sphere of light expanded outwards — a small victory over the encroaching gloom. From somewhere off in the distance came strange sounds: creatures of the night, emerging from hidden lairs, holes and hovels.

Crystabal shivered involuntarily, and drew his cloak close about him. Night-dankness, and nothing more... Others perhaps would feel afraid in such a place as this, but not the rogue magician. His blade was sharp and swift; a half-dozen cogent spells were at his command. Still, the situation called for vigilance. Steeling himself with another swallow of aquavit, Crystabal stoked the fire and assumed a watchful pose.

He awoke with a start sometime later, roused from a deep slumber by an uncomfortable premonition. Blackness engulfed the ruins. The fire had ebbed, leaving only a handful of faintly glowing coals. From somewhere nearby came a rustling sound: the charger stirring, the night breeze blowing through the trees, or something else? Crystabal gripped the handle of his blade, eyes straining to see into the darkness.

High above, a pale moon slid from behind the clouds. Misty grey light suffused the ruins, and Crystabal saw standing before him three figures, vaguely humanoid in outline but with the semblance of shadows. Hooded shrouds hung loosely on their wasted frames, and their eyes glowed with

an otherworldly light. With menacing intent, the shadowights advanced towards the rogue magician.

Crystabal sprang to his feet, scrambling backwards over rock and rubble. The apparitions followed, calling out in soft, imploring voices.

“Come closer, Crystabal, that we may embrace thee. We crave substance and being, and yearn again to possess corporeal form.”

Crystabal drew his blade and struck at the nearest of the specters. The sword passed harmlessly through the shadowight, cleaving empty air. An icy chill ran through Crystabal, permeating his soul with dread.

Disembodied laughter echoed throughout the ruins, rattling like chains dragged across a dungeon floor.

“Your weapon cannot harm us,” spoke the phantoms. “Flight is useless. Surrender, and we will grant you a swift death.”

The specters circled towards the rogue magician, reaching to touch him with arms outstretched. He dodged the first of the shadowforms, then tried to lunge through a gap in the circle. A ghostly hand brushed his arm: Crystabal felt an unreal sensation as if the very essence of his physical self was being drained away. Weakened by the shadowight’s touch, he stumbled over a rock and fell headlong to the ground.

The earth beneath him felt damp, as cold and unyielding as the grave. Crystabal struggled to clear his head. His fingers met something smooth and glassine — the flask of aquavit, still lying near the remnants of the campfire. Acting on instinct Crystabal shoved the bottle into the coals, rolled to the side, and smashed the glass container with his sword.

The aquavit ignited instantaneously upon contact with the hot coals, erupting in a column of blue flame that bathed the ruins in harsh incandescence. Pained and dismayed by the light, the shadowights fell back, cursing as they groped blindly for the sanctuary of darkness.

Crystabal used the respite to advantage; mustering his full powers of concentration, the rogue magician uttered the arcane syllables of the Spell of Radiance. A bolt of scintillant light flew forth from his hand, dissolving one of the shadowforms into nothingness.

The two remaining wights passed through the walls of the ruins and fled into the night. Crystabal heard their whispered threats and enticements throughout the rest of the evening but paid them no heed. Neither did

he permit the campfire to wane again or succumb once more to the temptation of sleep. Not until the twin suns ascended in the eastern sky did Crystabal allow himself rest. Even then, his sleep was fitful at best and filled with dark dreams.

He arose around noon, groggy and disoriented, and took stock of his gear and possessions. The loss of the aquavit, even in such a worthy cause, irked him. Equally disturbing was the discovery that the fire had singed the hem of his cloak, an item purchased at no little cost just days before. The wound left by the shadowight – a pale, ugly welt like the outline of a hand, still rendered his arm and shoulder numb with weakness.

Crystabal peered out through the ruined archway. His charger lay upon the ground, seemingly unhurt. Evidently, the shadowights had been reluctant to assume the corporeal form of a four-legged hybrid and so had left the beast untouched. He surveyed the creature at length: the charger seemed unnaturally peaceful in repose...

Lacking specific knowledge of animal husbandry, Crystabal approached to have a closer look. He called to the beast. The charger remained motionless. He stooped and gingerly touched a foreleg: the creature was as stiff as a board, apparently dead of old age.

Muttering under his breath, Crystabal packed up his gear. Then he hoisted the load on his back and set off to travel the last few miles to Zanth on foot, cursing the Djaffir merchants and Miriad the entire way.

## CHAPTER 7

**THE WITCHMAN, XAN,** stalked the shadowed alleys of Zantium in pursuit of his two legged prey. The city was a different type of jungle; grey stone and metal instead of green wood, alive with strange sounds and scents. Yet it was no more dark or foreboding than the place that he had once called home.

Xan followed the trail from the clothier's shop through the convoluted web of narrow streets and walkways that led toward the south end of the city. At an intersection of three roadways, he paused, momentarily confused. Many individuals had passed this way recently, and the tracks of his prey had been all but obliterated.

The witchman spoke a garbled incantation and executed a series of complex gestures, calling into effect the ancient spell of Spirit Tracking. He passed into an altered state of consciousness, from which he could now discern the faint spirit traces left in the wake by all living creatures as they passed through the material plane. Passers-by, taking note of the eerie-looking witchman, averted their gaze and gave him a wide berth.

Oblivious to their presence, Xan studied the ground and scanned the surrounding air. A complex web of intersecting spirit traces came into focus, each line a trail made by a single living thing. There were traces of many colors and types: some bright, innocent, and hopeful; others dark,

brooding, and sinister in aspect. The most recent lines could be discerned by their intensity, while the most ancient ones were faded, their colors muted by the passage of time.

The witchman squatted on his haunches, focusing on a single trail, the color of which was exactly like no other — a commingling of bright and dark hues that was indicative of the nature of the rogue magician's soul. Xan traced the trail across the ground: the prey had stopped here for a time and had spoken with a band of nomads from the Desert Kingdoms. From them, he had acquired a beast of curious lineage, on which he had ridden west, following the road that led out of the city.

Xan allowed the spell of Spirit Tracking to lapse, and his consciousness returned once more to the mundane world. The tracks of this unusual steed would not be difficult to follow. Without further delay Xan passed through the gates of Zantium, heading east along the Phaedran Causeway.

When he had traveled beyond sight of the city walls the witchman chanted the spell of Fast Traveling. The enchantment took effect at once. Xan's eyes glazed over, like one who has fallen into a trance. Then the witchman headed down the road at a loping gait, his mind and body no longer subject to the need for food or rest.

Xan traveled by day and by night, following the old roadway through woodlands speckled with hag-bush, spice tree, and tanglevine. Flocks of silver winged avir flew forth from the underbrush to soar on the winds like bits of shining tinsel. A caravan of Sarista gypsy folk rode past on the way to Zantium, their gaily painted wagons drawn by teams of land lizards. Xan paid them no heed, but continued ahead, moving at speed.

At a break in a line of willowood trees, the witchman paused to study the ground. The tracks of his prey were visible in the soil at the road's edge, showing where he had dismounted, tethered his steed, and stood among the trees. Xan parted the foliage with a grey-green hand, but saw only three old crones washing their withered forms in a brackish pond and continued on his way.

With the twin suns dipping below the tops of the trees, the witchman came upon the ruins of an ancient tower keep, standing atop a ridge overlooking the road. Xan followed the tracks of the thief's steed up the steep incline to the base of the tower. The body of the dead charger lay

on the ground, now bloated and covered with corpse-flies. Xan walked around the tower, studying the tracks. From them he learned that the thief had spent a night in the ruins, then departed on foot the next morning.

Xan sat upon a stone. He had employed the spell of Fast Traveling many times during the last few days, and would now need to rest in order to replenish his energies. He crouched within the walls of the old tower, as darkness enfolded the surrounding woods.

The suns disappeared from sight, leaving utter blackness in their wake. Three moons rose high into the night sky, partially obscured by banks of clouds. Xan sat unmoving, staring into the dark.

From somewhere nearby came the sound of voices, speaking in hushed tones. A pair of shadowy forms passed through the solid stone wall of the tower, to gaze upon the witchman with glowing eyes.

“Witchman, you are far from your jungle haunts,” whispered one of the shadowights. “What do you do here in these ruins, where we make our home?”

“My business is my own,” grunted Xan, remaining seated as before. “Begone, or incur my wrath.”

The two shadowights hissed softly. “That we will not do. It is our desire to experience corporeality once again; to feel and touch, as living things do. So it is that we must steal from you that which you have, and which we most desire.”

The phantoms drew close to take the witchman in their deathly cold embrace. Xan touched a bracelet made of knotted hide and muttered an incantation: at once, a web comprised of intersecting lines of force appeared in the air above the shadowights. The mesh wrapped around the ghostly entities and began to tighten, constricting the two wights into a pulsing black sphere barely a foot across.

“Witchman, dispel the soul net!” implored the shadowights. “Release us, and we will leave this place, never to return.”

“That I will not do,” answered Xan coldly. “Instead, I now employ you for my own purposes.”

Xan cast a second enchantment, then laid a hand on the black sphere. The dark energies passed through Xan’s fingers into his own body. Slowly,

the sphere diminished in size, until finally nothing remained except the empty soul net.

Xan dispelled the enchanted web and rose to his feet. Refreshed in body and spirit, he cast the spell of Fast Traveling once again. Then he left the ruined tower and continued on his way, following the trail of the rogue magician.

## CHAPTER 8

**WASTREL'S END WAS** an inn and tavern of unexceptional quality, catering to the least savory elements of those who populated the city of Zanth. Its clientele consisted primarily of two types of customers: those who robbed, cheated, or engaged in illicit activities for a living, and those who — wittingly or not — enabled such individuals to make a living.

On this day the inn's large common room was nearly filled to capacity. Seated at a corner table were four disparate seeming individuals: chief among them, the rogue magician, Crystabal, an individual prone to extravagant dress and mien, who had recently returned to Zanth after experiencing some difficulties in the town of Zantium.

Nearby sat Naros of Maruk, known by his ragged costume as “the Vagabond Thief”; the huge and bestial Tor, a renegade Ur clansman with leathery yellow skin and tusk-like fangs; and lastly, the raven-haired courtesan, Alianthe, known far and wide for her charms.

Several rounds of drinks were ordered and consumed, and the conversation around the table became more and more animated. In due course the four settled into a discussion of the time-honored art of thievery. Each in turn espoused a different opinion on the subject, according to his or her beliefs.

“Without magic, thievery is a base profession, at best,” spoke Crystabal. “This is plain to see, as I am sure all must agree.”

“An interesting postulation, with which I cannot concur,” said Naros. “Note if you will my tattered raiment, the sorrowful and downtrodden look on my features. Who at first glance would believe that I am a master felon? Yet such is the case, for deception is the most vital aspect of thievery.”

Alianthe brushed back her hair and pursed warm, red lips. “While I claim no kinship with the Vagabond Thief, his statements are not without some small grain of truth. Thievery is indeed best accomplished by subtle, rather than overt, means. And what is more subtle, and effective, than seduction?”

Crystabal struck a melodramatic pose, a hand placed on the hilt of his sword. “Alianthe, your claim inspires me to acts of gallantry! Let us go together to some less noisome place, where we can exchange our respective views on more intimate terms.”

The courtesan cast a cool glance towards Crystabal. “I would advise the rogue magician to keep his blade sheathed, and to concentrate on the subject at hand — which is to say, the art of thievery.”

Tor took a black iron mug in one of his massive hands, exerted pressure, and discarded a lump of crumpled metal. “Bah! I take what I want by force of arms, and leave petty games to ones such as you.”

Crystabal cast a foul look at the giant Ur clansman and toyed with an amulet that he wore at his throat. Tor, wary of Crystabal’s magics, grasped the handle of the heavy mace that hung from his belt.

Naros quickly intervened. “Gentlemen, please. We are all friends here.”

“Friends, and rivals...” added Alianthe.

“As usual, the lovely Alianthe cuts to the heart of the matter,” remarked Naros, “and also raises an intriguing postulation. In point of fact, it may well be that the city’s four preeminent thieves are seated at this table. The question therefore comes to mind – which of the four is truly the greatest thief in Zanth?”

“I claim this title by virtue of my past deeds, which speak for themselves,” said Crystabal.

“Philandery and petty larceny are accomplishments of a sort, this is true,” replied Alianthe tartly. “Yet if any here are worthy of such a title, it is Alianthe, whose charms have ensnared the loftiest nobles of Zanth.”

Tor spat on the floor. “I am no common thief but a skilled mercenary whose services are available for hire to the highest bidder.”

“The distinction is largely one of semantics,” remarked Naros. “As for myself, I readily admit to taking pride in my work and am unwilling to acknowledge any as my superior. For this reason, I propose a test to see who is the greatest thief in the city of Zanth.”

“As to the terms: each of us has one full day to exercise his or her particular talents to the fullest. At midnight this evening, we shall meet in some prearranged location in order to compare the results of our respective methods. Whoever has earned the most lucrative profit shall be accorded the title of ‘Greatest Thief in Zanth’.”

Crystabal twirled the ends of his neatly trimmed mustache as he pondered Naros’s proposal. If he were to fulfill his obligation to Miriad by the swiftest and most convenient means, he would require a fund of money sufficient to book passage on a windship. Naros’ challenge might well yield profitable results and would pose no more than a trifling delay, at best. Still, certain details of the test remained unresolved.

“A method of assessing the value of purloined articles must be determined in advance, in order to avoid possible controversy,” said the rogue magician.

“For once I am in agreement with Crystabal,” said Alianthe. “I suggest that we hire a neutral party to serve as an appraiser and adjudicator for the test — someone who can be trusted to deal fairly, without prejudice or favoritism.”

Tor grunted. “There is no such person in Zanth.”

“A point well taken,” said Naros. “To involve an outsider in our plans would be unwise. Instead, I suggest we resolve all disputes by the use of a monitor imp. I presume that the rogue magician can handle the arrangements?”

Crystabal nodded his head in assent. “The thaumatist, Erdmire, keeps such a creature in his shop and sleeps soundly at night due to a predilection

for strong intoxicants. It will be no great matter to borrow the imp for an hour or so.”

“Excellent!” replied Naros, gulping down the contents of his glass. “All that remains is to determine a neutral site for us to meet at the appointed hour.”

After some discussion, it was decided that the group would meet at midnight in the basement of an abandoned tower situated on the outskirts of the city. A few minor points were debated and clarified, and then the four rogues left the tavern, each to make his or her own secret plans.

## CHAPTER 9

**LATE AFTERNOON FOUND** Crystabal wandering the streets of the city's eastern quarter, his efforts to devise a stratagem suitable to Naros' challenge having met with abject failure. He was about to abandon the project and continue on his way when a singular event occurred in the vicinity of the House of Chance, a gambling establishment known for its varied and exotic diversions.

Crystabal was strolling by the aforementioned structure when its doors were suddenly flung wide, and a gaudily-attired patron expelled in a rude fashion from within. The unfortunate fellow tumbled head over heels for a distance of ten yards to land in a drunken heap in the middle of the road. Crystabal recognized the hapless victim as one Ordalini, a Zandir charlatan of some little local reputation.

Having known similar experiences in the past, Crystabal took pity on the besotted magician. With a surprising show of compassion, he helped the charlatan to his feet. He then dusted the unsteady Ordalini's garments, and pointed him in the direction of his home.

Only after the charlatan had departed did Crystabal notice the small silver disc that had apparently fallen from Ordalini's pocket. He bent to pick up the item, upon which was inscribed the following legend:

– The holder is cordially invited to attend a Grande Masque, to take place on the evening of the 24th of Ardan, at the estate of the honorable Palitane –

Crystabal looked up and down the street. Ordalini was nowhere to be seen. He discreetly placed the invitation in the pocket of his cloak, along with the purse that he had lifted from the inebriated charlatan while brushing off his clothing. Then he headed for the shop of a local costumer, a daring scheme already beginning to form in his mind.

Zahd's Emporium was an exclusive establishment that catered to the wealthiest of the Zandir upper class. Inside the brightly lit salon a wide selection of colorful apparel was on display, including costumes from past ages, ceremonial garb, and many odd and festive confections.

Crystabal arrived at the entrance to Zahd's and stood before the front window, gazing with longing at the racks of fabulous garments. Here were clothes worthy of the loftiest nobles of Zanth, both in terms of quality and price. Crystabal took stock of his finances and frowned; clearly, he would be forced once again to accept an unhappy compromise between economy and style. The rogue magician sighed, then entered through the gilt trimmed doors.

A chime sounded a melodious tone, announcing his arrival. From the back room emerged Zahd — a pear-shaped fellow with skin dyed three different shades of magenta, wearing a tent-like gown of yellow spangles. Taking note of the arrival of a prospective customer, Zahd clapped his hands in excitement and ambled towards the front of the shop.

“Good day to you, sir. I am the proprietor, Zahd. In what way can I be of service?”

“I require a costume suitable for a masked ball,” answered Crystabal. “Preferably, something simple yet elegant, while avoiding any implication of ostentatiousness.”

“But of course!” exclaimed Zahd. “You have come to the right place. Kindly follow me.”

The costumer stepped over to a rack hung with a selection of splendid garments, in all colors of the rainbow. From these he brought forth

an elaborate creation of lime green gauze, trimmed with sparkling emerald crystals.

“Here is an authentic copy of the traditional raiment once worn by the Aesthetes of Elande, during the Second Millennium. The color is perfect for you, if I say so myself. The price is a mere two thousand gold lumens.”

Crystabal coughed. “Perhaps something a bit less garish...”

“Of course,” said Zahd, returning the first item to the rack and taking out another. “The pyro-demon costume is perhaps a trifle excessive for one of your discerning tastes. However, may I recommend the cobalt blue wind demon instead? The cost is a paltry nine hundred gold lumens.”

Again, Crystabal indicated a lack of interest. Zahd forced a smile and brought out another costume, even less expensive than the previous one, which Crystabal also refused. This procedure continued for the better part of a half-hour, during which time Zahd’s manner became more and more irritable. Finally, apprehending the true nature of his customer, he abandoned all pretense at civility.

“In the economy category, we have here the authentic vermin-hide robe of a Namfarian pariah of the Forgotten Age — a bargain at only ten gold lumens,” said Zahd sarcastically. “Or, for those rare individuals who evince a casual disregard for the demands of fashion, we have this simple black vizard, at five gold lumens. If even this is beyond your means, then you must make do with a tin of boot polish, or perhaps chimney soot.”

Crystabal ignored the costumer’s insulting remarks, which he considered crass and undignified. After browsing for several more minutes he expressed interest in a second hand copy of a Zandir cavalier’s costume, replete with a cloak and mask of imitation silver-sparkle. This Zahd agreed to rent for half the listed price, simply to be rid of the rogue magician as quickly as possible. Crystabal paid over the sum of twenty gold lumens and went merrily on his way, oblivious to the stream of harsh invective hurled after him by the irate costumer.



## CHAPTER 10

**THE VAGABOND THIEF**, Naros, reclined atop a pile of rubbish in a dark alley on the south side of Zanth, humming a jaunty tune. Since meeting with his fellow rogues at Wastrels' End, he'd spent his time sleeping in the streets, scrounging for food, and begging for coppers in the marketplace — a typical day, as far as the Vagabond Thief was concerned.

Naros yawned, and scratched the parts of his ragged wardrobe which he shared with various types of small vermin. The day was beginning to wane, and in just a few hours he'd have to prepare for his meeting with the other thieves. There remained one small item of business to attend to first, however. To pass the time while he waited, Naros picked through the garbage, searching for some tasty scrap to nibble upon.

An hour passed. At last a grey-skinned man dressed in the robes of a Farad Procurer entered the alley, groping his way through the darkness. Naros snickered and rubbed his ratty-gloved hands together.

The Farad approached, his eyes gradually growing accustomed to the gloom. Spotting the Vagabond Thief seated upon a mound of refuse he stopped short, one hand resting upon the hilt of the dagger which he had concealed beneath his robes.

“You are the one who wished to see me?” The Farad's tone was less inquisitive than accusatory.

“That I am,” replied Naros, picking his rotten teeth with a fishbone.

“Then speak your piece and be done with it,” said the Procurer, impatiently. “I am not in the habit of meeting in darkened alleys with low caste beggars.”

Naros idly fingered the edge of his tattered cloak. “Perhaps you have not noticed me, but I have seen you many times — visiting the pleasure palaces of Zanth, the lotus dens of the Eastern Quarter, and other, less reputable establishments. In truth, it may surprise you to know that we share certain common interests.”

The Farad sneered. “I doubt it.”

Naros leaned closer and whispered: “Does the name, Zorastin, have a familiar ring to it?”

The Farad drew back in alarm, and looked nervously about in all directions. “Do not speak that name aloud!” he cried. “The wizard’s eyes and ears are everywhere present in the city.”

“As you wish,” replied the Vagabond Thief. “Be advised, however, that I am aware of certain indiscretions that occurred recently, involving a shipment of goods that was to have been sent to this unnamed person. I speak specifically of three artifacts exhumed from an ancient crypt, which — though paid for in full — never arrived at their appointed destination.”

“How do you know such things?” asked the Farad, his voice quavering.

Naros grinned. “I go everywhere unseen. Who notices a common beggar in the city of Zanth?”

The Farad clenched his fists. “A curse upon you! What is it that you want?”

“My needs are small. One of the three misplaced artifacts will suffice.” Naros described the article in question.

“This is blackmail!” cried the Farad.

“I prefer to consider it a simple business arrangement. In exchange for this small token, your secret remains secure from a certain, unnamed wizard.”

The Farad glared at Naros, his fingers closing around a dagger concealed within the folds of his robes. “You are bold. What is to stop me from killing you now, and thereby averting your demands?”

“In real terms, nothing. However, if I am not seen in a certain place, at a certain time in the near future, an associate of mine will know that I have

come to harm. This will alarm him, and he will respond by delivering a sealed message to one of Zorastin's representatives in Zanth."

"Enough!" said the Procurer. "Have I not told you to refrain from speaking this name?"

Naros shrugged. "As you like. Now, regarding the item that I requested..."

"It shall be yours," said the Farad bitterly.

"Within the hour," instructed Naros. "I will wait here. Deliver it yourself, and come alone."

Muttering a curse, the Farad turned and stalked out of the alleyway.

"Such a boorish fellow," remarked Naros. "Still, in business ventures of any sort, one must be willing to overlook certain deficiencies of character. The Greatest Thief in Zanth cannot afford to appear petty when dealing with individuals of lesser stature."



## CHAPTER 11

**THE ESTATE OF** the Swordsmage, Palitane, was a palatial manor built after the style of the third Sultan of Zandu, though on a somewhat less grandiose scale. Colored fountains and cool moss gardens decorated the grounds, where rare and exotic beasts imported from across the continent were allowed to roam free.

Sixteen gilded minarets surrounded the main structure: a great hall and ballroom supported by rows of white marble columns and surmounted by a domed roof inlaid with gold and jade tiles. Within, the flamboyant Palitane hosted his lavish fetes and spectacles, for which he was justly famed both in the city of Zanth and elsewhere.

The occasion on this evening was a Grande Masque, to be held in honor of Palitane himself. As always, a sense of anticipation preceded the event, surrounded by much speculation on the part of the privileged classes of Zanth. Which of the Zandir illuminati would be invited to attend Palitane's exclusive gala? What costumes would the most notable guests be wearing? Who would the handsome Palitane choose for his consort, and what manner of entertainments and diversions would be offered?

Crystabal himself cared little enough for such questions, for the simple reason that he had never been invited to one of Palitane's affairs. The idea of infiltrating one of Palitane's elitist gatherings had occurred to the rogue

magician during previous stays in Zanth, though never before had he gone so far as to act upon the impulse. Part of the reason lay in the fact that Crystabal was naturally averse to the company of snobs, sycophants, and cloying social climbers. An even more convincing rationale was presented by the persona of the swordmage, Palitane, an individual who bore a shadowy and dangerous reputation among certain elements of Zandir society.

A master of both swordplay and magic, Palitane publicly boasted that he had made his fortune as a professional duelist. While this was undoubtedly true, it was rumored in some circles that the swordmage often augmented his earnings by working as a hired assassin for the dreaded Revenant Cult – an occupation to which he was by temperament well-suited, according to the claims of his rivals.

Crystabal was aware of the rumors regarding Palitane's past, and had previously felt no great urge to test their veracity. He planned no further investigation into these allegations this evening, but rather, hoped to become more closely acquainted with certain elements of Palitane's fortune; in particular, Palitane's jewels, coins and valuables, with which he planned to abscond during the course of the night's festivities.

The moons, Laolis, Ardan, and Talisandre shone softly in the night sky as Crystabal approached the wrought iron fence surrounding Palitane's estate. Already, guests resplendent in a variety of colorful and unusual costumes were passing through the gates.

Crystabal observed the procedure closely. Each visitor paused briefly at the entrance to show his or her invitation to a pair of armored Zandir guards, after which the individual was allowed to pass. The rogue magician grinned beneath his silver-sparkle mask. Gaining entrance to Palitane's estate would be mere child's play.

Following behind the other guests, Crystabal arrived at the entrance to Palitane's fabulous residence, which was illuminated from without and within by an array of radiant crystal orbs. At the door stood a pair of guardsmen, and behind them, an immense reptilian humanoid wearing a chain hauberk and leather loincloth — a Saurud from the Volcanic Hills region. Apparently, Palitane was taking no chances this evening, and had taken steps to augment the security of his domicile.

Nervously eyeing the giant reptilian, Crystabal stepped up to the doorway and presented the invitation that he had purloined from Ordalini. In response, one of the guards raised his hand, motioning for the rogue magician to stop. Crystabal froze in his tracks, suddenly conscious of the beating of his own heart.

The guard looked him over from head to foot, scrutinizing every inch of his costume. His narrow eyes met Crystabal's. The rogue magician glanced about, contemplating possible avenues of escape.

At last, the guardsman spoke. "I am curious as to the nature of this costume," he said. "Tell me, is it genuine silversparkle?"

Crystabal nodded, dumbfounded.

The guardsman nudged his compatriot with an elbow. "What did I tell you? I have an eye for details of this sort!"

The other guard shrugged and muttered something unintelligible.

"No doubt Palitane rests easy with such vigilant sentinels on watch," complemented Crystabal. "I shall remember to mention the two of you to him at the nearest opportunity."

The two guards bowed graciously and stepped aside so that the rogue magician could pass. Waving a hand in acknowledgment, Crystabal stepped gingerly around the towering Saurud and entered Palitane's mansion.

The Grande Masque was already in progress, and the great hall of Palitane's manse was crowded with costumed revelers of many different guises and persuasions. There were red-masked she-devils and Aamanian acolytes in white ceremonial vestments, Rajan torturers and Thaecian enchantresses, archaic conjurers and temptresses, individuals dressed like wild beasts or birds, and others more outrageous even than these.

At the far end of the hall, a trio of captive forest Banes hung suspended in a silver cage, glaring at passersby as they mimicked their words and actions. Close by, a troupe of savage Druhk tribesmen performed paganistic dances to the pounding and wailing accompaniment of an orchestra composed of sorcerous hybrids and freaks. Elsewhere, servants attired in black night demon costumes circulated throughout the crowd, carrying trays of intoxicants, stimulating powders, and delicacies.

Crystabal accepted a goblet of Thaecian nectar from a demonic-looking servitor and sipped it slowly, surveying the surroundings. Twin flights

of stairs led upwards to a balcony overlooking the main hall, where a quartet of guardsmen stood, observing all that transpired below. Beyond this point were three separate corridors, each branching off in a different direction from the balcony landing. Palitane's private chambers were located somewhere on this level, and within his considerable store of riches and valuables.

Crystabal smiled. The operation, in his estimation, presented no great difficulty, particularly for an individual of his finely honed talents. Most of the guests were already reeling from the effects of various opiates and hallucinogens, and even some of the guards were beginning to appear a bit unsteady.

As for Palitane, it was usual for the swordsmage to spend the early part of the evening interviewing prospective consorts in his pleasure gardens, before making his grand entrance at the stroke of midnight. By that time, Crystabal planned to be sitting in the company of Naros and the others, basking in the grudging admiration of his former peers.

The rogue magician sidled over to a pair of large potted plants, the abundant foliage partially concealing him from view. Quietly, he cast that spell known as the Veil of Stealth upon himself. Then he stepped forth, unseen and unheard, into the crowd of drunken revelers.

Up the stairs went Crystabal, past the unsuspecting guards on the balcony and down the centermost of the three corridors. Coming upon a heavy wooden and iron portal, the rogue magician paused. The presence of this imposing barrier intrigued him. Why should such a stout door be here, except to protect something of value?

Crystabal pressed an ear to the wood and metal surface. No sound was audible from within. He gingerly tried the door handle. It was locked, as he had suspected it would be. From a pocket he brought forth a set of lockpicks. A moment's work, and he was inside, gently closing the door behind him.

Within, all was darkness. Crystabal took a tinderbox and the stub of a candle from a pouch at his belt, and struck a light. To his delight he found himself in a lavishly furnished sitting room, surrounded by rich collectibles and mementos.

A wide grin crossed Crystabal's handsome features. "Greatest Thief in Zanth"...the title had a certain, understated eloquence and would suit him well.

Crystabal initiated a search of the chamber. From a cabinet, he took a silver censer inlaid with a dozen black opals; from a brass reliquary, a necklace of moonstones, and a ring inscribed with ancient hieroglyphs. The next article to attract his attention was a miniature replica of a six-headed dragon fashioned from solid gold and set within a glass cage.

"What an ostentatious curio," said Crystabal, bending to have a closer look. "Fear not, Palitane! The rogue magician will dispose of this eyesore for you."

Crystabal opened the door to the glass cage and reached within. The previously dormant creature suddenly reared its heads and struck, sinking its tiny fangs into the thief's gloved finger.

Crystabal howled in pain and swiftly withdrew his hand. In the process, he knocked over the glass cage, which shattered with a loud crash. The clockwork dragon, freed from its prison, flew forth to attack. In defense, Crystabal grabbed an antique dueling sword from a wall rack and flailed wildly at the mechanical nemesis.

Attracted by the commotion, the four guards stationed on the balcony burst into the room with blades drawn. To their astonishment, they saw only a sword, floating by itself in mid-air, hacking away at a replica of a flying dragon. Crystabal, still protected by the Veil of Stealth, remained unheard and unseen.

"Magic is afoot," warned the captain of the guard. "Send for Palitane at once, and alert the sentinels at the gates."

Two of the swordsmen ran off down the corridor while the captain and his second in-command stood in the doorway, attempting to deduce the means by which the floating blade was kept aloft.

Crystabal had missed much of the previous exchange with the guardsmen for the reason that he had been preoccupied with the pestiferous clockwork dragon. Not until he had finished smashing the offensive mechanism to bits did he become aware of the two remaining guardsmen standing in the doorway.

Crystabal apprehended the basic nature of his dilemma at a glance. Reasoning that the odds of escaping from Palitane's mansion were decreasing with each passing second, he took the offensive. The two guardsmen, mystified by the floating blade, drew back into the corridor. The rogue magician pressed the advantage and won his way to the balcony. Another few feet and he would reach the stairway.

From the opposite corridor emerged an impressive bronze-skinned figure, bare-chested and wearing only a pair of tight-fitting silk breeches, black vizard, and hip-high boots. His long black hair was confined by a silver clasp. His eyes, like twin specks of blue fire, burned with dark and fearful passions. Standing behind him was a sultry-looking woman wearing only a golden visor and an enigmatic smile — the swordsmage's consort, or so Crystabal assumed.

Palitane raised a hand and executed the three swift gestures of the Spell of Revealment. An aura of illumination encompassed the area surrounding the rogue magician, and at once, he became visible to the eye. From below, certain of the less-intoxicated guests pointed upwards at the balcony, pausing in their revelry to gape at this new spectacle.

Palitane snatched a sword from one of his guards and stood forth to block the stairway. "Prepare to die, thief," said the swordsmage.

Crystabal flourished the stolen blade, his eyes darting from side to side. For a brief moment, he considered making a valorous show of things. Then, realizing the sheer lunacy of this idea, he threw down the rapier and leapt atop the balustrade surrounding the balcony. A chorus of gasps and exclamations was heard from below.

"The Greatest Thief in Zanth will not die this night!" he exclaimed after the best romantic tradition. Then, laughing boldly, he jumped from the balcony.

It was Crystabal's intention to grab hold of a chandelier, swing over the heads of the people below, and make a daring exit through the nearest window. Unfortunately, the chandelier was not built with this purpose in mind, and it pulled loose from the ceiling in mid-swing. As a result, rogue and chandelier alike landed amidst the crowd of startled guests, creating a general uproar.

Crystabal used the ensuing confusion to his advantage and made a mad dash for the exit. Directly in his path stood the giant Saurud — its massive bulk filling the doorway, a great two-handed battleaxe in its clawed hands. Eyeing Crystabal with dire intent, the reptilian raised the axe above its awful head, poised to strike.

Crystabal dove between the creature's legs, executed a neat somersault and sped out the door. Before any of the guards could squeeze past the saurud, the rogue magician had cast the Veil of Stealth upon himself once more and disappeared into the night.

Inside the mansion, Palitane stood with arms crossed, staring in silence at the doorway. The consort pressed up against him, and placed a hand upon his arm.

“Do not fret the loss of a few baubles,” she said softly. “There is still time before midnight, and we still have unfinished business to attend to.”

Palitane turned his fiery gaze upon the consort, eyeing her supple form. “You are not uncomely,” he said, his rage transformed to desire. “Perhaps a brief interlude, and then...”

Palitane turned once more towards the door and spoke a single word: “Revenge.”



## CHAPTER 12

**PALITANE ROSE FROM** his couch and dressed, his manner brooding and distracted. “You are an intriguing woman,” he said, to the masked consort with whom he had shared his bed. “What name do you answer by?”

The female drew the silken covers up about her languid form, a trace of a smile on her lips. “Is it not customary for guests at the Grande Masque to wait until midnight before revealing their true identities?”

Palitane adjusted a pearl-handled rapier and scabbard at his belt, then slipped a pair of long daggers into his boot tops. “You have chosen to hide little else from me this night,” he remarked, not without irony. “As you wish, then. I have business of my own to attend to.”

Striding to the opposite end of the bedchamber, Palitane tugged once upon a braided cord. A moment later, a costumed servant arrived in answer to his summons.

“Send in the Arimite,” ordered Palitane. The servant bowed, and exited the chamber.

“What business is so pressing that you must depart in such haste?” asked the consort. “Can it be that I have failed in some way to match your expectations? If so, then remain a while longer, for you have not yet seen the full extent of my passion.”

“I have stayed long enough,” said the swordsmage, his voice grown cold. “By now, the thief will have begun to think that he is safe. He will become careless, and... But hold — someone approaches outside the door. No doubt it is the Arimite.”

Into the room walked a dark skinned man of average height, wearing a hooded cloak and loose robes of grey linen. Seeing that Palitane was not alone, the man bowed his head in the direction of the naked consort and displayed a lecherous grin, revealing a complete set of gold teeth.

“There has been a change in plans,” said Palitane impatiently. “Notify your superiors that I will be preoccupied this evening, and will be unable to lend my assistance. Instead, I transfer the contract to you. The intended target is a minor magician named Crystabal, who arrived in Zanth earlier today. The customer has specified that he be taken alive, but a simple assassination will do if you are pressed for time. I will take my usual percentage of the fee, which I understand to be quite lucrative. Now go, and do not delay.”

The Arimite bowed and took his leave of the swordsmage. Having completed the necessary arrangements, Palitane threw a black velvet cape about his shoulders and advanced towards the door. Almost in the way of an afterthought, he turned back to face the masked woman, who still lay upon his couch.

“In the chest by the bed stand you will find a quantity of precious stones. Take whatever you wish, but begone by the time I return.” With that, the Swordsmage turned and strode from the chamber.

“That I shall,” said Alianthe.

Rising from the couch, she slipped into her costume and emptied the contents of the chest into her purse: a half-dozen fine emeralds and as many lesser gemstones. To this, Alianthe added the necklace of seven perfect diamonds, which she had earlier stolen from the unlocked sitting room, while Palitane and his guards had been occupied with the thief — the rogue magician, Crystabal, or so she guessed, judging by his melodramatic posturing.

Alianthe laughed softly to herself, imagining the look on Crystabal’s face if only he knew where she had been this evening. Later, while returning by carriage to the city proper, she found herself thinking once more about

the rogue magician. A handsome young man, dashing in a sort of foolish yet mildly endearing manner, mused Alianthe. The two of them might have made an interesting, if mismatched, pair. A pity that in just a few short hours Palitane or the Arimite would find him, and he would be very, very dead.



## CHAPTER 13

**FOLLOWING HIS NARROW** escape from Palitane's manse, Crystabal made straight away for the shop of Erdmire, as per his agreement with Naros and the others. A magician of minor talents, Erdmire earned a modest living by appraising and selling various types of arcane oddities. Among certain circles, he was perhaps better known as a purveyor of contraband and stolen goods; hence, the nature of Crystabal's previous association with the conjuror.

Erdmire's shop was a shabby establishment located in one of the seamier districts of Zanth. Crystabal knew the area well from past visitations and navigated the tangle of dark and narrow alleyways without difficulty. Arriving at the conjuror's shop, he crept around to the rear entrance and performed a brief reconnaissance of the surrounding area, keeping to the cover of the shadows.

Two rows of ramshackle tenements flanked the shop. A few showed dim lights from behind curtained windows; the rest were dark. Crystabal listened. A reassuring silence hung in the air, punctuated only by the muffled sounds of lovers, a child crying in the night, and someone singing in a drunken voice. Assured that it was safe to proceed, he approached the rear entrance to Erdmire's place.

The door was an ancient affair of stout span oak reinforced with iron; the wood now faded from the effects of the elements. An iron bar and heavy padlock secured the door, the latter showing signs of numerous attempted break-ins. Crystabal smiled, recognizing certain of the marks as his own handiwork, made in the days before he had acquired more subtle talents.

The rogue magician quietly cast a spell of Revealmant on the door. The padlock glowed in outline, indicating the presence of magic. As was his habit, Erdmire had imbued the mechanism with a ward that conferred protection from lockpicks. Crystabal easily dissolved the enchantment by the use of a corresponding counterspell. Then, retrieving a set of lockpicks from his pouch, he undid the mechanism and opened the door.

The backroom of the shop was long and narrow, with boxes and crates stacked to either side. On the far wall was a second door that led to Erdmire's chambers and, beyond that, his shop.

Crystabal made a cursory inspection of the premises. Apparently, little had changed since his last visit. He reviewed his plan: through the backroom, past Erdmire, into the shop, then back out — simplicity itself, for one of his talents. Adjusting the angle of his cap, Crystabal crept slowly across the room on padded feet.

Halfway to the door, Crystabal paused, feeling the uncomfortable sensation that he was being watched. He looked between two stacks of crates. A pair of sinister yellow eyes returned his gaze.

Crystabal let out a startled gasp and ran for the far wall, abandoning all thought of stealth. From out of the shadows came a four-legged creature of considerable ugliness, its long claws scraping across the floor as it bounded after the rogue magician.

Crystabal threw open the door, slipped inside, and slammed it shut behind him. Not an instant too soon: the beast crashed into the door, then withdrew, hissing in anger.

Crystabal leaned with his back against the door, breathing hard. Evidently, Erdmire had seen fit to obtain a pet drac since his last visit to the conjuror's establishment. He made a mental note of this addition for future reference, then locked the door behind him and continued about his business.

He stood in a parlor decorated to somewhat eccentric tastes, with a variety of odd-looking knick-knacks tucked into cupboards along the walls. A heavy rug patterned in concentric bands of brown, dark green, and red covered the floor. On a table of carved waxwood stood a brass lamp in the shape of a grinning gargoyle, from which emanated a feeble glow.

Nearby was an old padded sofa, upon which sat a decrepit-looking figure that Crystabal recognized as Erdmire. As was his habit, he wore a long frock coat of faded green fustian, stained and worn at the elbows, and a pair of curl-toed slippers. The face was slack and flaccid, with hollow cheeks and sagging jowls. The mouth was contorted into a mindless grin, and his skin exhibited an unhealthy pallor. A fringe of wispy hair encircled his balding pate, hanging in loose strands past his shoulders.

In one blue-veined hand, the conjuror clutched a long-stemmed pipe; in the other, a snuffbox half filled with a fine, silvery powder. A pair of bloodshot eyes stared from deep within their sockets, the pupils fully dilated as if from the effects of a powerful narcotic.

“Good evening to you, Erdmire,” said Crystabal.

Erdmire voiced no reply but merely stared off into space.

Crystabal bent to inspect the contents of the snuff box. “Into the euphorica again, I see. Apparently, old habits die hard.”

As before, the conjuror said nothing.

Crystabal shook his head sadly. “Do not bother to get up, Erdmire. I need to borrow something from you, but will return it in an hour or so.”

Without a backward glance, the rogue magician entered Erdmire’s shop. Disorderly rows of wooden shelves lined the walls, many bowed and sagging in the middle. Crystabal crept past jars of pickled homunculi, antique pottery, brass lamps, colored glass spheres, dusty scrolls, witchwands, and a host of odd curios from past ages. Many of these very items had been sitting in the same place for years, gathering dust.

Crystabal stepped behind the counter and walked over to an old wormwood cabinet. The veneer on the side panels had peeled back like the layers of an onion, but the doors were still solid and held fast by magic. Crystabal placed a hand on a sigil carved into the overhead panel and spoke a word of command. The doors parted: inside was a sealed brass urn, which the rogue magician tucked under his cloak.

Shutting the cabinet doors, Crystabal returned to the parlor. He found Erdmire as before, still sleeping off the effects of the euphorica. Crystabal gave the old addict a gentle pat on the shoulder and slipped a few gold coins into the pocket of his frock coat. Then he poured a small quantity of euphorica from the snuff box into his hand and departed the chamber.

Crystabal stopped to listen at the door. From the opposite side, he heard the sound of the drac's claws as it paced back and forth across the wooden floorboards. He opened the door partway, bracing it with his boot. The guard beast thrust its snout into the aperture; Crystabal blew the handful of euphorica powder into its snout, and the creature drew back, snorting and coughing.

Crystabal waited a moment, then opened the door. The drac lay on the floor, an idiotic grin on its features. Stepping gingerly over the supine creature he left the premises, locking the door behind him and restoring Erdmire's ward. Then the rogue magician went off into the night, headed for the midnight rendezvous with his fellow thieves.

## CHAPTER 14

**THE RENEGADE UR** clansman, Tor, lacking all subtlety, had decided to adopt the most direct approach to the wily Naros' challenge. To this end, he rode by wagon to the outskirts of the city, stopping at the intersection of four roadways. Here he hid in a clump of withergall, and waited.

A short time later, a group of Aamanian Orthodoxists in starched white robes approached on foot from the east, chanting in unison:

"Aa is severe! Aa is Omniscient! Make way for the humble servants of Aa!"

The armored giant emerged from the woods, brandishing his huge mace. "I am Tor," said he, fiercely. "Give me your gold!"

The Aamanians shrank back in fear at the massive Ur clansman. "Do not kill us!" they cried. "What gold we have is yours!"

Just then, one of their number, the acolyte Aabneb, stepped forth to voice an objection.

"Are we not loyal followers of Aa, the Omnipotent?" he asked his fellows.

All nodded in the affirmative. Aabneb pointed to the Ur clansman, who looked on, uncomprehending.

"And is this vicious brute not a heathen, and a base idolator?"

Again, the cultists nodded yes, though somewhat less enthusiastically, regarding with trepidation the monstrous Tor.

Aabneb turned to face the Ur clansman. “Then I say only this: Monster, do your worst. For as surely as I stand here, the mighty Aa will strike you down before he will allow a non-believer to do harm to one of His faithful followers.”

This said, Aabneb stood directly in the Ur’s path, arms folded across his chest in defiance.

Tor considered the acolyte’s words for several seconds. Then he raised his mace and struck Aabneb a fatal blow on the head.

“I am Tor,” he repeated. “Give me your gold!”

The cultists blanched. “Mighty Aa may well be occupied with more pressing concerns,” remarked one of the devotees, to which the rest nodded thoughtfully.

Without further delay, the cultists turned over their valuables to the Ur clansman and departed, carrying with them the body of their unfortunate comrade. Tor placed the gold in a burlap sack and went back to his hiding place.

A short time later, a pair of wayward travelers approached the crossroads from the west. The first was a slender and handsome fellow dressed in a gaily striped blouse and trousers, with a two-stringed lute hung over his shoulder and a carefree expression on his boyish features. The second man, short and squat, was laboring under a heavy burden comprised of numerous bags, parcels, props, and belongings.

As the two entered the intersection, Tor stepped forth to introduce himself and demand gold.

The slender fellow threw back his head and laughed. “Surely, sir, you must be deaf and blind. Do you not know who I am?”

Tor said nothing but simply stood with mace in hand.

“Why, I am the minstrel, Dalmundo,” said the young man, “composer of lyric poems and ballads, and a figure known and loved throughout the Western Lands! This, of course, is my trusted man-servant, Foroli.”

The heavy-set man nodded and smiled weakly. Tor remained silent.

The minstrel shook his head in disbelief. “Most unfortunate of creatures, who has never heard the music of the great Dalmundo. But fret not! Your condition has moved me to pity, and so I will compose an ode in your honor.”

So saying, Dalmundo took the two-stringed lute from his back and began to sing a woeful lament, with head thrown back and eyes shut in an expression of rapture.

Tor swung his mace, striking Dalmundo in mid-stanza. The minstrel fell to the ground, insensate.

“Ha!” commended Foroli. With a look of vast relief on his features, the beleaguered man-servant handed over to Tor the whole of Dalmundo’s belongings. Then, grinning happily, he headed back along the road to Zanth.

Tor stashed the most valuable of the minstrel’s possessions in his sack and dragged the body off into the woods. Then he resumed his position, awaiting the appearance of others on the roadway.

Events of this nature occurred at odd intervals throughout much of the afternoon. By nightfall, Tor had a sackful of gold and other valuables, and so decided to return to Zanth. As he was preparing to depart, however, he happened to take note of a lone rider headed towards the crossroads.

Tor appraised the heft and quantity of loot in his sack. There seemed to be room in it for one or two more articles, such as a coin purse or possibly a few pieces of jewelry. The Ur clansman shrugged, and made ready to ambush one final victim.

The rider, a dark-skinned man in a hooded cloak, approached the intersection warily, as if sensing a trap. Tor waited until he was but a few feet away, then lunged from hiding to stand directly in his path.

“I am Tor,” said the renegade Ur. “Give me your gold!”

The hooded man bared his teeth, which glinted golden-red in the moonlight. “Stand aside,” he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. “I am an assassin of the Revenant Cult, and will not be delayed by one such as you.”

Tor stood fast.

With one swift motion, the assassin drew a throwing knife from beneath his cloak and struck, piercing the Ur clansman just above the heart.

Tor looked at the blade that now protruded from his chest, then plucked it out and cast it aside. The Ur’s mace descended upon the assassin’s skull, and the Arimite fell from his mount to lie, dead, in the road.

“I am Tor,” said the Ur clansman, reaching into the slain assassin’s mouth to pry loose his golden teeth.



## CHAPTER 15

**AT MIDNIGHT ON** the outskirts of Zanth four individuals met in secret in the basement of an abandoned tower. Present were the rogue magician Crystabal, the courtesan Alianthe, the renegade Ur clansman Tor, and Naros of Maruk, known to some as the Vagabond Thief.

Barring the door from within, the thieves descended a long flight of dusty stone steps, each carrying a sack, bundle, or parcel of some sort. The four gathered around a musty wooden table, at the center of which was placed a glowing lantern.

When all had settled in their seats, the Vagabond Thief spoke.

“Honorable thieves and associates! When last we met, a challenge was put forth, to determine who among us is the greatest thief in the city of Zanth. The rogue magician, Crystabal, has sought to earn this distinction by virtue of his reputed prowess in magic. Alianthe, on the other hand, has steadfastly maintained that ‘seduction’ is the most important aspect of the thief’s art, while Tor cited ‘force of arms.’ and I, ‘deception’.”

Naros turned towards Crystabal. “Have you the imp?”

The rogue magician nodded. From the pocket of his cloak, he produced a creature resembling a four-inch-tall humanoid, fiery red in color, with pinched features and an oversized cranium — the monitor imp that

Crystabal had borrowed from the conjuror, Erdmire. Upon being exposed to the light, the tiny creature squinted and rubbed its eyes.

Naros spoke. "Imp, has the rogue magician informed you of your duties?"

"He has," came the reply.

"Kindly elucidate each of your given responsibilities," said Naros.

"They are as follows: to appraise the value in common coin of all articles and items presented at this gathering; to carry out this duty in a timely fashion; to show favor to none of the participants in the contest."

Naros regarded the imp with one eyebrow upraised. "Tell me," said the Vagabond Thief. "With regard to the last stricture, did the rogue magician specifically include himself among the list of participants?"

"In the specific sense, no," replied the imp.

Tor and Alianthe glared.

Crystabal shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "A minor oversight," he explained. "I was in some haste to arrive here before midnight."

"Of course," remarked Naros. "Fortunately, this 'oversight' was discovered in time."

Naros turned to face the imp. "Imp, take heed: you are hereby directed to serve as appraiser and to remain neutral as regards all individuals in this room, regardless of previous instructions to the contrary. I specifically include the rogue magician Crystabal in this category. Are the terms of your duty now clear?"

"Exceedingly so," replied the imp.

Crystabal sulked, his head propped up on one hand.

"Then now is the time of reckoning!" spoke Naros. "Our independent appraiser stands ready to scrutinize, assess, and tally the total value of each of our acquisitions. Who shall be the first to lay claim to the title of 'Greatest Thief in Zanth'?"

Tor stood and emptied the contents of his heavy sack on top of the table. "Here is gold — more than any of the others could even carry. Thus does Tor claim victory."

"That is perhaps premature," commented the imp, examining the pile of gold coins, rings, bracelets, and miscellaneous articles. "Quantity is not the sole measure of actual value. There are additional factors to be considered. In the case of coinage, the metal's purity, the date of minting,

and the coin's condition must all be considered. For precious stones, one must compare clarity, cut, and carat weight. For antiques, the avowed scarcity and age of a given piece are prime factors. Furthermore..."

"You have made your point," interrupted Naros. "Let us wait until all the items have been appraised and totaled before making any hasty claims."

Tor grunted and reluctantly returned to his seat. With the four rogues watching its every move, the imp began the process of counting coins and examining items, noting the corresponding figures in pen on a sheet of parchment.

The value of certain of these articles was difficult to accurately assess — the set of gold teeth stolen from the Revenant, for instance, which Alianthe noted with particular interest. There were also a number of spurious items made of fools' gold or painted with gold-colored lacquers.

After several moments the computations were completed, and the imp announced the results.

"The total value of Tor's goods is assessed at three hundred and thirty-nine gold lumens."

The figure seemed to arouse no great reaction in any of the participants except for Tor, who demanded a recount. The procedure was repeated for his benefit, with the same result.

The rogue magician, Crystabal, then rose from his chair and emptied the contents of a drawstring pouch on the table. Out came the black opals, moonstone necklace, antique ring, and silver censer purloined from Palitane's home, as well as a handful of coins and small gemstones scavenged at the last minute from the marketplace.

"I submit for your approval these precious gems and baubles," said Crystabal. "While the imp performs its function, I shall endeavor to describe the cunning means by which I acquired these priceless items. To begin..."

"Indeed, Crystabal. You must tell us of your daring escape from the manse of the swordsmage, Palitane," said Alianthe, with great sarcasm.

Flustered, the rogue magician sat back in his chair and glared at Alianthe. The courtesan favored Crystabal with a hauntingly familiar smile.

The monitor imp spoke. "Crystabal's goods are appraised at a total value of four hundred and twenty gold lumens."

Crystabal leaned back in his chair and grinned at Tor, who gnashed his fangs and muttered beneath his breath.

Naros tipped his ragged hat to Alianthe. "After you, by all means." said the Vagabond Thief.

The courtesan complied, and placed a silken purse on the table. Reaching inside, she brought forth the necklace of perfect diamonds, a dozen fine emeralds, and six small rubies and carbuncles.

The imp inspected each in turn, viewing the stones through a tiny lens that served to magnify objects seen through its surface. After several moments, the imp rendered its assessment.

"The necklace alone is worth at least a thousand gold lumens," stated the monitor imp. "All told, these gems cannot be valued at less than seventeen hundred gold lumens."

Naros' eyes widened, and even Tor appeared to be impressed. Crystabal, disgusted at having been outdone, turned away and sulked.

"Well, Naros, do you concede defeat?" asked Alianthe, basking in her moment of triumph.

The Vagabond Thief respectfully declined the courtesan's offer. "Yours is indeed a most impressive claim, as all here must surely admit." Here, Naros paused to cast a meaningful look at Crystabal before continuing.

"My own offering may, I fear, seem humble by comparison. But do not be too quick to pass judgment based merely upon superficial appearances alone. For this is a rare and precious artifact, which must be studied carefully in order to be fully appreciated."

Naros took from his pocket a wad of dirty cloth tied together with a length of twine. Setting the filthy bundle on the table, he carefully unwrapped rags and string, revealing an object that resembled a three-inch tall prism.

Crystabal scoffed, "This is your precious artifact? Why, it is nothing more than a worthless bit of glass."

"On the contrary," said Naros. "This is no common piece of brumagem but a priceless antique — a fabulous relic of a bygone age, once owned by the legendary illusionist, Cascal. See it sparkle in the flickering light of the lantern. Fascinating, is it not?"

All around the table gazed at the prism, which now appeared to radiate an entrancing glow. A moment passed, and then another. Naros looked from one set of glazed and expressionless features to another and chuckled to himself.

“Ha-ho!” laughed the Vagabond Thief. “Here is an amusing sight, indeed! Three of Zanth’s most infamous scoundrels held spellbound by Cascal’s wondrous prism! And with them, the honorable monitor imp, who seems to have fallen in with bad company. Most remarkable!”

The Vagabond Thief circled, ferret-like, about the table and its four occupants. “Possibly, you are wondering if I plan to do you harm. I promise that you may banish such thoughts from your mind! The effects of Cascal’s prism are relatively benign, though quite enduring. No less an authority than Cascal himself claimed that individuals affected by his device often remained alive and fully conscious for months or even years.

“As this location is quite secluded, you need not fear being disturbed by robbers or vagrants. Further, you may rest assured that I will take care to close the door on my way out, so that you will not be troubled by predatory animals or the effects of inclement weather. But now, to work!”

Naros took an empty sack from beneath his bedraggled garments and began to fill it with certain of the articles stolen by the other rogues.

“Ah, my friends, do not appear so distraught. Do you think that Naros would rob you of all that you own, simply because you are helpless to stop me?”

Naros snickered and wiped his nose on a greasy sleeve. “On the contrary; it is my intention to take only the most valuable of your possessions and leave the rest behind. Happily, the imp has had the forethought to prepare a convenient catalogue of prices and items, thereby saving me a considerable amount of time and effort.”

The Vagabond Thief continued to place more items in his sack, keeping count of the total value of the pieces as he went along. “Eighteen, nineteen, twenty-three hundred gold lumens – a considerable margin of victory,” boasted Naros. “Imp, we await an official ruling. Answer me this: who is the Greatest Thief in Zanth?”

The imp impelled to speak by Naros' command, answered as instructed. "By this method of accounting, you would appear to have won claim to this title."

"Excellent!" replied Naros. "But it seems as if the rogue magician wishes to make a comment. Speak, Crystabal, and let us hear what you have to say."

"I hereby proclaim the contest to be invalid," said Crystabal hotly. "You have had to resort to magic to win!"

"Not so," countered Naros. "The challenge itself was nothing more than a clever ruse, which I devised in order to dupe the rest of you into committing acts of thievery for my benefit. Cascal's prism was merely an accessory — a mechanism, enabling me to execute the final stage of my plan, and to rid myself of potential rivals. Thus, have I proven my claim that deception is the most vital aspect of thievery."

Naros took the enchanted prism from the table and placed it in his pocket. "But I am forgetting that there are others here who have not yet had the opportunity to voice an opinion. It is safe to assume that the brutish Tor has nothing of great import to offer, yet what of Alianthe? Speak, courtesan, if this is what you desire."

"Naros, you have won fairly," said Alianthe. "Release me from the spell, and I will show you my gratitude, which shall exceed in scope even your wildest imaginings."

Naros laughed sourly. "A valiant ploy, Alianthe. Under different circumstances, I might find your offer difficult to refuse. However, I am now a wealthy man and hence, have become desirable to individuals of a more elevated caste than your own. Also, if the truth be known, my tastes run somewhat towards asceticism."

As a final measure, the Vagabond Thief rifled the purses, pockets, and bags of each of the others, wary lest any item of value escape his notice. From the pocket of Crystabal's cloak, Naros removed a shining cape, folded neatly into a rectangle — part of the costume that the rogue magician had worn earlier that evening, and which he had not yet had the opportunity to return to the shop of Zahd the Costumer.

"Crystabal, your taste in apparel has always run to extremes," said Naros. "This item bears keeping, however. Is it an authentic silver-sparkle?"

Ah, but I forget! You cannot speak except at my behest. Since you raise no objection, I shall trade you my old cloak for this more stylish model. I have been meaning to upgrade my wardrobe for quite some time now.”

So saying, Naros arranged the silvery cape about his shoulders. Then, hoisting the now-full sack, he mounted the stairway.

“I regret that I must leave you all in this deserted place, yet I have little choice in the matter. Free, you might cause me no end of difficulties.”

Naros paused at the top of the stairs and called out. “And so, farewell! The Greatest Thief in Zanth must now be on his way!”

Naros opened the door. In the doorway stood Palitane, his sword bared.

“Greatest Thief in Zanth, you have arrived at your final destination,” said the swordsmage, running his victim through. Then, withdrawing his blade, he stalked off into the night.

For a second, Naros stood at the doorway, clutching his chest and staring, uncomprehending, out into the darkness. Then he fell backwards and tumbled down the stairs, the sackful of stolen gems, coins and baubles scattering in his wake. Cascal’s prism fell from his pocket and shattered. Instantly, the spell that had held the others enthralled was likewise broken.

The three thieves rose as one to stand over the prone figure of the Vagabond Thief. Tor raised his mace to crush the fallen Naros’s head, but Alianthe stayed his hand.

“I believe that will be unnecessary,” she said. “The treacherous Naros appears to be quite dead.”

Not without some regret, the Ur clansman lowered his weapon.

“This is a most unfortunate development,” remarked Crystabal. “How are we now to resolve who has won the contest?”

“Crystabal makes a valid point,” noted Alianthe. “Naros’s demise, though richly deserved, leaves unanswered the question originally posed: Who is the Greatest Thief in Zanth?”

The three remaining rogues looked from one to the other, each reading in the eyes of the other the same qualities of greed, suspicion, and malice.

The imp, as per its assigned duties, offered its appraisal of the situation.

“As independent arbitrator for the contest, I hereby suggest a new resolution to this affair. Based upon the latest developments, I submit to you that, in this case, the contest is void. Neither magic, nor force of

arms, nor feminine wiles, nor even deception, has proved the superior methodology. Instead, I cite 'luck' or 'chance' as the true determinant of success – not merely in the field of thievery, but in all mortal endeavors.”

Crystabal looked down upon the prone form of the Vagabond Thief. “Clearly, luck has deserted the wily Naros, whose corpse provides ample testimony to this account. While luck is still with us, I propose that we each take an equitable share of Naros’s stolen wealth and vacate the premises at once.”

“This may well be sound advice,” said Alianthe, pointing to the set of golden teeth that lay amongst the various articles strewn across the floor. “These belonged to an Arimite assassin in the service of Palitane, who does not take kindly to the murder of one of his own. For this reason, I suggest that we each make arrangements to leave the city and without delay.”

Tor grunted his approval, and the remaining rogues divided the loot equally amongst themselves. This done, the three bid each other goodbye and went their separate ways.

## CHAPTER 16

**CRYSTABAL RETURNED THE** monitor imp to its owner, then went off to find a place to stay for the night. Preferring to maintain a low profile after his recent escapades with Palitane, he took a room at a secluded inn, adopting as an alias the persona of Harrick, a collector of delinquent fees and tariffs. The guise functioned as intended, and the inn's staff and patrons gave him a wide berth. To Crystabal's dismay, the serving girls were likewise not inclined to partake of his company. And so it was that the rogue magician spent an uneventful night alone in his room.

In the morning he rose, washed himself in a basin of water, and dressed in clean garments. He appraised the contents of his satchel; thanks to the activities of the previous evening, he now had more than enough money to obtain passage on a windship and complete the remainder of his voyage in style, without additional delays or inconvenience.

Crystabal studied his reflection in the mirror, arranging his hair and garments until all met his exacting specifications. Then he departed the inn by a rear door and made for the western sector of Zanth, where facilities for the docking and maintenance of windships were located.

Crystabal arrived at the docks and took a look around. Graceful sailing craft of many different types hovered at anchor, held aloft by enchanted devices that enabled them to glide upon the winds. The most costly ships

were moored to high towers topped by shining copper domes. The rest were tethered to stone quays, their keels resting a foot or two off the ground, the side stabilizers lowered in order to keep the ship from tipping over in strong winds.

Crystabal walked among the quays until he located the dockmaster, a stout Zandir with a braided mustache, dressed in a long kaftan and leather sandals. The fellow seemed not to notice his arrival, as he was preoccupied with the task of inspecting a variety of crates, boxes, and baggage that were being readied for loading.

“Good day,” said Crystabal, doffing his cap. “I am interested in booking passage on a windship bound for the citystate of Hajan.”

The dockmaster grunted and scribbled several notations on a cargo manifest. “Then you are out of luck. The last ship left for Hajan an hour ago, and there will not be another until next week.”

Crystabal frowned. “That is most inconvenient. It is imperative that I depart Zanth at once. I have pressing business to attend to.”

“By coincidence, so have I,” stated the dockmaster, motioning with impatience towards the pile of cargo that still awaited his inspection. “If you are truly as desperate as you say, then you might inquire with Aeolius the dream merchant, whose ship is moored at the far end of the dock.”

Crystabal thanked the dockmaster and walked to the far end of the quays, where he found a windship of antique vintage hovering at anchor — an old single-masted vessel bearing the name, “Dreamweaver.”

The sails and rigging were woven from gossamer; the hull, mast, and cabin were fashioned from planks of lightweight span-oak, lacquered to reduce drag. The ship had two sets of wings: one each to port and starboard and two smaller wings positioned behind the aft cabin. Along with the rudder, these devices were made of gossamer stretched tightly over a framework of wooden rods, and resembled webbed membranes or sail-fins.

Crystabal made a cursory examination of the stabilizer vanes, rigging, rudder, and hull. The varnish showed signs of peeling in spots, but aside from this the ship appeared to be in fairly sound condition, at least as far as he could ascertain. Satisfied that the vessel met his requirements, he looked about for the windship’s owner.

“Hallo! Is anyone aboard the ship?”

The cabin door opened, and out came an elderly man, tall and thin as a water willow, with a pale complexion and a long grey beard. He wore a peculiarly tall cap and robes of blue silkcloth, both imprinted with the traditional star signs and sigils of a Phantasian dream merchant. On the Phantasian's shoulder sat a quaal — an odd-looking creature resembling a cross between a small primate and a lizard, with a prehensile tail and scaly hide.

“Hallo to you,” answered the old man groggily. “And what is the reason for this ruckus? You woke me from a sound sleep and ruined a perfectly good dream, which I was in the process of cataloging — a class ‘C’ daydream of far eastern origins, in fact, if I am not mistaken.”

“Please forgive the intrusion. Are you Aeolius the dream merchant?”

The old man yawned. “Who wishes to know, and to what purpose?”

“I am Crystabal, a magician of some local renown. I wish to obtain the services of a qualified windship pilot, and am willing to pay for your services in good gold coin.”

“Then I am indeed Aeolius, and none other,” said the Phantasian. “What is your intended destination, and where is this gold of which you speak?”

“I am bound for the junction of the Wilderlands and Hadjin Roads, in the vicinity of the citystate of Hajan,” replied Crystabal, holding forth a jingling pouch for the dream merchant's inspection. “And here is my gold.”

The Phantasian eyed Crystabal's purse, adjudging its heft. “The cost of a first class ticket is five hundred gold lumens, paid in advance.”

“The fee seems excessively high,” remarked Crystabal. “Have you no cheaper fares?”

“Hajan is many miles from Zanth,” observed Aeolius. “The distance neither increases nor decreases according to the cost of the ticket. As you are the only passenger on this journey, I can ill afford to lower my rates.”

Crystabal reluctantly agreed to the dream merchant's terms, and handed over the sum of five hundred gold lumens.

“Climb aboard then,” said Aeolius. “The wind is rising, and conditions are ideal for a swift departure.”

The dream merchant turned to his pet quaal. “Kiko, lower the gangplank. We lift off in one minute.”

The quaal chirped in agreement. Climbing down from Aeolius' shoulder, the creature leapt up to the helm and tugged on a wooden lever. In response, a hinged section of the hull swung slowly downwards, to serve as a gangplank.

Crystabal boarded the ship while the quaal threw off the mooring lines. The gangplank was raised, and Aeolius adjusted the sail and pulled back on a lever that activated the windship's levitationals. The vessel lurched, rocked from side to side, then raised upwards into the air, barely clearing the uppermost extremities of the quays.

Crystabal held fast to the rail and looked downwards, watching as the city of Zanth receded into the distance far below. The sails filled, and the windship drifted off to the east.

"Kiko, kindly take the helm," stated Aeolius. "I have work to attend to in my cabin. The course has been set; you need only guide the ship straight and true."

Crystabal stared, aghast, at the dream merchant. "Surely you are joking. This creature cannot be capable of piloting a windship?"

"Have no fear," responded Aeolius. "Kiko is highly trained in the operation of aerial craft, and is a veteran of numerous voyages. Rest assured, you are in good hands."

Aeolius stretched his arms and yawned. "Now, if you will excuse me, I must retire to my chambers to finish my work. Feel free to take a tour of the ship if you so desire. However, I must warn you: refrain from touching those mechanisms that control the levitationals, stabilizer wings, and rudder vane. These devices are quite delicate and are not to be toyed with. Also, please avoid the storeroom, which contains valuable merchandise."

This said, the dream merchant retired to his cabin, shutting the door behind him. Crystabal mused, intrigued by the Phantasian's latter remark. Making a mental note to investigate the storeroom as the opportunity permitted, he strolled about the deck of the windship, taking in the sights.

Crystabal ascended a short flight of stairs to the ship's bridge. Here the quaal sat atop a cushioned pilot's chair, one scaly-skinned hand at the rudder and the other resting upon the lever that operated the ship's levitationals. Noting the arrival of Crystabal the creature displayed a set of ugly yellow teeth and made a loud chattering noise. The rogue magician

turned about and headed back down the stairs, an indignant look on his features.

At the door of the dream merchant's cabin, Crystabal paused for a moment to listen. From within came the sound of loud snoring. The rogue magician mused; perhaps this was what Aeolius meant when he said he had work to attend to. If so, then this might well be an opportune moment to examine the storeroom.

Crystabal opened the hatch that led below deck and descended a narrow flight of wooden stairs, bowed in the middle from long years of wear. At the bottom of the stairway was a heavy wooden door decorated with fanciful dream images carved in basrelief. Crystabal approached to examine the lock, which appeared to be of archaic make. At the same moment, the quaal arrived on the scene, screeching at the top of its lungs while making threatening gestures.

"Cease your obnoxious keening, vermin!" scolded Crystabal. "I was merely checking to make certain that the locks were secure."

The quaal only screeched even louder, forcing Crystabal to withdraw from the hold and return above deck. Here he spent the remainder of the day, looking gloomily over the rail at the sights below.

At dusk Aeolius emerged from his cabin, appearing well rested from a long sleep. At Aeolius' command, the quaal went to prepare the evening meal. Then the dream merchant invited his passenger to join him in the main cabin, where dinner was to be served.

Crystabal sat at a round table of polished wrymwood, where he and Aeolius partook of a meal of dried fruits, erd's cheese, and a fine amber wine, which the dream merchant served in fluted goblets.

During the course of the meal, Aeolius regaled his passenger with the accounts of his career as a dream merchant and of his travels across the continent of Talislanta. He claimed to have made a great fortune in his day, though recently, his profession had fallen upon hard times.

"Alas, the business of selling dream essence is not what it used to be," lamented Aeolius. "In the old days, buyers could not get enough of our wares, and dream merchants were hard-pressed to keep up with the demand. Now, they complain about the high cost of Dream Essence and

tell us that they cannot afford to pay for such frivolous things. Can you imagine that?”

Crystabal nodded sagely, feigning interest. In truth, he found his thoughts wandering in the direction of the valuables that Aeolius had stored below decks.

As if reading his thoughts, the quaal glared at the rogue magician and hissed. Crystabal ignored the annoying creature and took a long swallow of wine.

Aeolius did likewise and refilled both their glasses. “True, the profession of dream merchant is a noble one, though few comprehend the difficulties that we must endure in order to get our product to market. First, there is the process of collecting and distilling dreams, in order to obtain the elusive essence, which is captured in amberglass vials. Then, each sample must be cataloged and graded, after which it is ready to be exported for sale.

Aeolius continued. “The latter process is fraught with peril, for the skies above Talislanta are home to numerous avian creatures, some few of which can pose a hazard to even the most diligent astrogationist. Ravens are of course a nuisance, though one eventually learns to ignore their incessant demands for food.”

Crystabal yawned, hoping that Aeolius would take notice of the lateness of the hour. But the dream merchant, taking this to be a sign of approval as was the custom among those of his profession, continued his reminiscences with unabated enthusiasm.

“Aeroplasm, on the other hand, are a greater threat than the layman might suspect. These seemingly innocuous creatures drift upon the winds, held aloft by membranous bladder-sacs that contain a gaseous substance that is lighter than air. They are translucent and, therefore difficult to detect. This can pose a serious problem, as the creatures tend to explode upon contact with any solid object.”

Aeolius pointed to the starboard wing, a section of which appeared to have been blown away. “There is the result of a collision with an immature specimen. A fully grown aeroplasm might well have destroyed the entire wing, with disastrous consequences. Yet even these hazards pale in comparison to the most feared of all airborne predators: the one-eyed, one-horned, purple-hued monsters known as depredators!”

Crystabal struggled to keep his eyes open. An hour passed, until at last, Aeolius rose from his chair, and spoke in expansive tones.

“But enough of this talk. It is time that I showed you my wares!”

Crystabal’s eyes lit up, suddenly alert.

The dream merchant called to his pet quaal, and handed the creature a ring of antique brass keys. “Kiko, kindly go to the storeroom. Retrieve a selection of essences for the delectation of our passenger and guest, Crystabal. Mind; do not forget to lock the door again when you are done.”

The quaal executed a brisk salute and disappeared below deck. It returned a short time later, carrying in its hands an ornate wooden box. Aeolius set it before him on the table and opened the lid. Arranged neatly in the padded chest were several dozen stoppered amberglass phials, each carefully labeled according to type, age, and place of origin.

Aeolius beamed with pride as he displayed his wares. “This is Phantasian dream essence —the very stuff of which dreams are made, captured and distilled in its most basic form.”

The Phantasian held up a number of phials, describing each in turn: “Here is violet dream essence, which gives forth dreams of passion and romance; blue essence fosters poignancy, silver for flights of fancy, gold for prophetic visions, and more! A single sip is sufficient to sample the effects, if you so desire.”

The rogue magician eagerly voiced his consent, indicating as his choice a vial of purple essence marked “Violet; Type A: Thaecian Isles.”

“A wise selection,” complimented the dream merchant with a sly wink. With exceeding care he unstopped the vial and placed a single drop in a crystal goblet, to which he added a small quantity of wine.

“Drink, and experience the wonders of dream essence!” said Aeolius, handing the glass to his guest.

Crystabal took the goblet and held it under his nose. He inhaled, but smelled only amber wine. Raising the glass to his lips, he took a sip.

At once, Crystabal’s mind was filled with vivid images. He lay on a carpet of cool green moss, basking in the shade of a feather-dendron tree. A mantle of tropical vegetation surrounded him; nearby sat a Thaecian enchantress, her skin and hair the color of violets, her lips red as blossoms. Doffing her meager garments the enchantress approached and lay beside

him, her rich perfume filling his senses. He leaned forward to kiss her ruby lips. Then, as suddenly as she had appeared, the enchantress was gone.

Crystabal rubbed his eyes, feeling as if he had just awakened from a deep sleep. As before, he sat at the table with Aeolius, who displayed a look of great satisfaction.

“What are your impressions?” asked Aeolius.

“This is indeed a fascinating product, possessed of exceptional virtues,” said Crystabal enthusiastically. “How much would you charge for the entire vial?”

“This particular sample is quite rare, and was acquired at substantial risk. As such, it is priced at twelve hundred gold lumens.”

Crystabal sighed. “I thank you for the sample, which exceeded all expectations. Unfortunately, the sum you ask is somewhat beyond my means.”

“Ah well, so it goes in the Dream Merchant business,” said Aeolius. “I see that it is getting late, and I must retire for the evening. Kiko has prepared a bed for you in the aft cabin, when you are ready to sleep.”

Just then, a sudden disturbance caused the windship to lurch unsteadily to starboard. Crystabal held fast to the edge of the table and looked nervously towards Aeolius, who exhibited a calm demeanor.

“There is no need for concern,” assured the Phantasian. “It is merely the ship’s levitationals. The devices are quirky, and tend to act up from time to time.”

The disturbance was over as quickly as it had begun. When calm had been restored Aeolius bid Crystabal good night and went off to his cabin, leaving his pet quaal to pack up his box of samples. Crystabal considered trying to pocket a vial of the violet essence, but was dissuaded by Kiko’s vigilant posture. With a look of disdain for the quaal, the rogue magician retired to his cabin, where he spent a fruitless night attempting to recapture the essence of the dream that he had experienced earlier.

The windship, Dreamweaver, sailed across the night sky, propelled by a strong easterly wind. Overhead, three of Talislanta’s seven moons broke through a sea of clouds. A thousand feet below, the continent of Talislanta lay in darkness, its civilized inhabitants huddled for safety in their fortified settlements. Beyond the walled cities lay regions untamed since the time

of The Great Disaster, inhabited by creatures of fearsome aspect: sorcerous abominations, predatory beasts, and tribes of savage sub-men. The ruins of past civilizations dotted the landscape, forlorn reminders of a lost and halcyon age.

Crystabal awoke late in the morning, feeling relaxed and well rested. He washed, dressed, and primed, then went out on deck. The twin suns shone brightly in the upper atmosphere, and the air was crisp and cool.

Invigorated, the rogue magician strolled about the deck, to find the ever present Kiko seated at the helm of the windship. The creature looked at him and sneered; Crystabal turned up his nose and walked away, contemplating various acts of mischief that he would perform upon the obnoxious creature, if only he were given the chance.

As on the previous day Aeolius remained in his cabin, sound asleep. Sometime after the noon hour he finally roused himself, and invited Crystabal to join him in a light repast of biscuits and tea.

“How long before we arrive in Hajan?” asked Crystabal.

“Conditions thus far have been at the optimum, and we have made good time,” said Aeolius, consulting a skychart while nibbling on a biscuit. “Barring any unforeseen delays, we should arrive in Hajan within four days, or perhaps five.”

“It is difficult for even the most skillful astrogationist to provide accurate estimates in this regard, owing to the unpredictable nature of windship arcanology. The levitationals are not uniformly dependable, but function according to a convoluted set of metaphysical principles. A sudden downdraft or turbulence can sometimes suffice to send a ship spiraling downwards to its doom.”

Crystabal contemplated Aeolius’ words and peered over the ship’s rail, his features suddenly grown pale. “Is it truly necessary to fly so high above the ground?”

“It is advisable to do so, unless one is willing to run the risk of colliding with such obstructions as hills, mountains, and low-flying depreddators.”

Crystabal nodded dumbly. He sat in silence for the remainder of the meal, occasionally glancing at the landscape far below and wincing in apprehension.

When he had finished consuming his breakfast, Aeolius excused himself. “I hope you will forgive me, but it is time for my mid-day nap. Even the most dedicated dream merchant must rest sometime”.

“A question comes to mind,” remarked Crystabal. “I am curious; among members of your profession, what exactly distinguishes work from rest?”

Aeolius chuckled softly. “While on the surface the two may appear similar, such is not the case. In point of fact, the professional dream merchant stringently avoids all types of dreaming while resting, so as to sharpen his mind for the work that lies ahead.”

“This seems a somewhat subtle distinction.”

Aeolius hunched his narrow shoulders. “The concept is sometimes difficult for the layman to grasp. However, to the professional dream merchant, the distinction is real.”

Aeolius waved and sauntered off to his cabin, leaving Crystabal to muse that the life of a dream merchant was perhaps not so bad after all.

The afternoon passed lazily by. Far below, the forests of Vardune of the Seven Kingdoms extended towards the horizon in a verdant mantle of viridian trees, tanglevine, and thornwood. High above, feathery cirrus clouds extended wispy fingers across a deep blue sky, and flocks of bright winged avir soared on the winds like multi-colored confetti.

Crystabal stood on deck, contemplating a surreptitious investigation of Aeolius’ storeroom. He glanced upwards towards the bridge: there sat Kiko, one eye trained upon him. Crystabal thumbed his nose at the pesky creature and took a seat by the forward bow, where he passed the time flicking bits of dust from his trousers.

A sudden noise, like the sound of sheets flapping in the wind, attracted his attention. Crystabal looked up towards the twin suns, shielding his eyes with one hand. High above the windship, a flock of avir scattered, the feathered creatures darting off in different directions. He wondered; was it his imagination, or did he see a dark spot on the larger of the two suns?

Crystabal squinted into the suns. The spot appeared to be growing in size with each passing second, as the flapping noise increased in volume. He rubbed his eyes: now he could make out a pair of leathery wings, a segmented carapace covered with purple exoskeletal plates, and a fearsome

visage, at the center of which was set a single, staring eye and above it, a curved horn.

Crystabal drew back in alarm and shouted at the top of his lungs. “Depradator!”

The quaal looked skywards and emitted a loud squeak. A shadow fell across the after deck, as the depradator descended towards the vessel. Swooping below the rigging, the winged creature plucked the quaal from its seat, then flew upwards and away in a wide circle.

Aeolius stumbled from his cabin, awakened by the disturbance. Spotting the depradator he grabbed a harpoon-bow from a rack and ran forth to stand at the ship’s bow.

“Hold fast, Kiko” cried Aeolius. “I will save you.”

Crystabal stared in disbelief, uncertain whether Aeolius was aware that this was not another of his dream-tales. He reached out to take hold of the Phantasian’s sleeve, but Aeolius waved him back.

“The situation is under control,” he assured Crystabal, though the groggy look on his features suggested otherwise.

Aeolius stood at the prow, frantically waving this weapon back and forth. The depradator spotted him and turned back towards the ship, dropping from the sky in a steep dive. The Phantasian took aim with his weapon and fired, but the harpoon glanced harmlessly off of the depradator’s armored exoskeleton. Snatching up the dream merchant in its claws, the creature carried him aloft along with the quaal.

“Matters appear to have taken a turn for the worse!” called out Aeolius, his voice trailing off into the distance. “Farewell, and good luck landing the windship!”

Crystabal came out from under the mast and watched the depradator and its victims fade from sight. He leaned up against the rail, shocked at the sudden and untimely end of the old dream merchant.

On the other hand, thought Crystabal, there was a positive side to this unforeseen development. At last he was rid of the obnoxious Kiko, whose loss would not be mourned by the rogue magician. More to the point, he now had full access to the ship’s cargo of dream essence, along with whatever other valuables Aeolius kept in his storeroom.

His mood considerably brightened as Crystabal descended into the hold. A moment's work and the padlock was undone, allowing the door to open inwards. Crystabal took a lantern from the wall and held it aloft, causing a wan light to be cast through the doorway.

He looked into a windowless room about six feet on a side. A motley array of items was stored within, sitting on half-vacant shelves or stuffed into corners. There were moldy crates filled with empty bottles, alchemical reagents, solvents, and miscellaneous pieces of alchemical apparatus; boxes of cheap trinkets, a coil of rope, some spare windship parts, and a section of sail crumpled into a heap. As for dream essence, there was only the single wooden box that he had seen the night before.

Crystabal could not recall the last time he had seen so much junk in one place. Based on the sorry collection of articles displayed in his storeroom, it was hardly surprising that the dream merchant's business was on the decline.

Crystabal muttered under his breath. While the contents of Aeolius' storeroom had proved disappointing, at least he now had access to the Phantasian's supply of dream essence. Recalling the pleasant experience of the previous evening, he took the box of essences down from the shelf. Opening the lid, he removed the vial marked "Violet; Type A: Thaecian Isles," and took a sip.

Once again, Crystabal found himself transported to a fabulous dreamrealm of cool green mosses and lush tropical vegetation. The Thaecian enchantress approached him as she had before, to slip from her gossamer robes and lay beside them. Her long violet limbs intertwined about him in an ardent embrace; she leaned close, ruby lips parted. And then...

A sudden turbulence struck the windship, awakening Crystabal from his delightful dream and rattling everything aboard the vessel. The rogue magician rubbed his eyes, disoriented by the sudden shift in perspectives. He vacillated between dream and waking states, part of him longing to return to the arms of the enchantress, while another part attempted to recall Aeolius' warning about the unreliability of windship levitationals.

A second and even stronger disturbance followed. The ship listed precipitously to the port side, causing items to topple from the shelves and land with a crash on the floor of the storeroom. Crystabal came abruptly

to his senses. From the corner of his eye he saw a sealed amberglass bottle teeter back and forth, then fall from the uppermost shelf.

For a split second events seemed to proceed in slow motion. Crystabal reached out to catch the glassine container, but the windship lurched back to starboard, causing him to reel backwards towards the opposite wall.

A label affixed to the bottle caught his eye just before the fragile container hit the floor and shattered into a hundred pieces. The label read: “UNIVERSAL SOLVENT: DANGER!”

An incongruous sight followed. From the broken bottle a clear liquid issued forth, hissing and bubbling as it quickly dissolved a section of the wooden floorboards. A hole appeared in the floor, expanding outwards at an alarming rate. In a matter of seconds half of the floor and part of the starboard wall were gone, and still the hole continued to grow.

Crystabal fled the storeroom and returned topside. Already a portion of the ship's starboard section was gone, and pieces of the hull were breaking loose and falling earthward. The vessel now leaned precariously to starboard, and appeared to be losing altitude with each passing minute.

Experiencing a surge of panic, Crystabal grabbed his possessions from his cabin and ran up to the bridge. Before he could reach the top of the stairs the forward section of the hull broke away, taking with it the mast and most of the rigging. The rogue magician held tight to the handrail and looked downwards: where the forward deck had been only seconds before, there was now nothing but blue sky and empty space.

Crystabal made a hasty appraisal of the situation. All that now remained of the windship was the bridge and part of the aftcastle. Somehow the vessel continued to remain airborne, indicating that the levitationals had not yet been affected by the universal solvent. This in turn suggested that the devices were located somewhere in the vicinity of the bridge.

Crystabal mounted the last few steps and ran to the helm. He tugged at the lever that operated the levitationals. There was a loud creaking and groaning sound; the remaining portion of the windship shuddered, then headed earthwards in a flat dive.

With the twin suns setting in the western sky, the rogue magician rode the wreckage of the windship downwards through the growing dusk. The vessel was breaking up all around him, trailing bits of debris in its wake.

Now the entire lower portion of the aftcastle was gone, leaving only the helm and part of the afterdeck.

The last section of deck disintegrated, and fell away beneath Crystabal's feet. Crystabal grabbed the lever that controlled the levitationals and held on for dear life. He looked down: the ground seemed to rush upwards at him, and the wind made his eyes water. Then the last remnants of the ship dissolved into pieces, and Crystabal plummeted down through the darkness.

## CHAPTER 17

**THE WITCHMAN, XAN,** stalked the streets of the city of Zanth by night. Following the tracks of a single individual through such a heavily populated area was a task of daunting proportions, even for one of Xan's abilities. The city was a veritable maze of spirit traces, showing the comings and goings of untold thousands of living beings over the course of many hundreds of years.

Since arriving in the sprawling capital, Xan had lost the trail three times: once, in a crowded tavern; next, outside the gates of a sprawling estate; and lastly, on the road leading from an abandoned cellar back to the center of the city. In each case Xan had been impelled to employ the spell of spirit tracking in order to locate the trail. The process, though effective, had resulted in numerous delays, and Xan had been unable to gain ground on his prey as quickly as he had hoped.

Through crowded marketplaces lit by rows of lanterns, the witchman passed, stopping from time to time to study the ground. Here, the rogue magician had turned left, down a narrow side street. Then a turn to the right, across a square and into a small inn.

Xan finally arrived at the western sector of the city, where the flying boats that city men called windships lay at moorage. The suns had long

since set in the western sky, and black shadows covered the grey stone quays. The last of the dock workers had left for their homes; all was still.

Xan stood alone on the docks with darkness enclosing him on all sides. Once again, he cast the spell of spirit tracking and passed into a state of heightened consciousness. As if in a trance, he walked slowly from one end of the dock to the other, carefully studying the infinitesimal spirit traces left in the thief's passing. The tracks terminated at the far end of the quays, then trailed off to the east, rising upwards like a bird in flight.

The witchman stared into the distance, his dark eyes narrow as slits. The rogue magician had been here little more than a day ago, but was now gone. His spirit traces still hung in the air, marking the direction of his passage. But he had left not a single track upon the ground.

Xan scanned the nighttime sky with eyes narrowed. There was but a single explanation. The thief had departed Zanth by windship.

The witchman reached into a pouch and retrieved a crude horn made of yellowed bone, into which had been carved a series of peculiar runes. Taking the device in hand, he raised it to his lips and exhaled a stream of air. A low moaning sound issued forth from the horn, echoing eerily among the quays.

A moment passed. Then the sound of beating wings was heard, and a creature like a great black manta ray descended from the sky, its sinister-looking visage cloaked in darkness. With a rush of wind, it lighted nearby to stare at the witchman with baleful eyes.

Xan approached and laid a hand on the creature's leathery hide. He uttered something in an ancient tongue, to which the bat manta appeared to nod in reply. Then Xan climbed upon the creature's back and pointed to the east.

The bat manta stretched its wings, and with a single powerful thrust took to the air, with the witchman holding fast to its horns. Upwards they rose, into the darkness, following after the windship that had carried the rogue magician towards Hajan.

## CHAPTER 18

**CRYSTABAL OPENED HIS** eyes and yawned. He lay in a clump of furze bushes, which he'd had the good fortune to land in following the dissolution of Aeolius's windship. Still in his hand was the wooden lever that had once controlled the ship's levitationals. Crystabal cast the useless item aside and extricated himself from the brush, rearranging his disheveled costume.

As if through a mist, he recalled the events of the last few days: his escape from the executioner's gibbet, his encounter with the shadowights, and finally, the abortive windship voyage. He looked high and low: the suns shone through the treetops, illuminating a verdant forest. A short distance from where he stood was a path that led through the woods. But where the trail led, or even where he was now, he could not say for certain.

Crystabal sighed. He was now stranded in some unknown wilderness, and lacked all but the most basic means of transportation. His joints ached from having spent the night in the brush, and he was hungover from the aftereffects of the dream essence. Currently in his possession was a sword, a pouch with about twenty gold lumens in coin, a satchel containing a few sundry items, and the enchanted horn and map that had been given to him by Miriad the magician.

Crystabal mumbled a curse, reminded of his agreement with the many faced magician. Clearly, the source of all his problems was his obligation to Miriad. True, the magician had saved his life, but to what end? In return for a single act of benevolence, Crystabal was now consigned to trudge across half a continent, risking life and limb in order to retrieve some magical oddity from the clutches of another magician, no doubt equally as odious as Miriad.

Crystabal considered various options. He could use the enchanted horn to transport himself to Miriad's abode, thereby putting an end to the entire affair. Once there, he could explain that, due to circumstances beyond his control, he had been unable to obtain the orb of sky-blue crystal. Conceivably, he could declare their contract to be invalid, on the basis that Miriad had failed to provide sufficient funds to cover the cost of the journey.

The rogue magician frowned. Such excuses, regardless of their validity, would hold little weight with an individual of Miriad's autocratic temperament. The oath that he had been forced to swear bound him both implicitly and explicitly to the terms of the contract. To renege upon his agreement with Miriad would only result in consequences of the most unpleasant sort.

Crystabal shook his head, resigned to his fate. Much as he would have preferred otherwise, he headed east, following the trail that led through the forest.

Through wood and meadow went the rogue magician, past copses of stunted withergall and hag-oak, and over hillocks tufted with blue-green grasses. Coming upon a stream, he stopped to refresh himself and to brush the dust from his garments. To his dismay he discovered that his brand new trousers had become frayed at the cuffs, a condition which caused him no end of consternation. Cursing the name of Miriad, he stalked off in search of a road or other landmark by which he might get his bearings.

The path led up the side of a steep incline then branched off to the east, bordering the edge of a sheer cliff. Crystabal kept to the trail, maintaining a judicious distance between himself and the lip of the precipice. From somewhere up ahead he heard a sound, like someone muttering in a

strange tongue. Crystabal proceeded with caution, one hand on the hilt of his blade.

At the edge of a bluff overlooking a scenic vista stood a man of middle years, with skin and hair the color of old vermillion. He wore a simple robe of green linen, sandals of brown land lizard's hide, and a wide-rimmed blue hat, the crown of which was bright red.

Before him was an easel, upon which was mounted a canvas stretched over a wooden frame. As he daubed paint on the canvas with carefully measured strokes he recited a mantra of some sort, repeating the phrase over and over to himself. The expression on his face was one of deep concentration, approaching exaltation.

Crystabal watched the painter for several moments, studying his manner of dress and mien. The color of his hair and complexion marked him as a Cymrilian, though his costume was of a type unfamiliar to the rogue magician. The fellow appeared placid enough, and so Crystabal called out to him from a distance.

"Good day to you, sir. May I speak with you for a moment?"

"Good day to you as well," said the painter, without looking up from his work. "Speak as you will; I am capable of conversing and painting at the same time."

Crystabal took this remark in a favorable light, and so approached to stand beside the easel. "Can you tell me what place this is?"

"This is Pleasant Gorge, in Cymril of the Seven Kingdoms," answered the painter, applying a splotch of red paint to the canvas.

Crystabal pursed his lips, considering the painter's remarks. He had long wished to visit the crystal city, which was notable for the enlightened views of its populace. Though Cymril was still many miles from his destination, he was sure that he could arrange some means of transport from there, and so complete his journey without further difficulties.

"How far is the crystal city from this place?" asked the rogue magician.

The painter pointed with his brush. "Five or six miles. The road to Cymril lies perhaps a hundred yards from this spot, down the far end of the embankment and just beyond that line of trees."

“Thank you,” said Crystabal, his eyes wandering towards the painting, an abstract work rendered in splotches of blue, green, red, and brown. “Out of curiosity, what is the significance of this piece?”

The painter glanced up from his canvas. “This work is an homage to the style of the artiste-philosophers of ancient Numenia, representing the perfect symbology inherent in nature. Each color signifies one of the four perfect, separate, and immutable virtues: brown is for the soil from which all living things originate, providing the firm foundation upon which our faith is based. Green symbolizes the Tree of Knowledge and the deeper insights acquired from the practice of Iconology. Cerulean is for the sky, signifying the promise of heavenly reward that all followers of Icon strive to attain. And lastly, red, the color of the twin suns, which light our way as we search for truth. Thus did the artiste-philosopher, Pandamon, explain the great mysteries to his disciples.”

The painter pointed to his garments. “You will note the identical symbology represented in the costume that I wear, which is a replica of the ancient Numenian garb.”

“It is most striking,” said Crystabal, though in truth, he considered the painter’s costume somewhat absurd. He looked again at the painting, then glanced upwards at the sky, a puzzled look on his features.

The painter, observing the rogue’s expression, posed a question. “You appear perplexed. Can it be that you fail to comprehend the full significance of Pandamon’s maxims?”

“Pandamon’s symbolism lacks nothing in the way of clarity,” remarked Crystabal. “However, I admit to puzzlement as regards one aspect of your painting.”

“Feel free to ask as you will,” said the painter. “As a follower of Icon, I welcome all inquiries into the mysteries of our faith.”

Crystabal pointed to the larger of the two splotches, which were meant to represent the twin suns. “It seems to me that the greater sun is more orange, rather than red, in color.”

The painter’s face suddenly turned livid with rage. “Do you dare to suggest that a loyal follower of Icon debase the teachings of Pandamon by the use of a forbidden color?”

“Naturally not,” said Crystabal hastily. “I was merely making an observation.”

“Heresy!” cried the painter. Drawing a dagger from the folds of his robes, he lunged at the rogue magician with murderous intent.

Crystabal stepped nimbly to one side; the painter hurtled past, his momentum carrying him off the edge of the cliff. There was a brief silence, followed by a distant-sounding thud.

Crystabal gingerly approached the precipice. He looked at the rocks far below and winced. Then he shrugged and headed in the direction of the road.

Struck by a sudden thought, he stopped and retraced his steps. He stood before the easel and looked first at the painting and then up at the sky. Taking brush in hand, he added a dab of yellow to the red sun and mixed the two colors together. Then he took a step backward to admire his handiwork, looking first to the sky and then at the canvas.

“It is orange, definitely,” he said with satisfaction.

Suddenly the painting began to undergo a strange transformation. The colors of the newly painted sun swirled and bubbled, congealing into an amorphous blob that protruded from the center of the orange circle.

Crystabal jumped back, performing various hand gestures intended to confer protection from irate deities, demons, and the like. To his relief, the tumescent blob did not portend the arrival of some aggrieved supernatural entity but of a miniature version of Miriad the Magician.

“I quite agree with you on the choice of color,” said Miriad’s image. “However, I confess that I am partial to the old masters, particularly the surrealists of the Third Millennium. It is unfortunate that the painter had such a limited appreciation of the classics. Yet it is my experience that art is subjective, rather than objective, in nature.”

“An interesting observation,” replied Crystabal disinterestedly.

“Thank you”, said the paint blob shaped like Miriad. Its orange eyes looked sidewise at Crystabal. “And now, shouldn’t you be on your way?”

“In fact, I was just about to leave,” replied Crystabal. “However, before I go I would like to voice my opinion concerning this quest that you have sent me on. In the first place...”

“Perhaps another time,” interrupted Miriad. “For the moment, I find myself preoccupied with more important issues. And so I say to you, goodbye and farewell!”

With that the illusory visage disappeared back into the canvas, leaving the painting as it was before. Crystabal shook his fist at the canvas and uttered a string of deprecatory remarks. Then, realizing the futility of his actions, he followed the path down the slope and through the forest.

Shortly afterwards, he came to a roadway paved with hexagonal stones, now cracked or worn with great age: the remnants of the old Wilderlands Road, which lead to the city of Cymril. Marking the position of the suns, Crystabal shouldered his satchel and headed east.

The miles passed slowly by, and the woods became less dense. Rays of orange sunshine slanted through gaps in the trees, creating alternating patterns of light and dark. From somewhere far off came a mournful cry, like the howl of an exomorph. Crystabal studied the underbrush to either side of the roadway, but saw no sign of any predatory beast, and so continued on his way.

Some distance down the road Crystabal thought to detect the smell of cooking, wafted on the wind from some unknown location. Reminded that he had not eaten since the previous evening Crystabal stopped and sniffed the air. Somewhere nearby, stew was simmering in a pot. With his stomach growling he turned off the main road and made his way through the underbrush, following the scent.

A few yards from the roadway he came upon a crude stone hut standing in the middle of a clearing. A thin trail of smoke issued forth from the hut’s chimney, filling the air with a spicy aroma.

Crystabal walked up to the wooden door and knocked. He waited a moment or two, but there was no answer. He tested the door, and finding it unlocked, opened it and looked inside.

The hut was unoccupied, and practically devoid of furnishings. A pile of dirty straw littered the earthen floor. A few pots and cooking implements hung from wooden pegs hammered into the cracks in the rough stone walls. A fire was burning in the hearth, over which a heavy iron kettle had been suspended.

Crystabal entered the hut and walked over to the fireplace. In the kettle he found a stew, simmering and bubbling over the fire. Taking a ladle from its peg, he dipped it into the contents of the pot to have a taste. To his horror, a severed hand bobbed to the surface, along with a quantity of sliced onions and tubers.

Holding down a feeling of revulsion, Crystabal dropped the ladle back into the pot. Then he ran from the hovel and continued at speed down the road, anxious to be gone before the hut's inhabitant — whoever or whatever it might be — returned to its grisly feast.

The road meandered through a rugged landscape flanked by squat hills and tufts of vegetation. The suns hung just above the treetops; shadows slowly deepened from grey to black, spreading across the terrain like ink blots.

Crystabal searched the surrounding area for a place to spend the evening. Not far ahead was an irregularly shaped mound of stone, the sides of which curved upwards and around, forming something of a natural enclosure. Lacking any better alternative, he began gathering wood for a fire, and soft grasses for his bed.

As he bent to pick up a fallen branch, Crystabal noticed the sad condition of his boots, which were beginning to show signs of wear. He muttered a curse; the rigors of travel were wreaking havoc upon his wardrobe, making it ever more difficult to maintain a decent appearance. Shaking his head ruefully, he spent several moments wiping away the dust and grime until the leather once again showed something of its original luster.

From somewhere nearby came the sound of soft footfalls and the snapping of a twig. Crystabal's muscles tensed. He looked about: in the dying light he saw only a few scattered trees and, closer by, a dense growth of briar-bush.

Crystabal focused his full powers of perception upon the underbrush. Gradually, the vague outline of a large, four legged creature seemed to take shape. A curved branch seemed to metamorphosize into a long and sinuous tail. What appeared to be two branches sprouting twin rows of thorns could now be seen as a set of sharp, slavering fangs.

Crystabal's eyes widened in recognition. Staring at him with smoldering red eyes was an exomorph — a predatory beast with abilities similar to

those of a chameleon. Realizing that its disguise had been penetrated, the exomorph charged forth from the brush, its coloration altering to match its changing surroundings.

Crystabal attempted to cast a spell of arcane force, but the creature was too fast. A set of hooked talons tore through the rogue magician's cloak, dragging him to the ground. Crystabal pulled free and retreated, only to find himself with his back against the rough stone mound. The exomorph crouched, prepared to strike.

The sound of advancing hooves suddenly cut the air. From around the rock ledge came a female warrior mounted on an armored greymane, wielding a longsword. She was clad from head to foot in shining chain mail, her long dark hair pulled back and confined with six copper bands.

The exomorph halted in its tracks, puzzled at this new development. It growled at the swordswoman, baring twin rows of six-inch fangs. For its trouble, the creature received a mighty blow from the female's longsword that sheared through bone and cartilage, cleaving the top of its skull. The exomorph reared back, mortally wounded. Then it slumped to the ground and lay still.

"Are you hurt?" asked the swordswoman.

Crystabal rose to his feet, brushing the dirt and dust from his clothing and eyeing the tattered cloak with a look of extreme irritation. "I fear that my cape is ruined beyond repair. Otherwise, I am uninjured."

He looked up at the swordswoman, her coppery skin glistening with beads of sweat. Though somewhat muscular for his tastes, she was not uncomely. Crystabal considered the romantic possibilities and found himself intrigued at the prospects.

"But I have not introduced myself," said the rogue magician, doffing his hat as he executed a sweeping bow. "I am Crystabal, a magician of some renown in the city of Zantium, now bound for the crystal city of Cymril."

"I am Ule," answered the swordswoman "I also hail from the Western Lands, though my destination takes me beyond Cymril to the far edge of the Eastern Borderlands. Word has it that the sub-men tribes are gathering along the border, and the military has put out the call for volunteers. The pay is fair, but at least there is work."

“Such is the lot of the mercenary,” said Crystabal sympathetically. “But I have not yet thanked you for your assistance. If there is anything that I can do to repay you for your kindness, please let me know.”

“The road to Cymril is long,” answered Ule. “As we are both headed this way, perhaps you would agree to travel with me, and provide company on the journey.”

Crystabal bowed a second time. “It would be my pleasure to accept your invitation. However, I must inform you that I have no steed.”

“It is no great matter,” said Ule. “You may ride with me.”

So saying, the swordswoman reached down and extended her hand. Crystabal took hold of her wrist and found himself lifted off of his feet and dropped onto the back of the charger as if he were no more than a boy.

“Hold tight to my waist,” said Ule. “We travel at speed; stranger things even than exomorphs reside in these parts, and I would prefer to find a safer place to spend the night.”

Crystabal wrapped his arms around the swordswoman’s mailed waist, his hands warm against the cool metal. Ule dug her heels into the flanks of her greymane, and the creature sped off down the road.

The two rode on for an hour, until they passed beyond the sparse woodlands of Cymril into territories cleared of vegetation, either for purposes of agriculture or habitation. Ahead lay a stretch of flat terrain littered with the ruins of what might once have been a stone farmhouse or perhaps a small tavern. The advanced state of decay precluded a more exacting appraisal of the structure’s original function, which had evidently been forgotten for many years.

Ule reigned in her steed and dismounted. She helped Crystabal to the ground, at which time he noticed that she stood some two or three inches taller than he did. For a second, their eyes met, then Ule abruptly looked away.

“We camp here for the evening,” said the swordswoman, tethering her steed to the remains of a stone column that protruded upwards at an odd angle from the mossy ground. “Make preparations for dinner, while I go to fetch fuel for a fire.”

Crystabal removed a saddle blanket from the back of the greymane and spread it on the ground, choosing a spot where a section of an old stone

wall could be used as a windbreak. From his satchel he retrieved a crust of black bread and a rind of cheese, neither of which looked particularly appealing. Ule's saddlebag yielded better results: a parcel of dried sausages, a fresh loaf, and two bottles of good green wine. Crystabal put his own meager provisions away and arranged the remaining items to best effect on the blanket.

The twin suns dropped out of sight below the trees, sending streaks of crimson and yellow across a cobalt blue sky. Crystabal watched the fiery arcs turn from red to deep purple and affected a sly grin. A beautiful sunset, the warmth of a shared blanket, and dinner under the stars... conditions were at the optimum for romance, and the evening was ripe with possibilities.

Ule returned a moment later, carrying with her a quantity of sedge and a large pile of firewood. Taking flint and iron from a pouch, she struck a fire. Then she unfastened the straps that held her armor in place, letting the sections of chain mail fall away one by one. Removing the last of her armor she wrapped herself in a cloak and sat upon the blanket beside Crystabal, her copper features outlined in the light of the fire.

The two ate in silence, watching as the last traces of the suns disappear, to be replaced by a sprinkling of constellations. The purple moon, Ardan, appeared in the night sky. The first bottle of green wine fell by the wayside, and the second was broached.

Crystabal appraised the situation. With instincts honed by long years of practice, he concluded that the time had arrived for action. Seizing the moment, he slipped an arm around Ule's waist, drew her close, and whispered a term of endearment into her ear. In response he received a clout on the side of the head that sent him reeling head over heels across the ground.

Crystabal rose to his feet, a look of extreme irritation on his features. "What is the meaning of this obstreperous behavior?"

Ule stood before him with fists clenched. "You have taken liberties with my person, and caused me offense. Be advised: I am no object, to be coveted by a vain popinjay such as yourself."

“Your conceit knows no bounds!” replied Crystabal in acidic tones. “To think that I would be attracted to a sociopathic harridan such as yourself is laughable.”

“Then explain the reason for your lewd proposition,” countered Zule.

“The answer is obvious. I sought only to repay you for the kindness that you showed me earlier; which, I might add, is now nowhere in evidence.”

“Ha! That is a grand joke! You are governed by your hormonal secretions, and attribute your motives to altruism. Go away! I find your presence offensive! Your manner of dress is atrocious, and you reek of inexpensive cologne.”

“I leave with pleasure,” spat Crystabal, his features livid. “Better to spend the night in a nest of chasm vipers than in the company of a tyrannical witch such as you.”

So saying, Crystabal snatched up his possessions and stalked off into the night. A short way from the road he found a small cave, into which he could barely fit by crouching down on all fours. In this fashion spent a cold and miserable night in the company of a band of caravan bugs, who found the accommodations much more to their liking than did the rogue magician.



## CHAPTER 19

**THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT** Xan rode on the back of the bat manta, following in the wake of the dream merchant's windship. The voyage was long and hard; the frigid winds stung his eyes, and the night dankness cut him like a knife. Xan cursed in his native tongue and spat into the wind. To track a man while airborne, even with Xan's uncanny capabilities, was a slow and difficult business. Still, the two covered many miles, narrowing the distance between the witchman and his prey.

At dawn his steed deserted him; a creature not of this world, the bat manta could not abide the light of day. Xan climbed from the back of the nightmarish entity and it soared free, returning to its spectral haunts just as the suns crept into the sky. Unfazed, Xan performed an ancient shamanistic ritual, and metamorphosized into the shape of his totem animal — a sinuous thing resembling a winged lamprey, known as an alatus. The creature that was the witchman took to the air on leathery pinions, following the route taken by the windship.

The hours passed, and the suns traveled across the sky. From high above the forest, the alatus that was Xan spotted several pieces of debris, scattered across the terrain. The witchman descended to the ground and resumed his natural form. Studying the wreckage, he determined that the vessel that had carried the thief had lost its magic and fallen to earth.

Xan affected a sinister grin, the sharpened points of his coal black teeth exposed. Now he knew that his prey was also on foot, like himself. This gave him the advantage, for the witchman's magics enabled him to travel many miles without the need for rest. Casting the spell of Fast Traveling, he ran off in pursuit of the rogue magician.

Night settled slowly upon the land. Xan looked up at the sky and saw the black nimbus of the dark moon, Zar — a good omen, in the mythology of the witchmen tribes. Though he had been delayed, the he knew that it was only a matter of time before he caught up with his prey.

Xan continued down the road, moving at a loping gait. Creatures of the night peered at him from the undergrowth, hissing and cursing in strange tongues. Xan paid them no heed, nor did they follow after him, for they sensed his dire nature and gave him a wide berth.

A layer of gauzy mist rose from the dank soil. Clouds slid across the faces of three moons. Xan halted in his tracks, and studied the signs. Here the trail diverged from the road, following a narrow path that wound its way through a copse of withergall.

Xan made his way through the woods until he came upon a stone hut standing in the midst of a clearing. In the light of the moons Xan saw the smoke of a cooking fire emerging from the roof of the hut. He crept up to the wooden door, following in the footsteps of his prey. He listened but heard only the wailing howl of a malathrope from somewhere far in the distance. Drawing his long-bladed knife, Xan entered the hovel.

The hut appeared to be empty. Xan entered, and felt a presence nearby. No, not empty. Something was now behind him.

Xan spun about. Standing in the doorway was a deathly pale creature with a wild shock of wiry hair and long, overlapping fangs. It stood a full head taller than the witchman, and was naked except for a tattered loincloth.

The ghast flexed its curved talons, its awful visage twisted into a frightful, leering grin.

“Manling. Pleassed am I to have your company for dinner.”

Xan snarled: “Begone, grave dweller. I have other business to attend to.”

“It would not pleasse me to ssssee you go,” hissed the ghast. “Ssstay awhile.”

Without warning the ghaſt ſprang at the witchman's throat, fangs poised to ſtrike. Xan ſtruck like a ſerpent, the enchanted longknife ſlicing through the creature's throat.

The ghaſt's ſeſvered head fell to the dirt floor. It ſcreamed in anger, ſpouting vile curses in a dozen languages. The body flopped to the ground, jerking and ſpouting black blood from its neck. Then the diſmembered head began to roll toward the witchman, the fanged jaws gnashing and snapping at his feet.

Xan calmly ſkewered the head with his blade, and dropped it into the kettle. He watched as it ſank into the boiling broth, cursing and ſpitting at him. When all was ſilent Xan took a ladle from a peg on the wall, dipped it into the pot, and taſted the contents.

Xan wiped his mouth with the back of his hand licked his lips. Nodding in approval, he conſumed the reſt of the kettle's contents with reſh. Then the witchman left the hut to follow the trail of his prey through the woodlands of Cymril.



## CHAPTER 20

**A SHAFT OF** sunlight peeked through the entrance of the small cave where Crystabal lay, deep in slumber. Inch by inch it advanced, until it shone full on the face of the rogue magician. Crystabal stirred and opened his eyes. The caravan bugs who'd bivouacked in his garments marched by within a hand's width of his nose, carrying diminutive packs and bundles on their backs. Traveling in single file the procession of tiny nomads saluted Crystabal in unison, then exited the cave, en route to their next destination.

Crystabal crawled forth into the sunshine, his limbs stiff from spending the night in the cramped confines of his makeshift shelter. Unaccustomed to the rigors of travel, he felt no great love for the outdoors, preferring the comforts of a soft bed — ideally, in the company of a willing and lissome female, rather than a troupe of traveling insects. Unfortunately, fate had decreed otherwise, at least for the time being.

With effort, the rogue magician straightened and stood erect, or as close to this posture as he could manage. He looked down the road. Ule was gone, and with her, the steed that he had hoped to ride along with her to Cymril. Uttering a garbled curse, he rubbed the soreness from his aching joints, and did his best to clean the dirt and dried leaves from his garments. It was only then that he noticed that his satchel was missing.

Crystabal went back to inspect the cave. Nowhere was there any sign of the missing satchel. He lowered his head so that his eyes were almost level with the ground. In the soft soil he saw a set of small, crabbed footprints, heading towards the back of the cave. Next to these was a long, irregular line, as if someone had dragged something through the dirt.

Crystabal's eyes narrowed. Here was clear evidence of thievery, perpetrated by some unknown scoundrel who lurked in darkened holes, coming forth by night to prey upon unsuspecting victims. Clenching a fist in indignation, Crystabal cast a spell of Radiance, calling into effect a luminous sphere. Using the glowing object to light the way, he proceeded on hands and knees, following the strange little tracks that receded deep into the cave.

As he went, the passage narrowed, and it became more difficult for him to maneuver. Cobwebs stuck to his hair; patches of moist earth stained his clothing, and clods of soil rained upon him from above. Crystabal gritted his teeth, rueing the additional damage done to his costume. How the culprit would pay for his misdeeds when he was brought to justice!

A short distance ahead the tunnel came to a dead end. Perplexed, Crystabal held the radiant sphere close to the ground. The footprints appeared to stop at the end of the tunnel, after which there were no more marks in evidence.

Crystabal felt along the wall with one hand, and found something that at first glance, resembled the end of a gnarled root. He manipulated the root forward and back; there was a soft clicking sound as of a latch being undone, and a hidden door less than three feet in height, disguised as a section of the cave wall, opened inwards.

The rogue magician poked his head through the opening and looked inside. Beyond this point lay a second tunnel, narrower than the first, which extended for a distance of perhaps twenty feet. At the far end of this passage was another chamber, from which emanated a soft luminescence.

Crystabal caused the spell of Radiance to fade. Then he squeezed through the narrow doorway and crept along the second tunnel, careful not to make any sound that might betray his presence. At the end of the passageway he paused, and gazed upon a sight that was both strange and wondrous to behold.

The tunnel opened into an underground cavern some fifteen feet in diameter and half as high, hewn from the rough stone and soil of the region. Hundreds of candles, tucked into niches in the walls, cast a flickering glow about the chamber, which was festooned with gaudy silks and colorful oddments: bangles and baubles, bric-a-brac, and bizarre curios. Clay pots overflowing with coins and gemstones were arranged about the room, along with piles of cushions, lamps, an old settee, plush curtains, and other furnishings.

In the far corner of the room a small table had been set, upon which were piled platters of fruits, seeds, and nuts. Seated at the table was a shriveled creature just over two feet in height, with a bulbous nose, elongated earlobes, and a pointed cranium. It was dressed in a garish costume that consisted of a pair of bright red pantaloons, a gold and purple tunic, a dozen ear and nose rings, and colored sashes in a variety of patterns and styles. The tiny feet were unshod, and clawed; the hands held an oversized pewter goblet, from which the creature toasted its good fortune as it perused the contents of the rogue magician's satchel.

Crystabal surveyed the scene from hiding, a look of wonderment on his features. Evidently, he had stumbled upon the lair of a weirdling — a rare and reclusive creature, possessed of fabulous magical abilities. Crystabal had heard stories of such things from his childhood, though never had he believed that he would get to see such a thing with his own eyes. For according to the ancient legends, if a weirdling was caught it must either bestow a wish upon its captor or surrender its cache of treasure.

Crystabal's mind raced. With the wish, he might ask for the orb of blue crystal, and so be done with Miriad's quest. Or better yet, he might simply wish that Miriad would cease to exist, and so never bother him again. On the other hand, if he took the weirdling's treasure, he could afford to hire someone to steal the orb of sky blue crystal for him, while he relaxed in comfort and safety at the finest inn in Cymril.

What to do? The possibilities seemed endless.

Crystabal roused himself from his reveries, and focused on the task at hand. The first step was to capture the weirdling. Afterward there would be ample time to decide what to do with his wish, or his new found fortune — or better yet, both, if such a thing could be arranged.

Steeling himself to the task that lay ahead, Crystabal crept into the chamber. Slowly, quietly, he snuck up on the weirdling, hands outstretched to grasp hold of the prize.

The weirdling's ears twitched, alerted to the presence of danger by some uncanny sixth sense. It turned its ugly head, saw Crystabal, and let out a startled squawk. Crystabal lunged; the weirdling slipped through his hands. Then with a great bound the creature leapt up from the table, stubby legs churning in mid-air, and bolted across the room.

A wild chase ensued, as Crystabal pursued the weirdling around the chamber, spilling the contents of the clay pots and knocking over items of furniture. The creature was remarkably nimble, and displayed considerable speed afoot. It seemed to defy gravity, running up the sides of the walls and even across the ceiling, twisting and dodging so that each time Crystabal lunged at it he found himself clutching only empty air.

Finally, after many frustrations, the rogue magician succeeded in cornering his prey. Puffing and panting, he grabbed hold of the weirdling by the scruff of its neck. Then he bound the creature's arms and legs with sashes and set it upon the table.

"Little thief, I have caught you at last," gasped Crystabal. "Now you must return what you stole from me, and grant me a wish, or your treasure. For you cannot refuse me, now that I have made you my prisoner."

The weirdling regarded its captor through rheumy yellow eyes. "You have captured me, and so I must obey," said the creature in a nasal, high-pitched voice. "But be forewarned: it is not permitted to take both wish and treasure. You must choose between the two."

As something of an afterthought the weirdling added: "As for your possessions, you may take them if you wish. Upon closer scrutiny, I have determined that they are less valuable than I had originally believed."

Crystabal considered the weirdling's words carefully before tendering his reply. "Rest assured that this is not my 'wish', nor will I be fooled into taking any object that you now regard as part of your treasure. You deal now with the rogue magician, Crystabal, not some addle-brained forest creature."

The weirdling screwed its odd looking features into a pitiful expression. "Woe is me! Now I will lose my precious wish, and I have so few left to me."

Crystabal remained unmoved. “Cease your conniving talk, or I shall be forced to gag you as well. I will determine whether wish or treasure shall be my reward after examining the contents of this chamber.”

Crystabal turned to inspect the weirdling’s treasure trove, a goodly portion of which was now strewn about the room. Almost at once a singular item attracted his attention — a small silver cube, scarcely four inches on a side, engraved with cunning scrollwork, with a number of perfect moonstones set into its surface. The device radiated a tangible aura of magic, and held Crystabal’s rapt fascination.

“What is the nature of this item?” asked Crystabal.

The weirdling glanced at the chest and shrugged. “It is a magic box of some antiquity. I consider it no more than a curiosity.”

“It is much more than that,” replied Crystabal. “See, here; when these two stones are depressed, the top section opens, like the lid of a jewelry box. But what is inside, I wonder?”

Crystabal held the magic box up to eye level, oblivious to the weirdling, who now watched him from the corners of its eyes. He looked into the opening, and was suddenly drawn into the silver box by an irresistible force.

Crystabal hurtled through an endless black void, spinning head over heels. Something reached out and caught him in mid-flight. A massive, clawed hand closed about him, and Crystabal found himself staring into the face of a horned demonoid, ten times the size of a normal man, wearing a necklace of skulls.

From somewhere beyond the void Crystabal heard the sound of cackling laughter. He looked upwards and saw a sight that caused him to question his sanity: a vast rectangular aperture, through which he beheld the face of the weirdling, now magnified to immense proportions. The perspectives were such that it took him a moment to realize the full extent of his misfortune. For the weirdling had slipped free of its bonds, and Crystabal was now the captive, held prisoner inside the magic box.

The weirdling pressed a bilious eye to the opening and peered inside. Its mocking laughter echoed throughout the void.

“So, ‘little thief’, the tables are turned!” gloated the weirdling. “You have fallen into my trap, as have so many others before you. Now I bid you

farewell! It has been a long time since the demon of the chest has eaten, and he appears eager to begin the feast!”

Crystabal tried to squirm free, but found it impossible to extricate himself from the grasp of the horned monstrosity, in whose hand he was like a small doll. The horrible entity lifted him upwards towards its immense maw, from which trailed long strands of rank and viscous fluid.

The rogue magician cried out in terror, cursing Grimal the executioner, Ule, the weirdling, Miriad the magician, and a dozen others. Then, in a sudden flash of cognizance, he recalled that he had not yet taken any of the treasure, and so still had a wish. As the demon’s jaws closed about his head, he shut his eyes and concentrated on a single thought.

Crystabal opened his eyes: once again, he was back in the weirdling’s lair. In his hand was the magic box, from which issued a pitiful, high-pitched moan. His wish had come true — he and the weirdling had changed places, and now it was the spiteful little creature upon whom the demon of the chest would feast.

Crystabal shook his fist in triumph. Without further ado, he shut the lid of the box and set it carefully on the table. Then he turned his attention to the weirdling’s treasure hoard.

To his dismay, he found nothing but cheap costume jewelry and bits of useless paraphernalia. The coins were tin and copper, not silver and gold, as they had appeared. Crystabal instigated a thorough search of the premises: overturning pots and boxes, tearing down curtains, looking under rugs, and checking the walls and floor for secret compartments. Nowhere could he find anything of value. The weirdling’s ‘treasure’ was nothing more than a pile of worthless junk.

Crystabal shook his head. The magic box at least would fetch a fair price, if only as a curiosity. Checking to make sure that the lid was secure, he placed the box in his pouch. Then he retrieved the rest of his belongings and headed for the exit, pausing briefly to take a candle from a niche in the wall in order to light his way.

No sooner had he removed the candle from its resting place than a rumbling and scraping sound was heard, as of stone rubbing against stone. Crystabal glanced over his shoulder: a section of the wall opened wide to reveal a second chamber, previously hidden from view. A gust of cold,

dank air wafted forth from within, smelling of ancient must and mold. Intrigued, Crystabal entered, holding the tallow aloft.

Walls of polished stone, hung with curtains of dust, encompassed him on all sides. Cobwebs covered the ceiling, swaying in the cool air like shreds of gossamer. Just beyond the tenuous veils was a chamber appointed in the manner of an archaic sitting room or study, furnished according to the extravagant tastes and fashions of a bygone era.

Crystabal thoughtfully stroked his goatee. Judging by the deep layer of dust on the floor and the webs that hung from the ceiling, the chamber looked as if it had not been disturbed in centuries. Was it possible that the weirdling was unaware of the presence of this place, which resided so close to its lair? Or was there some other reason why the creature had left this place undisturbed?

Crystabal brushed aside the cobwebs and looked around the chamber. In one corner of the room stood a tall dressing mirror on an ornate stand, and behind it, a wine rack containing several dozen bottles encrusted with oxides. In the other were three chests: one containing coins, one with jewels, and the other with scrolls and magical paraphernalia.

In the middle of the chamber stood a circular table decorated with rich inlay. About it were positioned seven chairs upholstered in plush velvet, the material now faded and eaten by worms. A crystal decanter filled with amber liquid and seven golden goblets were arranged about the table, on which stood a golden candelabrum fashioned in the shape of a seven-headed dragon.

Seated at the far end of the table, facing towards Crystabal, was a desiccated corpse attired in rotting finery. The body had been arranged in a comfortable and casual pose as if the deceased were awaiting the arrival of guests. The fingers of one hand were wrapped about the stem of a goblet, and the other hand was upraised in a gesture of greeting. The face, taut and yellow with age, was twisted into a sardonic grin. The eyes were gone, replaced by some long-forgotten embalmer with orbs of dull green glass.

Crystabal studied the scene with growing interest. This was no common cave or hole in the ground but an ancient burial chamber built to eccentric tastes. He wondered: during what bygone era had this strange crypt been

constructed? Did the weirdling avoid this place through superstition, or was the creature merely unaware of its existence?

Crystabal shrugged; these were mysteries beyond his comprehension. The acquisition of treasure and other valuables, on the other hand, was well within his area of expertise.

The rogue magician took the candle and lit the many-stemmed candelabrum, causing the room to be filled with a warm glow. From long habit, he took a moment to look into the dressing mirror in order to admire his appearance and make such adjustments to his costume as might be necessary. Oddly, the glass showed no reflection of any sort. He went to wipe the surface of the mirror clean. Instead of contacting the glass, his hand passed through the surface of the mirror as if it weren't there.

Crystabal withdrew his hand with alacrity. Here was magic of the first order — an enchanted portal of the type commonly employed by the magicians of old. Pairs of enchanted mirrors like these were once used to travel instantaneously from one locale to another, one mirror serving as entrance and the other as exit. Where this particular portal led, he could not guess, nor did he particularly want to know. For the moment, there were more pressing matters to attend to.

With the practiced eye of a born thief, Crystabal instituted a thorough examination of the contents of the crypt. Here was a treasure worthy of the name: antique gold and silver coins, easily worth ten or twenty times their face value; rubies, emeralds, and sapphires of superior cut and clarity; magical tomes indited with ancient spells and arcane cyphers, talismans and amulets quivering with magical force, and artifacts that were beyond his ability to comprehend.

Crystabal filled a sack with a selection of the most cogent magical writings and paraphernalia, plus a quantity of the most precious gems and coins. No more than this could he carry on his person, though even this was but a small portion of the sum total of treasure contained within the crypt.

His efforts completed, Crystabal brushed the dust off of one of the chairs and took a seat at the table. At long last, his efforts had been rewarded. No longer would he be forced to toil for a living. Rather, he could now retire from the thieving business and move to the crystal city of Cymril. Here, he would live the life of a wealthy aristocrat, surrounded by those things

that pleased him most: a wardrobe of the most costly apparel, the finest food and drink, sumptuous furnishings, and of course, beautiful women.

He could detect but a single flaw in his plans, that being his agreement with Miriad. An individual of his newly attained wealth and status should not be forced to traipse about the countryside at the whims of a miscreant magician, regardless of the circumstances. Now that he was rich, perhaps he could convince Miriad to drop the matter altogether by the offer of a generous bribe. Better yet, if he applied himself to a rigorous study of the arcane tomes currently in his possession, he might well attain a degree of magical knowledge and power exceeding that of Miriad himself. To reverse the positions of ‘servant’ and ‘master’ would be the supreme irony, and would provide a fitting conclusion to their present relationship.

Crystabal happily contemplated the beginnings of a new life — a future made possible through the auspices of an unknown cadaver, who’d had the foresight to arrange that he be interred with all his worldly goods, which Crystabal now planned to take into his possession. He looked across the table at the withered corpse who sat before him; on a whim, Crystabal cleaned the dust from his goblet and that of the deceased and filled both from the contents of the crystal decanter. Then he held his cup aloft and offered a salute:

“To my anonymous benefactor, whoever you may be!”  
said Crystabal, raising the goblet to his lips.

“And to you,” said the corpse in a voice like the rustling of dead leaves.

Crystabal’s eyes bulged in their sockets. He leapt from his seat in stark terror, upsetting chairs, decanter, and goblets. In his haste to get away from the lich he stumbled and fell headlong into the dressing mirror. Passing through the surface of the enchanted portal, the rogue magician disappeared from the chamber, leaving the corpse still seated in its chair, grinning its frozen grin.



## CHAPTER 21

**A WHORL OF** surrealistic images swam before Crystabal's eyes as he was drawn into the enchanted mirror and propelled outwards across unknown vistas of space and time. For a split second, he felt as though he were falling in several directions at once, impelled by powerful magical forces. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, he was thrust out of the dimensional nexus with a brilliant flash of light.

Dazed and disoriented, Crystabal struggled to his feet, brushing sand and dust from his hair and garments. It took him a moment to realize that he was no longer within the dark confines of the underground crypt. Instead, he now found himself in the midst of a vast desert of pale yellow sand that extended for miles in all directions.

Crystabal shielded his eyes from the harsh glare. Scattered about him were the remains of what appeared to have once been a merchant caravan. The bleached bones of two-legged lopers commingled with tattered piles of baggage, empty water skins, iron utensils, and bolts of torn and faded cloth. In and among the wreckage were the skeletal remains of a band of Orgovian traders. Their clothes were in tatters, and their bodies twisted into strange positions, the empty eye sockets of their bleached white skulls staring vacantly upwards into the twin Talislantan suns.

At Crystabal's feet, partially buried in the sand, was a mirror much like the one that he had fallen through in the crypt. By all indications, this was the second of a pair of enchanted portals. The first resided within the crypt, lost and forgotten for many centuries. The second had apparently been found or otherwise acquired by the Orgovian traders, whose mortal remains were now strewn across the yellow sands.

By way of a test, he laid a hand upon the surface of the glass. Unlike the first mirror, the surface of the glass was hard and unyielding to the touch. Apparently, the mirror functioned only as a one-way portal through which he could not return.

Crystabal groaned, the full extent of his misfortune now becoming apparent. The treasure he had found in the crypt was lost, and with it, his dreams of wealth and power. Once again, he was stranded — this time, in the harsh and forbidding environs of some unknown desert.

Crystabal glanced again at the skeletons of the Orgovians and shuddered. Lacking sufficient water and provisions, it occurred to him that he might well end up in the same condition as these poor unfortunates. Certain only that he could not remain where he was, the rogue magician headed off to the east in the hope of finding some sign of civilization.

The twin suns beat down from above as Crystabal proceeded onwards across the parched terrain. The topaz desert stretched across the landscape to the limits of vision, the rippling pattern of dunes emanating outwards like waves frozen in time. A hot wind blew from the south, kicking up swirling sheets of sand that stung the rogue magician's skin, invading his mouth, eyes, and nostrils. Wrapping his cloak tightly about him, he continued on, beset by heat and thirst.

Far ahead, Crystabal perceived what appeared to be the outlines of a walled settlement. A city standing alone in the barren desert? Or some sort of cruel hallucination brought on by the heat?

Crystabal rubbed the sand from his eyes. The city stood as before: no mirage but a tangible thing of solid stone, the outer walls a brilliant white under the light of the twin suns. With renewed vigor, the rogue magician pressed onward across the sweltering desert in the direction of the shining city.

A hundred yards from his goal, Crystabal's spirits sank. The walls of the city, tall and stately though they had appeared when viewed from afar, could now be seen to be cracked and pitted with age. One of the gates leading into the city hung crookedly on its hinges. The other lay in the dust, covered over with sand.

Crystabal passed through the ruined entranceway to stand amidst the ruins of a hundred ancient structures: toppled stone columns, broken paving stones protruding from ruined causeways, and piles of debris. At the end of a wide boulevard, a set of crumbling marble stairs led upwards into empty space. Beyond, the remnants of a grotesque stone idol sat overlooking an empty fountain. A mournful silence permeated the entire area, punctuated only by the faint stirrings of the desert wind.

With a heavy heart, Crystabal turned to leave. Only then did he notice that he was being watched by a pair of horned devilmen, one male and the other female. The two were perched atop a ruined archway, following the rogue magician's movements with eyes like flints. Their gangly forms were preternaturally thin, and appeared to consist of little more than skin, bone, and cartilage. Their wings were flaps of grey hide stretched over a framework of tough gristle, folded flat against their backs. Except for their loincloths and a few bits of iron jewelry, the two were naked.

Crystabal eyed the creatures with suspicion, aware that members of this species were prone to strange and dark moods. On the other hand, he required knowledge, and these two were the only sentient creatures that he had encountered since arriving in this barren wasteland.

"Good day to you both," said Crystabal. "Could either of you tell me what place this is?"

The male devilman called down from above in a guttural voice: "These are the ruins of Kasraan. Why do you ask?"

"Simple curiosity," answered Crystabal cautiously. "Do you call this place home?"

"We dwell in the mountains, not far from here," replied the she-devil. "These ruins radiate a mournful ambiance that we find soothing, and so we come here from time to time in order to meditate on ages past."

“And also to eat,” said the male, displaying a crooked grin. The remark elicited a sharp poke in the ribs from his mate, at which the devilman grimaced and fell silent.

Crystabal pretended not to notice the exchange. “You seem familiar with the surrounding environs. Is Kasraan the only city in this region?”

“The desertlands hold many ruins,” said the she-devil. “As to inhabited places, Danuvia is the only city in the region.”

“I see,” remarked Crystabal. From the she-devil’s remarks, he arrived at the conclusion that he had been transported to some part of the Wilderlands of Zaran, a region that lay to the east of Cymril, in the general direction of his goal. While this in itself was somewhat reassuring, he still found himself stranded in a desolate land with no form of transportation.

“How far is Danuvia from here?” inquired the rogue magician.

The devilman extended a taloned finger and pointed to the north. “The journey is four days by foot or one by air. As I see that you have no wings, it would be wise for you to base your plans according to the former estimate.”

Crystabal tugged thoughtfully at the ends of his mustaches. Lacking water and provisions, there was no way that he could survive a journey of four days through the desert. Clearly, he would have to contrive some swifter means of returning to civilization or perish.

“I have a proposition for you both,” said Crystabal. “If you will agree to convey me to Danuvia, I will pay you for your trouble in gold.”

The horned creatures shook their heads. “I am afraid we must refuse your request,” replied the she-devil.

“And why is that?” asked Crystabal.

“The former inhabitants of Kasraan hoarded gold like misers, but what good did it do them?” noted the she-devil. “They are long dead, while their wealth still remains, buried beneath the sands.”

The devilman interjected. “Conversely, food is scarce in this region, where the occasional appearance of a sand scorpion must often suffice to serve our dietary requirements. A creature such as yourself, on the other hand, would be deemed a virtual banquet.”

The she-devil spoke again. “To put it in blunt terms, you are worth far more to us dead than alive.”

Crystabal frowned. "I find your attitude appalling. As such, I take my leave of you now, but not before adding this warning: I am a magician skilled in the arcane arts. Do not seek to harass or discommode me in any way, or I will be forced to retaliate in kind."

The devilmen adopted a nonchalant attitude. "Why should we bother to expend the effort? You will die of thirst or hunger soon enough, and then we shall eat."

Crystabal made no further comment but left the ruined city without delay. Once through the gates of Kasraan, he turned north and started trodding across the burning sands. Several hundred yards from the ruined city he cast a surreptitious glance back over his shoulder and saw the two devilmen following at a distance, patiently awaiting his demise. Summoning his resolve, Crystabal forged ahead.

The twin suns burned down upon him from above, searing his skin and eyes. The blazing sands scorched the soles of his boots. Sweat poured down his brow and neck, soaking his once-fine garments. Still, Crystabal continued onwards, in the direction of Danuvia. Every so often, he looked back to see if he was still being pursued. Each time, he saw the two devilmen following at a leisurely pace.

By late afternoon, the rogue magician began to falter. His throat was parched, his eyes burned, and his legs felt unsteady beneath him. At last, with the twin suns slipping low into the western sky, he sank to the ground, unable to go any further. Crystabal's eyes closed; to remain right where he was seemed as good a plan as any.

The horned devilmen approached, sensing that their time had drawn near.

"Ho there, manling!" cried the she-devil from several yards away. "You are not looking well. How do you feel?"

No response was heard from Crystabal.

"It is my sad duty to inform you that we lied," called the other in mocking tones. "Danuvia lies in the opposite direction!"

Once again, there was no response.

The two devilmen conferred quietly amongst each other.

"He is dead," said the male. "Let us eat."

The she-devil raised a bony hand, waving her companion off. She leaned forward, testing the air with a long, forked tongue.

“The smell of magic is on this one,” she said. “Stand back while I investigate.”

The she-devil took a cautious step forward and prodded the rogue magician with a long finger.

Crystabal’s eyes opened. He raised a hand and mumbled a few words in a dry, rasping voice. A bolt of arcane force flew from his fingers to strike the she-devil square in the head, knocking her backward into the dust.

The two creatures scrambled back, out of range of Crystabal’s magics. The she-devil clutched her jaw in pain and motioned to her companion.

“This one is still dangerous. Let us kill him at a distance, with stones. Then we shall divide the spoils between us.”

The other nodded, and the two bent to pick up jagged chunks of rock from the sandy soil. Crystabal watched through half-closed eyes, too weak even to move. The devilmen reared back to hurl their stones. At the same moment, something whirred past Crystabal’s head, and the two winged creatures fell to the ground, transfixed by a half dozen spears.

As if in a dream, Crystabal saw a group of the shadowy figures headed towards him. Then, his vision grew dim, and he slipped into unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER 22

**THE WITCHMAN, XAN**, crouched before the entrance of a cave and looked within. From the signs, it was apparent that the rogue magician had spent the night here, huddled on the floor. Xan noted the tiny tracks of the caravan bugs, entering and exiting in single file. Of greater interest to the witchman was the fact that the thief's footprints led into the cave but did not lead out again.

Xan unslung the blowgun to his back. From a pouch he retrieved a feather-tipped dart, the sharpened end of which was coated with a resinous black venom. Placing the dart into the blowgun, he crept into the cave on all fours.

The rogue magician's tracks led across the cave into a narrow tunnel. Xan followed, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. Now he discerned a second set of footprints — smaller than the thief's, clawed, and unshod. The tracks entered and exited the cave from the opposite direction, indicating the presence of another cave or tunnel further back.

A sudden motion attracted the witchman's attention. Xan turned and expelled a dart from the blowgun. A cave viper fell from a ledge, the dart's paralytic venom taking effect at once. Xan left the viper where it lay, reloaded the blowgun, and continued along the tunnel.

Ahead was a hidden door through which the clawed creature had passed, followed by the rogue magician. Xan crept through the opening and continued along the passage, at the far end of which could be seen a flickering glow. He entered into a second cave, larger than the first, and littered with trinkets and odd furnishings. Set into niches carved into the cave walls were hundreds of candles. Most had guttered and gone out some time ago, though a few still continued to burn, casting a feeble light throughout the cave. On the far wall was another door, from which emanated a waft of cold, dank air.

Xan studied the markings on the floor. From these, he saw that there had been a struggle — the rogue magician had chased the creature around the room until, at last, he had succeeded in cornering it. This much was apparent. Yet Xan could not comprehend the reason for the rogue magician's actions or why the creature's tracks seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

Blowgun in hand, the witchman followed the rogue magician's tracks through the secret door. Inside, he found the elaborately furnished crypt, along with its mummified inhabitant. As before, the corpse still sat at the table, displaying a sardonic grin. In its hand was the goblet placed there by Crystabal.

Xan stood at the opposite end of the table from the corpse.

"Ancient one, hear my words," said the witchman.

"I hear," responded the corpse through cracked lips.

"I am tracking a thief. He came here but is gone."

The corpse emitted a rasping laugh. "I fear that he was in a hurry to depart. He left behind his sack, filled with the items he planned to steal from me."

The corpse stared at Xan through false eyes of green glass. "And what of yourself? Do you intend to rob me of my treasure?"

Xan shook his head. "It is unwise to steal from the dead."

"What is it, then, that you desire?"

"Tell me where the thief went, and you may return to your rest."

The corpse extended a brittle yellow finger toward the enchanted mirror. "The one you seek passed through the glass, and beyond."

Xan approached the archaic device to study it at close range. He ran a hand over the surface of the glass, sensing its powerful magical aura.

“Where does the portal lead to?” asked the witchman.

“That is for you to learn,” answered the corpse cryptically.

Xan slung the blowgun over his shoulder. Then, without a backward glance at the grinning corpse, he stepped through the surface of the mirror and disappeared.



## CHAPTER 23

**CRYSTABAL AWAKENED TO** find himself amid unfamiliar surroundings, in a spacious suite decorated in brightly colored silks and mosaics, with beaded curtains hanging in the doorways. A brace of copper lanterns cast a lambent glow throughout the chamber, which was heavy with the scent of incense and moonblossoms.

He lay on a cushioned settee, his head propped up on soft pillows. In place of his dusty garments, he was now attired in robes of rich blue silk cloth. He looked to his left. On a table beside the couch were his possessions arranged in a neat pile. Nearby were the clothes he had originally worn, now cleaned, brushed, and mended so as to appear as good as new.

Crystabal sat up, his thoughts centered upon the implications of these recent developments. Most encouraging, from his point of view, was the fact that he was still alive. The rest, however, was beyond his conjecture.

The curtains to his left suddenly parted, and a trio of sallow-skinned men dressed in multi-colored kaftans entered the room. The first was bow-legged and rangy of build, with a receding hairline. The second was short, with a protruding pot belly and double chin. The third, slope-shouldered, exhibited the nervous mannerisms of a bird.

“Ah, you are awake at last!” remarked the scrawny fellow. “Are you feeling well enough to get up?”

Crystabal rubbed the back of his neck and stretched his limbs, checking to see if all were in working order. "I believe so. But perhaps you would explain to me where exactly I am and how I got here?"

The pot-bellied man gestured with arms spread wide. "This is the citystate of Danuvia. You were carried here by one of our Wilderlands patrols, who rescued you from the clutches of a pair of horned devilmen. A representative of the Danuvian Gynocracy reviewed your case and arranged that you should be nursed back to health in time for the upcoming festival."

"The devilmen, I recall quite vividly," said Crystabal. "The rest is somewhat vague. For instance, what precisely comprises a Gynocracy, and what is the nature of this festival of which you speak?"

"First things first," answered the bow-legged fellow. "Unlike the more common patriarchal societies of the Western Lands, Danuvia is a matriarchal society governed by the female population. Here, women do all the work, while males are pampered and treated as objects of adoration."

"That is an enlightened view," remarked Crystabal approvingly.

"So we believe as well," replied the pot-bellied one. "As to your second question: the conjugal feast is a traditional event held each year in honor of the city state's male population. As a visitor to Danuvia, you have been tendered an honorary invitation to the royal banquet and pageant, which is the high point of the festival. If you have no previous commitments, you are welcome to join the three of us, who have likewise been honored with invitations."

Crystabal spent a moment in cogitation. First among his concerns was the promise he had made to Miriad, which he could not renege upon without invoking distressful consequences. On the other hand, he had hardly eaten or drunk anything in over a day, and the idea of a banquet sounded appealing.

"My schedule is open," answered the rogue magician, favorably impressed by the degree of hospitality evinced by the local inhabitants.

"Excellent!" exclaimed the high-strung fellow. "Let us not delay, then, for the ceremonies commence in just a few hours, and there are preparations to be made."

The others nodded in agreement and led Crystabal from the chamber and down a long corridor of polished marble. Along the way, the

threesome introduced themselves. The bandy-legged male identified himself as Mord, the overweight one, Bandil, and the last, Kaal. Crystabal reciprocated in kind but fended off inquiries into the specifics of his background, mentioning only that he was a traveler from the Western Lands. The three seemed content not to pry, and so the subject passed without further remark.

At the end of the hall, the group walked through a set of louver doors and entered what appeared to be a large dressing room. Padded chairs and full-length mirrors were positioned about the chamber, along with racks of rich-looking apparel. Crystabal was favorably impressed by the selection and said as much to his three guides, who bowed in acknowledgment of the compliment.

At the center of the room stood an elderly male attendant wearing a yellow barber's smock. As the four entered, the old man bowed and directed each to take a seat before one of the dressing mirrors.

"Appearance is an important consideration with regard to the festival's participants," said Mord. "To make the best impression, one must dress smartly and show a certain attention to such niceties as cleanliness and personal grooming."

"That has long been my credo," said Crystabal earnestly. "Too often, style is overlooked in favor of the lesser virtues."

The three nodded in approval. Bandil spoke to Crystabal from the other side of the room.

"Crystabal is fortunate in that he is slender and trim and so can wear the most fashionable types of garments. As for myself, I have this extraordinary stomach to contend with and must rely on the seamster's talents in order to appear at my best."

"Bandil is overly modest, as any who recall the blue chemise creation that he wore last year will no doubt attest," remarked Mord with a sly wink.

Kaal donned a cloak of four striking colors handed to him by the attendant and studied his reflection in the mirror. "True, Crystabal will surely cut a dashing figure at the banquet. But what of his presentation? He must still address the royal assemblage, like the rest of us."

"Kael's comments are provocative," said Crystabal. "What is this 'presentation' of which he speaks?"

“It is no great matter,” assured Mord. “It is the custom of the males to introduce themselves to the Queen and her coterie prior to taking a seat at the banquet. Those who wish to do so may embellish this perfunctory ritual with a short performance of their choice — a bit of verse or a song. Practically anything will do, as long as it is entertaining.”

Bandil wagged a chubby finger, admonishing his bow-legged companion. “Mord understates the importance of this aspect of the ceremony. A good presentation is as crucial as one’s personal appearance, indicating as it does a certain depth of character and refinement of taste.”

Mord made a flippant gesture. “Perhaps so. At any rate, I can ill afford to waste time arguing over such minor details. My hair is acting most uncooperatively, and I shall be forced to wear a cap unless the faithful Ohb can remedy the situation with his shears. Crystabal, you could do with a bit of a trim yourself, unless I am mistaken. Long hair is a fad whose day has come and gone, I am afraid to say. As to the presentation, I am sure you will think of something when the time comes.”

Two hours later, the four emerged from the dressing room, their preparations finally completed. Bandil was resplendent in a robe of red ruffles and feathers, which artfully disguised his extensive paunch. Mord, his troublesome coiffure confined by a blue peruke, looked dapper in a flowing white domino trimmed in gold brocade. Kaal wore his elegant four-colored cloak with matching accessories.

Eschewing certain of the more extravagant flourishes evinced by his fellows, Crystabal sported a cape and suit of royal blue satin — an outfit that all considered both bold and dashing, though Mord still contended that something could have been done about the length of Crystabal’s hair.

The site of the festival was the royal reception hall, a great amphitheater decked out in colorful pennants and banners, with a raised gallery situated at the far end. Facing the gallery was a long banquet table piled high with delicacies, delectables, and crystal flasks of the finest wines and liquors.

The hall was filled almost to capacity, with seating designated by gender. The lower levels were allocated to the sallow-faced Danuvian males, who gathered together in small groups to gossip or chat among themselves. The upper tiers were occupied by the Danuvian females, women of imposing size and mien, with skin like burnished bronze and jet-black hair brushed

straight up in a stiff crest extending from the peak of the scalp to the back of the neck. Most impressive of all were the members of the Danuvian Gynocracy, a stalwart group attired in iron corselets and bracers, who were accorded positions of honor in the gallery.

Crystabal, noting the considerable discrepancy in stature evident between the Danuvian females and their smaller male counterparts, leaned close to Mord and whispered in his ear.

“Are all the Danuvian females so robust?”

“Indeed,” said Mord, with more than a trace of pride. “The Queen is a particular beauty, as you can see.”

Mord nodded his head in the direction of the gallery. There, seated on her throne, was the Queen of Danuvia — a broad-shouldered figure dressed in ceremonial armor with a stern visage and powerful physique.

“Most impressive,” remarked Crystabal, though in truth, he found the Danuvian women to be somewhat large and muscular for his tastes.

A cadre of female sentinels met them at the entrance to the amphitheater and escorted Crystabal and his companions to their seats at the banquet table. Here, they were joined by a half dozen males of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds. There was a pair of sullen-faced Virids in desert attire, a Yrmanian Wildman in dreadlocks and braided beard, a jade-skinned Dracartan thaumaturge, and a tattooed and imposingly built Thrall mercenary from the Seven Kingdoms.

At the sight of the other males, the three Danuvians turned up their noses and muttered to each other beneath their breath.

“Note the soiled garments of the two Virids,” hissed Mord with disdain.

“Disgraceful!” agreed Kaal. “And what of the Yrmanian? Must we be forced to sit at the banquet table with sub-men?”

Bandil made a sour face. “The Thrall is nothing less than an exhibitionist! Observe the shameless way in which he flaunts his oversized muscles!”

Crystabal nodded absently, his attention directed toward the sumptuous fare that had been laid out for the banquet. He was about to ask when dinner would be served when a loud fanfare was sounded by the members of the royal orchestra.

All present took notice and settled at once in their proper places. There was a short pause, during which a respectful silence descended upon the

hall. Then the Queen made an officious gesture, signaling the start of the festivities.

Crystabal reached hungrily for a heaping plate of steamed land urchin, only to be elbowed by Mord, who gave him a look of stern disapproval.

“You are forgetting the introductory ceremonies, which precede the banquet,” he whispered sharply. “Even now, Kaal prepares to make his presentation. Listen closely, for it will soon be your turn.”

Crystabal reluctantly complied, eyeing the trays of delicacies with undisguised longing. Kaal rose from his seat and executed a grandiose flourish, his four-colored cloak sweeping the floor.

“Your Highness and members of the Gynocracy, it is with great joy that I, the noble Kaal, now stand before this august assemblage. Considerations of time prohibit me from describing to you the full extent of my virtues. As such, I have elected to present for your edification a pastiche of artful facsimiles, which I hope will meet with your approval.”

With that, Kaal proceeded to favor the females in the gallery with a series of impressions intended to simulate various rare and unusual animal species. The initial segment of his performance, featuring his rendition of the “plains loper” and “nocturnal ibik,” went largely unappreciated by the crowd. Kael’s “vari-colored warbler” was more favorably received, however, and earned him an enthusiastic ovation. Content to quit on a high note, Kaal bowed and returned to his seat.

The reception accorded Kaal left Mord feeling despondent. “It is a sad commentary on the state of Danuvian culture when a common bird impersonator receives such accolades,” he whispered to Crystabal. “Truly, there is no accounting for the tastes of the multitudes, which tend to gravitate towards the lowest common denominator.”

The next to stand before the gallery was the portly Bandil, whose program consisted of a series of classical odes recited in a quavering contralto. The first was a paeon to the womenfolk of Danuvia, replete with many a flowery turn of phrase.

Mord rolled his eyes and puffed out his cheeks. “Unbelievable!” he hissed. “See how Bandil panders to the Gynocrats! Has he no sense of pride?”

Heedless of Mord’s asides, Bandil proceeded to recite a second selection. The audience listened patiently until the overweight orator embarked

upon a third soliloquy. This elicited a chorus of boos and hisses from the crowd, at which Bandil was convinced to cut short his presentation and return to his seat post haste.

The latter development did much to restore the good spirits of Mord, whose turn it was next. With a jaunty step, he approached the gallery and introduced himself.

“For my selection, I shall perform a medley of archaic folk dances attributed to the Mud People tribes of the Dark Coast region.”

Mord turned to the orchestral ensemble and executed a crisp bow. “Impressario, if you please...”

The band launched into a rousing refrain, with kettle drums, bangles, and tambours pounding in wild syncopation. The funnel horns played a glissando, and the loose-limbed Mord sprang into action, executing a series of uncanny gyrations and gesticulations accompanied by odd grunting noises.

The performance lasted for several minutes, ending with a great crescendo of drums and cymbals. Yet despite Mord’s considerable efforts, his presentation garnered only a lukewarm reception, and he returned, dispirited, to his chair.

Bandil motioned to Crystabal, indicating that his turn was next. Ignoring the rumbling sounds issuing from his empty stomach, the rogue magician stood to address the gallery.

“Your Majesty and females of the royal Gynocracy, I thank you for your invitation to this banquet and for your previous considerations on my behalf. Unhappily, I possess none of the intriguing talents exhibited by those who have preceded me. However, as a magician of some standing in the Western Lands, I have learned a dint or two of legerdemain, a sample of which I shall display without further ado so that we may get on with the meal.”

Crystabal held both hands aloft and uttered a brief incantation. There appeared in the air above his head an illusory panorama: a sylvan setting, resplendent with imaginary flora in numerous hues and forms. In the midst of the scene appeared a tiny creature resembling a translucent imp. With great delicacy, the gremlin devoured the petals of a bright red blossom, upon which it immediately turned a vibrant shade of crimson.

The creature then ate a blue flower and changed from rosy red to a deep cerulean in color.

This same process was repeated several times, each episode producing a corresponding alteration of the imp's hue. Finally, a larger creature, all mouth, and legs, entered the picture. With comic relish, it swallowed the imp: at once, the animated mouth began to change color, passing through all the colors of the rainbow in rapid succession. Finally, it exploded into thousands of multi-colored sparkles, after which the scene faded into nothingness.

On the whole, Crystabal's presentation was well received, and he returned to his place, satisfied at least that he had done nothing to jeopardize his invitation to dinner. Mord now seemed gloomier than ever and would not speak to Crystabal at all.

The remaining six guests each made a presentation of sorts, with mixed results. The Dracartan amazed all in attendance by turning a quantity of air from gaseous to solid form and thence to a liquid. The effect was somewhat diminished, however, when he was accidentally drenched during the latter transmutation. The Wildman stamped his feet and made frightening faces, garnering more than a few startled gasps from the skittish Danuvian males. The least impressive were the two Virds, whose discussion of the various types and grades of desert sand left the crowd unmoved.

The most enthusiastic response by far was accorded to the Thrall, who earned the admiration of the Gynocracy by twisting two iron bars into a knot. Mord, true to form, impugned each of the others' performances, citing in detail every perceived flaw or excess.

When all of the presentations were finished, the banquet finally commenced. A host of male attendants came forth, attired only in scanty loincloths and sandals, to wait upon Crystabal and the other male guests. With a lavish hand, they served generous plates of roast beast, cheeses, breads, and piquant sauces. Next came dishes of fruits, parfaits, sweet cakes, and jams. And lastly, carafes of rose, purple, and green wines, served with delicacies such as steamed rock urchin and jellied sand eel.

Famished from his travels, Crystabal ate and drank with gusto, though not to such an extent as to appear a glutton. The two Virds exhibited no such qualms and devoured everything placed before them without concern

for cleanliness or etiquette. At the opposite end of the extreme was Kaal, who ate with such studied fastidiousness as to appear ridiculous, like a bird pecking at crumbs.

Throughout the course of the meal, Crystabal noticed that he and the other male guests were being watched by the Queen and her retinue, who paused periodically to gape at one or another of the menfolk and comment to each other in hushed tones. The quality of this attention was to Crystabal's mind somewhat demeaning, as if he and the other males were being appraised like objects at auction. Most astonishing were certain gestures and facial expressions exhibited by the Gynocrats, the implications of which carried unmistakably lewd connotations.

When the last course had been consumed another fanfare was sounded, and the male servants hurried to clear away the empty plates and goblets. A moment later, a herald approached the gallery, bearing a gilded scroll.

Mord nudged Crystabal and cupped a hand to his lips. "This is the culmination of the festival when the three favorites are chosen by the Queen's panel and announced to the crowd," he whispered excitedly. "The tension and anticipation are almost too great to bear!"

Crystabal smiled in agreement, though having already eaten his fill, he was able to muster no great enthusiasm for the moment. He leaned back in his chair, waiting for the event to run its course so that he could find some polite way to excuse himself and continue on his journey.

At last, the members of the royal Gynocracy concluded their discussion. The Queen nodded, and her herald unfurled the gilt scroll and prepared to address the crowd. Mord and his companions held their breath.

"The following are summoned to approach the gallery," said the herald. "First, the Thrall, Axxus; second, Kaal, the impressionist; and third, the magician, Crystabal."

The audience showed its approval by stamping and clapping in unison, males on the downbeat and females on the upbeat. Mord was crestfallen. Kaal, his eyes misting over with tears of joy, was rendered speechless. If the Thrall had any thoughts on the matter, he kept them to himself.

Crystabal also lacked words with which to express his feelings, though this was due as much to the confusion of the moment as anything else. The Queen presented the honorees with gold ribbons and certificates of

commendation, and the crowd showered them with handfuls of petals. Then, with much pomp and ceremony, a contingent of female guards whisked the three finalists from the hall and escorted each to his own private suite.

Crystabal sat on a couch, sipping emerald wine from a crystal goblet as he puzzled over the most recent developments. The suite that had been provided for his enjoyment lacked nothing in the way of comfort or amenities. Still, he could not help but wonder why the only door to the chamber had been locked from the outside or why a contingent of female sentinels patrolled the outer halls.

From the opposite side of the room came the sound of a latch being undone. A section of the far wall slid open to reveal a female of great size and stature, clad only in a veiled gown of gauzy material. The woman seemed vaguely familiar to Crystabal, though her veil prevented him from making any positive identification.

Closing the section of wall behind her, the woman entered the chamber and proceeded to extinguish all the lamps in the room save the one nearest the couch. Then she sat next to the rogue magician and gazed at him with unmistakable ardor.

Crystabal drew back, startled by the suddenness of the female's approach, as well as her imposing bulk. He cleared his throat, searching for some means to phrase a possibly indelicate question.

The woman, anticipating something of his intentions, moved closer and held a finger to his lips.

"There is no need to be alarmed," she said, her voice a husky whisper. "Most men in your situation are nervous at first, and why not?" The position of Royal Gigolo is a demanding one, though not without its rewards."

Then, throwing back her veil, the Queen of Danuvia leaned close and blew out the light.

## CHAPTER 24

**CRYSTABAL SPENT THE** next day and a half occupied with his connubial duties, a situation that he found more demanding than he could ever have anticipated. The Queen's nocturnal and diurnal visitations occurred as often as every two or three hours, and were of long duration. By the fourth visit Crystabal had begun to tire; by the eighth, he was on the verge of exhaustion. Soon he came to dread the appearance of the Queen in his chamber and took to hiding from her. The amorous Danuvian, further aroused by this behavior, pursued him all the more energetically.

After a particularly grueling morning, Crystabal dragged his weary body to the couch and fell at once into a deep sleep, only to be awakened a short time later by the sound of a voice whispering in his ear. Fearing yet another visitation from the Queen, the rogue magician leapt up from the couch and retreated to a far corner of the room. Yet when he looked about, he found that he was alone.

A voice spoke to him from nearby: "Crystabal! Over here, by the couch."

Crystabal approached warily. Among the pile of cushions arranged on the divan was one that wore the face of the magician, Miriad.

"Why do you linger here, engaged in romantic dalliances, when there is work to be done?" asked Miriad's plush image. "Have you so soon

forgotten our agreement? Perhaps you need to be reminded of what shall transpire should you fail to carry out your part of the bargain.”

Crystabal looked sideways at the talking pillow. “There is no need for histrionics. I have not forgotten the terms of our deal, nor would I remain here, were I free to leave. The door to the chamber in which I currently reside is locked from the outside, and the royal guards patrol the halls in force.”

Miriad’s image spoke in no uncertain terms. “Then you must take measures to rectify the situation, and at once!”

“That is easier said than done,” answered Crystabal with a sigh. “The Queen is a formidable personage in more ways than one. She is as strong as an ogriphant, and is resistant to magical influence, a condition that I attribute to overactive hormones.”

“No matter,” said Miriad. “You must escape from this indenture and continue on your mission! Otherwise, I shall be forced to invoke a certain clause in our agreement, the implications of which I am sure you are well aware. Now, carry on, with unflagging determination!”

With that, the image of Miriad disappeared, and the cushion reverted to its former semblance.

Later that day, as Crystabal sat moping in his chambers, he was visited by Ohb the palace barber. In the course of attending to his tonsorial duties, the kindly old gentleman apprehended the dolorous look on the rogue magician’s features, and expressed his concern.

“Crystabal, you seem glum today. Whatever is the matter?”

Crystabal cast a furtive glance about the room. “May I confide in you in secrecy, as one man to another?”

“Absolutely,” answered Ohb, as he trimmed the edges of the rogue magician’s mustache.

Crystabal shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Conditions with the Queen have become intolerable. She calls upon me day and night, and constantly makes romantic advances directed at my person. The woman is insatiable!”

The old barber applied comb and brush to the magician’s hair and nodded knowingly. “This is a common complaint among individuals of your profession. I know of what you say, for I was once a Royal Gigolo such as yourself. Of course, that was some time ago. Now I am nearly

forty-three years of age, and can no longer keep up with young men such as yourself.”

Crystabal’s eyes widened. The barber looked to be in his eighties, at least.

“Out of curiosity, how long is a Royal Gigolo expected to serve in this capacity?”

Ohb ran a knobby hand through his thinning hair. “The mandatory period of service is three months. Generally speaking, most Gigolos must be replaced after a month or so, owing to the demanding nature of the position. However, a handful of stalwarts have been known to last as long as eight or even nine weeks.”

“I do not think that the record for longevity is in danger in my case,” said Crystabal wistfully. “In fact, I would like to terminate my employment at the earliest opportunity. What advice can you give me on this point?”

Ohb sighed. “Alas, I can offer you precious little solace on this point. Escape is virtually impossible. The chamber locks are inaccessible, and the sentinels are most efficient in their duties. Only during the Queen’s visitations do they withdraw in order to afford her a measure of privacy while she is engaged with one of her Gigolos.”

Ohb cast a stealthy glance towards the door. “I can tell you this, however; on occasion, I too found the duties of my former position to be overly strenuous. At such times I would resort to administering a soporific powder to the Queen in order to gain a momentary respite for myself. A quantity of this substance can be found in the cabinet behind the bed, in the vial marked ‘narcolesian’. Also, I have heard that the Queen carries the key to the secret door in a locket that she wears around her neck. But remember: I know nothing of this!”

“Your secrets are safe with me,” replied Crystabal. “I thank you, and shall take your advice at the nearest opportunity.”

Ohb swept the clipping from Crystabal’s collar and deposited them in a nearby receptacle. Then the wizened barber tottered from the chamber, leaving Crystabal to formulate his plans.

The Queen arrived later that day, wearing a trailing negligee and an expression of unbridled passion. To her surprise she found Crystabal reclined upon the couch in plain view, holding in his hands two goblets of wine.

“My dear woman,” he said. “At last, you have returned! Come sit beside me, so that we may commence with this afternoon’s romantic escapades!”

The Queen regarded her consort with a puzzled expression. “Crystabal, it is unlike you to act in such a manner. Are you sure that you are well?”

“Never have I felt better! Here, now, do not be such a temptress, but come and join me on the couch!”

The Queen hesitated a second, then rushed forward to smother the rogue magician in an ardent embrace.

“Ah, my sweet love-thing! How I have missed you this day and yearned once more to hold you in my arms!”

“And I you, my darling,” spoke Crystabal, struggling to extricate himself from the women’s clutches. “But first, I have prepared a stimulating refreshment to enhance the mood of the moment.”

The Queen reluctantly loosened her grip and accepted the goblet proffered to her by the rogue magician. Holding the cup in hand, she proposed a toast.

“To our impending adventures! May they meet in all ways our fondest expectations!”

“As you say,” concurred Crystabal. The two drained their goblets. Almost at once, the Queen fell into a deep and languorous sleep.

Crystabal raised himself from the couch and heaved a sigh of relief. With great care he opened the locket that the Queen wore about her neck, finding within it the key mentioned by Ohb. Then he retrieved his possessions from a nearby cabinet, changed into his own garments, and went over to the secret door that the Queen used when entering and exiting the chamber.

Crystabal put the key into a hidden slot in the wall. In response, the sliding section of wall drew back. Then he slipped out of the chamber, closing the door behind him.

Crystabal followed the secret passage along a circuitous route that took him to various levels of the palace. Finally, after much searching, he located a door that opened into a narrow alleyway outside the palace walls. Drawing his cloak about him, he proceeded at once to the outer districts of the city, where merchant caravans and land-arks made preparations to disembark for far destinations.

## CHAPTER 25

**THE MASTER EXECUTIONER**, Grimal, sat at his work table, scrawling with a quill pen on a large sheet of parchment. He applied several strokes to a schematic representing a complex machinatus of rotating spikes and blades, then leaned back to critique the work. The perspectives were all wrong, and several critical elements had been drawn out of scale. Worst of all, the clumsy device lacked those intangible elements of understated drama and pathos for which he had once been justly renowned.

Grimal crumpled the parchment and flung it across the room. Retrieving a bottle of green arrack from a drawer, he removed the cork, raised it to his lips, and took a long, hard swallow. He coughed, then slumped into a chair, his manner glum and morose.

In the days since the failed execution, the onus that hung over his head had grown, while his reputation had diminished in inverse proportion. The other master executioners of Zantium now regarded him as a pariah and no longer invited him to their gatherings. Their assistants passed cruel remarks among themselves as he walked by, and even the lowliest apprentice executioners were seen to snicker at him behind his back.

Consequently, Grimal's work suffered. His performances were lackluster at best, exhibiting little of their former flair. Lacking inspiration, he found himself unable to devise any but the most moribund mechanisms. Though

he tried his best to maintain the attitude and appearance of a Master Executioner, his heart was simply not in it.

Grimal's personal life had likewise taken a turn for the worse. His appetite had dwindled, and he had begun to drink to excess. He couldn't sleep, but spent the long nights pacing back and forth across his bedchamber, muttering to himself. Problems of a more personal nature had caused his wife, Fedulia, to leave him for another executioner, the axeman Dobran.

At the sound of a chime Grimal turned to the seeing stone that rested on his desk. The surface of the crystalline sphere came alight, revealing the image of an individual in a hooded black cowl.

"Grimal, are you present? It is Remar, speaking from Zanth."

Grimal hid the bottle of green arrack under his worktable. "I see and hear. What is the news? Have you apprehended the rogue magician?"

Remar shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Not precisely. However, I have been apprised of his general whereabouts."

"What is meant by this remark?" asked Grimal irritably.

"There have been unexpected complications," said Remar. "My sources inform me that the prisoner is no longer in the city of Zanth. In fact, he is no longer in Zandu."

Grimal pounded the table with his fist. "This is outrageous! How is it possible that your associates allowed a petty criminal to slip through their grasp?"

"Such difficulties occur from time to time, despite the most stringent precautions," answered Remar coolly. "You may recall experiencing a similar frustration not long ago."

Grimal's cheeks burned at the reminder of his own failure. "It was my understanding that you were to assign your best man to this job."

"So I did. Unfortunately, Palitane was forced to attend to more pressing concerns. The Arimite, Jangk, was assigned to the task, but he failed to achieve the desired results."

"Jangk must be disciplined, and at once!" cried Grimal hotly.

"Of that, you need have no concern," said Remar coldly. "Jangk is dead."

Grimal cursed under his breath. "And what of the rogue magician? Where is he now?"

“It is our belief that he departed Zanth via windship. A dockmaster that we interrogated mentioned that an individual matching the rogue magician’s description was spotted boarding a Phantasian vessel. According to him, the ship was bound for Cymril, though to my knowledge no such vessel has arrived as yet in the crystal city.”

Grimal ground his teeth. “The situation is unacceptable! If the felon takes sanctuary in Cymril, he will be beyond our reach! Cymrilian law prohibits capital punishment, and will not allow extradition for such purposes.”

“I am well aware of the difficulties, but there is little that we can do,” said Remar wearily. “Hopefully, your thief-taker will fare better than Jangk.”

Exasperated, Grimal waved a hand over the seeing stone, and the surface went dark. He finished the last of the green arrack and opened another bottle, sensing the weight of the onus upon him.

The situation had gone from bad to worse. Not only was he burdened with the shame of his own failure, but also that of his associates. As if this weren’t sufficient, he now bore the disgrace of Fedulia taking up with a common headsman.

Grimal hung his head, feeling the growing weight of the onus. The guilty party must be made to pay for the insults that had been visited upon him, and dearly! Then and only then would he be free of the shadow of failure that hung over him like a black cloud.



## CHAPTER 26

**THE DESERT INN** was an establishment of no great repute, frequented by nomads, caravan drivers, and wayfarers. Here, the customers sat cross-legged on mats strewn upon the cool earthen floor, and puffed contentedly on long stemmed hookahs, sending clouds of blue and green smoke into the air. Serving boys circulated among the patrons, carrying brass samovars filled with mochan, an invigorating beverage served boiling hot in small brass cups.

Crystabal arrived at the inn just before noon, and took a seat in a far corner. He drank a cup of mochan and puffed on a hookah, contemplating his next course of action. The most expedient means of travel in these regions was by land-ark — massive wheeled conveyances that rode the dunes, impelled by means of sails and wind machines. From the innkeeper he had learned that a land-ark named the Ardan was due to depart Danuvia at the noon hour, headed east beyond the junction of the Wilderlands and Hadjin roads, to the citystate of Hajan.

The time and destination matched Crystabal's current needs. All that was required was for the rogue magician to obtain a sum of money sufficient to pay the fare. The problem, in Crystabal's estimation, could be repaired without great difficulty. Draining his cup, he left the inn and made his way

to a nearby square, where merchants of many stripes displayed their wares to prospective buyers.

Crystabal strolled among the booths and stalls, sizing-up the most likely prospects. Here was a group of Yitek tomb robbers, displaying funerary artifacts from six different ages. There, a band of ebony skinned Danelek traders offered large crystals of pure salt for sale or barter. Further along were open air booths piled high with melons, pomegranates, sacks of millet, dyes, bolts of silk-cloth imported from the Kang Empire, carpets from Faradun, and various wares and sundries.

Having completed his surveillance, the rogue magician stepped into a narrow walkway between two tents. Keeping to the shadows, he applied the spell of concealment upon himself, then sauntered back into the square.

The operation proceeded according to his best expectations. A fat purse departed unnoticed from the belt of a Farad procurer as he haggled over the price of a cask of grog. A wallet lifted from the saddlebags of a Djaffir merchant floated unseen into the rogue magician's pocket, along with a few coins pilfered from careless passers-by.

Uncertain if he had enough to meet his needs, Crystabal decided to make one final acquisition. Spotting an individual attired in the long surcoat and peaked cap of a Rahastran cartomancer, the rogue magician moved into action.

With a dexterous touch attained through long hours of practice, Crystabal reached into the Rahastran's shoulder bag. To his surprise, he felt something grab hold of his hand.

A high pitched voice called out from within the satchel. "Thieves! Scoundrels! RapsCALLIONS! Tareau, be on your guard!"

Before Crystabal could withdraw his hand the cartomancer's fingers closed tightly about his wrist. He tried to pull free, but without success. Holding fast to the invisible thief with one hand, the Rahastran reached into the pocket of his surcoat, brought forth a vial of glittering powder, and dispersed its contents in the general direction of his satchel.

The powdery substance wafted through the air, settling on the rogue magician. At once, the enchantment faded, rendering the would-be thief visible to the naked eye. The cartomancer's features darkened in anger.

“What is the meaning of this unwarranted assault?” inquired the Rahastran.

“That is precisely the question that I was about to ask of you,” replied Crystabal indignantly, casting a meaningful glance at the cartomancer’s hand upon his wrist.

A tiny pocket-gremlin emerged from inside the cartomancer’s satchel, its misshapen countenance twisted into a scowl.

“He is a thief!” cried the diminutive creature. “As you can see, I have caught him red-handed!”

“The charge of thievery is completely without substance,” replied Crystabal. “Look for yourself. Nothing whatsoever is missing from the satchel.”

“Only my vigilant posture prevented the robbery from occurring!” countered the gremlin.

Crystabal scoffed. “Presumption of intent is insufficient proof of guilt. Lacking further evidence, one might as readily assume that this pseudo-imp was intending to commit larceny, and I, attempting to prevent the crime.”

“Bah!” spat the pocket-gremlin. “That is sheer nonsense!”

Crystabal ignored the creature’s remark and turned to face its master.

“Rather than pursue the matter through legal channels, I propose a more amicable solution to this dispute. As such, I suggest that this obstreperous madling be returned to its place of origin, after which I recommend that the two of us repair to the local cafe. Here, it will be my pleasure to make amends for any inconvenience that I may have caused you by purchasing a bottle of amber wine for our mutual enjoyment.”

“The suggestion is not without merit,” replied Tareau, a thoughtful look on his features. “However, I must consult the Zodar first before making any decision.”

The cartomancer reached into his pocket and brought out a silver case containing a deck of triangular cards indited with arcane inscriptions. Shuffling the deck, he drew a pair of cards, which he studied intently for several moments before offering his reply.

“I see that you have had a checkered past. The cards also suggest that on more than one occasion, you may have run afoul of the law.”

“I am innocent of all charges!” responded Crystabal. “All can be explained!”

“There is no need,” interjected Tareau. “I have seen far worse things in these parts. I have decided to accept your invitation. Shall we go?”

The pocket-gremlin let out a vociferous protest, at which the cartomancer was compelled to dissolve the spell that had called the conjured entity into being. This done, Tareau accompanied the rogue magician across the square. The two entered an open-air pavilion where chilled wines were offered for sale and seated themselves on a bench.

Crystabal ordered a bottle of good amber wine, upon which the two exchanged introductions. Tareau identified himself as a traveling mystic and prognosticator of future events. Crystabal stated only that he was a magician bound in the direction of the city-state of Hajan.

“Most intriguing,” noted Tareau. “I, too, am bound for Hajan and was about to book passage on the next land-ark out of Danuvia. Perhaps you would care to travel together?”

“I see no reason to object to this proposal,” replied Crystabal affably.

Grounds for the discussion of mutual interests having been established, a second bottle of amber wine was ordered, this time at Tareau’s expense. When the contents had been emptied, the two travelers departed the pavilion and made straight away for the dry docks, where land-arcs lay at the harbor.

## CHAPTER 27

**THE LAND-ARK, ARDAN**, was a single-masted craft some sixty feet in length, outfitted with three sets of heavy iron-rimmed wheels situated fore, aft, and mid-ship. The ship's forecastle was a stout turret of three levels, with quarters for the navigator, helmsman, first mate, and captain above deck, a railed promenade above, and storage below. The more capacious aftcastle boasted two tiers of cabins above deck and one below.

Mounted behind the mast was a wind machine — a technomantic device resembling a complex network of baffles and tubing, which was used to provide impetus to the ship. An enclosed cupola stood at the top of the mast, from which the ship's lookout could survey the land for obstacles that lay in the ship's path. Suspended on hooks at either side of the prow were two great iron lanterns, which were used to light the way by night.

The hold was divided into scullery, storage, and bilge, with the aft sections reserved for cargo and baggage. In fair weather, meals were served aboard deck, with low wooden benches positioned along the rails so that the passengers could enjoy the view. When the weather turned, the passengers and crew ate in the hold or in their cabins.

Crystabal arrived at the docks along with his new companion, the cartomancer, Tareau. There was a considerable amount of activity in the vicinity, much of it undertaken by crews of Monads — ponderous

humanoids over eight feet in height, with placid features and black-and-white striped skin. One of the hulking creatures passed by Crystabal, toting an immense bale of goods under each arm. Others sauntered by carrying stacks of crates, casks, or wooden chests on their broad backs.

A horn sounded, indicating that the time of departure was near. Without further delay, Crystabal and Tareau purchased tokens from a Dracartan requisitioner. Then they hastened up the ramp and boarded the Ardan.

A Monad porter showed them to their cabin, a cramped enclosure barely large enough to contain a pair of bunks, a wooden stool, and a chamber pot. After stowing their belongings under the beds, the two went on deck to observe the goings-on.

Other passengers had now begun to file on board the Ardan. First in line was a group of Aamanian pilgrims dressed in smocks of starched white linen. They were led by a stern-faced Orthodoxist priest, carrying in his arms an ironbound copy of the cult's sacred scriptures. As was the custom among members of the cult, both the males and females had been shorn of all facial and bodily hair, a practice meant to convey "oneness in mind and spirit."

Close behind the pilgrims was a clan of squat and muscular Yassan technomancers dressed in hooded yellow tunics, heavy gloves, and boots. On their backs, they carried iron-strong boxes that contained the tools of their trade. A troupe of short and portly Bodor musicians followed in their wake, bearing exotic instruments of many types: glass flutes, gossamer harps, spiral horns, tambals, tubular bells, and a large and comically intricate device that Tareau described as a two-man bellows-horn. Standing head and shoulders above the Bodor was an orange-skinned Callidian, over seven feet tall and narrow in build, attired in flowing robes and a tall headdress.

Next came a band of Zandir freetraders dressed in colorful turbans, curl-toed boots, sequined vests, capes, and bright sashes. As they filed on board the Ardan, the ship's steward made certain to direct the group to a set of cabins opposite those of the Aamanians. Enemies since the Cult Wars of the early New Age, the two peoples bore a long standing hatred and resentment for each other that spanned more than five centuries.

Last to arrive was a curtained palanquin borne aloft by four huge Monads, its exterior decorated with sequins and tassels. Crystabal tried to sneak a look between the curtains as the palanquin passed by, but found the view blocked by the Monads' immense girth. The bearers carried their cargo aboard the Ardan and proceeded directly to one of the cabins. The palanquin was lowered to the deck; a curtain was raised, and the occupants entered within, shielded from the eyes of potential onlookers.

Fascinated, Crystabal turned to Tareau and asked: "What is the reason for this elaborate procession?"

"I have seen such things before in the course of my travels," replied the cartomancer. "It is a Hadjin matrimonial train, carrying prospective brides for sale to the wealthy aristocrats of Hajan. Most likely, the females were acquired from Faradun, far to the south."

"Most unusual," noted Crystabal, now almost fully recovered from his trying experience with the Queen of Danuvia. "I wonder, would it be possible make the acquaintance of the palanquin's occupants?"

Tareau laughed. "I doubt it. In such cases it is customary for the brides to be accompanied by a matron, whose presence is intended to insure the virtue of the females."

"As to that, we shall see," said Crystabal, with a mischievous grin.

Their discussion was interrupted by a second blast from the ship's horn. The captain, a wrinkled Kasmiran cloaked in purple robes, came forth from his cabin and gave the order to prepare for departure. The call to duty was answered by a group of Jhangaran crewmen, odd looking folk with distended craniums and striated, brown and sepia skin. Squabbling among themselves, they set to work turning the crank of a great iron winch, causing the gangplank to raise upwards.

Disparate crew and passengers finally aboard, the ship's mooring lines were cast off. The sails were raised, and the wind machines activated. A team of Monad dockworkers pulled out the chocks, freeing the great wooden wheels. Then the land-ark rolled through the ironbound gates of Danuvia and set sail for Hajan.



## CHAPTER 28

**THE LAND-ARK RUMBLED** to the northeast, following a course that ran across the sprawling desert lands. The first leg of the voyage passed uneventfully enough. During the early part of the day, the passengers remained in their cabins, seeking shelter from the oppressive heat. Only when the suns sank low in the sky did they venture forth, to stand or sit on deck, enjoying the cool evening breezes.

Crystabal emerged from his cabin, refreshed after a long nap. Stepping through the doorway he nearly knocked over the ship's steward, Uldvar, who was laboring under the burden of a large copper basin containing a stack of towels, flasks of scented oil, and a bucket of soapy water.

"Have a care," said the steward. "These items are meant for Madame Lagos and her charges."

"Is this the matron in charge of the matrimonial train?" inquired the rogue magician.

"Indeed it is, and she is not one to be trifled with, I can assure you. Now if you will excuse me, I must hasten to deliver these toiletries, lest the Madame fly into another of her tirades."

"Allow me to offer you my assistance," said Crystabal, eager to learn more of the mysterious females, who had remained unseen since boarding the land-ark.

Uldvar was only too happy to comply. The two exchanged introductions, then headed off in the direction of the Madame's cabin. Along the way, Crystabal questioned the steward as to the nature of the land-ark's crew and passengers.

"Our captain is Abul Abas, a Kasmiran trader whose family made their fortune by conveying goods between the Seven Kingdoms and Carantheum," replied Uldvar, wiping the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. "He is a miser who pinches every copper coin as if it were his last, and waits only for the day when he can retire in comfort. The first mate is Bant, and the helmsman is Dobras. Both are Arimites, who tend to keep to themselves."

"The crewmen are mostly Jhangarans, from the swamplands of the southern coasts. They are a crude and foul-mouthed lot, with a penchant for strong drink. Their sole virtue seems to be that they are far cheaper to hire than the average land sailor, which appeals to Captain Abas."

"As to the four Monads, they possess no skills to speak of, but are adept at following simple commands. Accordingly, we use them primarily as cargo handlers. They are mute and communicate only by sign."

"Interesting and informative," commented Crystabal. "What of the passengers?"

Uldvar shook his head wearily. "The rotund little folk are Bodor musicians. It is said that they possess the ability to see sound as a range of colors and converse among themselves in a musical language. They spend most of their time practicing for their next engagement in Hajan. The constant droning of horns and flutes that accompanies their regular practice sessions has set the Captain's nerves on edge, and already there have been complaints from some of the passengers."

"The stocky folk are a family of Yassan technomancers. They are headed for the outpost of Akmir, where they have been hired to help make repairs to the fortress. Supposedly, the outpost suffered extensive damage during a recent attack by sub-men. In the interim, the Captain is paying them to perform certain renovations on the ship, which in any event could use a good going over."

Crystabal nodded politely, inviting further discussion. Uldvar continued.

“The Aamanian acolyte is Droge. He is a zealot who abstains from all pleasures of the flesh and displays a stern and humorless demeanor. He and his followers are on a pilgrimage to the Well of Saints, which lies many leagues east of Hajan, beyond the Volcanic Hills. Twice already, the Captain has had to warn him against preaching to the other passengers and crew, whom Droge seeks to convert to the tenets of his faith.”

“The Zandir are a mixed bag of gem dealers and rug merchants who travel to Hajan in the hope of selling their wares to the wealthy Hadjin aristocracy. A scheduling conflict forced Captain Abas to book them on the same route as the Aamanians – a grievous oversight, as the two peoples have despised each other for centuries and are constantly squabbling among themselves.”

“The tall thin fellow is Calix, a Callidian cryptomancer and a scholar of arcane relics and antiquities. He is headed back east to the library at Jalaad, having spent a semester at the Lyceum Arcanum in Cymril of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“They are certainly a diverse lot,” remarked Crystabal. “But you have not yet told me about Madame Lagos and her charges.”

Uldvar groaned. “Madame Lagos is a dour and imposing matron whose strident voice can be heard from all ends of the ship. She constantly complains about the food, the accommodations, and the service, as if I were a magician, able to meet all her needs at the drop of a hat.”

Crystabal nodded sympathetically. “And what of the two females? I have heard rumors, but nothing substantial.”

Uldvar cast a surreptitious glance about the ship, then beckoned to Crystabal to lean close. “The females are Batrean consorts from the Far Isles,” he whispered. “They are said to be lovely creatures, possessed of exquisite charms. The two have magical abilities and so must be kept isolated from the other passengers. They are to be delivered to the harem of no less a personage than the Hajan Grandeloquence — ruler of the city state of Hajan, whose wealth is said to surpass all reckoning.”

Arriving at his intended destination, Uldvar stopped at the door of Madame Lagos’ cabin. “I thank you again for your assistance, but now you must leave. Not even I am allowed to view the females, this privilege being reserved solely for the eyes of the Grandeloquence.”

“Of course,” said Crystabal, hiding his disappointment. “When your duties are completed, I hope you will consent to join me for a glass of wine so that we can continue our discussion.”

“Alas, the work of the ship’s steward is never done,” sighed Uldvar. “The dinner hour is fast approaching, and soon the passengers will be demanding to eat. Still, one never knows.” And with that, Uldvar turned his full attention to his duties.

Crystabal headed back in the direction of his cabin. When he was sure that he was out of Uldvar’s line of vision, he ducked behind the ship’s mast. Then he watched from hiding as Uldvar knocked on the cabin door and announced his presence.

The door opened. Crystabal squinted, hoping to catch a glimpse of the two Batreans. To his dismay, a heavy-set woman attired in the trailing robes and tall headdress of a Hajan matron responded to the summons, her ample frame filling the doorway. After scolding the steward for his tardiness, Madame Lagos ordered him to deposit the basin and toiletries inside the doorway. Uldvar did as he was instructed and quickly departed, the door slamming shut behind him.

Frustrated, Crystabal wandered off to find some other means of amusing himself. He found Tareau seated upon a bench, staring out across the desert sands, and offered his greetings. Tareau acknowledged his presence with a nod of his head, then turned to gaze once more across the barren terrain.

“Despite its harsh and foreboding nature, the desert is not without a certain austere beauty,” remarked the cartomancer.

“I see only an ocean of dry sand,” responded Crystabal. “As for myself, I am more interested in the beauty of the feminine variety.”

Tareau uttered a soft laugh. “I spotted you nosing about the cabin of the Madame Lagos, hoping to catch sight of her two charges.”

“The ship’s steward believes that they are Batreans,” said Crystabal wistfully. “He says that he has been ordered to keep them sequestered from the crew and passengers, though for what reason, he did not specify.”

“If they are indeed Batreans, then the decision is a wise one,” said Tareau. “The creatures have magic of sorts and possess an uncanny influence over men, or so it is said.”

Crystabal struck a bold and defiant pose. “I too have magic, enough for two. It would please me to acquire a more intimate appreciation of the virtues of these exotic females.”

Tareau raised an eyebrow. “I wish you luck with your program. For now, I am distracted by the aroma of dinner, which, if I am not mistaken, is about to be served on deck. Would you care to join me?”

“It would be my pleasure. And perhaps after we have dined, a brief stroll about the Batreans’ cabin, to see the sort of accommodations accorded to such delicate and fascinating creatures.”

Tareau shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps, if it is in the cards.”

Dusk settled across the desert, causing the heat to abate. Dinner was served, and an atmosphere of conviviality soon prevailed among the passengers. The majority found the food and company to their liking, with the exception of Droge and the Aamanians pilgrims, who chose to sit apart from the others, eating bowls of bland porridge with heads lowered in supplication.

When all had eaten, the Bodor brought forth their instruments and performed a series of complex pieces. The glass flutes played intricate melodies, interweaving delicate patterns of sound. The gossamer harps created a polytonal tapestry supported by the low thrumming of the bellows horn.

The Zandir merchants rose from their benches, skipping and twirling across the deck as they kicked up their heels in a rendition of the caperetto, a popular dance of the day. Crystabal joined in and soon found himself at the center of a circle, dancing with a middle-aged Zandir woman dressed in a four-tiered skirt and a hat bedecked with an abundance of ribbons, rings, and bangles.

Tareau stood by the sidelines, clapping his hands in time to the beat and offering encouragement to the dancers. The Yassan technomancers stamped their feet in unison while Calix the Callidian sat nearby, content to watch the action from a distance.

As before, the Aamanians remained aloof, fingering their strings of prayer beads as Droge led them in the evening rituals. Every now and then, one would glance away from the acolyte to watch a dancer whirl across the deck or to listen to a particularly light-hearted refrain. After

admonishing several of the pilgrims for such inattentiveness, Droge got up from his bench and led his followers below deck, where he could be heard reciting the cult's penitential rites in a stentorian voice.

The music and dancing continued on late into the night. At one point Crystabal slipped away from the crowd and stole over to the window of Madame Lagos' cabin. A ribbon of light was visible between the casement and shutters. Crystabal crept close and pressed his eye to the crack. As he did, the shutter slammed closed in his face, but not before he caught a fleeting glimpse of two ivory-skinned females with hair the color of fresh green grass. Crystabal inhaled and smelled the scent of wildflowers, musk, citrus, and clove. His heart racing, he returned to his cabin and after a while, fell into a deep sleep.

That night his dreams were of two creatures, beautiful beyond compare, who beckoned to him from across a great divide. And in his dreams, Crystabal promised to visit with them, as soon as he was able.

## CHAPTER 29

**XAN EMERGED FROM** the enchanted mirror-portal to stand alone, surrounded on all sides by hostile desert. The twin suns burned high above; the stark white skeletons of a dozen lopers and as many humanoids lay at his feet. He knelt and stared intently at the arid terrain. The rogue magician's footprints were still visible in the sand, trailing off to the north. Judging by the age and condition of the tracks, the prey had been here only a day before.

Xan cursed in his native tongue. The delays in Zanth and Cymril had cost him precious time. In order to catch up to his prey he would have to resort to other methods.

The witchman traced a series of runes in the sand with his finger and chanted an incantation in a low voice. Then he waved a hand over the remains of one of the lopers and spoke in a commanding voice:

“Rise, and walk again among the living.”

The skeleton stirred; the bones of the skull, neck, tail, torso, and limbs knit together. Slowly, agonizingly, the loper's skeleton raised itself from the sandy soil, to stand erect on its two hind legs. The bony fore-claws moved reflexively. The skull turned slowly from side to side, empty eye sockets staring blindly at the witchman.

Xan took hold of a curved rib bone and climbed up on the creature's back. He kicked the bony flanks, and the skeletal steed took off across the sands at a gallop, following in pursuit of the rogue magician.

Day turned into night, and night to day. The witchman and his eerie mount rode on, past the tumbled ruins of Kasraan, and the bodies of the slain devilmens. Unlike the inhabitants of civilized lands, Xan's needs were few. The occasional scorpion or serpent sufficed to sustain him, and when even such meager fare as this could not be found, the witchman simply went without.

The skeletal steed never tired. No longer truly alive, it experienced neither hunger nor thirst, and knew nothing of pain or exhaustion. So it was that the two traveled swiftly and covered many miles in a short time.

Two days later, Xan arrived within sight of the walls of Danuvia. With night beginning to fall, he brought the loper to a halt and dismounted. Xan muttered an imprecation and spat in the sand. He could ill afford to spend the time it would take to track the rogue magician through yet another city, with its proliferation of intersecting spirit traces.

Xan sat cross-legged on the ground. Removing the shrunken head from the cord that hung around his neck, the witchman set it before him and spoke in a sepulchral voice.

"Ako, hear my words."

The shriveled features contorted into a frown. "I hear. What is it that you wish from me?"

"Speak truthfully: is the rogue magician within the walls of this city?"

"He was there for a time, but is now gone."

Xan fingered the edge of his longknife. "Where is he now?"

"He is many miles to the east, aboard a great ship that sails across the land."

The witchman waved a grey-green hand, and the shrunken head reverted back to its inanimate state. Affixing the frightful fetish to the cord that hung around his neck, Xan mounted the loper and rode away to the east.

## CHAPTER 30

**THE LAND-ARK CONTINUED** on its way throughout the night, rolling over the dunes like a great ship on the ocean. At dawn, the twin suns broke through the darkness, dispersing wisps of dank grey mist that hung close to the ground. The night crew of the Ardan retired to their berths to be replaced by the members of the day crew, their eyes still groggy with sleep. Among them were the Yassan technomancers, up at the crack of dawn to begin work on the land-ark.

The coming of daylight brought the heat, a tangible thing, the presence of which could not be ignored. As on the previous day, the passengers kept to their cabins while the crewmen strived to find any shade that they could.

Crystabal slept peacefully in his cabin. Tareau sat nearby on a stool, arranging cards on a wooden table and studying the portents. From below deck came the muffled tones of glass flutes, bells, and harps, as the Bodor musicians practiced their scales and modes.

The sounds of monotonous chanting emanating from somewhere outside the door to his cabin roused Crystabal from his slumbers. He stumbled out of bed and washed his face in a pannikin of water, then spent the next half hour arranging hair, hat, and garments. When he had achieved the desired effect, he went out on deck to investigate the source of the disturbance, leaving Tareau to his divinations.

He found the Aamanian pilgrims gathered around the aftcastle, where they had come to pray. Leading them was the acolyte, Droge, who stood above them on the afterdeck, reading aloud from his book of scriptures.

“Faithful followers of Aa the All-Knowing, hear the words of the prophet, Aadnar the Ascetic, who wrote in the Twelfth Book of the Omnival: ‘The way of Aa is the one true way. He is the One True God and no other.’”

“The way of Aa is the one true way,” chanted the supplicants, repeating the same phrase over and over in unison.

The sound of the pilgrims’ voices attracted some of the other passengers and crew. Droge spread his arms wide and called out to the new arrivals.

“Come forth, unbelievers, and hear the Holy Word of Aa the All Powerful! Fall down on your knees, and repent your sins! Join us on our holy pilgrimage to the Eastern Lands, and be rewarded by the attainment of mana.”

One of the Zandir freetraders stuck his head out from the door to his cabin, looking somewhat the worse for wear after the festivities of the previous evening.

“Enough of your mindless dogma!” he shouted. “Can’t you see that we are trying to sleep?”

“Paradoxist heathen, your fate has already been sealed,” scolded Droge. “As to the rest of you, there is still time to repent and save your mortal souls! Who will be the first to be saved?”

Favoring the acolyte with a lewd gesture, the freetrader slammed the cabin door. The Jhangarans seemed more receptive to the Aamanian’s words. Moving en masse, they ambled over to sit beside the pilgrims, at which Droge launched into another of his sermons.

Crystabal looked on, bemused. The reaction of the Jhangarans seemed most peculiar. They appeared as if they were in a trance, their faces slack, their eyes dull and lifeless. Crystabal glanced at the faces of the other passengers and crew. More than a few were beginning to take on a glassy-eyed semblance.

A voice spoke to him from somewhere nearby. “Most remarkable, wouldn’t you say?”

Crystabal turned and saw the cartomancer, Tareau, standing just behind him.

“Droge attempts to gain new converts to his faith by the use of magic,” said Tareau. “The chanting and gesticulation are components of the spell, which is intended to exert a hypnotic effect on the listener. The Zandir are quite resistant to cult magic of this sort, as you may have surmised from the rather boisterous reaction of the freetrader. The same cannot be said for the Jhangarans and perhaps some of our fellow passengers. In fact, I suggest that you avert your eyes as well, lest you fall under the sway of the glamour.”

Crystabal nodded and looked away. Droge, observing the exchange between the rogue magician and Tareau, called out to the cartomancer in a strident voice.

“Tareau, you are an idolator and symbologist by trade. Renounce your past sins, and see the One True Way!”

Tareau did not look up, but brought forth his Zodar deck and began to shuffle the cards.

“Believe what you wish,” said the cartomancer. “As for myself, I find it difficult to imagine that any god capable of creating an infinite Omniverse would love only the people of one faith.”

Droge folded his arms across his chest and admonished his followers. “These are the words of an admitted pantheist, and an infidel! Pay them no heed, for there is only the One True Way!”

The Aamanian continued his harangue, but it was apparent that the spell’s effect had been broken. The Jhangarans began to doze off, and even the most ardent cultists were seen to stifle a yawn. This brought a further stream of recriminations from Droge, who fined the pilgrims three points of mana as punishment for their sins. At this the pilgrims let out a woeful lament, prostrating themselves on the deck and beating themselves with penance sticks.

The noisesome activities of the Aamanians attracted the attention of the ship’s Captain, who came forth from his cabin in a foul mood. “What is the meaning of this gathering?” he inquired. “Ghar, Yanos! You and the rest of your Jhangarans get back to work on the instant, or I’ll have the lot of you keel hauled across the desert sands.”

Captain Abas gestured in the direction of the priest. "And as for you, I'll have no sermonizing aboard the Ardan! Either desist from this pedantic claptrap or you and your pilgrims can walk to Hajan!"

Droge made no response, but turned up his nose and retired to his quarters. The pilgrims followed after him, meekly asking what penance they might perform in order to regain their lost mana-points.

The day dragged on in seemingly endless waves of white dunes, broken by an occasional outcropping of rock, a line of faded ruins, or a patch of wireweed. Heat images rose from the sands like ghosts. Dust devils spun and whirled across the flats, eventually dissolving into nothingness.

A Djaffir merchant caravan passed the land-ark headed in the opposite direction, bells jingling and gongs clanging as their carts and burden beasts filed past, laden with cargo. The crew of the Ardan kept a close eye on this entourage, wary lest the caravan turn out to conceal a group of Djaffir bandits. The caravan continued on its way without incident, however, much to the relief of all aboard the land-ark.

By late afternoon the passengers began to get restless. Some came forth to mill about on deck, or stand at the rail and admire the passing scenery. To help pass the time, Tareau read fortunes for the Zandir freetraders in return for small donations.

Suddenly a door flew open, and Madame Lagos burst forth from her cabin, her portly form draped in voluminous robes of dark green velvet trimmed with rows of beads and tassels. In a loud voice, she hectored the steward, Uldvar, chastising him for a dozen slights and malfeasances. Retreating under the withering verbal assault, Uldvar ducked around a corner and disappeared below decks. Madame Lagos snorted indignantly and strode across the deck, headed for the captain's quarters.

Good day to you Madame Lagos," said Tareau, as the matron walked by. "Would you care for a reading?"

Madame Lagos came to an abrupt halt beside the cartomancer, her heavy set features still flushed with anger. "A reading?"

Tareau smiled. "Indeed. May I?"

Madame Lagos grumbled but acquiesced and took a seat on the bench next to the cartomancer. Tareau shuffled the deck and drew a pair of cards. He studied these intently for a moment, then spoke.

“The cards indicate that you are a woman of rare breeding, endowed with a kind and gentle soul. While these qualities may not always be apparent to individuals of lower social status, they are nonetheless manifest in your person. As to the deficiencies of others, you must learn patience. Not all are so competent in their work as are you.”

Madame Lagos listened intently, her anger subsiding. “You have read the innermost workings of my soul. Please tell me more.”

Tareau shook his head. “No more can I see this day. But return tomorrow, and I will perform another reading for you if you so desire.”

Madame Lagos offered her thanks and favored the cartomancer with a gift of three gold pentacles, which Tareau accepted with a gracious smile. Then the matron returned to her cabin, her mood much improved.

Crystabal, watching the cartomancer at work, commented favorably upon his methods. “Tareau, you must teach me how to use this Zodar deck, which is capable of performing such miraculous transformations.”

“I am afraid that is not possible,” replied Tareau. “This deck was made expressly for me, and will work for no one else. In a way that others can not comprehend, my fate is intertwined with that of the cards. However, if you like, I will cast a reading for you.”

Crystabal consented, and Tareau once again shuffled the cards, choosing two and spending a moment in contemplation.

“I see a long voyage,” said the cartomancer. “You have come far to get to this place, and still have far to go. There remain other obstacles to be overcome, yet through perseverance, luck, and your finely-honed talents, you will eventually achieve your goal.”

“Most intriguing,” replied Crystabal thoughtfully. “Yes, all is clear. I see the significance of the reading.” And with that, Crystabal gladly paid the sum of five gold lumens to Tareau.

The Aamanian, Droge, having witnessed the exchanges with Crystabal and Madame Lagos, stepped forward to voice a complaint.

“I am appalled at this display of obvious chicanery, which flies in the face of the teachings of Orthodoxy. These cards possess no virtues, except those that you fabricate in order to create your spurious readings. As such, I insist that you cease these activities at once, and refund the money that you have taken from these hapless people!”

“I have no complaint,” spoke Crystabal. “The cards spoke truthfully.”

Several of the other passengers nodded their heads in agreement.

“Nonsense” commented Droge. “The man is a fraud and a charlatan. Speak, Tareau! Do you deny that you have lied, in order to appease the vanity and hopes of these unwitting folk?”

Tareau made no reply, but merely dealt a pair of cards.

“Now what are you doing?” shouted Droge, angered at having been ignored.

“I have cast a reading regarding your future,” answered Tareau.

Droge clenched his fists. “How dare you do so without my permission? I demand to know what the reading says!”

“The cards are unclear,” replied Tareau calmly. “An accident or mishap of some sort appears to be indicated. However, specifics are lacking.”

“It is as I suspected,” sneered Droge. “The reading has no basis in fact. Only through the auspices of Aa the All-Knowing can the future be foretold!”

With a look of disdain for the cartomancer, the priest retired to a side bench, to read from his scriptures.

A moment later the Callidian, Calix, wandered on deck. He sat by the ship’s rail and watched with interest as the cartomancer shuffled and reshuffled his cards.

“Few folk are aware that the origins of the Zodar deck date back to the Forgotten Age, and possibly beyond,” said the scholar. “The Archaen scholar, Ezzradamus, theorized that the cards were once utilized as astrogational aids.”

“An interesting theory,” said Crystabal, taking a seat next to the Callidian. “Tell me, Calix, does your expertise also extend into the realm of antiquities?”

“It does. Why do you ask?”

Crystabal leaned close and spoke in a quiet voice. “While on one of my more recent adventures I chanced upon an ancient crypt, from which I obtained a valuable relic. Would you like to examine this object for yourself?”

“I would indeed,” answered Calix eagerly.

Crystabal reached into his pouch and brought forth the magic box that he had acquired from the weirdling. He handed it to Calix, who proceeded to study the artifact in detail, using a crystal lens that he wore on a chain around his neck.

“Now here is a fascinating curio,” observed the Callidian. “Hmm, yes, there can be no doubt about it. Observe the fine engraving: the symbology is definitely of early Archaen derivation and is quite authentic. This magic box dates back to the early Second Millennium, before the time of The Great Disaster. Items of this sort are exceedingly rare and may be classified as genuine antiques!”

“Such was my own appraisal,” added Crystabal. “Perhaps you would care to own this valuable curio for yourself? I am currently considering several offers for this piece and would be glad to accept your bid.”

“By no means,” stated the Callidian. “Items of this sort bear a dark reputation and are believed to be cursed. As such, they are of interest only to certain diabolists and necromancers. Nonetheless, I thank you for the opportunity to study such a weird and remarkable anomaly first-hand.”

“Think nothing of it,” said Crystabal, a sour expression on his features. Then, after returning the magic box to his pouch, the rogue magician went off to sulk in his cabin.

Dinner was a stew of leeks and wild rampant, served with wooden mugs of spiced wine – or, for the Aamanians, unseasoned porridge and water. While the passengers and crew sat upon benches eating their meal, Madame Lagos once again appeared on deck. Marching over to the captain’s cabin, she began to pound loudly on the door, issuing vociferous complaints regarding the inferior quality of the evening’s fare. At last, the captain allowed her to enter, and a loud discussion ensued, the woman’s voice plainly audible from within.

Crystabal nudged Tareau. “Madame Lagos is an outspoken critic of Captain Abas, whom she claims has stinted her of certain amenities and comforts previously stipulated in their agreement. Mindful lest he incur the disfavor of the Hajan Grandeloquence, the captain has been driven to distraction attempting to meet her incessant demands, as has his poor steward, Uldvar.”

“You seem well-informed about the latest shipboard gossip,” commented Tareau.

Crystabal dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand. “I have my sources.”

“And what of the two maidens? I have yet to see either of them set foot from their cabin.”

“It is highly unlikely that the Madame will allow them to do so, except under her strict supervision,” replied Crystabal. “I myself have caught only the most fleeting glimpse of the lovely creatures, and this through the shutters of their cabin. With luck, tonight will be different, and I shall obtain a better view.”

Tareau stared at his companion in disbelief. “What if you are caught by one of the crew, or worse, by Madame Lagos?”

A sly grin crossed the rogue magician’s handsome features. “I am a veteran of many romantic escapades, some few of which would make tonight’s adventure seem tame by comparison. Besides, even Madame Lagos must sleep sometime.”

“Perhaps,” said Tareau. “Still, it might be best to exercise caution with regard to the undertaking of any nocturnal activities.”

“Alas, like all artistes, I must heed the calling of my art,” said Crystabal. “What painter could look upon such beauty and not be moved to capture the image on canvas? So too am I moved to take action, after my own fashion.”

Crystabal raised a hand. “But hold! I detect that Uldvar comes forth from the captain’s cabin, carrying a tray of sweets and viands. See there! Behind him stands Captain Abas, wearing a long face as if he had been robbed by highwaymen. It would seem that Madame Lagos has convinced him to part with a portion of his own private stores.”

The two watched as Uldvar, accompanied by the Hajan matron, delivered the foodstuffs to the Madame’s cabin. Crystabal craned his neck, hoping to obtain a view of the cabin’s interior, but was once again foiled by the substantial form of Madame Lagos. The rogue magician sighed, resigned to his previous plans.

After the completion of the meal, the passengers lolled about on deck, enjoying the cool night air and chatting among themselves. By and by, the

discussion turned to the subject of metaphysics, a topic about which there seemed no lack of opinions.

Harath, one of the Yassan technomancers, was the first to state her case. "Life is a complex schematic, designed by the unknowable entity whom we call Creator. We occupy the narrowest of tangents, oblivious to the greater pattern, which encompasses all of the myriad dimensions of space and time."

Harath's fellow technomancers nodded in approval, acknowledging the wisdom of her comments.

The ship's first mate, Bant, affected a dour disposition. "What does it matter? Once our ancestors lived in fabulous sky cities, their every need attended to by flocks of neomorphs. Now, we are forced to dwell on the ground like the sub-men, huddled for safety inside our walled cities. The glorious past is dead, leaving us to contemplate an inglorious future."

"What is your opinion, Tareau?" asked Crystabal.

The cartomancer shrugged. "By virtue of the Zodar deck, I can sometimes see the future or the past. Yet the present baffles me, though I live in it constantly. Beyond this, I claim no special wisdom."

Calix the Callidian, spoke next. "The arcanologists of the Lyceum Arcanum have determined that the Omniverse is comprised of an infinite number of dimensions, each containing an infinite number of galaxies, solar systems, and worlds. With so many infinities to choose from, anything that can be imagined must exist in some place or time. Thus, all things are possible."

The Aamanian, Droge, voiced a contrasting view. "The principles of Orthodoxy are precise and exacting, allowing for neither variance nor dispute. In the words of great Aa the Omniscient, 'All is known'. The true Orthodoxist asks no questions but trusts in faith. The temptations of the flesh must be denied and the ways of the infidel shunned. For only faithful devotees of Aa can earn the mana required to attain the reward of eternal salvation."

"Bah!" spat one of Zandir freetraders angrily. "And what of the practitioners of other faiths?" asked, "Are they to be denied access into paradise simply because they do not agree with your rigid beliefs?"

Droge adopted a stern and inflexible posture. “All who fail to observe the tenets of Orthodoxy shall be consigned to spend eternity wandering the ten Hells, where they shall be made to suffer for their sins. So it is written in the Omnival, the holy book of Orthodoxy.”

The Zandir freetrader threw back his head and laughed. “We Paradoxists vehemently disagree with the Orthodoxist view, which we regard as mindless dogma. Our scripture is The Book of Mysteries, which contains ten thousand questions, and no answers. To the devout Paradoxist, life is an enigma, for it is written: ‘Nothing is known — All is forgotten!’”

“Blasphemy!” shouted Droge. His face flushed with indignation, and the priest advanced towards the freetrader in a threatening manner.

“You are entitled to your beliefs, no matter how narrow-minded,” countered the Zandir, raising himself up to his full height. “As for myself, I choose to live life to the fullest while I am still capable of drawing breath!”

For a tense moment, the freetrader and the priest faced each other like two combatants prepared to do battle. The other Aamanians and Zandir rose from their benches to glare at each other with an ancient hatred dating back over five centuries.

Crystabal stepped in between the two groups with arms upraised. “Enough of this metaphysical doom and gloom,” said he in a cheerful tone. “Musicians, to your instruments! Dancers, to your feet! Let the evening’s festivities begin!”

On a signal from the rogue magician, the Bodor musicians struck up a lively jig, with the timbals beating in double time. The freetraders turned away from their rivals and set to dancing, wheeling, and cavorting across the deck like dervishes. Droge cast a foul look in the direction of Crystabal and the freetraders and stalked off toward his cabin, followed by his band of pilgrims.

Tareau motioned to Crystabal, who stood by the mast wiping his brow with a scented handkerchief. “That was a near thing. Your timely intervention may well have averted a reenactment of the Aaman-Zandu Cult Wars, albeit on a much smaller scale. Which brings to mind a question: why get involved in a matter that did not concern you?”

“Are you so quick to discount the possibility that I was motivated by altruism?” asked Crystabal.

“Frankly, yes.”

“Ah, well,” sighed the rogue magician. “I suppose you will find out sooner or later.”

Crystabal’s voice lowered to a whisper. “Tonight, I plan a further reconnaissance of the Batreans’ chambers. If events go according to my best estimates, I may well proceed to the next phase. A violent fracas is hardly the proper backdrop for romance.”

Crystabal winked and slipped off to join in the festivities. Tareau shook his head. Then the cartomancer returned to his cabin and his divinations.

The revelry continued far into the night. The Zandir made free with the wine. Even the normally staid Yassan took a few glasses, as did some of the Jhangaran crewmen. Unnoticed in all the activity, Crystabal crept up to the window of Madame Lagos’ cabin. With a knife, he carefully pried open one of the shutters and looked within.



## CHAPTER 31

**CRYSTABAL AWOKE EARLY** in the morning and roused the cartomancer from a deep slumber. Tareau sat up in his bunk, bleary-eyed, to find his traveling companion in high spirits.

“Good day, Tareau!” said the rogue magician cheerfully. “And how was your rest?”

Tareau covered his mouth with the back of his hand, stifling a yawn. “Far too short, for one thing. And yourself?”

Crystabal grinned. “Between you and I, I have barely slept a wink,” he whispered. “Late last night, I stole to the window of Madame Lagos’ cabin and established contact with the two Batreans. They are beautiful beyond compare and are quite precocious. Only by the most concerted efforts was I able to resist their charms!”

“This is a venture fraught with peril,” warned Tareau. “If you are caught, the punishment will assuredly be severe.”

Crystabal seemed unconcerned. “Liselle and Soliatta are their names. Ah, my friend, you should see them! Tonight, I will attempt to arrange a tryst. Perhaps you will come with me?”

Tareau regarded the rogue magician with astonishment. “Crystabal, you are incorrigible. I wish you luck with your program. For the moment, however, I suggest that we confine our activities to more mundane affairs.

The air is cool today, and now that I am awake, I have developed an appetite for breakfast.”

Many of the passengers were already on deck, taking advantage of the pleasant weather. A breakfast of porridge, butter, and bread was served, along with steaming cups of mochan. All seemed much relieved to have passed beyond the harsh environs of the desertlands, and an atmosphere of good fellowship prevailed aboard the Ardan.

Afterward, several of the passengers asked Tareau to cast readings for them, to which the cartomancer gladly complied. Among their number was Madame Lagos, who it seemed now regarded Tareau as her spiritual advisor. The cartomancer performed divinations for each, and all went away satisfied, much to the chagrin of Droge, whose attempts to gain converts to Orthodoxy had thus far failed to match Tareau’s successes.

When the last divination had been cast, one of the Zandir freetraders, known to his fellows as Zendo, approached to consult with Tareau in private.

“Strictly out of curiosity, does your interest in cards extend into the realm of games of chance?” asked the freetrader.

“From time to time.”

Zendo leaned close and winked. “Are you familiar with the game, ‘Fortuna’?”

“From a technical standpoint,” answered Tareau. “If I am not mistaken, it is a variation of Quatrillion — a betting game played with a deck of sixty-four circular cards, originally popularized by the Sarista gypsy folk.”

“You are correct on all counts,” said Zendo. “Which therefore brings to mind an important question: do you object to wagering, either on moral, religious, or philosophical grounds?”

“I see no problem with such activities, provided they are undertaken in moderation and in the spirit of good sportsmanship.”

“Precisely my own views,” assured Zendo. “A group of our fellow shipmates has expressed interest in getting up a game. Would you care to join us?”

“I would be honored to do so.”

Zendo rubbed his hands together and displayed a crafty grin. “Excellent! In that case, I will assemble my group of hazzarders, and we shall begin.”

With a sprightly step, Zendo gathered the players, a group consisting of Crystabal, Calix the Callidian, a pair of Bodor musicians, two other Zandir freetraders, and the Jhangaran crewmen, Ghar and Yanos. Several of the Aamanians expressed interest in watching the game, but the stern-faced Droge banished all the pilgrims to their quarters on the grounds that gambling was an activity suitable only for infidels. Even so, Droge himself remained on deck and stood nearby, looking over the shoulder of Tareau.

Zando shuffled the cards and explained the rules of the game. “To begin, each player receives five cards. The objective is to acquire three of a kind, either by discarding and passing cards to other players or by drawing additional cards from the deck. Demons are to be avoided at all costs, as they negate the highest card in a hand. Alchemists are wild and may be ‘transmuted’ to any card desired. Pentacles are trump cards, the highest being the card of Fortuna, Goddess of Luck. Thus, three Pentacles beats all unless a rival player throws down the Hanged Man, a card of unfortunate aspect. The presence of this card invalidates all trump cards in any single hand.

“The minimum bet to begin is one silver piece, after which additional wagers may be placed after the fifth, sixth, and seventh cards are dealt, up to a maximum of one gold lumen. Is all understood?”

Crystabal, Calix, Tareau, the freetraders, and the Bodor nodded in assent. The Jhangarans scratched their elongated craniums and looked at each other, dumbfounded. Zando repeated the instructions for their benefit, using visual aids to describe the game’s more intricate concepts. When even this did not suffice, Calix showed them how to add by keeping track with their fingers and toes. Meanwhile, Crystabal rolled his eyes and tapped impatiently on the wooden deck. Finally, the Jhangarans seemed to get the general drift of things, and the game commenced.

The first few rounds were won by the Bodor musicians, each of whom took two hands apiece. Crystabal noticed them whistling among themselves and recalled Uldvar’s remarks about the peculiar musical language spoken by these folk. When a Bodor won the fifth hand as well, he insisted that the two be prohibited from all forms of whistling, singing, humming, or tapping in rhythm while the game was in progress. The portly musicians

reluctantly agreed to this stipulation, at which point their string of “lucky” wins came to an abrupt end.

A score of hands were played, during which the fortunes of Crystabal rose and fell in dramatic fashion, as did those of Zendo and his freetraders. Calix made a few modest gains through careful computation of the cards, but the Jhangarans wagered heavily and lost all. Finally, bored with losing, they quit the game and went back to their posts.

Tareau seemed to fare better than the rest, though his winnings were not so ostentatious as to arouse the suspicions of his fellow players. The same could not be said for Droge, who hovered nearby, observing all that transpired with a jaundiced eye. After the cartomancer garnered a particularly lucrative pot, the Aamanian could restrain himself no longer.

“I note that your supply of funds has grown considerably while those of your competitors appear to have dwindled,” remarked Droge pointedly. “Do you attribute your good fortune to luck or ‘skill’?”

Tareau remained placid, choosing to ignore the implication inherent in the Aamanian’s words. “The cards have a mind of their own. They may turn just as quickly.”

Droge addressed the other players. “Why do you continue to play with this mountebank? Can you not see that he is swindling you of your hard-earned coins?”

“We play to win,” answered Zendo with a snarl. “Now begone! You are disrupting our concentration and casting a pall over the game!”

Angered at having been rebuffed, the Aamanian returned to his bench. “Repent, sinners, and seek forgiveness in the eyes of Aa the All-Knowing!”

Droge’s remarks fell upon deaf ears. The game continued on for the better part of an hour until Zendo declared that his luck had deserted him and quit in a huff. The remaining players decided to bring the game to a close and went their separate ways to count their earnings or tally their losses.

Among those in the latter category was Crystabal, who, upon counting his money, discovered that he had been reduced to near penury. He scratched his head, baffled at his lack of good fortune. It seemed that every time he got a good hand, Tareau got a better one. Particularly frustrating

was his inability to acquire the Hanged Man, a card that would have come in handy on more than one occasion.

Crystabal pondered the possible implications of this revelation but dismissed the matter out of hand. For the moment, he preferred to forget the past and concentrate on the future. Specifically, an impending affair with the two Batreans, which he planned to arrange that same night.

Crystabal wandered about the deck, contemplating the evening's endeavors. Circling the mainmast, he came upon Tareau, who was seated on a bench beside the rail. The cards of the Zodar deck were arrayed in a pattern before him, which he studied intently, a grave look on his dark features.

"What is it that you see?" asked Crystabal.

"I see many things," replied Tareau. "Stones fall from the sky. The ship is sunk in a storm."

Crystabal seemed puzzled. "Stones falling from the sky? Ships sinking on dry land? Surely such things are not possible?"

"The cards do not lie," said Tareau. Then the cartomancer gathered up his cards and headed off to his berth.

Crystabal continued his stroll around the deck, pondering the possible ramifications of Tareau's divination. The cartomancer was prone to strange and eccentric moods, to say the least. Still, his readings had proven to be uncannily accurate in the past and, as such, could not easily be dismissed.

From somewhere up ahead came a sound like a heavy thud that seemed to shake the land-ark and the surrounding terrain. A second later the voice of the lookout was heard from on high.

"Ahoy, helmsman! Summon the captain, and at once!"

Some of the passengers and crew came topside, seeking to discover the source of the disturbance. Captain Abas rushed from his cabin, wiping traces of gravy from his chin.

"What is the reason for this interruption?" demanded the captain. "I was just about to take my lunch."

The lookout called down from his post in the cupola. "Sir, a great stone fell from the sky, narrowly missing the forward bow."

Crystabal turned about and saw Tareau standing beside him. The cartomancer gave him a knowing look but said nothing.

“Lookout, scan the surrounding hills, and see if you can determine the source of this weird phenomenon,” commanded the captain. “All others, remain at your posts until further orders.”

The captain mounted the stairs leading to the observation deck of the forecandle to consult with the helmsman. Meanwhile, the passengers milled about on deck, muttering fearfully among themselves. Sensing the opportunity to gain adherents to his cause, Droge took up a position at the prow of the vessel and addressed the assemblage in a resounding voice.

“All hear my words! This is an omen from Aa the Omnipotent! The great stone that has fallen from the sky represents man’s mortality, while the land-ark upon which we ride may be seen to symbolize our voyage through life. The conclusion, therefore, is inescapable. Man’s destiny is in the hands of Aa, who can perform such miracles as he sees fit.”

No sooner had Droge completed the sentence than a second boulder fell from the sky, crushing the Aamanian priest and splintering a section of the ship’s prow. The passengers and crew gasped and recoiled in fear.

“An astute reading,” mused Tareau.

From above, the lookout cried out, one arm pointed to the north. “Ho, Captain! If I am not mistaken, the stone was fired or propelled from somewhere beyond that line of hills. Yes, I am correct; here comes another!”

All on board, the Ardan ducked or dove for cover as another massive boulder sailed past, just grazing the topmost sail. With a loud thud, the stone landed some ten or twenty feet from the land-ark, embedding itself in the ground.

Captain Abas issued orders to the crew from a position of safety in the forecandle.

“Helmsman, drop the anchor! Bant, call the Monads and instruct them on the best means of removing that stone from the prow! Uldvar, summon the Yassan technomancers from below and have them come forward to make the necessary repairs. Yanos, have your fellow Jhangarans take care of the Aamanian’s corpse or what is left of it.”

The crewmen all set to work as instructed, with the exception of the Jhangarans, who exhibited little enthusiasm for their duties. After favoring the Jhangaran laggards with a few choice curses, Captain Abas directed instructions to the passengers.

“Attention, all! A state of emergency now exists aboard the Ardan, as can plainly be seen. The captain and crew are presently occupied with their responsibilities, and so I must ask for your assistance. Who among you will volunteer to investigate the source of the stones?”

Madame Lagos was the first to speak. “I am assigned to ensure the safety of my charges and cannot leave them unattended.”

The Bodor peeked from the doorway of their cabin and shook their heads in unison. “Activities of this sort are best reserved for daredevils, not musicians,” said their spokesperson, a female harpist named Solati.

“While some of us are dealers in precious stones, falling rocks are beyond our specialized area of expertise,” said Zendo, representing the Zandir freetraders.

Calix the Callidian stepped forward to offer his opinion. “I am a man of words and letters, not deeds. As such, I suggest that you allocate this task to Crystabal, who, by his own admission, is an adventurer and magician of wide experience.”

Crystabal looked out from the top of a wooden barrel, where he had judiciously sought shelter. “Possibly, I have overstated my abilities in this area in an attempt to enliven our evening get togethers.”

“No matter,” replied the captain. “It is clear that you are best suited to the job. And so I must insist that you go at once to learn what can be learned of these mysterious happenings that imperil both the ship and our entire company.”

“If it must be, so be it,” said Crystabal bitterly. “But I will not go alone.”

The captain looked about the ship, surveying all in attendance. “The heroic Crystabal has consented to undertake this duty on our behalf! Who will accompany him on this important mission?”

An uncomfortable silence followed. After several seconds Tareau stepped forward to speak. “I will go with Crystabal.”

“Then it is settled,” said the captain. “Ghar, lower the gangplank. Crystabal and Tareau, please move with alacrity before the Ardan suffers further damage.”

Crystabal and Tareau descended from the land-ark and proceeded in the direction indicated by the ship’s lookout. With apprehension, they crossed a stretch of open terrain and climbed a steep embankment of soil and loose

stone shingle. Arriving at the top of the ridge, they stopped and surveyed the territories that lay to the north.

On the opposite side of the embankment stood a pair of giant copper-skinned devils of the type known as Enim. They stood over twelve feet in height, sported hideous horned visages, and were attired in silver armbands, loincloths, and sandals. The two stood beside a pile of heavy stones, conferring among themselves in sonorous voices.

One of the Enim took hold of a boulder, lifted it above his head, and lobbed it in the direction of the land-ark. Crystabal and Tareau ducked instinctively, and the stone sailed high above the hills, to land some two or three yards from the ship. With an expression of disappointment the thrower paid over a sum of gold to his compatriot, who grinned widely and dropped the coins into an iron strongbox by his feet.

Crystabal nudged Tareau. "We have accomplished our goal, which was to determine the source of the falling stones," he whispered. "Let us now depart, before the Enim decide to use us for target practice."

"To what end?", asked Tareau. "If we allow the Enim to continue as they are doing they will destroy the land-ark, and we will be forced to make the long journey eastward on foot."

"A point well taken," conceded Crystabal. "But exactly how do you propose that we stop these two monstrosities?"

Tareau made an airy gesture. "No doubt some solution will come to mind. But now let us hasten, before any more stones can be launched."

The two scrambled down the far side of the escarpment, their footsteps dislodging a trickle of small stones and pebbles. One of the Enim, alerted by the falling debris, looked upwards and gestured to his compatriot. The other glanced in the direction of the two travelers and muttered something unintelligible. Then he crouched to pick up another boulder.

"Hold your throw!" called Tareau, arriving at the foot of the embankment. "For what reason do you lob stones at our ship?"

"We are currently engaged in a bout of rock-throwing for wagers," answered one of the Enim. "Kindly stand aside. It is my turn next, and your shadow threatens to distract my aim."

Tareau stood fast. “Before you do so, I would like to point out that your actions are endangering the lives of the passengers and crew of our land-ark.”

The Enim shrugged their massive shoulders. “Rock-throwing is a rugged sport, and injuries are to be expected,” said one.

“Besides,” remarked the other, “I could not refuse a challenge from Ongar, whose skill at rock-throwing is known far and wide. Surely you have heard of him?”

Tareau looked to Crystabal, who shook his head. The two Enim grunted, as if astonished that such a thing were possible.

Crystabal addressed the first Enim. “We also enjoy games of chance. As you seem to be sporting types, perhaps you would agree to a game of cards for wagers.”

The Enim laughed. “Play cards with a Rahastran cartomancer? What kind of fools do you take us for?”

Crystabal looked sidewise at Tareau, but dismissed the Enim’s remark as mere cynicism.

“We propose an alternative,” said the first of the giants. “I challenge you to a round of rock-throwing for distance against the renowned Ongar. If you win, we promise to leave your vessel alone. If not, we resume our game, using the two of you in place of stones — a variation on the game that we seldom get the opportunity to enjoy, given the secluded nature of the surrounding habitat.”

“With all due respect, such a contest would not be fair,” said Crystabal.

The two Enim approached Crystabal from either side, to glare at him in menacing fashion.

“The challenge has been posed!” bellowed Ongar. “There can be no backing down now.”

“Ongar is quite insistent on this point,” said the other Enim, brandishing a great copper-skinned fist.

“But of course,” answered Crystabal nervously.

Ongar rubbed his massive hands together and lifted a great stone that measured some four feet in diameter. “As the reigning champion, it is my prerogative to throw first.”

Tareau stepped forward, one hand upraised. "A moment, if you please. For the purposes of this contest, I ask that you kindly throw in the opposite direction of the land-ark."

"As you wish," grunted Ongar. And with that, the Enim drew back and launched the stone a distance of several hundred yards.

"A fine toss!" remarked the other Enim. "If I am not mistaken, I believe that Ongar may have broken his previous record with this throw!"

The two Enim snorted, congratulating themselves by pounding each other on the back.

"Now it is your turn," said Ongar, barely able to restrain his mirth.

Crystabal nodded, then picked up a small stone half the size of his fist.

"Unfair!" roared the two Enim. "The stone is not of regulation size!"

Tareau interrupted. "The size of the stone was never specified. Thus, Crystabal's choice must be allowed."

The Enim stamped their feet, muttering curses of the most terrible sort. Then Ongar whispered something in private, and the two grinned.

"After some discussion, we have determined that the manling's choice will be allowed," said Ongar. "Throw as you will."

Noticing the sly smiles on the faces of the Enim, Tareau leaned over to consult with his companion. "Beware, Crystabal. The Enim have magic, and are not averse to cheating in order to win."

"Neither am I, as the occasion warrants," whispered Crystabal.

Crystabal brought his arm back to throw. Suddenly, he noticed that the stone now seemed much heavier than it had just a moment before. Crystabal shot a glance at the two Enim, who stood to the side, chuckling among themselves.

Muttering something beneath his breath, Crystabal drew back his arm and let the stone fly. It sailed far off into the distance, dwindling to a mere speck in the sky.

The two Enim stared, shaking their heads in disbelief.

Crystabal turned to face his challenger, a look of smug satisfaction on his face. "So concludes our contest. Ongar, I congratulate you on your good sportsmanship, despite your loss. Now my friend and I must be on our way."

The Enim grumbled and complained, but Tareau held them to their word. Cursing and gnashing their fangs, the two devils promised to refrain from further rock-throwing, as per the terms of the contest. Then they withdrew to their underground haunts, arguing loudly among themselves.

When he was certain that the Enim were out of earshot, Tareau turned to address the rogue magician. "I saw the Enim cast an enchantment upon the stone and guessed that they were up to no good. How, then, did you manage such a throw?"

Crystabal made an easy gesture. "A small matter. I cast a spell of my own upon the stone, causing it to dwindle in size and creating the illusion that it had disappeared into the distance. In point of fact, I believe the stone barely traveled fifty feet, if that."

Tareau seemed impressed: "Crystabal, there is more to you than meets the eye."

"The same might be said for yourself," answered the rogue magician, one eyebrow upraised. "I refer here to the Enim's comment about playing cards with a Rahastran cartomancer, which leads me to wonder whether my recent inability to locate that card known as 'The Hanged Man' might not have been attributable entirely to a lack of good fortune."

Tareau shrugged. "Each of us has his or her own peccadilloes, myself included. Do you claim otherwise?"

"A point well taken," replied Crystabal. "Perhaps it is best to let the matter lie and venture onto new topics. From the look of things, it appears as if the repairs to the land-ark have nearly been completed, and the vessel should soon be ready for departure."

The two made their way back to the ship without further comment. Here they found the Jhangaran crewmen finishing work on a cairn of stones, under which the body of the slain Droge had been interred. The remaining pilgrims bowed their heads in prayer. The crew and passengers stood to the side, and the Ardan's captain came forth to say a few words over the Aamanian's grave.

"Here lies the body of Droge, whose premature demise gives us all pause to ponder our own mortality. This said it must be remembered that life goes on. So it is that we bid the soul of the deceased to depart this mortal

veil and not linger about or haunt the ship in the manner of a vengeful ghost as we continue upon our journey.”

Without further ado, Captain Abas turned and barked commands to the crew. “Raise anchor and draw up the gangplank! Stoke the wind machines and make ready to set sail! This accursed delay has cost us enough time as it is, and we must be on our way at once. But hold; Crystabal and Tareau have returned after all. Climb aboard there, lads, and be quick about it!”

The land-ark rumbled on its way, leaving the barren stretch of hills in its wake. Onwards it sailed, skirting the southernmost edge of a great salt flat and striking out across a wide expanse of scrub plains. The sun advanced across the western sky, and the shadows of scattered rocks and low-lying tumble bushes crept furtively across the barren terrain.

That evening the passengers and crew ate dinner on deck, consuming a ragout of land lizard and desert herbs prepared by the ship’s steward, Uldvar. For the first time, the Aamanians joined the rest of the group, though their mood seemed even more moribund than usual. After dinner, the Bodor brought out their instruments and began to play, but the passengers and crew appeared listless, and the festive air that had been present on previous evenings failed to materialize.

While all had dispersed to their cabins for the night, Crystabal attempted once again to make contact with the Batreans. He was deterred by the unrelenting presence of Madame Lagos, who stood at the door to her cabin, complaining about the afternoon’s delay, the inferior quality of the food, the chill night air, and a dozen other difficulties, both real and imagined. After spending a fruitless hour or two watching poor Uldvar run himself ragged, trying to keep up with the Madame’s incessant demands, Crystabal reluctantly abandoned his plans for the evening and retired to his bunk.

## CHAPTER 32

**THE NEXT DAY** found the land-ark sailing northwards across a rolling expanse of empty plains marked by occasional patches of wireweed and sponge bristle. Crystabal sat on deck with Calix the Callidian, watching as the ship sailed past strange-looking configurations of stone, worn smooth by aeons of wind and sand. Here and there, Calix paused to point out some feature of interest. High above, a flock of kite-winged batranc wheeled across the sky. Below, a pair of spangled skank lizards performed a curious, splay-footed mating dance.

The land-ark continued along throughout the morning and into the afternoon until at last, the lookout spotted a walled stockade constructed of rough-hewn stones and dried mud bricks — the borderlands outpost of Akmir, the easternmost waypost of the Seven Kingdoms.

Stationed atop the walls and gates of the rude fortress was a motley contingent of hard-bitten mercenaries: dark-skinned Arimites armed with throwing knives, male and female Thralls, their powerful bodies covered from head to foot with elaborate tattoos; furred Jaka manhunters from the hills of Yrmania; Aeriad scouts, their metallic plumes glinting dully in the sun's-light, and others of mixed ethnic and racial origins.

The land-ark arrived within hailing distance of the fortress, prompting a call from one of the sentinels stationed on the wall. "Halt and identify yourselves! Any closer and we will train our fire-throwers upon your vessel!"

In response to the sentry's challenge, the ship's captain came forth to stand at the rail of the forecastle. "I am Captain Abas of the land-ark, Ardan, out of Kasmir of the Seven Kingdoms. What is the reason for this show of hostility?"

"Last week a tribe of sub-men captured a Dracartan land barge and attempted to gain access to the fortress by deception," replied the sentinel. "Our scouts found them out, and we incinerated the barge, but not before the sub-men managed to ram the west wall, as you can see. Unless repairs are effected soon, the entire wall will collapse, and we will no longer be able to hold the fortress."

"Aboard the Ardan is a crew of Yassan technomancers who have been retained for such purposes," answered Captain Abas. "Allow us to enter, and they can begin work at once."

"Not so quickly," warned the sentinel. "Technomancers or no, our scouts must board and inspect your vessel before the gates of Akmir will be opened. These are the orders of our commander."

The captain rolled his eyes. "Yet another delay! At this rate we will never arrive in Hajan!"

Despite Abas' complaints a trio of Aeriad scouts were dispatched from the fortress. The birdlike humanoids boarded the Ardan and began a thorough search of the vessel from top to bottom. But when one of the Aeriad attempted to inspect the cabin containing the two Batreans he was thwarted by Madame Lagos, who would allow no one past the doorway.

Captain Abas threatened, cajoled, and pleaded, but without success. Madame Lagos stood her ground. Neither would the Jaka scouts allow the land-ark access to Akmir without first checking the cabin.

Finally, after an additional hour's delay, the parties agreed to a compromise. A female scout was sent forth and ushered aboard the ship. To Crystabal's displeasure, the scout chosen for the job turned out to be Ule, the swordswoman he had met in the Cymrilian woodlands. As she passed by him, he turned his back, having no desire to renew their acquaintance after the events of their last meeting.

With Madame Lagos keeping a careful watch over the proceedings, Ule was allowed to enter the Batreans' cabin. She emerged a moment later to tender her report to the fortress' commander.

"The cabin contains only the two females, as their matron indicated," said Ule. She then pointed in the direction of Crystabal, who had been trying to keep a discreet distance away from the Danuvian. "However, I recognize this foppish vagabond as an individual of questionable character and recommend that he be subjected to a thorough search of his person and possessions before allowing him to enter Akmir."

"This is an outrage!" cried Crystabal. "I am no common thief but a magician and a person of quality!"

The three Aeriad advanced with dart throwers at the ready. "K-k-indly step into this vacant c-c-cabin," chirped the first in line. "The procedure is highly personal in nature but goes more swiftly if you c-c-cooperate."

The Aeriad completed their duties in short order over the loud protestations of the indignant Crystabal. When they were done, the Aeriad signaled the sentinels on the walls. The iron-bound gates of Akmir were thrown open, and the land-ark followed the scouts into the walled fortress without further incident.

The Ardan pulled into a makeshift docking area and dropped anchor. Then the Yassan technomancers disembarked to inspect the damage done to the west wall, accompanied by four Monad servitors carrying iron-bound chests of tools and materials on their backs.

The crew of the Ardan off-loaded crates of cargo and took on fresh supplies of water. While they did so, Captain Abas consulted in private with the outpost's commander, a Thrall warrior named Cestus, whose multifarious tattoos showed him to be a long veteran of many Wilderlands campaigns.

Two hours later, the crew of the Ardan made ready to depart. The Yassan technomancers presented a bill for their services, which the Thrall commander paid without complaint, impressed by the quality of their workmanship. With all cargo delivered and fresh stores on board, the Captain ordered the crew to set sail and fired up the ship's wind funnels, and the Ardan rolled through the gates of the fortress and headed east.

As Akmir faded into the distance, Crystabal took Tareau aside and spoke to him in hushed tones. "By chance, I happened to be in the vicinity of

the Captain while he conversed with the Commander of the fortress and overheard something of what was being said.”

Crystabal continued. “According to the Thrall commander, there are no less than six sub-men tribes in the area. Three joined forces to attack Akmir just two days ago. Another assault is expected any day, as soon as the other sub-men tribes arrive with reinforcements. In the opinion of Captain Abas this is good news, for he believes that the sub-men will be too preoccupied with the outpost to bother with our vessel.”

“That is the optimistic view,” remarked Tareau gloomily, shuffling his Zodar deck and placing pairs of cards on a wooden bench.

Crystabal looked on intently. “What do the cards say in this regard?”

Tareau shook his head. “Events proceed along uncertain lines. The cards are fickle and do not always yield tangible results.”

“Then why the long face?” asked Crystabal.

Tareau headed for his cabin. “Recall the divination of the previous day,” he said, pointing to the west. “Storm clouds gather on the horizon.”

Crystabal looked in the direction indicated. Where earlier the sky had been clear, masses of dark clouds were now visible far off in the distance. Drawing his cloak about him, Crystabal repaired to his cabin, following after the cartomancer.

The land-ark rolled on, following the old Wilderlands Road as it swung to the southeast. The remaining passengers loitered about on deck, moving listlessly. From the hold came the sounds of the Bodor musicians, playing a melancholy refrain that suited the prevailing mood of the day.

Late in the afternoon, the lookout called out from on high to report that he had spotted a contingent of mounted riders approaching from the north. For a moment all was confusion. Gongs were sounded, calling the crew to their battle stations, and the passengers scurried for cover in their cabins. But the report turned out to be a false alarm, and no riders appeared to threaten the land-ark.

Clouds rolled in, and a light rain began to fall upon the plains. For the first time since leaving Danuvia, the passengers ate dinner in their cabins. Crystabal dined with Tareau, whose mood had now grown sullen and distant. After several failed attempts to initiate a conversation, the rogue

magician finished his meal in silence. Then he left the cabin to take a walk on deck, leaving Tareau to his cards.

The twin suns were lost behind a curtain of clouds, and a heavy mist shrouded the plains. Crystabal found the atmosphere to be excessively gloomy. To brighten his spirits, he strolled past the cabin that housed the Batreans, hoping to catch a glimpse of the two females. His hopes were quickly dashed when Madame Lagos suddenly appeared with the beleaguered Uldvar in tow.

“The situation is intolerable,” she proclaimed. “Our hair and garments have become permeated with the dust of travel, and now this confounded mist! The Grandeloquence will not be pleased!”

Uldvar placed his hands to either side of his head and massaged his temples. “Madame, I will do what can be done. In the meantime, please compose yourself. Your loud protestations threaten to attract the attention of wandering sub-men tribes.”

This statement caused Madame Lagos a moment of consternation, and she returned to her cabin without further remark. Uldvar wiped his brow with the back of his hand and emitted a weary sigh. Summoning one of the Monad servitors, he instructed the creature to fetch a basin of water and bring it to Madame Lagos’s cabin. The mute giant signed its assent and padded off to carry out Uldvar’s orders.

Crystabal, having seen and heard all, took the opportunity to step forward and offer his greetings to the steward.

“Good evening, Uldvar! And how are things with you?”

“In the main, unbearable,” he responded. “The Hajan matron gives me no surcease. Her demands increase with each passing day. Captain Abas does not dare even to set foot from his quarters for fear of being cornered by her and subjected to another of her tirades.”

“You have my complete sympathy,” said Crystabal. “Is there not something that I can do to help you? Perhaps you would like me to take over your duties this evening, attending to the needs of the Batreans, and of course, Madame Lagos as well.”

“Crystabal, you are a true friend,” replied Uldvar. “Unfortunately, I must refuse your generous offer lest the captain discover my absence and accuse me of shirking my duties.”

“He is a harsh taskmaster to forbid even a moment’s respite to such a loyal and trusted servant,” said Crystabal, shaking his fist at an imaginary captain. “Reconsider the matter, Uldvar. Perhaps later this evening, when the captain is asleep, you can come to my cabin and rest your tired legs for a spell. No one will be the wiser, I assure you!”

Uldvar pondered the matter carefully. “On second thought, the concept has much to recommend itself. What harm would there be in a short nap?”

“What harm indeed?” agreed Crystabal.

“By chance, do you keep a bottle in your cabin?” asked Uldvar. “It is not normally my policy to drink while on duty, but a flagon or two of good blue arrack would go far to calm my nerves.”

“The arrangements shall be made; of that, you need have no fear. When shall I expect you?”

Uldvar thought for a moment before giving his reply. “By midnight at the latest. Captain Abas retires to his bunk at this time, and Madame Lagos should be fast asleep and snoring like an old erd-cow.”

“Very good! Knock three times on my door – that will be the signal.”

Uldvar nodded his head. “As you say, and thank you, my friend.” With that, the steward rushed off to perform his other duties.

“The pleasure is mine,” answered the rogue magician, smiling in anticipation of the evening’s escapades.

## CHAPTER 33

**MOUNTED ON THE** skeleton of a two-legged loper, the witchman Xan rode across the barren plains of the Wilderlands of Zaran. Storm clouds blotted out the moons and stars. Gray mists crept along the ground, and a cold rain began to fall. The flinty soil was scored with six wide wheel marks — the tracks of the land-ark that carried the rogue magician, which Xan followed without difficulty.

Far in the distance stood the black bulk of a squat structure outlined in flickering lights. Xan reigned in the eerie steed, and the creature slowed its pace. Xan shielded his eyes from the rain and stared through the mists: now he could see that the structure was a fortress, the outer walls of which were lined with torches. He squinted and made out the forms of men and women armed with iron shields, spears, blades, and crossbows.

Xan scanned the area, his senses suddenly alert to the presence of danger. Slowly, he climbed down from the back of the loper and took cover amidst a tumble of stones and furze bushes. Out there in the darkness, something was headed towards the fortress, practically invisible in the mists.

Xan drew his long knife and waited. Through the mists came a pack of half-human creatures with shaggy hide and wolflike visages, crouching so low to the ground that it almost appeared as if they were traveling on all fours. They were armed with a motley collection of weapons, their

hunched forms attired in bits of mismatched leather armor and scarred or rusted plate mail. As they advanced, the creatures stopped every so often to sniff the air or press their noses close to the dank soil like bloodhounds.

Xan recognized the creatures as beastmen, and knew it was only a matter of time before they caught his scent. Sure enough, the beastman at the head of the pack suddenly tensed. It turned about and let out a yelp, startled by the sight of the witchman and his ghastly steed. The other beastmen snarled and drew their weapons. But their leader, a brawny creature called Kaz, stepped forth to stay their hand.

“Jungle-walker, why do you lurk here in the bushes?” asked the beastman.

“I am hunting,” answered Xan.

“With darkness upon us and the storm approaching? We have keen senses, but smell no prey in this area save serpents and sand lizards. Tell us who or what it is that you hunt.”

Xan trained a steely gaze upon the beastman. “I hunt a man.”

“We too are hunters of men!” snarled Kaz. “Already this day, we have caught several, and tonight we will kill even more!”

“The one I seek is a thief from the Western Lands,” said Xan. Then he proceeded to describe Crystabal to the beastmen.

The beastmen barked, attempting to approximate the sounds of laughter.

“The man who smells like a woman?” growled Kaz. “The cloying odor of his cologne carries for miles on the wind! He left Akmir a short time ago, traveling aboard one of the man-ships that rolls across the land. One of our clans follows this vessel even as we speak.”

Xan sheathed his blade. “Then I must go.”

“Forget this man and join us instead,” growled Kaz. “Tonight, the five beast tribes attack Akmir. We will slaughter all of the manlings and take their possessions for ourselves.”

“Do as you will,” said Xan. “The trail leads to the southeast. I must follow.”

This said, the witchman mounted his steed and rode off, following the wide-wheeled tracks of the land-ark. The beastmen watched the strange and eerie sight for several moments until the gray-green form disappeared into the distance. Then they resumed their preparations for the impending attack on the fortress of Akmir.

## CHAPTER 34

**LANTERNS ALIGHT, THE** land-ark rolled through the darkness. Four pastel moons shone softly in the night sky, their misty-pale light lending an ethereal beauty to the terrain. The ship's sails billowed in the breeze, and the dunes looked as if they had been draped in folds of silver-gray gauze.

Far to the west, the Jaspar Mountains stood like ghostly sentinels, overlooking a deep canyon known as the Dead River. In ancient times, a mighty river once flowed through this ravine, bisecting the continent of Talislanta from northwest to southeast. Now the waters were gone, and all that remained was a canyon that marked the land like a scar.

Below decks on the Ardan, Crystabal lay in his bunk, staring up at the ceiling. Tareau sat nearby on a stool, dealing out cards on his bed. Neither spoke, each being occupied with his own private thoughts.

There came a knock at the door of the cabin: once, twice, three times. Crystabal jumped out of bed and opened the door. There stood Uldvar, glancing nervously from the side in the manner of a fugitive.

Crystabal took the steward by the sleeve, pulled him inside, and closed the door. "Uldvar, enter by all means! I am glad you could come. How goes our little plan?"

Uldvar said nothing but gestured in the direction of the cartomancer.

“Tareau is the very soul of discretion,” assured Crystabal. “He is immersed in his cards and will not disturb your rest.”

Uldvar breathed a sigh of relief. “Madame Lagos is asleep in her private chamber, which adjoins that of the two females. I took the liberty of introducing a tot of sweet blossom tonic into her evening tea, just to be certain that she rests well.”

Crystabal patted the steward on the back. “Uldvar, your ingenuity exceeds all expectations! You are truly a nonpareil!”

Uldvar modestly brushed aside the compliment. “Any steward worth his stripes would have done as much.”

“And Captain Abas?” asked Crystabal anxiously.

“When last I saw him, he was sound asleep in his chair. The events of the last few days have been taxing, and he has gotten little rest. In truth, I have been worried that the stress of this voyage is taking a toll on his nerves.”

Crystabal clasped the steward by the shoulders. “Faithful Uldvar, ever concerned for the welfare of his captain! But for tonight at least, you shall be treated in a manner befitting one of your rare qualities. Kick off your shoes, lie back on this bed, and relax! For the remainder of the evening, your cares are over!”

With a jaunty wave, Crystabal headed for the door.

Uldvar gestured awkwardly. “There was mention of a bottle...?”

Crystabal clapped a hand to his forehead. “But of course! How could I be so forgetful? Look under the bunk, and you will find a flask of rare blue arrack for your enjoyment.”

Uldvar stooped low and retrieved the bottle, holding it up to the lamp for his inspection. “Why, this is the very same vintage as the flask that I keep in my own quarters...”

Crystabal cleared his throat. “A happy coincidence indeed! I take this as an omen that fate is with us this evening! And now, I must be going.”

“Do not forget to brew the tea for the night shift and bring them their biscuits before dawn,” reminded Uldvar. “There are tubers to peel for the morning repast and a soup stock to prepare for the afternoon meal. Be certain to keep the Jhangarans away from the grog barrel, and do not forget to provide adequate instruction for the Monads. Also...”

Crystabal held a finger to the steward's lips. "Enough, Uldvar! You are making my head spin. Have no fear, all will be well. Now, help yourself to the blue arrack, and drink with zest! I will return in the morning and awaken you in time for breakfast."

With that, Crystabal left the cabin, eager to get on with the evening's business. Uldvar's long list of chores could wait a few hours, at least. For the moment, there were more pressing concerns to address.

Walking on tiptoe, Crystabal approached Madame Lagos' cabin. He stopped and pressed an ear to the door. From within came the sound of loud snoring. Stifling a grin, he took a lamp from a hook on the wall, opened the door, and quietly stepped inside.

Crystabal examined the room by lamplight. Madame Lagos lay in her bed, her ample form bundled under blankets of costly silk cloth. On a nearby bed stand sat the empty teacup, and a tray piled high with pastries and sweets. On the left-hand side of the room was the door that Uldvar said led into the adjoining chamber.

Holding the lamp aloft, Crystabal approached the portal. He tried the handle and found it to be locked. The rogue magician produced his set of lock-picks, and in a trice, the door was open. The scent of blue moonflowers wafted through the open doorway. Trembling in anticipation, Crystabal entered and cast a light into the adjoining chamber.

Laying upon a plush divan were the two Batreans, lithe-limbed and beautiful beyond compare. Their skin was like white jade; their eyes were like the bluest of sapphires. Their emerald hair cascaded downwards in waves, caressing their slender forms, which were clothed in garments of sheerest gossamer.

The Batreans batted their long eyelashes and beckoned to him with open arms. In response, Crystabal doffed his beret and executed a sweeping bow. Then he rushed forth to join the two consorts and partake of their heady perfume.



## CHAPTER 35

**CRYSTABAL RECLINED ON** the divan, enraptured as if in a dream. The two Batreans lay to either side of him, their naked bodies intertwined with his in a passionate embrace. They caressed him and showered him with kisses, their adoration filling him with a sense of complete and utter euphoria.

Soft voices spoke his name: “Crystabal...Crystabal...”

“Yes, my darlings,” he answered.

“Crystabal...”

A dreamy smile crossed his features. “Yes, my sweet.”

“Crystabal!”

A sudden slap in the face brought the rogue magician abruptly to his senses. He frowned, opened his eyes, and tried to focus his vision. The images of Lisselle and Soliata were gone. In their place, he saw a face both familiar and strangely distant.

The voice spoke again, only louder. “Crystabal!”

Crystabal raised himself up on his elbows and rubbed his eyes. Lightning flashed through the cabin window, illuminating the form of Tareau, who crouched beside him.

“Crystabal, awaken!” cried the cartomancer. “The Batreans have escaped, and Madame Lagos has gone to get Captain Abas!”

Crystabal staggered to his feet, trying to recall what had happened. One minute he was holding the two females in his arms, and the next... Crystabal drew a blank.

Tareau ushered him out of the cabin. Outside, all was chaos, a cacophony of pounding rain, gusting wind, and the hoarse shouts of the passengers and crew. Jagged spears of white-hot lightning arced across the night sky.

“What is happening?” cried Crystabal, shouting to be heard over the raging tempest.

Tareau’s features looked grim and haggard in the harsh light. “It is as the cards foretold — the storm has come.”

From on high came the voice of the lookout: “All hands to battle stations! We are under attack!”

Suddenly the lookout’s voice was stilled, and he fell from the cupola to land with a sickening thud on deck, a black-shafted arrow in his throat. In the next instant, a hail of missiles assailed the land-ark. A javelin embedded itself in the mast. Broad-tipped arrows cut through the sails and rigging. The Jhangaran, Ghar, came running past Crystabal, then slumped to his knees with a spear in his back.

“The sub-men are attacking!” cried a voice tinged with terror. “Flee for your lives!”

Grappling hooks bit deep into the wooden hull and mast, and a horde of dark figures clambered aboard the ship: savage-looking humanoids with faces like wild beasts, fierce Za raiders armed with bladed bracers and saw-edged broadswords, and reptilian Araq with sail-like head-crests. Howling with bloodlust, they descended upon the occupants of the land-ark, eager to kill and maim.

A terrible battle ensued as the passengers and crew emerged from their cabins to confront their attackers. The Bodor fought the enemy with harps and horns. The Yassan technomancers wielded metal rods that spouted bursts of blue flame. The Zandir freetraders fought with swords and knives while the Aamanians swung heavy prayer wheels and penance sticks. Only Calix the Callidian ran for cover, using a heavy leather-bound tome as a shield.

Crystabal and Tareau climbed the stairs to the deck of the forecastle, where Captain Abas and the faithful Uldvar were under attack from a

group of six sub-men. Crystabal hurled bolts of red, green, and blue force, but for every sub-man he downed another two took his place.

Captain Abas killed a scaly-skinned Araq warrior with a blade-staff, but suffered a mortal wound in the process, and collapsed in a heap. Tareau snatched up the captain's staff and skewered a Za warrior as he was about to strike Uldvar from behind. The cartomancer's actions provided but a temporary respite. A pair of beastmen leapt into the fray, impaled the steward on their spears, and threw him over the side. The savage creatures next turned towards Crystabal, but he cast a spell of spontaneous combustion on them, and the two burst into flame, to run screaming and howling across the deck.

Tareau looked anxiously about, the wind and rain whipping his cloak. "All is lost," he said. "Flee now, if you value your life."

He pressed something into Crystabal's pocket. "Perhaps, if it is in the cards, we shall meet again."

Then Tareau took hold of one of the sub-men's grappling lines and leapt overboard. Crystabal stared, aghast, as the cartomancer disappeared into the darkness.

Up the stairs bounded a band of scaly-skinned Araq warriors, armed with axes of sharpened bone and horn. Crystabal turned to face them, his back to the rail. Then something struck him from behind; his vision dimmed, and he felt himself falling. The last thing he saw was Madame Lagos fending off a half-dozen Beastman, using a cushioned foot-stool as a club. Then all was blackness.



## CHAPTER 36

**SLOWLY, PAINFULLY, CRYSTABAL** awoke. He had the vague sense that it was early morning and that he was cold and wet. He peered through bleary eyes and attempted to take stock of his surroundings.

He lay flat on his back in the mud, his face to the sky. The storm had passed, and with it, the dark clouds that had blotted out the sky. Judging by the position of the suns, it was just a short while after dawn.

At his feet perched a pair of morde – hunch-backed avians, roughly four feet in height, with drawn, cadaverous visages and leathery wings. Crystabal heard the two muttering among themselves as they examined him, apparently unaware that he was still alive.

“Fresh meat...” said the first.

The other nodded. “Mmmm, I get the legs.”

“Auk! You got the legs last time. This time I get them!”

The other morde agreed to this compromise, and the two unsheathed their claws in preparation for a feast. Crystabal sat up in a panic, swatting at the scrawny scavengers with his hands. The creatures backed off, eyes wide with fright.

“Auk-auk! It rises from the dead!”

“On second thought, you can have the legs this time.”

“These legs are mine,” said Crystabal indignantly. “Begone or I will transform the two of you into mud-slugs.”

The morde turned up their hooked beaks and sneered at Crystabal. “It is just as well,” said one. “The smell of this one’s cologne clings to the palate in a most unappetizing way.”

Crystabal staggered to his feet and reached instinctively for his sword but found only an empty scabbard. He scanned the muddy ground for something to throw at the morde, but the two scavengers had already taken wing, squawking derisively as they headed off in search of less-animated prey.

Crystabal rubbed his aching head and attempted to put matters in perspective. Judging by the size of the lump on his skull, it seemed as though he had suffered a blow from a club or other blunt instrument. His sword was gone, lost in the heat of battle. Also missing was his satchel, which he had left in his cabin.

Worst of all, in his estimation, was the fact that his clothes were quite ruined. He gazed disconsolately at his reflection in a puddle, eyeing with distaste his soiled garments, disheveled hair, and mud-spattered boots. His face was streaked with dried mud and grime, and his mustache and goatee were a mess.

Crystabal groaned, dismayed at the sad state to which he had fallen. He bent to wash his face, then suddenly drew back in alarm. Something was in the puddle, and it was moving.

The surface of the murky water undulated and quavered in a most peculiar manner. A face bobbed to the surface, dripping mud and slime. For a moment, Crystabal thought it was the body of a dead crewman or something even worse. Then the face spoke in an all too familiar voice.

“Greetings, Crystabal!”

“Greetings, Miriad,” grumbled the rogue magician.

“How goes the quest?”

“Not well,” responded Crystabal irritably. “So far, I have been haunted by shadowights, stalked by a swordsmage, assaulted by devil-men, bamboozled by a pair of Batreans, and very nearly killed by sub-men. That is the short answer to your question, though I neglected to mention that in the process, a very costly wardrobe has been ruined beyond repair.”

“That much is evident,” said the dripping image, casting a sidewise glance at the rogue magician. “Frankly, I have seen you looking much better.”

Crystabal looked derisively upon the muddy visage of Miriad and scoffed. “The same could well be said for yourself, though, in fact, the reverse has also been true on occasion.”

Miriad’s image uttered a sardonic laugh, twin trickles of brackish water bubbling from the corners of its mouth. “Ah, I see that you have retained that fine sense of humor for which you are both known and admired throughout the Western Lands. But enough levity. Let us get down to business.”

“Not far distant lies the manse of the necromage, Shonos, wherein is stored the precious blue orb that by all rights should be mine. So, Crystabal, enough of your dilly-dallying! Rise from the muck and mire, as our ancestors did when they emerged from the primordial sea many millions of years ago! Onwards to your goal!”

Crystabal grumbled. “My possessions are lost, I am bereft of transportation, and I have not so much as a sword. Yet I am supposed to invade the sanctum of a rival sorcerer and rummage about until I locate this artifact that you covet? The plan is untenable!”

“Untrue,” spoke Miriad’s simulacrum. “You have spells, though certainly not so cogent as my own. You have your wits and those keen instincts upon which you have based a notably infamous career: stealth, sleight of hand, a silver tongue, and to some degree, a certain rustic charm. In short, you possess all that you need to succeed in this endeavor.”

“What about these clothes?” complained Crystabal. “If I must face Shonos in this condition, he will take me for a common vagabond and expel me forthwith from the premises.”

“In this regard, you may well have a point,” said Miriad’s image. “Very well, then. This much at least, I will do for you.”

The simulacrum waved a muddy hand and uttered Rodinn’s Spell of Sartorial Splendor. The enchantment took effect at once, cleaning, freshening, and repairing Crystabal’s costume while simultaneously performing all essential bits of personal grooming. A second later, the rogue magician and his apparel had been restored to their best condition.

Miriad's image appraised its handiwork with satisfaction. "I must say that Rodinn's spell has not only repaired your appearance but I dare say, even improved it. And now, I exhort you! Continue ahead with undiminished enthusiasm for the cause!"

"I go," muttered Crystabal, throwing his cloak over his shoulder. "But rest assured, should I survive this reckless undertaking, our accounts are even! Never more will I agree to any of your hair-brained schemes!"

"What a shame," said Miriad's voice. "I shall so miss our little chats." And with that, the murky image collapsed, reverting to ordinary mud.

Crystabal plodded onwards, the sodden earth sucking at the soles of his boots with each step that he took. It appeared that the heavy rains had resulted in a flood, which in turn had washed away sections of the old Wilderlands Road. The terrain was scored with deep gullies and chasms, marking the routes taken by the flood waters as they cut across the land.

Crystabal proceeded with caution, past sinkholes and stony hills shorn of their mantles of soil by the eroding rains. Up ahead, the land dropped off abruptly, where a large section of the roadway had been washed down a steep decline. At the bottom of the slope, Crystabal spotted the wreckage of the land-ark, now half-sunken in the mud.

Crystabal recalled the words spoken to him by Tareau about the land-ark sinking in a storm. Once again, the cartomancer's divinations had proven accurate.

The Ardan had endured much since Crystabal had last seen her. The vessel leaned drunkenly to one side, the raised end showing a damaged section of the hull and a broken axle as if the ship had struck a large rock before sliding off the roadway. The sails hung in tatters; the rigging was severed, and the spars snapped like twigs. Spears and arrows protruded like quills from the hull, the mast, and the fore and aftcastles.

With careful tread, Crystabal descended the slippery embankment to have a closer look. Nowhere did he see any sign of the passengers or crew. Crystabal walked around the far side of the mired vessel, seeking some means of gaining access to the ship's interior. He found a large mound of silt that had been piled up against the side of the hull when the land-ark had slid down the incline. Using this as a ramp, he climbed up and pulled himself over the ship's rail.

Making his way across the oddly sloping deck, he entered the cabin that he had once shared with Tareau. The contents of the room were in disarray as if the place had been ransacked by sub-men. Crystabal combed through the debris until he found what he was looking for — his satchel, which was still where he'd hidden it, behind the headboard of his bunk. He held his breath and opened the flap. Inside was the magic box, the enchanted horn given to him by Miriad, and the rest of his possessions.

Much relieved, Crystabal made a brief inspection of the other cabins. In the chamber once occupied by the two Batreans he found the remnants of a silken veil, trod into the dirt and torn at the edges. He picked it up and brushed the grime from the fabric. At once the scent of blue moonflowers filled his senses. He closed his eyes and found himself transported back to his meeting with the two Batreans. With a wistful smile, Crystabal tucked the veil into a pocket and resumed his search of the vessel.

The effort yielded little of substance. His sword was nowhere to be found, though he did find a decent blade of Zandir make which he assumed to have been owned by one of the freetraders. As to other items of value, there was not so much as a single copper piece among the piles of detritus and debris that littered the vessel. Evidently, the sub-men had taken everything they could carry with them before the ship went down, including even the bodies of the dead. At this thought, Crystabal winced, recalling that some of the sub-men tribes relished the taste of man-flesh.

Taking one last look at the wreckage of the Ardan, Crystabal climbed down from the land-ark and made his way back up the slippery slope to the roadway. Then, with a heavy heart, he continued on his way to the east, in the direction of the early morning suns.

A short time later, the rogue magician noted the approach of a large six-wheeled wagon drawn by a pair of land lizards, wending its way cautiously along the ruined road. At the reins sat a man of medium stature with a pale complexion, receding chin, and pointed ears that jutted out from the sides of a round and hairless pate. He was dressed in a shapeless grey smock and breeches of coarse sackcloth, all thoroughly stained and much the worse for wear. In one hand, he held the reins. In the other, a long goad that he used to prod the land lizards. As the wagon drew near, Crystabal detected a strong odor reminiscent of organic wastes and offal.

Crystabal waved and called out in a loud voice: "Ho, driver! Ahoy there!"

The driver reined in his land lizards, and the heavy wagon creaked slowly to a halt a few yards from where Crystabal stood.

"Who are you, and what do you want of me?" asked the driver. "If you are a robber, I advise you to seek more worthy victims. I am just a poor dung merchant from the city of Maruk."

Crystabal spoke in reassuring tones. "Have no fear. I am a magician from the Western Lands who finds himself marooned here in the Wilderlands. I ask only if you would agree to give me a ride, for which I am prepared to pay any reasonable price."

The Marukan's eyes widened. "For ten silver pieces, I will gladly convey you as far as Hajan, where I must stop to pick up a fresh load of dung."

"I travel only as far as the juncture of the Wilderlands and Hajan roads. Here I turn north to attend to business of my own."

"Nine silvers then, and we have a deal."

"Agreed."

The dung merchant displayed a wide, toothless grin. "Then climb aboard, and we shall be off."

Crystabal took a step forward and then recoiled, repelled by the strong odor that wafted from the wagon.

"Is there a problem?" asked the dung merchant.

Crystabal coughed, his eyes watering. "Please do not be offended, but your wagon emits a rather pungent odor."

"Aha, I see your point," replied the Marukan. "After a time the senses become dulled, and the odor is barely noticeable. Until you have had time to adjust I recommend that you cover your nose with a handkerchief or perhaps the hem of your cloak."

Crystabal reached into his pocket and brought out the silken veil that he had found beside the land-ark. Holding it to his nose, he inhaled. Happily, the sweet scent of blue moonflowers obscured the odor of the dung wagon. With careful tread, Crystabal climbed aboard the dray, dusted off a spot next to the dung merchant with his cloak, and took a seat.

Taking the sharp-pronged goad in hand, the Marukan prodded the land lizards. The creatures responded by breaking into a waddling trot, gradually picking up speed as they gained momentum. The dung wagon

rolled over the bumpy terrain, skirting stretches of washed out roadway and pools of mud, the latter now beginning to evaporate under the light of the mid-morning suns.

The dung merchant, who introduced himself as Vord, had likewise known his share of troubles and proved a sympathetic companion. In no time the two were engaged in an animated discussion of the various misfortunes that had befallen each in recent days.

“Observe the sad state of affairs to which I have fallen,” said Crystabal gloomily. “From windship to land-ark, and now, dung wagon.”

Vord nodded in appreciation of the magician’s travails. “Your tale is a sad one, to be sure. Yet I’m afraid it pales besides my own. Consider if you will the city of Maruk, my ancestral home. In ancient times our citystate was a place of notable splendor, surrounded by rich farmlands. The first Marukans lived here in prosperity, selling the fruit of their fields to such distant lands as Carantheum and Faradun.

“But soon after construction of the city had been completed, a series of misfortunes, occurring at intervals of thirteen months, beset us. Crops failed, animals died, and the city was plagued by infestations of chigs, sand scorpions, and other vermin. Attempts were made to rectify the problem, which was diagnosed variously as being the result of an ancient curse, malicious spirits, ill-aspected stars, sunspots, and a variety of other possible maledictions.”

The rulers of Maruk hired diviners, sooth-sayers, conjurors, priests, alchemists, thaumaturges, ghost-chasers, and even a local witchdoctor. Yet none of them was able to remove whatever curse had befallen Maruk”

“Sad to say, but these conditions persist to the present day. Our city has fallen into ruin, all attempts at effecting much-needed repairs having long ago been abandoned as a fruitless and unprofitable endeavor. Reduced to selling ogront dung in order to make ends meet, the people of Maruk have become morose. We dress in the roughest of garments and walk about with our eyes downcast. And for good reason, for in many lands we are regarded as harbingers of doom, and are shunned as if we were carriers of the plague.”

“That is indeed a tale of vast misfortune,” remarked Crystabal, edging away from the dung merchant.

“Indeed”, said Vord. “Were it not for our lucky talismans, I do not know where we would be.”

Crystabal raised an eyebrow. “Lucky talismans?”

“Indeed”, said Vord, holding up a lead amulet, one half of which had been painted white and the other black.

“These talismans signify the twin opposing forces of good and ill fortune, which together govern all aspects of existence”, explained Vord. “All Marukans wear devices such as this, which absorb unlucky essences and confer good luck upon us.”

“Good luck?” asked Crystabal incredulously. “Your city lies in ruins, and your people are impoverished and regarded as pariahs.”

“All too true,” agreed Vord. “But without our luck medallions, matters would be even worse. Consider, if you will – good luck and bad come and go, like the ebb and flow of the tides or the cycles of the seven moons. Yet I am fortunate enough to have a steady job as a dung merchant, from which I derive sufficient monies to survive. True, there is not much demand for my wares, but at least I need never worry about a shortage of raw materials. Is this not proof of the efficacy of our talismans?”

Crystabal conceded the point. The two engaged in idle banter for another hour, with the dung merchant explaining the many types of talismans that his people used to ward against various ills, accidents, injuries, and the like. At last, the wagon arrived at the juncture of the Wilderlands and Hajan roads. Here Vord brought the land lizards to a halt and let his passenger off by the side of the road.

“Farewell, and may good fortune follow you,” called out Vord.

“And you as well,” answered Crystabal.

Vord brought the lead medallion to his lips and kissed it, as was the Marukan custom. Then, prodding the lizards into action, the dung merchant headed south in the direction of Hajan.

With a look of distaste, Crystabal brushed a few specks of dried ogriphant dung from his trousers. Then he set off on foot, following the Wilderlands road eastwards across the stark terrain.

## CHAPTER 37

**NOT FAR AHEAD** was a desolate region demarcated by rows of massive stone pillars. Crystabal paused to consult the map given to him by Miriad, then turned to the north, following the track of an ancient roadway.

Long ago, this road had led to a fabulous city inhabited by a race of sybaritic magicians who indulged themselves in all manner of hedonistic pursuits. The ancient city is gone now, destroyed during The Great Disaster.

Crystabal scanned the bleak environs. The roadway had long since fallen into disuse. All that remained were the rows of pitted stone columns that once lined the Grand Concourse, standing as silent reminders of a bygone age.

The rogue magician proceeded along the archaic highway, searching to either side of the road for the seven-headed gate that Miriad had described as the entrance to Shonos's sanctum. Weeds and low-lying scrub proliferated throughout the region, broken by twisted mounds of rock and the occasional stand of withergall. The terrain became more irregular, and the local vegetation gradually more dense, the road wending its way among ever-larger and more imposing configurations of stone. But of the seven-headed gate, he saw no sign.

Rounding a sharp curve in the road, Crystabal spotted a traveler dressed in the long patchwork coat, and multi-colored cloak of a Pharesian peddler

headed towards him from the opposite direction. His complexion displayed a swirl of rainbow hues. A blue and yellow top-knot, standing straight up from the peak of his smooth cranium, bobbed up and down in time to his step. Slung across his shoulder was a cloth bag stuffed with a variety of oddments and in his hand, a wand that emitted puffs of colored smoke.

Crystabal took one look at the traveler and screwed his features into a scowl. Pharesian peddlers were common throughout the Seven Kingdoms, where they were widely regarded as a nuisance. The appearance of these wandering mountebanks in the Wilderlands was not unknown, though for one to be found in such a forlorn region as this seemed a bit unusual, even for a Pharesian.

Crystabal looked for a place to hide until the peddler passed by, but too late. The Pharesian spotted him and approached with an eager and lively step, waving his wand in the air.

“Good morning to you, fellow traveler!” he called, positioning himself directly in the path of the rogue magician.

Crystabal circled around the peddler without bothering to reply. Nonplussed, the Pharesian followed after him.

“Hello and good day,” said the peddler, scurrying to keep pace with the rogue magician. “You seem to be an individual of discerning tastes. Allow me, if you will, to display my wares. What have you to lose? Already you own none of these items. At worst, the status quo is maintained!”

“Do as you will,” grumbled Crystabal, continuing along the road. “Only cause me no delay. I have more pressing matters to attend to.”

The Pharesian’s eyes brightened, his painted features glinting red, blue, and green in the light of the twin suns. “Naturally, you are a person of some importance, as I thought. All the more peculiar that someone of your exalted status should be found traveling on foot through such a desolate region.”

Crystabal shot a decidedly unfriendly glance in the direction of the peddler. “The particulars of my travel arrangements are of no concern to you. Now, begone! I seek the manse of the necromage, Shonos, and have no time for mindless chatter.”

“As you like,” replied the Pharesian. “And may luck be with you. From what I know of Shonos, you will require a considerable degree of good fortune.”

The rogue magician stopped in his tracks. “You are familiar with Shonos?”

“I roam the roads and pathways from Akmir to Carantheum and back,” recited the peddler. “There is no place along the way that I do not know of, no personage of local repute of whom I have not heard. In a word, the answer to your question is yes.”

“Tell me what you know of the necromage,” said Crystabal.

The Pharesian clapped his hands together and effected a broad grin. Small sapphires set in the center of his teeth sparkled in the sun's light.

“I sense a new commonality of interest between us; a means by which we may each come to realize the fruits of our ambitions! On the one hand, you seek knowledge. On the other, I desire to sell my wares. Is the gist of my proposal becoming clear to you?”

“Abundantly so,” replied Crystabal sourly, reaching with reluctance for his purse.

In a state of excitement, the peddler opened his bag, displaying a selection of vials, bottles, flasks, and jars.

“Here are remedies for ailments great and small. Salves and balms, soothing lotions, soporific powders, unguents, stimulating tonics, and revitalizing elixirs. Whether you suffer from the ague, ill-humours, falling hair, or any other malady, the cure is available at minimal cost.”

Crystabal reluctantly purchased an elixir purported by the Pharesian to promote virility while also bringing relief to aching feet. This done, the rogue magician stood impatiently, awaiting the aforementioned recompense.

The peddler stuffed Crystabal's coins in his pouch, adjusting his satchel as he spoke.

“Shonos is an individual of some local repute — a recluse and a compulsive collector of necromantic paraphernalia. He retains a vast collection of relics, including — some say — the skeletal remains of those individuals who have unwisely incurred his displeasure.”

“Of interest to the layman is the rumor that Shonos wields certain potent magical adjuncts, wherein lies the true source of his power. Also widely

believed is the tale which states that Shonos, having lost an eye in a wager with a great Shaitan, now sports in its place a finely polished gemstone.”

“And what of Shonos’s manse?” asked Crystabal. “Do you know it’s location?”

“As luck would have it, the necromage’s domus lays just ahead, around the next corner,” said the peddler. “There is a seven-headed gate at the entrance of his abode, or so I’ve been told.”

The Pharesian shouldered his pack and gave Crystabal a salute. “And now, if you will forgive me, I must be on my way.” So saying, he turned and headed south down the road.

“One moment,” Crystabal called out angrily. “According to the terms of our agreement, in return for the purchase of one of your wares, you were to supply me with specific information on the subject of Shonos. Instead, you offer nothing but hearsay, rumor, and base speculation.”

“Such is life,” the peddler called back. “It so happens that the elixir that you chose was sold to me by a Djaffir merchant, who neglected to inform me that it was merely a placebo. Such is life.”

Then the Pharesian rounded the bend and was gone.

Crystabal shook his fist at the conniving peddler and tossed aside the useless elixir. Then he proceeded north along the ancient thoroughfare, his footsteps echoing softly among the ruins. Just ahead was the path that the Pharesian had described — an archaic promenade that diverged sharply from the main road, paved with hexagonal stones of faded black marble.

Crystabal paused before the entrance, applying the keen senses that had served him well in his chosen profession. The air about him seemed unnaturally still. Though he could detect no outward sign of danger, the surrounding area seemed to exude an eerie quality that filled him with a sense of foreboding. With cautious tread, the rogue magician entered the precincts of Shonos’s estate.

The path led through a garden of exceptionally morbid appearance. To either side stood a line of gnarled deadwood trees – misshapen plant forms of alien semblance, whose wormlike roots were believed to extend into the very depths of the Ten Hells. Sickly molds and fungi sprouted up from the trunks of rotten mang trees. Clusters of desiccated plants with blossoms

like bone-white skulls sent long stalks up from the arid soil. The entire place reeked of death and decay.

Crystabal shuddered. Shonos's tastes in horticulture were distinctly morose. The ambiance of the necromage's garden was not at all to his liking. Strange things lurked in the shadows, and he could not shake the uncomfortable feeling that he was being watched by unseen eyes.

Anxious not to linger in the area, Crystabal quickened his pace, cutting with his sword at those organisms that hung too close to the path. Skeletal fronds clung to his boots. Crystabal kicked them away. A carnivorous plant extended a hungry, blood-red blossom in his direction. Crystabal struck with his sword, and the plant-thing shrieked and withdrew into the undergrowth.

This last encounter convinced the rogue magician to abandon defensive tactics in favor of a more basic strategy. Sheathing his blade, he ran as quickly as his legs would carry him, impelled by a feeling of mounting terror.

He had gone no more than a few steps when he stumbled over a length of vine that had been stretched across the pathway. There was a sharp twanging sound, and Crystabal was dragged upwards into the air, to hang suspended by his heels from the upper branches of a deadwood tree. Writhing tendrils wound about him like serpents, holding him fast and pinning his arms to his sides.

Crystabal turned and twisted, trying to extricate himself from the animate vines. As he did so, a card fell from his pocket to lay face-up on the ground — the item given to him by Tareau before he'd abandoned ship. Imprinted upon it was an image of a man hanging upside-down from a tree, much like Crystabal. A message had been hastily scrawled across the bottom of the card. It read:

“Avoid gardens — Tareau.”

At that moment, a dark figure emerged from the shadows. Crystabal turned his head. Before him stood a savage being dressed in rude furs, his grey-green features decorated with strange tattoos. Crystabal tried again to break free of his bonds. The dark figure motioned with his hand, and the vines wrapped even more tightly about their prisoner.

“Who are you, and what do you want from me?” asked the rogue magician.

“I am Xan,” came the reply. “I have followed you for many miles. Now the hunt is over.”

“To what purpose?” asked Crystabal. “Your name is unknown to me, and I have done you no harm.”

Xan drew his long knife and began to sharpen its edge on a whetstone. “Perhaps you remember an executioner by the name of Grimal, who apparently feels that there is unfinished business between the two of you. It is he who hired me to bring you back to Zantium, where he plans to set matters aright.”

“Grimal’s vindictive behavior is one of his least endearing traits,” complained Crystabal. “For a few minor offenses, he unfairly decreed that I should die.”

“The details of your situation do not interest me,” said Xan, returning the whetstone to a pouch at his belt. “Save your complaints for Grimal.”

Xan tested the edge of his blade against his thumb. Gratified at the results, he took an iron pot and a pouch of herbs from his sack and commenced to build a fire.

Crystabal observed the ominous nature of the witchman’s preparations with growing consternation. “What are you planning to do?” he asked nervously.

“I am mixing a potion that will be used to preserve your head,” answered the witchman. “This way, it will remain alive after I remove it from your neck. The procedure is time consuming, but it is easier than carrying your whole body back to Zantium.”

A trickle of sweat ran down Crystabal’s forehead. “Release me, and I will pay you twice what Grimal offered.”

Xan said nothing, but continued to add ingredients to the mixture. Strands of blood-red vapor began to rise upwards from the pot.

“I know the location of an ancient cache of treasure,” said Crystabal in mounting desperation. “Allow me to go free, and I will tell you where it is!”

“I have already been there,” answered Xan. “As for the treasure you speak of, it is of no worth to me. I care nothing for the trappings of civilization, but prefer items of a more practical nature.”

Xan pointed to the shrunken head that hung about his neck on a cord. “Among my people, fetishes of this sort are valued for their potent magical properties. Grimal has promised to give me your head when he is done with it, so that I can add it to my collection.”

Crystabal swallowed. The thought of his head, shriveled like a dried fruit and hanging on a length of filthy cord, filled him with an unspeakable dread. He realized that, unless he cared to end up in such a condition, he must utilize those talents that had earned him the title of rogue magician.

“If it is magic that you desire, then hear my words,” said Crystabal. “In my possession is a powerful fetish that I acquired from a weirdling’s lair. Undo the spell that binds me, and it is yours.”

Xan glanced up from his work and scrutinized the rogue magician through narrowed eyes. “Describe this item.”

“It is a priceless artifact — a magic box of great antiquity, the origins of which date back before the time of The Great Disaster.”

Xan pondered the rogue magician’s words. “Show me this magic box, so that I can see if it is truly as valuable as you claim.”

“The box is in the pouch at my belt. Allow the vines to slacken, and I will retrieve it for you.”

Xan shook his head. “The box first. Then we shall see.”

With a deft motion, the witchman cut the pouch from Crystabal’s belt and emptied its contents on the ground. Amid the jumble of coins and other articles was the magic box, its lustrous silver finish gleaming even in the dark shadows of Shonos’s garden.

Xan picked up the artifact and examined it. “The box radiates a strange and ancient magic,” he said thoughtfully. “What is its function?”

“The device serves as a viewport into other realms and regions rife with wonders beyond imagining,” replied Crystabal.

Xan studied the chest from various angles. “How does one open it?”

“If I tell you, will you then agree to let me go?” asked Crystabal.

Xan pressed his blade against the side of Crystabal’s throat. “Explain the use of the box, or I will use other means of extracting this information from you.”

“But of course,” said Crystabal hastily. “Notice the two stones flanked by three ellipses. Press both, and the lid will open, after which you may look within.”

Xan did as instructed, and the lid of the magic box popped open. The witchman stared at the artifact in fascination.

“Now will you release me?” asked Crystabal.

“No,” responded Xan icily. “In addition to your head, I will also keep the magic box as payment for the trouble that you have caused me during the past few days. Now be silent; I do not wish to be disturbed while I study the artifact.”

Xan raised the box up to his eyes and looked within. There was a sudden gust of wind, and then the witchman was drawn into the magic box to his doom. There came the sound of a distant cry, and then the lid snapped shut.

At once, the witchman’s spell dissolved, and the vines released their hold on the rogue magician. Crystabal tumbled to the ground, to land in an undignified fashion, with his cloak tangled about his head. Rearranging his costume, the rogue magician rose to his feet and held the magic box aloft in triumph.

“Farewell, Xan!” laughed Crystabal. “Hear the parting words of your superior, Crystabal, who has bested you at every turn! Now you are food for the demon of the chest, and good riddance to you, as far as I am concerned!”

Crystabal laughed long and loud until he remembered that he was still standing in the garden of the necromage, Shonos. Without further delay, he extinguished the fire that Xan had set and carefully put the magic box back in his pouch. Then he continued along the garden walk, searching for the entrance to Shonos’ sanctum.

The path led to the base of an ancient stairway carved into the face of a rocky spire that extended some eighty or ninety feet above the ground. Crystabal peered upwards through a tangle of deadwood limbs. At the summit, illuminated from behind by the light of the twin suns, stood Shonos’s sanctum — a place conceived of madness, with tiered balconies fashioned of wrought iron and weirdly sloping gables. The windows were made of black crystal, and the walls of the structure jutted outwards at odd

angles, forming shadowy corridors and alcoves. The overall impression was that of a macabre mausoleum.

Crystabal muttered an imprecation. Here was more evidence of Shonos's habits, the nature of which suggested an individual of unstable and even sociopathic tendencies. Given the choice, he would have departed the premises at once, never to return. Unfortunately, the nature of his agreement with Miriad precluded such an option. Sighing, the rogue magician departed the necromage's garden and advanced towards the ominous stone pinnacle.



## CHAPTER 38

**WITH SLOW AND** careful tread Crystabal began the ascent up the ancient stone stairway. The way was difficult and sometimes hazardous. Time and the elements had conspired to fashion the stone according to unpredictable whims. On the north side of the spire, the stairs were covered with molds and mosses and were dank and slick underfoot. Elsewhere, the steps were worn smooth, cracked and pitted, or missing altogether. Crystabal negotiated each new obstacle carefully, wary lest the slightest misstep result in unhappy consequences.

At the top of the stairs stood the entrance to Shonos' weird sanctum, a great stone archway into which had been carved the leering visages of seven demons. The rogue magician smiled with grim satisfaction. Here was the seven-headed gate that the peddler had mentioned. Dusting off his garments and adjusting his hat, he advanced towards the archway.

A rasping voice, like flint against iron, assailed his ears. "Come no closer, or arouse the wrath of the dread Shonos, whose inner sanctum lies beyond this gate!"

Crystabal halted and looked upwards at the archway. The middlemost of the stone demon-heads now glared at him with unmistakable sentience.

"In this regard, Quarg speaks for us all!" growled a second voice.

Crystabal quickly stepped back. All seven of the demonic visages now appeared to be alive. Their misshapen heads thrust forward, and the demon heads hissed at the intruder through fanged jaws.

“Shonos’s taste in sculpture runs to extremes,” remarked Crystabal.

The demon-heads gnashed their teeth, straining to reach the rogue magician.

“Know that we take offense to your remarks,” said another of the demonic visages. “We are no mere gargoyles but aqua-demons from the water world of Mir, imprisoned in stone by the dread Shonos’s cursed magics!”

Crystabal rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Most impressive. It is your purpose, then, to slay any who attempt to pass?”

The seven demons threw back their heads, emitting a chorus of horrid laughter. “Come close and see!” they cried sarcastically.

“By no means,” answered Crystabal. “I am intimidated by your formidable semblances, particularly that of Quarg, who is obviously your leader.”

“Untrue!” snarled one of the visages. “I, Nureg, am the most formidable!”

“Bah!” snorted the head nearest to Nureg. “On Mir, the name of Yzak was spoken in whispers; such is my fearsome reputation!”

“Yzak?” screamed another. “Rather, it is the name of Vrek that you should fear!”

This remark was followed by others of an even more threatening aspect until all seven of the demon-heads were spitting, snapping, and cursing at each other in strange tongues. In the ensuing clamor, Crystabal slipped unnoticed through the archway and into the sanctum.

“Farewell to all of you,” said Crystabal when he was safely beyond the gate. “I have enjoyed our little discussion, but now I must be off before your master is alerted to my arrival.”

The demons stopped squabbling among themselves and gnashed their fangs in anger and frustration.

“Do you imagine that Shonos is not already aware of your presence?” said Quarg. “Your death is postponed another few moments!”

Crystabal shrugged off the demon’s remark and tipped his cap. “I trust you will excuse me, for I have business to attend to.”

Again the demons laughed. “Business with Shonos? Ha! Farewell! We shall soon feast upon your carcass!”

Favoring the stone monstrosities with a lewd gesture, the rogue magician entered Shonos’ sanctum and proceeded down a long hall lit by racks of black tallows. Inwardly, the demons’ comments caused him consternation. Was he even now being watched by Shonos or by some unseen agency?

Crystabal shuddered, gripped by a feeling of paranoia. He considered casting the Veil of Stealth, thereby rendering himself invisible to the eye. Then he recalled Miriad’s warning that Shonos was sensitive to the use of magic within his domain and recalled the spell that Xan had cast in the necromage’s garden. Had that enchantment already alerted Shonos of his presence, as the demon-heads had suggested?

Crystabal pondered the situation. Short of engaging in further repartee with the seven demons, there was no way of knowing for certain. Best to forge ahead before he was overcome by uncertainty and doubt. As to his spells, he would use them only if absolutely necessary.

The rogue magician continued along the corridor, past a number of tall vessels made of antique brass. Funerary urns in all probability, guessed Crystabal, recollecting the morbid tastes of the sanctum’s owner. Without delay, he continued further down the hallway, glancing stealthily in all directions as he went.

At an intersection of three corridors, Crystabal paused. Which way to go? Lacking any knowledge of the layout of Shonos’s manse, the decision seemed moot. On a whim, he turned left.

The passageway led to a dreary chamber furnished in black velvet and carved ebony, with bookshelves extending from floor to ceiling on three of the walls. Crystabal examined the contents of the shelves. Here were works of Necromancy and Black Magic: ‘The Pandiabolus’, a copy of Mordante’s ponderous ‘Maleficium’, a set of three volumes entitled ‘Practical Embalming’, Quarus’ ‘Tomb-Robbers’ Handbook,’ and others of a similar bent. Leaving all untouched, he continued his search for the orb of sky-blue crystal.

Crystabal retraced his steps and followed the right-hand corridor until he came to a room resembling a sunken crypt or ossuarium. A short flight of stairs led downwards into a circular vestibule, about which was arranged

a number of glass cases set on pedestals. In these were displayed hundreds of humanoid skulls, skeletons, and less commonly seen anatomical parts, all arranged according to type.

The rogue magician studied the grim objects and pondered their significance. Were these archaeological finds exhumed from some ancient burial ground or the grisly trophies referred to by the Pharesian peddler? Fearing the latter to be the case, he abandoned his earlier reservations concerning the use of magic in Shonos's sanctum and cast the Veil of Stealth upon himself. Then he hastened down the passageway, his sole interest, the blue orb.

After a fruitless search of several ancillary facilities, the rogue magician passed under an archway of black mosaic tiles and entered a windowless gallery, about which were arranged various necromantic artifacts. On a table adjacent to the doorway was a set of antique embalming tools, replete with saws, scalpels, suction bulbs, and sealed jars full of pale yellow liquid.

Nearby was a score of caskets fashioned from smoky blue, green, and violet crystal, each resembling a great, many-faceted gem. The rogue magician approached and studied the curious items at close range. Interred within were the mummified remains of a selection of female courtesans from past ages, arrayed in their characteristic costumes. Crystabal drew back from the shriveled cadavers in distaste, wondering if Shono's bizarre habits extended into the realm of necrophilia as well.

Strolling through the gallery, the rogue magician discovered other eerie sights: a collection of ancient gravestones, an ebony wardrobe filled with funeral apparel, a case of black iron tablets engraved with diabolical hieroglyphs, a variety of devices and appurtenances commonly employed in the summoning of demons and devils. Fighting his growing trepidation, Crystabal forced himself to go on searching for the orb.

On a dais situated at the center of the gallery, he spotted a sarcophagus of archaic design decorated with ancient runes and symbology. The lid was made of a strange silver alloy, into which had been set a number of costly black diamonds. The overall effect was one of great antiquity and rarity. Intrigued, Crystabal carefully opened the lid of the coffin and looked within.

Laying at rest was an emaciated figure nearly seven feet tall, attired in a black satin burial shroud and a veiled headdress of the type worn by the Black Savants of Nefaratus. On each of the pale, withered fingers was a jeweled ring, and around the neck, an onyx carved in the shape of a single, staring eye.

Crystabal marveled at the state in which the body had been preserved, the rich raiment, the fabulous jewels. He reached to touch the necklace. The cadaver's eyelids opened, revealing one yellow eye and an orb of sky-blue crystal.

It was Shonos.

Crystabal let loose an involuntary cry and retreated to a far corner of the chamber, quickly casting the Veil of Stealth upon himself. Shonos rose up from the casket and lowered his veil, displaying a ghastly, mummified countenance. He looked slowly around the room. Then, as if recalling some important detail, he paused to remove the blue crystal orb from an eye socket and replace it with the one made of onyx.

With the dark orb now in place, he again scanned the room. This time the necromage's gaze fixed on Crystabal, and a grim smile crossed his withered features.

"An intruder in Shonos's inner sanctum?" remarked the necromage, his voice like the tolling of a temple gong. "Intriguing! Sit, whoever you may be, and make yourself comfortable."

With a wave of his hand, Shonos dispelled Crystabal's Veil of Stealth. With a fluttering of his fingers, the necromage conjured a pile of silken cushions, a crystalline decanter of purple wine, and trays of delicacies.

Crystabal seated himself but touched neither food nor drink. The necromage adopted a look of mock despair.

"Do you fear treachery? Eat, drink! If I sought your death, you would long since have departed this mortal veil."

Crystabal cautiously tasted the wine, aware that Shonos was scrutinizing his every action.

"Such a quiet guest," said the necromage. "Tell me about yourself. Who are you, and to what purpose do you invade my sanctuary?"

Crystabal's mind raced. If he were to avoid becoming another trophy in Shonos's glass showcase, he would have to choose his words carefully.

“I am a traveler from the Western Lands and a collector of valuables and rarities,” he replied. “Having been appraised of your own talents as a collector, it became my goal to meet you and to see for myself certain of your most notable necromantic artifacts.”

“Indeed? You are a most dedicated collector to have traveled so far to such a desolate place.”

Crystabal bowed his head. “I trust you will forgive my enthusiasm, but I bear upon my person an item that I feel will be of interest even to such an accomplished collector as yourself.”

Slowly, so as not to arouse Shonos’s suspicions, the rogue magician reached into his satchel and produced the magic box that he had acquired from the weirdling.

“Here is a rare object that I obtained in the course of my travels. Note the fine scrollwork and the clever way in which these sigils have been engraved into the top of the lid.”

Shonos came closer, squinting with his real eye at the small silver box. “Yes, yes... Still, I have many chests and hardly need another.”

“Please allow me to elucidate,” said Crystabal, one finger upraised for emphasis. “This is no ordinary chest but a valuable antique of certifiable authenticity.”

Shonos came closer still. “The item radiates a profound aura of magic. Not surprising, as the symbology is indicative of the type used by the great magicians of the early Phaedran Dynasty.”

The necromage stared at Crystabal — a disconcerting sight, with his strangely mismatched eyes. “Describe to me its purpose if you would be so kind.”

“I will endeavor to do so, though I hope you will forgive my somewhat modest grasp of arcane terminology. In a nutshell, this mundane seeming device is actually a portal which opens into one of the lower planes.”

“Indeed?” queried Shonos, his interest piqued. “In the hypothetical sense, what price would you ask, assuming this device was for sale?”

Crystabal scoffed. “Considering the esteemed nature of this ‘hypothetical’ buyer, I could scarcely ask for a fee commensurate to the actual value of this rare and unique piece. A token souvenir of our meeting — such as

the orb of sky-blue crystal that sits on yon table, plus safe passage beyond the gates of your scenic estate — would certainly be more than sufficient.”

“The blue orb is an item of considerable value, which I obtained at no little expense,” noted Shonos. “I acquired it in a dispute with an individual known as Miriad the Magician.”

The necromage glared at Crystabal with his onyx eye. “You are perhaps familiar with this person?”

“In the broad sense, yes,” answered Crystabal. “I have heard his name mentioned in passing, though, of course, I myself would never choose to associate with a person of such dubious character.”

“A wise decision,” noted Shonos. “He is a habitual degenerate, for whom the term “two-faced” would be a gross understatement.”

Crystabal nodded in agreement, but already Shonos’ attention had turned back to the miniature silver chest. The necromage spent a moment in thought. Finally, he spoke.

“I agree to your terms, provided the chest is authentic. In the past, I have been gulled by unscrupulous charlatans, many of whose remains now decorate my display cases.”

“So I have heard,” remarked Crystabal, stifling a feeling of uneasiness. “Feel free to examine the device as you please.”

The rogue magician handed the chest to Shonos, who studied the artifact with interest tempered by a degree of caution. Crystabal smiled innocently, at the same time taking a surreptitious step backward.

Shonos peered intently at the magic box, first with his real eye and then with the other. He tapped the chest with a bony finger: the silver box floated a short distance from his outstretched hand and hovered in mid-air. Shonos spoke a word of command: the lid opened slowly. Crystabal held his breath, unsure of what would transpire next.

A long moment passed. Shonos turned to Crystabal, his withered brows knit in consternation.

“Where is the magic of which you spoke? I see nothing.”

Crystabal nervously cleared his throat. “Due to the smallness of the aperture, the dimension can only be viewed from up close.”

“A logical enough premise,” said Shonos thoughtfully. Approaching the chest, he looked within. There was a sudden intake of air, and the

necromage was lifted off his feet and pulled swiftly into the magic box. The lid snapped shut – Shonos’ spell lapsed, and the box fell to the floor.

All was quiet in Shonos’s sanctum.

Crystabal gingerly approached the silver chest. It appeared undamaged and was still closed. Quickly taking the magic box in hand, he cast a spell to seal the chest and set it securely on the table.

Crystabal grinned in triumph. He picked up the necromage’s orb of blue crystal and held it aloft, admiring its fine luster.

“A fair trade, all things considered,” he remarked.

“Indeed,” said Shonos.

Crystabal spun about, his heart in his throat. In front of him stood Shonos, arms folded across his chest. The rogue magician tried to speak, but words failed him.

The necromage took a step forward and raised his hand.

“Say no more!” said Shonos. “This is indeed a fascinating device, possessed of numerous practical uses! I accept the terms of the deal!”

Still trembling, Crystabal shook Shonos’ outstretched hand, thereby sealing the arrangement. The necromage then took the blue orb, wrapped it in a swath of gossamer, and placed it in an ornate gold jewelry box. This he handed to Crystabal, who accepted the package gladly, eager to complete the transaction and be on his way.

“Here is the orb and the reliquary in which it must be stored,” advised Shonos. “Be certain not to open the chest by day. The item must be kept in darkness when not in use, or it loses its efficacy.”

Crystabal nodded.

Shonos gestured expansively. “Will you not stay for dinner? I shall conjure up a feast for us, along with a bevy of exotic courtesans exhumed from the ancient Hajan Tombs, sufficient to fulfill any other appetites you may have developed while on your long and arduous journey.”

“Thank you,” said Crystabal with exaggerated courtesy, hiding a feeling of revulsion at the thought of Shonos’s “exotic courtesans”. “Only a previous appointment requires me to respectfully decline this most generous offer.”

Shonos seemed disappointed. “Ah, you are a man of your word, of course. Very well, I shall arrange for a carriage to take you back to the

Western Lands. I own a collection of antique funeral hearses, some few of which still retain their original drivers.”

“Please do not put yourself through any further difficulties on my account,” said Crystabal, anxious to be on his way.

“As you wish.” Shonos smiled faintly. “Perhaps you will visit me again sometime soon.”

“Thank you, perhaps I shall,” said Crystabal, convinced that, in an entire world of possibilities, he could imagine few events less likely to occur.

Shonos escorted the rogue magician from his inner sanctum, down the dark and dreary corridors, and past the seven demonic heads, who groaned in unison, dismayed at having been denied the opportunity to feast on Crystabal’s remains. At the doorway, Shonos paused and bid his visitor farewell. The rogue magician waved goodbye and then hastily descended the winding stairway. Making his way through Shonos’s garden, he followed the ancient concourse to the main road, where he turned to the west, moving with uncommon alacrity.

He walked for several miles until he felt he was safely beyond the range of Shonos’ magic-sensing abilities. Without further delay, Crystabal removed the enchanted horn from his pouch that Miriad had given him and uttered the magician’s name. There was a sudden flash of light, and then the rogue magician vanished.



## CHAPTER 39

**ONCE AGAIN, CRYSTABAL** experienced the disorienting sensation of simultaneously falling in several directions, a condition to which he was now beginning to grow accustomed. Colored lights flashed in front of his eyes. Space and time warped out of sync, and the rogue magician was expelled back into the mundane world.

He materialized in a septagonal room, suffused with a wan green light. The domed ceiling was fashioned from panes of emerald crystal. The floor was tiled with green and yellow stone, polished to a lustrous sheen. Like the chamber that he had previously visited back in Zantium, the walls were mirrored.

In their surfaces, Crystabal saw numerous reflections and counter-reflections of himself, each altered or distorted in some manner. Here he appeared short and fat. Here, tall and thin as a rod. There, with arms dangling below his knees, eyes the size of melons, a head like a pin and a bulbous torso, the body of a woman, feet like great flat disks, and so on.

Unamused, Crystabal averted his gaze. A doorway appeared in one of the mirrored walls, and a slender individual of indeterminate age and gender entered the room, levitating a foot above the floor. The eyes were wide and inquisitive; the delicate features seemed by some sleight to change

color when viewed from different angles. Nonetheless, Crystabal had no difficulty recognizing the personage who now hovered before him.

“Greetings, Miriad,” said the rogue magician without enthusiasm.

“Greetings, Crystabal,” replied Miriad.

Crystabal appraised the magician’s androgynous form. “Can it be that this is your true semblance?”

“From a strictly visual standpoint, no. However, I am here in substance. This domicile is my home.”

“It is a fitting residence, well suited to its owner,” remarked Crystabal.

Miriad bowed. “I accept this as a compliment. But let us get down to business. I presume that your arrival at my demesne is indicative of the fact that you have succeeded in your mission. That is to say, have you retrieved the orb of sky-blue crystal?”

“I have,” replied the rogue magician.

Miriad clapped his hands together, producing a shower of green sparkles. “Excellent! Kindly relinquish the orb, if you will.”

“I shall do so gladly. But first, you must agree to absolve me of all further obligations, contractual, magical, or otherwise, pertaining to our previous agreement.”

“In due course,” said Miriad. “Examination of the artifact must necessarily take precedence over such trivial concerns.”

“The matter is somewhat less trivial as far as I am concerned!” retorted Crystabal. “Do you hereby agree that our account is now even?”

“Yes, yes, very well. Anything to stop your incessant yammering,” said Miriad finally. “And now, the orb, if you please.”

Crystabal handed the reliquary to Miriad, who eagerly took the object into his possession.

“Mordante’s blue orb!” exclaimed the magician. “A talisman of unsurpassed virtues, beyond the meager abilities of Shonos to appreciate or comprehend. At last, it is mine!”

Miriad turned to face Crystabal, who affected a perplexed expression.

“Can it be that you fail to grasp the significance of this accomplishment? The orb bestows upon its wielder certain power, particularly as regards the ability to influence entities originating from the demonrealms. Long have I coveted this device! Yet to have confronted Shonos without knowing if

he had discovered the secret of employing the orb would have entailed an unacceptable degree of risk. Hence, the necessity of employing a surrogate.”

“An interesting stratagem,” remarked Crystabal, inwardly seething at having been used in such summary fashion. “And now, as our business is completed, I will take my leave.”

Crystabal bowed and headed for the exit, but Miriad no longer paid him any heed. Suspending the chest in mid-air, the magician opened the lid and looked within. To Miriad’s astonishment, a gigantic, metal-scaled demon emerged from the chest, its single eye focused upon the magician.

“Greetings from Shonos,” said the demon ominously.

A chaotic scene ensued. Miriad drew back in full retreat. The demon blocked the door, cutting off all avenues of escape. Spells flew from Miriad’s fingers, only to glance harmlessly off the demon’s metallic hide and rebound crazily about the room. Unfazed, the demon advanced and cornered the magician.

“Crystabal, a modicum of assistance would be appreciated!” cried Miriad, desperately attempting to fend off the demon’s claws.

The rogue magician shook his head. “Miriad, our account is now even. I wish to incur no further debt on either side. And so, farewell and good fortune to you.”

With a tip of his hat, Crystabal exited the chamber, leaving Miriad to grapple with the demon. The last thing he saw was Miriad struggling to break free of the demon’s grasp while simultaneously undergoing a series of weird metamorphosis: from androgene to female, to male, thence to other forms less easily defined.

Crystabal turned away and passed down a long hall illuminated by glowing spheres, which led to a pair of magnificent portals fashioned of green glass. Before passing through the doors, he cocked an ear in the direction from whence he had come — from deep within the magician’s sanctum, the sounds of a furious struggle could still be heard. Nodding in satisfaction, Crystabal opened the doors and departed Miriad’s fabulous domus.

To his surprise, the rogue magician found himself in the midst of a fanciful city composed of crystalline spires, archways, and promenades. Graceful folk of many colors and costumes passed along the streets and

elevated causeways. Overhead, aerial palanquins and brightly painted windskiffs floated by on the breeze.

Crystabal grinned in satisfaction. At long last, he had arrived in the crystal city of Cymril.

As he strolled along the boulevards, the rogue magician thought of all that had transpired in the last few days: the arduous trip to the Wilderlands, the hardships endured along the way, the many perils and pitfalls he had struggled to overcome. His obligation to Miriad having been satisfied, he was free to go wherever he chose, notwithstanding the city of Zantium, where the irritable Grimal no doubt still harbored a grudge.

Crystabal shrugged. A bottle of amber wine seemed the first order of business, followed perhaps by other, more stimulating pursuits. Time enough later to speculate upon future events...

## EPILOGUE

**THE MASTER EXECUTIONER,** Grimal, sat in his workroom, anxiously anticipating the arrival of one of his associates. A knock on the door informed him that the moment had arrived, and Grimal bid the visitor to enter.

Into the room stepped Vadmir, the chief representative of the Thief Chaser's guild. Bowing stiffly at the waist, the angular Zandir addressed the executioner in an inquisitive voice.

"I have come in response to your summons. What is it that you desire?"

"A short time ago I received a correspondence from one of my associates," replied Grimal. "It has come to his attention that the rogue magician, Crystabal, was recently spotted in the city of Cymril. He was seen at a local cafe in the company of several females, with whom he appeared to be enjoying himself to the fullest measure. In fact, he appeared not to have a care in the world."

Vadmir swallowed. "Impossible! There must be some logical explanation for this situation."

"Indeed there is," answered Grimal, an ominous look on his features. "The explanation is as follows: Xan has failed and has brought disgrace upon your guild. As you accepted payment for his services, I hold you personally responsible."

Grimal took a small mallet from his desk and struck a chime. In response, three tall figures attired in black hoods entered the room.

Grimal cast a disparaging glance at the thief chaser, who now quailed in apprehension. “Take Vadmir away, and prepare him for trial at noon tomorrow.”

The assistants grabbed hold of Vadmir’s arms and dragged him, kicking and moaning, from the room.

Grimal sat back in his chair and smiled. The failure of Vadmir had effectively removed the onus of shame from his own head and had restored the good name of his guild. At last, he was absolved of all blame in the matter of the rogue magician.

Grimal paused, struck by a sudden thought. From a drawer, he retrieved a sheet of parchment, upon which was drawn his latest creation — a fiendish-looking apparatus contrived of rotating drills, spikes, and blades. The basic idea for the machinatus had been conceived some days before, though it was flawed, and Grimal had found himself unable to complete the work while the onus still hung over his head.

The Master Executioner perused the design for several moments. Then, in a sudden burst of creativity, he took a quill pen and added an additional row of spikes, a mechanism resembling a conveyor belt, and a number of extravagant flourishes.

Grimal studied his handiwork and smiled in satisfaction. Vadmir’s execution would be a truly spectacular affair, the like of which had never before been seen in the city of Zantium. It would be a glorious death, one that would be spoken of and recalled with fondness for many years.

West across the Sea of Sorrow stands the city of Zantium – a bustling seaport and a nexus for buyers and sellers from across the continent of Talislanta.

Here, the famed executioner, Grimal, has prepared a grisly spectacle for the edification of his public: the execution of the young rogue magician, Crystabal.

But Miriad the Magician has other plans: to send Crystabal across the continent of Talislanta on a quest to retrieve a precious and powerful artifact from his archrival – the necromage, Shonos.

So begins a tale that will lead the rogue magician on a series of adventures... to ancient ruins haunted by shadowights... to Wastrel's End, and a challenge to determine the greatest thief in Zanth... on a windship bound for the crystal city of Cymril... to the underground lair of Wierdling, keeper of a strange and possibly magical treasure... and a trip by land ark across a perilous wasteland...

Hunted by a relentless spirit-tracker, pursued by horned devil-men... sought by a vengeful swordmage and the aggrieved executioner, Grimal... Hanging over his head was the bargain Crystabal made with Miriad the Magician. And a much-dreaded confrontation with Shonos.

Tales of the Rogue Magician is an adventure set in the original world of Talislanta. Written over forty years ago but unpublished until now, this book is dedicated to the late Jack Vance - esteemed author of *The Dying Earth* and chief inspiration for the Talislanta RPG and game setting.

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