

Chosen of the Sword

A Shadowbane Novella by Erik Scott de Bie

Scribe’s Note: As near as my analysis could determine based on contemporaneous events, this tale takes place over about a tenday of time, beginning 10 Ches 1480 and ending on 19 Ches 1480, which is the Spring Equinox. It is cobbled together from accounts offered by the most unreliable source possible, whom the reader will meet in short order. As always, when one is reading a tale told by Ellyne the Trickster, one should take her words with no small amount of skepticism.

~ Arita

One

10 Ches 1480, The Year of Deep Water Drifting

Steam curled around Garos One-Horn’s dripping snout as he crushed Kalen’s face and torso into the ceiling with hands the size of bucklers.

Far beyond his reach, Vindicator burned uselessly on the ground, its grey flames illuming the chamber as the two warriors struggled in their death grip.

“Die now,” the minotaur said. “You die now, Shadowbane. Die for the Sightless.”

His face purple, Kalen could hardly argue. The only reason he was still conscious was that, in his rage, the minotaur had forced him against the ceiling face up, instead of

just pressing a hand across his throat to cut off his windpipe. Or perhaps Garos had intended all along to spare him a merciful death by strangulation and instead wanted to compress Kalen’s body until his internal organs split their protective flesh.

Either way, Kalen Dren was going to die, and die in no small amount of agony. And then Garos would seize the kidnapped woman lying senseless in the corner and go on his way, leaving Kalen’s task forever undone. *Shadowbane’s* task.

Make of myself a darkness, he thought. A darkness where there is only me.

Kalen had long since stopped trying to break the minotaur’s grip or even beat at the paws that held him captive. He’d gone limp in the hope that Garos might drop him, but no such luck. At least he was outside the reach of that single cracked horn for which Garos was named—Kalen himself had cut off the other two years before. Garos had but to pull Kalen down onto his horn, however, and the fight would be at an end. That death would be a mercy compared to this slow demise by pressure: his spellscar would at least block out much of the pain, and he would die within a heartbeat.

“Any . . . time . . . ,” Kalen managed.

The light in the chamber moved, drawing Garos’s attention. Glassy red eyes focused on the moving sword, which someone as yet unseen had plucked up.

The minotaur’s force lessened in the distraction, giving Kalen the freedom he needed. He clutched both hands around Garos’s right arm, twisted, and kicked backward and down into the minotaur’s ox-like face. The creature staggered back, startled at Kalen’s sudden and desperate attack, and Kalen fell eight feet to the floor. The jarring impact blew the breath from his body, but he got back up. With fury in his pale grey eyes, he drew a dagger of good Sword Coast steel from his boot.

Garos steadied himself and lowered his head to charge, but Kalen knew not to give him the chance. As he ran at the beast, Kalen threw his cloak wide to intercept. Garos’s horn tore a ragged gash through the cloak, which only served to secure it in place around the beast’s head. The minotaur barreled forward blindly, and the momentum pulled Kalen around onto his back. He held on as tightly as he could.

The charge ended short at a solid stone wall with such force as shook the foundations of Downshadow—that topmost stretch of fabled Undermountain. Garos wavered on his feet, then slumped to the ground. By some miracle, the minotaur did not roll over on him, and for that Kalen was thankful. He slid off the mountain of muscle and hair, found his balance, and tugged his cloak free of the beast’s single chipped horn. It would be a chore to repair the jagged hole, but he was quick with a needle and thread.

A muffled sound came from behind them; Kalen had almost forgotten about the minotaur’s captive. Instead, he watched Vindicator, which seemed to float through the dark chamber, providing the only illumination.

“Took your time,” Kalen said with a touch of rebuke in his tone.

A short exhalation of breath—a sigh or a scoff—was his only answer.

A figure stepped from the shadows—a boy of seventeen winters or so, dressed in dark leathers that were in much better repair than the ones Kalen wore. He had been doing this only a matter of months, compared to Kalen’s long years.

“And what was the purpose of *that* lesson, master?” Vaelis asked.

“Teaching you not to . . . rely on the sword,” Kalen said, his lungs protesting every phrase. “At times you will be disarmed and you’ll need to fight . . . without it.”

“And get thoroughly thrashed?” The lad favored him with a dubious frown. “I’ll stick to the blade, if it’s all the same to you.”

Kalen shook his head. They’d been training together almost a year now. Two more months would mark their first anniversary patrolling the cavernous halls and torturous chambers of Downshadow. And though he showed a natural talent for swordplay, Vaelis was still learning. For now, Kalen was content to let him carry the sword. It had, after all, chosen him as its new wielder, marking Vaelis the heir to the legacy of Shadowbane.

No matter. If he was to complete the lad’s training and bequeath Vindicator to him, then he would be patient. After all, he’d waited near a year to fulfill a different quest--a woman to find and words to speak, however difficult they might prove to be. He could wait a bit longer.

“Master?” Despite Vaelis’s dismissive attitude, his anxious expression sought praise and approval. Kalen touched the lad’s shoulder, making him smile in turn.

“I hate to interrupt the father-son bonding,” said a grating voice. The minotaur’s captive looked up from the corner. “But I’m still tied up, you know.”

Talantress Roaringhorn had been missing for some time now, vanished without a trace or a note in the last months of the Year of the Ageless One. Speculation held that she had met some unsavory fate at one of her dockside haunts, or (as the *Mocking Minstrel* asserted with conviction) that one of her ill-advised liaisons had finally proved her undoing. Still other rumors claimed she was with child or had turned into a horrible scaled beast as a result of an old curse. Kinder speculation in the *North Wind* suggested

she'd fled her spiteful mother and the city for fairer climes, possibly in the arms of a romantic and well-blessed hero.

Instead, it seemed she'd been captured by the Sightless—a gang of Downshadow thugs that paid homage to a blind, dead beholder carcass as their totem.

Seemed, anyway. Kalen knew better.

“I did not forget you, Lady.” Kalen stepped toward her.

“Finally,” Talantress said. “If you oafs will just—”

Kalen cut her off with a withering left hook to the cheek. She cried out and fell to the floor.

Vaelis sucked in a breath. “What in the Nine Hells?”

Kalen ignored him and cracked his knuckles. “Well met, my lady.”

“Great Watching Gods,” she said. “My teeth! You've knocked them loose!”

“Really? You choose the Roaringhorn heir for your guise?” Kalen asked. “A woman I've known entirely too well for one lifetime?”

“What? What are you talking—?” Talantress spat out a tooth and moaned.

“Very melodramatic.” Kalen kicked her in the belly and she doubled over.

“*How . . . unwashed . . .*” she murmured, in a fair approximation of the woman she resembled.

“What the Hells are you doing?” Vaelis demanded. He raised Vindicator. “Stop beating that poor, innocent woman!”

“Not poor,” said Kalen over his shoulder, “and definitely not innocent.”

He wrenched the reeling woman up to her knees by her bonds.

“You didn’t think I’d have forgotten my apprentice’s first task, did you?” Kalen asked. “After the Sightless attacked the revel at the Temple of Beauty, we hunted them down and rescued all the captives. I freed Lady Roaringhorn myself. It stretches the bounds of credulity that she would go and get herself captured again, and by the same thugs.” He crossed his arms. “Nay, I suspect you picked Roaringhorn purposefully so that I would see through your guise, in which case I have to say, this is terribly uncreative for you . . . Fayne.”

The woman’s eyes rolled, and finally she focused on him. “Well, Shadow,” she said through bloody teeth. “One plays with the cards one is dealt.”

Suddenly, the visage of Talantress Roaringhorn shifted and flowed into that of a red-haired half-elf with grey eyes—not unlike Kalen’s own. He realized for the first time that she incorporated this particular feature into all her disguises, but whether out of flattery or admiration, he could not say. Her shackles, of course, fell away, and she beamed up at him and at Vaelis. If he’d really damaged her teeth, it didn’t show after she changed her face. He realized she was waiting for a compliment on her acquired looks.

“Nostalgic,” he said.

“Oh, very nice.” She waved her wand in front of her face and her hair began to darken. “Maybe you’d prefer something in blue? I could see about that—”

“I broke your nose the last time we did this dance,” Kalen said. “Did you come here for more of the same?”

“Hardly.” She stepped past Kalen and up to Vaelis, whom she appraised with a shrewd eye. “So this is what you’ve been hiding all this time, eh? A little Shadow the Lesser.” She stalked around him and grasped his hindquarters with both hands. “Ooh.”

“Hey!” Vaelis danced away from her and swept Vindicator across the space between them. Fayne vanished in a puff of fey magic and materialized out of the shadows behind Kalen.

“Feisty,” she said. “Can I keep him, Shadow the Greater?”

“Enough,” Kalen said. “You arranged this—I’ve no doubt you were the one who slipped me the lead about Garos One-Horn in the first place. So what do you want?”

“Ah, but you assume I want something.” Fayne sidled up to Kalen and pressed herself entirely too comfortably against him. “Something more than to see you, that is.”

Ignoring how well she fit under the curve of his arm, Kalen reached down and took her wrists. “I have to arrest you, Fayne,” he said. “After what you did to Lady Dawnbringer.”

“Oh, would you let that go?” she asked. “I only meant to embarrass her—not that she had any shame anyway. Her death was Rath’s doing.”

“And Cellica—my sister. You had no part in that?”

“Kalen—”

Vindicator’s blade appeared against Fayne’s neck, interrupting the conversation.

“It sounds as though you two have much to discuss, but some explanation, if you please?” Vaelis asked. “Unless you’d rather we shackle you for the Watch to collect.”

“As you wish,” Fayne said. “I’m hardly going anywhere with this beautiful blade at my throat. Ask away.”

“What are you?” Vaelis asked. “A wizard of some sort? An illusionist?”

Fayne started to answer but Kalen spoke over her. “She’s a fey’ri—she is to elves what tieflings are to humans. An unholy pairing of darkness and mortal flesh.”

“You make it sound so lurid, as though my mother seduced a demon and stole his seed.” Fayne closed her fingers around Kalen’s hand on her wrist. “That’s *exactly* what happened.”

“And add to that she keeps escaping the Watch’s captivity,” Kalen said. “Through her own magic or that of an accomplice.”

“I’m a lass who doesn’t like to be tied down,” Fayne said. “Well, unless I ask.”

“Then we should definitely kill her,” Vaelis said, as though it was the most reasonable suggestion in the world. “That, or let her go.”

Both Fayne and Kalen looked at him askance.

“What?” Vaelis said. “If the blood of demons runs through her veins, tempting her to foul deeds, does it not stand to reason that she will kill again?”

“Hey!” Fayne sounded offended. “You assume I killed the *first* time.”

“And if she keeps escaping, then there’s no purpose to keeping her locked up.”

“Actually, that sounds quite reasonable to me,” Fayne said. “I suppose you’d better kill me, Kalen. Here and now. Don’t make me wait.”

Kalen, who had been staring in shock at his apprentice, turned his incredulous gaze on Fayne. “Do you take nothing seriously?” Kalen demanded.

“Do you?” she asked. “Your lad just suggested you murder me. So what of it?” She sank to her knees, heedless of Vaelis’s sword, and stared up at Kalen. “Promise it will be fast, won’t you?”

Vaelis held out Vindicator to Kalen to take. There was a certain chill in Vaelis’ eyes, as well as a perceptive yearning. He was watching Kalen carefully, learning from this moment.

And Kalen thought this day was about testing Vaelis, not the reverse.

“No.” He sheathed Vindicator at his belt. “Criminal she may be, contemptuous liar she definitely is, but she is no murderer. She’s done nothing worthy of death, and so I won’t kill her.” Kalen gestured off down the hall. “Go.”

The fey’ri rose and flashed Vaelis a grin. “My thanks—I think?” She looked again to Kalen. “See you later, my handsome Shadow.”

“I hope not.”

“Heh.” Fey magic swirled around Fayne and she vanished.

Flickering motes of the Feywild faded around them—leaving behind the smell of distant flowers just on the edge of rot and the taste of spring air tinged with brimstone. The air wavered as the portal closed.

They stood silent, master and apprentice, gazing at the spot where Fayne had stood a moment before. Then Garos muttered where he lay in an unconscious heap. The sound drew Kalen back to the moment.

“We should bind him, before he awakes.” Kalen took out a pair of manacles and stooped to slide one onto Garos’s massive right wrist. “Vaelis.”

The lad was still staring as the sparkling lights of another world slowly faded. When he noticed Kalen watching him, he looked away.

“If she will only escape and wreak more havoc, then to arrest her makes no difference,” Vaelis said. “Is that why you let her go?”

“On the contrary, arresting her would make a great deal of difference.” Kalen worked to close the bond around Garos’s thick wrists. “She’d be off the street, not haunting Downshadow or rich nobles’ bedrooms. For however long she decided to stay

imprisoned.” Kalen had arrested Fayne multiple times over the last year, but she always seemed to escape in short order to plague him anew. “Still, it would better Waterdeep for a tenday or so.”

“So why didn’t you? Arrest her, I mean?”

Kalen hesitated, but he covered it by focusing on Garos to hide his face. “Even if we’d been able to restrain her from teleporting away, would you relish the task of watching both her and the minotaur at once? No, Garos is the greater threat. We can deal with Fayne afterward.”

Vaelis’s gaze was incisive. “No other reason?”

“No.” Kalen closed the lock firmly and pulled over Garos’s other arm. “And we do not kill unless we need to do so. I thought you knew that, Vaelis.”

“I do.”

Vindicator slashed down suddenly, and Kalen jerked out of its path with a cry. The flaming blade cut down through the darkness and smashed the minotaur’s remaining horn from his head.

“Was that necessary?” Kalen asked.

“Perhaps,” said his apprentice. “Would you rather I killed him?”

“No,” Kalen said. “But a minotaur without his horns—”

Vaelis shrugged. “Let it be a lesson in the error of his ways,” he said. “How is he to learn, if there is no punishment?”

Kalen felt the chill of his words, but tried to shake away his unease. Vaelis reminded him of a younger version of himself—a gutter-born commoner with a sense of good and evil that was very immediate. For Vaelis, there was no debate when dealing

with darkness—no compromise. But had he learned to reconcile that with his human heart? No doubt, if Kalen had suggested they murder Garos rather than deliver him to the guard, Vaelis would have done it. But he would mourn later—Kalen knew that very well.

His hand rose to an inner pocket of his leathers, near his heart. He felt the reassuring texture of a folded scrap of parchment, its edges still sharp despite age and many readings. “We always pay for our mistakes later,” he murmured.

“Master?” Vaelis was watching him carefully.

“Enough blood for one night.” Kalen put an arm around Vaelis’s shoulders. “If you help me with this beast, I’ll buy the ale.”

The lad’s mask slipped and he offered a genuine smile. “Fair accord,” he said.

As they hauled the unconscious Garos through the nearest corridor, Kalen saw Vaelis glance back at the spot where Fayne had vanished, his expression thoughtful.

The last thing Kalen wanted was the lad getting mixed up with *that* creature. He would have to be vigilant indeed.

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Fayne watched them go, unable to contain a smile.

Of course she hadn’t gone, but merely hidden herself in invisibility where she might watch them depart. It always filled her with melancholy to leave Kalen, but she did like to spy on his well-sculpted body. Also, she found his squire—this Vaelis—fascinating. No doubt he would prove an easy pawn in her ongoing game with Kalen.

And it was a game—no doubt about that. He could pretend to have no feelings for her at all, but Fayne knew better.

She slipped away through Downshadow, pondering the best move to make next.

This would be fun.

#

The man in the shadows waited until the daemonfey child was gone, then allowed his cloak of darkness to fade. He stepped into the room and considered.

Unlike the fey’ri, Kirenkirsalai cared nothing for Vaelis or even Kalen but only watched the sword. It had taken him some time to find the avenger of Downshadow. Like Kirenkirsalai himself, Kalen Dren seemed to walk in the shadows as though they were his world. On the other hand, Fayne—daughter of his old friend and nemesis—stuck out like a broken nail. She’d led him straight to the avenger and his apprentice.

It struck Kirenkirsalai as only too appropriate that after this long century, with his quarry finally reemerged, it would be Vindicator that still stood in his path. That damned sword and its wielder had thwarted him too many times, and he knew its power all too well. He had feared to face it a year ago, when his goal lay within his grasp, and, in his hesitation, had lost everything.

Gods, it would be so easy to kill Kalen now—to rip open his body and guzzle the sweet, warm blood—but the man knew to be patient. If Kirenkirsalai wanted to learn what Kalen knew of his true quarry—the girl who called herself Myrin—then he had to wait until the right moment.

At last he would make Kalen Shadowbane put down that sword forever, where it could no longer be a threat.

Then and only then would he delight in savaging them both.

Footfalls drew his attention to the nearest corridor, and he saw four Downshadowers creeping toward him. “Hey, look at the pretty elf-man,” one said. “He’s been wandering by his lonesome.”

“Picked a bad place to wander,” said another.

Kirenkirsalai put his hand on the hilt of the black rapier at his belt and smiled, baring his fangs. He’d grown hungry.

Men screamed.

Two

13 Ches

Needles scratched against leather and the smell of polish rose around the two men, mingling with the smoky aroma of leftover vegetables and braised meat. Vindicator sat sheathed on the table between them. Vaelis could hear it softly calling. But though he longed to take it, he resisted the urge out of respect for his master.

Repairs had become a regular post-evenfeast activity. They sat in silence at a woodgrain table and stitched, polished, or sharpened the tools of their trade. Today’s battles had left Kalen’s armor torn in three places, while Vaelis had a broken elbow guard to repair. Joint work was more complicated, but Vaelis’s skills had improved and he was making good time. He treasured these moments—a chance to share the silence, without a fight or one of his master’s lessons to interfere.

“I’d better hurry,” Kalen said, “or you’ll finish before I do.”

Vaelis shrugged. “You could dodge more cuts in the first place, and then you wouldn’t have nearly as much work to do.”

“You sound like my sister,” Kalen said with a bittersweet smile.

They had taken several hideouts over the past months, moving frequently to avoid detection. Tonight they slept in an unused warehouse, down at the edge of Mistshore, that was owned and operated by the Thann family. Times were tough in the City of Splendors, and even the best of merchants had been forced to suspend a number of their operations. The warehouse had thus far proved an ideal shelter, with an excellent location near the beating criminal heart of Waterdeep, as well as a plentiful store of supplies. A few wares remained in the building: old linens for bedding, broken bits of pottery for eating and drinking, and years-old manifests that let them keep notes on rogues in the city. Most importantly, they had found a whole storeroom of thread and scraps of cloth or leather. It gave them as many raw supplies as they would ever need to tend to their armor.

Growing up on the streets, Vaelis knew the importance of self-reliance, and he tried to place only rare demands on his master’s time. That night, however, something was bothering him, something he could not bring himself to voice. No doubt Kalen had detected it—Vaelis could tell by the way his master was watching him. Vaelis couldn’t help his thoughts as they strayed to an unfamiliar woman with glowing eyes and a wicked smile.

Vaelis’ finger slipped as he worked, and he hissed sharply as the needle stabbed into his finger. Pain bloomed—pain that Kalen would not have noticed. Vaelis wondered what that must feel like. Or perhaps, more accurately, what it would feel like *not* to feel.

“Here,” Kalen reached over, healing radiance sheathing his hand. “Let me—”

The lad pulled away. “It’s fine,” he said. “I can do it.”

“Vaelis—”

A carefully placed tankard toppled from where it stood by the door in the main hall, drawing both their attention to an intruder. Kalen shot Vaelis a look, and the lad knew what to do. He darted away to secret himself in one of the many empty crates. He loosed a secreted hand crossbow from its hiding place, then watched through a knothole.

Calmly, Kalen reclaimed Vindicator from the table and stepped lightly across the warehouse toward the source of the sound. As the door opened, he hid among a stack of empty boxes, sword raised.

The door opened and a slender form entered, dressed in a black cloak dusted with the light snow that had been falling since that dusk. Vaelis drew in a sharp breath at the sight of the feminine curves beneath the dark overclothes. At first, he hoped—but no, this was not Fayne. The intruder was too tall and she carried herself like a soldier. She paused as though sensing danger, and reached for the hilt of a sword.

Kalen stepped from the shadows. “Rayse,” he said.

Valabrar Araezra Hondyl loosed an anxious breath. “You’ve been reckless,” she said in a voice both sweet and sharp. She drew back her hood, revealing her fine features—a pert nose and radiant eyes framed by long, glossy black hair.

“Indeed.” It was not clear from Kalen’s voice whether he agreed with her assessment. “Have you come to arrest me?”

“I should,” said the black-haired Guard. “Jarthay has appointed me head of an elite cadre of soldiers to catch you, after all.”

“How terrible.” Kalen sheathed Vindicator. “Tea?”

“Please.”

As Vaelis remained hidden, Araezra joined Kalen in the small living quarters. Vaelis scrutinized her in the way Kalen had taught him, allowing his senses to flow and listening to his instincts about her motives. Like a trained warrior, she took note of every detail of her surroundings, and like a careful spy, she touched nothing. She was not here to fight, but she was wary nonetheless.

Vaelis had never met Araezra, though her frequent visits usually meant two things: that the Guard was getting close to finding them, and it was time to move.

“An elite cadre, you say.” Kalen poured the tea. “Talanna, I suspect. And—?”

“Turnstone, Starbrow, and Treth.” She pronounced the last name with a grimace.

“My sympathies,” Kalen said. “The Serpent must be making your life miserable.”

“That’s hardly the concern. Lord Neverember himself called me into his offices today, and I had to answer before three Masked Lords. They might as well have tortured me.” Araezra’s voice was forlorn. “I honestly don’t know how much longer I can cover for you. As soon as Talanna’s big mouth slips something compromising, we’ll all end up in the stocks. It’s a good thing Lord Neverember is so often away from the city these days and rarely has the time to meet with us.” She shook her head, her expression weary.

“I appreciate what you’re doing,” he said. “Both of you.”

Vaelis knew what they were talking about, even if he did not know the exact history between them. Last year, the Guard had learned not only of Shadowbane’s existence but also his identity as Kalen Dren. Ever since, Araezra and to a lesser extent her friend Talanna Taenfeather had kept the Guard purposefully one step behind. If the Guard was questioning Araezra’s ability to catch him, Vaelis thought it only a matter of

time before they removed her from the chase or worse. Likely, she already struggled to be taken seriously as a young woman in a position of command. And Vaelis had trouble believing she really deserved the rank of Valabrar—she couldn’t be more than three years his senior. The loss of this charge would be the death knell of her career.

“I’ll stay in Downshadow,” Kalen said. “I don’t have to fight above ground.”

“Don’t make promises you won’t keep—and anyway, it would only delay the inevitable.” She sighed. “If you’re really so concerned about my peace of mind, turn yourself in.”

“We both know I can’t do that,” he said.

“Yes.” She sighed. “Yes we do.”

They sipped tea in silence. Vaelis shifted to try and get a better view—particularly of Araezra’s lustrous black hair—and scuffed against the inside of the box. He winced at the sound—had she heard him?

“So.” Araezra’s fingers tapped the chipped tankard of tea. “Where is he?”

Vaelis drew in a deep breath. She *had* heard.

“Tonight I left three would-be burglars trussed up for the Watch down at the edge of the City of the Dead,” Kalen said. “Honestly, I should have let the topiary dragon have them, but—”

“That’s not who I mean,” Araezra said.

“Garos, then?” Kalen asked, deflecting. “That was days ago, Araezra. I hope he hasn’t escaped since—”

“Not the minotaur.” She leaned across the table. “Your student—squire, apprentice, whatever you call him. I’ve heard the rumors. So where is he?”

Kalen shook his head. “Rayse—”

There was nothing for it. Vaelis climbed out of the box and stepped toward them at the table. “Here,” he said. “I am called Vaelis.”

“Indeed.” Araezra gave him a long, appraising look. “Well met, then. I like to see who I’m protecting at the risk of my commission.”

Vaelis cringed, ready for his master to berate him, but Kalen did not acknowledge him. The silence chilled.

“Well.” Araezra cleared her throat. “I should return to the barracks.” She touched Kalen’s wrist—a friendly and intimate parting gesture. “Please take care.”

And with that, she went away.

As soon as the Valabrar was out of the chamber, Kalen turned to Vaelis, his expression harsh. “You should not have shown her your face.”

“Why not?” Vaelis smirked at Kalen. “You’re bedding her, after all. If she’s loyal to you, what does it matter if she knows my face?”

“It matters,” Kalen said. “And no, I’m not. Not for a long time, now.”

“Shame.” Vaelis scrutinized her posterior as she left the warehouse. “She’s well made, that one. I wouldn’t mind sleeping with the enemy—”

“She isn’t—” Kalen sighed. “You are too young to understand.”

“Oh, how likely it is that you’re such an expert on the feminine? To quote Thann, ‘ye, who hath so many womenfolk that do kiss the ground upon which he doth trod.’ ”

“Tread,” Kalen corrected.

“And there’s that,” Vaelis said, his anger rising. “You think because you’re learned and schooled, you’re smarter than me. And yet you’re not even smart enough—” He bit his lip.

Kalen drew back warily. “Whence all this? Have I done something to anger you?”

Words rose to Vaelis’s lips, but he choked them down. That business with Fayne had irked him, and he’d not realized it until just now.

“I would not have let you kill her, you know,” Vaelis said. “It was just talk.”

“I know.” Kalen nodded, as though he had heard Vaelis’s thoughts. The lad hated how his master could do that. “But if you are going to wield Vindicator, you should know the difference between justice and punishment for punishment’s sake.” Kalen took Vindicator’s hilt in his right hand and drew the sword. It glittered between them. “You do still want to wield the sword, do you not?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” Kalen said. “Then let us find a new place to rest. Araezra may be our friend, but—”

“Indeed, master,” Vaelis said. “I’ll start packing.”

On the run, again. Would they ever stop?

Vaelis looked over his shoulder at Kalen. His master set Vindicator back on the table but lingered a moment. Vaelis saw him take a scrap of parchment from a pouch at his throat. He’d seen the note before, of course—many times in the months he’d spent as Kalen’s apprentice—but he’d never before asked about it.

Seeing Kalen holding it now, Vaelis felt righteous anger churn within him. Kalen seemed like the worst kind of hypocrite.

Vaelis buried the feeling and focused on packing their belongings.

Three

13 Ches

Master and apprentice sprinted across the rooftops of Waterdeep’s dock ward, keeping pace with the racing seabirds. Cold, salty air gusted over them, ripping at their clothes as they leaped from building to building. The nobles and commoners who wandered the streets below only occasionally looked up in the wake of their passage.

Kalen paused at the edge of the Bloody Fist tavern and glanced back, cloak rushing up around him in an updraft. Vaelis pulled up short behind him, breathing hard after their miles-long run.

“Not as fast as you, nor for as long.” Vaelis bent down, hands on his knees. He gave Kalen a shaky smile. “Not all of us feel no pain, after all, and running hurts.”

Kalen nodded. He’d told Vaelis early in their partnership about his numbing spellscar, and the lad had never really understood why he didn’t view it as a blessing. He was young, and thought his master invincible.

If only he knew.

“Patience,” Kalen said. “Another month, and you will outpace me.”

“You said as much last month,” Vaelis grumbled. “And the month before—”

“Patience.”

Vaelis made a dismissive sound in his throat but nodded.

They stood atop the Fist and gazed out to the moonlight gleaming across the chopping waves. The Sea of Swords was troubled this night, quaking beneath Selûne’s silvery gaze. Kalen felt a foreboding stir in the turbulent water—something violent that drew ever closer.

“Ready to move?” Kalen asked after a moment.

Vaelis grunted and they continued on.

They made their way south along Snail Street. A late-night party shook the Three Pearls festhall across the way, and music and laughter serenaded the running men. It reminded Kalen of another night, long ago—the last time he had allowed himself to take part in such revelry. He remembered blood gushing from an opened throat, a dark-haired elf woman whose gold eyes turned jet-black, and a blue-haired woman in a crimson dress. No, her hair had been silver that night—silver and long . . .

“Master,” Vaelis said. “I’ve a question.”

“Of course,” Kalen said.

“What do you do, when you love a woman?”

The words were so unexpected Kalen almost missed the next landing, and he stumbled across the rooftop of the Sleeping Wench. He skidded toward the far edge and might have fallen into the plaza had Vaelis not caught and steadied him.

“Sorry, Master,” he said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s nothing.” Kalen shook his head. “What are you asking? About . . . er . . .”

“Not that.” Vaelis blushed. “I know about the things men and women do.”

Kalen was relieved. “So do you want to know?”

“You’re close with our friend in the guard. And there’s something between you and that Fayne woman.” Vaelis looked at him directly. “How do you have women while you follow Shadowbane’s quest?”

“I wouldn’t claim to *have* women—I certainly do not own them—but I take your meaning.” He considered “Do you ask because of that lass of yours—Trill? Trillian?”

“Trilla,” he said. “And yes, I suppose.”

Kalen knew that, before his calling, Vaelis had established a reputation as a friend to ladyfolk. He’d had a number of short-lived romances that had never seemed to go particularly far. His latest interest was a Tethyrian lass called Trilla, a commoner who worked at her mother’s cobbler shop. Kalen had never met the girl, but he’d watched the two of them at more than one of their surreptitious meetings. Vaelis always seemed casual and aloof around women, which Kalen suspected was exactly what drew them.

“You want to know how I manage to be both Shadowbane and a man.”

Vaelis nodded slowly.

Kalen sighed. “Sometimes, we are called upon to choose between those things we want, and those things we must do.”

Though this was true, he’d never before given it such bleak words. There had been a few women in his time as Shadowbane—Araezra, Fayne—but he had always chosen his duty first. Indeed, his relationship with Fayne was only slightly less confusing than his feelings for Myrin. He’d barely known the blue-haired wizard, and yet . . .

“And if I will not?” Vaelis murmured, which Kalen faintly heard.

“I am sorry,” Kalen said. “It’s not up to us . . .”

“Wait.” Vaelis turned his gaze down into the alley, from which arose a muffled plea. Two ruffians in torn tradesmen’s garb assaulted a woman whose light blonde hair shone in the moonlight. Even at this distance, the men reeked of sour ale and the stink of human waste. Their victim seemed to have relinquished her coin, but they made no move to leave—they tore at her clothes and laughed at her attempts to flee.

Kalen nodded. “I have the one on the right,” he said.

“Indeed.” Vaelis leaped first, and Kalen followed close behind.

Vaelis struck half a heartbeat faster, and Kalen’s opponent had just enough time to look up in surprise before the paladin in dark leathers fell into him and knocked him staggering. The man tried to right himself, but Kalen proved quicker and lunged forward. He smashed the pommel of Vindicator into the mugger’s nose, who went down like split kindling, the knife he’d tried to draw clattering to the grimy cobblestones.

Steel scratched against leather and Kalen heard a grunt of pain. Vaelis staggered back from his own victim, clutching a slashed-open arm. The thug—a sailor from the north, by his cold complexion and lack of hygiene—had a knife at the ready. He reversed it in his hand and chuckled at the boy who challenged him.

“Here, me pretty lad,” he said. “I’ll cut you more—”

Kalen unsheathed Vindicator and tossed it in one fluid motion. Vaelis caught the sword in both hands and grey flame sheathed the blade. They swept along his arm and seared his wound shut with holy power. His pirate opponent gasped.

Kalen turned to tend to the woman in distress. She seemed young, perhaps Vaelis’s age, and there was surprisingly little fear in her eyes. Though Kalen’s leathers and mask often proved intimidating to those he saved, this girl held her ground.

“Run,” he said.

She gave Kalen a grateful smile, then complied. As she slipped away, she called “Help!” and “Watch! Call the Watch!”

Behind Kalen, the mugger with the knife cried out in pain. The man fell back against the wall and cradled his knife hand, which gushed blood down his tunic. Vaelis bore down upon him, Vindicator raised, murder written in every movement. Kalen stepped forward and seized Vaelis’s wrist to hold the sword back. The mugger took off.

“What are you doing?” Kalen asked as he reclaimed Vindicator roughly.

“I am repaying his offense.” Vaelis showed Kalen his wounded arm. “Is this not justice?”

“We do not—” Kalen bit his lip. “It is not justice to murder.”

“Do you see what they would have done to that woman? No doubt what they have done before?” Vaelis glared. “How can you stand there and tell me not to kill them?”

“We do not murder.”

“But we *defend*,” Vaelis said. “How are we defending the people of Waterdeep by suffering scum like that to live?” He looked down at the man Kalen had knocked unconscious. He put his hand on his belt dagger. “What use is this trash to anyone? We would do Waterdeep a service—”

“No,” Kalen said. “That is not justice.”

“Indeed,” Vaelis said. “It is too *efficient* to be justice.”

The point became moot, however, when Watch horns sounded, and Kalen heard a dozen booted feet coming their way. The Watch couldn’t have responded so fast and in

such force. They appeared at the entrance to the alley—Watchmen as well as Waterdeep Guard in black coat-of-plate armor and weathercloaks.

“Speaking of your dally-dolls—” Vaelis nodded toward a familiar black-haired woman striding in front: Araezra Hondyl.

It was a trap, Kalen realized. They’d been set up. “Move,” he said.

They hurried the other way through the alley, but were cut off a pair of Guards searching near the street. Kalen and Vaelis crouched in a hidden alcove behind foul-smelling scraps of the evening meal at the Sleeping Wench. Black leather boots crunched through the alley toward their hiding spot. Vaelis again touched the hilt of his belt dagger, but Kalen shook his head silently. Hiding was their only course.

“A darkness,” he murmured, “where there is only me.”

To calm himself, Kalen repeated his mantra and touched the pouch at his neck where he kept his most precious possession. At least, if his task came to a close, the woman who had given him the pouch would not have to worry for his safety anymore.

Shadows moved, and a Guard stepped around the pile of refuse that provided their cover. Kalen thanked the gods it was Araezra, though her grim expression failed to reassure him. She had her hand on the hilt of her Guardsword, and when she saw Kalen and Vaelis, it tightened. Her bright eyes studied them.

“Rayse?” Talanna called.

After a moment, Araezra shook her head. “Nothing here,” she said, pointedly looking at Kalen. “Whoever did this must have fled.”

Then she went away.

“*Absolutely* you’re bedding her—or you should be, by the gods,” Vaelis murmured. Kalen elbowed him.

The Guard lingered in the alley another moment, but eventually went on their way, muggers in tow. Apparently, the man Kalen sent away had run straight into their arms. He cried out about a knight in black—two of them, even!—with a sword of fire.

“Fancy that—*two* black knights,” Vaelis said with a smile. “I’ll be as infamous as you, soon enough.”

Kalen did not share the lad’s enthusiasm, though he would allow that they had done well. Aside from the anger that had boiled over tonight, Vaelis was almost ready to take Vindicator and pursue Shadowbane’s quest himself, even though he was still a boy and thought like one. Vaelis must learn, and soon.

Kalen could not credit the feeling, but an uneasy sense of imminent danger tickled at his neck. They were being watched, he thought. He looked around but could see no one on the rooftops or in the shuttered windows.

“The Guard came upon us with remarkable speed, almost as though they knew where to look,” he said at last.

“Araezra didn’t betray us,” Vaelis said. “Else she wouldn’t have pretended not to see us.”

“No,” Kalen agreed. “Someone else. Fayne, perhaps. That woman we saved—she didn’t seem afraid. Perhaps—?”

“Perhaps it was her,” Vaelis said.

“Blades at the ready.” Kalen closed his hand on Vindicator’s hilt. “No doubt we’ll be seeing her soon enough.”

#

Kirenkirsalai lurked at the corner of the rooftop, watching it all and hearing every word with senses long since sharpened beyond those of mortal men. The shadows concealed him well enough from Kalen’s scrutiny—he had no worries on that account—but frustration still tugged at him. He would have been able to ambush the two men if a mugging hadn’t played out in the same exact spot. And like Kalen, he had no doubt that Fayne had set this up—like as not, she had been the seemingly innocent victim. Lilten must have taught her strong magic if Kirenkirsalai could not see through her disguises.

Over the year he’d spent in Waterdeep, he’d thought this Fayne creature a trickster and no threat, but she’d recently stepped across his path several times. Tonight might have been for the best, as facing Vindicator directly was not in his plan, but in the future . . .

Perhaps he could use Fayne, if only he could get to her without crossing her patron. His old friend had resided in this city for some time now, keeping close to his favorite servant. He could ill use the attention of Lilten Changecloak just at the moment.

But perhaps . . . ah yes.

He allowed himself a tiny smile, then danced away through the shadows.

Four

15 Ches

Vaelis sat alone in the common room of the Yawning Portal, toying with the rim of a mostly empty ale tankard. He seemed to focus on the lukewarm dregs, but in reality he was observing those around him.

He heard merchants discussing the price of silks two tables away. By the cut of their attire—one outfit fashionable and modern, the other slightly threadbare—Vaelis knew one of them was pretending to be interested. But why? From their words, much coin was at stake, and both were drinking heavily. Did the poorer merchant intend to scheme the other out of it, or was he merely desperate? Frustrated, Vaelis knew he could not intercede, as there was nothing illegal about making a bad business deal. He would, however, relish the chance to intervene in an ambush if hired thugs were waiting outside the Portal, looking to even the disparity in coin.

Five noble youths sat around a corner table, carousing and drinking heavily. Vaelis could only make out half of their words—they spoke with a slur inherited from hours of heavy drinking. Two laughing girls at the near edge of the table glanced toward him, then leaned back in to gossip. He thought they were daring one another to go join him. He smiled to himself.

Kalen called this technique Insightful Watching, and it was one of the first skills the Eye of Justice had taught the paladin in Westgate. Vaelis couldn't help but grow excited when Kalen spoke of his teachers there, and he hoped some day to travel to the Dragon Coast to round out his training with the full organization. For now, though, he'd work with what the gods gave. Kalen was a good teacher, and though Vaelis wanted more, he could content himself here in Waterdeep.

With his awareness expanded to encompass the whole of the tavern, Vaelis felt as much as saw Kalen open the back door to the alley and slide into the common room. Vaelis had not seen his master in two days—ostensibly, Kalen had been off taking care of business secondary to their task. This morn, when Vaelis had seen the banner hung outside the Yawning Portal—the signal to meet that night—he’d been relieved. Kalen smiled slightly when he saw Vaelis watching, then made his way to the center table.

“You’re late,” Vaelis said.

Kalen slid into the seat next to him. “What do you see?”

A further test, then. Vaelis thought Kalen might have been watching him all this time, seeing how he would act unsupervised. Very well.

“House Moonstar is about to lose a great deal of coin, assuming I’m right and its heir can’t hold his drink. It’s all legal, however, if underhanded. Those lasses over there want to approach me, but neither wants to do it first. Meanwhile, the lordlings accompanying them are hatching a scheme to test their tolerance as well.” He shook his head. “A slow night in the Yawning Portal.”

“Ah,” Kalen said. “But do you see anything you *like*?”

He traced his fingers along the lad’s wrist, causing Vaelis to recoil in surprise.

Kalen’s smile was far broader than Vaelis had ever seen on his face. “You’re not—” he said, just as he sensed someone sitting on the other side of him.

“Boy.” Kalen—the real Kalen—sat down beside him. “What is it?”

The lad opened his mouth to warn his master, but he felt a hand touch the inside of his thigh and froze. “I’d take care,” said the attractive half-elf woman who had looked

like Kalen half a breath ago. “I’ve a particularly poisonous ring at a very sensitive spot of yours that I think we’d both prefer remained intact.”

Vaelis looked over at Kalen, but his master seemed oblivious to his predicament.

“Only you can see or hear me.” Fayne squeezed his leg. “Be a love and don’t give me away, will you? I promise it’ll go better for you . . .,” She smiled, revealing surprisingly sharp teeth. “For both of us.”

Vaelis, roiling with both excitement and fear, nodded subtly. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?” Kalen regarded him curiously. “Are you—?”

“Where have you been for two days?” Sweat broke out on Vaelis’s brow, but he focused on the conversation. “Master,” he added.

“I’ve been handling a matter unrelated to our task.”

“With Valabrar Hondyl then,” Vaelis said, earning an approving snicker from Fayne. “I trust that as stunning as she is *in* her clothes, she’s just as—”

“As I said before, nay.” Kalen waved for an ale of his own. “If you must know, I’ve been interviewing dockhands and caravan captains.”

“Ooh,” Fayne purred, making Vaelis jolt in his seat. “I wonder why . . . ?”

Kalen looked a touch suspicious now, scrutinizing the space on the other side of his student. Vaelis had never imagined a situation quite like this. He could barely think.

“You must be looking for someone,” Vaelis observed shakily. “A mark?”

“The criminals of Waterdeep are keeping their heads below the water,” Kalen said. “Garos was just the latest in a string of major players we’ve taken down over the past months. I know it doesn’t seem like it, but we’re making good progress. Perhaps we should move to Neverwinter next. No doubt there are schemes aplenty there to—”

Vaelis stopped listening to Kalen and focused instead on Fayne’s caress. Her touch moved up his leg, subtly but definitely, and he could feel his heart beating in his throat. Gods, he could picture her, naked and beckoning. He yearned for her lips on his—wanted her hands all over him. She inched closer to him. Their hips touched, and her breasts brushed his arm as she leaned up to his ear.

“So, my handsome lad,” Fayne whispered. “Who was he looking for?”

“Who!” Vaelis almost squeaked, then caught himself. “You didn’t answer my question. Who are you looking for?”

Kalen hesitated, studying him, then nodded. “A friend. One that I drove away after—a mistake that I made.” Kalen shook his head. “We all make mistakes, and this one is mine to correct. Though I will not let it interfere with our task.”

Fayne caught her breath at Kalen’s final words. She leaned away from where she had almost entwined with Vaelis, a frown on her face. “I’m a mistake, eh?” she said.

Before Vaelis could move, Fayne was gone. There was no burst of flowers and brimstone this time. She simply disappeared.

“Vaelis,” Kalen said. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” He touched his empty ale tankard. “Keep your mysteries if you will, but the next round is on you.”

Kalen smiled. “You have been a good student, Vaelis. These past months, I have watched your skills grow. Soon I will have nothing more to teach you.”

Vaelis gaped. “But—but what does that mean? Will I—?” He glanced down at Kalen’s belt, but of course he’d not worn Vindicator openly into the tavern. “Will the sword be mine? To carry on the Threefold God’s work?”

“Perhaps.”

Vaelis’s heart swelled a pride that pushed all his lustful thoughts about Fayne far from his mind. He beamed at Kalen. “Better make that two ales each,” he said when the barmaid returned with their drinks. “Or better yet, zzar!”

Five

16 Ches

“Oof.” Vaelis shook his head. “Too much zzar.”

“Stay on guard.” Kalen slashed at his apprentice’s head, and Vaelis staggered under the force of the blow. “You think your foes will hesitate to cut you down because you had too much to drink? You must never let your weakness cause you to fall.”

“But—”

Kalen came at Vaelis in a quick, three-pronged attack that his apprentice deflected admirably. Swordplay had never been Vaelis’s strong suit, but he’d always moved with devilish speed. Growing up on the streets, constantly on the run from Watch and criminals alike, had given the lad a knack for escaping even sure defeat. Not, of course, that it allowed him to pierce Kalen’s guard.

“There is no excuse or compromise to be made.” Kalen dipped his sword to the dusty floor and drew a line. “You must be able to stand your ground and fight, until you are dead or you have a victory.”

“But run when you must.”

“Indeed.” Kalen raised his sword. “Now is not one of those times.”

The lad grimaced, but he straightened his stance. “Ready.”

“Good.”

Kalen struck, fast and brutal. Vaelis managed to dodge, but it was not enough. If the boy was to be Shadowbane, he would have to rise above simple defense. Kalen fell into the grace of the Threefold God, letting his soul guide his attacks. He struck Vaelis wide—perfectly—sending the lad reeling. Had Kalen been wielding Vindicator, it would have cut his apprentice’s sword from his hands and his head from his shoulders.

“Fight,” Kalen said. “Do not run.”

Vaelis glared and adjusted his grip on his sword.

Kalen attacked again, hacking down at Vaelis’s defenses. The boy shifted on his feet, though he set himself firm to receive each of the blows. Kalen admired how effortlessly Vaelis both parried and positioned himself into a better countering position with the same movements. He also moved too fast for Kalen to break his technique with anything like ease. When Kalen brought his sword around and slashed in the opposite direction, Vaelis ducked under the sweeping cut and came up inside his guard to score a hit to Kalen’s chest.

“You see?” Kalen asked. “Believe, and you will succeed.”

Vaelis smiled warmly. “Again.”

They had taken to doing their practice bouts in a hidden chamber in Downshadow—one that only Kalen knew how to find, secured with a lock only Kalen knew how to open. Their hideaway was sufficiently removed from the beaten track that

the odds of an errant adventurer stumbling across it were long indeed, and he had never encountered anyone anywhere near here.

Except the intruder opening the door just at that moment.

Kalen paused, not sure he quite believed his ears. To his credit, Vaelis reacted first. He threw down his practice sword and went immediately for the real swords that leaned against the wall, near to hand. He took up both, and tossed Vindicator to Kalen. Grey flames spread along the blade when Kalen grasped it. Startled out of his initial hesitation, Kalen turned toward the hidden door, ready for any attack.

When the door opened, however, it was not a contingent of the Guard, or a mass of Shadowbane’s enemies looking for retribution, or even hapless delvers into the fabled Undermountain. Instead, a grey-eyed half-elf woman stood up from where she had worked open the lock, and looked at them bemusedly.

“Quite a welcome,” Fayne said. “But I assure you, I mean no harm. This time.”

Vaelis remained silent, watching her steadily. If the lad even remembered he still held a sword, it did not show on his face.

After contenting himself she posed no threat—and that no soldiers stood behind her—Kalen lowered Vindicator. “In or out?” he said. “There’s no sense leaving the door open to invite in *another* wandering monster.”

“Charming.” Fayne swayed inside and shut the secret door behind her. Then she leaned back against the wall. “Aren’t you at all curious as to why I’m here?”

“Not even a little bit,” Kalen said. “Boy, fetch the practice swords. We leave in a twenty count . . . *Vaelis*.”

The boy was staring at Fayne, though when Kalen barked his name, he nodded and jumped to follow instructions.

"Vaelis, is it?" Fayne looked intrigued. "Delicious."

Kalen cursed inwardly. He hadn't meant to reveal his apprentice's name, but Fayne had disrupted his tight control. He'd been around plenty of women who made him reticent and suspicious, but only Fayne made him careless. He'd shared a number of confidences with her in moments of weakness that he later regretted. But he knew more about her than she cared to admit as well.

"Very well," Kalen said, admitting defeat. "Do you actually have some business this day, Fayne, or would you waste my time again?"

"I had hoped to join you," she said.

"Fighting? I did not think you cared for work that required you to sweat."

"Swordplay is not my forte, 'tis true," Fayne said. "Though I've just recently taken it up and find I rather enjoy it. No doubt you would prove much too skilled for my clumsy blade." She gave Kalen an appraising look, then winked at Vaelis. "But from what I've seen, I fancy I could defeat your boy any day in ten."

Vaelis stiffened. "In that case, I am for you."

"Oh, I hope so."

Kalen felt uneasy, but then, casual flirtation was Fayne's way. "I suppose there is time. Would you fight her, Vaelis?"

His apprentice was staring hard at Fayne. "Absolutely."

They squared off, the street lad and the fey'ri. Vaelis tossed Fayne a practice sword, which she caught clumsily. The lad scoffed.

“Careful,” Kalen said.

“Worry about her, not me.”

He struck first, and she parried awkwardly and retreated. He followed with two more pressing attacks, but she foiled them the same way. Always she retreated as she blocked, and her counterattacks all fell short.

“Don’t be a gentle knight and spoil me, now,” Fayne said.

“Certainly not.”

Fayne winced as Vaelis struck her arm lightly. The lad grinned, but Kalen shook his head. “Not a good hit,” he said. “She could still fight with that scratch.”

“Oh come now,” Vaelis said. “She could barely fight *without* it!”

Fayne’s face twisted into an angry grimace, but there was mischief in her eyes. “Ah, the poor lad has no confidence. He needs a judge on his side.”

“Not so,” Vaelis said, his voice wavering on the edge of anger.

Kalen understood Fayne’s strategy—to lure Vaelis into false confidence and clumsy anger. And so far, she was succeeding. The lad fought as Kalen had taught him, by testing his opponent’s defenses and technique, gradually increasing his assault when he learned the constraints. But Fayne knew this tactic as well, and she fed him exactly what he wanted to learn.

Not for the first time, Kalen thought her name particularly apt.

Vaelis grew lazy during these successful passes with Fayne. He faltered in an attack and recovered slowly, having no reason to expect an effective counterstrike. But that was exactly what came. Fayne exploded into motion and lunged inside Vaelis’s guard. The sudden speed allowed Fayne to step right through his defense. He stood

gaping at the dull sword pressed against the side of his neck, and at the woman pressed up against him.

“I trust that’s a clear enough victory?” Fayne asked.

“How did you—?” Vaelis’s words cut off as he smashed Fayne’s blade aside and raised his own sword high.

She fell back, startled, and Vaelis seized the moment to knock her practice sword away. She scrambled back into the wall, and he knelt over her, sword to her throat. They panted together, eyes locked.

“Stop!” Kalen said, his word echoing in the tense silence.

Vaelis sprang away from Fayne, then looked back, his face confused. The fey’ri rose slowly and adjusted her crimson hair.

“Go back to our new place,” Kalen said. “I’ll see she doesn’t follow.”

Vaelis hesitated a heartbeat, then looked away. “Aye, master.”

He took his time gathering up their equipment. When he had collected the practice swords and loaded up the packs, he paused as though to speak.

“This too,” Kalen said, proffering the sheathed Vindicator.

This drew his startled attention. “You are sure?”

Kalen nodded. “It is about time you carried it yourself.”

Vaelis accepted the sword with reverence, then left.

“I know what you’re doing,” Kalen said to Fayne. “And it’s not very proper of you.”

“Proper?” Fayne raised one red eyebrow. “The Shadow I know and lust for never cares about proper.”

“Vaelis is a young man—little more than a boy. He deserves far better.”

“You are a young man, too, Kalen, or have you forgotten?” She stepped lightly toward him and caught him by the laces of his breeches. “Shall I remind you?”

Kalen pulled away. “I deserve better than you as well.”

“Perhaps so, but it hardly stopped you a year ago—or all the times since.” Fayne sighed. “How many times have we danced like this, Kalen? Must we really do it again?”

He turned to go, but she caught his hand.

“I am tired,” she said. “Tired of the uncertainty, the awkward pauses, the significant looks.” She drew around him, and he saw fire in her eyes. “There is something between us, even if it is awful and wrong. And—and you make me want to be a better person.” Her cheeks flushed. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“I believe you,” Kalen said.

“It’s Torm’s honest truth and—wait.” She looked at him suspiciously. “What did you say?”

He leaned down to kiss her. Her lips tasted like vanilla and burned like dull coals. For a moment, she stood paralyzed in his arms. Then she lunged upon him like a pouncing cat, hands around his head and legs wrapped around his waist. They kissed and fell to the floor and tore at one another’s clothing.

Six

16 Ches

Vaelis sat back in the corner of the tavern, cursing his rotten luck.

Kalen’s instruction to go to their new hideout had been a bluff, no doubt meant to throw Fayne off their trail. They’d not yet found a new lair, so Vaelis knew to go instead to the last place they had met, which was the Yawning Portal. There he sat, hilt-shrouded Vindicator leaning against his seat, and considered his third ale.

Why had Kalen insisted he take Vindicator? While flattering, that also struck Vaelis as extremely odd. Did he really regard his apprentice so highly, or was it something else? Was he concerned that he might not return from whatever he was doing with Fayne?

Vaelis didn’t want to think about Kalen not returning, or about what he might be doing.

To distract himself, he looked around the crowded common room of the Yawning Portal. A landmark its own right, the inn boasted an infamous well that led down into Undermountain. It made an easy point of entry for those seeking to test their fortunes in Downshadow, and Master Durnan the Sixth occasionally sent convicted criminals below at the request of the Watch. His master had no small affection for the Yawning Portal, and not just because it offered easy escape routes. It was also a relic of old Waterdeep, and Kalen often said one should never forget the past.

“Past,” Vaelis murmured.

Fayne and Kalen certainly seemed to have one of those, but he suspected he would never learn what it contained. His master was not talkative at the best of times, and he kept absolutely silent on matters touching his heart. Is that what Fayne did—touch his heart? Vaelis didn’t want to think about Fayne touching any part of Kalen, but rather . . .

“Vael?”

For an instant, he thought it was Fayne’s voice, and his heart rose into his throat. Then he recognized the tanned hand on his arm and followed it up to the familiar, dark-complexioned face of Trilla, the cobbler’s daughter. He’d seen the lass off and on, even before he’d joined Kalen’s service. And while his master had advised him that ties to his old life could hold him back, his casual courtship with Trilla had not been one he’d felt the need to cut.

Not until just then, anyway.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “I thought you’d be happy to see me.”

“I am,” he lied. He pushed out a chair for her. “Here.”

“Thank Sune! I was worried for a moment.”

She sat in the seat he’d indicated, which irked him slightly. Somehow, he’d wanted her to throw herself into his arms.

“I haven’t seen you in *days*,” Trilla said. “You need to pick up those boots you commissioned, or Mam will start asking questions. Or I could just bring them for you, if you want. Are you staying here—at the Portal?” She pressed. “Somewhere else?”

“Somewhere else,” Vaelis agreed.

Trilla paused, waiting for more information, but Vaelis offered none. She smiled. “Keep your secrets then!”

Their conversations usually passed in this way. Before his apprenticeship, Vaelis had presented himself to the delighted Trilla as a tough street tramp of few words and many mysteries. The image infuriated her mother, who insisted that no daughter of hers would fraternize with a useless boy who lacked a future. Her mother’s dislike had, in turn, drawn Trilla to Vaelis all the more.

When Kalen had come along, offering training and a calling, Vaelis had let slip to Trilla that he had a teacher, but he refused to reveal anything incriminating. The apprenticeship, however undefined, had proved enough for Trilla’s mother. At least now Vaelis was destined for some sort of profession. Trilla loved the mystery.

“So—” Trilla’s voice held a hint of nervousness. “Mother wants to have you over for evenfeast.”

Trilla’s mother had wanted to have him as a guest for a long while now. Perhaps she’d begun to view her daughter’s courtship as a lasting fixture. His standing with her had certainly improved since he’d begun his apprenticeship. Or perhaps she simply wanted to get him alone to grill him as to his intentions regarding Trilla. Vaelis wanted to know those himself.

“Perhaps you’d be free tonight?” Trilla said. “Mother has a lovely roast from the butcher’s up in Castle Ward. And—and some gorgeous potatoes from the south . . .”

“Busy tonight.” He spoke without meeting her eyes.

“Or any night, truly.” She averted her eyes. “I mean, when you’re not busy. What of tomorrow?”

As recently as a tenday ago, he’d found Trilla’s awkward flirtation endearing—even charming. But now . . . now he wanted her to be strong rather than delicate, self-possessed rather than tentative. Trilla seemed so much younger than he felt—a stripling girl, almost, when what he wanted was a woman.

“What’s wrong, Vaelis?” She was starting to pick up on his reticence. “It’s . . . it’s not something I did, is it?”

He smiled fondly at her. “No, it’s just—”

I don't want you anymore, he thought. His fingers tightened around Vindicator's hilt. The life of Shadowbane was greater than Trilla, or her cobbler mother, or even this city. He was destined to wield this sword against the enemies of good and justice, not flirt with a hapless girl and . . .

Flames leaked around Vindicator's hilt, as though Vaelis had activated its power with his thoughts. His eyes widened and he snapped out of his reverie. He couldn't very well reveal himself in such a public place. What would Kalen say?

Vindicator's flame vanished.

Vaelis shook his head. He'd never thought such harsh things before, least of all about Trilla. He honestly liked the lass, and they'd shared some very good (albeit clumsy) moments. She didn't deserve to be so soundly ignored or set aside for the sake of a task he didn't rightly understand.

“I'm tired,” he said. “A lot on my mind. Kalen has been—”

He shut his mouth instantly, but the damage had been done. Trilla might prattle like an unschooled lass, but she was not stupid. “Kalen? Is that your master's name?”

“All right!” He caught her hands in his own. “I'll have evenfeast at your house. Tomorrow. But say nothing to anyone of my master. Particularly not your mother, aye?”

He gave her one of the smiles he knew she loved. It worked. She grinned, and nodded eagerly.

#

Not daring to attack the wielder of that damned burning sword, Kirenkirsalai watched. The squire and his woman seemed so young to him, but then, so did everyone.

He could hear every word that was said, and he could practically taste the uncomfortable sweat on the boy’s brow. He knew why Vaelis was hesitant. Fayne was the key to striking at Kalen Shadowbane, but it seemed she would prove the path to the younger one as well.

Kirenkirsalai rested his hand on the pommel of his black rapier, which had served him so well for so many decades. It hungered for death, but it would wait for a time.

“Soon,” he murmured. “Very soon.”

He looked forward to destroying them both.

Seven

17 Ches

“Mmf,” Fayne said as she lounged atop Kalen on the bed. “You always do that like you hate me.”

“I do hate you.”

“*Ha*, I say.”

Kalen raised a hand as if to push her off, but she snuggled into his chest and smiled warmly.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she said. “Not done with *mmf*.”

They had retired to a rented room in a seedy inn down in Dock Ward called the White Dragon, where Fayne had apparently been staying for some months disguised as a blonde dancer named Sarif. Fayne shed the disguise as soon as they got up to her rooms,

though she’d kept the blonde hair. The rest had needed no words—not from late that night to late the following morning.

“Hungry?” Fayne finally asked. “I’m *famished*.”

“Indeed,” Kalen said. “Though finding clothes would be a fine start.”

Fayne laughed derisively. “Tymora smile upon you with that.”

Her room was an absolute mess. Fashionable clothing lay strewn on the floor or hung over her furniture. Props for disguises leaned against the walls. Thousands of scraps of paper littered the place, the remnants of as many deceptions, intrigues, and scandals. In all her decades of existence—and he knew Fayne had lived so long, however young she chose to appear—it seemed she had never learned to clean.

Seemed, Kalen noted. If the Watch found this place now, they’d have a literal mountain of evidence, but somehow Kalen doubted Fayne would allow that to come to pass. If he put on the arms of Shadowbane and returned, he probably wouldn’t find a single scrap of her scandalous dealings.

Kalen watched as Fayne located a bright blue dress and slipped it on with sinuous grace. She did a little teasing dance, so he looked away. She uttered a mirthful sound deep in her throat, then stepped to the mirror.

Out of her direct sight, Kalen focused on moving. He’d purposefully avoided trying to rise when Fayne had been there, knowing he could not. As had come to pass more and more frequently these last months, his body took longer to awaken than his mind. He’d not wanted to reveal this weakness to Fayne; whatever lay between them, it was not trust.

Tiny pricks of pain studded his arms and legs, and he fought through it to move. First he lifted his arm, then swung one leg over the edge of the bed. This gave him the leverage to pull himself to a sitting position, and he clumsily lifted his hand to his face to rub it free of sleep.

Myrin had partially healed him a year ago—took away some of his chilling numbness—but in the time since, the sickness had returned stronger than ever. Before, it had manifested in fits and starts. Now, it also grew worse with rest and faded with action. Under these conditions, letting himself slip off to sleep in Fayne’s bed had been both foolish and dangerous. What was wrong with him?

He recovered his clothes and slipped out his token. The feminine handwriting was mostly worn away, but he’d carefully folded the paper to keep the ink from rubbing too much. He read the last few lines:

I think you’re going to live. Just a bit longer. Some of my life for some of yours.

You don’t owe me.

The words hurt him, but holding the letter Myrin had left for him had always made him feel better.

Now, however, it felt wrong to take it out, while he sat on another woman’s bed. There was nothing in the letter that even suggested a binding between Myrin and himself—quite the opposite, in fact. And yet it felt indecent, as though he was betraying a confidence they shared. And it was not fair to Fayne, either.

“What’s that?” Fayne asked casually from the other room.

Kalen avoided looking at her. “What do you want for morningfeast?”

“You mean besides you? Oh wait. Had that.”

Kalen tucked away the treasured letter. “What of orange sweetbread? A vendor up Snail Street offers them,” he said. “And Chultan coffee. A great deal of it. Yes?”

“Excellent.”

Kalen looked around, and just caught sight of Fayne by her mirror. Her face shifted as he watched, the product of fey magic he hardly understood. She tried on faces the way rich young heiresses tried on clothes. Kalen rose shakily, found his balance, and crossed toward her. He leaned patiently against the wall as she worked, standing where she would not see his reflection in the mirror.

She’d only worn her true form with him the first time they had been together. These days, she favored a succession of beautiful women of various skin tones, hair styles, and proportions. They always shared the same grey eyes and they usually had red hair, but otherwise none of her guises looked much alike. She put on her familiar half-elf visage, which didn’t at all match her cover at the inn. That told him quite clearly she did not plan to return.

“I like that one,” he said.

She rose up, startled, as though she’d forgotten him altogether, but quickly regained her composure. “With this dress? A bit boring, isn’t it?”

“I’m a man of simple tastes,” he said, putting his arms around her from behind.

“Again, I say thee, *ha*.” She pressed herself back against him. “Now, now, I’ve just put this on. Must I take it off already?” She groaned. “Well, I *suppose*—”

There was a commotion outside the door, coming from the common room. There was shouting, then the clash of steel. The sound sent cold focus through Kalen’s veins.

“I know that look,” Fayne said, then in a monotone: “Wait. Stop. Don’t go.”

When he glowered at her, she grinned and waved.

Pulling on his shirt with one hand, Kalen was out the door, long dagger in the other hand. He’d left Vindicator with Vaelis and had no other sword, but a short blade would do for close-quarters work. Waterdeep’s sigil on the hilt marked the dagger as a stolen Guardsman’s blade, which Kalen showed openly. If a foe loyal to the City of Splendors got close enough to see the identity of Kalen’s knife, he had bigger problems.

“We done told you,” said a man in the common room. “You in’t welcome here.”

“Say something, won’t you?” said another. “Think you’re better than us?”

“Stlarning brat! Go back to your mam’s—”

Kalen started at the rap of steel on flesh, and he hurried down the steps. A crowd of folk gathered in the common room, clustered around something—or someone—that drew a chorus of grumbles and threats. Kalen, who had been in dozens of brawls during his service to Westgate, knew well what this promised. He drew close surreptitiously and relied upon his superior height to see . . .

“Ah, there you are, master,” said Vaelis. “I was growing worried.”

Dressed in the black leathers he customarily wore on patrol, the lad sat in practiced nonchalance at the central table, drinking a tankard of ale. On the table before him, next to a few more empty tankards, lay Vindicator, wrapped in linen to hide its distinctive design. His pack sat at his feet.

“And to answer the question,” Vaelis said, his voice slightly slurred, “no, I don’t think I’m better than you—I *know* I am.”

Vaelis struck a very fat, very ugly man with the pommel of Vindicator. The patron staggered away from the table, his face distorted. He looked to Kalen, eyes red with anger and drink.

“Master, is it?” he asked. “This stripling yours, then, Gray Eyes?”

“He is.” Kalen stepped through the increasingly angry tavern patrons to Vaelis’s side. “What are you doing here?”

“Told you.” Vaelis put his tankard on the table, next to four empty companions. “I was worried. So I followed your trail. Wasn’t hard.”

It occurred to Kalen that Fayne might have purposefully left a trail to set up just this brawl. It confirmed his suspicion when she came down the stairs, dressed in her tight blue dress (and nothing beneath), and assumed a shocked—*shocked!*—expression. “Why, Shadow the Lesser! Fancy seeing you here!”

“Damn,” Kalen murmured.

“Shadow?” one of the inn patrons asked. “What?”

Kalen glared at Fayne, who offered mock mortification at her casual “slip.”

“Heh,” Vaelis said. “Well, let’s put it all on the table, shall we?”

From his pack, he drew a linen-wrapped item the size of a human head and knocked aside his half-full tankard to set it down. With a flick of his wrist, he tore the wrappings from the object, revealing a featureless helm any criminal in Waterdeep would recognize.

“Shadowbane!” cried one of the patrons. “He’s—he’s here!”

Fayne chuckled.

Kalen’s distress only increased when Vaelis cast him a smile, kicked over the table, and drew Vindicator in a flash of grey flames. He tossed the helmet to Kalen, then smashed one man in the face with the pommel of the fantastic sword.

The brawl that had been simmering in the White Dragon boiled over. Chairs, fists, and steel flew as the patrons lashed out at anyone near them.

Vaelis made an obvious target with the bright glowing Vindicator, but few of the brawlers had swords. Kalen’s apprentice waded into the melee, lashing this way and that, warding off fighters with the flat of the sword and the grey flames.

While Kalen drew less attention, he had the misfortune of holding Shadowbane’s helm, which still made him a target. He fought with his dagger in one hand, and swung the helm like a club with the other. A man punched at him, but he swayed under the attack, then slammed the helm into the man’s face to knock him cold. Two more men jumped on him, one wrestling his dagger wide while the other rained blows on his midsection. Kalen hit that man with the helm in the chest to drive him back, then turned his attention to the heavily-muscled dock worker grappling him. The thug locked his grip on the dagger and twisted Kalen’s arm behind his back.

“Aid?” Kalen said in Fayne’s direction, but the fey’ri merely grinned at him.

So be it, then.

Straining, Kalen smashed his helm into his captor’s elbow with a satisfying crunch. The man howled and eased his hold, and Kalen struggled partly free. The man was still grappling his dagger and now Kalen couldn’t get the proper leverage with his helm. Slowly, struggling with every motion, he put the helm on his head.

“Got you now, Shadowbane. Got—” His eyes widened as Kalen brought his head back and then slammed it forward. The man staggered, blood flowing from his nose, and tried to catch himself as he collapsed to the floor.

Kalen Shadowbane stood, dagger in his hand, and glanced around him. A dozen attackers stood ready—cudgels, knives, or bare knuckles hefted.

“Surrender,” Kalen said. “Only chance.”

They charged.

The common room of the White Dragon became a storm of sweat, pain, and blood. The appearance of Shadowbane had driven off a few would-be combatants, but plenty remained. Kalen recognized more than one rogue he’d apprehended over the years, and knew the danger of banding them together. On his own, Kalen couldn’t have faced them all, but Vaelis was on his side. Indeed, the lad cried out in bloodlust as he waded through a path carved by Vindicator, while Kalen fought his way to him.

“Must you?” Vaelis asked when they got close.

“Must I what?” Kalen asked.

“Fayne, of course!” The lad met a thrusting knife with a hanging parry, then countered by slamming Vindicator’s pommel up into his attacker’s jaw. His words blurred as much as did his sword. “I thought she was a villain.”

Kalen caught a man’s wrist and grunted as they compared strength. Finally, he twisted the rogue around to impede two more charging combatants. He relieved the man of his sword, which he immediately put to use in a parry. “Some things are more complicated than you can understand.”

“No!” Vaelis cried. “No, they aren’t. Good and evil, white and black.” Vindicator slashed a cudgel in two, and Vaelis followed up by knocking the man down with the flat of the sword, just as Kalen had taught him. He swung clumsily, but he had more than enough strength to do the job. “Bad folk do bad things, and they are punished. If they become better people in the wake of it, so be it—that should be our goal.”

“It is,” Kalen said, glad his apprentice was not heedlessly killing the brawlers.

“So it might be.” Drink blurred Vaelis’s words but anxiety lent them an edge. “But a villain is still a villain until she proves otherwise, and that—that *woman* . . .”

“You know, I *am* right here.”

Two men who had been readying an attack from behind abruptly sagged to the floor, confused smiles on their dazed faces. Beaming, Fayne stood behind them in her guise as the grey-eyed half-elf, a wand in her hand. A much-scarred bruiser of a man charged her. She blew him a kiss, then vanished in a puff of brimstone smoke through which her attacker tumbled, coughing and retching.

Kalen felt rather than saw Fayne rematerialize between himself and Vaelis, and she immediately draped her arm about his shoulders. He shook her off, and she laughed and teleported again into a whirlwind of fey magic that sent several men staggering.

Kalen tried to ignore her antics, and focused on the tightening ring of brawlers. They had put down six attackers who weren’t getting back up, but there were just as many waiting to take their place. Ordinarily, Fayne’s magic might have sent the men scattering, but Kalen seemed to have stirred up an unusually nasty mess.

“Mmm.” Fayne coiled up around Vaelis and whispered in his ear. “Any time you want me to prove anything, oh charming lad, you have only to ask.”

“Get out,” Kalen told her.

Fayne’s alluring smile turned to a pout. “No need to be so rude about it,” she said. “If you wanted me to prove it to you *both*, I can—”

“Get out, before you kill someone.”

“Oh, very well.” She teleported away with a rush of Feywild power and her own particular perfume.

Vaelis and Kalen backed toward each other. The brawlers were still coming, burning rage in their eyes. For too long now, Shadowbane had stalked and terrified the criminals of Waterdeep. To have him surrounded now was the perfect chance to avenge their beaten and arrested comrades.

“Are you going to see her again?” Vaelis seemed untroubled by the odds.

“Knowing her?” Kalen adjusted his grip on his borrowed sword. “Yes.”

“Tonight?” Vaelis held Vindicator low in a defensive stance.

“Almost definitely.”

Vaelis scowled. “Take Vindicator,” he said. “Summon its fire. All of it.”

Kalen shook his head. “Better for you to do it. If you’re ever going to, now would be the time.”

“Truly?” Vaelis sounded startled. “I—but I thought—”

“Do it,” Kalen said. “Prove yourself.”

Vaelis gritted his teeth and raised Vindicator. “Threefold God, give me strength . . .”

The blade redoubled with grey flame, lighting the common room like a miniature sun. The brawlers backed away, uneasy. Down the street outside the White Dragon,

Kalen heard the call of Watch horns. This sound—coupled with Vindicator’s power—broke the men’s resolve. They scattered like routed goblins.

Vaelis lowered Vindicator, a relieved expression on his face. “Close,” he said.

“Aye.” Kalen tossed the borrowed sword away to clatter on the floorboards. “We should go, before the Watch arrives.”

“Agreed.” Vaelis hesitated a moment. “I hope you know what you’re doing, master. She’s dangerous.”

“Indeed.”

The lad looked nervous—far more so than when he’d been so vastly outnumbered in the brawl. “Do you—that is . . . ?”

“I don’t love her, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Vaelis shook his head, but a tiny sigh of relief escaped his lips.

You be careful, too, Kalen thought.

Eight

17 Ches

Fayne did return that night. She walked right into their new hideout—an abandoned boathouse in Mistshore—and in the space of a moment, she and Kalen had vanished into a chamber was once an office.

At first, Vaelis could make out their hushed tones, but Fayne cast some sort of spell and all sounds from the chamber died. Vaelis heard only the thick, drumming rain

on the rooftop and the groan of old docks swaying slightly in the choppy waters of the bay. A fearsome wind had risen in Waterdeep this night, whipping the waters of the Sea of Swords to a turbulent boil.

“He knows what he’s doing,” Vaelis murmured, hoping that would put an end to his anxiety.

He tried to distract himself with small, necessary tasks—sharpening their blades, repairing armor, or mending torn clothing—but his mind kept conjuring images of what was going on behind Kalen’s door. He focused on his surroundings: the boathouse full of shadows and rot, its walls creaking under the strain of the weather. Sweat dripped down his forehead, and he wiped it away in frustration.

His imagination would not rest. He fancied he heard Fayne’s voice despite her magic—pleading, moaning. He heard Kalen’s dull grunt. He imagined their hands on one another, their bodies pressed together, their skin warmed by the touch . . .

Vaelis smashed his hand down on the table. “Damn you, Kalen.”

Dread curiosity finally took over, and he pushed back from his seat. No doubt they could not hear him through the ward, so he did not have to sneak. He moved to the wall, his fingers moving across it in the manner Kalen had taught him when searching. Fayne may have blocked sound from passing, but her spell had done nothing to fix the shoddy, worn-down construction of this place. He found a loose board and slid his fingers into its edges. Pulling the board open made no noise, and he peered through the crack into the next chamber.

What he saw matched all his imagination, and more.

He recoiled, shutting his eyes to block out the image, but doing so only made it worse. He opened his eyes wide and stared at his hands, which trembled. He shrank against the wall, hardly able to breathe through clenched teeth.

“You damned hypocrite,” Vaelis said, clutching his fists to his chin. “You know what she is, and still—”

Movement caught his attention, and he froze before he realized what he had seen. A mirror across the chamber reflected his visage, split in two by a long crack that ran through its dusty surface. He saw himself, haggard and weary, illumined in the gray light of Vindicator. The sword burned like dying coals where Kalen had left it on the table.

The temptation burned in him to take the sword and flee—abandon Kalen, who had obviously lost his way, and become Shadowbane himself. Kalen probably wouldn’t be angry, but relieved. Vaelis knew the duty weighed upon his master. Why shouldn’t he take the burden from the older man’s shoulders?

The mirror drew Vaelis to his feet. He wandered across the chamber, his heart slowed from its jealous race. It was calming, this old relic from someone else’s life. He paused before it. In the mirror, he became two people, parted by a single seam in the glass. Who were these two men—Vaelis and Shadowbane? He did not know.

A sudden crunch drew his attention—someone pounding on the door. He sat unmoving, heart pounding to match the knocks, and looked to the shuddering door. Who could have come upon them? He looked toward Kalen’s room, but of course his master wouldn’t have heard. Vaelis was on his own. Were a dozen members of the Guard waiting outside? Or an ambush Fayne had arranged for them?

Then he heard a quavering voice that reassured him in a heartbeat.

“Vaelis?” a woman asked. “Vaelis? Are you here?”

“Trilla?” he whispered. “How—?”

He pulled the door open a crack. On the porch, Trilla was drenched to the skin, her hair and clothes an absolute wreck. She looked as though she’d been wandering the murky streets of Dock Ward and Mistshore all night. How had she found him here?

“Oh, thank the gods,” she said, eyes wandering. “After you didn’t come to evenfeast, I was so worried.”

“Of course.” Vaelis winced as he remembered the agreement they’d struck the previous day. “I forgot all about it. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s . . . it’s well. Very well.” Her voice had a dreamy quality to it and her eyes rolled, as though her long search in the rain had confused her somehow. Her skin was bone pale and—if possible—she seemed thinner than she had been the previous day.

“What happened to you?” Vaelis asked. “Did—did you get attacked?”

Trilla shrugged her shoulders, half unsure, half indifferent. When she took his hand, her skin felt like ice.

The cold seemed to spread into Vaelis’s heart. “What happened?”

“A man,” she said. “I was waiting for you . . . and he came out of the shadows. I couldn’t resist. He just looked at me, and . . . and he . . .”

The cold evaporated inside Vaelis in the wake of a roaring flame of anger.

“Who?” he asked. “Who attacked you?”

“He . . . I . . .” She clutched his hand tighter. “You’ll help me . . . won’t you?”

Vaelis’s heart raced. This—this was what he wanted—a chance to prove himself the equal of a secret danger.

Her expression troubled, Trilla stood unmoving on the threshold and looked past him to Kalen’s door. She stared intently, as though by focusing she could see through the thick wood. It made Vaelis think of his master, and bitter jealousy stabbed at his heart. Let Kalen waste his time on an irredeemable woman. Vaelis could deal with *this* matter himself.

He stepped away, toward Vindicator, but for some reason Trilla did not follow. “Don’t leave me,” she said, eyes wide and very dark. “I mean—” She waved her hand, fingers curling like the legs of a spider. “I’m scared.”

“It’s well,” Vaelis said. “At least come in out of the cold. You’re freezing.”

Over his shoulder, Vaelis saw her smile.

The mirror drew his attention once again, and he saw his twin faces split by the tiniest of fractures. In the reflection, he stood alone in the chamber, Vindicator close at hand, and knew his destiny. He would become Shadowbane—punish those who did evil without wasting his time with the pretenses of justice and law. He would protect the innocent—like Trilla—and punish the guilty—like Fayne. All seemed clear to him.

He was uncertain why the mirror had been enough to pull his attention from Trilla’s plight. Seeing himself suddenly seemed strange, not noble. Something buzzed at the back of his mind, warning him. Perhaps it was merely guilt at how he had treated Trilla over the past days. No doubt his casual disdain had been terrible.

“Thank you, Vaelis,” Trilla spoke, so close it startled him. He turned and found her standing not half a pace away. “I thought you didn’t love me, but now I see I was wrong.”

“Of course I do,” he said. “I—”

She stepped forward to embrace him, and cut off his words with an unexpected kiss. Her lips felt cold, and he thought he could taste rainwater and something else on her tongue. Something like blood.

Despite the odd sensation, though, the kiss ravished his senses. She kissed him like no one had ever kissed him before, drinking in all there was of him as though she could not stop herself. When she loosed his mouth, he gasped for air. She purred like another woman entirely—like Fayne—and pressed herself closer, pushing him back against the wall. She licked along the line of his jaw.

“Thank you, also, for inviting me in,” Trilla whispered. “He said you’d need to.”

“What?” Vaelis didn’t understand what she meant and it confused him all the more when he looked past her at the mirror. He finally realized why the mirror drew his attention—he saw only himself, and not Trilla.

In his self-absorption, he hadn’t noticed that she cast no reflection.

Then her teeth sank into his throat.

At first, he could not even react. He, who had been trained in combat and had grown up listening to three-penny bard’s tales of vampires, still hardly credited what had come to pass. It was so far from the realm of possibility that little innocent Trilla would try to hurt him—kill him, even—that it was all he could do not to laugh. It seemed like an act that she was putting on to win his affections. She couldn’t possibly mean—

But the pain was very real, and he heard as much as felt his skin tear open beneath her bite. Blood welled forth. There was no ecstasy or release like in the stories. Instead, he felt only screaming fire from his neck as Trilla sucked at the wound.

Vaelis’s mind whirled. She couldn’t have been a vampire for long; after all, she’d been very much alive when he’d seen her the previous day. She might not have drunk from anyone until him—and Vaelis realized this was likely the only reason he was still alive. Finally coming to himself in the midst of the pain, he caught her grasping jaws in his hands and tried to wrench her back. She hardly budged. She was no longer a girl but a ravenous beast, stronger than he was, who cared only for her meal.

Vindicator was just out of reach on the table. He went for it, but Trilla crushed him back against the wall. One hand wasn’t enough to hold her at bay, and he had to grab her forehead in one hand and her throat in the other. She snapped and licked at him, slavering to get at his gushing neck. Gods!

“Kalen!” Vaelis cried, but of course his master could not hear. “Kalen—”

“The master you never let me meet,” Trilla said, her voice low. “I’m glad he’s here. I’m so hungry.”

Vaelis shuddered. If he fell now, there would be no one to warn Kalen, and no way to protect Fayne. Trilla would burst in on them as they lay defenseless. He could not let that happen. He could not let harm come to those under his protection.

In that moment, Vaelis knew what must be done. If he was to have even a tiny chance, he needed to reach Vindicator, at the cost of his own life.

He dropped his hold on Trilla’s face and reached for Vindicator on the table. Trilla overpowered him almost instantly and closed her fangs again on his neck. The pain was excruciating—flesh tore as her teeth gnawed at the tissue under his skin, gouging a hole seemingly down to his spine. Vaelis bore it because it let him close his shaking fingers on Vindicator’s hilt. The grey flames surged around the steel.

In the depths of a dim world, his vision ringed with bloody haze, Vaelis raised the sword behind Trilla. A bulky blade was useless for close quarter combat, of course, and he would only cut himself open trying to lever Trilla away. Instead, he pressed the holy flames of the Threefold God’s sword to Trilla’s back, wedging her between the steel and his own body.

Trilla shrieked in pain and her assault faltered. Vaelis felt her hold release and he slumped back against the wall, coughing and wavering on the edge of unconsciousness. Blood poured from his savaged throat, and he only dimly thought to staunch it with his free hand. Breath came in short, tight rasps that hardly seemed to touch his lungs.

Was this what dying felt like?

Trilla stumbled to the middle of the room, staggering dizzily as though he’d struck her a fearsome blow. She clutched awkwardly at her seared back, where wisps of putrid smoke rose from her blackened flesh. She glared at him with inhuman red eyes.

No, he thought. There *was* something human: hate. Absolute, undying, ravenous hatred of him and all that he stood for. She crouched, ready to pounce.

“You will die,” she slavered. “You will die and I will feast and live.”

Vaelis tightened his grasp on Vindicator even as his strength flagged. Her momentum would have to suffice. He’d only have one chance, and if he failed . . .

Trilla leaped at him like a wolf-spider, moving as nothing human could. Her mouth opened wide.

With a cry, he brought Vindicator arcing around, grey flames roaring, and cut her head from her shoulders.

Her body crashed into him, smearing blood on his midsection. There was surprisingly little of it. The body clawed at him, as if Trilla meant to cling to undeath by will alone. Her head toppled back and bounced off the table. It struck the floorboards with a wet smack and rolled toward the door. Hate burned in her dead eyes.

He lay against the wall, pinned by her shuddering corpse. He shook all over, and Vindicator fell from his nerveless fingers.

Despite all his talk, he’d never killed anyone before. Stabbed, cut, punched—aye, he’d done all of those, but killed? He shook his head to no one in particular. He felt sick. Empty. As though the Vaelis who had run across the rooftops of Waterdeep in his boots no longer existed.

“Kalen,” he murmured. More blood trickled around his fingers, so he pressed tighter against the wound. His hand felt like stone. He limped toward Kalen’s door.

He was about to push open the door, despite what he would be interrupting, when a dark figure blocked his view of the rainy Waterdeep night. It was a human or perhaps a half-elf, with dark skin and even darker eyes. His slender build was hardly imposing, but there was a force about him—a darkness that refuted any attempt to cast him as a mortal man. If Trilla had frightened Vaelis, this man completely annihilated his will just by his presence.

Somehow, Vaelis knew him—perhaps in the way that men of action know their deaths when they appear.

“I am Kirenkirsalai,” said the man in the doorway. “By inviting my child in, so have you invited me. I thank you for this, though I suspect that will be little consolation.”

Vaelis reached for Vindicator, and somehow managed to lay his fingers on the hilt. The dark man paused in his approach.

“Well done, boy.” His mouth spread wide, revealing his fangs. “Well done indeed.”

The world bled away.

Nine

17 Ches

He’d lost track of time, a frequent side effect of his trysts with Fayne. She lay in the curve of his arm, her back against his chest, eyelids drooping despite her best efforts. In this, Fayne resembled a cat dozing languidly in its favorite place. The rhythmic sound of her heartbeat and the rise and fall of her slender body soothed him. Her demon’s tail caressed his arm, almost as if in a dream of its own.

All was silent in their room warded by Fayne’s magic.

It must have seemed strange to her that he would prefer her true demonic form to any disguise she could craft. Tonight she’d tried on dozens of faces, giving him quite a parade of tempting beauties. But he’d insisted on *her* face, despite her protests. In fact, he enjoyed seeing her uneasy and longed for her unmasked vulnerability. He’d also had enough of lies between them, and wanted only the truth of her.

If only he could be certain of his truth.

Long after he thought Fayne had drifted off to sleep, Kalen turned slowly so as not to disturb her. Sure enough, she did not wake fully but merely cuddled up to his back and fell more fully asleep. He lay for a time, listening to her steady breathing, before finally he reached under the improvised pillow of clothing and drew out Myrin’s letter. As he had before, Kalen felt uncertain about reading it in Fayne’s presence. Was he being duplicitous? But when he considered it, Fayne and Myrin had always occupied different corners of his heart.

He unfolded the paper and read over the familiar lines, every word of which he had devoured a hundred times. It was his nightly ritual, one that reminded him of the man he had once strived to be and his choice to shed that persona. He hadn’t understood at first, but he now knew Myrin had left him because he could not be the man they both wanted him to be—the man Kalen knew she deserved. How could he stand to face her, when they both knew this?

And moreover, were his actions with Fayne fair to either her or Myrin? Kalen thought not.

Nor was it particularly fair to Vaelis, though Kalen was less worried about that. With his good looks, surely the lad could find another, more suitable brightbird than a creature like Fayne. Hadn’t he been asking Kalen about romance only a few days before—looking for advice? Kalen thought with a wry smile that his current preoccupation disqualified him as an arbiter of wisdom on that particular point . . .

“What’s that?” Fayne’s voice murmured with sleep.

“Something from a long time ago,” Kalen said. He wanted to add that it was not important, but he had resolved not to lie to her.

“It’s from her, isn’t it?” Fayne’s luminous eyes were very wide now, sleep banished. He could feel her warm breath on his neck, his numbness almost subsided. How did she make him feel things, when no one else could?

Fayne breathed out a sigh and closed her eyes. “Well, I’ll just have to enjoy you as long as this lasts.” She hugged him closer and slept.

Kalen read the note again, his eyelids growing as heavy as his heart. He fell asleep without remembering to refold the letter.

#

When Kalen awoke again, dawn still hours off, he thought himself alone. As always, awareness came first, followed only after by sensation. He looked around the room as his body gradually stirred, and his eyes widened to see Fayne standing stiffly before the shuttered window.

“Fayne,” he murmured. Then her true name: “Ellyne.”

She turned her eyes toward him. In them, he saw uncomprehending terror.

It was only then, as the darkness coiled fingers around Fayne’s throat, that Kalen realized what he had not seen at first. A dark man unfolded from the shadows and fixed dark eyes upon him. Fangs protruded over his lower lip. He stood behind Fayne and held her in place as both a hostage and a shield.

“Hail and well met,” he said, “Shadowbane the second.”

Kalen knew this man. He’d seen him once—many, many years before—the very night he had met Gedrin Shadowbane. This was the creature that had emerged from the darkness after the old hero was exhausted and near death. This was Kirenkirsalai, a lord among vampires, and he had slain Kalen’s master.

Kalen channeled his rage, demanding that his limbs move, but all that happened was a tensing of muscles. He lay paralyzed, his body a mass of needles and fire. The Threefold God’s light, however, he *could* summon, and his body lit with grey flame. It burned dully—only enough to keep the vampire at bay.

“Desist, Shadowbane.” Kirenkirsalai squeezed Fayne’s throat, and she gagged.

Kalen immediately relaxed, and the fire died. The vampire didn’t seem to notice his paralysis. Kalen would hold Kirenkirsalai’s ignorance as an advantage.

“What would you have, monster?” he asked. “You enter my home, uninvited—”

“I was invited,” Kirenkirsalai said. “And make no attempt to goad me, Shadowbane. I’ll not come close to you. I know your power with that sword.”

Kalen didn’t understand. The sword? For all he knew, Vindicator lay far from his hand, in the other room with Vaelis. Oh gods, *Vaelis!*

The uncertainty must have shown on his face, for the dark man’s lips spread in a cruel smile. “Your fear gladdens my heart, Shadowbane, wielder of Vindicator. Also, that you will follow me and in so doing, increase your suffering a hundred fold.”

“What do you mean?” Kalen cursed his sleeping body, praying that it would move, but he still could feel nothing but dull pain below his neck. “Follow you where?”

“A curious lover you have chosen.” The vampire stroked Fayne’s bare throat, making her shiver. “Shall I drain her and use her corpse to bludgeon you to death?”

“Your enmity falls upon me,” Kalen said, “not her.”

“Hmm. She must taste positively fiendish.”

Eyes wild, Fayne stared at Kalen but could not speak.

Kalen was starting to find his limbs once more. They woke unmoving, and he kept still so as not to provoke Kirenkirsalai. Not that he had a plan. Even if he could move, he still had no weapon, and this creature had overpowered Gedrin, a far greater wielder of Vindicator than he. He could not even approach without sacrificing Fayne.

Dimly, he could see Vindicator’s grey light through the door, illuminating the common chamber. The place was a mess, with shattered furniture and blood splatters across the walls. Kalen saw what he thought must be a body lying in a pool of gore. He couldn’t tell if it belonged to Vaelis. At first he cursed himself for not hearing the commotion, then remembered Fayne’s silencing spell and winced inwardly.

Gods. This was *his* fault. All of it.

Kirenkirsalai seemed to enjoy his despair. “Come to me in the Hall of the Vanished Lady, and deliver Vindicator. Bring no allies. Do you understand?”

“Why not take it now?” Kalen asked. “Take the sword, and welcome. You have the better of me, and I cannot stop you from taking it.”

“Take a blade I cannot touch? I think not. You will deliver it as I have directed.”

Again, Kalen was confused. The vampire claimed he could not touch Vindicator, and yet he wanted Kalen to deliver the blade to him?

“Do not delay. Else—” With an almost casual gesture, Kirenkirsalai shattered Fayne’s wrist. She tried to scream but his hand covered her lips and muffled the sound.

Then they were both gone, vanished into the shadows.

Through force of will, Kalen pushed himself out of the bed, and tumbled to the floor. His legs wobbled like foreign things beneath him, and he could not find his balance. He pulled himself along the floorboards to where Kirenkirsalai had stood. There

was a chill in the air, as though the vampire had left some of his darkness behind. Kalen could also smell the lingering traces of Fayne’s perfume: flowers and spoiled eggs.

He crawled past, aiming for the door into the common room. Vindicator’s light guided his way, but his hands trembled as he pulled his limp body through. He came upon the bloodied corpse and fought down the gorge rising in his throat. It was not Vaelis but a woman not nine and ten winters of age. He recognized Trilla, Vaelis’s brightbird.

“Make of myself a darkness,” he murmured. “A darkness where there is only me.”

He clutched Myrin’s letter in his hand, and that strengthened him for what he would have to see.

“Vaelis.” His voice rattled as though caught between jagged rocks. “Vaelis . . .”

His apprentice lay against the wall in a slick pool of half-congealed blood. The thick stuff ran down his chest from a gash in his neck, over which he held one hand. The other grasped Vindicator’s hilt. The flames cast strange, dead shadows on his face, sculpting him into an ancient grey statue.

Kalen’s heart cracked when he saw the boy, but he had barely opened his mouth to utter a mourning sound when he realized Vaelis’s chest rose and fell slowly. Vaelis’s eyes slit open and he expelled a groan. “M-Master?” he asked.

Hope bloomed in Kalen, and with it he fought against the tide of spellplague within him. “You’re alive,” he said.

Vaelis nodded slightly without moving his head more than a hair. His torn throat had closed enough to stop the gushing blood. Kalen realized Vindicator’s flame had healed Vaelis. His apprentice was Shadowbane for true.

“Can you move?” He crawled toward Vaelis.

“I don’t . . . I don’t know.”

“Hold fast.”

For the first time, Kalen managed to rise to one knee. He laid his hand on Vaelis’s cheek, and healing radiance bled from his fingers into the lad. There was resistance there—the power did not want to flow through him—but he forced it forth. Vaelis’s breathing eased.

“My thanks.” Vaelis shifted and finally removed his hand from his neck. It came away sticky, with the crackling sound of dried blood. The wound was closed.

“We have to go,” Kalen said. “We’re not safe here. We’ll have to hide for a time—let our wounds heal.” He reached down and closed his hand around Vaelis’s on Vindicator’s hilt. “Carry on the task we have been given.”

“But . . . what of Fayne?” Vaelis asked. “Where is she?”

In his relief over Vaelis, Kalen realized he’d almost forgotten about Fayne. “He took her. The vampire.”

Vaelis’s eyes widened. “Why do we delay? He can’t have gone far.”

“We do not have the strength.” Kalen shook his head. “We have to—”

“No.” Vaelis’s face was determined. “He must think I am dead. We have the advantage . . .”

“There is no advantage against Kirenkirsalai,” Kalen said. “He slew my master Gedrin. Even at our strongest, he is far beyond us. You must understand—”

“But—” Vaelis set his jaw. “I do understand, Master.”

Kalen felt Vaelis’s fingers clench tight on Vindicator’s hilt, and cold fear crept into his chest. What had he done?

“I understand you are a coward,” Vaelis said. “You cannot face what Fayne asks of you, and so it is easier for you to let her die than let her love you.”

“No,” Kalen said, but the sickness was rising again and he could say no more. And he could not dispute either of Vaelis’s assertions.

“I will save her—*Shadowbane* will save her.” Vaelis’s hand slipped through his half-numb, blood-soaked fingers. The lad pulled the sword away. “As for Kalen Dren, he may find whatever fate awaits him.”

“Vaelis, don’t—”

But the lad rose, heedless of Kalen’s feeble attempts to hold him back. In that moment, the sickness made him an old man, his palsied hands trembling and impotent.

“A darkness,” Kalen murmured. “A darkness where . . .”

“Where there is only me,” Vaelis said.

Then his apprentice staggered into the bleary night, and Kalen knew no more.

Ten

18 Ches

There was darkness, and he could not tell where it ended and where he began. Time did not exist, and neither did the world. He floated, borne like a tattered leaf on an infinite ocean of blackness. There was no fear any longer, no pain, no loss. He could find nothing in the void.

Even so, tears welled in his eyes.

“Make of myself a darkness,” he murmured to focus himself. “A darkness . . .”

He had nothing but the darkness, now. Fayne was gone. Vaelis had left him. Vindicator was taken. The Threefold God had turned to a better wielder. His spellscar had swelled, and he could not help but let it win. There was nothing for him now.

Nothing but the darkness.

Bright light crept into the corner of his sight, dazzling him after so long in blackness. He flinched, but it came close as though drawn to his coldness. It felt warm—full of life and . . . *magic*.

“You’re still alive,” a woman’s voice said. “Isn’t that enough?”

Kalen’s lips parted, but he could not speak.

“You call yourself a champion of three gods?” she asked. “One that lives, and two that only sleep, awaiting their time?”

A radiant being—a woman made of light—knelt over him and put a hand on his cheek. Her flesh burned with blue light, but he saw darker spots along her skin—tattoos of arcane runes, tracing a story he could neither read nor ignore. The seven largest runes collected the smaller ones around them, like planets orbiting a sun.

“Myrin—?” he asked.

She touched her finger to his mouth. He couldn’t quite read her expression, but he thought there was a secret amusement there.

“You’re still alive,” she said again.

Then she leaned down and kissed him. Her warmth spread through his numb body. She drew his sickness away, and he could feel vitality bleeding back in. He looked

up into her face—familiar but also divinely strange—and she gave him a tiny, mysterious smile. Her eyes glowed like iridescent sapphires.

Then her visage hardened. “Now get up,” she said.

#

As the morning light leaked through the cracks in the roof and shuttered windows, Kalen gasped into wakefulness. The room was as he’d left it, with the beheaded lass lying discarded on the bloodied floor. Vaelis was nowhere to be seen.

He lay unmoving for a series of breaths. But there was no numbness this time—he felt his whole body from the moment he awoke. He lay still and listened. His lungs drew air in and blew it out while his heart pounded a steady beat. His breath stirred the hair that hung over his face, and he could feel the itchy rash of a beard he’d grown over several tendays. How awful he must look, lying there like a wreck of a man, but how wonderful he felt.

He looked at the paper still crumpled in his left hand. “Thank you,” he whispered, though no one was there to hear it.

No time to rest. There was work to be done.

His hand twitched. He moved his fingers—clenching and releasing, in and out, to test their flexibility. Then he formed a fist.

#

As night fell, Kalen stalked through Downshadow. The black and gray leathers of Shadowbane let him blend into the shadows and darkness that had become his home. The skulkers of Undermountain were out that night—some of them monster, some of them man—but he avoided them all. He dodged fights he would have taken on another night:

scheming criminals or known thugs lurking in the depths. This night, he came with a purpose, though it might well prove his end.

He came to the corridor that led to the abandoned temple of Mystra, vanished goddess of magic. It was the only place Kirenkirsalai could have meant, and even if the vampire had not told him where to go, Kalen could have followed Vaelis’s trail of blood, which grew thicker as he drew closer to the temple. Kalen held a mundane, spare sword in one hand and Myrin’s note in the other. He bore them as his only talismans against the evil he would face this night.

The vampire’s threats about coming alone had been unnecessary. Kalen would bring no others into this. He would be responsible for no more bloodshed.

The temple stood in a recently unearthed part of Undermountain, revealed by a minor collapse lower in the complex. The skulkers of Downshadow had not yet made their way this deep, but they whispered of the dangers. In particular, a persistent ward guarded the place—a barely-visible blue wall of force that kept would-be pilgrims from entering. Kalen knew a spell of some kind proved the key to passage, and so when he found the wall temporarily not there, he was not surprised. Either Kirenkirsalai had magic of his own, or else he had forced Fayne to suppress the ward. He stepped through, and the wall sprang to life behind him. This, too, he had expected.

Kalen had made his way to the temple by borrowing the light cast by luminous fungus, flickering ever-burning torches, and the occasional band of criminals, sellswords, and other adventurers down in the depths. That had proved enough thus far, but in the pitch-blackness of the temple, he navigated by feel. He could, of course, summon the Threefold God’s light, but it would give him away immediately.

Tentatively, he touched the nearby wall of the temple, meaning to use it as a guide, and it called to the spellscar inside him. The sharp sensation startled his fingers away from the wall, but not before blue sparks awoke and settled into the stone, birthing an energy line that shot away into the distance.

A muted sound—a muffled word of some sort—caught his attention, but he couldn’t place it. It blew away his last trace of hesitation.

He shifted the sword and note into his right hand and put his left hand on the wall. He felt no pain this time, but only a sense of connection as the blue fire surged into the stone. Like water spreading gradually through a sculpted labyrinth, a racing forest of lines spread out from his hand and lit up the walls and ceiling within heartbeats. It traced the outline of a rectangular stone temple, the walls carved with skill or perhaps magic. Patterns appeared on the walls—complex designs of mountains, moons, and stars. The blue light drew a symbol on the ceiling—a scroll surrounded by seven gleaming stars. It reminded him of his dream.

The glow filled the temple with muddy azure light, which revealed how small the plainly adorned temple truly was. The walls could not have stretched more than a long daggercast, while the columns that held up the roof stretched perhaps half that distance. The room boasted long threadbare tapestries and two slabs of stone as altars. If he didn’t know better, he’d have thought the temple an afterthought—a tiny concession to a now-absent goddess. But underground space came at a premium, and whoever excavated this temple must have done so out of reverence.

Then he saw the blood. It splattered the walls, dripped down the pillars, and streaked across the floor. Two bodies lay on the altars: a bound and only slightly stirring

Fayne and an unmoving Vaelis. The boy was arranged as though for burial and looked pale as fresh-fallen snow. Vindicator lay on the floor beside Vaelis’s altar. The blade too seemed cold and dead. No doubt Kirenkirsalai had arranged this and left Vindicator where it had fallen because, if he’d spoken truly, he could not touch it.

Fayne was staring at Kalen, but her gag kept her from crying out. She wore an expression both terrified and mournful.

A sharp ring of metal on stone broke the awful silence, and Kalen realized he’d dropped his plain steel sword. His hand felt numb once more. Just then, staring at his dead apprentice, Kalen never wanted to fight again.

His knees threatened to go next, but he forced himself past Vaelis to Fayne’s side. He pulled the gag from her mouth. “He’s waiting for you,” she said.

“I thought as much.” He touched his awkward fingers to her bonds. “Let me untie—”

“No. You don’t understand. Not the vampire—” Then her eyes widened.

A hand fell on his shoulder, and he turned to see Vaelis standing behind him, red-spattered eyes wild. His mouth opened, letting blood pour down his chest.

“Vaelis,” Kalen said. “What—?”

The boy’s mad eyes stared at him, and his hands went for Kalen’s throat.

Something broke inside Kalen then, and his mind and heart fell silent. It was suddenly a matter of simple survival.

He slammed his helmed forehead into Vaelis’s face, sending his head snapping back. The lad staggered, and Kalen tackled him around the middle. They struck the altar, and Kalen’s helm struck Vaelis again, this time in the chest. The impact dizzied Kalen,

and he locked his eyes on Vindicator at the base of the altar. He reached for the blade, but Vaelis caught his arm and pulled him back. The lad’s mad eyes glared into his, and though he tried to speak, he could not form words through a sea of blood.

From somewhere, Fayne was screaming his name.

Vaelis forced Kalen down onto the stone and his hands tightened on his throat. Kalen feebly tried to break the grip, but he didn’t have the strength or leverage. Vaelis drizzled blood all over Kalen’s face—into his eyes, nose, and mouth. The salty taste made vomit rise in his throat, though Vaelis’s fingers kept it down.

“Kalen,” Vaelis said. “Kalen—”

Drowning, Kalen fought his way through the fear and horror. He released the boy’s arms, letting the choke hold tighten. Vaelis’s blood burst from Kalen’s mouth along with his last breath. His body went taut, fighting for breath.

Kalen reached for Vindicator. As he closed his fingers around the handle, the sword burst into grey flames. He raised the sword between them. He placed the point against Vaelis’s chest and wedged the pommel into the stone between his arm and his side. Heedless of the danger or the flames licking at his face, Vaelis kept choking him.

“I’m so sorry,” Kalen gasped, as Vindicator’s flames surged.

Then Kalen grasped his apprentice by the shoulders and pulled.

The sword jabbed into Vaelis’s chest and blood welled. A shudder ran through the lad, but he did not loosen his hold. Kalen pulled harder, drew Vaelis into a tight embrace, and the stone pushed Vindicator through him. The point erupted from Vaelis’s back and blood ran all over him. The flames roared—in protest or in fury, Kalen could not say—then abruptly vanished.

Vaelis’s blood-filled eyes met Kalen’s and gore dripped from his mouth. His eyes cleared of their former madness, and he looked confused. His hands loosened and fell away. Then his body slumped onto Kalen and slumped to one side.

Kalen lay still for a moment, panting and sputtering. Blood stung his eyes. And as he wiped it away, his hands trembling, he saw something that stopped his heart anew. Vaelis lay shuddering and convulsing his way into death. This was not the way a creature of undeath would perish, but instead . . .

“Gods,” Kalen murmured. “No.”

Vaelis made a series of harsh choking sounds, blood gushing from his lips at every gasp. His eyes locked upon Kalen, betrayed and furious. Then his eyes closed.

Silence filled the abandoned temple, broken suddenly by a sharp scream of rending steel. Before Kalen’s eyes, a crack shot through Vindicator’s blade, from handle to point—a flaw in the perfect sword once wielded by a god. He reached out tentative fingers toward the blade, but before he had even come close to touching it, flames erupted from the hilt and seared his tingling hand.

He had lost the privilege of wielding the sword of the Threefold God.

“Kalen,” Fayne was saying. “Kalen. You have to get up. You have to—*Kalen!*”

He could do nothing but look at Vindicator—his constant companion for years had abandoned him. And had he not deserved it?

He hardly noticed the cold chill that filled the chamber, nor did he react to the dark-skinned hands that pulled Vaelis aside and lifted Kalen effortlessly. Kirenkirsalai held him dangling in the air, breath filling his nose with the reek of blood.

“Well done, Shadowbane,” Kirenkirsalai said. “That sword has pained me for a century, and now you cast it aside. It has no living wielder, and now no one can use it against me.”

Kalen’s mind roiled. He could not make sense of what had happened. “Vaelis—?”

“And here I thought I would have to turn the boy in order to make you kill him, but you did that with hardly any provocation.” The vampire ran his finger over Kalen’s face, brushing blood from his brow. “I suspect you wanted to kill him all along.”

Had he merely imagined Vaelis’s hands going for his throat? Perhaps the boy had merely meant to ask him for aid—for comfort. Kalen wanted to deny the creature’s words, but his lips would not move. There was no fear—only despair.

“Let him go!” Fayne cried, but Kirenkirsalai ignored her.

“Nothing to say.” The vampire sounded faintly disappointed. “Very well.”

He lifted Kalen over his head easily enough with a single hand, and hurled him the length of the chamber. Kalen slammed into one of the pillars and collapsed to the ground. It hurt only dully through his spellscarred numbness, but he thought he must have bruised or broken several bones. He lay on the floor against the pillar, his lungs working hard to breathe, and looked again at Vindicator as it lay useless on the ground.

“I am not one for playing with my prey, but removing that thrice-damned sword from the game has made me . . . jubilant.” He grinned. “As a reward to myself, I will watch you die in agony.”

Kalen watched as green lightning arced through the air at the vampire from Fayne’s direction. It flickered and died around Kirenkirsalai, unable to pierce the shadow

that suffused his flesh. He turned to face the bound woman with a bemused expression. He stepped to her and caught her throat in his dark hand.

“Do not worry,” he said. “I’ve not forgotten you, little one.”

At those words, Kalen shivered and his mind finally worked again. His eyes shifted from the sword to where Kirenkirsalai stood, threatening Fayne. A flick of his wrist, and the vampire would tear out her throat.

He realized there was something in his own hand: Myrin’s letter. He clutched it tightly.

“Stop,” Kalen said. “You’ll not harm her.”

The vampire looked over his shoulder. “Indeed?”

“Indeed.” Kalen knew he had to draw Kirenkirsalai’s attention. “I’ll not allow it.”

“*Allow* it.” His foe smiled. “You’ll stop me, will you?”

“I will.”

“Then by all means.”

The vampire released Fayne, and, in a heartbeat, he was across the chamber, looming over Kalen. There was nothing Kalen could do—not without Vindicator.

“You cannot know how I have *longed* for this, ever since Gedrin first took up that damned sword.” Kirenkirsalai bent down and drew Kalen up by the collar of his armor. “I thought I had won the night I slew him, but no—he had already passed the blade to you. This is a doom long overdue.”

Kalen bit his lip but said nothing. He could not resist as the vampire dragged him up the pillar.

“Gedrin was a worthy combatant—a great man,” he said. “Until he died a broken old man pissing in his breeches. You—” He scoffed. “You are far less.”

He hurled Kalen aside once more, back toward the altars. His helm bounced off the altar, saving him from breaking his skull, but the impact tore the helm from his head. Kalen’s numbed bulk crashed into the stone, then collapsed on top of Vaelis. The impact had dazed him, and in his dizziness the dead lad’s hands seemed to claw at him. He pushed himself free, sticky blood coating his hands and arms.

Kirenkirsalai watched Kalen clamber off Vaelis with an impatient expression. “That boy would have been a better wielder than you, Kalen Dren. But you killed him for me. Defended your station—your honor. How wonderful.”

Kalen wanted to speak, but his insides ached and he could hardly breathe. Vindicator lay on the floor just at his side. Its magic seemed to have faded, leaving behind a mundane scrap of metal. When he eased his hand toward it, however, grey flame raged and heat bloomed against his hand. If he could feel it even through the numbness, the heat must be intense indeed. No mortal man could touch a sword so hot.

“How sad,” Kirenkirsalai said. “Your salvation lies beside you, but you cannot touch it. It does not want you, Kalen Dren, or anyone ever again. Another relic of a time better left forgotten.” He glanced up at the dusty symbol of Mystra, which hung nearly forgotten on the wall. “Truly, your despair is sweet to the Lady.”

It was a blessing sacred to the church of Shar, goddess of darkness and loss.

He stepped over Kalen and reached for the black rapier sheathed at his waist. He drew the blade—the very weapon with which Kalen had seen him slay Gedrin all those years ago.

“You were never worthy,” the man said. “Not of Gedrin’s trust, not of Helm’s sword . . . certainly not of my beloved Maerlyn.”

“Maerlyn?” Cold filled Kalen. “You mean . . . Myrin? What—?”

Kirenkirsalai stepped back artfully. “And so dies the line of Shadowbane.”

“Myrin . . . ,” Kalen murmured.

The vampire’s rapier thrust down, but Kalen smashed it aside with Vindicator. The flawed sword bore the lighter rapier aside and locked it against the altar, its magically sharpened steel cutting into the stone.

“No.” For the first time, Kirenkirsalai looked surprised. “You cannot.”

Kalen looked down at his hand on Vindicator’s hilt, around which grey flame coursed. Searing pain ripped through his flesh, and if he could have felt it fully, he was certain he would have dropped the sword in a heartbeat. But he had his numbing spellscar—his blessing and his curse—and though Vindicator lashed out at him, he would not set it aside.

He had chosen this path, even if it would deny him.

Vindicator burning in one hand, Myrin’s letter in the other, Kalen faced the vampire. “Perhaps I cannot,” Kalen said. “But I *will*.”

Kirenkirsalai hesitated, giving Kalen the heartbeat he needed. He wrenched Vindicator across and shattered the black rapier like glass. The vampire staggered back and hissed. Grey flame trailing, Vindicator slashed open Kirenkirsalai’s arm. The black leather parted and a ragged scar burned through the creature’s dusky flesh.

Challenged by the Threefold God’s scourge, Kirenkirsalai cowered. He offered no parting words but merely flew apart into a swirling mass of shadows and was gone.

Kalen wavered on his feet, head pounding and lungs heaving. Dimly, he could hear a woman crying out for him. But he could only see only Vaelis’s corpse, and he could only think of how he had murdered him. His apprentice.

Kirenkirsalai was right—Kalen *did* despair.

Dimly, he heard Fayne’s voice, but he could not understand her words.

Vindicator clashed against the stone, though it could not fall from Kalen’s fingers. Its fire had made a ruin of his hand, searing the steel into the leather and flesh.

His legs slipped through the floor and he fainted.

Epilogue

19 Ches

Kalen remembered only a little of the rest of the night.

It came to him in bits and pieces, which he could not tell apart from dreams with any degree of certainty.

He stumbled, leaning on someone small but surprisingly strong.

He made his way through darkness and smoke, and then through rain. He coughed, and blood trickled through his fingers.

Warm hands gripped him and would not let him fall, despite the pain.

Later, he saw worried faces looming over him and heard a woman’s voice insisting on aid. Cajoling, threatening.

He felt the weight of his savior’s love, but knew he could not return it.

There was pain, and he slept.

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When he awoke fully, he found Fayne sitting at his bedside. She wore the form in which he had first met her—the grey-eyed half-elf with the scarlet hair. He thought that was odd and couldn’t say for sure what had come to pass, until she drew a damp cloth from a ceramic bowl to dab his brow.

He had to be dead. This couldn’t be happening—Fayne? Being gentle?

“What—?” he murmured.

Fayne gave him a faint smile. “We’re in rooms I’ve taken at the Yawning Portal,” she said. “No one will find us—I’m very good at that.”

Kalen nodded weakly.

“There’s no sign of Kirenkirsalai—with any luck, he fled the city now that his plan has failed. If we never see him again, I’ll thank the gods every day.” She shifted on the bed. “I had a healer from the temple of Ilmater tend you, one who owes me quite a few favors. He assures me you’ll be well, though I wanted . . .”

She trailed off and gestured to a table near the bed, where Kalen saw Vindicator, its blade dull against the wood.

“Obviously, I couldn’t touch it directly, but you carried it back here. It fused to your hand in the heat.” Fayne looked a bit ill. “The healer and I had to cut it away, which was *not* a process I’ll soon forget.”

Kalen’s hand tingled, and he saw it was heavily bandaged. He wondered how badly the sword had damaged him. He wondered if he would ever wield it or any sword again.

He closed his other hand, remembering what it had held—something just as important as the sword. “Did you—?”

“Yes, I salvaged that.” She drew his much-folded letter from the table. “Not sure why I bothered, but it seemed important to you and it didn’t take any time to filch it.”

“Did you read it?” Kalen asked.

“Oh, Shadow, do you think so little of me?” Fayne gave him a wry smile, though it had a touch of sadness to it. “Even *I* have some shame.”

He noted that she had not answered the question.

He licked his lips. “Vaelis?”

That she did not answer either, except to give him a sympathetic look.

They sat in silence for a moment, and Fayne cleaned his face a bit more. Kalen felt tired, and realized he would fall asleep in a moment. He moved his unburned hand and touched Fayne’s wrist.

“Thank you for saving my life,” he said.

“Well, you did it for me,” she said. “That makes us even, and—”

He held her hand tighter. “I mean it.”

Fayne was adept at hiding her reactions, but that seemed to surprise her. She looked first at his hand on hers, then at his face. All that they had done, this yet seemed the closest they had ever come.

“Can I ask a last favor?” He held out his arms.

Relief passed over Fayne’s face, and she crawled sinuously onto him. Her lips sought his, but he shook his head to stay her. Instead, he buried his face in her hair and

sighed. Her unique perfume filled his nostrils, tinged with something that defied definition of a fragrance. If he had to name it, he would have called it sadness.

“Ellyne for sadness,” he murmured. It was her true name.

Fayne—who had gone taut as soon as he embraced her—relaxed at the words. She sighed. “Well, at least you’re not weeping.”

Kalen drifted off to sleep.

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Sometime later, Fayne awoke on her own, cradled under Kalen’s uninjured arm. She perched atop him like a cat, which was her favorite place to sleep. She realized also that she had slipped into her true form at some point. The comfort of it all—the peace—soothed her to an extent she had rarely experienced in her many decades of life.

She could stay with him, she thought.

She checked Kalen’s dressings, in the way the Ilmatari priest had showed her. He was going to be perfectly well, but she wanted to reassure herself just once more. Satisfied, she laid her head on his chest, mindful of her long antlers. She bore such horns for the goddess of misfortune she served. Perhaps Beshaba would allow her this.

“You’re my unbreakable champion, you know,” she whispered. “Just too godsdamned stubborn to die and put us all out of your misery.”

She realized that he was clutching the scrap of parchment she’d salvaged from Downshadow. When she’d claimed to not have read it, she’d spoken true (a novel experience for her). She would never claim not to burn with curiosity, however.

When she reached out to take it away, Kalen murmured a single word: “Myrin.”

Instantly, Fayne’s ardor cooled.

Beshaba, she thought, was a spiteful bitch.

“Oh, Shadow.” She shook her head. “We could have been so wonderful together.”

She paused long enough to steal the old letter, then slipped out the door.