

The Cloakmaster Cycle • Two

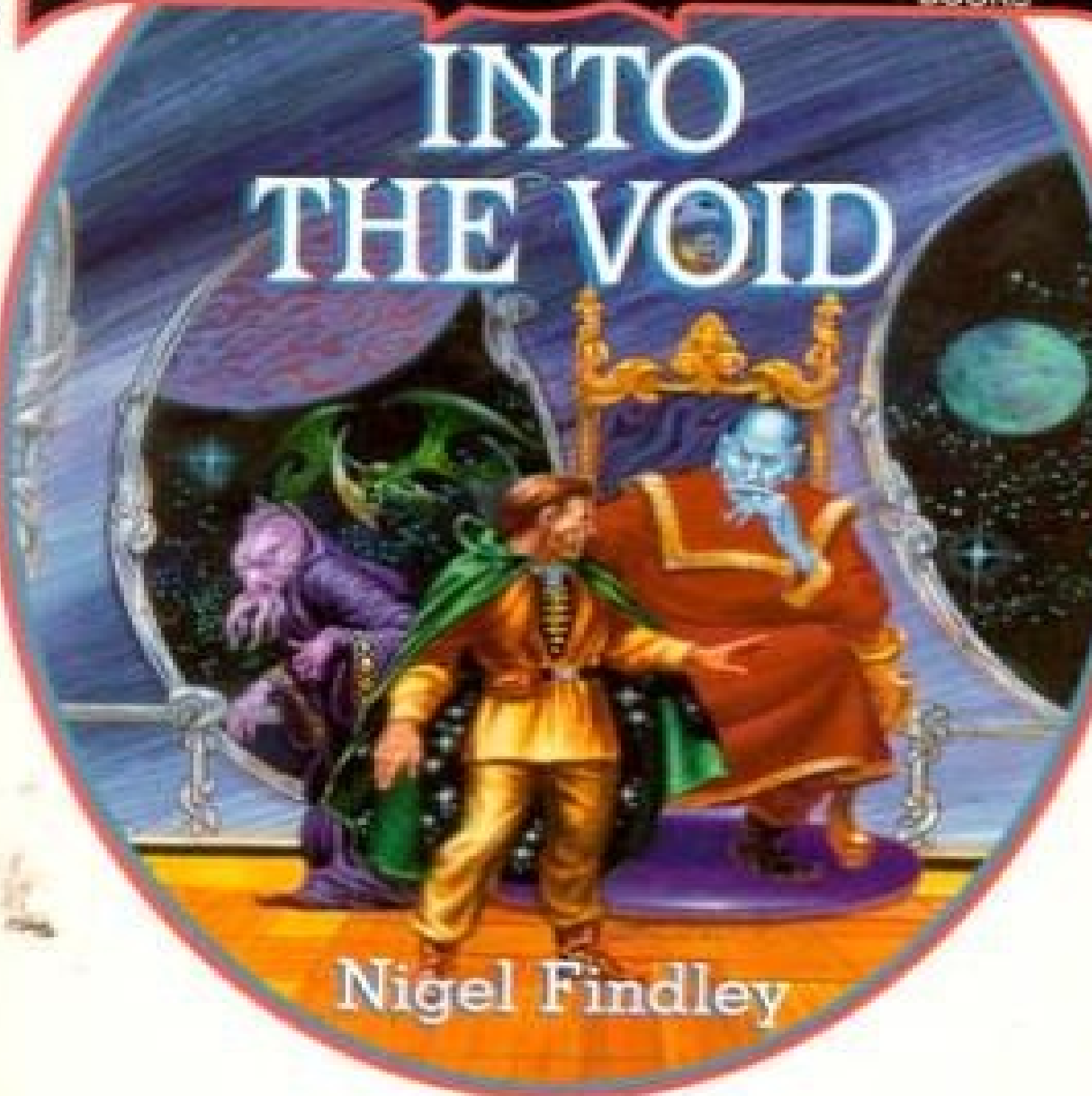
SPELLJAMMER

BOOKS

INTO THE VOID

Nigel Findley

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About The Author

Nigel Findley was born in Venezuela and grew up in Spain, France, England, Nigeria, and other foreign countries. After years of working as a senior marketing executive, he eventually settled in Vancouver, Canada, and became a full-time freelance writer. He has published game material for TSR, contributes regularly to various business and high-tech magazines, and writes screenplays. Into the Void is his first novel.

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Chapter One

It was night, but a night such as Teldin Moore had never seen before. The sky was darker, a deep velvet blackness, and the stars brighter, more immediate, somehow closer. If he could just climb the gnomish ship's watchtower, Teldin found himself thinking, climb up to where the lookout crouched on his small platform... He might be able to touch a star, pluck it from the sky, and hold it like a gem, glittering coldly in his hand. He settled his slender, lanky frame more securely against the ship's starboard rail and leaned back farther to gaze directly upward. He brushed a lock of hair from his eyes. Teldin was a man of thirty-two summers, a little under six feet tall with a light build. His features were finely chiseled—handsome, he'd been told many times, but in a comfortable way, attractive rather than beautiful. His smile was warm and winning, and women were attracted by the way it made his striking, cornflower-blue eyes sparkle. His sandy hair had a strong natural curl to it, making it difficult to control unless he kept it cropped fairly close to his head. Although slender-waisted, he had shoulders that were quite broad and slim arms that were surprisingly strong though they didn't show large muscles. The deck of the vessel shifted beneath his feet, strangely, not like the small river-going boat with which Teldin was familiar. It surged upward, like a thing alive, and Teldin tightened his grip on the rail. Steeling himself for the vertigo he feared—but which, surprisingly, had yet to come—he turned, looking over the rail, and down.

Below was land, not a river or an ocean, land that spread from horizon to horizon in the light of two of Krynn's three moons, looking like a tapestry of the most intricate detail. The gnomish vessel had been climbing steadily since it had pulled away from Mount Nevermind, and already Teldin was as far above the land below as the highest mountain peak. His home—the only environment he ever known, or ever dreamed of knowing—was two leagues and more beneath him and receding with each passing moment.

Sadness pierced him, a mourning for what he'd lost, what he was forsaking, perhaps forever. For a moment, he tried to pick out the familiar landmarks that had demarcated his life: the fields, the granaries, the market towns, the rivers, and the hills where tough, hardy sheep grazed, oblivious to the vessel that climbed into the sky above their heads—as oblivious as he had been, short weeks before. Part of him wanted to cling for as long as possible to the familiar, the safe.

But what he saw wasn't safe, he remembered with a pang. Death was below him, death that had come from the same sky that now beckoned him. He wanted to weep like a child for those he knew who had died: friends from his home; the tinker gnomes who had helped him when no one else would; and, most of all, Gomja—that sometimes-buffoonish, sometimes-noble creature who had sacrificed himself so that Teldin could live. At least the giff had met his end in the way he'd always desired, in battle after defeating overwhelming odds. As the barrel-chested creature had wished, his death had meant something, and in those last moments he'd known it. Would Teldin be able to say the same when his own time came? It was a thought that had never troubled him before. Why did "dying well" matter to a farm boy?

That's all Teldin was and, until recently, all he'd really thought of being. His home had always been his land and, since his war years he'd never wanted more. The world was large, as his grandfather had always told him, but he had little desire to see any more of it than the breadth of his family's farmlands. The thought that there were other worlds, other lands beyond the moons, had never occurred to him until the strange ship had crashed from the sky and shaken Teldin from his comfortable life.

The rigging overhead complained quietly as a gust of night-wind rocked the ship. To stave off its chill, he pulled tighter about himself in the cloak he'd been given by the grievously wounded stranger—that sky-traveler, that spelljammer. Hers had

been the first death—a peaceful one, as such things go, as she'd faded quietly away despite everything Teldin had tried to do to prevent it, lying there in the mangled wreckage of her ship and Teldin's home. That death wasn't the last. The spidership had come, a huge black shape sinking silently out of the nighttime sky. The horrors, too, had come. The smaller ones—half spider, half eel—and the larger, with their rending claws and clashing mandibles. Others had died, and their deaths had been far from peaceful. With an effort of will, Teldin wrenched his gaze from the ground, and turned it back to the sky above. That was where his life was now—where it had to be—away from the land that had given him birth and sheltered him for thirty years. His life would be among the stars. He shivered, but not from the cold. Perhaps seeking some kind of reassurance, he ran his hand over the coarse fabric of the cloak, no different in texture from any other traveling cloak, but somehow slightly colder than any fabric had any right to be. It was a strange gift from one who knew she was dying, but an important one, if the traveler's rambling was to be believed. Teldin remembered for the hundredth—thousandth?—time the dying traveler's cryptic last words: "Take the

cloak. Keep it from the neogi. Take it to the creators." The words still seemed as meaningless to him as when he'd first heard them. He shrugged, relegating the words to the back of his mind. His life up until now had been notably free of mysteries. He'd have to learn how to handle such things.

The vessel heeled slightly as the wind blew across its beam. A chill breeze caressed Teldin's face. He drew a deep breath in through his nose, hoping to catch for one final time the familiar scents of home—mown grass, blossoms, and the rich smell of good brown earth, but he was too high. The winds here were clean and crisp—sterile, one part of his brain told him, empty of life; fresh, another part countered, new and full of promise. He looked down once more and gasped aloud with wonder. The view below had changed from a flat tapestry to something he could hardly have described, even to himself. The land curved away to the left and to the right in huge sweeping arcs. The table-flat land that his emotions had found so familiar had become a sphere. He knew from some schooling that the world was round, but to know it and to actually see it were two very different things. The sphere that was Krynn appeared to him in all its glory.

The sky above—and below?—was clear, but in the distance he could see moonlight-washed banks of clouds, spread out like a ghostly landscape of the dead. He could no longer make out any landmarks, but over there... that must be the great ocean. He searched his brain vainly for the name. A huge weather system, a spiral, was motionless when viewed from this height, but the shape of the tortured clouds still seemed to imply violent action. He turned to his right, to the aft of the vessel. There the distant limb of the planet seemed afire, burning gold. Then, in a silent concussion of light, the arc of the sun appeared above the edge of the world. Teldin turned away, wiping streaming eyes. For the first time he noticed the small figure standing at the rail next to him. The figure's head, topped by a mass of gray braids, barely came up to his waist. The gnome grinned up at him, teeth flashing white in the dark, wind-tanned face. "Impressive, wouldn't you say?" he asked. "Sunrise from space—one of the great gifts the universe gives to us. It's still a wonder to me, even after all these years."

Teldin wrestled with his memory, seeking the gnome's name, and was impressed with the small man's courtesy in speaking slowly. "Yes," he said wanly, "impressive." He sighed and admitted defeat. "You are... Wysdor?" The gnome chuckled. "Captain Wysdor is my brother. You may call me Horvath. I am He-Who-Is-Fully-Responsible-For-And-Depended-On-With-Regard-To-Location-And-Distance..." With a visible effort, the little fellow stemmed the sudden and rapidly accelerating flow of words. He took a breath to settle himself. When he

spoke again, it was in the same relatively slow cadence with which he'd first addressed Teldin. "You may call me the navigator, if the oversimplification doesn't worry you."

Teldin suppressed a grin. In his dealings with gnomes so far, it was their lack of simplification, the insistence on absolute precision at the expense of efficiency, that had worried him. "Then we haven't met?" he concluded. Horvath shook his head. "No, Teldin Moore of Kalamán, we haven't." He grinned. "I can't explain it, you know. Gnomes are no more alike than... than star apples and pomegranates. You big folk only see the superficialities." He reached up to pat Teldin on the upper arm. "And that's why you're lucky to have us gnomes around, aren't you? To tell you what it is you're really looking at." The gnome's smile faded. "Tell me," he said after a moment. "I don't know all the details of what brought you to us, but stories spread on board ships. In fact, ships are the best places for stories. I heard you had some... troubles? Neogi, I hear tell, even before they attacked Mount Nevermind. Now, what I'm wondering is, why? No offense intended, of course—far be it from me to insult a man's homeland—but surely the neogi can find better places to come slave-hunting than this dust ball. Why were they interested in you?" Teldin hesitated. He knew the answer to the gnome's question all too well, but should he tell Horvath? There might be some value in secrecy, after all. He thought it through. The higher-ranking gnomes, specifically the three admirals aboard ship, knew what had brought him to Mount Nevermind, but Horvath seemed more experienced at space travel and probably would learn the truth from his own sources. Furthermore, Teldin realized he owed some kind of moral debt to these gnomes. He was certain that the neogi would come after him... which meant they'd be coming after the gnomes. What would be his ethical position if he withheld anything that could help the gnomes make it through alive? "They're not interested in me," he answered, "not as me, if that makes any sense. They're after my cloak."

He saw understanding dawn in the gnome's eyes. "Ah, the cloak," Horvath breathed. "I've heard about it, of course, the Cloak-That-Adapts-In-Size-And-Will-Not-Be-Sundered-From-Its-Wearer." He reached tentatively toward the cloak. "May I?"

Teldin paused a moment, then nodded. The diminutive figure took a corner of the cloak and rubbed the fabric between his fingers. He turned it over and looked at the delicately patterned silk lining. Holding the fabric in two hands, he tugged on it, testing the strength of the weave. Raising it to his bulbous nose, he sniffed at it audibly. It was only when he opened his mouth, apparently preparing to taste the fabric, that Teldin snatched it back from him. If Horvath was disappointed over being unable to complete his investigation, he didn't show it. "Hmm," he snorted. "Neogi. They're crazier than an owl at noon, that's for sure, but they don't do anything that doesn't suit their purposes—whatever those purposes are. When they want something, they go after it, come doom or destruction. And they wanted that cloak, but I wonder why?" That, of course, was the key question that had been gnawing at Teldin's peace of mind virtually since the outset. "I don't know," he said honestly. The gnome shrugged. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "I suppose we could ask the neogi..." He must have sensed Teldin's horror, because he quickly continued, "Presuming we ever see them again." He patted Teldin on the arm. "Don't worry about it now. Neogi aren't common in Krynnspace. I should know, because I have a few friends and I ran into—"

"Krynnspace?" Teldin interrupted.

The gnome casually changed the subject as he gestured around him, taking in the planet below and the stars above. "Krynnspace. A crystal sphere. Of this, everything inside this crystal sphere."

"Crystal... ?"

Horvath sighed. "Dirtkickers," he said resignedly. "What do they teach you in school?" He raised a bushy eyebrow ironically. "You did go to school, didn't you?"

For a moment, Teldin was taken aback, then he saw the gnome's barely concealed smile. He grinned in return. "Of course," he shot back. "The school of the land."

"Ah, that one," Horvath said with a chuckle. "I never graduated from that one, myself. No desire. The universe is a much bigger school. Of course, I haven't graduated from that one either, not yet, as if I ever will." He smacked his lips and grinned up at Teldin. "It's time for a cup. Traveling always gives me a thirst and natural history always goes better over a draft of ale, wouldn't you say?" Teldin followed the diminutive figure down a companion-way that led below the ship's main deck. They navigated a narrow corridor—"Watch the overhead, it's low," warned Horvath, a trifle too late—and entered a small room laid out like a cozy tavern. There were two oaken tables surrounded by stools—all built to gnomish proportions, of course—and a low bar at the far end. A brass oil lamp swung on slender chains from the wooden beams overhead, and a small window—a porthole, Teldin supposed—gave a view of the outside. Teldin looked around him, bemused. Apart from the scale of the furniture and the view outside, the room could well have been the "snug," or back room, in any one of the taverns he had known at home.

Horvath must have noticed Teldin's expression, because he said with a smile, "Just because we travel doesn't mean we have to leave behind all the comforts of home." He walked around the bar and rapped on the end of a small barrel that was set into the wall. His grin broadened at the solid sound it made. "If there's one thing you dirtkickers do well, it's make ale." He retrieved two pewter mugs from a shelf overhead and manipulated the tap on the end of the barrel. Returning around the bar, he thrust a mug into Teldin's hands and settled himself comfortably on a stool. "Take a seat. School is now in session." Teldin hesitated, then sat on the end of the table next to the gnome. He took a draft of the nut-brown ale, savoring its richness. "Crystal spheres," he prompted.

"I know where I was," Horvath told him, a little aggrieved. "I'm just trying to say it simply without eliminating everything of importance." The gnome took another swallow of his ale and gave a satisfied sigh. "You can think of crystal spheres like bubbles—or, better, like those glass floats fishermen use to support their nets. These spheres of wildspace float in the phlogiston, what we call the flow, or the Rainbow Ocean." He held up a hand to still Teldin's incipient question. "Give me a minute. I'll tell you about the flow in good time. So, the crystal spheres are like glass floats. Each one contains a world, often more than one world, and everything in it is a solar system. Take Krynn-space: It contains Krynn itself, its primary—you call it the sun, but then everyone calls their primary 'the sun'—and all the other planets, Sirion, Reorx, Chislev, and Zivilyn. Other spheres contain other solar systems. Greyspace, now there's a weird one: a flat world, duster-worlds, and the sun revolving around the main planet, Oerth, rather than vice versa." Horvath shot a quick glance at Teldin. "You do know Krynn orbits your sun, don't you?" Teldin snorted his derision. "What about the stars?" he asked. "It varies from sphere to sphere. Here they're fixed to the inside of the crystal shell itself, huge, multifaceted gems—big as the ship, or bigger—and they glow like... well, like nothing you've ever seen. But they don't give off heat. In other places—"

Teldin cut him off. "So you can touch the stars?" Horvath shook his head firmly. "No," he stated. "Or, to be more precise, you can touch them, but there's nothing left of you to remember the experience afterward. When I was second apprentice third assistant to the subordinate

navigator, I heard a tale about the explorer Bethudniolanika—" The gnome closed his mouth with an audible snap and took a deep, calming breath. "Sorry." Teldin waved off the apology and shook his head with amazement. "I can't believe it," he said as he took another draft from his mug. "I mean, I do, but... go on."

The gnome finished his ale with another long swallow. "Ah," he said, "education's thirsty work. Another?"

Teldin drank back the last of his ale and handed the mug to Horvath with a nod of thanks. The drink was already spreading its comforting warmth through his body. Another couple of these, and I'll be taking all this for granted, he thought.

"In other spheres, the stars are different," Horvath continued, as he drew two more mugs from the barrel. "Some places, they're lit through portholes in the crystal shell, letting in the light of the flow itself. In others, they're huge, glowing beetles that wander around the inside of the shell. They're a real sight, that I'll tell you. And in others... Well, I've heard this, but I've never seen it. They're great bowls of fire held aloft by huge statues of forgotten gods. At least, that's how the stories go." "And you... you travel between these crystal spheres?" "You mean gnomes? Certainly we do, though not very often," Horvath confirmed. "We trade, ferry passengers, but mostly just explore. That's what we were doing when..." The navigator cleared his throat softly as he recalled his previous flight from Krynn. Horvath briefly related how a group of gnomes had made it into space decades earlier, only to be attacked by neogi and sent racing back to their home sphere and world. Only he and a handful of veterans had survived the ensuing crash to tell the tale and oversee the Unquenchable's manufacture. "That's fantastic!" Teldin sensed his new friend's mixed emotions and changed the subject. "What exactly is the flow?" "The flow? Well..." The gnome paused; "Whatever I said wouldn't be enough, and you wouldn't believe me anyway. You've got to see the flow to understand it. Just wait a few days."

A cold fist seemed to grasp Teldin's heart. "A few days?" "Well, a week, maybe." Horvath paused and looked appraisingly at Teldin. When he spoke again, his voice was gentler. "Of course we're leaving this sphere. I thought you knew that." Teldin closed his eyes. Yes, he'd known that the gnomish vessel was going somewhere, probably another planet, but he'd assumed it was somewhere else in Krynn-space. Then he recalled other gnomes aboard ship mentioning an excursion through the flow. He was leaving his world, which was bad enough, but to be told that he was leaving everything he thought of as his universe... For a moment he almost gave in to crushing despair, but the moment passed. With an effort, he brought himself back from the brink of discouragement and forced his eyes open. He realized that the gnome was still talking. "Our course will take us to Devis, in a sphere called Path-space," Horvath was saying, "then on to the Rock for a refit. He-Whose-Duties-Revolve-Around- Maintaining-And-Repairing..." He stopped short and started again. "Our shipmaster says we're about due, particularly after that scrap with the neogi spidership. You didn't think we'd have

around here, did you?" "I didn't really think about it," Teldin replied, trying to keep his voice steady. "Well, you should," Horvath said, not unkindly. "We're heading for the shell now. Good view on the way. We'll be passing close to Zivilyn. What a wild planet that is: twelve moons and more colors than you've got names for." The gnome set down his empty mug. "My advice to you is, don't worry about it. Enjoy the trip and learn everything you can. Once it gets in your blood, this is the only life that makes any sense. You'll never go back to being a dirtkicker again." He slapped his thighs and stood. "Well, I'm on watch short. Why don't you come up on deck with me? Just because I have the duty doesn't mean I can't talk."

Teldin followed the gnome up a different companionway and emerged on deck farther aft than he'd been before, just forward of the chaotic structure the gnomes called the stern-castle. He looked up and saw another gnome leaning over the sterncastle rail, looking down at them. Remembering Horvath's comment about humans only seeing the superficial, he tried with a critical eye to make out the differences between the two gnomes. But, if he discounted the minor differences in clothing, the two looked enough alike to be mirror images. Horvath looked up at the other gnome and raised a hand in salute. "Greetings, Yourcaptainship, sir, Captain Wysdor, sir." Now that Horvath was speaking to another gnome, the words flooded forth so fast that, to Teldin's ears, they blurred inextricably together. "Wherewouldyoubewantingme?" Captain Wysdor pointed forward and rattled off a speech even faster than Horvath's—so fast that Teldin could make no sense of it at all. Horvath obviously understood, however. He snapped another salute up at the captain and headed forward. A little belatedly, Teldin followed. "What did he say?" the former farmer asked. Horvath looked puzzled for a moment, then grinned. "I'd forgotten I might need to translate," he said. "There's no watch this time. We took damage in the fight, and the captain needs to know how much. He told me to get Saliman and a couple of others and take the longboat to check us out from stem to stern. It shouldn't take too long." He took another couple of steps, then stopped again and turned back. "Would you like to come?" Teldin looked down at Horvath. "Come?" He tried to keep his voice flat, to hide his sudden trepidation. The gnome's smile told him he hadn't succeeded. "Certainly. You're Honorary Captain. You're entitled. And you've got a lot of questions, probably, about spelljammers, about the Unquenchable. Am I right? Well, the best way to learn is to look, as we gnomes say. Are you game? It'll be perfectly safe, I promise you." Teldin hesitated, then a broad grin spread across his face. "If this is perfectly safe, it'll be the first safe thing I've done in weeks. I'm game." "Good," Horvath said briskly. He turned away and called to a young gnome who was crossing the mizzen deck. "Miggins-effivargonastro." "Yo?"

"Get Salimanaduberostrafindal and, er, Danajustiantorala and join me at the longboat." The young gnome nodded and trotted down a companion-way leading belowdecks. "Come on," Horvath said as he led Teldin forward. The longboat rested on blocks on the gnomish dreadnought's mizzen deck, hard against the port rail. Two large davits were bolted securely to the deck and the rail, and heavy block-and-tackle rigs were hooked to large eyes at the longboat's bow and stern. Teldin looked the longboat over with interest. Now here was a vessel he understood. About thirty feet long at the keel and tapered at bow and stern, it was a larger version of the small riverboats that Teldin knew from his childhood. Oarlocks were mounted on the gunwales, and two oars lay lengthwise across the thwarts that braced the hull. The only unusual feature was the enormous, broad-armed chair that was bolted securely in place in the longboat's stern. Made from heavy, dark wood and ornately carved, the chair looked more like a throne than something appropriate to a water-going vessel, especially with the assorted bits of machinery that appeared to have been bolted to it at random. Horvath noted where Teldin was looking, "Minor helm," he said as though that was sufficient answer, then he raised his voice. "Boys, crew, get us ready to put out." A number of gnomes appeared from elsewhere on deck and checked the davits' rigging, then took up the slack on the lines. "In you get," Horvath told Teldin as he clambered over the gunwale. "Sit up in the bow if you like. It's a good view, and you'll be out of the way."

Obediently Teldin stepped over the gunwale—easy for someone of his size—and settled onto the forward thwart. As he did so, three other gnomes arrived and climbed aboard as well. The youngest of the three—Miggisomething, he remembered Horvath had called him—looked at Teldin curiously, then his face crinkled in a jaunty grin, and he winked broadly. "Welcome aboard the Ship of Fools," he said in a cheerful voice as he settled upon a thwart amidships. "You can call me Miggins." The second gnome to board was a marked contrast to Miggins. He was short and squat, even shorter than Horvath, and his lined face made him look centuries older than Teldin's new friend. Instead of the off-white shirts and leather aprons favored by most of the crew, he wore an ankle-length robe of rich burgundy, its hems embellished with finely woven gold threads. Around his neck was a thin gold chain, bearing as a pendant a rough nugget of raw gold almost as large as the gnome's small fist. A thin circlet of gold was around his brow, holding his curly gray hair away from his face. Totally disinterested, he didn't spare Teldin a glance as he seated himself in the ornate throne and laid his hands palms-down on its broad arms.

The third gnome was different again. She was female, apparently about the same age as Horvath. She wore the standard apron, but the cut of her clothes was different to accommodate the swell of her full bosom. She shot a glare at Teldin, and he realized he'd been staring impolitely. He looked aside quickly in embarrassment. The woman took her place on the same thwart as Miggins. Horvath spoke up. "These are Dana, Miggins and Saliman," he said, indicating the individuals as he named them. Teldin was glad that Horvath had abbreviated the names. "Welcome our new shipmate, Teldin Moore," Horvath went on, "a mighty neogi-killer, I hear tell." The woman, Dana, shot him a quick glance that mixed surprise and disbelief, then looked away again. Horvath nudged Teldin with an elbow. "Watch out for Saliman," he said in a stage whisper, indicating with his thumb the elder gnome seated in the throne.

"Give him a chance and he'll entrap you with his rhetoric. You'll be worshipping gnomish gods and wishing you were a gnome before he's through with you." He raised his voice to its normal pitch. "And you, Dana, I'll ask you to keep your lively good humor and ready wit to yourself, or you'll overwhelm our fine guest." Dana snorted and shot Teldin another disgusted look.

"Boat crew ready?" Horvath bellowed.

"Ready," responded one of the gnomes at the ropes. "Then take us out."

The lines complained as the boat crew took up the slack and lifted the longboat dear of the deck. The davits pivoted with a groan as they swung the vessel over the rail.

"Lower away," Horvath ordered. "Easy this time." The boat crew let out the lines, and the longboat descended slowly. When it reached where the waterline would be on a seagoing vessel, the ropes went slack. The longboat bobbed slightly as though it were floating on the ocean. Teldin looked over the gunwales at the blackness and distant stars below and tightened his grip on the thwart. "Free the lines," Horvath called... and after a moment added, "Teldin, that means you."

Teldin glanced back over his shoulder, then looked at the bow rigging. The lines in the block-and-tackle were slack, but the large iron hook was still engaged with the eye on the bow. With a conscious effort he loosened his grip on the thwart and started to stand. The boat swayed alarmingly. "Keep low!" Horvath shouted. "It's a long way down." Needing no second urging, Teldin crouched in the bow and reached upward to release the hook. The lines swung free. "Clear?"

"Clear," Teldin answered, as did Saliman from his position aft.

"Good. Now push us off."

Two gnomes wielding long poles with padded ends pushed on the longboat's hull. Slowly it moved away from the dreadnought. Even when the smaller vessel was too far away for the gnomes to keep pushing, it continued to drift slowly outward from the other ship.

"Oars out," Horvath said crisply. Dana and Miggins lifted the long oars, swung them outboard and mounted them firmly in the oarlocks. They held the oars as if ready for a stroke, but didn't pull on them. "Saliman, take us out... oh, a spear cast should do it. Oars parallel to the hull, please." The older gnome nodded at Horvath's order. He closed his eyes and settled his hands more comfortably on the arms of his throne... and the longboat began to move. Slowly picking up speed, it drew farther away from the huge dreadnought. When they were about a hundred yards away, Teldin judged, Dana and Miggins changed the angle of the oars they held. The longboat maneuvered to a course parallel to that of the Unquenchable.

Teldin watched in fascination. He knew that the main motive power for a spelljamming vessel came from the "spelljamming helm." Somehow this device absorbed magical energy from any spellcaster who sat in it, and converted it into another form that drove the vessel. What purpose, then, did the longboat's oars serve... or for that matter, the almost-transparent sails used by the neogi deathspiders? After a few minutes of observation, of correlating the movements of the oars with the maneuvers of the longboat, he came to a conclusion. Although the helmsman had control over the vessel's motions, that control was only on a gross level. For fine maneuvering, the oars—and presumably the sails—were required. This conclusion still didn't answer everything, he knew—like, what did the oars push against?—but it did allow him to start to make sense of what he was seeing.

As the longboat maneuvered again, Teldin could see the dreadnought in all its glory... if that was the right word. He'd seen it before in the lake at Mount Nevermind, but this perspective made it look even more impressive... and even more outrageous. Its broad-beamed hull was several hundred feet long, constructed of planking for the most part but patched and reinforced here and there with large plates of metal. A little aft of amidships were the huge paddle wheels, turning slowly as though to propel the vessel across a nonexistent river. Both forecastle and sterncastle loomed huge over the deck, massive constructions of wood and metal that would surely overturn any true seagoing vessel. Even to Teldin, who admitted he knew little to nothing of ship design, the structures looked fundamentally wrong. Chaotic they seemed, as though built piecemeal by multiple crews of artificers who weren't on speaking terms with each other.

Signs of battle were everywhere. The hull was marked and cracked here and there where it had been struck by catapult missiles, and splintered pieces of wood hung by fraying ropes from the rigging. To Teldin's unpracticed eye, the ship looked somewhat mauled but still "spaceworthy." Horvath ordered course changes as he continued his inspection of the ship. As the longboat cruised on, Teldin felt his gaze drawn once more to the world they were leaving behind them.

Krynn was now a full sphere, half in sunlight, half in darkness. The day side had taken on a brilliant blue color, mottled over much of its surface with abstract patterns of white. The night side was dark, but not pitch black, and once he saw a flash of dim, cold radiance that could only have been the light of one of the moons reflecting off some body of water. It looked so beautiful and serene. How could this... this work of art, be a world where conflict had killed so many? he wondered.

Light caught Teldin's eye from an unexpected direction then. The brilliance of the sun reflected off a metal plate on the Unquenchable's hull. Had the longboat changed course again?

No, it was the dreadnought itself that had maneuvered. As he matched, the massive vessel completed a turn. Its course was no longer parallel with that of the longboat, and the sidewheeler was picking up speed. Teldin looked back. Horvath's eyes, too, were locked on the Unquenchable. "What's happening?" the human asked the gnome. "Don't know," Horvath replied shortly, then snapped, "Saliman. Get us up to speed. Oars—" he gestured his confusion—"follow that dreadnought!" The longboat surged and began to accelerate, but Teldin knew it would never catch the Unquenchable if the larger vessel maintained its present speed. Teldin shifted his position on the thwart, and his foot struck something that rolled on the planking with a metallic sound. He reached down into the scuppers and extracted a brass tube almost as long as his forearm.

Although it was rare on Krynn, Teldin recognized the object immediately: a sailor's glass. He raised it to his eye and pointed the tube at the receding ship. The dreadnought seemed to leap closer. Through the glass he could easily see the commotion on deck. Gnomes were running everywhere, swarming into the rigging. "Ship ho!" The voice was Miggins's, booming from the midships thwart. The gnome was pointing generally forward and upward. "High on the port bow," he called, "ahead of the 'quenchable!" There was a cold prickling on Teldin's brow, and the flat, coppery taste of fear was in his mouth. He strained to make out the ship, bringing the glass around in the direction in which the gnome was pointing, but could see nothing against the blackness of space. You don't need to, his fear told him, you know what it looks like: a black spider, coming to kill you. "Can you make it out?" Horvath asked.

"Is it neogi?" It took Teldin a moment to realize it was his own voice that had asked that.

In answer, the younger gnome reached forward and snatched the glass from Teldin's hands. "No, not neogi," Mig-gins replied after a dozen heartbeats, "not a deathspider. Wasp. No, three wasps."

Relief washed over Teldin like a wave. For the first time, he realized that his forearms were knotted from the death grip he had on the gunwale. With a conscious effort, he opened his hands and flexed them to restore the circulation in his fingers.

Once again he looked up into space in the direction that Mig-gins had indicated. He could see the ships—still too distant for him to pick out details, but recognizable as shapes totally different from the neogi spiderships he'd imagined. He sighed and smiled at Horvath. "Any colors?" Horvath asked.

"None," Miggins answered, then immediately corrected himself. "Hoisting a flag now. Black field..." The young gnome's voice took on a harsher edge. "... red device. It's the neogi skull."

Teldin felt the sudden tension amid the rest of the crew. "What's happening?" he demanded. "You said they're not neogi." "No, they're not neogi," Horvath confirmed flatly. "The neogi skull flag is universal. They're pirates."

Chapter Two

Teldin stared at the three ships closing rapidly with the dreadnought and spreading out into a line-abreast formation. In the harsh sunlight he could make out their angular, somehow brutal configuration. They seemed so small in contrast to the bulk of the dreadnought. "Three wasps are serious trouble," Horvath said as if in answer to Teldin's thoughts. "They've got the maneuverability and the Unquenchable isn't in any shape for a fight, not now."

"But it's sailing right to them!" Teldin yelled.

"Sure she is." It was Dana who snapped back the answer. "In a stern chase, at that range, we'd lose. They'd rake us, and we couldn't return fire until they chose to approach."

"Maybe they haven't the stomach for a foe that wants to close," Miggins added. "What do we do?" asked Teldin.

"Nothing," Horvath told him. "They can't retrieve a boat in a battle. We stay back." The gnome grinned, but to Teldin it looked forced. "It won't be long. We've got enough air to hold out until this is over. Even now, the Unquenchable can give a good accounting of herself. Right?" "Right," Miggins answered heartily, a little too heartily, Teldin thought. "I wish I were aboard," Dana mumbled.

Teldin had never seen a space battle from this perspective, and being in one wasn't the same thing at all. At first it seemed like a stately dance. From his vantage, the four ships seemed to be moving virtually at a crawl, maneuvering to get the advantage on their foe. The approaching wasps initially held to their line-abreast formation while the Unquenchable brought its bow to bear on the center pirate vessel. The dreadnought's stern was now pointing directly at the longboat. The line of wasps began to lengthen noticeably as the ships loosened up their formation.

It looked like the illustrations of naval skirmishes that Teldin had seen in his grandfather's books, but then everything changed and he realized for the first time exactly how complex a space battle could be. Suddenly, the two flanking wasps tipped their noses down and dived sharply. The line became a triangle, and suddenly another dimension had been added to the tactical picture. "Classic tactics," Horvath muttered.

"What?"

Horvath shot an exasperated look at Teldin... then relented. "You can't know," he said tiredly. "Look you. It's the classic move for three ships engaging one. Form a triangle. If the enemy commits to attacking one ship, the other two maneuver to parallel the enemy or 'cross its T' and rake it from astern. Whichever ship the Unquenchable goes after, the others have clean shots at her. And if the attackers have superior maneuverability and speed—which they do—all the Unquenchable can do is go after one ship. Unless..."

"Unless?"

The gnome grinned wolfishly. "Unless Wysdor remembers those dusty books we read a century or so back."

"But what can they do, anyway? They don't have any weapons left," Teldin exclaimed.

"They didn't!" Horvath corrected him. "But we do have some members of the Weapons Guild aboard, and I doubt that even my brother could keep them from making some modifications over the last few hours. Now watch." The dreadnought held its course, although to drive straight through the center of the expanding triangle of wasp ships. Then the gnomish vessel's complex rigging shifted, and the bow started to come up until the stubby bowsprit was pointing directly at the wasp forming the triangle's apex. Teldin could almost feel the strain in the massive ship as it settled on its new course. "I thought you said they shouldn't commit to one ship," Teldin said accusingly. "Just watch," Horvath told him, "and learn something." The dreadnought kept its bow pointing directly at the apex wasp. For the first time, Teldin started to sense the immense speed of closure as the ships hurtled head-on at each other. He reached back and took the glass from where it lay, forgotten, on Miggins's lap, and focused it on the pirate vessel. The angular ship seemed to jump closer as Teldin focused through the clumsy device. It really did look like a wasp. The body was wide where the two

sets of wings were mounted, but then tapered to a sharp point at the tail. The head— maybe the bridge, or maybe a fire platform— was cantilevered forward and down, giving the whole vessel a slightly hunchbacked, and decidedly evil, appearance.

Six legs sprouted from the lower hull near the wing roots—probably landing gear of some kind, or maybe part of the ship's rigging, Teldin presumed. The whole ship, apart from its pale and slightly iridescent wings, was painted night black, making it difficult to focus on against the backdrop of space. As he watched, two of the four wings shifted their angle and the vessel began to maneuver. Teldin tracked the glass over to the dreadnought, but the two vessels were too far apart to fit in the device's narrow field of view. He lowered the tube from his eye, understanding why Miggins had given up on the device: the naked eye was the only way to get a sense of the overall battle. "The wasp's changing course," Miggins shouted. "Aye," Horvath growled. "Getting edgy, as well it might." Teldin nodded. It must be more than slightly unnerving to have the huge bulk of a gnomish dreadnought bearing down on you.

The wasp changed course again—slight corrections only, but obviously to get it out of the Unquenchable's path. Captain Wysdor was shifting his course, too, keeping his bow pointed directly at his foe. Collision course was maintained. A projectile hurtled from the small ballista in the bow of the wasp, to slam and shatter harmlessly against a metal hull plate. With an effort, Teldin tore his gaze away from the apparently imminent collision. The other two wasps were changing course, too, just as Horvath had predicted. Their bows were coming up and turning inward, as they maneuvered to close with the dreadnought. Finally Teldin saw the wisdom of the pirates' tactics: even if the Unquenchable destroyed its single target, the other two ships would be maneuvering into position below and behind it, masked by the dreadnought's own hull from any weapons it might be carrying. Presumably the gnomish ship could roll, but by then the wasps could already have landed several damaging shots. And, according to Horvath, the dreadnought was in no condition to sustain prolonged fire from two fully armed wasps. "Look!" Miggins yelled.

The closing ships were almost on top of each other. Again the wasp fired a ballista bolt—a dean miss this time. The gunner must have been distracted, Teldin mused, grinning wryly. Wonder why. The pirate captain tried a last-ditch move—a hard turn to port—but the Unquenchable matched the maneuver perfectly. There was no chance that the wasp could avoid a collision.... Then the dreadnought's bow dropped into a steep dive beneath the still-climbing wasp. The gnomish ship's heavy mast smashed into the pirate ship's underside, tearing away two of its legs. At the same instant, a barrage leaped upward from the sterncastle, but a barrage such as Teldin had never seen before. Catapult stones and ballista bolts were one thing, but this fusillade seemed to consist of virtually anything that wasn't bolted down: a table and several stools, replacement lengths of spar, lanterns and flasks of oil, boxes and crates of supplies, even a barrel of ale. Teldin couldn't even begin to imagine what contraption the Weapons Guildsmen had fabricated to loft all those projectiles. Whatever it was, it was certainly effective. The volley rocketed straight into the underside of the wasp. High-velocity foodstuffs tore through fragile wings; furniture smashed into the wooden hull. Something struck the root of the port wings and burst into flame.

The gnomes in the longboat roared their approval. "Good shooting!" bellowed Horvath in a voice three times his size. "And they're away. Look." Sure enough, the dreadnought was accelerating again along its new course—down and away from the scene of battle. The two wasps that had been climbing to engage the gnomes were now well behind their target and heading the wrong way. They immediately began to come about, but even to Teldin's untrained eye it was obvious they'd be at a grave disadvantage by the time they completed their turn. It would be a stern chase, but this time the range would be much greater. He added his voice to the cheer of the gnomes.... Then he stopped as a thought struck him. "What about us?" he asked.

"Aye," Horvath replied in the sudden silence. "That is a question. Oars, I think we—"

"Wasp ho!" Miggins's cry cut him off.

In the excitement of the Unquenchable's escape, they'd forgotten the third wasp. Seriously damaged—virtually crippled—with sullen red fire licking from a hole in the hull, the vessel was still under power. Its last maneuver to avoid the collision had changed its heading. Maybe a sharp reversal of course was beyond the capabilities of the damaged ship, or maybe its captain and crew had decided they'd had their fill of battle. Whatever the reason, the wasp wasn't even trying to take up the pursuit of the dreadnought. Instead it moved slowly toward the longboat. Teldin could see movement on the wasp's foredeck. "Oars," Horvath snapped, "take up about and down." Dana responded instantly, but Miggins sat transfixed. "Oars!" Horvath roared. Miggins jumped guiltily and grabbed his oar, mirroring the angle at which Dana held hers. The longboat turned sharply, and the nose dropped. Teldin clutched at the thwart, expecting some kind of falling sensation. There wasn't one. To his sense of balance, the longboat seemed as steady as ever. It was everything else—the stars, the distant dreadnought, and the closing wasp—that seemed to wheel around him as though he were the center of the universe. Intuitively, it seemed, he grasped what that meant.

Or was it intuitively? Teldin had come to suspect that the cloak he wore was somehow supplying him with information. Was this another example of the process? No matter what the source of the revelation, it made sense. Apparently, every spelljamming vessel, no matter how small, had its own field of gravity. "Up" and "down" had no significance, except when related to the vessel itself. As he'd seen when the longboat was lowered from the dreadnought, "down" didn't extend forever, or the boat would have plummeted to the surface of Krynn, hundreds of leagues below. There had to be some kind of "gravity plane" near what would be the waterline of an ocean-going vessel. It seemed logical that "down" might be the direction toward that gravity plane. But didn't that mean you should be able to walk on the underside of the Unquenchable's hull? "Give us a quarter roll to port," Horvath ordered, breaking into Teldin's deliberations. The oarsmen obeyed instantly. Once again the universe moved about Teldin, and the wasp disappeared below the longboat's hull. "Shielding us from bow shots," Horvath explained grimly. "We can't do much about anything heavier but get out

of here, fast. Saliman, if you please?" The gnomish priest furrowed his brow in concentration but gave no other sign of having heard. With a splintering crash, the boat jolted as if struck by a titan's fist. Teldin sprawled in the scuppers, striking his head solidly against the thwart as he did so. His stomach was wrenched with nausea and he struggled to keep from vomiting. With a supreme effort he foug back the black veil that seemed to dim his vision.

The gnomes had fared better than he had, he saw... except for Saliman. The impact had tumbled the priest from his throne, and now he lay huddled in the scuppers, bleeding from a nasty gash on his brow. Horvath crouched beside him, his ear by the older gnome's mouth to listen for breathing. Teldin looked over the gunwale. The ship was surrounded by flotsam: splinters of wood, and a ballista bolt as large as a giant's spear shaft. After a moment Horvath looked up from Saliman. "He's alive, but not for long if we hang about here." He reached beneath the carved throne and pulled out a leather case about two feet long and half that wide. "Teldin, can you see?" "Yes."

"Then take this." The gnome threw the case forward to Teldin. "When you see somebody at the ballista, take 'em down, all right?" Teldin opened the case. Inside was a light crossbow, its walnut stock lovingly polished and its metal limbs buffed. A smaller compartment held a dozen thick quarrels. He looked back at Horvath. "But I can't..."

The gnome sighed. "Look you," he said quietly. "You've got to. I need these two at the oars, and I've got to take the helm. Do you understand? Anyway—" he grinned again, but the expression looked forced, a grim mockery of the gnome's usual good-humor—"you're the neogi-killer, isn't that right? Why not add a couple of pirates to your bag?" Horvath settled himself in the throne and placed his palms on the wide arms. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "All right," he said, deadly calm, now, "here we go. I wish I'd taken my mother's advice and stayed in the priesthood."

The longboat surged once, then settled down to steady movement again. "Oars," Horvath ordered quietly, "hard a'port... now!" Teldin jumped at the intensity in that last word. The gnomes on the oars responded as strongly, but more purposefully. The bow of the longboat came around fast, almost fast enough to unseat Teldin from his thwart. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something flash silently by to the right of the tiny vessel, and he turned quickly to follow its flight. It was another ballista bolt, visible for only an instant before it vanished into the depths of space. Without Horvath's sudden maneuver, the bolt probably would have hit its target. How did the gnome know, Teldin asked himself, with the wasp masked by the hull... and with his eyes closed? Horvath's quiet work cut through his thoughts. "That's why you've got to do it, why you've got to take out their gunner," the gnome said. "I can't dodge them forever. Just tell me when you're ready." Teldin tried to swallow the sharp taste that was in his mouth and picked up the crossbow... tentatively, as though it might do him some damage. He turned it over in his hands. In the war he'd seen crossbows and crossbowmen—albeit at distance—and knew how lethally accurate the weapons could be in the right hands. Personally, he knew precious little about using a crossbow. He'd never fired one, never cocked one, never even touched one. He pulled the woven wire bowstring back a couple of finger-breadths—much harder to do than he'd expected—and released it. The metal limbs of the bow sang. Taking a tighter grip on the bowstring, he began to draw it back. The bow's limbs bent, but not enough. The tendons in his forearm burned with the strain and the bowstring cut cruelly into the flesh of his fingers. With a muttered curse, he braced the weapon's butt against his belly and pulled on the bowstring with both hands. The bow bent farther, but still the string was almost a hand's span short of the metal tang that would hold it at full draw. The bowstring slipped from his sweaty fingers, and the bow limb straightened with a dull thwung. Disgusted with himself—and not a little humiliated—he flexed his aching fingers. Setting the weapon down across his lap, he turned back to face the gnomes. As he'd expected, Dana was glowering at him. Her expression communicated sheer contempt. A fire of anger flared within him. "All right," he growled, holding the weapon out toward her. "How?" It was Miggins who answered. "It's a gnomish design, a very cunning one. The lever is on the bottom, under the stock. Move it forward to cock the bow." Teldin turned the weapon over. A metal lever as long as his forearm ran along the underside of the crossbow. Its pivot point was within the wooden stock, directly under where the bowstring rested when the bow wasn't cocked. The other end of the lever was underneath the butt of the weapon. A recess in the wood gave enough space—just!—for Teldin's fingers to wrap around the lever. "Put the nose of the weapon on the ground," the young gnome continued. "Grab the butt with one hand, the lever with the other, and pull." Teldin did as he was instructed. As he moved the lever, he saw a hooked metal finger rise out of a groove in the wood, directly beneath the bowstring. Presumably, the finger was the other end of the lever. The hook caught the bowstring and started to draw it back. It was still an effort, but now Teldin had leverage—and the fact that he could use both his arms and the strong muscles of his back—to help him. With a metallic snick, the bowstring caught on the tang

and held fast. Teldin returned the lever to its original position and hefted the cocked weapon.

"Now the quarrel." It was Miggins again. Apparently Dana didn't even consider him worth talking to.

"I know that much," he said dryly.

The quarrel was short and brutal, with only the smallest amount of fletching, but with a wickedly sharp head like crossed razors. He seated the missile in the groove ahead of the bowstring. "Now?"

"Left hand under the stock, right hand down by the trigger," Miggins directed. "Now put it against your shoulder."

"Which shoulder?"

The young gnome's control started to slip. "Whichever feels most natural, for the gods' sake," he snapped. "Just do it." "Ready?" That was Horvath.

Teldin shrank the cloak so it was little more than a band of fabric around the back of his neck, then he took a deep breath, held it for half a dozen heartbeats, and let it out in a hissing sigh. "Relaxation ritual," he heard his grandfather's voice savin his mind. "Practice

so you can do it anywhere, anytime." He wondered what his grandfather would think if he knew his teachings were being taken out of this world? "Ready," he answered Horvath flatly. Horvath nodded, his eyes still closed. "Oars, quarter roll to starboard." Miggins and Dana shifted their oars, as Teldin twisted on the thwart to face astern. The smooth wood of the crossbow was cool in his hands, its weight somehow reassuring. Once more the universe did its disconcerting pirouette around the longboat, and the wasp ship rose above the gunwale like an evil, angular moon. The pirate ship was close now, no more than a good dagger cast from the longboat, virtually point-blank range for the ballista mounted in the pirate vessel's bow.

Somebody was readying that weapon now, cranking fast on a windlass, winching back the thick bowstring. The wasp was close enough for Teldin to make out the pirate's loose-fitting white shirt, even the red bandanna holding his hair clear of his face. Teldin lifted the crossbow and jammed the curved butt into his left shoulder. He was almost certain this was wrong—he was "crossing his weapon" or something—but that was what seemed most natural. "Sight along the quarrel," Miggins called to him. "Steady, and pull the trigger."

Teldin closed his right eye. He tried to line up the uppermost feather on the quarrel with the pirate crewman, but he couldn't hold the weapon steady. He tightened his grip on the wooden stock, but still his hands trembled. Once more he took a deep breath, stretching his chest to its fullest extent... held,... then exhaled, blowing out with the air his tension and fear. He sighted again. This time the weapon was steady as a rock and the quarrel's fletching bisected his target. He hesitated, wondering at the sudden sense of calm he felt. Tension was gone; he was like the weapon he held: solid, cold, dedicated totally to its purpose. He was a weapon. For a fleeting moment he felt as though this crystal clarity, this focus, might be somehow external to him, something enforced upon him from the outside, then he discarded the thought as meaningless. He was as he was.

The pirate had winched the ballista's bowstring fully back and was wrestling the heavy bolt into place. Teldin took another breath, let out half of it, and fired.

The crossbow jerked against his shoulder, but he hardly noticed. His time sense seemed to have changed. He could easily follow the quarrel's flight as it flashed across the intervening distance and buried itself in the base of the pirate's throat. The gunner's mouth opened in a death scream, but Teldin thankfully couldn't hear it. In a final convulsion, the pirate lurched backward, a flailing arm striking the ballista's firing lever.

The huge bow's limbs slammed forward, but there was no bolt in place, nothing for the bowstring to push against, nowhere for all that energy to go. When the bowstring reached the limits of its normal travel, momentum kept the limbs rocketing forward. Teldin watched in amazement as the ballista literally tore itself apart. He lowered the crossbow from his shoulder. The intense focus of just a moment ago had vanished, and he had to squeeze the weapon painfully tight to control the shaking of his hands.

"Dry-fired," Dana muttered. Then, reluctantly, she added to Teldin, "Well shot." Teldin nodded. He felt no pride in his performance even though he had to admit it was an amazing shot. There must be gods who watch out for novices like me, he thought. Next time he'd be lucky if he didn't shoot himself. "We're not clear yet," Horvath said quietly. "They've still got the speed on us, and they've probably got other weapons aboard. Teldin, I'll take us up, over the top of them. I want you to pick off the captain. Can you do that? No! he wanted to shout, I can't. Don't depend on me. I'll kill you all. But, "I'll try," was all he answered.

"Good," Horvath acknowledged. "It should be no harder than the last shot. Fine shooting, by the way. You impress me, dirtkicker." Before Teldin could respond, the gnome shouted his orders. "Oars, loop us back, and another quarter roll to starboard. Now" Dana and Miggins shifted their oars drastically, and the longboat maneuvered in response. This time, Teldin could feel the turn, an uncomfortable disorientation originating in his inner ears. The rapid wheeling of the stars didn't help, nor did the fact that the wasp was now above the longboat... and that Teldin was looking down onto its deck. He took another cleansing breath and concentrated on readying the crossbow for another shot. "There he is," Dana yelled, "on the port rail. Get him!" Teldin saw the man she meant, a tall figure with shoulder-length black hair. As the wasp swept by overhead, he snapped the crossbow to his shoulder. That same cold stillness came over his mind again as he brought the weapon to bear. For an instant, his gaze locked with that of the pirate captain. The man had eyes the gray of a winter sea. Teldin pulled the trigger. The quarrel flew true... but at the last moment the captain flung himself backward. Razor-sharp steel grazed the man's cheek, then the missile buried itself deep in the wasp's port rail. In his peripheral vision, Teldin saw a flash of swift movement....

And Miggins cried out. The longboat lurched and rolled, taking the wasp out of sight beneath the hull.

Miggins sprawled against the gunwale, clutching at his right shoulder, while his oar waved wildly. Crimson spread across his jerkin from where the shaft of an arrow protruded from his flesh. The longboat lurched again. Reacting instinctively, Teldin dropped the crossbow and scrambled over the thwarts toward the oarsman. Miggins was trying to sit up, but seemed unable to find the strength. Teldin reached out to help him, but stopped. How badly was the boy injured? Would moving him make it worse? The young gnome looked up at him with pain-glazed eyes. "It hurts, Teldin," he said dully. He tried once more to sit up, moving his oar as he did so. Again the longboat lurched, pitching Teldin against the gunwale. "Take his oar," Dana shouted.

Once more, Teldin felt anger spark within him. "He's wounded," he roared at her. "He'll be dead if you don't do it," assured Horvath "and so will we." The calm tone of the older gnome's voice was unchanged. A sharp rebuttal sprang to Teldin's lips, but then the anger within him died. The gnomes were right. As carefully as he could, he moved Miggins from the thwart—the youth was almost as light as a child in his arms—and took his place. He grasped the oar and felt it slippery with Miggins' sweat. "What do I do?" he asked.

"Unless I tell you otherwise, watch how Dana does," Horvath said, "and do just

the opposite. She moves her oar up, you move yours down. She moves hers forward..."

"I move mine astern. I understand. I'll try." "That's all we can ask. Dana, half roll. If we want to avoid the wasp, we've got to see it." The woman snorted. Maybe she didn't agree with Horvath, Teldin thought, or maybe she just enjoyed snorting. Either way, she lowered her oar. Teldin raised his, trying to match the angle exactly. The stars swung, and the pirate ship came back into sight. It was astern again, but its heading matched that of the longboat, and it was much closer, a massive, asymmetrical shape with its missing legs and damaged wings looming in Teldin's field of vision. A cold fist seemed to squeeze his heart as he realized how fast the ship was closing. "Ramming!" he cried. To his own ears, his voice sounded like a croak, as though somebody were choking him. "I know," Horvath replied. "We have to wait for the right moment. Teldin, when I say, bring your oar astern. Hard, do you understand me?" "I understand." Where was that calmness he'd felt only a minute ago, Teldin wondered. There was certainly no sign of it now. "Ready..." Horvath's voice sounded detached, disinterested. "And... now." Teldin threw his weight on the oar. Beside him on the thwart, Dana did the same. The longboat turned sharply just in time. Silently—and the huge shape's movement was all the more terrifying for that—the wasp soared by to port, so close that Teldin felt he could almost touch one of its tattered wings. As the vessel passed, his sense of balance swung and pitched the way the stars had done only moments before. His stomach lurched with vertigo, and he clung to his oar to counteract a sudden, terrifying sensation of falling. It was over in a moment as the universe seemed to right itself, almost fast enough that Teldin could believe he'd imagined the whole thing, but Horvath was shaking his head in discomfort; he'd obviously felt something too. "Gravity effect," the gnome muttered. "We passed through their gravity field. That was close. Now, center oars."

Teldin responded instantly but kept his eye on the wasp. There was movement on the deck, but nobody was pointing a weapon at them. In fact, the pirate crew didn't seem to be watching the longboat at all.... "Ship ho!" Dana screamed hoarsely. Her head was tipped back, eyes on something directly overhead. Teldin followed her gaze. There was another shape against the stars, another ship, this one with lines as smooth and streamlined as the wasp's were angular. Its hull was long and slender, tapering at the stern to a sharp point set with a vertical spanker sail. Its bow was rounded, reinforced by a metal ram. Metal lobes extended from the hull just aft of the ram, each with a circular port at its end, which reminded Teldin uncomfortably of an eye. Just aft of the lobes, vertical structures were visible on the hull, looking very much like the gill slits of some impossibly huge shark. The new ship was several hundred yards away, too distant for Teldin to make out any details of its crew, though he could see movement on deck. The vessel's blunt bow was pointed directly at the pirate wasp, and it was under speed. The wasp's crew had obviously spotted the approaching vessel as well. The pirate ship's torn wings shifted, and its bow began to bear off. Without warning, fire blossomed on the wasp's deck, a silent concussion of orange flame. The vessel shuddered but continued to turn away from its new enemy. As the wasp began to accelerate, Teldin saw that the fire was spreading, devouring the wing roots. "The ship's dead," Dana hooted. In a transport of excitement, she clasped Teldin's shoulder as she would a comrade's. "They'll never control that fire," she cheered.

Teldin was silent, his eyes on the new ship, drawing ever nearer. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," his grandfather had always told him, but was that true? Had it ever been true? Dana fell silent and withdrew her hand from his shoulder. After a moment she asked quietly, "What do we do, Horvath?" "We can't outrun that hammership," he said calmly. "I say we remember our wounded." He lifted his hands from the arms of the throne and clenched them into fists as though to relieve tension in his forearms. He brushed a light beading of sweat off his brow and looked at the approaching vessel—for the first time with his natural eyes, rather than the arcane senses provided by the minor helm. "Oars in, you please," he requested. "And prepare to greet our rescuers." Teldin watched as Dana quickly unseated the oarlock and brought her oar inboard, then tried to copy her actions. It wasn't nearly as easy as it looked. The oar's length made it clumsy, and he was hindered both by inexperience and his worry about jostling Miggins. By the time he had his oar safely shipped, the approaching vessel—the "hammership" as Horvath called it—was within a spear cast of the longboat and drawing smoothly closer. For the first time he could see the ship's crew: human, as far as he could tell. As if that was any kind of guarantee; the pirate wasp had been manned by humans too.... At least they weren't neogi.

The long, blunt hull of the hammership drew alongside the longboat and eased to a stop with less than fifty feet separating the two vessels. For an instant Teldin's vision swam with vertigo, then the universe settled down once more. Half a dozen of the hammership's crew were lining the near rail. They weren't wearing armor, and their weapons were limited to belt daggers or clasp-knives, but they had the same unmistakable air about them that Teldin remembered from the veterans he'd met in the war. There was nothing about their actions, or even their justifiable scrutiny of the longboat, that could be considered hostile. Still he recognized an unmistakable sense of readiness—whether to deal violence or receive it, he wasn't sure.

Something snaked across the intervening distance. Instinctively Teldin grabbed it—a rope.

"Cleave it off," a voice ordered from the hammership. Teldin had no trouble picking out the man who'd spoken. Holding on to the other end of the rope, he was easily a head taller than anyone else at the rail. His shoulders were broad and his chest deep and muscular. His hair—curly and dose-cropped to his head—was pale enough at this distance to appear gray, but his face seemed to be that of a man not much older than Teldin himself. There was something about the man that spoke of command. "Well, cleave it off." The powerful voice boomed across space again.

Horvath gently took the rope from Teldin's hand, passed a bight around the midships thwart, and tied it off. "Tell him to bring it in," he told Teldin quietly. "Humans are more comfortable dealing with humans." Teldin nodded. He cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Bring us in." The big man stepped back as three other crew members took the rope and threw their weight against it. Teldin nodded to himself. The pale-haired man had the aura of command. Was he the captain?

The longboat moved closer and bumped against the hammership's hull. The smaller vessel floated at the same point on the

hammership as it might were both ships floating in water. Teldin nodded to himself; this seemed to confirm his deductions about a "gravity plane." The larger vessel's rail was a good four feet higher than the longboat's gunwale—no difficulty for Teldin, but a significant obstacle for the gnomes.

The barrel-chested man must have recognized the same difficulty. He swung his legs over the hammership's rail and dropped lightly into the longboat. His face split in a lopsided grin as he asked Teldin, "Give you a hand with the crew?"

There was a flurry of movement beside Teldin. He glanced over toward Dana... and saw the gnome training a cocked and armed crossbow on the large man. When did she bring that out? he asked himself. When I was shipping the oar? "Dana..." Horvath began.

"No," Dana cut him off, "we have to know." She settled her finger more firmly on the trigger and aimed the weapon at the center of the man's chest. "What do you want?"

The man's asymmetrical grin didn't falter. When he spoke, it was directly to Teldin. "Spirited, isn't she?" The big man's eyes didn't shift, but his hand lashed out with the speed of a striking snake. He batted the crossbow aside—the bolt thudded harmlessly into the hammership's hull as Dana pulled the trigger much too late—then gave the weapon a twist and wrenched it almost contemptuously from the woman's grasp. He glanced casually at the weapon in his hand—"Gnomish design, right?" he speculated—and handed it to Teldin. "Do they do this often?" he asked.

It was Horvath who answered. "There will be no more trouble," he said quietly. He gestured at the motionless Saliman and Miggins. "We have wounded." The man nodded, but his grin remained. "That's right," he said, feigning wonder. "Almost half your crew injured. Grievous losses for taking out a wasp ship." He nudged Teldin with a rock-hard elbow. "Remind me to take gnomes more seriously in the future."

Two more of the hammership's crew clambered down into the longboat, easily passing the injured gnomes up to their fellows above. In response to a surprisingly cordial gesture of invitation from the large man, Horvath climbed onto the gunwale and extended his arms up, to be hoisted aboard the larger vessel. Dana hesitated for a moment to glare at the man who'd so easily disarmed her, then did the same. The others from the hammership swung themselves back aboard their ship, leaving Teldin alone with the big man. For the first time, Teldin had time to really look the fellow over. He was a large man, at least a hand's breadth over six feet tall, with shoulders to match. Lines seamed his face around his eyes, making it difficult for Teldin to judge his age, and a scar, bone-white against weather-tanned skin, angled up from his right eyebrow into his curly blond hair. The large man extended a big-knuckled hand toward Teldin. "I'm Aelfred Silverhorn, of Toril." His voice was deep but not harsh, with a trace of an unfamiliar accent. "And you are?" Teldin grasped the large warrior's wrist. "Teldin Moore of Krynn." Aelfred's grip was firm. "Well met, Teldin Moore," he said. "Now, what do we do with the boat?"

"Bring it aboard?"

Aelfred shook his head. "No space."

Teldin frowned. At the speed the Unquenchable had taken off, it didn't seem likely it would be back soon... if it even survived. "Cut loose, then." "As you say." Aelfred put a boot onto the gunwale, reached up for the hammership's rail... then stepped down again. "After you," he said with a half-bow.

Teldin hesitated, not quite sure how to take the larger man's politeness. He shrugged. If I'm supposed to be captain, I'll be captain, he told himself. He stepped onto the longboat's gunwale, grabbed the rail above him, and swung himself over onto the hammership's deck. Saliman and Miggins were nowhere to be seen—presumably they'd been taken belowdecks and were being tended to—but Dana and Horvath were beside him. The two gnomes stood with their backs to the rail, looking with some trepidation at their new hosts. Most of the crewmen had returned to their task, but several still stood around, watching the gnomes with interest.

Aelfred, too, swung over the rail, tossing the rope to another crewman. Teldin tried to ignore the fact that their only possible escape from the hammership was

now drifting away into the darkness of space, and he asked, "What's the name of your ship?"

The big man chuckled deep in his throat. "My ship? Oh, I'm not the captain. Lort—" he called to another crewman—"why don't you bring the captain on deck? Our guest would like to meet him."

Lort, a whip-thin boy of perhaps twenty summers but already showing the hard edge of a mercenary, grinned and vanished down a companionway. "We spotted a gnomish dreadnought making high speed, with two wasps hard after it," Aelfred continued to Teldin. "It was too far away for us to get into the action. Your ship?"

Teldin was silent for a moment. The caution he'd learned over the last few weeks began to reassert itself. "In a manner of speaking," he temporized. Aelfred didn't question him on it. The large man was watching the companionway where Lort had disappeared belowdecks. "You're interested in the captain?" he asked, a strange tone to his voice. "Teldin, meet my commanding officer." A figure emerged from the companionway. It was almost as tall as Aelfred, but there the similarity ended. The captain's skin, mottled and purple, glistened, and the short tentacles that made up its lower face moved sinuously. Large white eyes with no visible pupils regarded Teldin icily. The figure was clad in a silken, midnight-purple robe, clasped high at the neck and long enough to brush the deck. A brooch of amethyst set in burnished silver was at the creature's throat.

Aelfred laid a calloused hand on Teldin's shoulder. "Welcome aboard," he said flatly.

Chapter Three

Teldin took an involuntary step backward and felt the ship's rail press against his spine. Nowhere to run, his fear told him. He was

flanked to left and right by members of the hammer-ship's crew. Nothing was actively hostile in their manner, but there was certainly nothing welcoming either. The harsh sunlight of space glinted off knives and daggers and illuminated hard and scar-etched faces. Ahead of him, the captain—the monster—drew closer. You're dead. Dead, dead... The words hammered in the back of Teldin's brain. Images from childhood stories and horror tales flashed through his mind. He saw his own death, his head held immobile while writhing tentacles peeled away his skull like the shell of a hard-boiled egg. He felt his legs tense of their own volition, ready to heave him backward over the gunwale. Better the long, dizzying fall into nothingness than that ultimate obscenity....

You have nothing to fear.

The voice was quiet, but as clear as the tone of a flute, completely unaccented. Teldin looked around wildly for the one who'd spoken. No one had moved: neither Dana nor Horvath, nor the crew of the monster's vessel. His gaze snapped back to the tentacled creature.

It raised a three-fingered hand, and Teldin flinched. The rail slammed into the small of his back, and for a moment his balance wavered. The firm hand of a crewman grasped his shoulder then, not painfully or threateningly, merely to steady him.

The clear voice sounded again, I repeat, you have nothing to fear. This time the voice was accompanied by an almost subliminal tingle within Teldin's skull, a momentary feeling of coolness a finger's breadth behind his left eyebrow. He stared at the monster. Although there was no change in its expression—if a thing with tentacles instead of a face could be said to have an expression—its gaze no longer looked threatening or even intense, merely curious. What is your name? This time Teldin was sure of what he'd only just begun to suspect. The "voice" was sounding directly in his mind. With a supreme effort, he forced control on his body, slowing and deepening his breathing, releasing the tension in his chest. "Teldin," he whispered. "Teldin Moore."

Teldin Moore, the mental voice repeated. I welcome you aboard the good ship Probe, Teldin. Tentacles moved in an intricate and graceful pattern—a gesture of greeting? My name is "Estriss." It took Teldin a moment—and the startled reaction of the two gnomes beside him—to realize that the creature had spoken the last word aloud. Its voice was sharp and thin, a hissing sound more like the warning cry of a lizard or snake than the speech of a warm-blooded creature. But, of course, it's probably not warm-blooded, he thought with a shudder. "Estriss," he repeated. Correct. The cool words formed inside his head once more. Translated into your language, the name means "Thought Taker." "Thought... Taker? That is how my own people know me. Teldin felt a touch of something that could be humor—albeit cold and detached—in the monster's statement. It is not as bad as it sounds. I am a philosopher, a student of the universe. I learn from others, borrow from their wisdom and learning. Thus 'Thought Taker' Estriss. Do you understand?

Teldin nodded dumbly. His trip-hammer heartbeat was slowing back to some semblance of normality, and, as before, Teldin was dully surprised at how fast his body seemed to be able to recover from shock so great that he should be curled into a gibbering, fetid ball. Was his resilience, he was coming to wonder, something to do with the cloak that was now just a strip of fabric around his neck? "What... what are you?" It took a conscious effort to force the question from his lips.

The name we use for ourselves has no cognate—no equivalent—in your symbology, the monster explained silently. To some we are known as illithids. To others, mind flayers. You have not heard of us? There was no expression in the creature's eyes, but Teldin somehow sensed what could be mild disappointment as he shook his head. No matter, the "illithid" continued. What was your destination?

Teldin glanced over at Horvath, but the gnome made no reaction. Apparently he hadn't "heard" Estriss's question.

"I don't know," Teldin answered honestly... then wondered why he'd bothered to speak aloud. Surely the illithid could read his thoughts without the clumsy intermediary of speech. He concentrated, willing Estriss to respond. But after a few seconds of no reaction, he said out loud, "You can't read my mind?" Only when you speak. Forming the words focuses your thoughts enough for me to sense them. I have no need to hear the words, nor do I have to understand the language. But the action of speech must be there, and the communication must be intended for me. Have no fear. Your secrets are safe should you wish to keep them. The illithid gestured around it with a strangely articulated hand. The Probe's destination is Toril, in Realspace. You and your comrades—here the gnomes looked up, startled, as though only now hearing Estriss's words—are welcome to work off your passage as members of my crew. I would be glad to number you among them, particularly since your ship seems to have deserted you. Or, if you wish, you can be returned to Krynn.... "No!" Teldin was surprised by the force of his own voice. Estriss was taken aback, too, in the sudden tilt to the creature's head was any indication.

Teldin cursed himself silently. He was a fugitive, and fugitives shouldn't draw attention to their plight. The gnomes had taken him aboard knowing he was being pursued—and look what happened to so many of them, his guilt interjected—but this mind flayer might decide that a fugitive represented too great a risk and return him to Krynn against his will... or simply kill him. The illithid just nodded its head—a surprisingly human gesture. So be it, then, the cool voice rang in Teldin's brain. My first mate will assign your quarters and duties.

Aelfred Silverhorn stepped forward. "All right, you lot," he said, not unkindly.

"Follow me and we'll get you squared away." "Wait," Teldin interrupted. "The others..." "The wounded are already below," the first mate answered. He patted Teldin's shoulder in a comradely manner. "Don't worry. We'll take good care of your, uh, men." Dana snorted but, to Teldin's relief, made no comment. Horvath gave him a friendly wink as they followed Aelfred's broad figure. Teldin stopped at the head of the companionway that would lead him belowdecks and glanced back at Estriss. The illithid was watching him... and a smaller figure was watching him, too. A tiny face, with green reptilian skin and stubs of horns on its brow, peered out from behind Estriss's robes. It must have been there all the time, Teldin realized, whatever it was.

Aelfred reappeared in the companionway. "Hoi," he called to Teldin. "You coming?"
"Sorry," Teldin mumbled, and he turned to follow the first mate. Aelfred glanced past Teldin at the illithid and shrugged. "You're the captain," he said in answer to an unspoken order, then disappeared below. Estriss's "voice" sounded in Teldin's mind again. You wonder about the kobold? The mind flayer reached down and laid a red-purple hand on the small creature's head. It gazed up trustingly at its master and stepped out from behind the shelter of the illithid's robe. Teldin looked at the kobold with interest. It stood about three feet tall, with a squat, barrel-shaped body and short but powerful legs. Dressed in a coarsely woven jerkin—from under which protruded its vestigial tail—it resembled some twisted parody of a human child. Once more it turned its trusting eyes on Estriss and it took a fold of the illithid's robe in its short-fingered hand.

I charmed it, Estriss explained.

"Why?"

The illithid gestured with its tentacles in what might be its equivalent of a shrug. It is my food, it replied. When I hunger, I will eat your brain. The kobold calmly squatted down on the deck, still holding on to the robe as a child might cling to its parent's clothing for comfort. Teldin stared at the kobold, then the illithid.

Kobolds are enemies of my kind as well as yours, Estriss's mental voice told him calmly.

"But..."

Estriss's words took on a sharper edge. Better that I should eat your brain? The mind flayer looked down at the kobold and stroked the scaled head once more. The small creature responded with a short, unintelligible phrase—its voice reminded Teldin of a small dog yapping—and scurried away, to vanish belowdecks. Teldin watched it disappear, his thoughts an uncomfortable mixture of emotion. Come. The illithid had turned away and was walking toward the afterdeck of the hammership, obviously expecting Teldin to do likewise. Teldin followed slowly. The illithid climbed the ladder to the raised sterncastle, Teldin at its heels. The creature settled itself against the aft rail and gazed out past the spanker sail. Teldin, too, leaned on the rail, a wary distance from the illithid. The planet of Krynn hung against the velvet blackness, like a large gibbous moon. The distance was too great for Teldin to pick out any details... and was growing greater with every heartbeat. Home was slipping inexorably away.

You are from Krynn. Teldin started when the liquid syllables formed in his brain.

"Yes," he replied.

Then how do you come to be aboard a gnomish sidewheeler—again there was that faint touch of detached humor—particularly on a ship so fickle? The illithid turned and fixed him with its featureless white eyes. I ask only out of curiosity, I

intend no insult, but I think you have no familiarity with ships, or with wildspace. Is that so?

Teldin hesitated, wondering exactly how much to tell the creature. You flee something, I feel.

It was Teldin's turn to stare at the illithid. Can it read my mind? he asked himself. It—Estriss—had said it couldn't, but how far could he trust such a monstrous being? "Yes," he said at last. It must be something you fear greatly. Wildspace is rarely a safe haven... as you know from recent experience. The illithid shrugged its shoulders—a human gesture, but one that brought home to Teldin how... alien... its body structure was. Bones jutted under the robe in anomalous places, like a man who'd had both his collarbones—and maybe his neck—broken. He shuddered, an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Well, the illithid continued, turning its gaze once more to the planet falling ever farther astern, I trust you will tell me sometime, when you feel more comfortable in my presence. The mental voice fell silent for a moment, then continued. You fear me, is that not so? You see me as a monster? "Yes," Teldin answered truthfully. "You're so... different. We were told... When I was growing up..." He wasn't sure how to continue. "I was taught to fear things that were different," he finished lamely. How typical of so many small minds, Estriss replied, a quiet, speculative quality to the illithid's "voice." Generalizations are often dangerous. Some of my kind prey on humans, that is true, but then, so do some humans: pirates, bandits, marauders, those who attacked you, for example. Would it do to judge all humans based on the actions of a few? While some planet-bound illithids consider humans as cattle, I think you are not the cattle. I think you know much. I think you have many stories. I would like—the humor was back again—I would like to take your thoughts. Not now, perhaps, but at some point in our voyage together. I would like to hear your stories. And you may take my thoughts in return. It seems to me that we might each have something to teach the other. The illithid lapsed into mental silence. Teldin cast a sidelong glance at the creature. Estriss, he mused. What could you teach me? To stay alive? But at what cost? Then he paused. The creature beside him was a brainer—it had admitted it—and showed neither pride nor shame in the admission. It was alien, yes... but was it a monster? Monsters don't discuss the philosophy of prejudice, nor offer to exchange tales. He'd have to think about this.

The illithid stirred again, its blank eyes still on the distant planet. Why do you travel into wildspace? it asked. For a particular reason? Or just because wildspace is not Krynn?

More than ever, Teldin was convinced that the mental tone of the last phrase was the creature's expression of humor. But it was still a question he didn't feel comfortable answering. Or was it the answer itself that made him uncomfortable? "Why are you heading to Realmspace?" he countered. If the illithid cared about—or even noticed—Teldin's blunt attempt to change the subject, it gave no sign. Again it gave a broken-backed shrug. I have business on Toril, Estriss replied. The city of Rauthaven, if you know of it. There is an auction of items... The mental voice paused—almost shyly, it seemed to Teldin. "Items...?" he prompted, interested. What would a mind flayer be embarrassed about?

My life's work. Perhaps—if it interests you—we could discuss it... at a later date....

Teldin looked at the creature beside him with renewed interest. Monsters don't want to discuss prejudice. They don't have a sense of

humor... and they certainly don't get embarrassed talking about their life's work. Well. Estriss's mental voice was brisk again. I must discuss our course with the helmsman. We can continue our conversation later if you wish.

Teldin nodded. "I'd enjoy that," he said... and he was telling the truth.

Belowdecks on the Probe was quite different from on the Unquenchable. The overheads were higher—Teldin wasn't putting his skull at risk whenever he moved— but the companionways were much more cramped. Certainly there was nothing like the little "snug" where Horvath had drawn him a pint of ale. The companionways and ladders—and what few compartments had their doors open—were scrupulously clean and uncluttered and showed no signs of the spontaneous "modifications" that the gnomes seemed to make a matter of course. One of the hammership's crew—the thin youth Aelfred had called Lon—tried to brush past him, but Teldin stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Where are... where's my crew?" he asked, trying to inject into his voice the confidence that he had heard in Aelfred's. The boy gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. "Guest cabin," he said. Teldin frowned. That wasn't much help. "Well, where—" he started. "Port side, by the mainmast," Lort cut in impatiently. The youth shook off Teldin's hand and hurried on.

Teldin sighed. He didn't seem to have made the impression on the boy that he'd hoped. Once he was heading in the right direction, it wasn't difficult to find the gnomes. Even from a distance he could hear Dana's sharp voice railing about something or other, and all he had to do was follow the sound. The "guest cabin" was small and cramped—maybe ten feet long by half that wide— and obviously intended to house only one guest. It was made even more claustrophobic by the fact that two hammocks had been slung from brackets on the walls. His four shipmates were there. Miggins and Saliman lay in the hammocks— both conscious and apparently out of danger, he was glad to see—while Horvath sat comfortably on a folded sail. Dana, fists on her hips, paced the width of the compartment.

"Now it would be much better all around if you were to just calm down, Danajustiantorala," Horvath was saying at breakneck speed. "You know very well there's nothing we can do at the moment, and..." He broke off as he saw Teldin enter. "Well, well," he said, jumping to his feet. "Don't just stand there in the doorway. Come in and join us."

Teldin grasped his friend's offered hand and squeezed it warmly. Even though he'd tentatively decided that he didn't have anything to fear among the hammership's crew, he felt much more comfortable in the presence of the gnomes. He reached out and patted Miggins on the shoulder. "How are you feeling?" "Much better," the young gnome replied with a grin. "They gave me some kind of potion, listed like... well, like something pretty awful if you want to know the truth, but it did the job." He moved his wounded shoulder experimentally. "It's still stiff, but it doesn't hurt much anymore." Teldin nodded. "And Saliman?"

The gnomish cleric lay motionless on his hammock, an unfocused gaze on the ceiling. "Saliman?" Horvath prompted.

"Head hurts," Saliman said, with a totally ungnomish abruptness that indicated just how much pain he must be in.

"He'll be all right," Horvath finished. "They've treated us well." Dana snorted, but Horvath paid no attention. "Do you know the ship's destination?" Teldin seated himself on a stack of folded blankets. The gnomes—even Saliman— were looking at him, waiting for his answer. "The Probe is going to RealmSpace," he told them. "Horvath, what about the Unquenchable?" The gnome sighed. "We were talking about that," he said. "There were still two pirate ships left and no guarantee that the Unquenchable will even survive." "It'll survive," Dana muttered fiercely under her breath.

Horvath fixed her with a hard, steady gaze, and the younger gnome seemed almost to wilt under it. "No, Dana," he said flatly, "now is the time for realism, not false bravado. I say there's no guarantee the Unquenchable will survive, and you know that to be true as well as I. Even if the ship wins through, what do we do? Can we get back aboard her?" The diminutive figure shoved his fists deep into his pockets. Teldin could feel the pain this was bringing him, but the gnome kept his voice steady. "We could wait on the longboat and hope the Unquenchable comes back to find us before the air runs out. Or we could search for the Unquenchable, or for her wreckage, but KrynnSpace is big. And that's if our fellows even stay within this sphere.

"Or we could go back down to the surface—" he smiled grimly "—but I don't think Teldin would be alone in his opposition to that. What say you to that?" There was no answer. Horvath continued, "Or we can stay aboard the... the Probe, you called it? Aye, the Probe. And we can travel to Toril aboard a solid ship. Not to say that it couldn't do with a few improvements, of course," he added with a grin. "What say you?"

Teldin spoke up. "Estriss—he's the captain—says we'd be welcome as crew members."

"Estriss," Dana snorted. "You're getting very chummy with that brain-eating monster, aren't you, now?"

Horvath turned to Teldin, pointedly ignoring Dana's comment. "That big fellow, Aelfred something. Now, he made us the same offer. I know, I'm like the rest of you—" he fixed each of the other gnomes with his gaze "—I'm wanting to get back aboard the Unquenchable with my own kind. But I don't see any way we can do that. Teldin, do you trust these big folk?" Teldin was silent a moment. He remembered his brief conversation with Aelfred Silverhorn aboard the gnomish longboat. He'd felt some kind of kinship there, a strength tempered by a sense of balance. "Yes," he said. "And the captain, the mind flayer? Do you trust it?" The pause was longer this time. Teldin felt the responsibility, a tightness across his shoulders and the back of his neck. If he was wrong, he could be dooming the four gnomes as well as himself. But still, he knew what his answer would have to be. Monsters don't discuss philosophy. "I trust Estriss," he answered.

Horvath nodded. "And I trust Teldin." He squared his shoulders. "I will sail to Realmspace with the Probe. How say you all? Saliman?" "Aye."

"I'll stay," volunteered Miggins.

"Dana?" Horvath fixed her with his sharp gaze. The woman dropped her eyes. "That mate," she grumbled, "he wants us to take up duties."

Teldin's patience had worn thin from Dana's surly manner. "What's wrong with that?" he snapped. "By the gods, they saved us, remember that. The wasp ship wasn't their fight. If, in return, we have to work like any other member of the crew, that's the least we can do." He saw the surprise in Dana's eyes and turned away.

Horvath laid a calming hand on his shoulder. "I'm with Teldin," he said quietly. "What he says only makes sense. Am I right?"

Saliman and Miggins nodded. "Danajustiantorala, am I right?"

Dana didn't meet his gaze. "Aye," she grumbled. "Very well, then." Horvath clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Teldin, maybe you wish to tell the captain that his new crew members are ready to take up their duties— when you see fit, of course." Teldin climbed to his feet. Something had changed in his relationship with the gnomes. He'd started to feel it in the last minutes aboard the longboat, but now it was even more pronounced. There was a change in Horvath's tone when the gnome

talked to him, a change to the look in Miggins's eyes. Teldin hadn't sought this

development, but it was definitely there. "I'll talk to Aelfred," he said. "Teldin."

He turned. It was Saliman who'd spoken, the first time he'd actually addressed Teldin. "Yes, Saliman?"

"I..." The cleric hesitated. "Teldin, I need a quiet time each day for my devotions," he said quietly. "Could you, maybe, ask if... Well, could my duties be... ?"

"I'll talk to Aelfred." With that, Teldin felt the mantle of leadership for the small group—subtly but nonetheless surely—transferred to his own shoulders.

Aelfred Silverhorn was on the hammership's sterncastle, seated comfortably on the box that contained the shot for the Probe's aft catapult. The larger man watched as Teldin climbed the starboard ladder, and he greeted him with a lopsided smile. "And how is your, er, your crew?" he asked with a touch of irony.

"Well," Teldin replied. He settled himself against the stem rail. "I'd like to thank you," he went on. "The two wounded men, you treated them kindly." Aelfred waved the thanks away with a scarred hand. "What would you have us do?" he asked. "Ignore them? And have the young one bleed himself white all over the deck? We're not enemies—" a chuckle rumbled deep in his throat—"though that's not what the woman thinks. You might want to keep an eye on that one." He shifted his weight, and the wooden box creaked. "Tell me," he said, "you're from Krynn? Born there?"

"Krynn's always been my home," Teldin answered. Was this burly warrior going to ask the same uncomfortable questions as the illithid? he wondered. "I've never been there," Aelfred mused. "Not that I haven't wanted to. We heard about the wars, you know. News of war always spreads fast. I even thought of taking passage there, see if I could get a commission, command a small unit. But..." He grinned. "The people of Krynn seem to have settled their own problems without my help. I thought when we came to this shell that I might at least have a chance to do some sightseeing, but the captain had his own plans, and we never came closer than one of the moons of Zivilyn. Apart from just recently, of course."

Teldin leaned forward with interest. "Why was Estriss interested in Zivilyn?" he asked.

The first mate shrugged his broad shoulders. "Research," he replied. "You two have been, urn, talking, right? Didn't he tell you what he's up to?" "Not really."

Aelfred grinned. "Surprising. He's always bending my ear about it... so to speak."

"Then...?"

"Estriss is a historian," Aelfred said. "He's always knocking about the universe, looking for clues to some lost race. He calls them the Juna." The large man shrugged again. "The only schooling I got was at my own hands, so I don't really understand much of what he's talking about, but he's all fired up about it."

"Is that why we're going to Realmspace?" "That's it. He thinks he's going to find some artifacts that can prove one of his pet theories. Truth be told, I think his ideas are all starshine and fertilizer, but then I don't really care one way or the other. I'm glad to be going home, even if it's just for a few days. It's been a long time." "How long?"

"Almost a year, this trip," Aelfred replied. "Not to say we haven't made planetfall in all that time. We've put down on more worlds than I care to count."

"I can tell you some stories—" He stopped himself and grinned. "Now it's going to be me that bends your ear. Tell me," he said again, "were you in the wars?" "Yes," Teldin answered... then added, "Well, in name, mainly. I was a mule skinner, nothing glamorous."

Aelfred snorted in disgust. "There's nothing glamorous about war. It's just a job."

"You're a mercenary, then?"

"That I am." There was no pride in the big warrior's voice; the phrase was just a flat statement of fact. "I've picked up my scars in— what?—half a dozen wars now, in half a dozen lands."

Teldin remembered the mercenaries he'd met on Krynn— most of them big-boned men like this one, full of swaggering pride and a

endless supply of stories. "It must be an interesting life."

"Interesting?" the large warrior scoffed. "like hell it's an interesting life. It's crushingly boring. Hard, tedious... Weeks of boredom interspersed with hours of abject terror. You get hardened to the whole thing, but the fear never goes away. To die Nine Hells with the fools who think it's glorious." He grinned wryly. "Not the fabulous tales you expect? I'll tell you, Teldin Moore. The mercenaries who survive are the ones who treat it like a business. Let the other men be the glory hounds and die for their countries. Good mercenaries don't learn from their mistakes. They learn from other people's mistakes. Tell me." He fixed Teldin with his cool blue eyes. "You fought a pirate ship and you won, and you'll have to tell me about that sometime. Was that glorious, or were you just scared?"

There was no need to answer. Teldin just smiled thinly and nodded. Aelfred thumped Teldin on the shoulder with a fist the size of a small ham. "That's what it's like being a mercenary," he said flatly. "Just as glorious to be a mule skinner. In other words, not at all." Teldin seated himself more comfortably on the rail. Despite his natural caution, he found himself liking this burly warrior. There was something disarming about his easy familiarity and the honest warmth in his booming voice. "How did you come to be here?" he asked. His new friend smiled. "Let's just say I was between engagements," he said. "I had a... call it a difference of opinion with my commanding officer over some back wages I was owed. He decided he wasn't going to pay me what I was owed and thought he'd terminate my commission with a broadsword." Aelfred grimaced. "Drunken bastard. I lost my best dagger when I didn't have time to pull it out of his neck."

Aelfred was warming to his tale. "So there I was in West-gate, with no money, no job to get money, and my one-time commander's criminal colleagues baying at my heels. I heard there was a ship of some strange design in the harbor and it was taking on crew, and I figured I could adapt easily enough to shipboard life. As they say, all bills are paid when you cast off from the dock. Of course," he mused with a smile, "it came as something of a shock when I met my captain... and when I learned the sailing we would be doing wasn't on the Inner Sea after all. I've been with the Probe for three years now, and I like it. "I understand your story isn't too much different." Aelfred's voice was casual, but his ice-blue gaze was steady. When Teldin hesitated, he went on, "I believe that a man's background is his own to give out or not, as he sees fit. But your wounded crewman babbled while we were patching him up. Something about you being pursued, and you shipping out with the gnomes to get away. Is that the case?" Teldin was silent for a moment. He trusted Aelfred, he decided, but there were still things he was uncomfortable talking about. Maybe when he'd sorted things out a little better in his own mind he could talk more freely. "Something like that," he answered.

Aelfred nodded, apparently unconcerned by Teldin's reticence. "If you're going to get yourself lost, there's no place like a ship in wildspace," he said, "as

long as you can get yourself into the routine." He gave Teldin a sidelong glance. "Any bets as to whether that spitfire of yours—what's her name, Dana?—is going to get into the swing of things?" Teldin grinned. "No bets, but I'll do what I can to make sure she tries." Aelfred pounded Teldin's shoulder again good-humoredly. "Good." He paused. "I didn't know just what kind of duty to give your gnomes," he admitted after a moment. "They don't know the Probe, and I wanted to keep them away from anything they might try to, er, improve" Teldin smiled; it was obvious Aelfred shared his distrust of gnomish "improvements." "When the little one's better, I'll get him standing some watches, with your agreement. And the spitfire, I'll have her work with Bubbo, tuning the heavy weapons. If she figures out a way to aim a catapult at me, she deserves the results." "I think she'll like that," Teldin said with a grin. "What about Horvath?" Aelfred frowned. "He volunteered to help out in the galley," he said somewhat doubtfully. "Says he's a good cook. The problem is, I don't know much about gnomish food. Is he likely to serve us fricasseed rat or anything like that?" Teldin thought back to the food he'd been served aboard the Unquenchable. The meals had mainly been vegetable stews or thick soups. The spices had been unfamiliar, but not at all unpleasant. "I don't think you have to worry," he said.

The ex-mercenary wasn't totally convinced. "We'll try it," he allowed, "but if he tries to 'improve' one of Dargo's recipes and ends up as the main course, on his own head be it. Now, about your cleric..." "He asked me to find out if he could have some time every day for his devotions or whatever," Teldin put in.

"I'd thought about that," Aelfred told him. "I thought maybe I'd have him stand by to spell our helmsmen. Who knows, maybe he could even learn to steer by the stars and help out our navigator." The big man feigned a shudder. "You know the old saying, 'Better a ho in the hull than a gnome at the map table,' but I think Sylvie can keep him in line."

"And for me...?"

Aelfred smiled broadly. "You can stand forward watches with me. When that Dana of yours wasn't railing at me, she was telling me how good you are with a crossbow." He leaned forward to poke an iron elbow into Teldin's ribs. "I think you've impressed the lady Teldin my lad." Teldin laughed out loud. "In your dreams," he responded.

Routine aboard the good ship Probe was very different from that aboard the Unquenchable, Teldin found quickly. For one thing, there was a routine. For a ship in space, there's no such thing as night and day, but diurnal creatures such as humans operate best on a regular cycle of about twenty-four hours. Thus the ship's day was divided into three watches, each eight hours long. At any time of day or night the major crew positions were manned. There were always lookouts standing watch on forecastle and sterncastle, gunners always lounged about near their weapons turrets, and there were always at least two officers in the chart room within the hammership's bow. The crew included three helmsmen, so that one was always awake and sitting in the major helm positioned in the lower bridge. The forty-five crew members—fifty including Teldin and the gnomes—stood one watch in three so that all had sixteen

hours for sleep and relaxation out of every twenty-four. The sole exceptions appeared to be Aelfred and Estriss, who seemed always to be on the bridge or wandering about the ship, and the helmsman and head navigator, Sylvie. Teldin had seen Sylvie at a distance but hadn't yet had a chance to speak with her—a condition that he promised himself he'd remedy at the earliest opportunity. She was a half-elf, as slender and supple-looking as a willow tree.

Her face was finely chiseled, with pale skin that was silken-smooth. Teldin had never seen her actually smile, but she always seemed just on the verge of doing so, and she had a habit of brushing her flowing silver hair back from her slightly pointed ears that he found somehow enchanting. Every time he found some excuse to visit the chart room on the cargo deck she was there, poring over some chart or other, or discussing the ship's course with Aelfred or Estriss. Meals were served at eight-hour intervals, and there was no distinction between dawnfry, highsunfeast or evenfeast. How could there be, when one-third of the crew had just risen, one was in the midst of a watch, and the third was getting ready to bunk down? Crew members who were on watch ate meals at their stations; those who were off duty ate in the two galleys. One of these was situated in the stern, directly below the sterncastle turret, the other in the lobe that extended from the port side of the main deck near the bow. Although it was traditionally reserved for the officers and senior crew members, Aelfred had reassured Teldin that he was welcome to eat here when he wasn't standing watch. Teldin was glad to accept the invitation. The officer's galley—or "mess," as it would have been called in the army—boasted a large, oval port of thick glass. This was one of the "eyes" that Teldin had noticed when he'd first seen the ship, and it gave a spectacular view of the star-studded void through which the ship sailed. Teldin quickly discovered there was something almost magical about sitting in a warm, lantern-lit room while gazing out into the cold vastness of space. Whenever he wasn't on duty or asleep, he'd often find himself drawn either to the galley or to the officers' saloon on the opposite side of the ship. The only member of the Probe's crew who never ate in either of the galleys was the captain himself. Estriss spent several hours each day in his private cabin, and what he did there was a matter of speculation among the crew. Some said he never slept, just spent his time poring over old scrolls and musty boob that he kept in a chest beneath his small desk. Others claimed that he spent his time in dreamless sleep, empty white eyes open, while he hung a hand's span above his bunk. The one thing that was never a subject of discussion was the captain's eating habits... particularly after the kobold was no longer seen around the ship. In the forward galley, while enjoying two relaxing meals each day—which, to his surprise were unsurpassedly delicious—Teldin had the chance to meet and talk with other members of the crew. Although none was as outgoing toward him as Aelfred had been, he'd found two who were willing to pass time in conversation. One was Sweor Tobregdan, a mercenary warrior who'd joined the ship in much the same way as Aelfred—as an alternative to having his head part company with his neck—and was now second mate and directly below Aelfred in the Probe's chain of command.

The other was Vallus Leafbower. Vallus was a high elf who hailed from the world of Oerth, in Greyspace, and a wizard some power and repute. Although the elf seemed to prefer listening to speaking, Teldin had managed to extract the fact that he'd signed on aboard the Probe as helmsman simply because he was curious about the rest of the universe. "After five hundred years of exploring the world of Oerth," the white-haired elf had told him in his quiet voice, "I came to realize that another five hundred would be insufficient to learn all there was to know about my home. I looked up into the sky and knew there were other worlds out there. It was then that I decided it would please me more to know something of many worlds than everything of one." Teldin's eight-hour shift of duty usually involved standing on the bow platform next to the forward catapult, the gnomish crossbow in his hands, scanning the skies for potential enemies. It would have been stultifyingly boring if it weren't for conversation with other members of the crew. There was never any enemy for him to look out for and nothing at which to shoot his crossbow—which

was just as well, he thought, since his first two accurate shots probably were nothing more than luck.

So it was, on the fourth day since joining the Probe's crew, that Teldin was standing at his duty station, leaning on the rail, and gazing at the planet Zivilyn as it was passing to starboard. It was Horvath who'd first mentioned this planet to Teldin, during his first days aboard the Unquenchable, and who'd described the gargantuan orb's wondrous beauty. At the time, Teldin had put the gnome's description down to an attempt to awe the "dirtkicker." Now he had to admit that Horvath hadn't done the world justice. At this distance, Zivilyn filled almost half of Teldin's field of view, a massive globe streaked with all the colors of an insane painter's palette. Myriad bands, each its own hue, circled the planet. Some were broad stripes, others lines that looked as thin as a hair. The edges of the wider bands were rippled, turbulent, and some of the smaller striations seemed almost braided. Although no actual motion was visible—the ship was much too far away—the sensation of chaos, frenzied movement, and cataclysmic forces at work was almost overwhelming. In the upper hemisphere of the planet, near the right-hand limb, was a spiral that could only be a storm of some kind. Darker than the surrounding clouds, this vortex was made up of traces of many colors, blurred together like smeared paint. It was like the storm that Teldin had seen over Krynn as the gnomish dreadnought had climbed out of the atmosphere, and, in comparison to the diameter of the planet, looked hardly larger. Aelfred had told him, though, that the entire world of Krynn could vanish down the vortex of this storm without touching either side.

Zivilyn had twelve moons, he'd learned, perhaps even a thirteenth that had been sighted once but not yet had its position properly charted. Four of them were visible now, just as points of light that seemed brighter—and somehow nearer—than the stars. Each of those moons was a world in its own right, he'd been told, only slightly smaller than Krynn itself. If Krynn is a world scaled for humans, Teldin thought, then Zivilyn is a world for the gods themselves. He set his crossbow down on the base of the bow catapult and crouched down to stretch the muscles in his thighs. One of his knees gave a disconcerting pop, and tendons complained at the unaccustomed effort. He swore quietly to himself. He'd always prided himself on his level of physical fitness. Working in the fields

had strengthened the muscles, and his time in the army had proven what he'd always suspected: that a certain degree of conditioning could spell the difference between life and death. He'd never had to worry about actually exercising before; his daily life had provided all the exertion he'd really needed. But now there was precious little to do aboard ship but eat, sleep, and stand his watch. He'd noticed that several of the officers and crew were fighting a weight problem—in at least one case, a losing battle—and realized he might well face the same fate soon. How did Aelfred manage it? The burly warrior seemed no more active than Teldin, but his belly was hard and tight. And Sylvie, the navigator, appeared the least active of all, but there certainly didn't seem to be an ounce of fat anywhere on her body. Teldin smiled and chuckled quietly to himself. Maybe he should just stroll down to the chart room and ask the striking half-elf how she kept herself so beautiful. After all, he justified, it would be in the ship's best interest if he learned how to keep himself at peak condition.... A hoarse scream of agony from above him shattered his comfortable musings. Quickly slinging the crossbow's carrying strap over his shoulder, he clambered up the ladder that led from the forward bridge to the forecandle. The forecandle was a scene of chaos. In addition to the skeleton crew of two sailors who always manned the turret's heavy ballista, Estris, Aelfred, and Sylvie were present. One of the ballista crew, a woman named Preema, was down, clutching a torn shoulder and screaming in agony. The others crouched, weapons drawn, scanning the skies above them.

Where was the enemy? What had wounded Preema—had virtually torn her arm from her torso?

Out of the corner of his eye, Teldin saw a fast-moving shape hurtling toward him. Instinctively he threw himself to the deck, simultaneously snapping the crossbow up to his shoulder and pulling the trigger. He felt a rush of air as the shape rocketed by above his sprawling body, and rough skin grazed his shoulder. As the shape retreated, he saw it properly for the first time. It was a night-black shark, he thought, but a shark rendered by a madman. It was more than three times longer than a man's height, and its powerful body was proportionately broad. Its fins and tail seemed no different from those of the small mud sharks he'd occasionally seen on fishmongers' barrows in the marketplaces of Krynn, but its head... From its gill slits forward, the creature seemed all teeth-filled mouth and single glaring eye. The thing tore through the air, its body twisting in a grotesque mimicry of a swimming motion. Its speed was terrifying in a creature so large. It flashed away from the ship again, curving up and over the forecandle. Then, with an agility totally belying its mass, it turned end for end and drove back toward them in another high-speed pass. For an instant Teldin could see the fletching of his crossbow bolt, buried— apparently harmlessly—just behind the monster's gills, then he rolled aside in the shelter of the ballista turret. The other gunner, the young man named Lort, crouched below the turret rail, his short sword clutched in a white-knuckled fist. As the monster rocketed past, he leaped to his feet and threw all his weight behind a thrust at the thing's head. But at the last instant, the creature twisted its body. And Lort was gone. The youth's short sword clattered to the deck. The black space-shark soared away from the ship again, its great mouth making chewing motions. Blood streamed back along its flank, glistening in the harsh light of the distant sun. Teldin felt his gorge rise and tried to swallow the bitter taste of bile that filled his mouth. He rolled to the fallen sword and picked it up. The grip was slick with Lort's blood. "Void scavver," Aelfred was saying. "Sylvie, can you... ?" "I'll try," the woman answered. Amazingly, she climbed to her feet. "No," Teldin croaked, but the woman paid him no mind. The monster had turned again. Its mouth was empty; there was no sign of Lort, except for a red stain on its teeth. Again it steadied itself for a pass, this time from directly ahead of the vessel. Sylvie faced the onrushing creature, her slender hands weaving a fluid pattern in the air before her. She hissed arcane syllables between her teeth and thrust her hands out toward the monster. Multicolored fire lashed out from her fingertips, striking the creature full in its hideous eye. It shuddered, and for the first time it made a sound—a whistling shriek of pain— but still it came on. Sylvie was still standing, totally exposed, weaving her hands again as she struggled to put together another spell. There was no way she'd be able to get out of the way in time. Teldin looked at the creature's gaping maw and knew what he had to do.

As soon as the decision was made, he felt the cold, crystal clarity of thought that was becoming almost familiar. His time sense accelerated, and the monster seemed almost frozen in space. He had time to jump to his feet and take one, two steps across the forecandle and push the half-elf to the deck, then he turned to face the approaching scavver, clutching Lort's short sword before him in both hands, more a talisman than a weapon.

In his peripheral vision he could see Aelfred open his mouth to scream something—no doubt a warning—but it was too late for any warning. The scavver was almost upon him, filling almost all of his field of view. He knew he should feel terror, but somehow the emotion wouldn't come. His world was empty of anything that could interfere with thought or with volition.

The monster's mouth opened wider, preparing to snatch him the way it had snatched Lort, but at the last instant he flung himself to the deck. At the same time, as the huge mouth snapped shut on the empty air where his body had been a moment before, he thrust upward with the short sword. He felt the power in his arm muscles, felt the blade drive deep into firm flesh. Then the weapon was wrenched from his grasp. He felt a hard impact against his right hip, hard enough to tumble him over and over until he came to rest against Sylvie's prone body. Still seemingly in slow motion, the scavver arched over his head. Lort's short sword protruded from the underside of its throat, the weapon's cross-guard flush against the creature's skin. Green-black fluid pulsed from around the steel.

The scavver's inertia carried it forward, but it was obviously in serious trouble. It rolled to the right and started to drop. With a bubbling shriek it hurtled over the rear of the forecandle, barely missing the mainmast, and plummeted to the main deck below. With his still-accelerated time sense, Teldin was able to roll over and see the creature strike. So great was its speed that it skidded along the deck, leaving a trail of ichor, and slammed into the ladder that led up to the sterncastle.

A dozen crew members were on the main deck, armed with weapons ranging from swords to belaying pins from the rigging. At once

they fell on the creature, slashing and bludgeoning it. Although it was mortally wounded, still the scavver thrashed and writhed, snapping wildly with its great mouth. The mindless ferocity of the creature was unbelievable. Even as the Probe's crew dismembered it, it fought, smashing the ladder and tearing at its killers. The main deck was awash with blood, both green and red, when the scavver was finally still. Teldin felt a calloused hand on his shoulder and suddenly his time sense returned to normal. The fear that had been absent as he faced the scavver washed over him like a wave, and his stomach knotted with nausea. Trembling, he rolled over to look up into the serious face of Aelfred Silverhorn. "That was amazing," Aelfred told him quietly. "Stupid, suicidal, insane... but amazing." He squeezed Teldin's shoulder reassuringly, then the big warrior's face split in its familiar, lopsided grin. "Now about your sword technique—you handled that weapon like a shovel. If you're interested, I'll teach you a little something about the proper way to wield a word—once you're put back together, that is...."

"What do you...?" Teldin started to ask, then he felt pressure on his right hip, the one that had been struck by the scavver. He looked down. Sylvie was pressing a folded doth against the side of his hip. The cloth had originally been white, but now it was turning a rich, dark red. Pain struck him like a blow.

"Me him below," Aelfred ordered, and firm hands lifted him from the deck. Chapter Four

Teldin kept his eyes closed and tried to ignore the gentle swinging of the hammock. His right hip throbbed, not with pain so much as with a nagging discomfort. Whenever he tried to move it into a more comfortable position, it started the hammock swinging again, which caused nausea to knot his stomach. He should really be grateful, he told himself. The healing potion had dosed the wound on his hip. Nausea should be a minor price, one he should be glad to pay. Tell that to my stomach! In an effort to make himself more comfortable, he expanded the cloak to its full size and wrapped it around himself like a blanket.

A firm knock came on the door. "Yes?" he croaked. He heard the door open and rolled over to look at his guest. The first thing he saw was Aelfred Silverhorn's crooked smile. "How are you feeling?" the first mate asked him.

Teldin ran a quick mental review of his body. His hip still throbbed in time with his heartbeat, but otherwise, "Pretty good, overall," he answered. "I suppose I'm ready to stop gold bricking." He sat up... And the universe seemed to do a quick double flip around him. He sank back onto the hammock with a groan, closing his eyes in an attempt to quell the sudden resurgence of nausea that racked his body. Aelfred put a restraining hand on his chest. "Not so fast, old son," he said quickly. "You lost a lot of blood and enough meat to make a small roast. Potion's are going to help, no doubt about that, but there's no way you're going to be doing handsprings for the next few days. You're to stay here and rest—that's a direct order from the captain, and from me too—until you're stronger. Got it?"

Teldin nodded wordlessly.

"Speaking of the captain," Aelfred went on, "he wants to talk to you, if you feel up to it. Probably wants to talk to you about what happened on the foredeck." His voice grew quieter, more serious. "I want to talk to you about the scavver, too. Like I told you, what you did was amazing. To be honest, and no offense meant, I didn't think you had it in you. You probably saved Sylvie's life—I don't think she could have gotten another spell off in time—and I know she wants to thank you for that when she gets off watch. The creature knows it was you who brought that thing down. Anyway—" his normal gruff manner returned—"the captain's waiting outside. Do you want me to send him in?" "All right," Teldin replied. "Thanks, Aelfred." The broad-shouldered warrior snorted as he went out the door. Teldin tried to relax, but as soon as he closed his eyes, all he could picture was the tooth-filled mouth of the scavver rushing toward him. He was grateful for the distraction when he felt the cool mental touch of the illithid's "voice."

Teldin Moore, the words formed in his head. Are you feeling strong enough for conversation?

He opened his eyes again. Estriss stood in the doorway, his facial tentacles writhing in a way that made Teldin think the creature looked tense or worried. "I think so," he replied. "Come in." He looked around the cabin, but there was nothing he could offer the mind flayer as a seat. Estriss didn't seem to notice. He walked over to Teldin's hammock and looked intently into his face. Teldin was uncomfortable under the scrutiny of the blank white eyes, but struggled to hide his reaction. Something important happened earlier, Estriss said without preamble. I wish to talk about it with you, if you will. Teldin simply nodded. Your reaction to the scavver, the illithid went on, there was more to it than the bravery that so impressed Aelfred Silverhorn. Is that not so? Will you tell me what you felt? What you thought?

Teldin hesitated. "I don't think I know what you mean." The motion of the mind flayer's tentacles intensified, reminding Teldin more and more of a human wringing his hands with anxiety or anticipation. Magic! The word rang in Teldin's mind as though the creature had shouted it. I sensed magic. The illithid clutched his amethyst pendant in a three-fingered hand. Or, rather, this did. You are not a spellcaster. I know this as a fact. The magic I sensed was not the directed, bidden magic of a normal enchanted item. It was... Estriss hesitated, seemingly groping for the right words. It was... almost autonomous, independent of your will, but not quite. Not the magic woven by sentience, and not the blind magic of a wizard's ring or wand... but something of both of them. The creature leaned forward, intent, and a tenor almost of pleading entered his mental voice. Tell me what you felt.

"Well..." Teldin paused. There was something about the illithid's intensity that he found compelling. He needed to analyze for himself the strange sensations of those few moments, and maybe this was the best way to do it. "Well," he started

again, "what I felt was clarity. Everything seemed to slow down around me, or maybe... maybe it was my thoughts that sped up. I... I..." It was his turn to struggle for words. He tried to force his mind back, to feel again what he'd experienced. "I felt like I'd, well, stepped outside myself, that everything was clear. I could think, I could concentrate, and I could act... and there was nothing that could interfere with what I wanted to do. It was... Well, it was like I was looking through a glass window, and the window had suddenly been wiped clean." He frowned, disturbed with his inability to

communicate what he'd felt so absolutely. "That's not really it, but I don't think I have the words." Was this the first time? Estriss asked. Have you felt this before? "Yes," Teldin answered slowly. "Twice before." Were the circumstances similar?

"Yes."

Tension? Danger? On both occasions?

"Yes," Teldin said positively. "When the wasp ship attacked the longboat. I had a crossbow. The gnomes told me I had to shoot the ballista gunner, then the pirate captain."

And you did?

Teldin nodded. "I'd never shot a crossbow before, but it didn't seem to matter. I could concentrate. There were no distractions. I could... I could focus all my thoughts on what I had to do."

This focus—did it come from within you? There was a different tone to the illithid's words, a profound intensity, and Teldin knew they both realized this was the key question.

"No," he responded softly. "It felt... It came from outside." The mind flayer's tentacles ceased their writhing but now quivered with tension. The creature's mental voice was silent for two score heartbeats, then it continued, gentler but still insistent. Teldin, Estriss asked, do you possess any items of magic? Anything possessed of enchantment? Now it was Teldin who was silent. He knew with perfect clarity what the illithid was driving at, what it wanted to know. He knew he had the answer Estriss wanted... but was he willing to give it? Over the past weeks he'd thought more and more about his "gift" from the mortally wounded spelljammer, about the strange occurrences that happened around it. He knew that he needed to learn the cloak's significance.

But should he discuss it with Estriss? Could he trust the mind flayer with his secret? At home he'd never been one for secrets (except when it came to his father, of course, but that was different). He'd always found it much easier to be totally open with everyone. Sometimes people tried to take advantage of what they saw as his naivete, but much more frequently his honesty and forthrightness brought him the support he needed to follow the path he thought was right. Of course, what importance could there be to the secrets of a farmer? Now he was playing a much deeper game, and the stakes were much higher—the neogi had taught him that. People had died because of the cloak. Would more die if he kept it a secret, or if he discussed it openly?

The illithid knows, though, he told himself, at least the general form of what I'm hiding. His questions showed that beyond any doubt. What sense did it make to continue to hide it? Maybe Estriss is the help I need to learn the answers I've got to have. He made his decision. "I suspect," he answered at last, "it's the cloak." Ahh. The word was a mental sigh. I thought as much. The mind flayer shook his head in puzzlement—another very human gesture. Still, your cloak puzzles me, Estriss admitted. It is not enchanted in the sense that the word is normally used. It has no dweomer about it, no aura or quality of power to it. I have checked it to the limit of my abilities. But, when you faced the scavver, the sense of power was very intense. I have experienced nothing like this before. Will you tell me how you came to possess it?

Teldin felt another twinge of doubt—should he tell the illithid everything?—but quickly suppressed it. Telling the story could do no further harm. "I... acquired it on Krynn," he began, "but it didn't come from there. Several weeks ago, a vessel—a spelljamming vessel—crashed near my farm. The owner of the cloak was badly wounded, dying. She gave me the cloak before she passed away, and she told me to take it to 'the creators.'" Teldin raised himself on one elbow to look into the illithid's eyes. "Who are 'the creators'?" he asked. Estriss didn't answer directly. Instead, he asked, What happened then? Teldin closed his eyes as a wave of sadness and pain washed over him. The fear and danger was too recent, all the deaths too immediate, for him to dwell on it. He wished he could just blot everything out of his mind. Estriss must have sensed some of his emotions. There is no need to tell me everything now, he said gently. There was pain and there was loss. You were pursued? "By neogi," Teldin confirmed. "They want the cloak." The illithid nodded. It is an artifact of some kind, and artifacts are usually notable for their power, he said. If the neogi are aware of the nature of the cloak, then they would want it. I refer to individual neogi here. An individual neogi wants power, all it can acquire, and it cares not at all how it gets it. It was Teldin's turn to nod. That was the kind of behavior he'd come to associate with neogi. "The traveler told me to keep the cloak away from the neogi," he said. Well that you do, Estriss agreed. Until you learn more about it, you should keep it away from everyone. Humor tinged the creature's mental voice. Even from me. "Can you help me?" Teldin asked. "Who are 'the creators'?" The mind flayer gave one of its broken-backed shrugs. I have no knowledge of this, he said after a moment, only speculation, and that may well be groundless. "Tell me," Teldin prompted.

Estriss paused. Just as when they'd first spoken on the stern-castle, Teldin was convinced that the illithid was embarrassed. "Tell me," he urged again. "Please, I'm interested."

Estriss nodded his acquiescence. I must tell you something of my life's work, he began. I told you that I am a scholar. I know you have spoken with my first mate, and I am certain he has told you a little more about my interests, even though I realize he considers my theories to be the utmost foolishness. The words formed a statement, but the mental tone was questioning. "The Juna," Teldin said.

The Juna, Estriss confirmed. When I was younger, I became fascinated with the vast range of 'origin myths' that exist concerning the creation of the universe. Did you know—he leaned forward, intently—that virtually every sentient race has a legend or legends that tell of a reality, a universe where the constraints of space and time as we know them do not exist? And of the Great Powers that finally shaped the walls of time and space around that reality to form the worlds that we know today? The illithid shrugged and waved off Teldin's imminent question with a purple-skinned hand. That is merely poetic language, he explained, and the language varies from one version of the myth to another. But, I repeat, every sentient race has a similar myth, even yours and mine. Although— and humor temporarily replaced intensity, as the creature gently stroked his facial tentacles—the appearance of the Great Powers

differs significantly between the two accounts.

Teldin broke in, "What has that...?"

... to do with the cloak? Estriss finished for him. Nothing. Have patience. Each storyteller has his own way of telling a story. Will you allow me mine? "Sorry," Teldin responded, somewhat chastened. He settled himself more comfortably in his hammock. "Go on." Initially, my interest was the differences between the various origin myths, Estriss continued. I thought... Well, in my youth and unsophistication, I

thought that by correlating the differences in the accounts with the characteristics of the races involved, I might be able to cancel out the variations and expose the root of the matter: the true events that gave rise to the myths. The mind flayer shrugged once more. As I say, I was young. I never completed the task—unsurprising, since I now know it to be impossible—but I did discover something interesting. The most lucid and detailed version of the origin myth was to be found in the ancient epic poetry of the thri-kreen. Do you know of the race? Some call them mantis warriors. "I've never heard of them," Teldin admitted. They may not exist on Krynn, Estriss told him. In any case, many millennia ago the People of the Celestial Mantis underwent a period of almost explosive expansion throughout the universe. The thri-kreen preceded your race—and mine—into the greater universe, perhaps by millions of years. They talk little of it now, even those who still dwell in the void. But they remember the glory. They remember it well.

Teldin felt the mental equivalent of a sigh. Those were the transcendent days of the People's race, Estriss continued, and their poetry reflects this. It was in this poetry that I sought the origin myths. And it was here that I found references to the Juna.

Teldin found himself caught up by the sense of wonder in the illithid's mental voice. "Tell me about the Juna," he asked softly. Estriss seemed not to have heard him. My focus changed, he continued. The origin myth no longer had interest for me. My concentration was focused on the Juna. Now that I knew what to look for, I found references to them elsewhere. There is no need for me to describe the years I worked on the problem. Suffice it to say that I now know more about the Juna than, I believe, anyone else in the universe. The illithid paused a little uncomfortably. I must admit that many scholars, perhaps most, share Aelfred Silverhorn's low opinion of my work. Teldin shook that off. "Tell me about them," he prompted. The illithid went on, The Juna were a mighty race. They were worshiped as gods on hundreds of worlds, by a myriad of peoples now extinct. I have seen representations of them carved on many ruins and painted on the walls of many caves. Their form is unmistakable, even when transformed through the eyes of misguided faith. And their symbol, the three-pointed star, ends its way into the symbology of many races.

While your race and mine were barely taking our first steps away from our cosmic cradles, the Juna were already disappearing from this universe. Whether they died out, were destroyed, or moved on to another plane of existence, I know not. Teldin shook his head in bewilderment. This was so far outside his ken as to be virtually incomprehensible. All his life, his world had been measured by acres and miles and seasons. To hear Estriss talk in terms of millions of years, hundred of worlds... Even though the words were familiar, he found himself unable to comprehend the reality those words were describing. Apparently the illithid misinterpreted his reaction. I understand your doubt, he said, with a tinge of sadness. Even those who have seen evidence mistrust my conclusions. I must have more tangible proof if I want my research to receive the credibility it deserves.

Teldin remembered something that the illithid had told him earlier. "And that's why you're going to Realspace?" he asked. "To get more proof?" The mind flayer nodded eagerly. A great collector of curiosities, of mysterious items and artifacts, has died, Estriss explained, and his collection is being auctioned off in the city of Rauthaven, on the island of Nimbral. For some time, I have known that his collection contained several items that might be connected with the Juna. But I also knew that he would never sell those items to me while he lived. Now, however... My only concern is that there may be others who recognize the significance of these items and bid the price out of my reach. "What kind of items?"

Several pieces of artwork, replied Estriss, other items, and—so I believe—a twin to this. The creature reached within his robe and drew out a long, curved knife. He handed the weapon to Teldin. I carry it with me always, the creature went on, somewhat diffidently, for defense, but more importantly as a... as an amulet, if you will, against discouragement. Examine the weapon. Teldin hefted the knife in his hand. It was almost as long as his forearm, with the hilt taking up nearly half of that length. The blade was razor-sharp along the inside of the curve and sharpened perhaps a third of the way along the back. In the light of the room's single lantern, it shone dully like brushed steel. Teldin ran a finger along the flat of the blade... and stopped in surprise. He'd expected the blade to be cool to the touch. It wasn't, but neither was it warm. It seemed to have no temperature at all, as if it didn't register fully to the sense of touch. He looked up at Estriss questioningly. The blade is not metal, the illithid explained, nor is it forged in the normal sense. It is some form of crystalline material, and I believe the blade was grown into its current shape. It was once highly magical, but the enchantment has faded over the millennia.

"How old is it?" Teldin's voice was hushed. At least two million Krynn years. Two million years... Teldin wrapped his hand around the hilt, preparatory to testing the balance. His fingers encountered strange ridges and channels, making it impossible to get a comfortable grip. Suddenly squeamish, he handed the knife back to the illithid. There was something unaccountably disturbing about holding a weapon that was obviously designed for manipulative organs only distantly related to human hands... "What did they look like?" They had a trilateral symmetry, Estriss said, looking down at the blade he held in his hands. Three legs, three arms... Like a xorn or a tirapheg, but unlike both. The mind flayer's mental voice fell silent for a moment, as though he were contemplating the creatures he had just described. Then he shook his head, as if coming out of a doze, and returned the knife to its place within his robe. There are other artifacts that I believe were created by the Juna, Estriss said. One more important than all the rest... The mental voice trailed off. "Goon."

Double eyelids hooded the illithid's white eyes, as though the creature were embarrassed to meet Teldin's puzzled gaze. This is merely a theory, he said hurriedly, merely my own belief. I have no evidence, and others find the theory unbelievable....

"Tell me."

I believe the Juna created the Spelljammer. A thrill, a tingle, shot through Teldin's body. He'd heard the word "spelljammer" before, of course, but never in this context, never as a proper name: "the Spelljammer" There was something—maybe it was just the tone of the illithid's mental "voice"—that made it seem somehow wondrous. "What is the Spelljammer?" he asked.

Some call it a myth, replied Estriss, but there have been enough independent reports to convince me that it exists. It is a huge ship, a tenth of a league long and almost twice that in width. It sails wildspace and the flow, and has been sighted in half a hundred crystal spheres. Its speed and maneuverability are unmatched, and it boasts armament sufficient to defeat an entire Beet. The body of legend that surrounds it is huge and growing larger every year. Some philosophers claim that the Spelljammer was created by the gods, either as a test for the faithful or as a nemesis for the false. I believe it to have been built by mortal creatures, however....

"By the Juna?"

Estriss nodded. So I believe. Few share my conviction, however, and there seems no way to prove or disprove my theory.

Teldin shook his head. His initial atavistic reaction to the illithid's words had faded, and his normal levelheadedness was reasserting itself. "This is interesting..." he said.

But you wish to return to your original question? Estriss nodded. There is a connection. I ask you to look at the cloak. Look at the pattern woven into the lining.

Teldin ran his hand over the garment's silk-smooth inner surface. As always, it felt slightly cold to the touch. In the lantern's light it was almost impossible to judge the lining's color—was it green with a hint of gold, or brown with a sub touch of yellow?—but Teldin knew from experience it was no better in clear sunlight. The cloak's color seemed to shift elusively depending on its surroundings. There was a subtle pattern worked into the finely woven cloth, a precise, geometrical motif.

The pattern includes the recurring symbol of a flower with three petals, Estriss continued. Do you see it?

Teldin looked closer at the cloth, changing its angle to the light. The pattern was composed of many fine lines, some no thicker than slender, hair-thin thread of the woven material. The lines intersected, joined and branched in a network of almost dizzying complexity. There was nothing that his mind could resolve into a three-petaled flower.

Estriss responded to his dilemma. A four-jointed purple finger traced out a section of the pattern. Here. Now do you seek? As the illithid traced the figure, it seemed to leap into visibility. It reminded Teldin of some of the cunning optical illusions he'd seen where the viewer could force the background and foreground of a drawing to reverse, changing its contents. "I see it now," he told the mind flayer. "But how could you see it?"

The mind flayer shrugged. The vision of my race is highly attuned to geometrical patterns, he explained. Much more so than is yours. Teldin frowned. "Well, why is it important?" I said that the three-pointed star is the symbol that represents the Juna, Estriss explained. But so, too, is the three-petaled flower. "Then the Juna are 'the creators'!" Excitement surged within Teldin. Estriss had just given him the answer to the mystery. All he had to do now was find a representative of the Juna....

The illithid's words checked his elation, however. It is possible, Estriss said doubtfully, but there are three problems. First, she who gave you the cloak spoke as though 'the creators' still exist—Otherwise how could you return the cloak to them? And the Juna have not been known in this universe for millennia. Second, if this cloak were created by the Juna, it would presumably have to be millennia old. Certainly, a high enough level of enchantment can prevent the aging of an object, but it still must be considered. Third, the three-petaled Bower is a symbol also widely used by the arcane. I believe that they may have borrowed or adopted it from the Juna, but the effect is the same.

He wasn't going to give up without at least some struggle, Teldin decided. "Then how about the arcane?" he asked. "Could they be 'the creators'?" He paused. "And just who are the arcane anyway?"

Estriss was silent for a moment, and Teldin sensed the exercise of patience. We may continue our discussion later, the illithid told him finally. You need rest to recuperate, and I must be on the bridge soon. "Why?"

We are about to leave this crystal sphere and enter the flow. "I have to see this." Cautiously, steeling himself for a recurrence of the crippling nausea and dizziness he'd felt earlier, Teldin raised himself up onto both elbows. This time the world obediently held its place and didn't engage in any gymnastics around him. He swung himself down from the hammock and stood,

swaying slightly. Aelfred was right, he thought, he wouldn't be doing any handsprings, but there was no need to remain bedridden as long as he took it easy and didn't push himself too hard. He took a step forward.... And was thankful as the illithid's quick hand on his shoulder steadied him. "Thanks," he said a little self-consciously. "I'm as weak as a kitten." Then perhaps...

"No," Teldin countered, somewhat more forcefully than he felt. "I'll make it."

The hammership's open forward bridge was more crowded than Teldin had ever seen it. Sylvie and Aelfred were there, of course; anything else would have been inconceivable. So were the second mate, Swear Tobregdan, the elven helmsman, Vallus Leafbower and two other crew members whose names Teldin didn't know. As they'd climbed the companionway to the main deck, Teldin had been glad of Estriss's supporting hand. At first the pressure of four-jointed fingers was alien enough to make his skin crawl, but by the time he'd reached the bridge, he gave it no further thought. When they'd entered the bridge, Estriss had solicitously conducted

him to an aft corner, where he could settle himself on a wooden seat that folded down from the bulkhead. The illithid had gestured away Teldin's thanks and joined Sylvie and Vallus at the secondary chart table. Both Aelfred and Sylvie had greeted him silently—with a grin and a wink, she with a fleeting but warm smile—but had immediately started a low-voiced conversation with Estriss. The others had paid Teldin no attention; in fact, they'd seemed totally unaware of his arrival, with good reason. The view out of the bridge was... Teldin searched vainly for the right words. Awe-inspiring? Mind-bending? Terrifying? All were appropriate, but none was sufficient. The Probe hung motionless in space. Ahead of the ship was a wall of impenetrable blackness, a plane of darkness that extended in all directions—up, down, port and starboard—seemingly to infinity. This must be how a fly views a mountainside, Teldin found himself thinking, though even this analogy simply didn't capture the magnitude of what he was experiencing. On Krynn, Teldin had stood beneath the walls of huge buildings and at the foot of sheer mountainsides. In all of those cases, there had been the sense—totally false, but nonetheless disturbing—that the wall had sloped outward near the top, so that it was poised over him like a mighty weight ready to fall. This wasn't the case here. There was no sense that the black wall was anything but flat, no sense that it posed any threat of falling. Yes, Teldin felt fear welling up inside him, but it was nothing so mundane as a fear of falling objects. It was the sheer scale that terrified, the very sense of infinity. There was no feeling of direct danger, either to him or to the ship as a whole. To acknowledge danger would, somehow, be to dignify oneself with too much significance, to fool oneself into believing that one's existence or nonexistence mattered one whit. It was that conceit that the black wall denied, and therein was its terror. In a universe in which such things could exist, how could anything as infinitesimal as Teldin Moore have any importance whatsoever? "What is it?" he croaked.

It was Sylvie who turned away from the map table and answered him in her clear voice. "The crystal shell," she said. "The boundary of Krynnspace. We'll be there soon."

That didn't make sense.... "We're still moving?" Sylvie chuckled, a sound that reminded Teldin of mountain streams. "At fall speed," she told him. She came over to him and laid a seemingly weightless hand on his shoulder. "How far away do you think that is?" she asked him quietly. Teldin paused in thought. There were no marks on that infinite plane, no features or details. It was totally unrelieved blackness, with nothing for his eyes to focus on. How can you focus on nothingness? At first he'd thought the

wall was perhaps a bow shot away: one hundred paces, maybe two. But now? He realized his initial estimation had been a desperate attempt by his mind—and, if the truth be known, not a very successful one—to reduce what he was seeing to dimensions that he could comprehend. When he forced himself to be honest, he could no more estimate the distance to that wall than he could accurately gauge its size. "How far?" he asked, his voice almost a whisper. "More than a thousand leagues," the half-elf replied. She glanced over her shoulder back toward the chart table. "They're ready to open the portal," she told him. "I'll talk to you later." She flashed him another of her instant smiles and returned to her duty station. More than a thousand leagues...

At the map table, Vallus Leafbower glanced over at Estriss and replied to a silent question. "Yes, we're within range," the elf said. "Shall I proceed?" Teldin's brain didn't pick up the answer, but the elf nodded in agreement. He picked up a rolled parchment from the map table—Teldin had assumed it to be another navigation chart—and carefully unrolled it. His gray eyes darted over the scroll's contents, and he began to read. "Ileste al tiveniel no aluviath bethude..." The elf's voice was soft, and the syllables flowed fluidly off his tongue. Teldin felt the short hairs at the nape of his neck stir with his fear. He'd seen spellcasters weave their magic before; if Estriss was to be believed, the cloak was capable of something similar. But here, within sight of the infinite wall of blackness, the event seemed to take on much greater significance. He felt the sudden urge to cover his eyes, to withdraw. He was involved in things that were too great for him. What was he, anyway? A farm boy. And here this farm boy was, about to pass through the barrier that contained quite literally everything he'd ever known or experienced. It was only with the greatest effort that he kept his gaze steady on the blackness ahead of the ship.

"... menoa tire alao galatrive." Vallus Leafbower fell silent. Directly ahead of the hammership, a new star burst into life: a point of fierce white light. A smile of satisfaction spread across the elf's face as he saw it. When he spoke, there was a slight tremor of exertion in his voice. "The portal is open." Aelfred nodded to an unspoken order from Estriss. "Aye," he responded. "Flow stations. I'll spread the word." He gave Teldin another quick but reassuring grin. Then, stopping only long enough to extinguish the lantern that hung over the chart table, he left the bridge.

Teldin felt his eyes drawn back to the new star that had sprung to life in the firmament. It looked somehow different now from how it had been in its first moments of existence. For one thing, it seemed to twinkle slightly, to shimmer the way stars had always done when he'd looked at them from the ground. In contrast, all of the other stars were constant when viewed from space, totally unvarying in their hard light, like tiny crystals. There was now color, too; sometimes the new star seemed blue, sometimes red, changing its hue so rapidly that his eyes could hardly keep up with it. Was it just his imagination, or was the star growing larger? At first it had been a point, totally dimensionless. Now he could swear that it had a disk.... Yes, there was no doubt at all. It was growing larger. With a suddenness that was as shocking as a solid punch to the stomach, his perception of the universe instantly reordered itself. No longer was he looking at a star that was somehow, unaccountably, growing in size. He was looking at a hole in the blackness—a hole through it—leading to what lay beyond that infinite wall. The light he saw wasn't coming from an object. It was the light of whatever lay outside this crystal sphere, outside Krynnspace. The hole—the portal—wasn't growing. The Probe was hurtling toward it at inconceivable speed....

Teldin couldn't control his reactions. He slapped both hands over his eyes and folded the waist so his chest was against his knees. He heard a whimper of panic... and realized that the voice was his own. He felt

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