

## Chapter Two

### The River

#### *Radovan*

The boss peered through his spyglass. "There."

I squinted at the Ustlav side of the river. In the distance, the Hungry Mountains had just gnawed the sun to death, smearing the sky with blood. Shadows huddled on the west bank. On account of my devil blood, I see just fine in the dark. At a distance, not so much.

"Let me see."

He handed me the glass, but the barge captain snatched it away. She put it to her eye.

Zora Gorcha was a tough old bird. She looked a good ten years older than the boss, but she couldn't have been much past half his age, which was working on a hundred. Even so, more red than gray curls spilled out of her headscarf. I didn't mind that. Even the rope of garlic around her neck didn't put me off. I like garlic almost as much as redheads and older women.

Everybody on deck was wearing garlic, including Arni. The big dog hated the stinky collar, but the boss taught him to leave it alone. Arni listened to me sometimes, but he always obeyed the boss.

Even the big bay draft horses tethered beside the Red Carriage wore loops of garlic. At first they'd eaten the bulbs off each other's necks, which Zora said was good for repelling mosquitoes, but the boss disagreed. He made the crew adjust their tethers, saying too much garlic was bad for horses. Besides, bugs weren't the bloodsuckers he was worried about.

Zora peered through the brass tube of the spyglass. "Is a different man, no?"

"A different man," said the boss. "Yes."

"You have dangerous enemies, Count Jeggare."

"I did not conceal this fact from you, Captain. I trust you are not frightened."

"Not frightened," she said, looking him up and down. "Impressed."

The boss clicked his heels and made a little bow.

"Come on," I said. "Let me see."

"Wait your turn. I am boat captain. You are only . . . What did you say?"

"Bodyguard."

"Bodyguard," she said, all dubious-like. "I wonder."

"Come on, you've had your look."

Zora slapped the spyglass into my hand. She tilted her head back to look down her hooked nose at me.

She fancied me, all right.

It took a few seconds to find the cultist. He wore the same kind of tattered cloak and leathers, but he wasn't the tall, lean guy we'd seen the night before. This one was built like a wrestler, kind of like me. Bigger, maybe.

Hard to judge without somebody standing next to him. I wanted to get my mitts on his neck and work out which one of us was stronger.

Zora gasped and stepped away.

“Radovan,” said the boss. At his heel, Arni whined and put his head on his gigantic paws.

“What?”

“You . . . growled.”

“I didn’t.”

Did I?

Zora shot me the Varisian evil eye, which looks kind of like the tines, only low and backward. I got the feeling she fancied me a little less. She shouted at her crew to keep well away from the Ustalavic shore.

We’d been hugging the eastern bank ever since we got clear of Razmiran. Even so, the first night we spent alongside Ustalav, these mooks began showing up. They just stood there watching us. They hadn’t tried anything.

So far.

The boss studied my face like a page in a book.

“So what if I did growl? You hate these Anaphexis jerks as much as I do. Aren’t they pretty much the evil opposite of your little club?”

“The goals of the Anaphexis are indeed the antithesis of the Society’s,” he said. “And please, for the thousandth time, I ask you to cease referring to the Pathfinder Society as my ‘little club.’”

“Aren’t you still on the outs with them? Or did that last letter change your mind?”

The boss touched his coat pocket. He had at least three different letters there, two of them from queens, all of them asking for the same favor. “I have yet to

decide, but that is beside the point. The Anaphexis merely remind us of our oath.”

“Your oath. I never promised those mooks nothing.”

“The word of a count of Cheliax binds both him and his—”

“Don’t say ‘servant.’ Don’t say ‘henchman.’”

“You know perfectly well I never refer to you by those terms. I was about to say ‘friend.’”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“In any event, you know I made that agreement for your sake as much as my own. More so, in fact.”

He had me there. One look at me, most folks realize my family tree has roots in Hell. The Anaphexis, these killers of knowledge, they knew my big secret: my family tree also has roots running under the throne of Ustalav.

A light came up where we’d seen the Anaphexis twerp. He waved a torch over his head. Like his buddies on the previous nights, he wanted to make sure we saw him.

We got the message, all right. If we broke the deal and landed on the Ustalav side, it meant trouble for my people: the wolves, the witch, and the freaks.

I felt the copper coin I wore around my neck. Scratched and half-melted, the face stamped on one side did kind of resemble me if you were looking for a family resemblance. A dozen times I almost lost the coin, but somehow it always turned up. It was damned near the only thing I still had since the last time I was in Ustalav. Well, that and the starkknife.

The starkknife hung from my hip. Its double-edged blades shot out at compass angles from a ring around the grip. I’d learned to throw it all right, but it never seemed like something I ought to bloody. Most of the

time I kept it with my pack. Since we'd gotten close to Ustalav, I'd hung it from my waist for I don't know why.

Maybe I thought I'd see the woman who gave it to me, and she'd see that I'd hung on to it. I kissed my thumb and drew the wings of Desna on my heart.

*Are you there, girl? You standing there, hidden on the black shore, waiting for me? I've lugged this promise around a thousand miles. Sometimes I think it's getting heavier, but tonight it feels—*

The boss coughed.

I'd been talking out loud. That was worse than growling.

"Why, Radovan," he said. "You are a poet."

My blood turned cold. "You take that back right now."

"Whatever for? I meant it only as a compliment."

"You take it back, or I will beat your ass right here in front of the gods and everybody."

He started to laugh, but then he saw my eyes. One thing we have in common, he's only half human, too. His elf blood lets him see plenty good after dusk. What he saw in my pretty yellow eyes sobered him up.

"Very well, you are nothing like a poet. Please permit me to withdraw my careless and utterly unfounded inference to the contrary. Your untarnished reputation deserves not the least such blemish, and I implore you to forgive my hasty and misinformed—"

"All right, all right! Forget it."

He raised an eyebrow to let me know he'd humored me.

Feeling like a dope, I took another peek through the spyglass. On the shore, the cultist waved the torch overhead. In the firelight, I could make out the dried-blood color of his cloak. I saw the lumps of his black

mask. The boss said Anaphexis assassins made those masks out of the flayed faces of their first five victims.

As the cultist watched us watching him, a dark shape moved in the woods behind him. Its eyes reflected the torchlight.

“Hey!”

“What is it?” The boss reached for the spyglass, but I shrugged him off, careful not to give him a spur in the heart. I wasn’t really going to rough him up, poet talk or not. At least, I was pretty sure I wasn’t.

Out of the shadows, a black wolf jumped the Anaphexis guy. It knocked him down and tore a hunk out of his middle. He drew a blade, but another wolf ran in to clamp its jaws around his wrist. The first wolf went for his throat as another two melted out of the woods to join the feast.

A second later, we heard the scream. Just the one, and then all we could hear was the sound of waves lapping around the barge.

“Tell me what you see,” said the boss.

“Looks like our enemies ain’t the only ones watching us tonight. We got some friends out there.”

Three wolves tore the body to pieces while the first one stepped away. It stood up on its hind legs, shifting gradually into a familiar figure.

I knew that figure.

She picked up the guy’s torch and let its light show off her body. The flame turned her skin to gold. A moment later, she brushed back her long black hair to make sure I had a good view.

It was a real good view.

“That’s my girl.” This time I knew I was muttering out loud.

“The witch?”

“The harrower. She’s sending us a message.”

“Let me see.”

I shrugged him off again. “She ain’t decent. I wouldn’t want you to be scandalized. She’s got company, though. Three of them. Can’t tell which ones unless they shed their skins.”

“Please tell me they didn’t kill the Anaphexis agent.”

“Well . . .”

He sighed.

“If it makes you feel any better, it don’t look like they’re leaving any evidence.”

“Let us pray not. Their master is not a fool, but it’s possible he will attribute the loss of one agent to mishap. What is she saying?”

He must have thought she’d learned his Pathfinder hand signs or something, but her message was a lot simpler. “She misses me.”

“Malena does?”

“All the girls miss me, boss. You know that.”

“No doubt they, too, have been dealing with the encroachment of the horde.”

That was the thing, the reason we weren’t going home just yet.

The demons.

All winter, fiends kept popping up all across Elfland—which the boss insists I call Kyonin, but my way’s funnier. At first we thought it was fallout from our caper in the Fierani Forest, but they weren’t coming from the Witchbole. They were showing up all across the Inner Sea, and they were all coming from the one place they were supposed to be stuck: the Worldwound.

The first summons came from Telandia, Queen of Kyonin, Wearer of the Viridian Crown, High Protector something something—I forget the rest. On account of we did her a good turn, she asked us to check out why these demons were pouring out all over the world. The boss was inclined to help, seeing as she'd done him some good turns, too. Anyway, it never hurts to have the queen of the elves owe you a favor.

The elves put us on a riverboat, along with the Red Carriage and the boss's fancy new horses. They took us up the West Sellen between Razmiran and the River Kingdoms. Those guys were having their own demon troubles.

Unlike some of the river towns we'd passed, the people in a city called Tymon weren't running from the fiends. They unleashed their gladiators on them. Those demons they didn't kill they enslaved for the arena. That didn't seem like the smartest idea, but it stopped them breaking up the joint.

Tymon was also where the boss's mail caught up to him. He'd already had a few magic messages from Queen Abrogail's sorcerers back home in Chelias, as well as from some wizard with the Decemvirate, his little club's inner circle. I half expected him to rip up their note, but the Pathfinder letter was the one that got his attention, on account of they used the magic word: "book."

While everybody around the Inner Sea wanted to know what had gone wrong at the Worldwound, the Decemvirate had an idea how to sort it out. Whoever it'd been that first opened the door to the Abyss a hundred years ago did their homework first. That included something called the *Lexicon of Paradox*.



The boss knew the title. It was some kind of famous evil book, like the *Lacuna Codex* we'd found and lost and found and lost again. Once the boss knew the Pathfinders were interested, he wanted to be the one who found it. Whether he planned to deliver it to Elfland, Cheliox, or the Pathfinders' headquarters in Absalom was anybody's guess. I had a feeling what he really wanted was to put it in his own library back at Greensteeples. That didn't seem too smart of an idea, either, but he's the boss.

The elves left us in Tymon, where we hired Zora Gorcha. Her crew included men from both Ustalav and the River Kingdoms—but no Razmirans, those lunatics who called their king a god.

I liked having the Ustalavs on the boat. Even though I was born and bred Chelish, the human part of my blood was all Ustalavic, far as I knew. It was about time I brushed up my Varisian, too. I'd been forgetting all the best curses and getting bored of the ones I remembered.

“Captain!”

One of the sailors pointed up at the southern sky. Zora yelled at her sailors to finish setting torches along the gunwales. I gave the boss the spyglass before he could ask for it. “Is it him?”

The boss fiddled with the spyglass until he got it in focus. His hand dropped to the hilt of the Shadowless Sword. A princess from the other side of the world gave that to him. No lie.

He drew it an inch out of the scabbard, letting its magic pierce any illusions. When he stood up a little straighter, I knew the answer before he said the name: “Kasiya.”

“That guy don’t know when to quit.”

The boss snapped the spyglass shut and put it in the pocket of his long coat. Like my new leathers, it was elf-made but in the Chelish style.

The horses snapped and stirred. During the river voyage, they’d kept quiet as long as I kept my distance. With Kasiya on his way, they sensed something wickeder than me.

From the sky came the sound of barking dogs. Arni grumbled to hear it. The ruff of his neck went up.

Zora ordered her men to double-double-up. A pikeman joined each of the sailors poling the boat upriver. A third man hustled over to each pair with a covered fire pot. A fourth lowered buckets into the river and drew them back onto deck.

The little dot in the sky became a blob. I could start making out details.

A pack of long-legged dogs flew through the sky. They pulled a chariot driven by Prince Kasiya, the Osirian vampire.

I’d seen the gold-masked creep a couple times since Kyonin, and the boss knew him from way back. Kasiya’s cloak floated up behind him. He shook a javelin that crackled with red lightning.

Something hung off the sides of his chariot. Whatever it was was heavy, because each time he shifted his weight the whole thing tilted one way or the other.

As they got closer, I saw the four other guys hanging off the sides. It was hard to make out details, but there was no mistaking their pale skin, clawed fingers, and red eyes.

Kasiya had been busy making little vampires.

I pointed. “Boss—”

“I saw them.” He handed me his loop of garlic and drew the Shadowless Sword.

“You sure about this?”

“Let Arnisant defend the horses,” he said. He sent the wolfhound toward the Red Carriage while he moved toward the side of the barge nearest the chariot. “You support the crew. Drive any boarders toward me.”

“Got it.” He shot me a look. I must have had a tone. “I said I got it. It’s just I’m used to being the mayhem.”

The boss smiled at that. We’d been a couple years in the field, and he was becoming more and more a regular guy. Or maybe he’d always been one, and it was just showing more since we’d been away from Egorian and all his fancy peers.

One of the passengers dropped from the chariot. Kasiya’s vampire minion howled as he saw he was going to miss the barge by thirty yards. He plunged into the river. A moment later, he came up screaming, flesh sloughing off his arm. He went down again, water boiling where he’d been.

“Idiot,” the boss spat. “Even his spawn are susceptible to running water.” Then he looked at me and added, “But Kasiya is no less dangerous for his stupidity. Do not allow any of them to touch you.”

“Check.” I pulled the big knife from the spine of my new jacket.

He shook his head at the blade. “I wish you would learn to use a sword or a spear—anything with reach.”

I shrugged. “What can I say? Old dog.”

“Try the scrolls.”

“Boss, you know I can’t—”

“Just try one before they close with us.”

I sighed. No matter how often I tried using the flippy scrolls, they never worked for me—except for the one time. But that was before I *knew* they weren't supposed to work for me.

That was the problem, the boss said. It worked when I didn't know better, so I must have had a knack. The problem was that the more I thought I couldn't use the riffle scrolls, the less chance I could make them work.

That's what you call a paradox.

Before I could dig a scroll out of my jacket, I saw a flicker of light above us. "Hey, look out!"

A tiny red flame shot down from Kasiya's javelin. It got bigger as it got closer.

The boss plucked a riffle scroll from the bandolier beneath his coat. It was a stack of paper strips the size of my thumb, one end shut with a brass brad. The boss pressed his thumb against the other end, pulling back the edges to let the pages snap free one after the next. Each page glimmered for an instant, the glow of one blending into the next to form fragments of arcane symbols. Riffled like that, the pages cast a spell.

The boss's magic shot up at Kasiya's fireball, barely visible even to my devil eyes. When the spells met, the fireball flickered and vanished with a whoosh.

The rest of Kasiya's vampire slaves flew down at us. Not "flew" flew. More like "fell screaming" flew.

"Brace yourself, boys!" I said it again in Varisian, even though all the Ustalavs spoke Taldane better than I spoke their language. Speaking Varisian made me feel more like a vampire-slayer.

One of the vamps hit the deck, rolling until its claws clung to the planks. It crouched for a second, hissing. Its eyes fixed on one of the pikemen, a fat, bearded

Ustalav. The man's jowls went slack. He pulled the ring of garlic off his neck and threw it over the side before walking toward the vampire.

I ran in, sliding to take out the fat man's legs. He fell beside me, stunned but getting mad when he realized I'd knocked him down. There was no talking to him since the vampire put the whammy on his mind. I headbutted him. It took two shots to knock him out, and was I going to regret that later. I dropped the extra garlic rope around his neck to make him bite-proof.

Kasiya's vampire slave hissed at me, lashing out now and then to keep the other sailors at bay but still unwilling to get close to the garlic. I got to my feet and shot it the tines.

That's one Chelish gesture that never needs translating. The vampire showed me its teeth.

I showed it mine.

The vampire damn near swallowed its tongue.

"All right, boys," I began. I wanted to drive this mook toward the boss, but one of the sailors had a different idea. He swung his fire pot, but the vamp leaped right over him. It landed neat as a cat on the gunwales.

From the clothes I figured the vamp had been a man of the River Kingdoms. Death grayed its face and hollowed its cheeks. Its nails had grown dark and ragged. The thing lashed out at the sailor.

I slapped my arm, filling my hand with darts from the secret pockets in my sleeves. I flung them hard. Two struck deep into the vamp's face. The third went flying past, into the river.

Snarling, the vampire plucked one out of its cheek and made a show of licking off its own half-congealed blood.

The nearest sailor broke his pole across the vampire's neck, but the monster hung on to the gunwales.

I looked to either side. The boss had just snapped another scroll at Kasiya, whose chariot was about to fly right over the barge. Two pikemen had one of the other vamps pinned to the deck. The third vamp was nowhere in sight.

The horses screamed.

Another vamp—this one a patchy-bearded dwarf—came scrambling out from beneath the Red Carriage, Arni on its heels. Maybe the garlic collar helped, but I had to think anything with half a brain would run from the big wolfhound. Arni was so big he could barely squeeze under the carriage as he chased his prey.

I tumbled forward and kicked the feet out from under the former dwarf. The creature's momentum threw it across the deck to slide toward the boss, who finished snapping another scroll straight up as the chariot passed overhead. Lightning crackled above us, but none of it touched the boat.

The dwarf vamp grabbed the boss's ankle.

I winced to see it. A vampire's touch was supposed to suck the life right out of you. The boss said that wouldn't happen to him, but I wasn't so sure.

The boss looked down like he'd stepped in something nasty. All casual, he thrust the point of his sword three times into the dwarf's head before turning his attention back to the sky, where Kasiya's chariot circled back toward the barge.

The vampire dwarf rolled away, mostly dead. Or dead again. Deaderer. There's got to be a word. I'd ask the boss later.

A couple of sailors smashed their fire pots against the thing. The bucket brigade waited for the vamp to stop struggling before dousing the flames. They timed it just right. The river water hit the burning thing just in time to turn its ashy skin to mud on the deck.

The same thing was happening with the vampire skewered by the other pikemen. Their buddies lit up the monster, and they held it out over the water until its screams became just the sound of its last fatty bits sizzling away. Then they dunked the charred remains into the river. The water boiled more from the unholy flesh than from the heat.

The rest of the sailors were still playing tag with the vampire who'd taken the darts. The garlic wasn't doing the trick anymore. The vamp had ripped the necklace off one sailor and grabbed another one by the throat. The sailor's face withered before our eyes.

I remembered the boss's warning: You don't want those things touching you.

I ran two steps, jumped, and came down with all my weight on the vamp's knee. The impact felt like kicking a pile of rocks, but it annoyed the thing enough that it let go of the sailor and came for me.

The vamp had already picked my other dart out of its face, leaving only a black sliver of a wound. You had to kill these guys fast, or they just got back up.

"Finish that one," said the boss. He ran past us, snapping off scroll after scroll as Kasiya's chariot flew by again. I kept one eye on the boss while backing away from the vamp. These things have some wicked quickness.

The boss's first scroll sent bolts of silver at Kasiya, but they splattered like raindrops against an invisible

globe. The second scroll didn't seem to do anything except cover that magic shield with a web of white light before vanishing. The third was a fireball. I expected to see it fail as it hit Kasiya's magic barrier.

Instead, it exploded.

The chariot dogs fell in all directions as the chariot drew a smoking arc above the river. Kasiya and his fancy little cart made it to the Ustalav bank before crashing into the woods.

"Good job, boss!"

Just then I remembered the riffle scroll the boss told me to use.

The sailors stabbed at the vamp with their pikes, but it dodged them and came for me. It hammered a careless sailor to the deck as I got my thumb on the scroll's edge. I could smell its decaying breath as I snapped the pages free. The scroll tingled against my thumb, and a little cloud of dust blew into the vampire's face.

The vamp flinched, maybe thinking it would burst into flames or start choking on poison.

But there was nothing. I hadn't cast a spell. I'd only blown paper dust in its face.

The vamp hit me straight in the chest, hard as a mule's kick—and I know what I'm talking about when I say that.

The blow threw me back into a couple other guys. We hit the gunwales tangled together. We all moaned, but when I tried to get up I really felt it, like the vamp had put a hole right through me.

Now I can take a punch. Desna knows I've taken plenty before. This one knocked more than the wind out of me. I half expected to hear my heart splash into the river behind us.



Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the gray blur of Arni racing toward the vamp.

“No!” I tried calling him off, but he didn’t listen. He don’t like seeing me or the boss get hit.

“Arnisant, down!” At the sound of his master’s voice, the wolfhound flattened his body on the deck.

A whooping sound cut through the air. A whirling silver flash passed through the vamp’s neck. Black-red spray covered the deck between the monster and me. Its head tumbled off and slid toward me through the gore. Startled eyes looked up at me where it came to a rest between my knees. Its body collapsed a second later.

The Shadowless Sword flew back to the boss. He caught it with a casual gesture. As the hilt touched his palm, I saw a glimmer of magic. He’d done some spell I’d never seen before. Maybe he’d been doing more than “diplomacy” with Kyonin’s other queen last winter, and the scaly old gal had taught him a few new tricks. Probably she’d just let him loose in the library, but I can dream, can’t I?

He wiped the blood on the cloth hanging from his scabbard before putting the sword away. I saw a gleam in his eye. He was proud of his stunt. Couldn’t blame him for that. It was a pretty slick move.

The crewmen were helping each other stand up. One or two were hurt pretty bad, but everybody was alive. That was something that didn’t happen to us all the time. Desna smiled.

Zora Gorcha offered me a hand up. Behind her, some of her crew were waking the other guy a vamp shook by the throat. He looked thin and gray, but he was alive, with no bite marks anywhere I could see.

When she saw that all her men had survived and her boat wasn't on fire, Zora grabbed my face and planted a garlicky smooch on my lips. My knees went all weak, but not from the kiss. Not even from the garlic.

I'd taken one hell of a hit from that vamp.

"The Count Jeggare, I am thinking he saved your life." Zora laughed as she looked me up and down. "Tell me again, Radovan, which of you is bodyguard?"