



RICHARD LEE BYERS

THE REAVER

FORGOTTEN REALMS®



Book
IV



THE REAVER

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CHAPTER ONE



Eleint, the Year of the Nether Mountain Scrolls (1486 DR)

THE COLD RAIN HAMMERED DOWN LIKE A WATERFALL. COMBINED with the gray clouds shrouding the sky from horizon to horizon, it was blinding. Peering around the corner of a peasant's cottage at more of the shacks, sheds, and pigpens that made up the ramshackle village, Anton Marivaldi took solace in the reflection that the enemy couldn't see him and his crew either.

Then darts of crimson light leaped out of the gloom and streaked at Atala. Like her captain, the pirate with the wheat-blond braids had been trying to spot the foe, and now she sought to duck back down behind the donkey cart she'd been using for cover. She was too slow, though, and a pair of the arcane missiles pierced her face. They didn't leave holes or any sort of visible wounds, but Atala flopped down in the mud, shuddered for a moment, and then lay still.

"I stand corrected," Anton murmured. "Someone can see." Perhaps the wizard had worked magic to sharpen his sight.

From beneath a broad-brimmed hat that shielded from the rain narrow gray eyes set in a long, dour countenance, Naraxes Corieth said, "I say we retreat before the wretches circle around and block the way back to the ship."

Anton snorted. "How likely is that?"

"How likely was it the child would turn out to have bodyguards," his first mate retorted, "and one of them a mage? How likely was it that all these farmers would risk their lives to protect him?"

RICHARD LEE BYERS

Anton smiled. "It's the little surprises that make life interesting."

"Curse it, Captain, one man fell overboard before we even got here because you sailed us into the teeth of that storm—"

"We needed to reach this place before the boy moved on."

"—and now I count three more of our comrades lying dead!"

"You may count twenty before we're done. But the rest of us will be rich, and that's what matters." Anton turned to survey the crew at large.

His men were well armed for raiders living in the days of the Great Rain, when the perpetual downpour so quickly ruined bowstrings and rusted mail that many folk had dispensed with them. Their weapons coupled with the willingness to *take* what they needed filled their bellies and provided creature comforts in a time of want. Yet even so, like many people their captain had encountered over the course of the last several months, they had a haggard cast to their faces.

Anton raised his voice to make himself heard over the hiss and clatter of the rain. "We're going to split into three groups and charge. Naraxes and his squad will swing left. Yuicoerr will take his to the right. I'll lead mine straight up the center."

The pirates looked back at him with a sullen lack of enthusiasm. Then Yuicoerr, the second mate, an Aglarondan whose pointed chin and slanted eyes bespoke a trace of elf blood, said, "What about the wizard?"

"He can't throw spells in three directions at once," Anton said.

"Maybe not," Naraxes said, "but he might have more trouble hitting us if we wait until dark."

Anton grinned. "Excellent idea. Unless, of course, the villages sent a runner in the direction of Teziir, in which case, cavalry will arrive before nightfall to butcher us all."

"Still," the first mate said, "one blast of frost or vitriol—"

"Enough!" Anton snapped. "You heard my orders. Now, everyone who isn't craven, count off by threes!"

For a moment, no one spoke. But then Roberc squared his shoulders and said, "One." And perhaps the example of the sole halfling

THE REAVER

in the company, an able fighter but one no bigger than the human child they sought, shamed the others into following suit.

Once the three squads formed up around their leaders, Anton took off his hooded cloak and hung it on a fence post so it wouldn't hinder him. The cold, stinging rain instantly plastered his inner garments to his skin. Suppressing a grimace, he drew his two curved blades, the long saber he customarily wielded in his left hand and the shorter cutlass, useful for parrying and close-in killing, he generally carried in his right.

The men around him still looked less than eager, but they did seem resigned. Some breathed heavily and glowered like madmen, summoning anger and the urge to violence. Others mouthed prayers, fingered lucky amulets, or guzzled from flasks and wineskins. In Anton's eyes, all such practices were equally pathetic. Still, whatever it took to steady the rogues so they could perform their function.

When he judged the crew ready, he said, "All right, charge on my signal, and whatever happens, keep going. Our first task is to kill the mage. The second is to seize the little boy. Alive, like Evendur Highcastle wants him."

He then turned in the direction of the foe, raised his saber over his head, swept it down, and lunged into the open. Scrambling out from behind the cottage, a cluster of nearby chicken coops, and a little shrine to Chauntea with a neglected-looking wooden statue of the Earthmother inside, the other pirates darted after him. Naraxes's and Yuicoerr's teams swung wide as instructed.

Anton's boots splashed up brown water from puddle after puddle. The mud alternately slid under his feet or clung to them like glue, threatening his balance either way. He squinted and blinked against the rain but still saw little sign of the enemy, just shadows in the dusky grayness up ahead.

Javelins plummeted at him and his companions.

But the folk who'd thrown them could, apparently, see no better than he could. Most of the weapons missed. On his right, though, a fellow renegade Turmishan, with skin the same mahogany brown

RICHARD LEE BYERS

and who still sported the long, black, squared-off beard his captain had long ago shaved off, caught a javelin where his neck met his shoulder and fell down thrashing. Another pirate tripped over him and pitched headlong in the muck.

Then a point of red light appeared amid the downpour. Even though Anton was looking for warning signs of hostile magic, it took him an instant to discern that the spark was moving, indeed, hurtling toward him and his companions fast as an arrow.

“Ware magic!” he roared. He sprang to the side and threw himself down to the ground.

Something boomed. Heat and yellow light washed over him, the ambient murk momentarily giving way to brightness. Men screamed, and when Anton raised his head, he saw them reel and drop as they burned like torches. The fires would go out quickly, doused by the rain, but likely not quickly enough to save them.

His striped purple sash, gold-trimmed crimson shirt, and the rest of his gaudy pirate finery now black with mud, Anton scrambled back to his feet. “Onward!” he screamed, charging once again, and as before, the survivors of the fiery attack raced after him, even though, as best he could judge, they only numbered half a dozen.

Anton watched for another spark, but none was forthcoming. Instead, thunder banged and a dazzling twist of lightning stabbed off to the left. Evidently satisfied with the harm he’d done to the pirates charging up the middle, the enemy mage turned his attention to Naraxes’s squad.

Anton grinned and thought, Wizard, you should have finished with me first.

At last a line of armed rustics appeared amid the pelting rain and the gloom. Anton’s respect for them increased a hair when he saw that they stood behind a low line of plows, horse troughs, and barrows. As barricades went, it wasn’t much, but it showed somebody was thinking.

Two men pulled crossbows out of the sacks that had thus far protected them from the wet. The weapons clacked, Anton sprang

THE REAVER

to the side, and neither of the quarrels found him. He couldn't tell if all the freebooters behind him had been as lucky. Nobody screamed, so it was possible.

When he came within range, a boar spear jabbed at him. He knocked it out of line with the saber and leaped high enough to clear the makeshift barrier, slashing while in the air.

The saber sliced a farmer's face from his right eye to the left corner of his mouth and sent him stumbling backward, but not quite far enough to open a gap. As Anton landed, he slammed into the peasant, and the impact staggered him as well.

The foes to either side pivoted toward him. He bulled forward, shoving the stunned peasant with the gashed face ahead of him, and his assailants' initial blows, a swing with a mallet and a chop with a hoe, missed.

Anton heaved the man with the ruined features away from him and down into the mud. In so doing, he recovered his balance and cleared sufficient space to use both swords to good effect. He whirled and cut, and the saber slashed open the belly of the farmer with the hoe.

The man with the mallet screamed and rushed in with his weapon raised for a bone-crushing strike to the head. Anton stepped in, twisted, and the blow fell harmlessly behind him. He slid the point of the cutlass between the peasant's ribs.

As that man dropped, another villager rounded on Anton with a pitchfork. When the thrust came, Anton rammed the cutlass between the tines, jerked the fork to the side, and lunged. The saber tore open the peasant's throat, and blood spurted.

By now, the other pirates had reached the barricade, and, howling and hacking, swarmed over and pushed the defenders back. Satisfied, Anton turned to locate the wizard and spotted him—or rather her—too. But another of the boy prophet's actual bodyguards was in the way.

The barrel-chested warrior had proper martial gear, a broadsword, targe, brigandine, and a conical helm with a nose guard sticking down between brown eyes. Judging from his stance—feet at right

RICHARD LEE BYERS

angles, blade high and slanting—he knew his trade and might well have learned it in Cormyr.

As he closed with the guard, Anton shifted to the left, then instantly back to the right. He feinted to the head, then whirled the saber low to slash beneath his opponent's shield.

Unfortunately, neither Anton's footwork nor his blade work deceived the warrior. The Cormyrean lowered the targe to deflect the true attack and cut over the top of it. Anton jerked sideways barely in time to keep the broadsword from cleaving his skull.

He grinned and tried a head cut of his own, but the targe jerked up and blocked it. Then he and his adversary traded attacks for the next few breaths. Neither scored, but the exchanges gave him the chance to take the Cormyrean's measure.

His initial impression was correct: The bodyguard was good. But like most swordsmen, he had a few favorite moves and an accustomed rhythm, and once Anton determined what they were, he likewise understood how to exploit them.

He waited for the Cormyrean to cut to the knee. When the attack came, he sidestepped and slashed at the other man's forearm.

But as he did, a stabbing pain in his gut turned the whirling extension of his arm into spastic flailing. The saber still reached the target but not squarely and not with the maiming force he'd intended.

A few paces behind the Cormyrean, the mage, a pale, slender moon elf whose blue cloak matched her tangled, rain-sodden hair, glared at Anton while holding a talisman over her head. He realized she'd cast a spell to cause the ongoing agony in his belly, and then the Cormyrean lunged and smashed the shield into him.

Anton reeled backward. The guard rushed him and bashed him again, this time knocking him down on his back in a puddle. His bloody right hand empty—Anton had evidently at least cut him badly enough to make him fumble the broadsword—the Cormyrean dropped to his knees beside his foe and raised the targe to smash the edge down on his head.

THE REAVER

The preparatory action opened him up, and the need to strike *now*, now or never, spurred Anton into motion despite the ripping pain in his stomach. He stabbed the cutlass up underneath the bodyguard's ribs, and his foe flopped down on top of him.

To Anton's relief, his spell-induced torment subsided a moment later. Otherwise, he might not have found the strength to flounder out from under the Cormyrean's corpse. He scrambled up and looked in the elf's direction.

Another man-at-arms fought hard to protect her, but two pirates kept him busy. Anton had a clear path to the wizard, and he charged her.

Magic filled her hand with a short sword made of blue and yellow fire. Raindrops puffed into steam when they struck the blade. But unfortunately for her, whatever the supernatural virtues of the conjured weapon, her technique with it was rudimentary, and it only took an instant to cut past her guard and into her torso.

As she fell, Anton noticed the brooch pinned to her mantle, a rolled-up silvery scroll sealed with a round white moon and a circle of blue stars. It looked like a coat of arms, perhaps the symbol of some sect or knightly order, but he didn't recognize it.

Nor did he have time to wonder about it. He cast about and observed that although there was still a little killing going on, he and his fellow pirates were victorious. Naraxes's and Yuicoerr's squads had assailed the enemy's flanks to murderous effect, and it looked like all the boy's actual bodyguards were dead. The only folk still resisting the raiders were a handful of peasants too stupid to quit.

The pirates disposed of the dolts in a few more heartbeats, and then, panting, Naraxes hurried in Anton's direction. "We won," the first mate said.

"Yes," Anton said, "we defeated a rabble of pig keepers. It's a glorious moment."

Naraxes scowled. "The crew fought like demons to give you what you wanted."

"I want the boy. I don't see him."

RICHARD LEE BYERS

“We just now finished fighting.”

“Then start searching. Every hovel, dunghill, and woodpile. And while you’re at it, round up all the peasants who are still alive.”

Anton led one of the search parties himself. It would make the task go that much faster, and he wanted something to occupy his mind.

He relished combat even at those moments when he took some hurt or feared for his life. It whetted existence into something sharp and simple. But in the aftermath, he sometimes suffered a bleak despondency, and when he felt such feelings rising, activity helped to quell them.

He didn’t find anyone who matched the description of the boy prophet or even any loot worth pocketing, just the cowering folk—children, mothers, the elderly and infirm—he flushed out of hiding. But when he marched them to join their fellow captives in the center of the village, he saw that some of the other searchers had been luckier.

In fact, one could argue they’d been too lucky. They’d found three little boys with blond hair and fair complexions, and on first inspection, there was nothing to distinguish the special one from the other two.

Anton could haul all three back to Pirate Isle and let Captain Highcastle identify the one he wanted. But what if *none* of them was the right child? It would be embarrassing to disappoint the self-proclaimed Chosen of Umberlee. It might even be dangerous.

He raked the prisoners with a menacing glare. “My name is Anton Marivaldi, and my ship is the *Iron Jest*. You may have heard of me.”

Apparently they had. Some of them blanched.

“You have a choice,” Anton continued. “Someone can point out the boy Stedd Whitehorn without further delay, in which case, all of you will live. Or you can keep mum until my men kill enough people to loosen somebody’s tongue.”

With that, he waited. While the rain beat down, the moments crawled by, and none of the peasants spoke up.

THE REAVER

Perplexed, Anton shook his head. The rustics were clearly terrified. He could all but smell it on them despite the downpour. So why weren't they giving up an outsider to save themselves?

Maybe because, despite Anton's reputation, they hoped he wouldn't carry out his threat. If so, it was time to disabuse them of their optimism. He turned to Yuicoerr. "Have at it. Start with the babies and little girls."

"No!" an old man yelled. He was stooped and scrawny with brown spots on the backs of his wrinkled hands and the bald crown of his head.

Anton raised a hand to halt the second mate and the other pirates advancing with knives in hand. "I'm glad one of you is sensible. Keep talking, old man. Point out Stedd Whitehorn and save your grandchildren."

"I can't!" the elderly villager replied. "He isn't here! When the trouble started, one of his minders rushed him out of town!"

Anton's jaw tightened. That was what he'd feared might have happened, and he and his crew could hardly comb the countryside if riders from Teziir were on the way.

But was the story true? If he'd been commanding the other side, would he have believed he had to get the boy out of the village because he couldn't possibly win the battle to come? Why? The defenders had had wizardry and superior numbers on their side, and at least some of their fighters had been seasoned warriors of the scroll, moon, and stars.

"That's too bad," he said to the old man. "I explained the only way to save your village, but if the boy's no longer here, then obviously, you can't avail yourselves of the opportunity. Go on, lads. Kill everyone."

"Wait!" cried a woman with three small children clinging to her skirts. She had the sagging, loose-skinned look of someone who'd been stout before hunger whittled away the excess weight. "He's—"

"No!" cried one of the three golden-haired boys. "Don't say it! You don't have to." He turned to Anton, and even amid the downpour

RICHARD LEE BYERS

and the gloom, his eyes were as blue as the clear skies and seas that no one had seen in a year. He swallowed, and in a voice that quavered just a little, said, "I'm Stedd."

Anton had to admit, the lad had courage. Although he might not know exactly what fate awaited him, he surely realized it wouldn't be pleasant. But then again, maybe he was simple or downright mad and believed the power he professed to serve would protect him.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Anton said. "Now be a good boy and stand still while one of my men ties your hands and leashes you. Then we'll be on our way and let your friends here get back to slopping the hogs or whatever they need to do."

Yuicoerr looked to Anton. "What about our dead?"

"In my considered opinion, they're likely to stay that way."

"I mean, we should carry them back to the ship and give them to the sea."

"That would slow us down."

"Only a little, and we owe it to them."

Anton laughed. "When did you turn so sentimental? We owe it to ourselves—"

Something smashed into the back of Anton's head. He pitched forward onto his hands and knees, and, his skull ringing, turned his head to discover Naraxes standing over him. The first mate raised the belaying pin he used as a cudgel and clubbed him a second time.



The rain turned the streets of Immurk's Hold into streams rushing from the mountainous heights of Pirate Isle, past taverns, festhalls, fighting pits, chandleries, smithies, and sail makers' shops, and down to the harbor, where the rising waters of the Sea of Fallen Stars were drowning docks and shipyards. Umara Ankhlab hunched her shoulders against the downpour and tried to avoid wading through deep water. It slopped over the tops of her shoes and soaked her feet even so.

THE REAVER

That was unpleasant, but not as much as her sense of Kymas Nahpret's amusement at her discomfort. Her superior had cast a spell to link their psyches, and in consequence saw, heard, and felt what she did, but not so intensely as to cause him distress.

One day, he said, speaking mind to mind, if you serve me well, I'll make you as I am. Then you'll never be cold again.

Or *forever* cold, she thought, forever cold and dead. Then she made haste to mask the thought before it bled across into Kymas's awareness. It would be unwise to let him realize she didn't want to become a vampire.

And actually, she needed to overcome her instinctive revulsion and desire it in truth. She came from a long line of tharchions and khazarks, but over the course of the last century, mortal Thayan nobles had declined in stature relative to the undead ones. The only way for even the daughter of an old and once-prominent Mulan family to achieve any measure of genuine status and influence was to become such a creature herself, and at least then she wouldn't have to bear the presence of a thing like a psychic tapeworm.

She splashed past scrawny, half-naked men setting up trident-shaped markers to line the street leading to the temple of Umberlee, Queen of the Depths. The rain made any sort of outdoor labor unpleasant, but the raiders of Pirate Isle evidently were no more concerned than Thayans for the misery of slaves, and the overseers with their coiled whips had taken shelter under the dripping eaves of nearby buildings.

Many buildings in Immurk's Hold were haphazardly constructed of driftwood, other flotsam, and the odd piece of plundered lumber. A few though, including fortresses and the mansions of the most rapaciously successful captains, were as imposing as any structure Umara had seen in any settlement bordering the Inner Sea. The house of the Bitch Queen was one of the latter, and thus proof that Pirate Isle was one of the few places where her priesthood had wielded considerable influence even before Evendur Highcastle proclaimed her new ascendancy. It was a pile of blue-green stone perched on a

RICHARD LEE BYERS

promontory overlooking the storm-tossed sea. Stairs and walkways snaked their way down the cliff face to vanish beneath the heaving surf where it smashed itself to spray against the rock.

Umara strode to the primary entrance, where two steps ascended to a recessed doorway with one of Umberlee's emblems, a double wave curling to both the right and the left, carved above it. A pair of sentries, novice priests in sea-green tabards, crossed their tridents to bar the way.

"I'm Umara Ankhlab," she told them, "Red Wizard and envoy of Szass Tam, master of Thay. The Chosen of Umberlee has agreed to receive me." As he certainly should have done after all the gifts Kymas's legionnaires had carried to the temple.

One of the waveservants said, "Yes, Saer. Follow me." And when he led her into the high-ceilinged, shadowy chamber beyond the doorway, her first thought was that it was a relief to escape the rain. She pushed back her scarlet cowl and wiped at the moisture that had blown inside it to dampen her face and shaven scalp.

But escaping the rain didn't mean she'd escaped water, or at least the idea of it. As one would expect, the keepers of Umberlee's house had adorned it with representations of sharks, eels, octopuses, and the goddess herself with her clawed hands, finned elbows, kelp hair, and cloak made of jellyfish dragging a ship beneath the waves. In addition, some acoustical trick filled the structure with the rhythmic hiss and crash of the waves below, while the cool air smelled of brine.

As Umara's guide conducted her deeper into the temple, she paid attention to the number and locations of other guards. She noted, too, the glyphs protecting windows and thresholds. Many of the symbols were unfamiliar to her, likely because they derived from divine magic rather than arcane. But even so, she could often sense the power lurking in them as a twinge of headache or a prickling on her skin.

Her escort ultimately brought her to a round chamber with several doorways leading out of it and what appeared to be a bottomless pool in the center. Given that the spacious room was above sea

THE REAVER

level, she inferred it was enchantment that drew the water up the shaft. Wet, splayed footprints suggested that some marine creature had recently clambered from it to confer with the waveservants or Captain Highcastle himself.

“Sahuagin,” rumbled a voice at her back. “We’re good friends.”

Startled, she nearly jerked around. But it wouldn’t do to appear nervous, and so she took a breath and turned with the composure appropriate to her alleged role as an envoy. At which point, she had to steady herself again.

Like most Thayans, she’d spent her life growing accustomed to the undead and in fact was obliged to consort with a vampire nearly every night of her life. Yet even so, the sight of Evendur Highcastle jarred her.

Plainly, he’d been a hulking brute of a man even when alive. The tendays he’d supposedly spent lying at the bottom of the sea before his goddess saw fit to reanimate him had swelled his bulk even larger just as they’d softened his features. Still, despite the bloated, mushy look of him and the bits the fish had nibbled away, the balanced solidity of his stance conveyed a sense of enormous strength.

His costly but mismatched attire accentuated the grotesquerie of his appearance. From his massive shoulders swept a pearl-bedizened, high-collared green cloak that was part of the regalia of a high priest of the Bitch Queen. Yet beneath it, he still dressed like a pirate with plunder to squander and an utter lack of taste, in a jerkin with alternating ruby and emerald buttons, an orange sash, black and white checked breeches, and high maroon boots inlaid with erotic imagery.

Spreading her hands, Umara gave Evendur a shallow bow, respectful but not servile. “Captain Highcastle, Szass Tam sends felicitations to his brother in undeath.”

The pirate’s face shifted, but his features were too puffy for Umara to tell exactly what expression he’d assumed. Her inability to read him gave her another twinge of unease.

“Does the lich understand that I am more than undead?” Evendur asked. “That I am the Chosen of the Queen of the Depths?”

RICHARD LEE BYERS

Well, that's the question, isn't it? said Kymas, speaking inside Umara's head. *Use the talisman.*

Safely ensconced in the coffin concealed aboard their galley, his very existence unsuspected by any of the locals, the vampire could afford impatience. Umara was the one who'd suffer if Evendur caught her doing something he didn't like. She exerted her will to quiet her superior's urging and to keep the nasty sensation it produced, like an itch inside her skull, from showing in her face.

"He does indeed," she said to Evendur. "Who could doubt it, considering how quickly the church of Umberlee, under your leadership, is extending its influence around the Sea of Fallen Stars? That's why he sent me."

"To pledge me his fealty?"

Despite the gravity of Umara's situation, the question almost surprised a laugh out of her. Divinely anointed or no, the living corpse plainly didn't understand the ruler of Thay.

"Honestly, no," she said. "Only a small portion of Thay is coastline, and Bane is our patron deity. But Szass Tam offers an alliance between equals."

"I just told you: He and I are not 'equals.'"

"Captain, it's not for me to debate that. You and Szass Tam are both greater than I, so how could I even pretend to know which of you stands higher than the other? All I can do is deliver my master's message and hope that something in it meets with your favor."

The drowned man grunted. "Continue, then."

"Thank you. Szass Tam asks you to consider that he has the strongest army in the East, and you have a mighty fleet. Thayan traders have goods to sell—including crops grown in fields where continual rain doesn't spoil them—in Turmish, Impiltur, and the cities of the Dragon Coast if they can convey them to market without the sea wolves of Pirate Isle attacking them. They'll pay you for immunity . . . and for doing your utmost to destroy their Aglarondan competitors."

"What do I care about armies when I'm building an empire of the sea?" Evendur replied. "And as for the toll you propose, I already

THE REAVER

have something similar in mind, but I don't need an arrangement with your master to collect it. The day will come when every man who sails these waters or lives anywhere near them will tithe to Umberlee and her church."

"To answer your question about armies," Umara said, "may I show you something? I'll need to work some magic, but I give you my word, it's harmless."

Evendur spat a wad of something too dark and foul to be a living man's saliva. "I don't need your 'word', girl. You couldn't hurt me if you tried. Go ahead and cast your charm."

Inwardly, Umara bristled at his contempt, but, probably fortunately, she'd had a great deal of practice masking her resentment when undead beings condescended to her. She simply said, "Thank you," turned toward a clear space in the circular chamber, and began an incantation from *Six Lies and a Question*, a grimoire supposedly authored by the legendary illusionist Mythrellan.

As Umara crooned and whispered, she swept her hand back and forth like a child finger-painting. Gradually, a city square crowded with figures took form, and when the magic filled in enough detail, the figures began to move.

Soldiers wearing sea-green cloaks emblazoned with the image of a dolphin leaping over a seashell battled other men-at-arms clad in white surcoats bearing a purple dragon emblem. The major differences between the two factions were that the warriors of the dolphin were fully armored and attacking in squads, while as often as not, the men of the dragon wore no mail, carried no shields, and scurried to form up with their comrades.

The scene shifted to a tree-lined boulevard and then a shabby little marketplace in the shadow of a towering city wall. In each view, it was plain the warriors of the dolphin and shell had attacked the Purple Dragons by surprise and to deadly effect.

Evendur Highcastle had been an infamous pirate long before he rose from the waves as an undead monstrosity, and he studied the butchery with what Umara took to be professional interest. That

RICHARD LEE BYERS

meant it was time to use the talisman in her pocket. If she was lucky, his distraction combined with the magic already seething in the air would keep him from noticing another momentary pulse of power.

She wrapped her fingers around the carved onyx disk and mouthed the trigger word Kymas had taught her. Pain stabbed between her eyes as her perceptions shattered into paradox.

Evendur seemed to loom taller and also to spring toward her even though neither of those things actually happened. Rather, he became more massive and real than anything else, the crushing force of his presence diminishing the thick stone walls around him to something as wispy as the clash of shadows Umara had conjured to hold his attention.

Yet though he felt more solid and true than anything she'd ever experienced, at the same time, he was empty, absent, just a hole in the substance of the world opening on a realm of churning tumult and ferocity. It was actually the infinite violence of that place that made his mere existence so oppressive. That, and the intuition that at any moment, *something* might peer back at her from the far side of the opening.

No one claimed a place among the Red Wizards without facing fiends and other horrors that common folk could scarcely imagine. Still, Umara's heart pounded, and she had to bite back a moan.

She needed to get hold of herself before Evendur noticed anything amiss. She tried to let go of the talisman, but her fingers wouldn't stop clutching it. She took a breath, focused the trained will of a wizard on performing that simple action, and her digits slowly unclenched. Evendur reverted to the rotting hulk she'd first encountered, and vile as that creature was, she almost felt grateful to him for masking the greater horror that used him as a spy hole and a conduit.

"What am I seeing?" he asked.

"The defection of Daerlun," she replied. "With the beginning of summer, First Lord Gascam Highbanner betrayed Prince Irvell with the results you've now seen." Deprived of her concentration, the illusory struggle began to blur and fade.

THE REAVER

“How do *you* know?” Evendur demanded.

She smiled. “Captain, you’ve made it plain you deem my powers weak compared to those granted by your goddess, and I don’t contest the point. Still, Thayan scrying and divination have their uses.”

“Maybe so,” Evendur said, “but how does treachery in the war in the west concern me?”

“Prince Irvel and his army were the great hope of Cormyr,” Umara said. “Now that they’ve come to grief, Sembia will soon win the war. Then it—and the conquered vassal state it will make of its foe—will be free to turn its attention to any power that threatens its interests anywhere around the Inner Sea. It will have a strong, seasoned navy *and* army to bring to bear, and this . . . tacit theocracy you’re building may need allies to withstand them.”

The pirate priest shook his swollen, all but neckless head; the dangling mustachios and strands of beard like black, slimy seaweed flopped back and forth. “I doubt it. By the time the Sembians and the shades pulling their strings turn their attention to me, the church of Umberlee will control every port and coast, no matter who the nominal lord may be. And if my enemies succeed in bringing a force against me even so, the goddess will give me the strength to smash them.”

“I mean no irreverence, Captain, when I point out that the Queen of the Depths, mighty as she is, isn’t the only deity in the world, nor is hers the only priesthood.”

At last, Evendur’s corpse face twisted into an expression Umara could interpret: a sneer. “They’re the only ones that matter hereabouts. I’m making sure of it. Go home and tell Szass Tam that if he approaches me with the proper reverence, I may look on his petitions with favor. If not, Thayans can expect ill winds, sea serpents, and yes, the attentions of my pirates, whenever they set sail from Bezantur. The waveservant will show you out.” He turned and strode out through one of the doorways along the wall.

Umara sighed and reached for Kymas with her thoughts. *Did you follow all that?* she asked.

RICHARD LEE BYERS

Yes, replied the vampire mage. *The creature's an arrogant buffoon.* Even though the words were scornful, the underlying feeling wasn't. Kymas was impressed, perhaps even rattled, as his lieutenant had never known him before. Had they been conversing in the normal way, he likely would have concealed any trace of it beneath a facade of urbane imperturbability, but that was more difficult with their psyches linked.

Whatever you think of Highcastle's judgment, Umara said, he manifestly is a Chosen. But now that we've established that, what are we supposed to do about it?

You know, my dear. You know.

That's fine to say, but how are we supposed to manage it? Looking through my eyes, you saw how strong the creature is and, when I used the talisman, perceived his spiritual strength as well, but for argument's sake, let's say our wizardry could overpower him. We'd also have to contend with all the temple defenses, mystical and mundane, get off Pirate Isle, and escape across stormy seas that the raiders know how to sail better than our mariners ever will.

I'll think of something, Kymas said. I haven't worked as long as I have and climbed as high as I have only to fail Szass Tam now.

Umara might have found that dauntless attitude more inspiring if she hadn't suspected that only she and Kymas's other servants would have to pay the ultimate price for failure. She'd fall with a half-uttered spell on her lips, and the legionnaires would drop with bloody swords sliding from their hands, while the vampire slipped away to safety in the form of a fluttering bat or drifting mist.

It wasn't that Kymas was cowardly. She'd known him to brave considerable dangers when he judged circumstances warranted it. But never to spare or save one of his mortal agents. In his eyes, the living were so far beneath him that he sent them to their deaths with no more hesitation than a lanceboard player sacrificing pawns.

"Saer?" said a half-familiar voice. Umara blinked and discerned that in the moment when she'd turned her attention inward—or to the undead mage secreted on the Thayan vessel in the harbor,

THE REAVER

depending on how one cared to look at it—her escort had approached her. “The Chosen said it’s time for you to go.”

“Of course,” she said, “lead on.” The cleric—who had the hard, truculent look of a youth who’d been a pirate until recently—turned away, and she started whispering a spell.

She was trying to be stealthy about it, but the waveservant either heard her or simply sensed something amiss. He jerked back around with the tines of his trident dropping to threaten her.

Then she spoke the final word of the rhyming incantation, and the pugnacity in his face gave way to blinking confusion. That in turn melted into chagrin, and he hastily turned the points of his weapon away from her.

“I’m sorry!” he said. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Umara smiled. “It’s all right. Something just startled you, I suppose.”

The young priest shook his head. “I suppose. Still, if I hurt one of Captain Highcastle’s guests . . .”

“If you want to make it up to me, how about letting me look around a little? I’ll come back to the main entrance when I’m ready to leave.”

He hesitated. “The Chosen said to show you out.”

“That’s exactly what you will do after I’ve looked my fill.” Hoping he found her attractive—she’d observed that non-Thayan men sometimes did despite the shaved head and tattoos they deemed bizarre—she gave him a smile. “Please? The temple is magnificent, and I know you need to get back to your post.”

The waveservant sighed. “I guess I do. Otherwise, I’d show you around myself. Just don’t be too long, all right?” Resting his trident on his shoulder, he took his leave.

That was risky, Kymas observed. What if the beguilement failed?

It didn’t, Umara replied, and now I can search.

For what?

Anything that will help us.

She skulked to one of the doorways behind the well. Beyond it was a smaller room where a cylindrical screen revolved around a

RICHARD LEE BYERS

greenish magical flame. The screen had shark shapes on it, and thus the light cast shadows of sharks circling the walls. Gold and silver gleamed atop an altar hewn from coral.

A common thief would likely have been happy to snatch the offerings and flee, and for a moment, her pride in her heritage and arcane accomplishments notwithstanding, Umara rather wished she was one. Then she thrust the feckless thought aside and prowled on into the next chamber, and the one after that.

Although she'd never visited a temple of Umberlee before, all great castles, palaces, and the like possessed certain features in common, and she soon discerned that she'd passed from the more public part of the structure to an area where important folk had their apartments and personal workrooms. That had its good side. She'd left the sentries and warding glyphs behind. But if anyone noticed her trespassing, it might well be someone less easily befuddled than her erstwhile escort.

In time, her search led her to a map room. Some hung on the walls, many were rolled up with their ends protruding from cubbyholes, and others lay spread on long tables where round brass weights kept the corners from curling up.

All the ones she could see were nautical charts. Spaces inland from the coasts were mostly blank, but the parchments were replete with information about the tides, reefs, shoals, and even the tiniest islets of the Sea of Fallen Stars. Some even pinpointed features in the uttermost depths like the sea elf city of Myth Nantar.

It occurred to Umara that the knowledge stored here might be even more valuable than the coins and jewelry she'd already left unpilfered. But it seemed just as irrelevant to her present needs, and so she began to turn away. Then dark spots caught her eye.

Specifically, greasy-looking smudges on one of the charts unrolled on a tabletop and the several smaller parchments scattered around it. In her imagination, Evendur traced lines on the map with a fingertip and held the papers before his eyes to read them, and exudate from his rotting skin left stains.

THE REAVER

She headed for the table in question. When she was halfway there, she heard a faint creak of leather at her back. Someone was coming.

She hastily stepped aside so no one could see her from the other side of the doorway. But that wouldn't protect her for long, not in a room with nowhere to hide and no other exits. She whispered a spell, swept her hand from the top of her head down the front of her body, and cloaked herself in invisibility.

A moment later, Evendur himself strode into the chartroom, and she swallowed away a sudden dryness in her throat. In that instant, she found it all but impossible to place any faith in the basic magic she'd employed to conceal herself.

Yet if the spell was basic, her skills were not, and evidently even the Chosen had their limitations. Evendur stalked on past her.

That was good as far as it went, but if the Queen of the Depths chose this moment to peer out through Evendur's eyes, it was inconceivable that the charm would blind her. Breathing shallowly and holding still, Umara could only hope the deity had other matters to concern her.

Evendur moved to the same chart and notes that had snagged Umara's interest and studied them with the glum air of a man who, despite a lack of fresh facts or insights, had succumbed to the urge to resume picking at a vexing problem. Eventually, he tossed down a parchment to slide off the table and spill to the floor, made a disgusted growling noise, and turned back toward the door.

Umara started to relax at least a little, and then the Chosen stopped short. Frowning—another expression just barely identifiable despite the bloat and decay—he peered about.

He senses he isn't alone, Umara thought, and now that he's set his mind to it, he's going to spot me. If he can't do it by himself, he'll call on Umberlee to help him.

Strike first! Kymas said. He knew as well as she did how unlikely she was to prevail, but if by some miracle she did, he'd reap the benefit, and if she perished, he might learn something useful from the manner in which the Chosen opted to kill her.

RICHARD LEE BYERS

She, however, had no intention of revealing herself by initiating combat or otherwise so long as any alternative remained. She whispered a cantrip, stretched out her hand, and shook it back and forth. The rolled maps in one of the floor-level cubbies rustled.

Evendur strode to the source of the noise, crouched down, and peered into the nook. Umara knew he wasn't going to find anything but hoped she'd allayed his suspicions even so. Mice were good at vanishing when larger creatures approached, and they infested nearly every manmade structure from time to time. With luck, the Temple of Umberlee was no exception.

Evendur snorted and stood back up. He took a last look around, then headed for the door.

Once she was sure he was truly gone, Umara let out a long breath. Her shoulders slumped, and her hands began to tremble. But she didn't have time to fall apart, so, scowling at her own frailty, she stifled the aftereffects of her close call by pure force of will and hurried to the table.

It took longer than she would have preferred to consider the chart and the papers, which proved to be dispatches from spies stationed at various points around the Sea of Fallen Stars. But no one else turned up to interrupt her, and by the end of the examination, she was smiling.

Thanks to their psychic link, she knew Kymas was smiling, too. She could even tell his fangs had extended thanks to a phantom sensation in her own mouth.

Easy prey, her master said, yet a prize that will fully satisfy Szass Tam. We merely have to find the child first.