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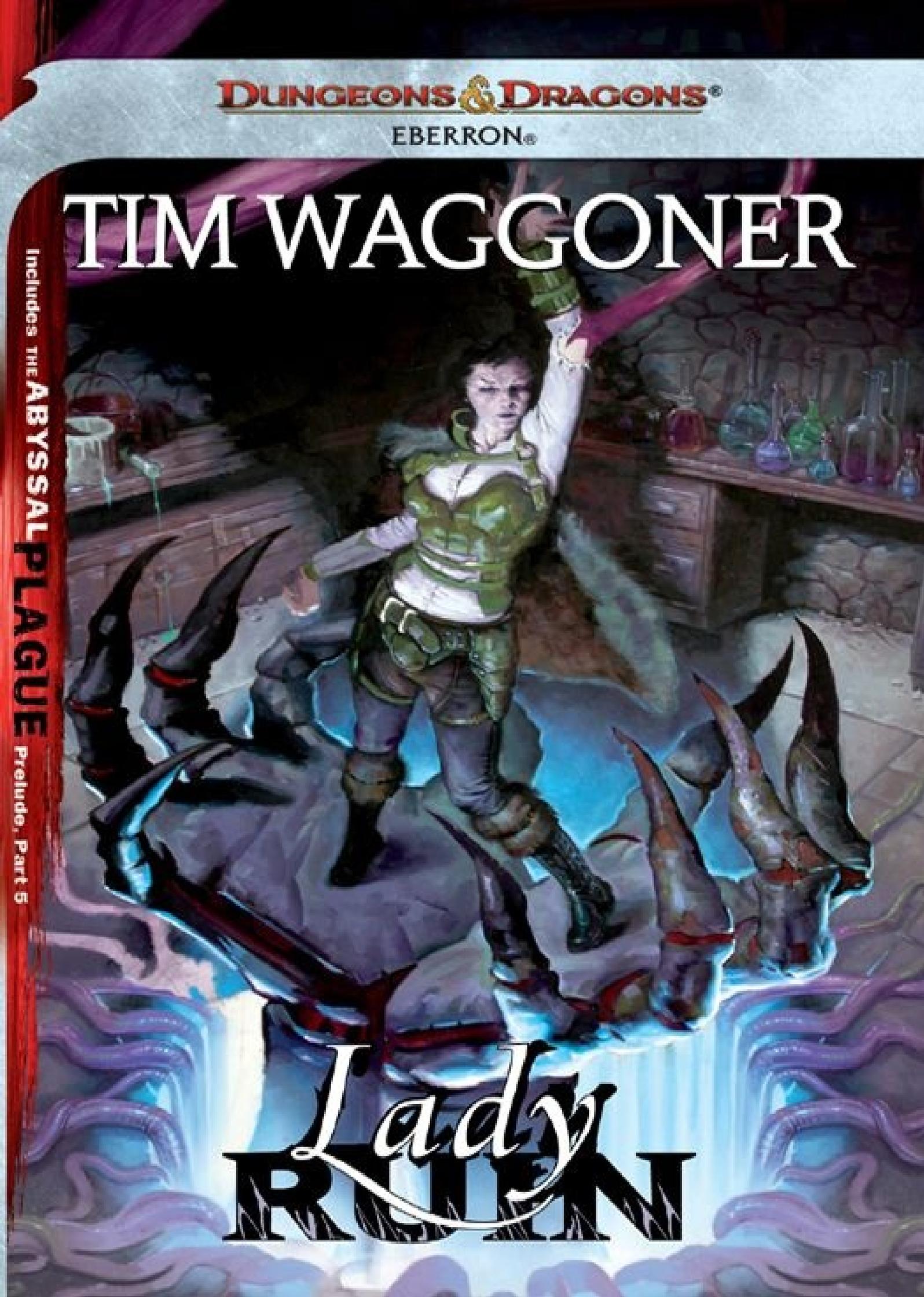
EBERRON®

TIM WAGGONER

Includes THE ABYSSAL PLAGUE

Prelude, Part 5

Lady  
RUTH



# THRILLS AND MYSTERIES IN THE SHADOW OF WAR.



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### **A MILITARY EXPERIMENT GONE WRONG.**

She glanced toward Osten's left arm where the symbiont was attached, but as she did so, its length unfurled toward her, and its coils wrapped around her throat. She instantly tightened her neck muscles before it could squeeze too hard, yanked her boot free from Osten's hand, and spun around, intending to bring her sword up and strike at the aberration.

### **A PROUD SOLDIER TAINTED BY CORRUPTION.**

But before she could do so, she watched in horror as the tentacle whip's mouth detached from Osten's arm, anchor tendrils tearing free from his flesh with tiny sprays of blood. Then, using its grip in her neck for leverage, the whip flexed, bringing its mouth-end swinging toward Lirra's left arm.

### **A WARRIOR BECOMES A LIVING WEAPON.**

It happened so swiftly that she had no time to react, and then the beaked mouth bit into the inner flesh of her forearm and its anchor tendrils burrowed into her skin, seeking purchase in the muscle beneath.

Lirra screamed.

### **AND THE BATTLE FOR LIRRA'S SOUL BEGINS.**

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## LADY RUIN

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For generations, all the world of Eberron knew was war. The five nations—Aundair, Cyre, Breland, Karnath, and Thrane—clashed long after the warring heirs of Galifar had died, allying and attacking as the tides of battle shifted. Then the Mourning—an atrocity no nation claimed—wiped Cyre from the face of Eberron.

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Though the war is over, the world abounds with reminders of a magical arms race, the spectacular technology born of magic and ambition. The influential dragonmarked houses ply their magical skills in trade instead of weapons. The warforged, a race of living constructs, strive to find a place in a world that resents them. The lightning rail and the elemental airships that once sped weapons across Khorvaire now haul goods and travelers.

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### **BUT THE LAST WAR WON'T FORGET THEM.**



**THE NEXT WAR IS BREWING.**

## **DEDICATION**

For Mark Sehestedt and Erin Evans—one at the beginning, one at the end.

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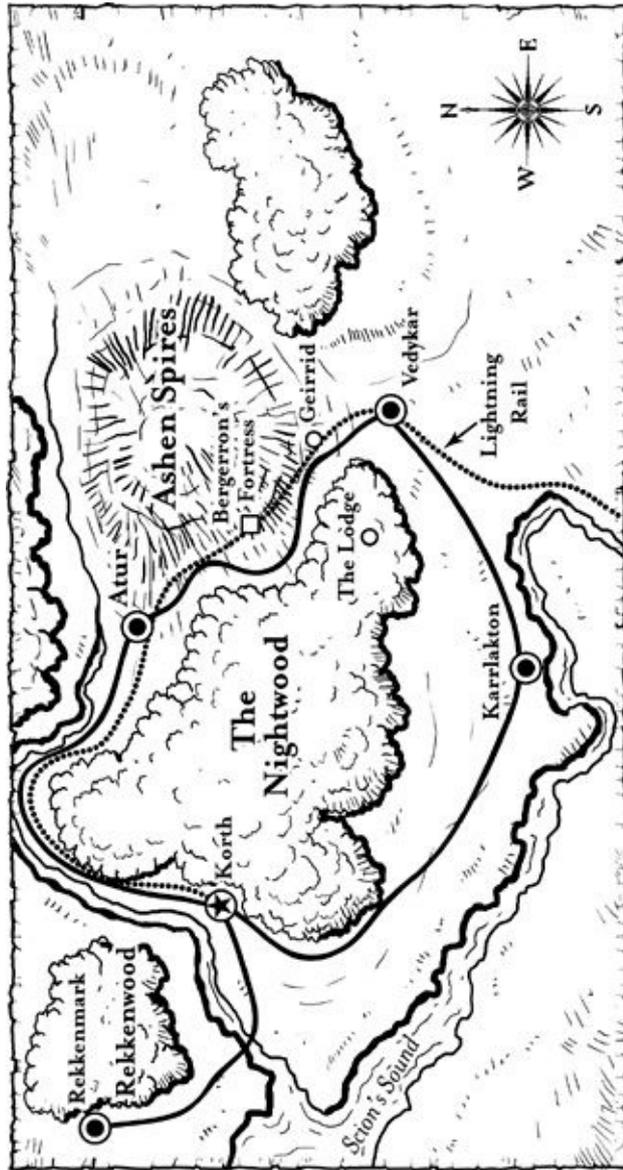
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# CHAPTER

## ONE

Whenever you're ready, Osten," Captain Lirra Brochann said.

The man nodded, his brow furrowed in concentration. Coiled in his right hand, the tentacle whip pulsed softly as blood—a mixture of its own and that of its host—circulated through the symbiont's rubbery red flesh. The barb at its tip quivered slightly, as if it enjoyed the taste of Osten's blood and looked forward to sampling someone else's—namely, Lirra's.

Two men stood on opposite sides of the room, swords belted at their sides, hands resting on the pommels of their blades. One was a handsome man in his late twenties, close to Lirra's age, while the other was a white-haired lion of a man in his mid-fifties. General Vaddon Brochann, the older man and Lirra's father, wore full armor with a series of runes engraved upon the breast plate, while Rhedyn, the younger, wore only a mail shirt over a tunic and leggings. Despite the illumination of the everbright sconces set along the cold, gray walls, the younger man's features were indistinct. Still, Lirra didn't need to be able to see his face clearly to know that he—like Vaddon—watched the fight intently, ready to step in at the first sign that something was about to go wrong.

Osten's eyes narrowed in concentration and sweat beaded on his forehead. He was a boyish-looking man with a shock of midnight-black hair cut by a white streak on the left side. While Osten was barely into adulthood, his broad shoulders and strong limbs hinted at the man he would one day become. Osten was serving two years in the Karrnathi military, as was mandatory for every citizen in the country—man and woman—and he had the makings of a fine soldier. At least physically, Lirra thought. Mentally ... well, that's what they were here to find out.

Osten stepped forward, and as he did so his left eye twitched and his lips moved, almost as if he was talking to himself, but no sound came out. Though he was young and strong, his movements were stiff and awkward, as if he were having trouble controlling his limbs. Or as if he were *fighting* to maintain control, Lirra thought. A distant look came into his gaze, and she knew that his focus had turned inward.

"Hold," she ordered. If he didn't have full control ... But it was too late. With a sudden motion, Osten extended his right hand and released the tentacle whip.

Lirra kept her gaze fixed on the barbed tip as the fleshy coils of the whip straightened and extended toward her. The barb streaked toward her right eye, and she could see a bead of poison glistening on the tip. A tentacle whip's range was roughly fifteen feet, and Lirra stood about that distance from Osten, but she wasn't about to

take any chances. She drew her head back, leaned to the left, and brought her wooden sparring sword up to deflect the attack.

But at the last instant before it struck the sword, the barb angled sharply downward and shot toward the hilt—or more precisely, toward her hand. If the whip managed to pierce her flesh and inject even a low dose of its poison into her, she'd be incapacitated and completely at its mercy. And if it managed to get a full dose into her, only the blessings of the Sovereign Host would be able to save her life. She knew Osten wasn't trying to harm her—at least, she *hoped* he wasn't—but the tentacle whip had a mind of its own. She released her grip on the sword and yanked her hand away an instant before the whip-barb struck the weapon's leather-wrapped handle. The sword's wooden blade pitched toward Osten as the force of the whip's strike flipped the handle toward Lirra. Lirra was already in motion, though, and she caught hold of the sword in an overhand grip with her left hand and she managed to keep her weapon from falling. Then with a flip of her wrist she swung the sword in a downward arc and struck the tentacle whip. The symbiont recoiled from the blow and retracted toward its host, giving Lirra time to shift her wooden sword back to her right hand.

She retreated several steps and regarded Osten. Sweat ran freely down the man's face, despite the fact that he'd put forward little physical effort so far. The tentacle whip undulated in the air, like a sea plant moving to the rhythm of an underwater current. Lirra had the impression from the easy, almost lazy confidence of its movements that, whatever effort Osten was putting into their internal struggle, the tentacle whip was winning.

"Osten," she said, "stand down."

The man's head jerked slightly when she spoke his name, but otherwise he didn't reply, didn't even acknowledge her existence. His gaze remained clouded, unfocused, and his lips continued to move as he whispered silently to himself. Lirra could just make out the shape of a single word, repeated over and over: *No. No, no, no, no, no, no ...*

Without taking her eyes off Osten, she gestured with her left hand, a signal to Vaddon and Rhedyn to make ready. She then lowered her wooden sword to her side and started walking slowly to Osten, speaking in calm, even tones.

"I think you've made a good start, Osten. That initial strike was clever. Even if for some reason you didn't manage to inject poison into the hand, the blow itself could cause someone to lose hold of their weapon. The precision with which your symbiont can strike is one of its greatest assets, as you've amply demonstrated today. What I think we need to do now is continue to devise ways to best use that precision in battle. I have a few ideas ..."

Lirra came within striking distance of Osten while talking, raised her sword, and swung it toward Osten's left temple, aiming for the white streak in his hair and—

The tentacle whip lunged toward the practice sword, wrapped around the wooden blade, and with a single, savage yank tore the weapon free from her hand. She caught a momentary glance of Osten's face—eyes wild with dark joy, mouth stretched into a feral grin—before the symbiont brought the sword swinging back around toward her. Lirra managed to twist to the side and take the blow on her right shoulder, but the tentacle whip was far stronger than it looked, and the impact sent her flying.

Training took over and she rolled as she hit the floor, using her momentum to bring her back onto her feet. She remained upright only a split second before instinctively

diving forward into a somersault. She felt more than heard the sound of the wooden sword slicing through the air where her head had been an instant ago. As she rolled into a standing position, she drew a dagger from inside her right boot and spun around to face Osten—or rather the symbiont, because that was her true opponent. Osten's personality was still there, somewhere inside his mind, but he was no longer in control of his actions, and that changed everything.

Osten's features were twisted into a mask of fury, his eyes bright with madness, and he moved toward her with a sinuous grace that contrasted sharply with the awkwardness he'd displayed only moments before. The tentacle whip hurled the practice sword aside—directly at Vaddon, as it turned out, who was approaching Osten from behind, sword in one hand, dagger in the other. A single slice from the general's own sword was enough to cut the wooden blade in two and send its separate halves clattering to the stone floor.

Not for the first time since joining the Outguard, Lirra marveled at a symbiont's ability to perceive its surroundings despite an apparent lack of sensory organs. Osten's back might be to Vaddon, but the tentacle whip still knew the general was approaching.

Lirra risked a quick glance to Rhedyn. He moved more swiftly than her father, and it appeared he was within a half-dozen yards of reaching Osten. But a shadowy skein rippled across his body, making it difficult for Lirra's eyes to focus on him clearly. He might've been closer than that, or perhaps farther away. Rhedyn had drawn his sword and held it gripped tight in his right hand, and he stretched his left hand out as if it were a weapon in and of itself. Vaddon continued approaching Osten as well, features set in an expression of grim determination, but he was farther away than Rhedyn. Not that it made much difference how close either of them were, Lirra thought. Neither could reach Osten before his—or the symbiont's—next strike. The wisest thing for her to do would be to put as much distance between herself and Osten as she could, to give herself the few extra moments necessary for Vaddon and Rhedyn to move in close enough to help her.

But she remembered something one of her teachers at the Rekkenmark Academy had once told her: *You can run from danger, but you can't run from yourself.*

She grinned. She'd never been one for making the safe choice.

Rhedyn shouted for her to stop as she ran toward Osten, but she ignored it. Lirra had fought enough battles to narrow the focus of her attention to a single objective. In this case, getting close enough to Osten to slam the handle of her dagger into the side of his head and render him unconscious. The man wasn't in control of his own actions right then, and she'd spare his life if possible. But Osten had known the risks when he'd accepted the symbiont, and if she had to slay him, she would.

Osten's left arm flexed upward, and the tentacle whip coiled back into his waiting hand. He then swung his arm around and released the whip again, its length unfurling toward Lirra as she ran to him. She dodged to the left and the barbed tip of the tentacle shot past her, but a half second later she realized her mistake; the whip hadn't intended to strike her directly. The end of the whip curled down, approached her from behind, and wrapped around her right ankle. Osten yanked his left arm back, and Lirra's leg was pulled out from beneath her. She fell onto her left side and hit the stone floor hard enough to force the air from her lungs. Sharp pain stabbed into her side, and she

thought she might've broken a rib or two. She still had hold of her dagger—a Karnathi soldier didn't release her weapon until she was dead, and maybe not even then—but stunned as she was, the blade did her little good at the moment.

The tentacle whip coiled loosely around her right wrist and its barbed tip continued slithering through the air toward her face. She feared that the whip intended to inject her with poison, but instead it wrapped around her neck. Then the coils around both her wrist and her neck tightened, preventing her from wielding her dagger while at the same time cutting off her breath.

She reached up with her left hand and clawed at the coils around her throat, but her fingers could find no purchase on the symbiont's rubbery flesh. The coils constricting her neck were tight as iron bands, and they were growing tighter by the second. Gray began nibbling at the edges of her vision, and flashes of light sparked behind her eyes. A deep lethargy swept through her, and she knew she had only seconds of consciousness remaining. She focused the last remnants of her rapidly fading strength and continued tearing at the coils around her throat. She knew it was hopeless, but she would keep fighting until she could fight no longer.

Everything went black for an instant, but then she felt a shudder pass through the coils around her throat, and the pressure eased enough for her to draw in a gasping breath. Before her vision could clear, she grabbed hold of the coils and began yanking them off of her. As Lirra struggled to sit up, she saw a blurry outline of a shadowy figure standing between her and Osten, with the midsection of the tentacle whip gripped in one hand.

She understood what had happened. Rhedyn had used the corrupting touch imbued by his own symbiont to stun Osten's tentacle whip, thereby saving her life. She unwrapped the last of the limp coils, careful to keep the barbed tip away from her skin. Osten stood staring at Rheydn's shadow-shrouded form, as if he were having trouble seeing it—or perhaps he saw it, but in his weakened state of mind he didn't understand what he was looking at. All signs of the fury that had gripped him were gone, leaving only confusion in their wake.

“What ... happened?” he whispered.

Osten didn't see Vaddon coming up behind him, and Lirra's father couldn't see the expression on the other man's face. Lirra tried to call out a warning, to tell her father that Osten was no longer under the influence of the symbiont, but her voice refused to work, and all that came out of her mouth was a soft croak. The general's own features were horribly calm as he stepped up to Osten, raised his sword and brought it slicing down onto the man's arm where the symbiont was attached.

Osten screamed, and Lirra's fragile hold on consciousness evaporated.

# CHAPTER

## TWO

Warm healing energy spread through Lirra's side like liquid sunlight, suffusing skin, muscle, and bone, washing away pain as it mended. The sensation was so soothing that Lirra found herself drowsing, and she nearly started when a soft feminine voice spoke a single word.

"Better?"

Lirra opened her eyes and looked up at the speaker, a lithe middle-aged woman with large green eyes and pointed ears whose blonde hair held only a few strands of gray. "Much. Thank you, Ksana."

The half-elf smiled. "You're most welcome." The cleric removed her hand from Lirra's side, and the warmth dissipated. Lirra started to sit up, but the half-elf gently yet firmly pushed her back down onto the cot.

"Best to lie still for a few moments longer," Ksana said. "A bit of rest will do you good."

The bedroom window was open and the curtains drawn back, allowing the late afternoon sunlight to filter into the infirmary, along with a pleasantly cool breeze. The wind felt soothing on Lirra's skin, but she was especially grateful for the sunshine. Summers in southern Karrnath were cloudy more often than not, and sun was always a welcome sight.

Lirra looked at the cot where Osten lay, eyes closed, hands—both of them; Ksana had managed to save his arm, she noted with relief—folded on his stomach. The tentacle whip was gone and he was alive, but despite Ksana's attentions, the young soldier's skin was pale and his breathing shallow. His clothes had been exchanged for a simple white robe—a good thing, considering how much blood had been on them. At first Lirra had no idea if the man was conscious, but then she noted the way his eyes moved erratically beneath his closed lids, saw his facial muscles jerk and spasm. He was sleeping then, but from the look of it, not sleeping peacefully.

"Will Osten recover?" Lirra asked.

Ksana's expression grew more serious. "Yes ... despite your father's best efforts to kill him." She shook her head, though Lirra couldn't tell whether she did so in frustration, admiration, or a combination of the two.

"He was just trying to protect me."

"Of course he was," Ksana said. "Vaddon is never more dangerous than when he thinks you're in trouble."

Lirra started to reply, but she bit back her words. She knew Ksana wasn't mocking

her father. Ksana had served with Vaddon on numerous campaigns, and she'd been around so often while Lirra had been growing up that she was like a member of the family. When Lirra's mother Mafalda had been killed during the Battle of Jaythen's Pass when Lirra was just a child, it had been Ksana who'd helped Lirra through her grief. And the cleric had done the same a few years later when her brother Hallam fell at the Siege of Thiago. Ksana might tease on occasion, but she would never mock someone she cared for.

"The boy's strong, which is a damned good thing considering the state he was in when he was brought to me. After Osten lost control of his symbiont, your father ordered the creature be removed from his body. It wasn't an easy—or a neat—process with the boy unconscious, but your uncle and his"—her upper lip curled in disgust—"assistant helped, and in the end they managed to detach the tentacle whip. Unfortunately for Osten, his injuries were so severe that being weakened like that nearly killed him. If I hadn't been there to tend to him as soon as the symbiont was removed ... Well, it was a close enough thing as it was, and let's just leave it at that. He will recover, though even after the blessings of Dol Arrah, it may yet be a couple days before he regains his full strength."

"Thank the Host," Lirra said.

Ksana smiled. "As always," she said, but her smile quickly fell away. "Would that I could heal his mind as easily as I mended his flesh. Being bonded with a symbiont can take a heavy toll on the host's mind and spirit. Vaddon told me what happened during Osten's test. I won't know for certain what sort of damage it might have done to his mind until he awakens." Ksana turned to regard Lirra.

"The situation got out of hand today," she said. "You're lucky you weren't injured more seriously than you were. Attempting to control symbionts is a chancy proposition under the best of conditions, but Osten—"

"Nothing personal," Lirra interrupted, "but I'm bound to get a lecture from my father about what happened today. I don't need one from you too."

The cleric scowled and was about to reply when the infirmary door opened and Rhedyn stepped into the room. His shadowy aspect wasn't drawn so tightly around him at the moment, and his features were clear—handsome face, chestnut-colored hair brushing his shoulders, neatly trimmed beard, and piercing blue eyes—though even with the sunlight from the open window, he still appeared partially cloaked in shade. He smiled as he walked over to the two women.

"Good afternoon, Ksana. I see you've managed to keep our Lirra alive for yet another day."

"That's *Captain* Lirra, to you," Lirra said in a mock-stern voice.

Rhedyn smiled as he executed a half bow. "Of course. My apologies." As he straightened, he glanced over at Osten and his expression became grim. "I suppose he'll recover as well."

Ksana gave Lirra a last look before turning to Rhedyn. "You don't sound too happy about the prospect."

"Osten failed to maintain control of his symbiont, and in so doing, he placed Lirra in great danger *and* forced the general to nearly take his life."

"Try not to judge Osten so harshly," Lirra said. "It's not an easy task to resist a symbiont. You know that better than most."

The shadowy sheen surrounding Rhedyn's body darkened slightly, and the effect caused his blue eyes to appear dark gray. "It's precisely because I know what that struggle is like that I *can* judge him. Osten didn't merely hesitate due to the symbiont's influence, nor did he simply fail to make it obey his commands. The tentacle whip took him over completely, both body and mind. Osten was the puppet, and the symbiont was the one pulling the strings."

Rhedyn was a few years older than Lirra, close to thirty, and like her, he'd been trained at the Rekkenmark Academy. He was a nephew of Veit Bergerron and, since the warlord had produced no children of his own, that made him a potential heir to Bergerron's lands. Despite his noble upbringing, Rhedyn didn't act as if he were better than any other soldier, and he was as skilled as any warrior she'd ever served with.

She admired how well Rhedyn controlled his own symbiont—a shadow sibling—although she had to admit that she found herself at times uncomfortable around him since he'd joined with the creature.

"Osten's failure is as much my fault as his," Lirra said. "I'm the one that recommended he be considered for a symbiont." She looked over at the young man once more, self-conscious to be talking about him as if he weren't there. But Osten was still sleeping soundly.

"He was a good choice," Ksana said. "He's young and strong, and don't forget, he volunteered willingly. *And* your uncle interviewed him thoroughly before approving him."

"And it wasn't as if he received just any symbiont," Rhedyn added. "That tentacle whip is particularly strong and willful. It will make a powerful weapon ... assuming a suitable host can be found."

"I suppose you're right," Lirra conceded. "Thanks for stepping in to help. If you hadn't stunned the tentacle whip ..."

"I could hardly stand by and allow my captain to be killed, could I?" Rhedyn smiled. He started to reach out to touch her hand, but then paused, as if thinking better of it. Before he could withdraw his hand, she reached up and clasped it. His flesh felt cool and too smooth, like a serpent's, and she had to force herself to keep holding on.

Rhedyn smiled gratefully and gave her hand a gentle squeeze before releasing it.

"What happened to the whip?" Lirra asked. "Was it damaged?"

"Not permanently. After I stunned it, your father's sword blow weakened Osten to the point where the whip could fight no more on its own, and your uncle was able to detach it from Osten's body. Elidyr and Sinnoch are making sure that the symbiont is returned to its cage as we speak."

Lirra remembered capturing this particular aberration. She often led the hunting parties that journeyed into the Nightwood in search of symbionts. Osten's tentacle whip had a presence that was stronger than most. It radiated a sly, baleful intelligence that Lirra found daunting, and in retrospect, she wasn't all that surprised that the creature had proved too much for Osten to handle. She wasn't certain Rhedyn would've been able to master it, and he had already proven that he could serve as a host to a symbiont without having his personality overwhelmed.

"I hate to do this to you," Rhedyn said, "but the general sent me to bring you to the den. He wants to, and I quote, 'Have a few words with that rock-headed daughter of mine.' " He turned to Ksana. "He'd like you to come too, cleric—and he's summoned

Elidyr as well. Not Sinnoch though. I don't think your father cares for the dolgaunt."

*That* was understatement. Vaddon absolutely loathed the creature.

Ksana glanced at Osten, who still slumbered fitfully.

"I'd prefer not to leave Osten's side," she said.

"The general was most insistent," Rhedyn said.

Ksana sighed. "What else is new?"

"Osten's well liked among the Outguard," Lirra said. "I won't have any trouble finding a volunteer to sit with him so you can attend the meeting."

Lirra sat up and swung her legs over the side of the cot. The movement made her feel a touch lightheaded, but the sensation soon passed and she was able to stand without difficulty.

Her father had summoned them all. She knew it had to have something to do with the reason why he'd insisted on being present during Osten's test, but she couldn't imagine what it might be, and there was no way to guess. Her father was a man of many moods, and she'd never been able to predict them with any degree of accuracy. One thing was certain though. Whatever Vaddon wanted, Lirra doubted she was going to like it.



"Gently now. I don't want this one hurt."

Elidyr stood watching while a pair of soldiers attempted to wrestle the tentacle whip into its cage. The soldiers—one man, one woman—wore full armor, including helmets and visors, that had enchantments embedded in the metal by Elidyr to repel a symbiont attack. Even with the armor, there was still a risk that a symbiont might be able to attach to the wearer, especially if the symbiont was strong and determined. But it helped to cut down on the danger.

Neither of the soldiers showed any sign of having heard the artificer's words of caution as they continued fighting the thrashing, writhing symbiont. Though the tentacle whip made no sound—indeed, it possessed no capability of doing so—the air in the chamber was charged with tension, and the other captive symbionts moved about restlessly in their cages. The soldiers wielded devices Elidyr had specially designed for handling symbionts—metal poles with retractable cable nooses. Both ends of the tentacle whip—the barbed tip and the mouth—were held tight by the nooses, allowing the Karrns to drag the symbiont across the stone floor to its cage. Though someone unfamiliar with symbionts would've thought the whip fought fiercely, Elidyr knew the whip was putting up only a token fight, weakened as it was by Rhedyn's attack and the forced removal from its host. Still, its struggles were strong enough that it might injure itself if its handlers weren't cautious.

The hooded brown-robed figure standing beside Elidyr sniffed in derision.

"It seems the reputation you Karrns have for bravery is somewhat exaggerated. Not only do your people need to wear armor to handle one symbiont, they also need *enchanted* armor." The dolgaunt spoke in a phlegmy, whispery rattle, his voice a sickening parody of human speech.

"I'd speak more softly if I were you, Sinnoch. Your presence in the lodge is tolerated only because I've interceded with my brother on your behalf. But his sufferance is not without limit, and if he heard you speaking of soldiers in his

command like that, he'd run you through without a moment's hesitation."

Sinnoch sniffed again, but he said nothing more. Sinnoch's robe was large on his almost skeletal frame, the voluminous hood and long sleeves concealing the dolgaunt's inhuman features. There was movement beneath the cloth over Sinnoch's shoulder blades, sinuous and serpentlike, indicating Sinnoch's true nature. Elidyr didn't know if the movement of the shoulder tentacles was an unconscious gesture on the creature's part, or if he did it on purpose to remind all within eyeshot that he wasn't human. Given the chaotic thought patterns of Sinnoch's kind, it was impossible to know for sure, perhaps even for Sinnoch himself.

Elidyr Brochann was a middle-aged man with an unruly mass of white hair badly in need of trimming. Elidyr was reed thin—almost as thin as the dolgaunt. The artificer had a tendency to remain motionless until such time as movement was required, and even then he moved with a deliberate precision and economy of motion that said he was a man who despised waste of any sort. He wore a leather apron over a plain white shirt, gray trousers, and black boots. Bloodstains covered the apron, remnants from the rushed and none-too-gentle removal of the tentacle whip from Osten. The blood didn't bother Elidyr. After all, it was something of an occupational hazard for him these days.

Finally, the two soldiers managed to get the symbiont inside its cage, loosen the cables binding it, and withdraw the poles. After that they swiftly closed the door, visibly relaxing once it was locked. The symbiont cages had been fashioned from spell-reinforced steel built to Elidyr's precise specifications by artisans of House Kundarak, and in addition, Elidyr had added an enchantment to the cages to keep the symbionts sedate. Once the tentacle whip was inside, the spell went to work, and the creature curled up and became still.

The soldiers stepped away from the cage and lifted their visors as they approached Elidyr. The man kept his gaze fastened on Elidyr, but the woman looked at Sinnoch with undisguised disgust. The tentacles on the dolgaunt's back writhed more noticeably beneath his robe, and the woman quickly looked away. Sinnoch let out a soft, hissing laugh.

Before either of the soldiers could speak, Elidyr said, "Thank you. That will be all."

They nodded, both looking grateful to be excused, and departed the chamber. Elidyr walked over to the tentacle whip's cage and Sinnoch followed, the dolgaunt moving with silent, inhuman grace. Elidyr gazed upon the quiescent symbiont for a time before speaking.

"This is the most magnificent specimen Lirra has ever brought back for us. So strong, so willful ... to think my brother wanted to destroy it." He shook his head.

"You made a mistake in allowing Osten to serve as the whip's host," Sinnoch said. "He was too weak." He glanced sideways at Elidyr. "You are all too weak."

Elidyr refused to rise to the bait, but privately he admitted the dolgaunt was right. The whole point of this project was to find the perfect marriage of host and symbiont, and Osten had been completely overmatched by the tentacle whip. The boy was strong in body, but his mind and spirit simply weren't enough to stand up to the symbiont's corrupting influence. The whip would make a wonderful weapon—provided they could find the right person to wield it.

"I have to go," Elidyr said. "My brother has summoned me to a meeting."

"I take it I'm not invited," Sinnoch said. He reached up with clawed hands and

lowered his hood to reveal a pale inhuman face with empty eye sockets. His skin was covered in a layer of writhing cilia, and a mane of longer tendrils surrounded his head. “Too bad. I do so love to visit Vaddon and bask in his utter loathing of me.” He grinned, displaying a mouthful of discolored fangs. “Go. I’ll stay here a bit longer to make certain our friend suffered no ill effects from its less-than-tender treatment at the hands of your oh-so-valiant countrymen.”

Elidyr scowled at the dolgaunt, and handed his gore-smeared leather apron to Sinnoch. “Take care of this for me, would you?”

“With pleasure.”

The dolgaunt snatched the bloody garment from Elidyr and held it up to his nose. He inhaled the blood scent, the mane of tentacles surrounding his head quivering with excitement. Elidyr then turned and walked away as the dolgaunt began licking the apron clean with eager strokes of its grotesquely long tongue.