

ALEX
IRVINE

THE SEAL OF
KARGAKUL

~~The road ended in a tumble of scree that fell a few dozen yards to the lip of the gorge itself. Remy couldn't see its bottom from where they stood. Around them reared up impassable walls of stone, with the narrowest of ledges on the left side of the scree.~~

And ahead of them, hanging impossibly in the empty air, was the Bridge of Iban Ja. Remy tried to count the stones, but could not. Some of them were larger than the house where he had last taken a meal in Avankil. Some were no larger than a man. Gathered together, they were a mosaic impression of a bridge, the gaps between them sometimes narrow enough for a halfling to tiptoe across and sometimes wide enough that no sane mortal would endeavor the jump without wings. Bits of cloth and sticks fluttered from cracks in some of the rocks, the guideposts of long-past travelers. All of the stones moved slightly, rocking in the winds that howled through the Gorge of Noon as if they floated on the surface of a gentled ocean, or a wide and flat stretch of river. Snow clung to some of them, and drifted in sculpted shapes across the flat edges of others.

“Well,” Kithri said, “now we’ve seen it. Biri-Daar, what did you say the other way across this gorge was?”

“It involves traveling fifty leagues off the road to a ford,” Biri-Daar said. “We have no time. I have crossed Iban Ja’s bridge before. It held me. It will hold you.”

“And by this point, crossing it is no longer a matter of choice,” Keverel chimed in.

“Is that so,” Kithri began. She saw Keverel pointing back up the road, turned to see what he was indicating, and saw—as Remy did at that exact moment—the band of tieflings standing in the road behind them. As they watched, the band of perhaps a dozen was fortified with ten times as many hobgoblin marauders.



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DUNGEONS
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ALEX
IRVINE

THE SEAL OF
KARGA KUL



Dungeons & Dragons
The Seal of Karga Kul

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*To Gary Gygax, for the game
and my Pop for introducing me to it.*

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The Dragondown Coast



~~In the shadow of empires, the past echoes in the legends of heroes. Civilizations rise and crumble, leaving few places that have not been touched by their grandeur. Ruin, time, and nature claim what the higher races leave behind, while chaos and darkness fill the void. Each new realm must make its mark anew on the world rather than build on the progress of its predecessors.~~

Numerous civilized races populate this wondrous and riotous world of Dungeons & Dragons. In the early days, the mightiest among them ruled. Empires based on the power of giants, dragons, and even devils rose, warred, and eventually fell, leaving ruin and a changed world in their wake. Later kingdoms carved by mortals appeared like the glimmer of stars, only to be swallowed as if by clouds on a black night.

Where civilization failed, traces of it remain. Ruins dot the world, hidden by an ever-encroaching wilderness that shelters unnamed horrors. Lost knowledge lingers in these places. Ancient magic set in motion by forgotten hands still flows in them. Cities and towns still stand, where inhabitants live and work, and seek shelter from the dangers of the wider world. New communities spring up where the bold have seized territory from rough country, but few common folk ever wander far afield. Trade and travel are the purview of the ambitious, the brave, and the desperate. They are wizards and warriors who carry on traditions that date to ancient times. Still others innovate, or simply learn to fight as necessity dictates, forging a unique path.

Truly special individuals, however, are rare. An extraordinary few master their arts in ways beyond what is required for mere survival or protection. For good or ill, such people rise up to take on more than any mundane person dares. Some even become legends.

These are the stories of those select few ...

BOOK I

THE WASTES

Remy lay *dying*, the poison of stormclaw scorpions burning its way through his veins, and while he died he tried to pray. Pelor, he called out, save me. The god did not answer. Remy tried to look around for help, but dark was falling and his eyes were sticky and dry, whether from the venom or something else he didn't know. He fell into a fever dream as beside him, the horse he had ridden past the Crow Ford breathed its last.



He was a boy of twelve, weaving through Quayside with a message for the captain of a river barge. He was barefoot because his mother forbade him to wear shoes on warm days. The stones of the Quayside wharves were familiar to him, as were its smells: stagnant water, woodsmoke, sun-baked mud. Avankil stood at the head of the Blackfall Estuary, which slowly opened out for a hundred miles or more. The Blackfall itself was meandering and brackish there, a creature of tide and commerce three miles wide and studded with vessels of every description. Remy found the barge captain smoking a pipe on the deck of his vessel, sharing an uproarious joke with one of Avankil's custom-house clerks. Silver and what looked like a snuff tin appeared briefly in the captain's hands before vanishing into the clerk's pocket. Permission to board, Remy called out. I have a message for the captain.

Board then, the captain answered.

Still out of breath from the run—he'd come all the way from the Undergate of the Keep of Avankil—Remy delivered his message. Is that right, the captain mused. He worked the stem of his pipe around in his teeth. Well. Here is something to carry back.

He wrote on a sheet of paper, in an alphabet that Remy—who could read Common well enough—could not decipher. Show this to no one but the vizier himself, the captain said. Or, if you must, hand it double.

How will I know the difference? Remy asked.

The captain laughed. The customs clerk joined in. Remy burned silently, not understanding the joke. If you ever figure that out, tell me, the captain said. He gave Remy a piece of silver. Go now.



The seventy-ninth vizier of Avankil, counsellor to kings and keeper of the library, unchallenged lord of the Undergate and all that passed through it, was named Philomen. It was rumored that he had once spent a hundred years perfecting an enchantment for creating doubles of oneself, and that he lived on in those doubles, moving his spirit from one to another as each body aged beyond its prime. Philomen was rarely seen in public. Remy had seen him twice, and to Remy the vizier seemed impossibly old. If he was moving his spirit into new bodies, he wasn't doing it nearly soon enough.

Where does a man learn such magic? he asked his mother once.

The Abyss, she answered. Don't ask again. Remy had mistrusted magic ever after. His mother was kind but not foolish, imaginative but not superstitious. If she believed that Philomen's magic came from the Abyss, Remy believed it too.

He came to the Undergate bearing the barge captain's message. A guard at the gate, big as a dragonborn and just a bit less ugly, demanded the message.

I cannot, Remy said. It is for the vizier only.

The guard caught Remy's arm and squeezed until Remy could feel the bones of his wrist grinding.

together. He stood it for as long as he could but eventually he cried out and dropped the slip of paper on the ground. The guard picked it up and squinted at the writing. He looked at Remy. What does it say?

How should I know? Remy answered. I can barely read, and I don't know those letters.



Remy snapped briefly out of the fever. Cold sand against his cheek, cold stars overhead in a cold, cold sky. Remy shivered and knew he was going to die. This was what he got for going beyond the Crow Fork. All the world was darkness and cold. Something was eating the horse. Remy tried to look over his shoulder and see what it was. He couldn't lift his head. He tried to crawl away but couldn't move his arms. With a sigh that was meant to be a scream he faded back into his delirium.



At the Crow Fork, the North Road splits, one arm reaching across the wastes toward the fabled Bridge of Iban Ja, where the Crow Road begins. There stands Crow Fork Market, an ancient trading post and bastion against the hobgoblin raiders who harry and destroy civilized outposts throughout the wastes between the Blackfall and the Draco Serrata Mountains to the north. Over the centuries the market has grown from a collection of tents to a fortified settlement and staging area. It sprawled and wound behind timber walls and beneath the pitiless sun of the wasted lands that stretch from the North Road away from the Blackfall toward the mountains. Remy had gone there for the first time a month before his father died, on a trading excursion in the company of a dozen other men and boys, of whom Remy was the youngest by more than a year. On that trip he had learned most of what he knew of the folklore of the Crow Road and the Draco Serrata. Those were stories for the campfire on the trip from Avankil; by the end of the trip, when the timbered walls had heaved out of the hazy glimmer at the horizon, Remy had been ablaze with the desire to see the world beyond the city he had known.

As he had fallen asleep that night, within sight of the glow of great fires and magical illuminations inside Crow Fork Market, Remy had dreamed of going there again. And that night he had dreamed of taking ship and seeing the cities and towns of the Dragondown Coast: Karga Kul the largest, but Furi Toradan and Saak-Opole each with their own histories and points of interest to an urchin who had rarely ventured beyond the walls of Avankil.

He had never dreamed that it would be six years before he saw Crow Fork Market again, or that when he saw it he would ride by, his errand too pressing to admit digression.



The vizier Philomen had found him soon after his mother's death, which had occurred not long after the death of his father. Orphaned, Remy squatted where he could and fed himself how he could. Philomen's guard—the one who a few years before had ground the bones of Remy's wrist—caught that same wrist one afternoon as Remy was dashing off with a message from a ship's captain to the woman he kept in apartments overlooking the Inner Pool. The vizier has messages that need carrying; the guard had said. Remy had never been certain whether it was an invitation or a demand; it had never occurred to him that he could refuse.



He heard the muted clop of horses' hooves on hard earth. The road from Avankil to Toradan—the road at whose side Remy would shortly die—was laid down of stones cut flat and placed so that in most places a knife blade would not slip between them. Hooves made a different sound there. Someone was riding off the road.

To me, Remy thought. Someone is riding to help.

"Stormclaw scorpions." The voice drifted down through the veils of Remy's fever. He tried to answer but could not.

“The horse is dead.”

“Notice that, did you?”

Something prodded Remy’s hip. “This one isn’t, though, I don’t think.” That voice came close. Remy vomited and tried to speak as several voices joined in rough laughter.

“Not quite. Got some life left in him.”

“Late. Maybe we should camp anyway, see if he makes it through the night.”

“And then what?” The voices blurred together, too fast for Remy to follow. The last clear thing he heard was, “We should leave him.”



He dreamed in his fever of catching fish in the shadowed water under the wharves. Sometimes when one of the wizards or alchemists of Avankil disposed of failed elixirs, remnant trickles found the way to those slack waters, producing monstrosities. Once Remy had caught a fish with tiny hands. He had been about to throw it back when a passing woman, her face hooded by a dark cloak embroidered with the constellations of summer, bought it from him for thirty pieces of gold. It was that money Remy had used to buy his first short sword, an unadorned blade whose hilt Remy had re-wrapped with wire and leather scavenged from dockside rubbish heaps. He had enough left over for a month’s lessons with one of the drillmasters who trained the garrisons of the keep. He had taken to wearing the sword, but not everywhere. Avankil had laws about which of its citizens could be armed and where. Remy had no desire to break them, and no desire to provoke random belligerents who might swagger across his path from the docks or the Ferry Gate.

Despite his discretion, he had crossed swords more than once and had killed a man the year before. A drifting sword for hire, killing time on the Quayside, had seen Remy receive a message and a few coins. Catching up with Remy in one of the twisting alleys between Quayside and the downstream terminus of the Outer Wall, he had left Remy no choice. Since then Remy had moved with more caution through streets he had once thought he owned. When he was a boy, he was just one more boy flitting through the streets of Avankil; as he became a man, he attracted more notice.

Once a year, perhaps, he found some oddity dangling from his hook. Some of them died as soon as he brought them up. Some frightened him enough to drop the whole line into the water. Some were pathetic, freakish, fit only for an afterlife suspended in amber fluid on the top shelf of some distracted alchemist’s study. All of them were mysteries Remy didn’t particularly want to solve.



What’s in the box?



“No,” Remy moaned. “Don’t.”

The vizier had warned him. If you open the box—if you so much as crack the seal that holds it shut—you might not die, but you will wish you had. And if you don’t die from what the box contains, you most certainly will when I find you again. You are a good messenger, Remy. Do not disappoint me in this.

With that, the vizier Philomen had disappeared through the curtains into his inner chamber, leaving Remy with the box he dared not open and a letter to present at the stable just inside the Undergate, in return for which he would be given a horse. Toradan was a week’s ride. Perhaps ten days if he made excellent time and encountered no trouble along the way.



Remy woke to the smell of stew. The odor of cooking fat hooked him and hauled him up from the depths of his fever into waking life. He shivered and opened his eyes, confused at first by the angle of the sun. Long shadows lay across the wastes and behind he heard conversation in low voices. He rolled

over, legs tangled in a blanket that was not his. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and pinpointed where the voices were coming from.

Like most residents of Avankil—or any of the settlements along the Dragondown Coast—Remy had only seen a few dragonborn. They kept to themselves, by and large, and their travels—for the dragonborn were a rootless and wandering race—tended to pause only in the company of other dragonborn. From time to time, Remy had seen them on board ships that docked Quayside. Once he had run a message from one such seafarer to the dragonborn clan enclave upstream of Quayside, near the Outer Wall in the oldest quarter of Avankil. On the whole, dragonborn didn't spend much time in the settled coastal cities, preferring to spend their time in places more likely to yield adventure.

And there was one—a female, no less, armed and armored—stirring a small pot over a campfire on the road between Avankil and Toradan. She looked over at the motion and said, “Ah. So you did live. Praise to Bahamut.”

“Or to Keverel's medicines,” cut in a halfling woman sitting at the dragonborn's left. She nodded at a human wearing the holy symbol of Erathis and the sunburn of someone who spent most of his time under a roof.

“The cleric is honest in his worship. Bahamut does not consider the followers of Erathis enemies of the Law,” the dragonborn returned. “Be flip about something else, Kithri.”

The halfling stood and somersaulted backward. “I am flip,” she announced, and went over to Remy. “So. I'm Kithri.” Pointing at each member of the party in turn, she introduced them. “The humorless dragonborn there is Biri-Daar. Keverel there saved your life with his clerical ministrations. He and Biri-Daar will bore you to death with their notions about Bahamut and Erathis. You ask me, there's not much difference between a god of civilization and law and a divine dragon dedicated to justice and honor. The sourpuss with the bow is Lucan, and the quiet one in the wizard's cloak is Iriani.”

She squatted and tapped Remy on the shoulder. “Now you know us. Here's what we know about you. You were traveling from Avankil. You were attacked by stormclaw scorpions. You killed several of them. After they killed your horse and you slipped into your fever, something else came along and ate the horse.”

“You should feel lucky it didn't eat you,” Lucan said from the other side of the campfire. He was a half-elf. His dress, leathers, and muted colors marked him as a ranger with long experience in the trackless wilderness of the Dragondown. Iriani, sitting quietly at the edge of the campfire's light, also had the elongated, angular features that bespoke elf blood, but his aspect was more human. A half-elf, Remy thought. They were known to be drawn to the magical arts. Iriani had acknowledged Kithri's introduction with a nod in Remy's direction but had not yet spoken.

Already it was brighter, the shadows were shorter, and Remy realized with a shock that it was not evening but morning. He sat up and thought that he might attempt to get to his feet.

“How long have I been ...?”

“Before we came along, who knows?” Kithri said. “A day, probably. And another half day since we found you. Probably other travelers passed during that time but didn't think you had anything worth taking.”

“She and I disagree about that,” Lucan said.

“Lucan and I disagree about everything,” Kithri said. “It passes the time.”

“If there are stormclaws around, probably there's a ruin nearby,” added the cleric Keverel. “They tend to congregate in such places. I believe this road dates from the times of Bael Turath, before the great war. There could have been an outpost ...” He trailed off, looking around. “The land reclaimed what the higher races abandon.”

“Higher races,” Kithri said drolly. “Speak for yourself.”

“Wonder if there’s anything to be gained from having a look around for that ruin,” Lucan said.

“Depends,” Biri-Daar said. “Are you taking our mission to Karga Kul seriously, or are you adventuring?”

“You say adventuring like it’s a bad thing,” Kithri said.

“Wait,” Remy said. He was having trouble following everything they said; it seemed like he was still feeling the effects of the venom. “I have to get to Toradan,” he said.

“It’s that way,” Kithri said, pointing down the road. “Maybe five day on foot. Not that it matters. If you go walking alone in this desert, you won’t live a day.”

“My errand is urgent. I—I thank you for saving me, but the vizier of Avankil will—”

“String you up by your thumbs? Run a ring through your nose and lead you around his chamber? Put you to work in the kitchen?” Kithri winked, but Remy had no time or patience for jokes. He was frightened and confused and very conscious of the time he had lost on his task for Philomen.

“Please,” Remy said. “I have to take this to Toradan.” He showed her the box. Reflexively his fingers traced the runes carved into its lid.

“What exactly is the errand?” Keveler asked. His fingers traced the outline of his holy symbol, a silver pendant worked in the gear-and-sunburst motif of Erathis. “What does the box contain?”

“I don’t know,” Remy said.

“No one told you?”

Lucan tsked. “Never take anything anywhere for anyone unless you know what it is,” he said.

“And why they want it to go where they want it to go,” Kithri added.

“I already did,” Remy said. “And now that I’ve said it, I have to do it.”

“Admirable,” said Biri-Daar. “It is too rare that one finds that kind of commitment. But unless you want to walk the rest of the way by yourself,” the dragonborn went on, “you’re going to be traveling with us for a while. And scorpions are hardly the worst things you’re going to find out here.”



Having no choice, Remy went, at least until he could think of a better plan. He wasn’t going to get the horse from them unless he stole it, and he didn’t think that he could steal a horse. When he was a child, he’d stolen things here and there, but to steal a horse from a party of adventurers in the wilderness ... for one thing, they would hunt him down and kill him if they could. For another, it was wrong.

So, with the option of theft removed, Remy turned with Biri-Daar’s group—it was clear that the dragonborn, a paladin of Bahamut, was the leader of the group—and followed the road back toward Crow Fork. The sun burned down and morning haze lifted, replaced by the glimmer of mirage at the horizon. “Sometimes,” Iriani said, “you can see the mountains in a mirage. Then when you see them with your own eyes, you fear that it’s magic.”

Remy guessed that he wouldn’t mind seeing the mountains whether by magic or other means. Anything to get him out of the wastes. Around them, flat, salt-stained sand stretched to the horizon, broken only by the occasional small heave of a hill or protruding stone. No bird sang, no lizard crept. If life was there, it kept to itself.

Like stormclaw scorpions, perhaps, hiding under the earth until they emerged from their ruined lairs in the cool and darkening evenings.

The welts left by their stingers still puckered angry and red on Remy’s legs and the back of his left hand. He had survived. He felt stronger, not just because of his five companions but because he had fought off stormclaw scorpions. They had not killed him. Whatever came next on the road—before he could finally get to Toradan with Philomen’s box—Remy felt that he was ready for it.

After the first day of travel, trying to keep up with a party on horseback, Remy was also more than ready to get a horse again. Biri-Daar's idea was that they would see what was on offer at Crow Fork Market, which they would reach the next morning—"If you can keep your pace up," she added with what on a dragonborn's face passed for a smile. "If not, it'll be two days."

As night fell they built a fire. "Just like last night, except this time you're not rolling around sweating in your sleep," Kithri joked to Remy. The evening meal was dried fruit, cheese, and bread they'd had meat that morning, and would again the following morning. Then, with any luck, they arrive at Crow Fork Market and replenish their supplies before continuing the trek.

"Where are you going again?" Remy asked at the end of the meal.

"Karga Kul," Lucan said. "The great cork stuck in the bottle that would pour the Abyss out into the world."

"Sounds wonderful," Remy said with a grin.

"It is," Biri-Daar said. "I was hatched there. It is the city of my dreams, the city I would grow old in. The city I would die in, if I had to die somewhere."

"Listen to Biri-Daar talk about dying," Iriani chuckled. "She's yet to meet the foe that can nick her sword, and yet she thinks about dying. You dragonborn."

"Bahamut will decide," Biri-Daar said.

At the mention of the god's name, Remy caught a gleam of pale light beyond the glow of the campfire.

"You better hope something interesting happens between now and Karga Kul," Kithri said. "And by interesting, I mean something that ends with some kind of booty. Otherwise you're going to owe Biri-Daar for a horse. She's not forgiving when it comes to debt."

"I'm not going to Karga Kul," Remy protested. "I must get to Toradan."

"Then go right ahead back the way we came. Give the stormclaws and the hobgoblins our greetings," Kithri said.

Remy stewed. He knew he wouldn't survive the road to Toradan on his own. Kithri was right about the hobgoblins. They controlled everything on the map between the few points of civilization, which Avankil and Karga Kul were the largest. Even the substantial towns such as Toradan were on constant alert against hobgoblin incursions, and the roads between settlements were heavily preyed upon by the creatures native to the wastes.

"Erathis has brought us together, Remy," Keveler said. "Whatever worldly errand you contemplate, remember that the gods dispose and we must follow."

Again, as Keveler mentioned the god's name, something shone briefly just beyond the light. "Do you see that?" Remy asked. He pointed into the dark, in the direction of the gleam.

The others looked that way. "See what?" The elf-blooded had better night vision; Lucan stiffened when he caught sight of something.

"Stay close to the fire," he said, as a chilling cackle came out of the darkness.

"Hyena," Keveler said. He was shoulder to shoulder with Remy. "How did you see it?"

"There was a gleam when you said the god's name," Remy answered. He had the presence of mind not to use the name, since he was not a worshiper. Some gods looked dimly on hearing their names from the mouths of unbelievers.

The leather grip of Keveler's mace creaked as he brought it up. "Then it's no ordinary hyena," he said over the cackling, which got louder and seemed to come from several directions at once. "It's a cacklefiend. There will be gnolls with it as well, and perhaps worse than gnolls. Erathis!" he called out, holding up his holy symbol.

Light washed out from the symbol, washing over the hulking shape of a cacklefiend hyena. It was nearly man-high at the shoulder, with a row of serrated spines where an ordinary hyena had bristled down its back. Its fur was mottled green, gray, and black. Behind it loomed the hyenalike humanoid silhouettes of gnolls.

“This is why I hate the desert,” Kithri said.

“Me too.” Lucan unsheathed his sword, which gave off a silvery light similar to the glow of Keverel’s talisman. Iriani too created light, with a complicated pattern of snapping fingers that popped small flares into life over their heads. The cacklefiend ducked its head and chuckled demoniacally, swaying its head back and forth as the gnolls skirted the perimeter of light, timing their rush to the center the cacklefiend would give.

It was a tricky situation for the members of the party used to having an advantage because of their superior night vision. The gnolls had it too, and the cacklefiend could see the way demons did because it was a demonic perversion of a hyena. So one advantage Lucan, and Iriani were accustomed to had vanished because of circumstance and opponent—yet for Remy and the others, the campfire and the various glares of magical light were a leveler. They could see the cacklefiend and the gnolls perfectly well, or at least as well as the enemy could see them. And the first thing Remy saw after Iriani’s light flashed into being was the gleam of Kithri’s throwing daggers, flickering their way to their target or at the end of the gnoll grouping. She was trying to prevent the gnolls from spreading out and surrounding them. In the uncertain light, Kithri’s attack—unusually for her—wasn’t fatal. The gnoll, its burnished steel dagger hilt sticking out from its shoulder and one of its ears carved to a flap, charged. The rest followed, the giggling cacklefiend skipping around to flank the party and keeping to the edge of the firelight.

Biri-Daar stood to meet them, Keverel and Lucan flanking her. Behind them, Iriani and Kithri used the campfire itself as a defensive structure. Remy stayed up with the fighting front rank, not sure what he should do but knowing that when push came to shove, he was more good with a sword than he was dancing around and waiting for a clear shot from a distance.

There were perhaps a dozen gnolls. Lucan cut down the first as it got within range of a sword stroke while it was still raising the chain-slung morningstar it carried. The spiked ball thudded into the packed earth between his feet. Biri-Daar took a single step forward and broke the charge, knocking a gnoll aside with her shield while slashing another to the ground. The gnolls hesitated, sidestepping away from her into Lucan’s blade and the crushing head of Keverel’s mace. Light shone more fiercely from the cleric’s holy symbol as the misbegotten enemy drew closer, and Biri-Daar’s sword to glow with Bahamut’s power. Remy saw that, and was nearly distracted enough that when a gnoll bore down on him, its weapon a steel bar that thrummed past Remy’s head with the promise of a backswing that would shatter his skull, he barely reacted in time. But his training both casual and formal, from Quayside brawls to those first precious lessons in the courtyard of the Keep of Avanki took hold; before he could think about what to do, Remy had stepped inside the sweep of the gnoll’s brutal mace, pivoting along with the backswing until his head was practically in its armpit—at the same moment the blade of his sword scraped along its bottom rib as he spitted it with the momentum of its own charge.

He looked up to see the cacklefiend slaving not six feet away. It chuckled and raved, and the droplets from its yellow-toothed maw hissed and crackled when it dropped to the bare earth. The clashes of blade against steel reached him, but Remy did not look. The enemy that he could see was the only enemy he could fight, and to turn his back on that enemy would bring only death. His sword caught on the gnoll’s ribs. He wasn’t going to be able to get it out in time. The cacklefiend’s eyes glowed with hunger sharpened in the Abyss. It sprang as Remy kept hauling on the hilt of his sword, throwing h

other arm up as he wished for a shield. Anything. Even an armored sleeve.

A blast of magical energy from an angle behind Remy and above his head knocked the cacklefiend off to one side. It hit the ground, legs splayed, and skidded. Iriani came into view, brewing another spell between his two hands as Kithri kept watch on his back with throwing daggers fanned out in one hand and a short sword in the other. Like a marketplace magician, Kithri flicked the daggers one at a time two at a time without ever seeming to move her hand.

She couldn't keep all of the gnolls away, though. One of them had outflanked their position, Remy saw as he finally dragged his sword free of the dead gnoll. It was behind Kithri, behind Iriani; Biri-Daar and Lucan were still back to back against the main group of marauders. He could not see Keeverel.

"Behind you!" Remy shouted. At the same time he broke toward the gnoll as it leaped over the campfire. Behind him, the cacklefiend got its feet under it and tensed to spring again.

The gnoll landed within reach of Kithri and dealt her a two-handed blow that she partially deflected at the cost of her own sword. Its blade snapped and the head of the gnoll's mace glanced across the top of her helm. Kithri went down, and in the firelight Remy couldn't tell how badly she had been wounded. The gnoll was poised for another blow, this time at Iriani, whose focus was still and solely on the cacklefiend. Remy hit the gnoll from the side, his blade cutting through its leather cuirass and deep into the muscle below. The gnoll roared and tried to bring the butt of its mace down on Remy but he danced away. The mace thudded into the ground and Remy thrust over its guard, feeling the point of his sword strike home at the base of its neck.

Rearing back with this death blow, the gnoll swept upward with its mace, catching Remy in the pommel of the stomach and knocking him flat on his back. His mouth was open but he could make no sound and couldn't breathe. It felt as if the mace had caved in his ribs. He rolled over onto his side and looked for his sword. As he put his hand on its hilt he looked up to see the cacklefiend bat Iriani aside and keep coming toward him.

He got to his knees but could not stand. The cacklefiend came closer. Off to his left, Remy heard the crunch of Keeverel's mace splintering bone. He saw Lucan come at the cacklefiend from the side, plunging his sword down into its back. It rounded on him, snarling, and bit into the edge of his shield. Smoke poured from its mouth as its saliva ate away at the wood and steel of the shield. It shook its head like a dog with a rabbit, unbalancing Lucan and knocking him down. He still held his sword and struck out at it, opening a wound on its snout. Blood ran and mixed with the acid that dripped from its open mouth. It shook its head, splattering Lucan with blood and saliva.

The elf started to scream as the cacklefiend's fluids ate into his skin and burned holes through his armor. He dropped his sword and shield, trying to strip his tunic and jerkin before the rest of the blood could get through them.

The cacklefiend laughed, high and maddening. It came after Remy again.

He still could not get to his feet. The dying gnoll had knocked the wind out of him so badly that he still couldn't draw a full breath. Lucan was screaming *Melora, Melora, Melora*, drawing on the strength of his god to keep the pain from driving him mad. He got his jerkin off and stood barechested, burns showing across his arms and face. Past the cacklefiend, Remy saw him run around to the other side of the campfire.

No. He couldn't believe Lucan would abandon the fight. Remy got one foot under him and found the strength to point his sword at the cacklefiend. Iriani was stirring. Kithri lay still. Keeverel spoke a word of incantation and energy flowed through Remy, loosening his throat as the clash of armor and weapon lessened in intensity. Remy glanced from side to side. On his right, Iriani scrambled to his feet.

On his left, Biri-Daar was surrounded by the sprawled bodies of gnolls, her face wreathed in smoke.

from her mouth and nose. She struck down the last of them and stepped over it to finish off the cacklefiend ... but Remy wasn't sure she would get close enough before it got to him, and he had nothing to protect himself against its corrosive blood.

But he would die trying, if it came to that. Aided by Keverel's blessing, he got his feet under him and stood to meet it. It tensed to spring.

Two arrows, one after the other faster than Remy could follow, struck it in the chest, an inch apart just inside the joint of its right shoulder. Bolts of eldritch power peppered it from Iriani's side. Keverel was running to its other side, winding up with his mace as Biri-Daar came on behind him.

For me, Remy thought. They're doing this for me. A new kind of strength rose in him. He raised his own sword and stepped forward. Another arrow from Lucan's bow buried itself in the cacklefiend's neck. One of its feet slipped. Keverel got to it first, bringing his mace down on its head with a crunch. Blood splattered onto the ground and across the front of the cleric's mail shirt. He raised the mace again.

The cacklefiend kept coming at Remy. He met it head-on, sword thrust out at its chest. The blade went deep and Remy planted his feet, keeping the cacklefiend's jaws away from him. From the corner of his eye he saw Biri-Daar hacking down on its back, twice before Keverel caved in its ribs with his mace. It slumped to the ground, the awful giggle dying in its throat as the Abyssal light went out in its eyes.

Remy walked to the nearest dead gnoll and wiped the blade of his sword on its fur. The cacklefiend's blood ate into the flesh. Before sheathing his sword, Remy scrubbed it down with sand. The other members of the party did the same, not talking for the moment as each of them came slowly down from the pitch of battle. Keverel broke the silence, murmuring healing charms over Lucan's wounds and then ministering to Kithri as she stirred and wakened. The unscathed members of the party dragged the bodies of gnoll and cacklefiend far enough away from the campsite that the night scavengers wouldn't be tempted to add adventurer to their menu.

It was some time before anyone said anything to Remy, and when the words came he wished they hadn't. He had just finished cleaning his sword and was oiling it and wiping it down, looking forward to a few hours' sleep before the sun would come up and the wastes breed new monstrosities for them to face. He heard someone approach and stop. It was Lucan, fresh bandages showing through the holes in his tunic and jerkin.

"How come the cacklefiend wanted you so badly?" the elf asked him. "It fought its way through the forest to get to you. What is it you have there in your little box? Care to show us?"

"I told you I can't."

"Perhaps I can." Lucan nudged Remy's pack with the toe of his boot. "Come on. Let's have a look."

Remy knew bullying when he saw it, and he knew that if he didn't put a stop to it now it would grow into something far worse. He stood. "We just fought together," he said. "I don't want to fight against you now."

Lucan was taller than he was, but Remy was broader and had one other advantage. He was ready to fight, and he didn't think Lucan was.

Biri-Daar stepped in before things could get any more tense. "Lucan," she said. "Remy swore an oath. Would you have him break it?"

Lucan didn't answer. His gaze remained on Remy, who looked back.

"Lucan," Biri-Daar added. "Even if we wanted to open the box, would you do it without knowing what those charms on its lid might unleash?"

There was a pause. After a delay, the common sense approach appeared to work. Lucan looked away from Remy at the group's dragonborn leader. "The cacklefiend was looking for him," he said to her.

pointing at Remy. "Because of what he carries. That endangers all of us."

"Perhaps," Biri-Daar said.

Remy was suddenly and uncomfortably conscious of the fact that the entire group was looking at him. Something permanent was being decided about his status within the party, and how it affected their mission.

"What endangers us is you breaking away from the group when the gnolls had us surrounded," Remy said before he could stop himself. He was a stranger to the group, perhaps, but he was damned if he was going to be made a scapegoat.

"You dare," Lucan growled. A dagger appeared in his hand, the motion too fast for Remy to follow.

"Hold," Biri-Daar commanded. "Remy, you will not question Lucan's stomach for a fight while I am here. He and I have faced down creatures the like of which you cannot imagine. And Lucan, the gods have brought Remy into our group. We will not cast him out while their reasons are still unclear to us."

"If the creations of the Abyss are following him," Keverel said quietly, "I'm inclined to think he's on the right side."

"Enemy of the enemy is my friend, is that it?" Iriani said.

"Something like that," Keverel said. "Remy, would you mind if Iriani and I took a closer look at that box? The sigils might tell us something that we need to know the next time creatures come out of the dark looking for it."

"If we just left him here, we wouldn't have to worry about it," Lucan grumbled. His good-natured jousting demeanor was utterly gone, as if the brief battle had killed off his sense of humor and left him with an inexplicable hostility toward Remy. For his part, Remy could only wonder whether Lucan was ashamed of how he had reacted in the fight or something else was happening that Remy couldn't detect.

"True," Kithri said from a little distance away. "But if he's not around and horrible monstrosities start stop following us, we are going to have a lot less of this."

Everyone turned to look as she came back into the firelight. "I know they're only gnolls," she said, "but all of you need to sharpen up your looting instincts. Look what we have."

On a flat rock near the campfire, she spilled a number of objects she had bound up in a cloth.

"Trust Kithri to distract us with gnoll trinkets and trash," Lucan said—but he went right along with the rest of them. "What wonders have you found? And which ones went into your pockets before you told us about the rest?"

"Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies," Kithri said as she spread her findings out on the rock. There was nothing in the way of coins—gnolls had no use for them—but there were four things of interest. An armband worked from silver in the shape of entwined snakes, with tiny jewels as the eyes; a human jawbone with its teeth replaced by cut gems; a gold ring set with a square green stone and a pearl, a single pearl, worked into an earring with gold wire.

"And this was tied around the cacklefiend's neck," Kithri said, drawing a pendant from her pocket. "I thought I would save it for last."

Biri-Daar took it and handed it to Keverel. "Do you see what I see?"

"Demon's workmanship," Keverel said with a nod. "I can feel it even if I can't see it. Erath knows." The god's name brought a pale gleam from the pendant and Remy realized that gleam was what had first alerted him to the presence of something beyond the firelight.

"This pendant is a demon's eye," Biri-Daar said. "It guided the cacklefiend and the gnolls to us."

"Or to him," Lucan said, pointing at Remy with the dagger he had not yet put away. Remy began

feel that a fight between him and the elf was inevitable, and he did not feel confident of winning it.

Biri-Daar's response made him even more uncertain. "Or to him," she echoed. "Which means that we need to know more about what he carries, and why. But the wilderness is no place for such investigations. Lucan, we didn't rescue this boy just to kill him. Put the blade away."

Lucan did, with a last cold glance at Remy, who was a bit nettled at being called a boy. Yet now was not the time to challenge the group any more than he already had. He bit his tongue. Biri-Daar swept all of the treasures into cupped hands. "We'll sell this, or have it appraised at least, when we get to Crow Fork Market," she said, holding her hands out to Iriani. "Iriani, is any of it of use to you?"

The mage floated a palm over the items and closed his eyes. "There is some power in the jawbone," he said after a moment. "But nothing I would dare use. Corellon would turn his back on me, and for good reason. There is evil in it."

"Then we must be careful who we sell it to," Biri-Daar said. "But maybe we can wring some good from it."

Everything went into a pouch at her belt. "We ought to sleep now," she said. "First watch to the unwounded. That means me and Remy."



"For someone without much experience fighting in a group," Biri-Daar said after everyone else was asleep, "you did well."

Remy nodded, accepting the compliment.

"And it's a good thing you can fight," the paladin went on. She looked from the campfire to Remy. "Even though you should maybe have been more careful about picking a fight with Lucan. He was right that the cacklefiend was looking for you. That's what the demon's eye was for."

The fire was burning low. Remy poked at it and watched the swirl of the glow in the embers. "I don't understand if you're not sure what to say," Biri-Daar said.

"I said everything I know," Remy said. "I don't know what's in the box. I only know that Philomena wanted me to take it to Toradan."

"So you don't know what it is and you don't know why Philomena gave it to you. Let me ask you this: what do you know about Philomena?"

"That he's the vizier in Avankil, and has been since well before I was born." Remy said nothing about the darker rumors of sorcery that Philomena's enemies propagated throughout the city.

"Do the people of Avankil trust him?"

"If they don't, they're shy about saying so," Remy said.

"With good reason." Both of them watched the fire for a few minutes. Remy wondered what Biri-Daar was thinking behind the roundabout questions about the vizier.

Out in the darkness, something growled and there came the sound of tearing flesh. "Scavengers are out," Remy commented.

"Worried?" Biri-Daar looked at him and he shook his head. A bone cracked. "Why do you think Philomena gave you something so important?" she asked.

Remy bristled. "Because I've carried things for him before. I've never failed him."

"And you don't ask questions," Biri-Daar added. Remy didn't challenge this. "Because if you did, the dragonborn added, "you wouldn't be here." She lapsed into thought again until Remy broke the silence.

"What are you getting at?"

Still the silence went on. Remy yawned. Finally Biri-Daar said, "If someone is looking for what you carry, and that someone is powerful enough to make a demon's eye, then you ought to ask yourself

what the vizier thought was going to happen to you out here.”

Now it was Remy’s turn to fall silent.

“There are two possibilities, Remy,” Biri-Daar said after some time. “Either Philomen has enemies who are after what you carry, or the vizier himself is using you to get the box out of Avankil and he planned to have you killed in the wastes. Either way, more is going on than you or I understand. And either way, someone wanted you dead. That means that what you carry is important.” The dragonborn shifted her weight, her armor creaking. “And now you should sleep. One thing you learn when you leave the cities is that when a chance for sleep comes, you take it. No questions asked.”

Remy knew he should keep watch with Biri-Daar, but he was too tired to argue with this small kindness and too confused to assess everything she had said. He lay down where he was and was asleep so fast he couldn’t even remember touching the ground. He dreamed of fighting a battle and winning, only to find that another battle awaited and another victory, and another, and another ...

In the morning, the bodies of the gnolls were gone but the cacklefiend lay untouched except by flies that appeared as the sun rose.



The next morning passed uneventfully except for minor bickering among members of the group who wanted to spend a few days in Crow Fork Market and those who wanted to stop just long enough to replenish their supplies and then get on with the trip to Karga Kul. Lucan and Kithri wanted to delay Lucan for the gaming and Kithri for the possibilities of a little recreational purse-cutting; everyone else wanted to get on with it. “You two are agreeing on something?” Remy needled them, seeing a chance to perhaps mend some of the fences broken in the aftermath of the previous night’s battle.

Kithri laughed, a high pure bell of a laugh slightly at odds with her fundamentally larcenous nature. Lucan, by contrast, didn’t crack a smile. Remy had the feeling that the elf still bore him a grudge; his ready wit seemed to appear at all occasions and conversations save those involving Remy. The preoccupied Remy as he backtracked along the section of the Toradan Road he had followed in the last day before the scorpions had found him. He found he had few memories of that day; between passing Crow Fork and waking up in the care of Keverel, all Remy remembered were general sensations of heat and dust and endless broken landscapes where no living thing moved. There was a dreamlike quality to those sensations, and Remy lapsed into that dream. His task was going unfulfilled, Biri-Daar had raised troubling questions about Philomen ... Remy had to wonder what he was getting himself into.

Perhaps the thing to do was take his share of the spoils from the gnolls, buy a horse, and traverse that stretch of the Toradan Road for a third time. He owed them a debt for saving his life, but he didn’t think it was a debt any of them were especially interested in collecting.

And either way, he would finally make his first trip inside the walls of Crow Fork Market.

Its walls reared up just then like a mirage on the horizon, shimmering and flickering with the promise of everything civilization had to offer in the midst of the endless empty wastelands. A sandstorm had prevented Remy from seeing those walls on his way east toward Toradan; he enjoyed the fine clear day not least because it showed him the sight of the market, resolving and solidifying it as if it were actually becoming real.



Remy knew part of the story, the part that any child who grew up along the Dragondown Coast would know: In an age forgotten even by the time of Arkhosia and Bael Turath, a market had sprung up around an oasis at the intersection of two roads. Perhaps it had sprung up because a freak desert rainstorm had bogged a caravan down in mud so deep that when it dried, the merchant could not drive his wagons out and all of his beasts had died. So he stayed, never arriving at his destination—which

might have been any of the ancient cities that since lay in ruins along the shores of the Gulf. It might even have been the ancient city that lay below Karga Kul.

At first it was a collection of tents, a way station for caravans skirting the edge of the desert by way of coming too close to the bandits and worse that haunted the Blackfall's banks. There was water there, and safety in numbers.

Over the centuries, the market had grown. Walls had sprung up around it, and earthen berms. Cisterns had been dug, and cellars to store goods that would not survive long in the Fork area's heat and dust. As Remy walked through its road gate, it was larger than any town he had ever been to except Avankil. Above the ground, awnings and tents that had once stood by themselves now fronted permanent stalls and rows of wood-frame houses. Remy wondered how much the builders had paid to get that much wood all the way out here. The nearest tree was forty miles away. At the center of the market stood a citadel built of sandstone. "More than once," Keveler said, "Crow Fork Market has stood against an army. Below that keep, there are cellars. Below the cellars, dungeons. Below the dungeons ..." He trailed off. "One hears stories."

"Who invades a place out in the middle of a waste?" Remy asked.

"Recently?" Keveler said. "The hobgoblin warlords who ravage these wastes have had their eyes on this market since before you were born."

Around them surged the activities of commerce, a storm of getting and spending. Crow Fork Market stood at the crossroads of the southern Dragondown. Any land route between Toradan, Avankil, and Karga Kul passed the Crow Fork.

Iriani stopped a passing fruit seller and spent a piece of silver on a basket of apples. Holding the basket up to everyone, he said, "Apples in the wastes. Who wouldn't fight to control this place?"

"Me," Biri-Daar said. "I wouldn't. I wouldn't waste a goblin's life on this place."

Keveler looked around, taking in the chaos. He had mentioned to Remy that morning that he, like Remy, had never been inside the market's walls. "History is long. One imagines that the actions we find baffling made sense at the time," he mused.

"Or that people were just as stupid then as we can expect them to be now," Lucan countered dryly.

"At least once, it was an elf army that marched on the market," Biri-Daar reminded him. "Which by your formulation would mean that elves can be stupid just as humans can. Or halflings."

"Or dragonborn," Kithri added cheerfully.

"The propensity for foolishness knows no racial boundaries," Keveler commented. "Shall we eat?"

The area immediately inside the gates of Crow Fork Market was reserved for the staging of caravans and merchant missions. From there, grooms took their horses and walked them along the wall toward the stables that were set away from the main bazaar spaces. To the left and right were rows of stalls offering every kind of foodstuff found within three months' journey. These stalls were hotly contested, and handed down across generations. Few things in commerce were certain, but one of those few certainties was that a caravan arriving was hungry and a caravan leaving thought it might be. In both cases, food was desirable.

Remy ate skewers of fried squid from the Furia coast, where the waters were deep and wracked with storms. He washed them down with a strong tea chilled by ice brought down from the glaciers high on the Draco Serrata. It was said that some of those glaciers contained the preserved bodies of warriors and mages from the age of Arkhosia, and that so powerful was their magic that when the ice melted from around them they walked and breathed as if they had never spent frozen millennia beneath the alpine stars. There were those who believed that ice from those glaciers had healing properties, as did the water that remained when the ice melted. Remy didn't know about that, but he would willingly have stated that the tea itself had restorative properties after ten days spent in the wastes.

Tieflings down from the mountains mixed with their ancient adversaries, the dragonborn; members of warring nations and clans haggled over the same goods; zealot and unbeliever poured and drank from the same tankards. Crow Fork Market, by tradition and decree, was a place where the only permissible violence was that done to a customer's purse.

Spiretop drakes flitted from the gate towers and nestled under the eaves of the keep at the center of the market. They were an irritating scourge of some cities, threatening unlucky citizens and stealing anything shiny that caught their attention. In Avankil, Remy had earned bounties from the Quayside neighborhood constabulary for killing spiretops. It was how he had learned to use a sling. They were the rats of the air, only smarter and more vicious than rats. Remy was tempted to take a shot at them now. Instead he sipped his tea and crunched the last of the fried squid, spitting their beaks onto the stones. "All of this came from somewhere else," he marveled.

"Most of it, yes," Iriani said. He was rebraiding his hair and pausing every time he finished a braid to take a swallow of distilled liquor from a bottle he'd bought the minute they came through the gate. "When this place was founded, the stories go, all they had to work with was rocks and sand."

He turned to Remy. "So. Are you staying with us?"

Remy blinked. His conversation with Biri-Daar the night before had unsettled him. On the one hand, he felt that of course he would go with them; they had saved his life. On the other, he had an errand not quite complete.

On a third hand rested the questions Biri-Daar had raised.

"No," he said. "I will buy a horse and go to Toradan. I committed to this errand."

"Let him go," Lucan said.

Keverel took a swallow of Iriani's liquor. "Lucan, bury your grudge," he said. "It is no right act to let a boy go off and die out of an overdeveloped sense of obligation."

"I am not a boy," Remy said. "You didn't think I was a boy when I fought with you."

Iriani laughed. "As a matter of fact, we did. You fought as a boy fights, all arm and no brain. But that's good. At least you have the strength in your arm. The brain for the fight comes later."

"Where are you going to get money for a horse?" Kithri asked, eyes wide and expression so serious that Remy knew he was being mocked. "If you leave now, you aren't entitled to a share of the spoils."

Remy couldn't quite tell if she was serious about this. "That is the code," Keverel said. "But surely we could make an allowance given the circumstances."

"Ha! The boy who called me a coward is finding his own cowardice," Lucan said. "At least that's what it seems like to me."

Coming from Lucan, this stung. Remy bit back his first reply and considered the situation anew. "Biri-Daar," he said. "Do you still think that—?"

"Yes," she said. "If you go into the wastes alone, you will not survive to reach Toradan. And if you don't, you will not leave Toradan alive. Bahamut has brought us together. Keverel would say Erathis. I believe we should show your box to the Mage Trust at Karga Kul. We can trust them, and their magic is powerful enough to discover what lies inside."

"So he draws demon's eyes and we're going to invite him along," Lucan said. "Biri-Daar, one of these days you're going to take in a stray and get us all killed."

"I would sooner die doing the right thing than live an extra day because I failed what I know to be right," Biri-Daar said. "Remy, I will say it again. The gods have brought us together."

Remy's childhood had not featured much in the way of devotion to gods. His mother was a quiet worshiper of Pelor, in the way that many citizens of Avankil whose recent ancestors had come in from the fields still followed that god of harvests and summer. Her devotion had become perfunctory,

matter of occasional holiday sprigs and leonine sunburst emblems stitched into the hems of the tunics she made. In the Quayside, religions mixed and turned into a kind of hybrid river creed, a constant barrage of hand gestures and muttered oaths, holy symbols and superstitious stories told over tankards of ale. Remy had soaked it all in without ever developing a firm idea of which god he would follow.

Even so, Biri-Daar's idea that the gods had brought him together with her party gave Remy pause. He had been on the brink of death, and now he lived, thanks to a dragonborn paladin of Bahamut and the healing magic of the Erathian Keverel. Something greater than Remy was at work here ... and he feared that Biri-Daar's dark assessment of his mission was correct. Why had the demon's eye been keyed to look for him? What was it he carried?

Remy was brave but not a fool. He did not want to die as a pawn in another man's game.

He looked around. Every race that made a home in the Dragondown was here, selling everything that could be grown, made, or built—by hands or magic.

"Have an apple," Iriani said, tossing him one. Remy caught it and bit into it.

It was beginning to seem as if they were commanding him to come along, and that feeling made Remy resist even though he was starting to think accompanying them to Karga Kul was the best way forward. He didn't want to be forced into it, though. "I'll stay with you," he said, meaning *until I figure out what's going on*. "If you can lend me the money for a horse."

"No lending necessary," said Biri-Daar. She was eating what looked like an entire pig's leg and had a new pair of katars thrust in her belt. "We'll sell these things off," she added, jingling the pouch containing the dead gnolls' trinkets, "and you can buy a horse with your share."



First they found a jeweler who would take the ring, armband, and earring. It was simply done, and when Kithri's bartering skills faltered, the presence of Biri-Daar ensured a fair bargain. Then they wound their way deeper into the market, toward the shadowed older districts where layers of buildings were built upon each other, leaning in to block out the sun as the streets narrowed to alleys that approached the market keep from furtive angles. It was where magic was dealt and the spiretop dragons were as likely to be carrying messages as stealing coins from the counters of market stalls.

Iriani had done business with a broker of potions and talismans there before. They found him smoking a pipe outside his shop, frowning up as if the shadows of the buildings' upper stories over his head contained some bit of occult wisdom just beyond his understanding. "Roji," Iriani greeted him.

He turned to notice Iriani and winked. "What have you found in your peregrinations across this fine land of ours, my elf friend?"

On the way there, Biri-Daar had handed off the jawbone and demon's eye to Iriani. She stood close as the half-elf suggested they go inside and chat. "Not every bit of business needs to take place where everyone can see."

"Fine," Roji said. He knocked his pipe out and pulled back the curtain across his doorway. "But most of you have to stay outside. None of us will be able to breathe if you all come in. The dragonborn is too big, the halfling will steal everything she can see. I don't like holy men. So the ranger and the boy can come in."

Iriani grinned. "It's settled, then. Remy? Lucan? After you."

The three of them followed Roji into his shop. They sat on cushions around a low table. "What do you have?" Roji asked. "And why so worried about who might see? This is Crow Fork. Nothing will happen to you here."

"Something might happen to us as soon as we leave," Iriani said. "We would prefer to be sure."

"Sure," Roji chuckled. "What is sure? Let me see what you've brought."

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