

— S E M B I A —

SHADOW'S
WITNESS

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CHAPTER 1

THE SUMMONING

**The month of Hammer, 1371DR,
the Year of the Unstrung Harp**

The dim light from the guttering torches in the stairwell stopped at the edge of the doorway as though blocked by a wall of magical darkness. Conscious of Riven beside him and unwilling to show the assassin the nervousness which had him sweating beneath his robes, Krollir stepped briskly through the doorway and into the summoning chamber. Riven followed, wary and apprehensive.

When both had stepped through the archway, Krollir turned and closed the door behind them. Instantly, darkness as thick and impenetrable as scribe's ink cloaked the room. The iron portal's immense latch fell into place with an ominous, resounding *click*.

Familiar from long habit, Krollir felt

around in the blackness for the wrist-thick iron dead-bolt, quickly found it, and slid it home. The shrieking grate of metal against metal set his teeth on edge. He quelled the apprehensive quaver that fluttered in his gut. I will succeed, he assured himself. I *am* the chosen of Mask.

Invisible in the darkness beside him, Riven's breath came harsh and rapid. Blindness apparently made the assassin nervous. He no doubt suspected an ambush.

Krollir smiled behind the black felt of his ceremonial mask. His lieutenant's nervousness amused him. Riven's breathing reminded Krollir of the frightened pant of a wary cur.

Despite Riven's earlier protests, Krollir had forbidden the assassin from bringing a torch or candle, even while descending the dimly lit stairs. Unsanctified light brought into the Shadowlord's summoning chamber spoiled its holiness. Only certain spells and specially prepared forms of luminescence could safely light this room. His thoughts turned to the candles he had specially prepared for this night. He had spent months painstakingly crafting them and carefully instilling them with power.

Though blind in the darkness, Krollir knew his lieutenant well enough that he could imagine perfectly Drasek Riven's stance—a ready crouch with his back to the wall—his single eye darting about the darkness and both callused hands resting familiarly on his enchanted saber hilts.

Spitefully, Krollir let him simmer nervously in the soup of pitch darkness for a few extra moments. Let him wonder and fear, he thought. He had told Riven nothing; he required the assassin's presence but left his purpose unexplained. He enjoyed keeping his lieutenant off balance and making him nervous. Like all dogs born vicious, Riven occasionally had to be reminded of his

master's authority.

The summoning chamber of Mask—Krollir's patron deity—fairly stank of power. Behind the stale must, the magical residue of past conjurations lingered in the dry air and ran tingling along Krollir's nasal passages. No doubt Riven sensed it too, in his own thick way.

Inhaling deeply, Krollir drank in the sheer energy of the room while letting Riven stew in the dark.

The sinister majesty of the summoning chamber served as a pointed reminder to the one-eyed assassin that Krollir Venastin—the Righteous Man—was not only the guildmaster of the Night Knives but also a powerful servant of Mask the Shadowlord. Krollir was a man not to be challenged, even by the most dangerous of dogs. Riven's nervousness indicated that he still grasped that point. The cur yet remained at heel.

Krollir allowed himself another satisfied smile that vanished when thoughts of his other lieutenant, Erevi Cale, entered his mind. Three days ago, he had sent word via messenger to Riven and Cale that they must attend him tonight. Riven had obeyed; Cale however, had sent the messenger back with word that he could not attend, that Thamalon Uskevren had an important business meeting that Cale could not miss without compromising his cover.

Krollir frowned thoughtfully. He fidgeted with a platinum coin in his robe pocket. Was Cale still loyal? The answer to that question was becoming increasingly unclear. Cale had an obvious fondness for the Uskevren, the noble family he was spying upon—an unfortunate but understandable fact—but did his ultimate loyalty still reside with Krollir and the guild?

Unsure of the answer and uncomfortable with the uncertainty, Krollir decided to put a tail on Cale. A guildsman to spy on the spy.

Though he highly valued Cale's intellect and ruthlessness—the bald giant had served the Night Knives well for many years with his cutthroat schemes—he nevertheless realized that those same qualities made Cale a potential loyalty problem—a potential rival for Mask's favor. Far more so than Riven. But would he dare an open challenge? Certainly Cale feared little—

“How about a blasted light?” Riven's hoarse, disembodied voice interrupted Krollir's chain of thought. “It's as black as a devil's heart in here. I can't see a godsdamned thing.”

The tension in the assassin's voice dispelled the disquieting thoughts of Cale and returned a smile to Krollir's face. This cur, at least, remains obedient. Perhaps I should turn *him* loose on Cale he thought. That would make for an interesting dogfight.

Riven's breath continued to come fast. Krollir fancied he could hear the assassin's teeth grinding. He waited a moment longer before replying.

“Be at ease, lieutenant. You stand in the summoning chamber of Mask the Shadowlord, in the presence of Mask's most prized servant.” He smiled and mentally added, In the presence of he who soon will be Mask's Champion.

Riven replied through gritted teeth. “Grand. But I still need to see.”

Krollir chose to ignore the assassin's sarcasm and softly intoned the words to a spell. Upon completion, a soft, diffuse glow filled the large chamber, enough light to create a patchwork of shadows but not enough to fully dispel the darkness.

The rough-hewn limestone walls of the chamber glowed softly in the pale light of the spell. Krollir turned to face Riven. As he had suspected, the assassin stood in a fighting crouch with both saber hilts

clenched in white-knuckled fists.

"In this chamber, this light alone is acceptable to the Shadowlord."

Riven nodded but made no reply. His one good eye must have adjusted quickly to the darkness, for his gaze darted warily about the chamber, still suspicious. Krollir observed his hunting dog with professional detachment. He tried to follow Riven's thinking as the assassin's one-eyed gaze scanned the room.

The summoning chamber had but one means of entry and exit, something a professional like Riven necessarily disliked—predictable entry; predictable retreat. Thick hinges as long as daggers and bolts as thick as a man's thumb affixed the door to the limestone. The great slab of blackened, cast iron looked able to resist a siege engine.

In the center of the chamber, strips of platinum inlaid into the smooth, polished floor formed a triangle. Flesh-colored candles as thick as a man's forearm stood at each of its three corners. Riven would not know that the thaumaturgic triangle served to cage the extra-planar creatures that Krollir summoned to do his bidding.

He watched with a satisfied smirk—hidden by the felt cloth of his mask, of course—as Riven's gaze took in the binding triangle and summoning candles. The assassin's one good eye widened slightly, his fear of spellcraft evident in his expression.

I know you too well, lieutenant, Krollir smugly thought.

Riven understood little of spellcraft and its practice made him uneasy. As long as Krollir demonstrated the power of his magical arts from time to time, the assassin would never present a loyalty problem. Riven would never even *aspire* to become Mask's Champion.

A plain, mahogany lectern stood at the apex of the triangle. An open tome sat atop it, thick with knowledge and yellowed with age—the Shadowtome—a holy book of Mask that allowed Krollir to reach beyond this reality and summon . . .

“What are we doing here?” Apparently having recovered himself, Riven now sounded strangely calm, though he remained near the door and kept his back to the wall.

“All in time, lieutenant,” Krollir replied. He turned his back on Riven and walked ceremoniously across the room. The velvet of his gray robes softly whispered as he strode around the triangle and took position at the lectern. Gripping the cool, smooth wood on either side of the Shadowtome, he steadied himself for the ordeal ahead. When he felt ready, he ordered over his shoulder, “Come forward and light the candles, Riven. But do not disturb their position.”

He had expected the assassin to protest—for surely Riven would fear to take a direct hand in a summoning—but after only a moment’s hesitation, Riven walked calmly to the binding triangle, took a tinderbox from his belt pouch, and struck flint to steel. Krollir watched him intently; he prided himself on his ability to read a man from the subtlest of actions.

Surprisingly, the assassin’s hands did not shake as he held a flaming cloth to each candle in turn. The corners of Riven’s thin-lipped mouth curled slightly upward. His goatee masked what could have been either a fearful grimace or a secret smile.

Strange, Krollir thought, but not entirely out of character. He had learned long ago that Riven masked fear with a show of calm bravado. Inside, the assassin’s guts were no doubt roiling like a butter churn.

Careful to disturb neither the candles nor place his hand within the platinum borders of the binding

triangle, Riven soon had all three of the thick wax towers lit. Wisps of stinking black smoke snaked from the dancing flames and rose toward the invisible vents in the ceiling. The room rapidly filled with the smell of rancid meat.

“What in the Nine Hells did you use to make these candles?” Riven asked. “They stink like horse dung.”

Krollir smiled softly—the materials used to craft the candles had been hard bought. He made no reply to the question. He inhaled deeply, steeled himself. He had summoned lesser demons many times before, but what he would attempt now. . .

Is suitable for Mask’s Champion, he reassured himself. “Stand away, Riven,” he commanded.

At his authoritative tone, the assassin shot him an irritated glare but nevertheless obediently backed away from the binding triangle. He padded back to his position near the door, behind and beside the lectern.

“You still haven’t explained what we’re doing here.”

Angered by the incessant questions, Krollir turned from the lectern to face the assassin. He spoke in a soft voice pregnant with power and heavy with threats. “Do I owe you explanations, lieutenant?” He emphasized the last word slightly, explicitly referencing Riven’s status as a subordinate; a *replaceable* subordinate.

The assassin’s good eye narrowed, but he swallowed whatever angry retort he might have been considering. His gaze went to the binding triangle and the unusual candles.

See in them my power, lieutenant, Krollir silently advised, and consider well your next words. If necessary, he would kill Riven where he stood.

Riven’s gaze returned to meet Krollir’s. His mouth remained a defiant rictus in the hairy nest of his

goatee, but his words bespoke submission. “No. You don’t owe me an explanation. I was curious, is all.”

Krollir smiled behind his mask. Heel, cur. He decided to drive another verbal splinter under Riven’s fingernails. “It is regrettable that Cale is not here,” he said, as though in passing. “I would have him share my moment of triumph.”

The assassin visibly stiffened at the mention of his rival Erevis Cale—and at the implicit recognition in Krollir’s statement of Cale’s superior status in the guild—but he ignored the bait. Instead, he asked, “Triumph?”

Krollir ignored Riven’s question. He enjoyed the assassin’s discomfiture at the mention of Cale. He had long encouraged the rivalry between the two men. He had chosen them as his lieutenants for that very reason. The hate that they held for one another lessened the threat to him that either alone would present. The two could never ally to overthrow him—one would always betray the other. When the time came—and it was coming soon—Krollir would kill them both. For he alone would serve as the Champion of Mask. The Champion destined to restore the faith of the Shadowlord to the status it enjoyed before the Time of Troubles, before the coming of the pretender god Cyric the Dark Sun. All of Krollir’s augurs and dreams had indicated that Mask would choose a Champion soon from among the Night Knives in the city of Selgaunt. Taking nothing for granted, Krollir had decided to assure his selection with the summoning tonight.

“Alone you will have the privilege of bearing witness to these events, Riven,” he grandly announced. “With this one act, the Zhentarim will be destroyed and our guild—*my* guild—will be elevated to preeminence in Selgaunt. Mask has mandated this course,

and I obey.”

He waited for an appropriate reply but Riven held his silence. Krollir went on.

“With the power of the Shadowtome, I will reach beyond this reality into the darkest layer of the Abyss and summon forth a dread. I dare this in the name of Mask! I dare this for the guild I lead! Do you see, Riven?”

He had expected Riven to protest or recoil upon learning Krollir’s intent to summon a demonic dread—had hoped for it, in fact—but the assassin stood his ground, expressionless.

“I see,” he replied noncommittally. Though Riven spoke in a steady voice, he looked coiled as tight as a dwarf’s beard braid.

He is more nervous now than ever, Krollir thought with satisfaction.

He turned from Riven to stand over the lectern and peruse the pages of the Shadowtome. He had acquired the magical artifact from an ignorant curio dealer in Arabel. The oblivious fool had not been able to decipher the script and so had not known what he possessed. Krollir had sent Riven to purchase the tome, eliminate the dealer, and escort the prize back to Selgaunt. In all of the city, perhaps in all of Faerûn, only he and Riven knew of the Shadowtome’s existence, and the assassin was too unschooled in the magical arts to appreciate its significance.

Within its pages of ancient, coded text, the Shadowtome contained the description and proper name of a mighty dread, the name and nature of its abyssal abode, and the means to summon and properly bind it. The dread named in the tome dwelled in Belistor, a layer of the Abyss, a void of nothingness empty of normal life, but not empty of all life. Dreads resided there, greater and lesser, as did certain powerful

undead. Because the denizens of Belistor existed in such close proximity to the negative energy of the plane, they possessed a certain power that Krollir desired to harness—their touch siphoned the souls of any mortals they contacted, killing them irrevocably. Spells that raised or resurrected the dead could not bring back those slain by dreads.

Krollir planned to command one of the greatest of the dreads to slay the leaders of the Zhentarim—the widespread organization of Cyric-loving priests, warriors, and wizards. The Zhents were Krollir's and the Night Knives' most dangerous rivals. But not after tonight. With their leaders slain, the Night Knives could destroy the weakened Zhents and rule Selgaunt's underworld.

Mask's first triumph over Cyric is at hand, Krollir thought, and my status as the Shadowlord's Champion is assured.

He spared a glance over his shoulder to check on Riven. The assassin stood near the door. He met Krollir's gaze.

Flushed with his soon-to-be success, Krollir smiled indulgently behind his mask. He realized now that Riven and Cale had never been true rivals for Mask's favor—by the gods, neither of them had ever even set foot in Mask's shrine. Rather, they had served as whetstones. Whetstones used by Mask to hone Krollir and better prepare him for his ordained role as Champion. Feeling razor sharp, he decided to discard them as unnecessary after tonight.

"Witness, Riven," he hissed, alive with the knowledge that Mask had chosen *him*. Riven smirked but made no response. Krollir turned back to the Shadowtome and began the summoning. Though the words of power had been scribed in a now time-corrupted form of Thorass, he nevertheless pronounced them force-

fully. He had rehearsed the phrases in his mind many times before and had dreamed them for a tenday.

“*Ichilai follin vaeve . . .*” His voice resounded in the chamber, magnified fourfold by the limestone. His hands rapidly traced invisible symbols in the air above the tome. Behind him, Riven’s breathing again grew rapid. It sounded in Krollir’s ears as loud as a bellows.

“*. . . Narven Yrsillar ej . . .*” The power in the room began to grow, and as it did the candles flickered. When the wicks began to die, a feeling of stark terror washed over Krollir, but the flames quickly rallied and stayed lit. He managed to keep his cadence steady despite the moment of terror. His hands gripped the lectern so tightly they dug depressions into the wood.

“*. . . Velnen dretilylar Yrsillar . . .*” Increasingly confident, his voice grew in volume as he recited. His fingers began to leave sparkling trails of silver in the air where he traced arcane symbol after arcane symbol. The glow from his earlier spell began to dim. Shadows coalesced in the corners and thickened. Inarticulate hissing sounded from everywhere and nowhere.

“*. . . Belistor om follin ej . . .*” All the hairs on his body rose and stood on end. The air pressed against him so hard he felt as though he was caught in a vise. Sweat poured from his clammy skin. The hissing grew louder. The shadows grew deeper, darker. He raised his hands above his head and shouted the final phrase in a voice gone hoarse.

“*. . . Yrsillar ej wexeral Belistor!*”

Like thousands of dwarven steam engines venting at once, the hissing reached an unbearable crescendo. The sound of an unliving multitude filled his ears, pawed at his soul. Reality ripped open with the sound of tearing cloth. An expanding globe of emptiness

formed in the air above the binding triangle. Krollir stared into the bottomless void and knew the beginnings of madness. Mentally gripping his sanity, he watched transfixed.

Two pinpoints of yellow light took shape somewhere back in the emptiness, feral eyes so full of hate and malice that their gaze nearly made Krollir vomit. Abruptly, the hissing ceased. All stood quiet but for Krollir's and Riven's breathing. The eyes began to draw closer . . . closer. . . .

The candles suddenly flared and in an instant burned down half the length of their shafts. The melted wax flowed along the platinum lines of the triangle inset into the floor and congealed like blood, then hardened like day-old scabs. The emptiness above the triangle writhed, solidified, shaped itself into a towering, black, demonic form that Krollir *sensed* as much as saw—a muscular biped with great batlike wings and powerful, overlong arms that ended in vicious claws. Above, an oval head formed, featureless but for yellow eyes and a darker line that might have been a mouth. It was a being that somehow seemed to occupy space and create emptiness all at the same time. The malice in its eyes burned holes into Krollir's brain. When it spoke, its sinister whisper hissed with such hate that it struck him like a physical blow.

"What *creature* dares summon Yrsillar, Lord of the Void?"

Despite his exhaustion, Krollir's heart leaped in his chest. To have summoned a demon of such power! Indeed he *must* be the chosen of Mask!

Dripping with sweat but smiling triumphantly, he unclenched his hands from the lectern and closed the Shadowtome, each motion slow and deliberate. Yrsillar's angry hissing filled his brain but he pushed it

aside. He had succeeded! Succeeded where none before had even dared! Confidence lent strength to his voice.

"I have summoned you, Yrsillar. I, the servant of Mask called the Righteous Man. Summoned you and bound you."

At that, Yrsillar hissed. As though to test Krollir's claim, the great dread extended an arm and clawed gently at the magical barrier that extended upward from the wax-filled lines of the binding triangle like an invisible pyramid. When Yrsillar tried to reach beyond the borders of that invisible pyramid, green energy flashed. The demon jerked back as though seared. Growling low but undeterred, Yrsillar examined the inside of its cage and probed for weakness, testing in turn each side of the triangle.

Krollir knew that a single flaw in the platinum strips or the wax coating would corrupt the binding and free the demon. He felt a flash of fear despite himself, though he knew he had made no mistake. Each time the towering demon tried to reach through the air beyond the border established by the wax-coated, platinum lines, flaring green energy elicited a growl and forced it to recoil. Krollir merely watched, fascinated and horrified, gleeful that—

Yrsillar suddenly whirled on him, crouched, and tried to leap bodily through the binding. Surprised, Krollir staggered a step backward in terror, nearly tripping over his own feet.

Green fire engulfed the demon and stopped it in midleap, framing its muscular black form in a penumbra of crackling energy. Its mighty figure hung suspended in the air over the binding triangle, writhing and growling as the fire seared its emptiness. Greasy black smoke boiled from its body and filled the room with the acrid stink of ozone.

Krollir quickly regained his composure and again stepped forward to the lectern. After another moment of growls and green flames, Yrsillar finally managed to pull his body free from the barrier and back into the triangle. Streamers of smoke snaked from its torso to mix about the ceiling with the smoke from the candles. The dread's baleful eyes bored into Krollir, but this time he refused to give ground.

He gestured at the binding triangle and the half-consumed candles burning at each corner. "The candles bind you, demon. Virgins' blood and the fat from newborn babes went into their wax. I have prepared well, and you are bound." He paused to let that sink in, then asked, "Do you agree to do my bidding in exchange for your freedom?"

Yrsillar hissed and crouched low, a predator ready to kill. His yellow eyes narrowed to hate-filled sparks. Each claw looked like a dagger blade. "I will drink your soul for this, human. I smell your fear and taste your weakness. You are food, and I will consume you slowly. Your pain will be unending. I will leave your body a dried husk. You will beg for dea—"

"Do you agree to do my bidding in exchange for your freedom? Or shall I cause you pain?" Meaningfully, Krollir reopened the Shadowtome. "I can reduce the size of the binding pyramid so that you will not be able to avoid its touch. The pain will be ceaseless."

Yrsillar screamed, a frustrated howl of rage that shook the limestone. At that moment, Krollir knew that his plan had come to fruition. Tonight, Zhentarim would die by the score, never to be raised from the dead by the foul priests of Cyric the Dark Sun.

The demon finished its outburst and spoke slowly, growling the while, the words reluctantly spilling forth. "So long as I am bound, I agree to do your bidding."

Well enough, Krollir thought, and barely managed

not to laugh aloud. He spoke over his shoulder to Riven, unable to keep the glee out of his voice. "Witness, lieutenant! You see before you the end of our enemies. The end of the Zhentarim! Witn—"

The shriek of the opening door jerked Krollir around. Riven stood in the open doorway, his squat, athletic silhouette framed by the torchlight in the stairwell. A cold chill raced up Krollir's spine. Behind him, Yrsillar began to softly hiss.

"Riven, what are you doing?"

The assassin reached into his cloak, pulled out a small token, and flung it at him. It *tinked* on the stone floor and skittered to a stop at Krollir's feet. His eyes went wide when he saw a black triangle with a yellow circle inset and a Z superimposed over the whole—the device of a Zhentarim agent. The realization crashed over him like a collapsing wall. Riven is a Zhentarim agent! They know! He looked up, goggle-eyed—

"Riven, no! Don't! You don't know what you're do—"

The assassin had already pulled a dagger from his belt sheath. "Witness *this*, fool," he snapped, and threw the dagger.

Krollir felt his next heartbeat as though it were an hour, or an eternity. The dagger toppled slowly through the air, with every turn the blade's edge glinting orange in the candlelight. It flew through space toward the binding triangle, toppling end over end. Krollir's heart stopped. His eyes threatened to burst from his skull. Point, hilt, point, hilt, toppling, toppling.

Yrsillar crouched low in anticipation, flexed his muscular, clawed arms. Yellow eyes narrowed to hungry slits.

Krollir watched in horror as the dagger's point impaled one of the candles. A few droplets of melted wax jumped into the air. The candle fell to its side and

rolled along the floor. The dancing flame snuffed instantly, drowned in the remainder of the candle's wax, drowned in virgins' blood and babies' fat.

The great iron door to the summoning chamber slammed shut. Riven was gone and Yrsillar was free.

The demon began to laugh loud and long. The sound, like the opening of a hundred mausoleum doors, hit Krollir like a fist. A wave of supernatural fear flowed from the broken binding and drove him to his knees. His eyes welled with tears and snot streamed down his face as he helplessly watched the demon *flow* through the open corner of the triangle, laughing. Cold yellow eyes stared out of emptiness and pulled his breath from his lungs. The demon approached. He closed his eyes and prayed to Mask for a quick death. I'm not the Champion, I'm not the Champion, I'm not the—

Yrsillar stood before him. Fear blanked his mind. Every hair on his body stood on end. A coldness embraced him and set his teeth to chattering. He dared not open his eyes. Terror pulled inarticulate moans from his throat. He felt a disgustingly soft caress on his neck and face, like ice running over his skin. A scream rose in his throat.

"Food," Yrsillar hissed in his ear, and began again to laugh.



Breathing hard, Riven grabbed a torch from a wall sconce and raced up the stairs three at a time. Though blocked by an iron door, the terrified screams of the Righteous Man still filled his ears and chased him like a specter. The hopeless sounds of a helpless animal, those screams. He felt no guilt for the betrayal, of course—Nine Hells, that's why the Zhentarim had

placed him with the Night Knives in the first place. He actually felt a certain satisfaction for a job well done, but even Riven found it mildly distasteful to leave the Righteous Man as food for a demon. No way for a man to die, he thought. He would have preferred to drive a dagger into the old man's back and have done with it.

Abruptly, the screaming ceased. He stopped running, steadied his breathing, and listened for a moment. Nothing. Satisfied, he ascended the rest of the long staircase at a walk. By the time he reached the door at the top, he had fully regained his breath. He took a moment to compose himself. Knowing that he had nothing to fear from the dread, he took his time. When he felt ready, he pushed open the door and walked into the lower level of the Night Knives' guildhouse.

The long hallway to either side of him stood empty and dim. Torches hung from wall sconces along the uneven plaster walls and cast shadows that looked uncomfortably similar to the black nothingness of the dread.

It's long gone already, he assured himself, long gone.

Still, the screams of the Righteous Man echoed in his brain and sent a cold shudder up his spine. Out of long habit, his hands fell to his saber hilts as he walked.

The lower level of the guildhouse was used mainly for storage, training, and worship. It also doubled as a final defensive strongpoint in the unlikely event of some kind of frontal assault on the guild. At this hour, the area stood empty. The main hallway Riven walked served as a spine from which branched all of the other rooms, hallways, and stairs of the lower level. At the northern end of the hallway, behind a sturdy door, stood

a small storage chamber with a concealed trapdoor that opened onto a secret access route into the city's old sewer system. At the southern end of the hall is the old man's shrine, he thought with contempt. He glanced behind him down the hallway to the double doors of the shrine and sneered in derision.

Over the past three years the Righteous Man had quietly spent guild proceeds to build an elaborate worship hall dedicated to Mask the Shadowlord. Riven had seen smaller temples dedicated to so-called "legitimate" gods.

What a waste of coin, he thought. Pissing away valuable time and resources, the Righteous Man had led the guild in a service every tenth night of every tenday since. Over time, more and more of the Knives had attended and more and more had come to actively worship Mask. So much so that the worship had come to dominate the activities of the guild.

Idiots! he sneered. This place was becoming more priesthood than thieves' guild with every passing day. I did you all a favor tonight. Riven had made a point never to set foot in the shrine. He despised gods, even Cyric, the patron of many of his fellow Zhentarim. Reliance on the gods made men weak, overconfident, and willing to rely on miracles rather than their own abilities. He figured that the fate of the Righteous Man was the ultimate fate of all priests, for priests kept their eyes on a god and not on the world around them. Riven had spied on the Knives for the Zhentarim *for years*, all the while holding the implicit trust of the Righteous Man. The old fool's faith had made him stupid and blind.

Weeks before, when the Righteous Man had told him about the Shadowtome, Riven had sent word of it to Malix, his Zhentarim superior. Then, upon retrieving the book and returning to Selgaunt, he had not

taken it directly to the Righteous Man. Instead, he had taken it to Malix for study. Based on the book's contents, Zhentarim mages had easily determined that the old man planned to summon a dread. Riven was told how to sabotage the delicate binding. At the time, he had thought he would have to create an excuse to be present for the summoning, or that he would have to break in during the casting of the spell, but the old fool had actually *required* him to be present! Witness this, lieutenant! Riven had almost laughed aloud. The arrogant ass!

Though Riven knew little of magic—he disdained spellcasters almost as much as priests, trusting his steel over spells any day—even he had seen the potential danger of turning a demon loose from its binding, possibly turning it loose on Selgaunt. Malix had laid that fear to rest, though. The Zhentarim did not fear the dread running amok in the city because, according to the Shadowtome, it could not long endure existence on this plane. Since negative energy made up so much of a dread's being, existence on this plane—a plane full of positive energy—caused it immense pain.

Or some such. Riven had ignored most of Malix's explanation. It was enough for him that the dread would kill the Righteous Man and then leave. He smiled viciously. Kill and then leave. He liked that. He had done the same countless times himself, was doing so again now. Killing and then leaving.

After he walked out of the guildhouse tonight, his time as a Night Knife was over. The Night Knives were over. When Riven informed Malix of the Righteous Man's death, the Zhentarim would pounce on the leaderless guild. Without someone to organize a defense, the Night Knives would be easy prey. The Zhentarim would hunt them down, recruit those who

would turn, and kill the rest.

The rest will be a lot, Riven figured, with a backward look at the shrine. Too many of the Knives had become religious fanatics. Far too many. They would not be open to recruitment. Zealots didn't change sides, they were martyred.

This guild is already a cooling corpse, he thought. Other than he and Cale, everyone else in the guild had the mind of a lackey, which was why they had been led to religion in the first place. None of them could lead the guild in a fight against the Zhentarim. They all would be easy fodder. Of course, Riven was prepared to acknowledge—reluctantly—that Cale *could* lead them, were he so inclined. But he was not so inclined. In fact, Riven suspected that Cale wanted *out* of the guild, not leadership of it. The leaderless Night Knives would soon be no more, another casualty in Selgaunt's ongoing gang wars.

Still, for the next few days Riven would have to lay low and watch his back. At least until after the Zhentarim hit the guildhouse. If anyone with a grudge survived the coming purge, they might notice his absence, put the puzzle together, and come looking for him. He wasn't afraid for his safety, but he didn't want the bother of fanatics trying to hunt him down.

He smiled, appreciating the irony. The rabid fanaticism of the Knives had been the very reason the Zhentarim had decided to move against them so forcefully in the first place. While Selgaunt's underworld *was* a viper's pit of competing organizations, none of them had been fanatical prior to the radicalization of the Night Knives. Thieves' guilds acted predictably; religious movements did not. Selgaunt's underworld could not long tolerate an unpredictable actor—unpredictability drew the attention of the city's otherwise disinterested authorities. The Zhentarim could not

allow that.

One more reason to spurn religion, Riven supposed with a contemptuous sneer. Where was your god tonight, old man? Holed up in the shrine, maybe? He chuckled aloud. Riven restricted his worship to only three things—sharp steel, cold coin, and warm women, in that order. Anything else was weakness.

Still chuckling, he turned his back to the shrine and strode down the hallway until he reached the oak door that opened into the storage room. Low voices from within carried through the wood. He spared one last glance over his shoulder—his last sight of this den of idiots—wiped the satisfied grin off his face, and pushed the door open.

Two men, Fek and Norwyl, decent thugs, not so decent sentries—hastily stood from their game of dice. Two small piles of silver lay at their feet, and a pair of ivory knucklebones rested on the floor between them. Asp eyes, Riven saw, and smiled coldly. Crates lined the walls. For light, Fek and Norwyl had stuffed a tallow candle into the tap of an empty keg. A filthy rug covered the floor.

“Riven,” Fek said in nervous surprise. The taller of the two, Fek wore a short sword at his belt and looked as though he hadn’t shaved his spotty beard in days. A wooden disc painted black and ringed with red at the edge hung from a leather thong around his neck—the makeshift symbol of Mask that many of the guild’s members had taken to wearing. Riven managed not to strangle him with it. Barely.

“Fek,” Riven replied with a nod. “Norwyl.”

Norwyl too wore the black disc about his neck. A nervous little man even shorter than Riven. Norwyl gestured at the knucklebones on the floor.

“Join us?” he asked halfheartedly. “Fek could use a change in his luck.”

"Piss off," Fek said.

"No," Riven briskly replied and pushed past them. He thought about killing them both, a sort of going-away present for the guild, but decided against it. They'd be dead soon enough. "I'm leaving for a few days," he announced. "Business for the Man."

Without waiting for a reply, he pulled up the dirty carpet—scattering the coins and dice—to expose a trapdoor with an iron pull ring. Norwyl and Fek merely watched, shifted from foot to foot, and said nothing further—they knew better than to ask him about his business or complain about the spilled coins. He had killed many men for much less.

He jerked the trapdoor open and wrinkled his nose at the stink of old sewage that raced up his nostrils. Without a glance at the two guards, he lowered himself over the side and slid down the rusty iron ladder. Halfway down, Norwyl's head appeared above him, framed in the candlelight. The guildsman's wooden holy symbol dangled from his neck, slowly twisted in the air. "Mask's favor," he called.

"Luck to you too," Riven grunted insincerely. You'll need it, he silently added.

With that, Norwyl slammed the trapdoor shut.

Riven, familiar with this exit, descended the rest of the ladder in darkness. When he reached the muck-covered floor, he took out his tinderbox, struck a flame, and lit a candle taken from his belt pouch. Surprised by the sudden light, rats squeaked and scurried for the comforting dark.

Riven pulled his crimson cloak close against the chill, shielded the small flame with one hand, and headed westward for the well exit onto Winding Way. As he walked, he replayed the events of the night in his head. *It is regrettable that Cale is not here to share this triumph*, the Righteous Man had said. Riven

frowned thoughtfully. Regrettable indeed. Hearing Cale scream as the dread devoured him would have been the sweetest triumph of all.



Yrsillar pushed the squealing soul of the Righteous Man into a dark corner of the mind they now shared. He smiled in satisfaction. The feel of pliable, fleshy lips—his lips!—peeling back over spit-wet teeth exhilarated him. He disdainfully wiped the snot and spittle from his new face and held his hand before his eyes for examination. He frowned when he saw that the spotted, wrinkled flesh of this body covered muscles and bones weakened with age.

Testing their limits, he repeatedly clenched and unclenched the fists of his new body, clawed the air, bent at the knees, twisted at the torso, and finally hopped up and down. Afterward, he hissed in satisfaction.

Though old, the body remained fit. Indeed, fit enough to contain Yrsillar's being and still provide a living shell that protected his emptiness from this plane. He felt no pain! None!

He reached his hands toward the ceiling and laughed, deep and long, a sound so full of power and malice that the true occupant of the body could never have produced it. The soul of the Righteous Man squirmed helplessly in its dark corner and Yrsillar laughed the more.

He had waited long for this day, centuries. Once before he had been summoned here. Over six hundred years ago as mortals measured time, a drow mage named Avarix had called his true name and drawn him here, had bound him and required for his freedom that he slay every member of a rival household. Yrsil-

lar had done so without compunction, reveled in the massacre, fed greedily on drow souls, but screamed in pain all the while. The energy of this plane ate away like acid at his being, burning, searing.

He had felt the scars of that first summoning for years, even after he had won his freedom from accursed Avarix. Throughout the long healing process, he had brooded, plotted. The lure of this place had pulled at him. A plane so full of life, so full of *food*. He had longed to return and gorge himself, but the unavoidable pain that accompanied his existence here had made such a return inconceivable. Inconceivable that was, until he had struck upon the simplest of solutions—possess a living mortal body and use its flesh to shield him from the poison that flooded this plane. With that plan in mind, he had nursed his hate, and waited patiently for another summons.

At last the call had come. This fool called the Righteous Man had cast a summoning and pronounced his true name. The powerful word had sped instantly through the intervening planes and resounded in Yrsillar's ears as though spoken beside him. Gleeefully, he had leaped upon the power thread and traced it back to this plane, his hunger for living souls lending him speed. Again however, he had found himself properly bound! His ingenious plan to possess his mortal summoner and remain here to feed caved in around him. Or nearly so. The other human had broken the binding and freed him.

He laughed and danced a gleeful little jig. As he did, his eyes fell on the Shadowtome, the hated book that held within its pages not only his true name, but also the *proper* way to bind him. What mortal had dared scribe such a thing? Avarix? Wretched book! Wretched drow!

“Rrrrar!” He kicked over the lectern and knocked the

book to the floor. Enraged, he stomped on it again and again, jumping up and down in a paroxysm of rage. A tendon in his calf snapped, but he ignored the twinge.

“Never! Never again!”

He ground the book into the floor with his heel until its torn, crumpled pages lay strewn about the room like blown leaves. “Never again,” he said, gasping. Fatigue was new to him. He rather disliked the sensation.

To assuage the feeling, he drank a small part of the Righteous Man’s soul for the first time. The tiny, fearful thing squirmed and tried to back away when it sensed Yrsillar turn inward and come for it, but its terror only whetted his appetite. He sipped from the top of the soul as a human would a fine liquor, savoring, taking delight in the horrified squeals of the Righteous Man’s being. As he drank, the memories, thoughts, and experiences of the human—the events that had shaped the soul—played out in his mind’s eye. The short, irrelevant life of the Righteous Man flashed through Yrsillar’s mind in the space of three heartbeats. He mocked its insignificance, enjoyed the failure of its lofty aspirations.

“A priest of Mask the *Shadowlord*,” he softly said to the walls, thinking aloud. “How very ironic. And with a loyal guild at your command. At *my* command,” he corrected.

The beginnings of a plan took shape in his mind. The soul of the Righteous Man sensed his scheme and squealed in protest. As discipline, Yrsillar drew off still more of the human’s life-force, sucked a writhing, twisting portion of it into his being. “Mind now,” he said with a vicious grin. “Mind, or I’ll have the rest.”

The soul retreated, weakened, defeated.

“Take heart,” Yrsillar mocked. “Though you’ll not become the Champion of Mask, neither will the two you

had thought your rivals for the honor." He laughed aloud, a deep sinister sound that bounced off the walls. The Righteous Man's soul curled in on itself, horrified. Yrsillar thought of Mask's discomfiture in Hades and smiled. "So much too for *your* lofty aspirations, Shadowlord," he mocked.

To execute his plan, he would need more of his kind, lesser dreads that could exist on this plane without pain. Together, they would lead these shadow mongering Mask worshipers in an orgy of slaughter. He gleefully pictured the bloodletting to come and laughed still more.

With an exercise of will, he brought a gate to Belistor into existence. An empty hole formed in the air above the toppled lectern. Hisses and moans sounded through the gate, music to Yrsillar's ears, a reminder of his home plane.

"Araniskeel and Greeve," he softly hissed. "Come forth."

Instantly, four yellow pinpoint of light took shape within the emptiness and drew closer. Shadows coalesced around the gate, solidified into clawed, winged shapes similar to, but smaller than, Yrsillar's natural form. The two shadows streaked from the gate and screamed their malice into the air of the chamber.

"Welcome, little brethren," hissed Yrsillar.

Despite his human shell, they recognized him immediately. Obsequious as always, they bowed and fawned, flitted about his person like moths. With only slight ties to the plane of unlife, these lesser dreads felt no pain from this plane. Perfect tools to bring him power and food.

"Yrsillar calls and we answer."

"Great Yrsillar, what is your will?"

"My will is to rule and to feed," he pronounced. "And this plane is my realm and table."

“Feed,” they hissed in echo. “Feed.”

Yrsillar smiled, smoothed his velvet robe, and gestured expansively. “You look upon the servant of Mask,” he announced.

Their yellow eyes narrowed quizzically and he began to laugh. “In good time, little brethren. For now, there is much to be done. Then we shall feed.”

“Feed,” they hissed eagerly. “Feed.”