



ERIN M. EVANS

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®
FORGOTTEN REALMS®

ASHES^{OF} THE TYRANT

A BRIMSTONE ANGELS NOVEL AND COMPANION TO *FIRE IN THE BLOOD*

FORGOTTEN REALMS

ERIN M. EVANS

ASHES
OF THE
TYRANT



1

16 Nightal, the Year of the Nether Mountain Scrolls (1486 DR)

One day from Djerad Thymar, Tymanther

CLANLESS MEHEN NEVER SPOKE OF DJERAD THYMAR TO HIS DAUGHTERS except by accident, and so the shadows of a thousand half-spoken memories implied the shape of the City-Bastion in Farideh's mind. She had been raised with its language in her ears, its customs in her home, its stories lulling her to sleep as a child, but the city of the dragonborn itself remained little more than a legend, until now. The pyramid city of her father's birth loomed on the horizon, as real and gleaming red as spilled blood in the sunset. It left Farideh uneasy, and she wasn't alone.

"Is there anything I can do?" Clanless Mehen asked.

Farideh glanced back at her adoptive father, standing on the ridge of the riverbank, shifting from one foot to the other. The faint steam of his breath curled around his scaled nostrils in the evening chill.

"You can stop watching," Farideh said, and smiled wanly at the dragonborn. "I don't want you to see."

"I've seen it," Mehen reminded her, looking down his snout. "It doesn't bother me."

It should, Farideh thought.

She looked down into the River Alamber brushing the tips of her boots, its muddy waters painted by sunset. *Kuhri Ternhesh*, she thought, the name of the river in Tymantheran Draconic. The River of Stone. Her reflection looked back—one silver eye, one gold beneath a ridge of horns—broken by the ripples of the water. Does a thing change when you change what you call it? Or do the names just uncover other layers, other truths, other ways of seeing something?

Farideh, she thought. Or Chosen of Asmodeus.

Both, she thought. There's no running from it, and you know that.

She shut her eyes, turning her attention to the roiling powers of Asmodeus, the god of sin, that tugged on her nerves like a pack of wild hounds, threatening to break what control she had over them. Four days of holding on so tightly and it felt almost impossible to loose that grip.

But if she didn't now, the powers that came from being a Chosen of Asmodeus would pry it loose for her.

The dark horror of Asmodeus burst out of Farideh, a corona of fear, just before the flames raced over her bronze skin, gathering and unfolding from her back in

wings of fire. Anger burned through her—she didn't want this, she didn't ask for this, *any* of this. She steeped in it for a moment—the fury was hers, and yet it wasn't. She had to remember that.

A few breaths later, she let the flames die.

"Better?" Mehen said, as if Farideh had only thrown up in the river. She climbed up the bank, taking Mehen's hand to pull herself up over the rise.

"For now."

Mehen hesitated, then embraced her with a suddenness and strength that crushed the air from her lungs. She hugged him back.

"It scares you," Farideh said. "Don't pretend it doesn't. Not to me."

"The whole business scares me," he said. "But *karshoj* to that burning-angel nonsense. Just a conjurer's trick when you get down to it."

The blessings of Asmodeus couldn't be ignored, couldn't be undone, and every time she tapped into them, the wave of fear took hold of everyone around her, friend or foe, family or stranger. Or lover. She shied from that thought and wondered what the dragonborn would make of it.

"Do you need more time?" Mehen said, a little too quickly. "Would a stroll help? Wear you out a bit? It's not a bad walk, along the river."

She looked back over her shoulder at her father. "You're stalling."

His fearsome teeth parted. "If caring about my daughter's well-being is stalling—"

Farideh tucked an arm around him. "You know it is. Come on. It's better to have it all out."

They walked together back to where the caravan had camped for the night, a stone's throw from the path the human caravan master called the Road of Dust and Mehen called *Ossa Choshk*. The wagons, laden with copper bars, in locked and lashed chests, and goods to tempt the dragonborn of faraway Djerad Thymar, had been circled loosely around a handful of campfires, and at their edge, a guard post had been set. A small fire crackled between a tiefling leaning against an enormous, muzzled black dog, a human man stretched out on the ground listening to her, and a young dragonborn man standing with his back to the fire, looking out at the plains of Tymanther. Beyond them, Djerad Thymar waited, impossibly large, and still a day's ride away.

The hellhound, Zoonie, came up on her feet as Mehen and Farideh approached, jostling Farideh's twin, Havilar. She broke off whatever she'd been saying to Brin with a curse. "*Tiamash!* Zoonie, lie down! It's just Mehen and Farideh. How'd it go?" she added to her sister.

"Same as always," Farideh said. As Djerad Thymar should have been familiar, so should the powers of Asmodeus have become less alien over time. It had been the better part of a year since that first time the flames had taken her over, but it still felt like a violation when it did.

"Well?" Havilar said, as Mehen settled down beside the fire. He ignored her, scratching the empty piercings along his jaw frill. Then he heaved a great sigh and poured himself a mug of watered-down wine.

"All right," he said. "Ask your questions."

Just beyond the firelight, Dumuzi turned, looking back as if something on the road had drawn his eye and not as if he were listening to the conversation. That would be improper, Farideh was fairly sure, and Kepeshkmolik Dumuzi was never improper.

"Who's Anala?" Havilar asked. "Why did she call you back? Are you rich now? Are we staying?"

"How long are we staying?" Farideh asked.

"Anala is my father's younger sister," Mehen said. "She's the matriarch of Verthisathurgiesh now."

"How is she?" Havilar asked. "Do you like her?"

"Slow down," Mehen said. He drank some of the wine. "In my youth, I would say she was dear to me. She minded me and my siblings often. She was the elder I went to with my troubles, the one who cared for me."

"Like your mother?" Brin asked.

Mehen sighed again. "Yes and no. Things are different in Djerad Thymar. But keep in mind, I haven't seen her in almost thirty years. I don't *know* Anala anymore."

"Is your mother alive?" Farideh asked, surprised she didn't know the answer already.

"She died before I hatched." He drummed his thick fingers against the mug, eyes on the fire. "To your other question, Anala called me back because my father's dead, and so his exile doesn't stand. I doubt very much we're getting any coin out of this."

"We know *that*," Havilar pointed her chin at the dragonborn in the darkness. "Dumuzi said as much in Suzail. But that's a lot of trouble just to say sorry when you've never asked to come back. What's she want, do you think?"

"There is no telling," Mehen said. He fell silent again, as if he were trying to sort out words. "You know the ancestor stories? 'Khorsaya and the Thigh Bone Sword,' 'Clever Nala and the Ten Thousand Shadows,' 'The Battle of the Crippled Mountain'? Verthisathurgiesh prizes wiliness and action, and while Anala may have been like a mother to me, she is matriarch for a reason. She might say calling me back is only to right Pandjed's wrongs."

"But you wouldn't be here if it might not be more," Farideh said.

Mehen nodded. "That *doesn't* mean we're staying, and if I have my way, we'll hardly be here long enough to shake the dust from our boots." He hesitated. "I don't want you three to be unprepared. Djerad Thymar is a dragonborn city. You'll be as strange as you were in Suzail, girls, and Brin . . ." He sighed once more. "Well, I suppose you'll see."

“What do we call her?” Havilar asked. “Anala? Matriarch? Auntie?”

Mehen looked as if he hoped beyond hope they would call Anala nothing at all, and it made Farideh’s heart squeeze. “Call her Matriarch Anala, and then see what she says,” Mehen said. Then, “I’m not going to lie to you, she likely doesn’t know about you girls, and I don’t know how she’ll feel about my adopting tieflings. Mind, anyone says a word against you and I’ll make them regret it, but I can’t promise words won’t be said.”

“Well,” Havilar said a little briskly, “we’re used to that. Better or worse than Cormyr, do you think?”

Farideh sneaked a look at Brin and marked the abashed look that crossed his face. Just a tenday ago, they had been in Cormyr, the kingdom of his birth and birthright, a place where Farideh and Havilar had stood out worse than ever before—even setting aside the racing gossip that accompanied Brin, a nobleman in line for the throne, having a tiefling for a lover despite his engagement to the princess of Cormyr. The stress of it had proved too much for Havilar, and she’d broken things off. What was happening between them now, Farideh couldn’t say. She couldn’t say she wanted to know either—it was beyond private—but it would have helped to know what to say and what to bite her tongue about.

“It’s complicated,” Mehen said again. “I’d guess the same as Cormyr. Worse than Waterdeep, but better than it would’ve been in . . .” He trailed off suddenly, and Farideh’s heart twisted around the omission. *Better than it would have been in Harrowdale.*

A month ago, standing in the Royal Gardens, the air thick with the scent of lemon balm and the sound of bees. Dahl standing beside the hedge, fiddling with the leaves. Nervous, she’d thought, because of the impending siege, but no. “Would you consider coming to Harrowdale?”

“It’s been three days,” she’d pointed out. “Are you sure?”

“Three days since I told you I loved you,” Dahl had said. “We’ve been all but courting for months—false or not, I don’t think there’s much I haven’t learned about you by now. You can hardly pretend I’m rushing. Besides,” he said after a moment, “I have to go.” War spilling out over the North and the Heartlands, with no regard for border or boundary—how could he not go, with his mother, his family in danger’s path? Farideh had agreed—even if doubt had made its own little nest in her thoughts, she was sure she loved him.

But then he’d gone without her and without a word to say why.

Before they’d left Cormyr, she’d had one last message from Dahl in Harrowdale: *I love you. I will fix this.* Farideh had borrowed enough coin to gather the components for a sending ritual. She’d laid the lines of powdered metals and salts and dried blood, conjuring up the magic Dahl himself had taught her years and years ago that would let her speak with him on the other edge of the continent.

"I got your message," she'd said. "Mehen wants to go to Djerad Thymar. We leave tomorrow, unless you tell me why I should stay?" She hesitated. "I love you."

But only silence had followed. Farideh had sat, perfectly still, until the magic that powered the spell fizzled and crackled out of the air, a snow of dying power. The response hadn't come.

Because Dahl couldn't answer? Because Dahl didn't want to answer? Because she hadn't cast the spell right?

Because someone in the Nine Hells was keeping her from him?

There was only one way of knowing at her disposal. One way of being sure, one way of saving Dahl, of bringing him back to her, and it tore at Farideh.

All I want is your happiness, Farideh. The one who gets hurt doesn't have to be you.

Asmodeus, the god of sin, king of the Nine Hells, could give her Dahl, *would* give her Dahl, if she just stayed quiet, stayed calm, stayed out of his business and stopped wondering what it was that made her dream of both the king of devils and the long-dead god of wizards.

She rubbed her thumb over her bleached ring finger, the remnant of another hasty decision, another attempt to fix things that had wound up hurting more people. What was to say Dahl wanted to come back to her anyway? She thought of Lorcan then, the half-devil who held her pact and who she still thought of with complicated feelings. *Don't you think it's more likely that he left of his own accord? I suppose he's just not our kind.*

Hush, she told herself. He loves you. He can take care of himself. Stop worrying about this right now.

She eyed Havilar, still sprawled across the hellhound. There was plenty to worry about that was far more pressing.

"People will say things," Dumuzi piped up, "but you won't know it."

"Cryptic," Havilar said.

"*Sjashukri*," Dumuzi said as if he were correcting her. "No one will be directly rude. Not even Anala. That's not our way." Mehen's teeth gapped, his tongue hammering a nervous rhythm against the roof of his mouth.

"Shjash-oo-kree," Brin repeated. "Sounds like nobles in Cormyr." Dumuzi looked back over his shoulder at Mehen.

"No," the older dragonborn said, as if the whole business annoyed him. "*Sjashukri* is subtler. Trickier. *You'll* suspect it's an insult or a criticism, but you cannot call it out. If . . . If I were to praise Havilar's skill with a blade, and then say how nice Farideh's script is—"

"Then you'd be lying," Havilar interrupted, "because her script is *terrible*."

"You have no room to talk," Mehen said sternly. "But the *sjashukri* is in the way the compliments are arranged. It implies Farideh's skills are not worth mentioning, that the only thing that comes near is her scriptwork. But no one can say that's

an insult. It's two compliments." Mehen coughed. "Your blade work's come along nicely," he added to Farideh.

"It's not worth complimenting," Farideh said dryly. "I see what you mean. Should keep us on our toes." She wrapped her hands around each other, nervous and uneasy. "Are you sure she doesn't know about us?"

"I haven't been back in thirty years," Mehen said again. "How in the broken planes would she know?"

Farideh gave her father a significant look. He might not have returned to Djerad Thymar in thirty years . . . but some part of Djerad Thymar had come to find him not sixteen years earlier. Verthisathurgiesh Arjhani, Dumuzi's father, the man Mehen had loved enough to choose exile over, had come to the hidden village of Arush Vayem and joined their patchwork little family for all of a summer, before fleeing back to the City-Bastion.

Mehen frowned and said nothing, and Farideh squeezed her hands together more tightly. The one thing they needed a plan for and there was no plan. She glanced at Havilar scratching Zoonie under the jaw, remembering the summer, the following autumn and winter. Havilar, unsettled, uncertain, fragile as an ice crystal, and more heartbroken even than Mehen. She had loved Arjhani the way she loved all things, wholly and unreservedly, and he'd left without a word. What would happen this time?

We won't stay long, she told herself. We won't run into Arjhani.

"Here's something I've always wondered," Brin said lightly. "You all hate the dragons so much, right? Why do you call yourselves dragonborn?"

Mehen turned a cold eye on Brin. "We don't," he said. "We just gave up trying to convince you all to stop."

"It's *Vayemniri*, in Draconic," Havilar said.

"Vie-yem-near-ee," Brin repeated. "What's it mean?"

"'The Ash-Marked Ones,'" Farideh said, prodding the campfire and sending up a swirl of embers as the last of the sun dipped below the horizon.

• • •

THE LAST TIME Clanless Mehen had passed through the gates of the city of Djerad Thymar, he had vowed to never return, cursing his father's name and his lover's cowardice, two wounds he never thought would heal. Melodramatic, he thought. He'd been too young to know plenty of people lived with wounds like that.

"Come on," he muttered to Brin. The young man nodded once, climbing down from the wagon seat. "What are you going to do?"

"Ask if he needs anything else and hold out my hand," Brin recited. "No niceties."

Mehen nodded back. When they'd left Cormyr behind, and Brin's royal life with it, Mehen knew that he'd have to make sure the lad could survive this unkind

life he'd chosen. He might not have been Mehen's son, but whatever happened between Brin and Havilar, the boy was in his heart.

Besides, he thought, looming over the much shorter human and glaring at the caravan master, humans always paid their own kind better.

"Will there be anything else?" Brin asked. The bearded caravan master looked him up and down, a faint sneer on his face.

"Didn't really have much need of you it seems," he said. "You oversold the dangers of the Road of Dust more than a little."

"A fortunate season," Brin said. "I think we agreed on fifty-eight gold."

The caravan master handed over a purse of coins. "Thirty. You didn't give me fifty-eight's worth. And those devil-children and their great hound spooked my horses."

Brin turned his head, as if to look back at Mehen the way they'd agreed upon, punctuating the discussion with the threat of Brin's monstrous right hand. But then he turned back to face the caravan master.

"You're coming from T Burlagol, isn't that right?" The caravan master narrowed his eyes. "You're not the first to bring copper to Djerad Thymar," Brin went on. "I'm guessing . . . you want a deal with the glassworks. Do you know that my dragonborn friends here are associated with two of the most powerful clans in the city?" He dropped his voice. "Do you even *know* which of the clans is powerful? Who invited you?"

The caravan master's eyes darted from the young man to Mehen and back. "Clethtinthtiallor," he said, naming one of the score or so clans in Djerad Thymar.

Brin turned back to Mehen then as though this answer wasn't to be believed, and the dragonborn allowed himself a small smile. It was a newer clan, but its reputation didn't suffer. Not that the caravan master knew that.

"Listen," Brin said. "I don't want to ruin your livelihood so long as you don't ruin mine. Pay what we're owed, and I don't tell Kepeshk molik and Verthisathurgiesh you shorted their kin." He shrugged and the caravan master's scowl deepened. "It's coin now or coin later. Your decision."

"I see Cormyr hasn't left you as completely as you'd like," Mehen said, as they walked back to the twins with their full fee. "What happened to the plan?"

"To be honest? There's so many of you here." Brin gestured at the dragonborn milling around the gates and the outer city. "I figured he's not going to be as frightened of my dragonborn guard, and if he were, he'd see a value in fighting that fear. But coin—he'd be scared of losing more coin. It's a risky venture already, diving into a market no one's successfully tapped."

"Hmph. Well done. Next time, leave the clan names out," Mehen said. "You don't want to stir that pot."

"How'd he do?" Farideh asked as they approached.

"Full fee," Mehen said. "He put the fear of the clans into him."

"Nicely done, Brin," Havilar said.

Brin's smile grew a little. "Thanks."

Dumuzi said nothing, only frowned in disapproval, arms folded across his chest. Kepeshkmolik to the core, thought Mehen.

But Verthisathurgiesh under the scales—Dumuzi could have been your son, he thought. If he'd married Kepeshkmolik Uadjit the way his father had planned, if he hadn't chosen love and exile over duty and honor, then who knew how many Kepeshkmolik eggs he would have reluctantly sired.

Some ancient part of him, awakened as he crossed through Djerad Thymar's gates, noted he ought to feel regretful, ought to wish for a strapping child of his own blood.

But there was nothing of the sort in Clanless Mehen. There was no path he wanted that left those two babies to die in the snow.

He gave Dumuzi and Brin their shares, and the two young men collected their belongings from the caravan wagon. Mehen held out two shares of the coins to Farideh and Havilar. They traded a glance.

"We get our own?" Havilar asked, as if there were some trick here.

"You're grown," Mehen said. "You handle your own coin from here on out. That means you pay for your own supplies too," he pointed out, seeing a dangerous gleam in Havilar's eye. "You waste it on a fancy blade or a gown you don't need, you'll be the one selling at a loss when you can't afford trail rations." He cleared his throat, dropping into Draconic. "And don't forget you need to . . . buy the herbs, regardless of what . . . of who . . . of where your day-count is—"

"*Thrik!*" Havilar cried, keeping the tongue. "Gods, Mehen, we *understand*."

"You all but bought out the stall in Suzail for us," Farideh said, her cheeks scarlet. "We're set for a good while."

Mehen scowled. "Either of you get a child, I'm not paying for that either." A lie, he thought, even as he said it. Still if he were the praying sort, he'd have told the gods to keep their blessings to themselves. They might be grown, but they were still too young.

"No one is getting pregnant," Havilar hissed. "*Neither* of us has a lover, and maybe if you'd taken up Kallan on his *obvious* interest—"

"That is not your business," Mehen snapped.

"Well mine's not yours!" Havilar said. "Neither is Fari's. So if you want to get obsessed with someone's love life, then *yours* is the only fair option."

Mehen growled, and tapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth to ease his agitation. "You're paying to stable the dog for tonight," he said.

"You can use Verthisathurgiesh's stables," Dumuzi piped up. "Matriarch Anala gave permission."

"For horses," Mehen pointed out. "I doubt she'll be pleased about a fire-breathing hellhound bedding down amongst her prized brood mares."

Zoonie scratched her ear and sneezed. "Yeah, she's a killer," Havilar said dryly. "The stables will be fine for now."

Until Verthisathurgiesh finds out about you, Mehen thought. Until someone says something cruel or callous or thinks to use you against me. He blew out a breath. His daughters didn't have to exchange a word to Anala or any of the Verthisathurgiesh clan. Mehen would make it clear he wanted nothing to do with Verthisathurgiesh or Djerad Thymar, and they could be on their way tomorrow.

"I'll take you," Dumuzi offered to Havilar. "Then we can all go to the enclave—"

"No," Mehen said. Dumuzi clamped his mouth shut, stiff and startled. "I mean," Mehen said, a little more gently, "it's not necessary for all of us to go tramping through the City-Bastion. I don't expect this will take long."

The twins exchanged skeptical glances, which only made Mehen's resolve firmer. It wouldn't take long. It couldn't.

"The stables are on the western edge of the pyramid," he said. "Dumuzi will give you whatever insignia Anala handed off to him." He spared a dark look for Dumuzi that all but forced the brass disk etched with Draconic from his pocket and into Farideh's hand. "After the dog's settled, wait for me in the . . ." The *Munthrarechi* word eluded him. "Tavern," he decided. "There's a tavern near there, Reshvemi's Shield—"

"They can't go there," Dumuzi interrupted. "*Chaorkartels* are for warriors."

Mehen blinked. The memories of uncountable evenings spent in that *chaorkartel*, the farthest place in Djerad Thymar from his father's reach besides the barracks—laughing with his friends, laughing with Arjhani, late into the night—tripped him up. His girls *were* warriors, he almost said—but no, not by Djerad Thymar's standards. They were not pierced, they had no status swords, they hadn't served in the Lance Defenders or killed a dragon.

"I . . .," he started. But his memories refused to give him the name of a single other place the twins and Brin could wait, snagged as they were on Reshvemi's Shield and the taste of watered apple brandy.

"You could wait at, umm, the Horn of Shasphur?" Dumuzi asked. "It's on the market floor. My cousin owns it—they have the sort of things you like to drink. It's nice enough," he said to Mehen.

It's inside the city, Mehen thought. He held his tongue. They would just be treflings, travelers, passersby. Kepeshkmolik wouldn't know who they were either. "Fine," Mehen said. Then, "You're not to have whiskey."

Havilar's eyes danced. "Too late!" she teased. "It's our coin now."

"I think she's joking," Dumuzi offered as Zoonie cut a path for the three of them through the crowd of dragonborn. "She's probably joking. Shall we go?"

Mehen snorted and turned, heading toward the pyramid's entrance. There were more buildings beyond the city's massive main structure than he remembered, more people—dragonborn and otherwise—milling around the gates and through the outer city. At a glance, Mehen was left with the impression that the city had become something entirely new.

But as he walked, his eyes would find a chink in the stone, a stain of lichen, a shape of the ground, and he'd suddenly be a boy all over again. It was as if Djerad Thymar were stirring in his blood.

The first time Mehen had ventured into a human city, he'd been struck by the overwhelming sense of the sky. Although there had been comfort to be found in the closeness of people, the embrace of dwellings and shops squeezed against one another, the way everything just *stopped* around twice or three times his height had been disorienting. Returning didn't throw him in the same way—it felt *right* to have the stone over his head again.

In Djerad Thymar, the base of the pyramid city supported a sprawling network of shops and stalls, taverns and offices and homes for those who had displeased their clan. Rather than spreading out, the city ran up the pyramid's walls, with balcony after balcony jutting out over the city, clan enclaves linked by arching staircases and walkways, all dripping with plants that grew in the magical light that flooded the City-Bastion. More dragonborn than he had seen in twenty years passed by him.

Staring, Mehen realized, at the empty holes along his jaw. One thing that hasn't changed, Mehen thought. *What did he do?* their frank gazes wondered. *What was worthy of exile?* He caught a pair whispering to one another, and glared at them fiercely enough to cut them off.

He looked back over his shoulder, at Dumuzi straggling ten steps behind him as if he hoped not to be noticed by the passersby or by Mehen. Mehen rolled his eyes. "Your task's almost done," he said. "Thought you'd quit being skittish by now."

"You have my apologies," Dumuzi said, picking up his pace. "Here I . . . I'll lead."

Mehen muttered a curse under his breath as the younger dragonborn pushed past him. He'll grow out of it, he told himself. Most of us do. And Dumuzi wasn't his to worry about anyway.

Neither were the girls—Havilar's rebuke still needled at him. They were grown enough to manage their own coin and their own lives. They didn't need him like they once did—even Brin didn't need him anymore, without a network of nobles trying to assassinate him. Once he'd sorted himself out, he'd be fine on his own.

You were someone before you were a father, he thought. If they don't need you, you can always find something else.

A handsome sellsword was a poor substitute. Even if he still found his thoughts wandering to Yrjixtilex Kallan more often than he was willing to admit.

Done is done, he thought, weaving through the passersby.

Mehen stretched his jaw twice as Dumuzi approached the staircase that led up the pyramid's northwestern wall, into the enclaves of half a dozen clans—most importantly Verthisathurgiesh. But his thoughts rattled with memories of the Lance Defenders' barracks, of riding bat-back over the plains, of crossing swords with Uadjit. Of kissing Arjhani. It slid into his thoughts like a knife, the heart-shattering memory of a slim, brassy dragonborn boy in his arms.

The Verthisathurgiesh Enclave's doors loomed deep into the passages through the thick walls of Djerad Thymar, their enormous faces hung with a mock red dragon skull carved of lusturl root, mottled brown and gleaming and split down the center. The real skull had been lost, they said, when the Blue Fire came, but Verthisathurgiesh's name was still present many times over in the Hall of Trophies. Mehen wondered if the skull of the green dragon he had killed to finally earn his long sword still hung there, or if Pandjed had destroyed it in his pique. He wouldn't put anything past the old man, and if *he* said *one* word about the girls—

He is dead, Mehen reminded himself as they entered his childhood home. Pandjed is dead and his bones are gathered. He can say nothing at all.

And the girls will stay far, far from here.

Dumuzi stopped in the large entryway and turned to Mehen so suddenly the older man almost crashed into him. "I have to tell you something," he blurted. "Your forgiveness, I should have told you before, but . . . I was advised not to, but I suspect Matriarch Anala will have it all out and then you'll know—"

"Spit it out," Mehen said with a sigh. A thousand possibilities—none of them mattered. Kepeshkmolik opposed him returning, surely, he thought. Or perhaps the Lance Defenders would not have him—as if it mattered to Mehen. Or maybe—

"I came for you because my father was . . . he didn't think it was his place," Dumuzi said. "But Matriarch Anala sent him at first, and he passed the task to me. To prove myself. But I think also to excuse himself."

Mehen raised his brows. Bold words from such a correct and proper hatchling. "So you think she's going to chastise your father."

Dumuzi shook his head, his tongue fluttering in an agitated way. "If so, she already has," he said. "I should have told you when I . . . My father is Verthisathurgiesh Arjhani."

Mehen's heart stuttered, and he saw it. The boy had his mother's coloring, the steel-blue scales and amber eyes of Kepeshkmolik Uadjit, daughter of Narghon of the line of Shasphur, scion of Kepeshkmolik. But in the shift of his scale ridges, in the crooked shape of his smile, there was a man whose claws still dug into Clanless Mehen's heart. How had he missed such a thing?

Because for all Arjhani had done, he realized, he could never have expected a slight this deep. He had turned from *everything* because he loved Arjhani . . . and then Arjhani had taken his place beside the bride Mehen wouldn't abandon Arjhani for.

"I see," Mehen said. Then, "Do the girls know?"

Dumuzi nodded, looking abashed. "I told Farideh, before you returned. And Havilar guessed."

"She has an eye for such things," Mehen said, crushing down everything he wanted to say instead. He gestured at the door. "Shall we?"

Dumuzi didn't move. "Are you angry?"

"You cannot help your parents," he said, chillier than he meant to. "Farideh told you to hold your tongue, didn't she?" Dumuzi nodded. "It was wise." Mehen would have words with her later. "Lead on."

Let's get this over with, Mehen thought. An elder who would send Arjhani to find him, to apologize, would have nothing Mehen wanted, so at least he knew that much.

Thirty years had wrought their changes on the clan's quarters—hangings faded, statues replaced or moved, rugs now lying upon the granite floor. It was as if Mehen moved through a dream, his memories jumbled together into nonsense, while he tried vainly to refit them.

The audience chamber on the other hand, looked exactly as Mehen remembered, the skull of a colossal red dragon hanging high on the slanting outer wall, so that it looked as if the beast bowed its head over the elder's throne. The floors were uncovered, built of bloodred stone. On every wall, the weapons of past elders hung, testaments to their strength and protection. It had not changed a bit from Mehen's last day in Djerad Thymar.

His father had sat upon the elder's throne, all the gray-scaled aunties and uncles arrayed around him, cheated of the patriarch's position by their line and their own elders. A potent audience for the scion of Khorsaya's line.

I don't wish to marry Kepeshkmolik Uadjit.

Your wishes don't enter into it, you spoilt hatchling. The agreement is made. You live at my pleasure. You will wed her, or you will be no son of mine.

Verthisathurgiesh Anala did not sit upon the elder's throne, but stood over a stack of scrolls on a table to the side, a filmy wrap draped over her shoulders. Her greatsword lay across the throne in her place. She had the height Mehen and his father had inherited, but not the bulk. Lithe and loose-limbed, her scales the color of damp brick, and her plumes nearly black and hanging neatly to her shoulders, Pandjed's youngest sister seemed not to have aged a day.

Dumuzi started to speak an introduction. No more than a syllable had crossed his teeth but Anala raised her head, eyes bright, and clapped her hands.

"Mehen," she said warmly. "You came."

"I've . . . I found . . .," Dumuzi stumbled.

"Thank you, Dumuzi. You are a credit to your sire's line. Give your clan our deepest appreciations for your help," Anala said with a polite bow. "And if you see your father, kindly remind him of your success."

The younger dragonborn nodded. "Thank you." Dumuzi's eyes darted to Mehen again, and Mehen's annoyance at the boy softened slightly. But Dumuzi turned and fled the room before Mehen could think of a single thing to say.

Anala crossed to him without warning and embraced Mehen tightly, rubbing the frill of her jaw against his shoulder. "You won't want to hear it, but it must be said: You look exactly like your father." She held him at arm's length, dropping her voice. "Though, I do hope you're happier than he was. Miserable old *henish*."

"That's not hard, but I think I've managed it."

"Please sit. May I offer you some refreshments?" Mehen didn't answer and didn't sit. Anala poured two glasses of something ruby colored and steaming from a clay teapot. "You must be buzzing with questions."

"Not really," Mehen said. "I'll save you the trouble. I'm not coming back."

Anala smiled. "You always were a stubborn one. I agreed with your father about that much. Have a drink and talk a bit if you're so sure you won't change your mind. Give an old woman the comfort of hearing her favorite nephew is well."

Mehen took up the cup from the table. "How did he die?"

Anala's smile fell from her eyes. "Pandjed? An excess of bile, one presumes. It caused a heartstop and he didn't recover."

Mehen recalled his powerful, furious father and imagined the old man clutching his broad chest, imagined the roars, imagined him looking for someone to blame death on.

"Should have seen that coming," Mehen said.

"I wish I could say he mentioned you at the end," Anala said. "But we both know that would be untrue and unkind to you."

"It wouldn't matter," Mehen said. "Pandjed's regrets don't matter to me." He drained the cup—a mild wine, heavy with spices that bloomed up more memories. You couldn't find these in Cormyr. "How'd you end up matriarch? If I recall, Pandjed didn't love you either."

Now her eyes smiled. "Nor did he hate me. I annoyed him—every day of my life—but I never angered him, never enough to warrant exile. When he lay on his deathbed, he had me and a great bunch of *pothachi* and hatchlings to choose from." She set her cup down, leaned against the table. "Between you and me," she said in conspiratorial tones, "he's left us in quite the bind. Verthisathurgiesh is damaged, no doubt, and every other clan marks it."

"So you want me to come back," Mehen finished. He sat in the chair beside the table, to spare his tired knees. "Shore up your numbers. That didn't work out so well for Pandjed."

"I'm only asking for *you*," Anala promised. "You represent, Mehen, the days before Pandjed's anger twisted us. The glorious young scion returned. That's more than enough, and—selfishly—it would do my heart good to know you weren't out in the wilds. Although," she added, sitting against the table, "I won't say no to more eggs. Maybe we'll find you a handsome fellow with an over-fertile sister or cousin. Broker something clever."

"What would the other clans say to *that*?"

"Does it matter? I want to remind the others, after all, that Verthisathurgiesh has always adapted when others made themselves stagnant. Besides, I suspect that you aren't the only one who'd prefer a marriage brokered that way."

Mehen studied the matriarch, wondering if she meant to surprise him, or entice him. Wondering, briefly, if Kallan had sisters, before he brushed it aside. Anala wouldn't catch him off guard like that.

"I think you'll find I'm less of a catch for Verthisathurgiesh than ever before."

"Ah, Mehen," Anala said. "I think you'll find Verthisathurgiesh less choosy than ever before. What is it you've done that's so insurmountable?"

The doors to the rest of the enclave squealed open, and a rusty-colored dragon-born man came flailing through them. When he caught sight of Anala, he skidded to a stop, making a hasty bow.

"Matriarch Anala!" he said, breathless. "There's been a . . . a crime, a terrible crime! Baruz is dead! Murdered!" He glanced at Mehen, at the missing piercings, as if realizing how incautious he'd just been, and then continued anyway. "You must come. Right now. It's terrible."

Anala became still, as if her whole spirit had left her, as if she were the one to discover the murdered body of Verthisathurgiesh Baruz, her third-hatched son, and not this stranger. She was not the matriarch in that moment, and Mehen watched her, just as still, just as startled, his heart aching as it wrapped itself in memories, warding off the imaginary pain of losing his own children.

Baruz. Baruz had been just a baby when he left, just starting to walk, overbalancing on his clawed toes. Mehen could remember minding him and his two clutchmates in the summer before he left—knowing Pandjed would have said that wasn't a warrior's task. Pulling faces and making puppets of dollies, the same way he would for the twins, years later. Baruz had laughed loudest, always.

"Matriarch Anala?" the frantic man said. "Please?"

"Of course," Anala said, her voice shifted, as if she were speaking through the mask of Verthisathurgiesh. She turned to Mehen. "I . . . I have to take care of this. Would you . . . Would you mind—"

"I'll come with you," Mehen said, standing.

"That's not necessary," Anala said. "You're a guest."

"That's not what you were saying a moment ago," Mehen said, taking his aunt by the arm. "This is what I do now. A bounty hunter. If someone's . . . If Verthisathurgiesh has been wronged," he amended, sliding into that safer, less personal position, "I can find them. Get you justice."

Anala nodded, her expression closing swiftly as the enclave's heavy doors. "I'll pay," she said, and named a sum that meant nothing to Mehen in that moment, snarled as he was between the past and the present. Imagining Baruz the hatchling and the twins' in the same moment. Imagining the agony of hearing his daughters were gone.

"We'll discuss it," Mehen said. "Maybe you should stay here."

"No," Anala said, retrieving her arm. "I am Verthisathurgiesh. I need to be present. But I'd be glad to have you with me," she added softly. She nodded to the young man, "Lead on."

Mehen followed her from the enclave, all thoughts of fleeing Djerad Thymar pushed aside as death made him a member of Verthisathurgiesh once more.

• • •

TURN. TURN. DOWN into the shadows. Blood smells so sweet, so thick—no, must follow orders, must find the—oh such fury, such passion. Just a taste, just a morsel, just one more . . .

No, no, no. These must be enough for now. More later. More soon. Too many eyes and too many weapons mean meanness. Mean using what you have.

Must find the weaknesses, must find the holes, must make the path or the Dark Prince will be displeased and then death, death, death. Unless unlucky. Then worse. He made the deal, not me—could tear that surly mortal all to pieces I could, king of figments, king of dust. But the Dark Prince says he is ally, he is more than mortal, so turn, turn, down in the shadows, down where it's darker than the spot a soul leaves behind. Now we have a little fun.

Think like her. Think like the screaming one. Soak it all in, fill out the skin, wear it like my own. Pull the words together, remind the tongue how to speak, the face how to move. Possess it all—the memory of the sword, the memory of a kiss, fears and loathings and wishes—she's mine. They'll never see a thing. How lucky that king of dust is to have such a one as the maurezhi on his side!

Until the Dark Prince changes his mind. He won't even see a thing, that king of figments, king of dust.