



TROY DENNING

THE SENTINEL

FORGOTTEN REALMS®



Book
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THE SENTINEL

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Published by Wizards of the Coast LLC. Manufactured by: Hasbro SA, Rue Emile-Boéchat 31, 2800 Delémont, CH. Represented by Hasbro Europe, 4 The Square, Stockley Park, Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB11 1ET, UK.

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Prophecy by: James Wyatt
Cartography by: Mike Schley
Cover art by: Tyler Jacobson
First Printing: April 2014

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-0-7869-6459-8
ISBN: 978-0-7869-6548-9 (ebook)
620A435900001 EN

Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress

Contact Us at Wizards.com/CustomerService
Wizards of the Coast LLC, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057-0707, USA
USA & Canada: (800) 324-6496 or (425) 204-8069
Europe: +32(0) 70 233 277



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CHAPTER 1



2 Uktar, the Year of the Nether Mountain Scrolls (1486 DR)
Marsember, Cormyr

THE EYES WERE THE FIRST SIGN OF TROUBLE, A PAIR OF STEEL-BLUE
Tovals staring out from beneath a storefront awning across the street. Focused and intense, they were watching something on the wagon-choked boulevard, fixing on it the way a predator fixes on prey.

“Those priests have to go,” said a hoarse voice down in front of Kleef. “You can see that, can’t you?”

The voice belonged to a ruddy-cheeked cloth merchant. A moment before, Kleef had climbed onto the side of the man’s wagon, trying to see what was clogging Starmouth Way. The merchant had immediately begun to harangue him about removing a group of street-corner priests who were attracting a crowd and blocking the square ahead.

Kleef continued to ignore the fellow and continued to studied the steel-blue eyes across the way. So bright they almost seemed to glow, the eyes were set beneath a heavy brow, in a gaunt, gray face that appeared to shift hues with the shadows. The shoulders beneath were broad and sturdy and covered by a dusky cloak that seemed to blur at the edges. Through the press of the crowd, it was difficult to tell much more about the figure—except that he had a commanding presence that seemed to insulate him from the jostling mob.

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As a topsword in the Marsember Watch, Kleef Kenric had more experience fighting back-alley cutthroats than Shadovar spies—but he was fairly certain he was looking at one now. He had been warned to expect them before the actual assault began, and scouts from the Purple Dragons had been arriving since yesterday with reports of the enemy’s approach.

Hoping to spot the Shadovar’s quarry, Kleef shifted his attention to the middle of the boulevard. It took only a moment to find the likely target: a beautiful woman whose long, flame-red hair cascaded down the shoulders of her fine green cloak. She was moving against the traffic, glancing back as though aware she was being stalked. Even from a distance, Kleef could see that her eyes matched the emerald-green hue of her cloak. Following close on her heels was a slovenly little man with a round head and a thin frame, dressed in a drab gray robe that hung on him as though it had been draped over a skeleton. Despite the press of the crowd, people were moving aside to let them pass, smiling and nodding at the woman but scowling and wrinkling their noses at her companion.

Kleef had only been watching the pair for a moment when a mule cart piled high with furniture and children pulled alongside him, blocking his view. Almost instantly, the cart’s progress was blocked by the wall of wagons that had already attempted the same maneuver, and Kleef found himself staring into the wide-eyed faces of three young boys, all sitting upon an overturned table. The youngest was clutching a small white dog that flattened its ears and began to bark at him.

The cloth merchant grew more impatient. “Well, Watchman? Are you going to do your job or not?” He waved the handle of his ox whip in front of Kleef’s eyes, then pointed it up the clogged boulevard. “Those charlatan priests are the problem. You have to get rid of them.”

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Kleef dropped his gaze to the merchant, a ruddy-cheeked man with a slim crescent of chain mail peeking out from the neck of his silken robes. Seated on the bench beside him were a haggard-looking woman and two young, weary-looking girls.

“I see a lot of things,” Kleef said. As he spoke, he tried to peer past the mule cart and catch another glimpse of the Shadovar. “I can’t fix them all.”

“But you *can* remove the priests, can you not?” The merchant slipped a hand beneath his robes and withdrew five gold lions. “Surely you see how they’re bringing the entire evacuation to a halt?”

Kleef felt his lip curl at the offer of a bribe. But with an enemy spy already inside the city, now was hardly the time to slap an ordinary merchant in the stocks. Kleef started to step off the wagon.

“Perhaps you didn’t understand me, Watchman.” The merchant’s voice grew more urgent, and a metallic jingle sounded from his palm. “With the crowds they’re drawing, those priests are endangering everyone. You *need* to clear the streets.”

Kleef glanced over to find that the palm now held ten gold coins. He stopped mid-descent, one boot still on the wagon’s footboard and the other on the boarding step. Despite the insult of the gold, the merchant was right about one thing: Starmouth Way was so choked by top-heavy carts and wagons that it was impossible to see even fifty paces ahead—and it was as much Kleef’s duty to keep the evacuation moving as it was to watch the Shadovar spy.

And the merchant was right about the priests, too. Kleef could not actually see them, but they were clearly audible, using the magic of their gods to make their booming voices heard above the din of the evacuation, above the creaking axles and lowing oxen, the shouts of impatient evacuees and the wails of frightened children. From the sound of it, at least one priest stood preaching on each of the four corners of the square ahead, and each priest

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was heralding the end of the world, swearing that his god alone could offer salvation.

It was no wonder crowds were stopping to listen. There were streaks of greenish-blue flame in the sky, and just that morning, the streets had shaken so hard that an entire neighborhood in the Canal District had slid into the water. People wanted to believe that the right prayer would return their lives to normal—that if they offered a large enough donation to the priests, or made a large enough sacrifice, it would save them from the coming cataclysm.

Fools.

The gods might spare them, but the Shadovar would not. From what Kleef had heard, the entire kingdom of Cormyr was falling. Riders from the Purple Dragons arrived at the King's Tower every day to bring news of a fresh disaster—Myth Drannor was besieged, the Netherese were storming Arabel and marching south toward Suzail, the shadow fiends had escaped their prison in Wheloon and would soon be descending upon Marsember. By some accounts, the fiends might even arrive before the next dawn—news that had not been shared widely, lest the evacuation turn into a riot.

The merchant continued to offer the coins expectantly. Kleef pulled himself higher and craned his neck, trying to catch sight of the Shadovar as he weighed his responsibilities. On the one hand, it was important to stop the spy. On the other, it was his duty to keep the evacuation moving. Without a doubt, the Law of Service—the law of his god, Helm—prohibited the taking of bribes. But Helm had been silent for a hundred years, and these were unusual times. Kleef was beginning to see how the merchant's gold might allow him to go after the spy *and* clear the priests from the square.

A curtain of sapphire light flashed across the western sky, and Starmouth Way surged a few inches upward, cracking and crunching as cobblestones popped free of the street. In the next instant, the

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lowing and braying of terrified draft animals was echoing off the swaying storefronts, and the merchant's moon-faced wife began to grow impatient.

"Hantur, this is no time to be cheap!" she said. "With this mob, you're asking the good watchman to take his life into his hands. Give him twenty."

"*Twenty* gold lions?" Hantur gasped. "That's as much as he earns in a month!"

"And you had me up all night rolling cloth worth a thousand times that," she countered. "With the portals corrupted and the travel-wizards dead or gone, you'll pay him twenty platinum *tricrowns*, if that's what it takes to get us out of this city."

Hantur scowled, but he reached under his robe for more coins. It made Kleef's stomach turn to even consider taking the bribe, but he knew that most of his fellow watchmen would have laughed at his aversion. The Marsember Watch had been founded in a cesspool of corruption nearly a century ago, when the merchant's guild had decided the city needed its own militia to protect its members' interests—and to prevent the local garrison of Purple Dragons from interfering with the way they conducted business. And not much had changed in the last hundred years.

Hantur's hand came out again, filled with more gold. "Twenty lions," he said to Kleef. "If you want more, go rob someone else."

Kleef sighed. "*Ten* gold lions is enough," he said, putting his hand out. "And offer no more bribes. In this madness, there are too many who will see it as a chance to take your entire purse."

Hantur frowned, clearly insulted. "I know how to conduct my own business, Watchman." The merchant dropped ten gold into Kleef's palm, then tucked the rest back inside his robes. "Just get on with your job—and be quick about it. This wagon should be halfway to Suzail by now."

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Kleef felt his jaw clench at the merchant's tone, but he supposed such treatment was to be expected when a watchman opened his hand for gold. He cast one last glance across the boulevard and, finding the mule cart still blocking his view, dropped off the wagon. He moved to the near side of the street, where his small troop of uniformed drunkards and wastrels stood waiting in an alcove, their short swords still sheathed and their halberds resting against their shoulders.

Kleef motioned for his troop to gather around, then said, "We can't have the evacuation choked off like this." He turned to the largest man, a heavy-jawed brute with legs like tree trunks. "Tanner, take the troop and remove those priests from the square."

"And do *what* with them, Topsword?" Tanner gave him a sly grin. "Dump their bodies in the lagoon?"

"If it comes to that, yes." Kleef could see the surprise in the faces of his men, for he had never been one to tolerate the mistreatment of prisoners. "It might be less work to just escort the priests outside the city walls and order them to stay there, but do what you need to do. If we don't get those wagons rolling through Wilhastle Square before the assault begins, we'll have a riot on our hands."

Kleef held out his hand, displaying the coins the merchant had given him, then added, "Clear the square within a quarter hour, and there's a gold lion for each of you."

His first blade, a young Shou from the now-flooded quarter of Xiousing, scowled in open disapproval. The rest of the troop looked confused and suspicious.

"That's a mean joke," said the oldest man, a gray-stubbled fellow named Rathul. "We're selling our lives cheap as it is. There's no need to rub our noses in—"

"Does it look like I'm joking?" Kleef interrupted. "Clear the square, and the gold is yours."

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The men continued to look wary.

“Right,” scoffed Ardul, a fuzzy-cheeked youth. “So you can flog us for taking a bribe? This must be another one of your tests.”

“No test,” Kleef said, allowing his frustration to color his voice. “Times are desperate, and I need you to clear that square without Jang and me. *Now.*”

Tanner frowned. “So, we’ll all be in the square, while you and Jang are . . . doing *what*, exactly?”

Normally, Kleef would have rebuffed the question with a curt reminder of who gave the orders. But not much was normal right then. Dozens of senior watchmen had already deserted their posts, and that morning, even the day-watch oversword had failed to report for duty.

Kleef sighed and pointed across the street. “Jang and I will be back there somewhere, watching a Shadovar spy.”

“The Shadovar are inside the city?” Jang gasped. “Already?”

“I believe I’ve spotted *one*,” Kleef said, hedging a little, since he had not yet confirmed his suspicions, and he did not want his men to panic or rethink their priorities. “Maybe I’m wrong, but Jang and I need to check it out.”

Tanner raised his brow, studying Kleef with grudging respect. “Just the two of you? Alone?”

“No choice,” Kleef said, knowing that Tanner and the rest of his troop’s ready blades would be more hindrance than help against a Netherese shadow warrior. “Someone has to clear the square. Besides, if I bring more men, he’ll see us coming.”

Tanner’s gaze drifted back to the coins in Kleef’s palm. “Makes sense,” he said. “But maybe you should leave the coins with me, just in case you don’t—”

“Sorry,” Kleef said, closing his hand. “Clear the square *first*. If I don’t return—”

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“Don’t worry, we’ll come and find you.” Tanner grinned, displaying a set of broken brown teeth, then added, “Or whatever is left of you. You’ll be carrying our gold, remember?”

With that, the big man turned and, using his halberd to shove and poke his way through the crowd, led his companions toward Wilhastle Square. Kleef motioned for Jang, then started down the street in the opposite direction, bulling his way through the pedestrians. It was difficult to see anything on the far side of the wide street, but Kleef knew his best chance of locating the Shadovar again lay in finding the red-haired woman.

Jang seemed to slip through the crowd like an eel, and he easily kept pace with Kleef. “Now *you* are giving bribes?”

“Not really,” Kleef said.

Jang was the only man under his command whose respect truly mattered to him. The Shou wielded a blade almost as well as Kleef did, and he followed a code of honor as strict as Helm’s Law. Unlike Kleef, however, Jang hadn’t devoted his life to faithful service; he was simply an honorable man, and Kleef both admired and envied him for that.

“I just needed a way to keep the troop from deserting the instant we’re out of sight.”

“By offering *them* a bribe,” Jang insisted. “It is good that you follow Helm. A dead god will not punish you for ignoring his laws.”

Kleef winced. He *was* stretching Helm’s Law of Service, but he saw no alternative. He knew his troop too well to think they would clear the square without the promise of gold. Moreover, Helm had been gone so long that even his most devoted worshipers considered his Law more of a guideline than an inviolable code. Under the circumstances, was it wrong of Kleef to think the same way?

After twenty paces, Kleef glanced over the backs of two stamping mules and caught a glimpse of green wool slicing through the crowd

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near the middle of the street. He tugged Jang's sleeve and stepped into the slender gap in front of the mules' noses. The beasts brayed and balked, but Jang quickly grabbed their halters and calmed them with a few words of whispered Shou.

Kleef located the flash of green again, about ten paces away and still pushing against the traffic. The woman had wisely concealed her hair by raising the hood of her cloak, but the green was so bright and distinctive that it drew almost as much attention.

Still, something seemed wrong to Kleef, and after a moment, he realized the woman was not moving through the press of bodies as easily as she had before. Now she was shouldering her way ahead, not looking back at all, and there was no sign of her short companion.

"Stinking Hells!" Kleef pointed at the green hood. "Fetch the one in the green cloak. I have questions."

Jang acknowledged the order with a curt nod and slipped into the crowd. Shaking his head at his own folly, Kleef shoved through the mob in the opposite direction, until he found a spot where he could view the far side of the street. Here, the river of pedestrians was roughly ten people wide. In the absence of wagons, they were pulling handcarts and carrying heavy rucksacks, creeping toward Wilhastle Square at a tortoise's pace.

Kleef stepped onto another wagon to get a better look. Neither the red-haired woman nor her short companion were anywhere in sight, but a dusky-robed figure was skulking along the walkway, moving against traffic and still keeping a watchful eye on the middle of the street. The man's eyes were not visible, but there was a vague haziness around the edges of his silhouette, a kind of murkiness that suggested shadow magic, and Kleef began to hope that he had found the spy again.

Then the figure looked directly at him, revealing an ashen face with a long chin and brown, faintly glowing eyes. His gaze slid past

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Kleef without pause, then he turned around and began to move through the crowd again. As the man drifted away from the buildings, his drab robe faded to gray, and he grew indistinguishable from the rest of the mob.

Kleef resisted the impulse to go after him. He had never seen a Shadovar before today, much less hunted one. But he had been told by a member of the Purple Dragons that there were several kinds of Shadovar, and that the ones with the lambent eyes—the *shades*—were the most cunning and dangerous. So, trailing the spy now seemed unlikely to accomplish anything more than leading Kleef into an ambush. It would be much smarter to find the red-haired woman, then ambush the shade when he attempted to take his quarry.

Jang returned to Kleef's side, engulfed by a cloud of fragrance so sweet and fresh that it masked the stench of manure and urine that pervaded the street. The Shou's hand was locked on the elbow of the slender figure wearing the green cloak. Kleef reached out and snatched back the hood, exposing the dirty blond hair and sunken-cheeked face of a teenage street urchin. A *boy*, no less. No doubt the cloak was the source of the perfume.

Kleef ordered Jang to keep watch for Shadovar, then grabbed the urchin by the back of his neck and pushed him off the street, seeking the privacy of a doorway. Once he felt certain he could question the boy without being observed by the spy, Kleef took the front of the cloak and rubbed the soft green cashmere between his fingers.

"Nice cloak," he said. "How did you come by it?"

The urchin raised his chin. "I didn't steal it, if that's what you mean. It's mine."

"That so?" Kleef knotted his fist into the cloth, then lifted the urchin off the ground and made a show of sniffing around his collar. "Pretty nice perfume for a guttersnipe like you—especially a *boy* guttersnipe."

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"I'm no boy," the urchin said. "I'm a man."

"A *boy*. . . who smells as sweet as a noblewoman." Kleef lowered the urchin back to the street, but continued to hold the cloth. "You can keep the cloak, but I need to find the lady who gave it to you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the urchin said. "I took this cloak off a cart."

Kleef raised a brow. "You're admitting you stole it?" he asked. "*Confessing* to thievery, just like that?"

The urchin paled. "I mean, it fell off a cart, and I picked it up." He looked away. "If you want my thumb for that, I guess I can't stop you."

"You'd give up a thumb for the red-haired woman?" Kleef was truly surprised. Marsember's street urchins were not the kind to make noble sacrifices. "Who is she to you?"

The bewilderment that washed over the urchin's face told Kleef all he needed to know. The boy had no idea who the woman was—or even why he was trying to protect her. She had probably charmed him with magic.

"Look," Kleef continued, "if you truly want to help the lady, you *will* tell me where she went. She's being hunted by a dangerous sort. She'll be much better off if I find her first."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I *expect* you to answer me." Kleef took a deep breath, then switched to a more kindly, fatherly voice. "Since you're a man, I'll tell it to you straight. It's not *me* this woman is running from. It's the Shadovar."

"There are *Shadovar* in the city?"

"At least one—a shade no less—and he's hunting your red-haired lady." Kleef released the urchin. "Now, will you help her or not?"

The urchin looked uncertain for a moment, then finally nodded. "She's so beautiful," he said. "I can't believe she asked *me* for help."

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“Go on,” Kleef urged. “Everything you remember.”

“There isn’t much,” the urchin said. “She just smiled at me and said she would consider it a kindness if I took her cloak and wore it.”

“That’s all?” Kleef asked.

“That’s all she *said*,” the urchin replied. “But there was a look in her eyes. It felt like we had known each other forever. I could tell she liked me . . . she liked me a *lot*.”

Kleef nodded to himself. Charm magic, for certain. “And I suppose she told you to pull up the hood?”

The urchin shook his head. “That was my idea,” he said. “I knew she was being chased, and I wanted to draw them off.”

“*How* did you know she was being chased?”

The urchin frowned, clearly confused. “I don’t know. I guess it was the way her manservant kept watch,” he said. His face brightened, remembering. “And the servant said something like, ‘There is one of the devils now,’ and then he led her away.”

Kleef felt his belly sinking. “*One* of the devils?” he asked. “You’re sure he said that exactly?”

The urchin nodded. “That’s what I heard. And then he grabbed her arm and pulled her into Backstabber Alley, just like I said.”

Actually, the urchin hadn’t said anything about Backstabber Alley, but it seemed an honest mistake. Kleef reached into his belt pouch and removed a Watch flan—a steel meal token the Watch used to buy the cooperation of the hungry—and passed it to the boy.

“Take that to King’s Tower and tell the gatekeeper you’ve been of service to Kleef Kenric,” he said. “Got that? He’ll see that your belly is filled before you leave Marsember.”

The urchin took the flan. “Kleef Kenric. Got it.” He paused, then frowned. “Wait—are you throwing me out of Marsember?”

Kleef frowned. “I’m trying to look out for you, boy. The shadow fiends of Wheloon have escaped their prison, and they’re marching

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against us. Even the lord marshal doubts we can hold the city, and with the war against Netheril going the way it is, there won't be any help from the Purple Dragons."

The urchin shrugged. "What do I care who rules this city—or the Realm?" he asked. "Either way, I sleep in a doorway. But I hope you help the lady. I liked her."

"I'll do what I can," Kleef promised. He thought about trying to persuade the urchin to leave, but then realized a boy alone wouldn't be much safer on the open road than he was on the familiar ground of the city. He took a few more Watch flans from his belt pouch and gave them to the waif. "I suppose every man has the right to face his doom how he will. The Watch will be looking for bolt-loaders to help man the walls. You could join them, if you decide you want to make your death count for something."

The urchin looked at Kleef as though he were daft. "Thanks, but I won't." He closed his hand around the meal tokens. "Can I go?"

Kleef nodded. Fighting to overcome a rising tide of bitterness and despair, he started back toward Jang. Raised in a household devoted to Helm, Kleef had joined the city Watch as soon as he was of age. Like his father and grandfather before him, he had dedicated his entire life to bringing Helm's Law of Service to his fellow watchmen. But the corruption of the order's founders simply ran too deep. After three generations of effort, the Kenric line had nothing to show for its faith but the knowledge that they had stayed true to the teachings of a dead god. If the inhabitants of Marsember had no interest in helping to save their city, the Watch had only itself to blame.

Kleef returned to Jang's side.

"I have seen no sign of any Shadovar," the Shou said. "I hope you learned something."

"I did." Kleef motioned for Jang to follow him, then started plowing through the crowd, angling up Starmouth Way. "It seems

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the woman and her manservant are headed down Backstabber Alley.”

“A bad choice for someone who is fleeing a Shadovar,” Jang said. Backstabber Alley was aptly named, for it was a crooked and narrow gauntlet, lined with dark doorways and crannies where trouble invariably lay waiting. “They must not be familiar with the city.”

“Probably not,” Kleef agreed. “We’ll circle around fast and take Rover’s Way, then catch them at the other end of the alley. That way, we can take them by surprise—and the Shadovar spies, too, if they’ve caught up.”

“*Spies?*” Jang asked, slipping to his side. “There is more than one?”
“That’s the way it sounds.”

They reached High Bridge Road. It was filled with foot traffic, all flowing away from Starmouth. No doubt most of the pedestrians hoped to detour around the jam in Wilhastle Square. To make up for lost time, Kleef did his best to run along the edge of the street, shouting, “Make way for the Watch!” while shoving dawdlers aside with well-placed forearms. He and Jang often had to bound over handcarts, and twice, Kleef found it necessary to throw a slow-moving crone over his shoulder and carry her a few paces until he found a safe place to deposit her. By the time they reached Rover’s Way, a narrow cross-lane that led to Backstabber Alley, both men were sweating and breathing hard.

Kleef slowed to a walk and slipped his greatsword, *Watcher*, off his back, then unsheathed it and returned the empty scabbard to its place. Jang drew his own blade—a slender Shou katana—off his hip, and together they turned the corner into Rover’s Way. Though the lane was nearly ten feet wide, it was so littered with discarded belongings that a donkey cart could not have passed through. Pushing their way past all the paupers picking through the refuse, Kleef and Jang advanced nearly a hundred paces before

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they finally saw Backstabber Alley opening onto Rover's Way on the right.

As they approached the mouth of the alley, Kleef listened for screams or the sound of running boots, anything to suggest the Shadovar had caught their quarry. He heard only the nervous murmurs of the paupers on Rover's Way, who were quick to shy away from two watchmen with drawn blades. In normal times, Kleef would have also heard the *bang* of slamming shutters overhead and the thud of crossbars falling across doors, but times were not normal. The residents of Rover's Way had already fled, leaving their homes open to the urchins and thieves in hopes of one day returning to find the doors still hanging on the hinges.

The two watchmen were a dozen steps from Backstabber Alley when a small cone of blue radiance flared in front of Kleef. Stunned, he dropped into a fighting crouch, his eyes scanning left and right for the source of the spell.

When he found none, Kleef's blood ran cold.

He removed a hand from Watcher's hilt to wave Jang back. As his other hand rebalanced the sword, rolling it slightly downward, the blue cone faded to a glow. It was only then that Kleef realized the blue light was emanating from a decoration on the crossguard of the sword itself: a blue agate surrounded by the etching of a large eye—*Helm's Eye*.

Kleef's jaw dropped. Watcher had been in his family since the time of Ildool, and there was no doubting its magic. In the hands of a true Kenric, it was as light as a dagger, yet no one outside the family had the strength to wield it. A set of runes etched into the blade read *STAY TRUE AND SO WILL YOUR STEEL*, a motto that had proven itself accurate time and again as the greatsword cleaved oak shields and steel armor. But as far as Kleef knew, that was the extent of the sword's power. Never

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had anyone mentioned a blue light, and Kleef had never seen the agate glow as it did now.

Jang touched his shoulder and whispered. “What does that mean?”

Before Kleef could reply, a trio of dusky figures stepped out of a doorway opposite Backstabber Alley, all three with the lambent eyes of shades gleaming beneath their cowls. The figure in the lead swung a hand, and a scythe of darkness swept across Rover’s Way, slicing through a half-dozen paupers who had been scurrying up the lane ahead of Kleef and Jang.

A panicked voice, nasal and male, rang out of Backstabber Alley. “Go back! We’re trapped!”

By then, the three shades were springing toward the mouth of the alley, and Kleef and Jang were charging up Rover’s Way to attack the trio’s flank.

Kleef arrived first, bringing Watcher around in a chest-high strike that took the nearest shade from behind. The blade dragged a bit as it sliced up through the warrior’s shoulder. Kleef pivoted, putting all his strength into the attack, and felt the sword drive the rest of the way through. The shade’s torso came apart in a spray of blood and darkness.

Jang was already on the second shade, his slender katana hissing and whistling as he attacked high and low, severing first tendons, then limbs, and finally rising toward the neck.

Kleef glimpsed the third warrior spinning to attack Jang from behind. Kleef stepped forward, using a shoulder to bull the shade off balance, then leaned away and brought Watcher up in a one-handed slash. The blade entered beneath the warrior’s armpit and did not stop until it was halfway through his chest. Kleef used his free arm to knock the dying shade off his sword, then brought his weapon back around to send the fellow’s head tumbling.

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Like the rest of the Watch, he had been told to behead a shade every time, that it was the only way to be sure that the shadowstuff would not heal him. He glanced over and found Jang already spinning away from his headless foe, putting his back to the wall on the far side of the alley mouth. Kleef did the same on his side, and by the time the third body had hit the cobblestones, he and Jang were flanking the mouth of Backstabber Alley.

From inside the alley came the sound of running. Two sets of feet—one clumsy and loud, the other light and graceful. Kleef caught Jang's eye and wagged two fingers, then held his palm open and level, indicating they should let both runners pass.

Jang nodded, and the odd little man Kleef had glimpsed earlier burst from the alley. Gaunt and round-headed, with bulging eyes and thick lips, he was clutching a gray satchel to his bony chest. He hopped over the carnage in the street with no hint of revulsion or surprise, then turned right and raced up the lane without a backward glance.

The red-haired woman appeared an instant later, her green eyes going wide at the sight of so many bodies cut into so many pieces. Absent her cloak, she was wearing a silk tunic belted over leather trousers. Her right hand carried a slender short sword. Despite her practical attire, she was lovelier than any woman Kleef had ever seen, and when she glanced over at him, he felt the same sense of warmth and familiarity that the urchin had described.

Kleef pointed up the lane in the direction her manservant had fled, then silently mouthed the word, "Go."

She responded with a smile that made Kleef go even warmer inside, and he began to wonder just what he had gotten himself into.

Then the agate on Watcher's crossguard began to glow more intensely, and Kleef glimpsed a blur of motion across Rover's Way. He turned to find another shade emerging from the same dark doorway

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as the first three warriors. To Kleef, it seemed the dark figure was not just stepping out of the shadows—he was dividing from them.

The woman's face grew pale, but she flicked a hand in the enemy's direction. A trio of white darts appeared at her fingertips and streaked across the lane. Her target dropped to one knee, crouching behind his arm and raising a shield of swirling shadow.

The first dart hit the shield and sizzled out of existence. The second vanished in a crackling flash that also took down the shield. The third sank into the warrior's ribs, buckling him forward. He sprawled in the lane, writhing in pain and bleeding shadowstuff onto the cobblestones.

By then, the woman was five paces up Rover's Way, and Kleef was leaping across the lane. He beheaded the fallen shade with a single swipe, then stepped into the doorway from which the warrior had emerged. A blazing blue radiance shone from Helm's Eye, dispelling the darkness within. He found himself looking at a small foyer, in which a ropy, half-formed silhouette was being pushed into the far corner by the light of his sword. Kleef glimpsed a gray, grimacing face, then the dark figure melted into the last remnants of shadow and vanished.

Kleef had been warned that Shadovar warriors could sometimes move through shadows, but with Jang's slender sword singing in the lane behind him, he had no time to consider what he had just seen. He whirled out of the doorway with Watcher still aglow and found Jang dancing around in front of him, his slender sword chopping and slashing in a shadow-cleaving blur. Already, a pair of gray limbs lay oozing darkness onto the street, and the warrior who had lost them had dropped to his knees. Jang's blade whistled back around and sent the shade's head flying.

A piercing hiss sounded from the black mouth of the alley. Jang stumbled backward, his sword arm falling limp and his katana flying free.

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Kleef leaped forward, snatching the katana on the fly. “Jang, with me!”

He retreated a few paces down Rover’s Way, away from the woman, then turned to Jang. Part of the Shou’s breastplate had shattered, and his right shoulder and breast were exposed, revealing a patch of flesh that look bruised, black, and icy. His right arm hung useless, but at least he was keeping up. Kleef held the katana out and was relieved to see Jang take the weapon with his left hand.

“Time for you to withdraw,” Kleef said, nodding his friend down the lane. “Report to the King’s Tower.”

Three more shades spilled from the alley’s mouth. The first two turned away, continuing after the woman and her manservant. The last one stepped into the middle of the street and turned to face the two watchmen, studying them with the bright, steel-blue eyes that had first caught Kleef’s attention.

“Go.” Kleef pushed Jang behind him, back toward the entrance to Rover’s Way. “Tell the lord marshall we have Shadovar assassins in the city.”

“And leave you behind?” Jang gasped. “Never.”

“It’s not a suggestion, Jang. Someone needs to report.” As Kleef spoke, he continued to watch the last shade—who was merely watching *him*, not yet advancing. “Tell the lord marshall it looks like they’ll end up in the Canal District. Have him send reinforcements down High Bridge Road.”

“And that is where we’ll meet?” Jang asked, his voice still reluctant. “High Bridge Road?”

Kleef nodded. “I’m going to keep an eye on the chase,” he said. “But I’ll look for you there.”

As Kleef spoke the words, the agate on Watcher’s crossguard glowed brighter—this time, casting its blue beam a dozen paces

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down the lane. Kleef adjusted his stance so the light fell directly on the steel-eyed warrior.

The Shadovar merely grinned, showing a pair of white fangs as long as fingers. Then he raised his arm and vanished behind a shield of darkness.