

FORGOTTEN REALMS

Author of *Insurrection*

THOMAS
M. REID



THE
GROSSAMIER
PLAIN

THE
EMPYREAN
ODYSSEY
Book I

In Heaven, Among the Angels, A Demon Awaits Justice

The head of the angel's weapon collided with the once-beautiful face at the same moment that the tips of several swords punctured her scaly skin. An explosion of blood and flesh spattered the cushions, the rugs, and the tent wall as the demon's head disintegrated.

The muscles in her arms kept working for a heartbeat longer.

The blades sank deeply into flesh. The two life-forces that were there, one inside the other, grew faint, then vanished.

The unborn child was lost to him, slain by its own mother.

**But Demons
Aren't Known For Patience**

THOMAS M. REID

The Empyrean Odyssey

Book I

The Gossamer Plain

Book II

The Fractured Sky

November 2008

Book III

The Crystal Mountain

Mid 2009

Also by Thomas M. Reid

The Scions of Arrabar Trilogy

Book I

The Sapphire Crescent

Book II

The Ruby Guardian

Book III

The Emerald Scepter

R.A. Salvatore's War of the Spider Queen

Book II

Insurrection

THE
GOSSAMER
PLAIN THE EMPYREAN
ODYSSEY
Book I

THOMAS M. REID



DEDICATION

For Gina,
who always helps me keep my head on straight
about the nature of Good and Evil.



Prologue

Tauran knelt upon a protrusion of rock and surveyed the shimmering pool far below. The distant surface of the water rippled and gleamed, disturbed to a golden foam by a roaring, tumbling waterfall. The astral deva's perch jutted from the top of the cliff alongside the lip from which the cascade plunged. Spray from the churning torrent peppered him with fine, cool mist and made the rocks beneath his bare feet slick.

It was a long drop.

Behind the angel, the surging headwaters of the river spilled out of a cleft in the side of a towering pinnacle of rock. It was the tallest, most delicately thin peak among a high, sharp ridge of jutting stone that formed a deep basin surrounding the pool on three sides. On the distant bank, opposite where Tauran rested, the water spilled over a lower lip of the ridge, vanishing from sight to other basins even farther below. From the astral deva's vantage, it was as though the pool lay within the confines of a great crater, like the belly of a steep-sided volcano. He knew the far slopes of that circular ridge fell away just as sharply, where they eventually vanished into a sea of white, fluffy clouds.

The powerful effusion of water, coupled with the slenderness and loftiness of its host peak, liberated more power and beauty than any mere spring. The gushing flow of the cataract bursting from the crevice owed its vigorous current to primal and potent magic. Those headwaters held the might of gods, the puissance of deities, within them. In many ways, the essence of divinity itself spouted from that peak.

It was the Lifespring.

The Lifespring derived its amber hue from both its own inner glow and the warm rays of the late afternoon sun illuminating its surface. Even from his lofty perch, Tauran could smell the sweetness of that glow wafting upward. It filled him with energy and confidence, infused him with the glory of Tyr, his beloved and benevolent lord. The urgency the angel felt to bathe in it made his skin prickle in anticipation, but he waited, watching.

Other creatures swam in the water. Tauran could see them despite the glint of the sun reflecting in his eyes. They were angels, like himself, though not all were astral devas. He observed a handful of emerald-skinned planetars frolicking in the pool. Even a pair of solar angels, silvery gold and larger than the others, had come to relax and soak up the glory of the deity. They remained near the far shore, gathered together for conversation and games. A few swam or drifted toward the center, content to enjoy the spiritual invigoration of the Lifespring in their own way. But none of them approached the cascade.

Nodding in satisfaction, Tauran stood. He unfurled his feathery white wings only slightly, gave a measured appraisal of the distance, and leaped off the outcropping. He straightened his body and pointed his fingers and toes. The wind rustled the feathers of his wings for a moment, then he caught the breeze and lifted in a gentle arc, rising above the churning waters that fell directly beneath the cataract.

The air currents held the angel aloft for a heartbeat. He floated at the apex of the arc, and it seemed to the deva that he hovered there, perfectly balanced between the pull of the world below and the buoyant updrafts of the breezes. In that moment, at that instant of equilibrium, Tauran felt unbridled joy, harmony, contentment. He felt the embodiment of a dream that was the House of the Triad.

Then the angel's forward momentum carried him through the apex of his arc, and he slid downward, toward the pool. Tauran had to resist the urge to unfurl his wings fully, had to fight to avoid catching the updrafts once more and gliding through the air. That would have been easy for him. But he wanted the greater challenge.

The deva stayed rigid, his body an arrow, his wings the fletching. He nosed downward, increasing speed, plummeting toward the water. The winds whistled past his ears and his long amber hair blew. He accelerated, truly falling, and shifted his wings by fractions, making subtle corrections in his descent.

The exhilaration of the drop mingled with a hint of fear. Tauran had made the dive before, of course. Many times, in fact. But there was always risk, no matter how experienced he felt. One wrong shift, one overcompensation and he might lose control, might crash against the surface of the water rather than knifing through it with barely a ripple. With that uncontrolled fall would come pain, injury. Even with healing magic at his fingertips, the angel dreaded such wounds. He remained vigilant, wary, concentrating.

Tauran's skills proved equal to the task. The deva held his form and kept his angle accurate. Just before he penetrated the surface of the pool, he drew a great breath. Then he was under, gliding into the depths of the water.

The angel felt a surge of raw energy. It permeated every nerve and pore. His body drank greedily, crackling with life and exuberance. It was exhilarating, overwhelming him, driving him to burst forth again, yet he wanted to loll within it forever, bathe in its cleanness, in its holiness, for all eternity.

The surface light faded as Tauran sliced deeper into the depths, but he had no fear of striking the bottom, which he knew lay much farther beneath him. As his momentum ebbed, Tauran arched his back, angling himself upward. He began to swim then, pulling himself with powerful strokes of his arms and kicks of his legs, back toward the surface.

At last, his head burst forth. He lunged out of the pool and drew in a great gulp of sweet air. He soared up, freeing himself from the water, and spread his wings. Two, three, the four powerful beats of those wings carried him aloft, dripping, into the air above the pool. The angel stretched his arms and legs, rejoicing in how good it felt to be alive, to be in such proximity to unbridled vitality. He hovered a moment, a few feet above the surface, and closed his eyes, soaking in the life-giving force of the pool.

It wasn't just physical, that energy. All of Tauran's cares, all his troubles, seemed to have

been washed away in the plunge. He felt more alive, more confident, more capable. He felt spiritually bolstered, close to his god. He was ready to accept any challenge. He felt unstoppable.

“Why do you do that?”

The voice startled Tauran, though he recognized it as Micus, his friend. He had believed himself alone. The other bathers had been at the far edge, away from the place where he had dived.

Tauran blinked and looked at his friend, another deva with wings spread wide, hovering nearby. “I didn’t hear you approach,” he told Micus.

The other angel smiled when he said, “You seemed preoccupied. I hated to disturb you, but we are summoned.”

Indeed, Tauran could hear the faint clarion call of dozens of trumpets. He could see that the others who had been relaxing in the golden waters were departing, moving away from the water and down the mountain. He and Micus flew together toward that same shore.

“Feeling refreshed?” Micus asked as they neared the rocks at the edge of the pool.

“Yes,” Tauran answered and gathered his loose-fitting pants, belt, and massive mace. “I know some might term it a weakness, a vanity, but I like to reward myself with a dip after accomplishing something of import. It’s not an end unto itself, but it makes the trials and tribulations less heavy.” He finished dressing and the pair launched themselves into the air once more, following the others.

“No harm in that,” Micus said. “Blessed Tyr would not have made this place if he hadn’t intended for us to take advantage of it. But you didn’t answer my question.”

“I thought you wanted to know why I dive into the water.”

“I do,” Micus said. “But not the water part. Why do you start from way up there,” he asked, pointing at the outcropping just before it disappeared from view, “and let yourself fall like that? Why not just glide to the surface like the rest of us and settle in gently?”

“Ah,” Tauran replied as the pair plunged into the clouds. “It helps remind me.”

“Remind you? Of what?”

Tauran could not see his friend in the mist of the clouds, but he could hear the other deva’s voice clearly enough. “That the easiest path is not always set before me. That I must be ready to accept the harder road, and stay wary of distraction or lapse of attention.” The angel broke through the clouds and saw the lower slopes of the great mountain from which they had descended. Three lesser mountains ringed the larger, each the home of one of the Triad—Tyr, Torm, and Ilmater. Atop the nearest peak, the gleaming white walls of Tyr’s Court reflected the sunlight.

“Diving from up there keeps me alert,” Tauran continued. “I know that even one mistake will be very painful or disastrous. Out there,” he said as he swept his hand around, “one mistake might cost someone his life. Even mine. Complacency has no place in our duties. I dive to help me remember that.”

Micus turned and gave his friend an appraising look. “That’s very insightful. Perhaps you can teach me how to do it.”

“I will,” Tauran answered. “When we return.”

The two angels neared a great pinnacle of rock jutting from the mountainside where a host of others like themselves had gathered. The various devas, planetars, and solars hovered in orderly ranks, all facing a dais at the top of the pinnacle. A great arch pierced the stone directly below the dais, like the mouth of a tunnel. Instead of blue sky shining from its far side, though, a curtain of pearlescent light veiled the arch.

Tauran and Micus took their places among the other devas as a great silvery solar settled upon the dais. As she furled her wings, the gleaming being’s golden eyes surveyed the gathering critically for a moment, as though assessing the attendants’ worth. After a moment she spoke.

“Today, we fight another battle in the war to free the oppressed. Though we seek the destruction of all that is evil and depraved, we strive by equal measure to offer redemption to those worth redeeming, to save those who can be saved. Our goal, our duty, is not merely to provide salvation to all who wish it, but to rescue those who cannot fight, or even speak for themselves.”

A murmur of approval ran through the assemblage. The solar waited until the noise abated then continued. “Blessed Tyr has bid us embrace this duty, so that one day, all the multiverses might glow with the shining warmth of equality and acceptance.” The solar paused, then delivered her next words punctuated for emphasis. “Today, we once again take the fight to our enemies, and thwart their foul schemes before they have a chance to grow to tainted fruition!”

The gathered crowd roared with eager acceptance. Tauran and Micus cheered along with the rest. After his glorious swim, the deva felt ready for anything. He thrilled at the prospect of fulfilling his duty, shivered in delight at the chance to bring Tyr’s glory to one who had never known it before.

“You know your tasks. You’ve prepared. Go and bring Tyr’s light to the multiverse!” the solar commanded.

Another roar rose up from the host. The planetars sounded their horns, a cry of battle that reverberated through the skies, echoing from the mountaintops. To Tauran, the sun seemed to blaze just a bit brighter, the sky seemed to turn a sharper hue of azure, and the air smelled faintly sweeter. The atmosphere was electric with expectation and impending triumph.

The angels began to sing as they sorted themselves into bands. A hymn of Tyr’s glory extolled in perfect harmony, accompanied the horns. Micus gave Tauran a hearty pat on the back and a handshake before he moved away to gather with his own group. Tauran lifted his voice in song, joining with the chorus, as he bid his friend farewell with a wave and went to join his own band.

His was a small force comprised of Keenon, the solar leader, and four planetars. He was the lone deva, assigned to the group for a special purpose. He grasped his mace and steadied himself, waiting for the command.

Other units swarmed around the arch in anticipation. In orderly succession, they passed through the veil, disappearing in a wink. When it was time for his own unit to surge into the portal, the angel drew a deep breath, remembered his admonitions of staying wary, and

followed his team.

The landscape twisted and changed. Light bent and warped around Tauran, deepening in a purple gloom. The crisp, clean air vanished, replaced by the charnel scents of a battlefield. Lightning crackled and thunder pealed in a sodden sky that sent a cascade of fetid rain down upon all beneath it. The deva settled upon slick, clutching mud and surveyed the scene.

The angel and his cohorts stood within a low river valley, along the rim of a great bowl surrounded by the silhouettes of low hills. Two armies collided within the middle of the valley, slipping and slogging through the torrential rain and mud to slaughter one another as best they could. One force, badly outnumbered, found itself surrounded on three sides by its enemy and pressed hard up against a churning, frothing river.

“There!” Keenon shouted to be heard above the din of war and weather. “Near the river!” He pointed, and very quickly, he and the four planetars took flight, racing in that direction.

Tauran took to the air along with his companions, but his mission was different. They were to save the brave-hearted defenders who desperately called for the angels’ aid. The deva sought a different life-force, one that wouldn’t be eager to welcome him. Knowing he would not be well received, he cloaked himself in innate invisibility.

Swooping over the plain toward the center of the engagement, Tauran soared above snarling clusters of savage beasts, orcs and ogres—and worse things from the Abyss—then surrounded tiny defiant pockets of men and women in mismatched armor. The mercenaries—and they were mercenaries, hired to fight for some petty lord—stood back to back in tight circles, clinging to their final moments in desperate hope that someone or something might save them.

The deva felt remorse course through him, saddened that he could not spare the time or energy to save them all. But they prayed to different gods, and ineffectually called on other celestial beings for salvation. Their lives were not his to assist. He had a different goal.

He quickly found what he sought. At the far end of the battlefield, near one edge of the great bowl-shaped valley, flapping pennants atop a pavilion tent marked the location of his quarry. Numerous campfires, sputtering feebly in the rain, surrounded the tent, and brutish creatures huddled near those fires, cursing their ill luck at both the weather and their guard duty. They wished to be out among the others, gleefully fighting and killing.

Tauran drifted unnoticed past them, the soft whisper of his wings drowned out by the concussive clash of combatants in the distance, as well as the rumble of thunder overhead. He settled upon the ground near the entrance to the tent and studied the two guards flanking the opening.

Each creature appeared as a hulking, upright toad, equally as tall as Tauran himself and easily surpassing his own bulk. The slick skin covering their bloated bodies was green and bumpy, but unlike a normal toad, rows of jagged teeth lined their mouths. They both wielded massive axes, which they held cradled in their arms. The pair exuded a nauseous stench that nearly made the deva gag, but he stood still for a moment to adjust to the smell before he approached them.

Gripping his mace, Tauran stepped as lightly as he could, hoping to catch the creatures off balance for an initial strike. Though he moved with deftness and grace, one of the two mu

have sensed something was amiss, for it jerked upright and hefted its axe. A low, menacing growl issued from deep within its voluminous body.

"I smell the stench of a celestial!" He snarled, taking one step forward and drawing his axe back as though to strike. Tauran saw that the demon's beady eyes shifted back and forth, and he was reasonably certain the demon could not sense where he was, but his moment of subterfuge had come and gone. Not waiting for the creature before him to determine his location, the deva channeled divine energy, summoning the holy power of his kind and pouring it into his weapon. He swung his mace with both hands, smashing it against the demon's shoulder with a brilliant flash.

The beast snarled in rage and pain and staggered backward as Tauran spun and struck the other in the same manner. The second demon howled and stumbled against the side of the tent, but Tauran could not close in and finish him with a blow to the head, for the first one had recovered enough to take a swipe at him.

"Your time is over, fiend," Tauran said, once more calling on his innate divinity to aid him in the fight.

He blurted out a word of power, a word of divine force, a holy word. He spoke it clearly and there was no mistaking that the two guards heard its utterance. Simultaneously, they shrieked and dropped their weapons. One clutched at his eyes, while the other wrapped his arms around his head and cowered.

Tauran drew his mace back, ready to crush the skull of the first demon as he writhed before him. Just as he brought the weapon down in a great, sweeping arc, though, the fiend vanished. His weapon thudded hard against the sodden ground, spraying muddy water everywhere. The deva growled in exasperation, but his frustration was shortlived, for a cloying miasma enveloped him, as though a greasy darkness had descended upon him.

The angel's stomach roiled and he doubled over in agony. All his limbs ached and lost their strength. He thought he would retch. Tauran stumbled away from the remaining demon and gasped for breath. The clinging, sickly blanket of darkness moved with him, filling his nostrils with horrific odors. He spat, trying and failing to expunge the awful, sour taste.

Slowly, the cloaking darkness evaporated, leaving the deva standing in the rain once more. His stomach still churned, but he could breathe again.

Tauran turned toward the tent and saw the demon flailing about blindly with his axe. The beast stopped and listened, cocking his head to one side for a moment, then swung the huge blade once more. The massive axe whistled through the air, seeking flesh to cleave.

The angel left his feet and soared above the demon. He ascended sharply and swung the mace with all his might, once more drawing upon the holy power of Tyr to aid him. The crushing blow landed true, right against the back of the demon's head, and he heard the satisfying sound of crunching bone as the thing's skull collapsed.

With a sickening plop, the demonic toad sprawled forward into the mud and quivered. The beast's axe slid to one side, no longer needed.

Tauran spun away from the creature and approached the opening of the tent. Not knowing what other defenders might be lurking within, he nudged the flap sideways with the head of his mace, expecting an assault at any moment. When no attack was forthcoming, the deva

stepped inside and drew the flap shut behind himself.

The dimness of the tent did not hinder the angel. His acute vision allowed him to easily discern the interior. He gave a quick glance in the direction of a table with maps spread upon it, but the figure before him, languishing upon numerous rugs and cushions, interested him most.

He stepped nearer.

“No closer,” the figure said. “Your stench is awful enough from this distance.” It was the voice of a woman, though she sounded husky, tired. A cough followed by several wheezing gasps confirmed what he already knew.

She was wounded, dying.

Tauran paused to let her show herself fully. A human torso and head rose up into a sitting position, her six arms pushing her upright. Where her legs should have been, twenty feet of reptilian flesh writhed in discomfort. The massive, coiled body might have been capable of crushing him, had she been hale and hearty, but Tauran saw an arrow protruding from her chest directly beneath one bare breast. It penetrated her from front to back, and though very little blood leaked from the wound, he knew the missile was killing her.

It was also holding her there, preventing her from traveling back to the plane from whence she had come. She could seek no solace, no rescue among her own kind in the Abyss.

“You’re dying,” Tauran said, taking another step toward the fiend. “I can help you,” he said. “I can ease your suffering.”

“Stay back!” the demon snarled, and she hoisted swords in several of her hands. The blades shook, would not stay on guard.

Tauran looked at her face, saw the pain glazing her eyes. She might have been beautiful had she been fully human. Even half-human in shape, she was attractive. But her dark hair hung in bedraggled clumps from her head, and her skin was sallow and glistened with the sweat of sickness. She swallowed hard, then groaned and collapsed back upon her pillows.

“Gloat and get it over with,” she mumbled, closing her eyes. “I don’t have much time left.”

Tauran shook his head, though he knew she did not see. “I am not interested in dancing over your grave. I cannot even claim the honor of having fired the arrow that leeches your life away.”

“Then what do you want?” she asked, her eyes still closed, her voice growing more hoarse by the moment. “Whatever it is, I won’t give it to you.”

“It’s not yours to give,” Tauran replied, “but if you do not fight me, I will ease your final moments before claiming it.”

The demon opened one eye and looked at him. “No,” she said simply. “I would never bargain with your kind.” She coughed, tried to catch her breath, coughed again. Blood dribbled from her lip. When she regained her breath, she said, “That you would try to bargain tells me it is very special to you. You have piqued my curiosity. Tell me what you want. Perhaps I will make an exception and give it to you, just this once.”

Tauran breathed in and out slowly. He was obligated to give her the chance, though he knew that revealing his desire would most likely enrage her, making his task that much

harder. But he was obligated.

“The child growing in your womb,” he said.

Both of the demon’s eyes flew open then, and she shrieked in realization. “No!” she screamed, and the coils of her body twitched to life, writhing and whipping around the tent.

Tauran had to leap into the air to avoid being struck.

“Never!” the demon cried.

She rose up, her blades out, as though ready to fight him to the last. He braced himself for the duel, but then he saw the cunning gleam in her eye.

Just as she began to reverse the blades and drive them into her own body, to slice the burgeoning life out of herself to deny it to the angel, he reacted. With explosive force, he flung the mace forward, channeling every bit of strength, both natural and preternatural, that he could muster.

The weapon sailed across the space between them. Tauran watched it tumble through the air as though it moved in slow motion. The blades of the demon’s long swords descended, and the mace moved closer.

The head of the angel’s weapon collided with the once-beautiful face at the same moment that the tips of several swords punctured her scaly skin. An explosion of blood and flesh splattered the cushions, the rugs, and the tent wall as the demon’s head disintegrated.

The muscles in her arms kept working for a heartbeat longer.

The blades sank deeply into flesh. The two life-forces that were there, one inside the other, grew faint, then vanished. The unborn child was lost to him, slain by its own mother.

Tauran hung his head in sorrow for a long moment, reminding himself that the easy path was not always the one set before him.

He turned, grief and disappointment hanging heavy around him, and departed, returning to the House of the Triad to report that he had failed.



Chapter One

Thin, wispy clouds scurried across the night sky, passing in front of gibbous Selûne and deepening the gloom upon the land below. Aliisza glanced up, careful as she shifted on her perch upon an outcropping of stone. The alu-fiend didn't want to dislodge loose rubble beneath her feet. Though invisible, she feared clattering stones would reveal her position to anyone below and thus spoil the ambush. The notion of ruining her little trap annoyed the half-demon for an instant, but she dismissed the thought in the time it took to reassure herself that she had made no sound.

She could still make out the pale, glowing near-orb, though the high clouds diffused its light and encircled it with a strange halo. At any other time, she might have taken a moment to marvel at the strange sight. The alu strayed to the surface of Toril only rarely and had few opportunities to gaze upon such useless but intriguing wonders. That night, however, she could not long keep her attention away from the impending clash in the narrow valley below. Fingering the hilt of her sword in anticipation, she turned to stare downward once more.

To all but fiendish eyes, the approaching Sundabarian patrol had vanished. Moonlight no longer glimmered off a bared blade or polished helm, but Aliisza had no trouble locating the darker shadows gliding silently through the murk of night. The mounted figures moved in single file along the path in the center of the valley. They rode without caution, never hesitating as they approached the defile where Aliisza and her invisible tanarukk soldiers waited.

The half-fiend put a magical whistle to her lips and blew it as hard as she could. The shrill tone that emanated from the device echoed all through the defile, piercing the otherwise still and quiet night. Almost immediately, an answering roar went up all around Aliisza. The tanarukks responded to the signal with fierce delight, screaming in battle lust or cheering in joy at the impending fight. She could hear the clatter of weapons and the clack of dislodged stones as her minions raced forward, charging at the patrol.

The soldiers milled in confusion and panic. Some, perhaps the veterans, attempted to dismount and fan out, preparing to receive the onslaught that they could not see. Others wheeled their horses back and forth, disrupting the line of their comrades already on foot. Their lack of discipline and experience disintegrated the defense before it ever had a chance to properly form up.

The half-fiend stood still and watched for a moment. When her minions were finished there would be no evidence left of the patrol. Aliisza's task was to sow mystery and doubt; it was too soon to alert the populace of the danger that lurked on the periphery of the valley. Her foe they couldn't see or counterattack was far more insidious than an open siege. The people of Sundabar had to be left wondering. Their Ruling Master, Helm Dwarf-friend, had to appease

ineffectual. It was all part of Kaanyr Vhok's grand plan.

At the bottom of the defile, the first of the tanarukks reached the patrol. They slammed into the half-formed defensive circle of men and horses, popping into sight as they swung battle-axes and jabbed with spears. The two groups became a swirling mass of howling screaming confusion. Human and horse fell before the onslaught of the horde. It would be over all too soon. The patrol never stood a chance.

The half-demon sneered at the scouts' foolishness. Green, the alu surmised. Hardly worth the sport.

Disappointed but feeling assured that her charges knew what to do, Aliisza departed leaving the horde of savage tanarukks to complete the ambush and subsequent vanishing act by themselves. Mauling an inexperienced band of scouts might satisfy the fiendish or brutish yet simple bloodlust, but it had hardly been worthy entertainment for the half-demon herself. And she had other places to be, other things to do.

Still under the cover of invisibility, Aliisza soared into the sky and winged her way toward the community of Sundabar. As she flew, she mused over all the preparation, all the effort that Kaanyr had put into his latest plans to conquer the city.

In some ways, it had long ago become a fool's errand to the alu, but she knew her lover would never stop trying to unseat the current ruler, Helm Dwarf-friend. Vhok had tried many different paths to victory. Through the years, he had thrown countless troops against the city's walls, even managed to get inside once or twice. Always, though, he had been driven back, for the folk of Sundabar were hearty and wary, and they had the aid of the wretched dwarves who lived in the great halls beneath the city.

Aliisza knew Kaanyr's hatred of Helm Dwarf-friend burned strong within him, a seed of resentment planted long ago from some slight or insult the ex-mercenary had delivered against the cambion. Kaanyr had never spoken in detail of the event, though she knew that it had somehow caused him to lose face in the eyes of his mother. That had been years before when Dwarf-friend had still led the Bloodaxe mercenaries, and Kaanyr's mother Mulvassy the Sceptered, a marilith demon of considerable power, stood prominent among the fiends of Hellgate Keep. Whatever had happened between half-fiend and mercenary, the cambion had repeatedly vowed revenge in the intervening years. Aliisza held no doubts that her lover would spend the rest of his days strat-egizing Dwarf-friend's downfall.

At least he's finally wised up, Aliisza mused as she drew nearer the object of her lover's desire. He's finally trying cunning and deception instead of brute force.

The alu was pleased with Kaanyr's latest plan, particularly because she had her own prominent role to play in the scheme, one which she was all too happy to fulfill. Kaanyr had been clever indeed, the alu admitted with glee, even if his scheme had tried her patience. Tendays of plotting, of establishing her cover before she ever set foot inside the city walls had often driven her to distraction.

In the beginning, it was all maneuvering and surveying, noting the strength of defenses and routes of patrols. Aliisza had grown quite bored with it all. During those first tendays, her thoughts often drifted back to the time she had spent pursuing Pharaun Mizzrym of the mysterious and treacherous drow, during Kaanyr's aborted siege of Menzoberranzan. The

had been a far more exciting pastime for her than endless scouting. She even complained about the lack of action to Kaanyr, not just for herself but on behalf of her restless troops. She could sense that they were growing impatient, too.

“Hardly the sort of banal recreation you promised the hordes after the fiasco at Menzoberranzan,” Aliisza had complained to Kaanyr one day between forays to the surface.

“Patience, my petulant love,” Kaanyr had replied absently, never looking up as he studiously pored over a tabletop full of maps. “These matters take time and planning.”

Unsatisfied with the cambion’s distracted explanation—and more than a little put off by her lover’s apparent disinterest in her—Aliisza longed to liven things up a bit.

Then she learned what her own role would be in the coming attack when her lover and commander told her he had a separate assignment for her to carry out. Aliisza almost pouted but after he explained the plan in detail, she had jumped at the offer.

She was to be the cancer that ate at the city from within, created the doubt and weakened the resoluteness of its people. She was to be the seed that flowered into full-blown distrust. She was to be the source of Helm Dwarf-friend’s downfall, and Kaanyr would have his city.

But it was only the beginning. Kaanyr had much grander military ambitions. Laying siege to the fortress-city of Sundabar with his fiendish hordes was only the first step in his larger scheme of conquest over all of the Silver Marches.

The alu arrived at the perimeter of the city, and she glanced down at the icy moat below her as she soared over the walls and darted down toward the roof of the Master’s Hall. The prominent government building within Sundabar, the Master’s Hall housed every city official and also served as Dwarf-friend’s abode. It was a fine place for her to land unseen and transform into the winsome girl Helm Dwarf-friend was so enamored of, but she remained cautious.

The alu circled the building a couple of times, still invisible, just to be certain there was no trouble. Aliisza peered in every direction, along every balcony and walkway, letting her fiendish vision penetrate the darker shadows. She even utilized Pharaun’s ring to try to spot the telltale signs of cloaking magic. A patrol of the city’s watch, the Stone Shield, approached from the distance along one street, but she saw no one else. She settled silently on the stone roof. After shifting form, she dispelled her invisibility and slipped through a tower door into the interior of the hall.

Aliisza’s disguise was that of a sprightly young human girl with green eyes, lovely auburn curls hanging to her shoulders, a tiny little upturned nose, and dimples in her rosy cheeks. It was Helm Dwarf-friend’s vision of heaven. Secretly rooting out that most private of desires while watching him from a distance had been a simple matter for the half-fiend, but the manipulations afterward had been a bit more tricky.

Adopting the name of Ansa, the alu had taken every additional precaution to disguise her true character. She had employed her wizardly magic to mask her thoughts and her aura, preventing others from detecting her treacherous intentions and demonic nature. Then she had insinuated herself among the Master’s Hall staff. Dwarf-friend’s seneschal, an intoxicatingly handsome man named Zasian Menz, was her first obstacle.

The tall man with long dark hair and a flowing mustache scrutinized her severely and

inundated her with questions concerning her skills and her past. Aliisza had expected some resistance to her efforts, knowing full well how careful the seneschal must be. But the matron truly unnerved her, and that was a feeling she had rarely experienced. At one point, the alu was certain Zasian knew her true identity and was merely toying with her before exposing her to the house guards. Finally, he had relented and turned her over to one of his senior matrons.

Ginella, the burly and severe woman in charge of the staff, took an instant dislike to Ansa and beat her regularly, even when she was doing a good job. It was all Aliisza could do not to strike the hateful woman down where she stood. The menial tasks Ginella had given to her had been the worst sort of labor, always filthy and backbreaking jobs, but Aliisza made sure she carried them out well. She would not risk getting cast out before she could get near her quarry.

The alu had discovered that it was harder to get close to the master than she had imagined. Dwarf-friend was often locked away in meetings or out in the city on business when Aliisza was working. Ginella brooked no loitering of any kind, and she had forbidden Aliisza to go anywhere within the hall beyond the reach of her chores. Most of Aliisza's duties had kept her in the lowest levels of the place, under the watchful eye of Ginella and other matrons. It was almost as if they sensed her desire to get close to Dwarf-friend and were determined to put a stop to any moon-eyed girl cavorting with the most important man in the city.

At last, Aliisza had gotten her chance. It had been laundry day, and she had been ordered to gather linens from a particular wing of the hall. On her way back, she had made a point of passing through a great hall where Dwarf-friend was discussing city matters with a pair of his advisors. As luck would have it, the girl tripped and spilled her bundled wash over the side of a banister—right onto the Ruling Master's head. Ginella had witnessed the gaffe, but before she could drag the girl back to the wash room for a sound beating, Dwarf-friend had spotted her and ordered her brought before him.

Aliisza had feigned a severe case of blushing embarrassment and had moved as reluctantly as she could, but Dwarf-friend was smitten with Ansa the moment he got a good look at her. From then on, it was almost too easy. After discovering that the girl could read and write, he had insisted to Zasian, over Ginella's protestations, that she be reassigned to him to assist him as a scribe. Aliisza had received plenty of scowls from Ginella in the days since, but the elderly woman had left her alone, for which the alu was thankful. She had no desire to stir up suspicion by being forced to get rid of the matron.

It wasn't long afterward that everyone in the hall knew that Ansa shared Helm Dwarf-friend's bed. Whenever they were alone, Helm frequently exclaimed that he could not believe his good fortune at having such a lovely creature stumble into his life, and Aliisza had heard him quietly thank Tymora on more than one occasion during their trysts.

Aliisza's thoughts returned to the present as she descended the stairs from the tower and entered a great hall in the wing housing Dwarf-friend's private chambers. It was late, and only a few lanterns burned, turned low to save oil. The hall, which soared three stories high and was ringed by balconies at each level, lay shrouded in shadows. A great table rested in the middle of the chamber, surrounded by high-backed wooden chairs as uncomfortable as they were imposing. Aliisza crossed the hall and crept down the passage toward the master's

abode.

A figure up ahead caught her attention, coming from Dwarf-friend's office. It was Zasian Menz.

Aliisza froze, wondering if she could duck out of the way before the man spotted her. She was in no mood to feign intimidation at that moment. She had been clever enough to adapt a reasonably modest nightshirt as part of her disguise for the evening, but appearing in such outside of the bedroom was the slightest bit improper to the Sundabarians, and she had little doubt Zasian would raise an eyebrow and scold her for it.

Before Aliisza could melt into the shadows unnoticed and let the seneschal pass, he faltered a step, and she knew he had seen her. She stepped to the side as though to let him by, keeping her eyes lowered deferentially. Even though she shared Helm's bed, she still worked for Zasian on the master's behalf.

Zasian strode before the girl and stopped. "Look at me, child," he said, lifting Aliisza's chin with one finger.

Aliisza let him tilt her head, but she kept her eyes cast down a moment longer before meeting his gaze. A genuine shiver ran through her. Under different circumstances, the alu wouldn't mind wrapping her arms and legs around that tall, muscular body and stealing a kiss. She struggled to look fearful rather than hungry.

"You know you shouldn't be out here," the seneschal began, "especially not dressed as you are. I know how fond Master Helm is of you, and I am willing to look the other way, but only so long as you do not disrupt the smooth operations of my hall. The last thing I need is more tongues wagging about Master Helm's half-naked whore traipsing through the common rooms. I've already had five visitors to my office this tenday, complaining about the impropriety of it all. You put me in a very difficult position, child."

"Yes, Seneschal," Aliisza answered, doing her best to sound chastened. "I will be more careful." Secretly, she was thrilled. The seeds were being planted. Folk were starting to frown upon the master's indiscretion, to question his actions. It would grow.

The alu blinked and realized that Zasian had said something else, but she had not been paying attention. She searched her memory to draw out his words, and realized she couldn't remember them. In fact, she had the oddest feeling that she had been standing there, listening to him, for quite some time, but the time had simply ... vanished.

"I said, get yourself out of sight," Zasian instructed, pointing down the hall toward the master's rooms. "And don't let me catch you out like this again."

Aliisza stared at the man, a bit unnerved over the puzzling sensation, but she dismissed it. I'm just tired, she decided. To the seneschal, she replied, "Yes, my lord," then turned and almost ran to the door of her lover's chambers. By the time she was inside the master's rooms, she had forgotten about the gap in time.



Kaanyr Vhok stood in the middle of an ancient dwarven thoroughfare, deep beneath the streets of Sundabar. The low ceiling hung only inches above the cambion's head, giving him the unnerving urge to duck. A series of stone double doors flanked the wide passage in pairs.

as far as the half-demon's eyes could observe. Each set of portals bore runes inscribed into its surfaces, holy texts and clan names in honor of the dead buried behind it. Vhok ignored the crypts and made his way toward the end of the hall, to a final set of doors that stood at the top of a short stairway. The dust he stirred as he walked reassured the half-fiend that he was the only one who had tread that route in many years.

At the top of the steps, Vhok stopped and perused the inscription. The ancient words marked the chamber as a shrine dedicated to Moradin, god of the dwarves. Smirking, Vhok was relieved to see that the craftsmen who had constructed the shrine had not seen fit to place arcane runes upon the surface of the doors, protective sigils that would have barred his entry. Satisfied that no fell magic would harm him, he pushed on the stone. The twin doors swung ponderously open, as silent as the day they were first hung. Cool bluish light spilled into the thoroughfare from within.

The cambion stepped inside and shut the doors behind him. The chamber was hexagonal in shape, not very far across from one side to another, but quite tall. A series of thick square columns stood around the periphery of the chamber, one at each of the eight corners. A set of torches rested in brackets mounted on each of the columns, casting the chamber in a surreal azure glow. Vhok knew of such illumination. The torches would burn forever, their flames preserved with magic.

The spaces between each pair of columns formed private alcoves. Within seven of the niches, a large stone sarcophagus lay parallel to the wall behind. Atop each sarcophagus rose a statue of a dwarf hero, clergy members who had died in service to Moradin. Each of the seven was unique in stature, dress, and appearance. Inscriptions carved into the sarcophagi identified the dwarves laid to rest within, but Vhok ignored the names. He knew those interred were only so much dust by that time.

A whisper of wind and a faint flash of ruddy light upon the walls were the only clues that another had appeared within the shrine.

Vhok turned, knowing who stood halfway across the room. Zasian Menz, a young handsome fellow with long black hair and a flaring moustache, grinned at Vhok. He dressed himself in finery, black leather pants and shirt with a black and gold tunic over both. He gestured in the air around himself. The remnants of a crimson-tinged magical doorway snapped out of existence behind him, leaving the shrine bathed in bluish light once more.

"You found it," the man said as he peered around the chamber and twitched his nose in apparent distaste.

"You choose an odd place to meet, Zasian," Vhok replied, letting the swirls of afterimages fade from his vision until he could see through the darkness again. "You did not tell me that we would be trespassing upon Moradin's holy ground."

"Do you care?" Zasian asked, strolling around the perimeter of the room as he gazed at the effigies of the fallen dwarves. "I did not take you for a pious being."

The cambion almost smiled at his counterpart's joke. "Only insofar as I must be wary of divine retribution. The doors or the interior of this place might have been warded."

"Yes, but they weren't," Zasian answered. "We dispelled such nuisances long before inviting you here."

Vhok waved his hand in dismissal. It was not a conversation worth pursuing, in his mind. “How is she?” he asked.

“She is well, and still has Dwarf-friend firmly in her charms,” Zasian confirmed. “I performed the enchantment earlier tonight, in fact. All is set.”

Vhok nodded thoughtfully. “And she does not remember it?” he asked. “She has forgotten everything?”

“Everything of significance,” he replied. “She seemed a bit disoriented, as you might expect, but that will pass from her mind quickly enough. She will have far too many other things to think about.”

Vhok nodded once more and tapped his finger upon his lips, lost in thoughts of his lover. Aliisza was in a very delicate position, and any complication could mean her life. Though the cambion would be disappointed to lose the beautiful creature as his consort, he was far more concerned with the implications of her failure to complete her mission. Should her true purpose be exposed, should she fall before she completed her tasks, the rest of the plan would almost surely fail, and he would not be able to orchestrate Helm Dwarf-friend's downfall. That, above all else, was paramount.

“You are certain this will work?” asked the half-fiend.

Zasian shrugged. “As with any plan of this complexity, there is always the chance of unforeseen complications. I cannot say that I am certain, and I give you no guarantees. But I know what Tyr's lackeys are about. They are becoming proactive, seeking to turn any opportunity to their advantage. They will seize any excuse at all to stake a claim in the future. If we have laid the groundwork subtly enough, they will take the bait. Now we can only let it play out and see what transpires.”

“Are you certain of her condition?” Vhok asked. An odd feeling of remorse passed through him for a moment, but he brushed it aside.

“I checked again this evening, before traveling here to meet with you. Your own divinations are accurate.”

“The deception is necessary,” Vhok said, as much to himself as to the priest. “There is no other way to reach the garden and the Lifespring. She cannot know yet the part she plays.”

Zasian shrugged again. “As you said yourself, it is but a single piece of the puzzle. A very important piece, to say the least, but only one.”

Vhok nodded once more, then drew himself out of his worries. There were more immediate things to deal with. “Very well, let's conclude this business. Lead the way.”

Zasian nodded and moved to the sarcophagus directly opposite the doors through which Vhok had entered. Moving behind the massive stone coffin, the man made a motion with his right hand.

Vhok felt a deep, low rumble reverberate through the room. He watched as a portion of the wall behind the sarcophagus shifted and slid from view, revealing a passage just beyond. An orange glow spilled from the chamber, the light of several ordinary torches. Zasian gestured to Vhok and to the passage.

“After you,” he offered.

The cambion stepped past his counterpart and entered the hallway.

Two paces later, Vhok found himself in a very different sort of temple, one far more sinister in appearance. In shape and structure, the chamber was identical to the one he and Zasian had vacated. Unlike the austere simplicity of the previous room, the second chamber felt menacing. The square stone columns were replaced by twisted, sinuous pillars, and the stone itself was ruddy in color. Instead of a series of sarcophagi, each niche housed a dark stone throne topped by a high throne. Each chair faced the center of the room, where a forbidding altar of black marble shot through with green veins and carved in the shape of a jutting fist rested.

Figures dressed in a manner similar to Zasian occupied each seat except one. As Vhok surveyed the men and women arrayed before him, haughty and self-assured gazes returned to his own. Some of those gazes roamed over his noble, almost elven features, noting the silver hair contrasting his olive complexion, undoubtedly finding him handsome. Certainly many female, human or otherwise, had fallen under his sway after being charmed by that exotic countenance. Other eyes lingered on Burnblood, the elven long sword resting on his right hip or Scepter Malevolus, the steel rod engraved with black runes that dangled from his belt on the left side. The potently magical scepter marked Vhok as ruler of the Scourged Legion. He had taken that title after he had slain his mother, the marilith Mulvassyss, and pried it from her dead fingers. No doubt some among the Banites in the secret chamber pondered the cambion's prowess with it, perhaps assessing his worth to stand among them.

The cambion was hardly intimidated, though he could imagine how a mere human might be cowed into submission before an audience of seven priests of Bane. The power radiating from the group was palpable, and Vhok knew enough to appreciate and respect the minions of the Black Hand.

Zasian manipulated the door through which he and Vhok had entered, shutting it silently. Then he moved to the empty throne and seated himself upon it, joining his companions. Once he was settled, the leader, whom Vhok knew as Dreadlord Holt Burukhan, held his hand up as though commanding silence, though no one had spoken. The high priest uttered a short prayer to his dark god, then gestured around the chamber. When he finished, he gazed at Vhok.

"The chamber is warded," Burukhan said, his voice dispassionate. "No one has followed you to this sacred but secret place. We may speak freely."

Kaanyr Vhok wanted to snort in derision, but he managed with some effort to keep the noise to himself. He knew enough about spies to understand that no secret meeting chamber was foolproof, and anyone who thought otherwise was asking for trouble. Even hidden away in a room concealed behind the tombs of the dead, far below the world of daylight, someone might figure out where they were and employ magical means to listen and watch.

From where he stood near the entry, Vhok surreptitiously cast a spell of his own. He kept the gestures concealed and muttered softly to himself so that the gathered Banites would not notice his work. When he was finished, he strolled to the altar, confident that he would be aware of someone listening or watching the proceedings magically.

"Let us beseech the Black Lord to grant us wisdom and strength," the dreadlord began, turning his gaze from one priest to the next. "Let us ask him for the might to bring all our

enemies low and the cleverness to rule our ever-growing dominion in his name.” He bowed his head and closed his eyes, and the other priests joined him.

Vhok wanted to grimace, but the cambion kept his face bland as he looked around at the praying clerics. Each one seemed to smile in fervent delight at the prospect of wreaking havoc in the name of their god. The zealousness of Bane’s followers never ceased to annoy Vhok, but he knew he had to keep such disgruntlement to himself. If he had any hope at all of ruling Sundabar, he would need their help. The city was too well defended, too difficult to overthrow by force. He had tried and failed too often to continue down that foolish path, so he needed a new plan, with allies on the inside. It was a shame that the only ones with any true potential to assist him in his endeavors were such mindless fanatics. Vhok found almost all of them exasperating.

Only Zasian seemed to think for himself, to exhibit any cleverness at all. Vhok liked him. The man was confident but not arrogant. He knew the dangers of pride, and sought in all things to find accord among his own kind—so unusual among Banites, for whom competition and strife seemed to ruin as many machinations as brought fruition and success. Zasian actually had potential as a long-term ally. Vhok doubted he would be able to tolerate the other priests at all, if not for Zasian.

Burukhan finished his prayer and began eyeing the other Banites. His gaze was both critical and expectant, as though he sought to confirm the eagerness in their faces, ensuring that they reveled in their god’s power as much as he did, but hunting for some sign that their piety might be lacking. Their rapturous smiles and glittering visages seemed to satisfy the dreadlord.

“Step into the center of the chamber, hellspawn,” Holt Burukhan demanded, gesturing toward the altar. “Step forward so that we may hear your words clearly and judge their worth plainly.”

Vhok eyed the dreadlord with distaste, but he did as the high priest bade and moved near the altar. For long moments, no one spoke, and the cambion began to grow agitated under the assemblage’s scrutiny.

“Zasian has told us of your offer,” Holt said at last. “You wish an alliance.”

It was more a statement than a question, but the silence following the high priest’s words dragged.

Vhok nodded at last and said, “There is much we could gain, working together.”

“Indeed,” one of the Banites, a woman, replied. “We well understand what *you* might gain by seating yourself upon the throne of Sundabar, but how does that serve *our* interests? Share with us, if you will, what benefit you see for us in this proposed alliance.”

Vhok glanced at Zasian, taken aback slightly. The cambion presumed that the other man had already won the assembled clergy over, and that the meeting was just a formality. It seemed the alliance was not as sealed as he had thought.

“You get to see Helm Dwarf-friend deposed, and your church becomes the sole divine power in the entire valley,” the half-fiend replied. “All your adversaries—the servants of Helm, Torm, and Tyr—are cast out of the city, their temples destroyed. Your companions and the Zhentarim, establish a monopoly on commerce within the walls. Quite a lucrative

bargain, if you ask me.”

“Such a utopia is within our grasp without your aid, fiend,” another cleric said, his voice gruff.

“Why should we trust you?” Holt Burukhan asked. “You and your brutish Scourged Legion have attacked our city repeatedly in the past. We know that the devilish horde you call an army sits now on the periphery, waiting for the right moment to strike. Will you bring them down upon us once more, after you hold the seat of power?”

They’re demonic—not devilish, you simpleton, Vhok thought.

“If you had the means to drive out the Tyrrans and Helmites, you would have already done so,” the cambion answered. “My Scourged Legion will be needed to tear down the walls of those temples and quell any rebellion within the ranks of the city’s army and guardsmen. Once that is complete, I will send them to conquer more territory in my—in *our*—name, and they will do as I command. All I ask in return for this is that you let me unseat Helm Dwarf-friend before all the citizens of Sundabar, to humiliate him and drive him out of the city, branded a failure. I know you want to see the mercenary gone from Sundabar as badly as I do.” Well, not as badly, but maybe close, he silently added.

“And how will you ruin Helm Dwarf-friend?” Holt asked. “What assurances can you give me that you will turn the populace against him?”

“A fine question,” Vhok replied. “The answer to which I will keep to myself. But suffice it to say I will have a means when the time comes. You risk nothing in accepting that answer, for I ask you to do nothing until I return. By that time, my preparations will be complete, and I will share my secret with you.”

And Helm Dwarf-friend, Vhok said to himself, I will witness your fall from grace. I will be the instrument of your utter and unending misery. Mark my words.

For a moment, the cambion reveled in the image of the human mercenary exposed as a fraud and a traitor to his own city. The half-fiend daydreamed the scene playing out, the forces of Sundabar gathered in the square, bearing witness to Dwarf-friend’s downfall and Vhok’s triumph.

A triumph that would not come to pass without the Banites’ aid.

“Very well,” Holt said, just a hint uncertainly. “We shall concede this secrecy to you for the moment. But we will not seal this alliance, at least not yet. Though you have made a compelling case showing the mutual benefit of our cooperation, you have not assuaged my concerns over the outcome should you—we—fail. If we cannot unseat Helm Dwarf-friend from the Master’s Hall, you and your army simply return to your infernal pit beneath the ground, little the worse for wear. But we”—he gestured around the chamber—“we are drawn out, exposed, and our power crushed between the city and temples. That does not sit well with me. You must bring proof that you can lead the populace, control them. Only then will we lend you our aid.”

The chamber was quiet for some moments longer. Vhok again resisted the urge to grimace, though for a different reason. Dreadlord Holt Burukhan was a fanatic, but the half-fiend grudgingly acknowledged that he was not a complete fool. All the risk lay in the Banites’ loyalty, and the priests knew it.

No matter, Vhok thought. Once I have the power of the Lifespring, convincing them of the plan's worth will be the simplest of things. They will feel foolish for ever doubting me. I will have this city. And Bane be damned.

The meeting was over. The gathered assemblage rose to their feet and began to slip out one by one, each by magical means of one sort or another. Vhok watched the priests as they vanished, leaving behind nothing more than a sparkle of magic or a zephyr of breeze to mark their passing. In moments, only he and Zasian remained behind.

"He is a fool," Vhok said at last, sighing loudly. "A fool's fool."

The remark drew a raised eyebrow from Zasian. "Perhaps, but such comments are dangerous. He or his spies might be listening to us at this very moment."

"It's all right," Vhok said. "I warded the room before we began tonight."

Zasian nodded. "Wise," he replied. "As did I. Burukhan rarely gives proper consideration to such precautions, I fear."

"Exactly," the cambion said. "A fool. And don't think I don't know you feel the same way about him, Zasian. I see the wisdom in your eyes—wisdom that flinches whenever that bag of winds speaks. For all his dedication and charisma, Dreadlord Holt Burukhan is not best suited to lead your church, Banite. You are far more able than he to command the hordes who worship your Black Hand." Vhok knew he spoke that last bit with more sarcasm than was probably wise, but he couldn't refrain from letting his true feelings trickle out.

Zasian seemed to ignore the jibe. "It is not so uncommon for a man to serve as the power behind a throne," he said. "Sometimes the masses need a face—a 'bag of winds' who can work them into a fervor on his behalf—more than they need a wizened contemplator. I can accomplish far more behind the scenes, away from the scrutiny he receives. Burukhan can be the king. I prefer the role of kingmaker."

Vhok smirked. "If you say so. I could not be so content in such a role." Then his eyes narrowed. "When we have the city, is it your intention to continue to work behind the scenes?" he asked.

Zasian smiled, a charming grin that gave the ladies unsteady knees. "Almost assuredly," he purred. "Though I'm sure that when Kaanyr Vhok sits in the Master's Hall of Sundabar, High Priest Zasian Menz of the Temple of Bane will be busy with his own pursuits. I'm sure we will reach some sort of agreement of coexistence. You do not have any interest in spiritual matters, and I have little interest in the day-to-day affairs of secular rulership. What's good for you and your city will undoubtedly be good for me and my temple."

"Indeed," Vhok said. Silently, he added, "Though I might prefer the incompetent blowhard at the head of the temple. Less dangerous most of the time."

The cambion dismissed future confrontations from his mind and changed the subject. "Are you prepared to leave tonight?" he asked Menz, though he knew the answer already. Both had been planning their impending journey for a long time.

"Yes," Zasian answered. "And what of your preparations? Will we have access to the port by this evening?"

"Yes," Vhok replied. "Lysalis and the others are working now. It shouldn't be much

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