

## Chapter Two

### Dance of the Sczarni

**J**ust give me the goddamned money.” Nicola arched his back to look down his skinny nose at me, black eyes goggling. He had no idea how much that posture made him look like a giant grasshopper. If we’d had an audience, I might have told him so just to watch him turn red. Unfortunately, even the hired driver had wandered off to enjoy his pipe out of range of the valet’s complaints about the smoke, leaving us alone beside the cart laden with supplies for the expedition. The rising sun had burned away the morning mists, and it was getting hot on the cobbled street that wound up the hill from the seething markets. We’d finished our chores, and I was eager to get back down to the market for a cool draught of the local brew.

“As you of all people should know, Radovan,” Nicola said, “I take my responsibilities seriously. The master entrusted me with his purse for a reason, and he made no mention of an allowance for you after engaging our additional security. That task settled, I presume you have ample personal funds to enjoy the marketplace, or wherever it is you choose to visit

in Caliphaz in your free time. If not, I recommend you manage your money more carefully. I would be glad to demonstrate a simple method of monthly accounting—”

“Listen.” I poked him in the chest, not too hard since I didn’t want to give him a bruise he could show the boss. “You wouldn’t even have that purse if not for me.” The young pickpocket we’d encountered earlier had been no amateur, but I’d been doing it a lot longer than his ten or twelve years.

“And for that service I will gladly commend you to His Excellency,” said Nicola. “And in personal gratitude I will overlook the matter of your attracting the constabulary.”

He had me on that point. The gutter rat tried to bite me when I pinched him for the purse, and we were so close to the water that I couldn’t resist tossing him in. I should have realized he’d start crying “murder” as soon as he came up for air. Despite Nicola’s impeccable Jeggare livery, the guard who stopped us saw not a couple of innocent visitors to his fair land but a pair of foreigners with a fat purse. My devilish good looks didn’t help. Chelaxians are unwelcome enough in most places, but hellspawn are enough to start a riot.

I took a breath and gave Nicola the little smile, because threatening him wouldn’t do any good. “Listen, the guard just wanted a little taste. That’s what I was trying to tell you.”

“You mean something like a bribe?” Nicola’s cheeks colored.

Desna weeps. “I mean exactly like a bribe.”

“Don’t be absurd. He repeatedly stated that his only concern was the welfare of that street urchin—”

“Who scarpered off because he was a pickpocket.”

“—and the maintenance of peaceful conduct on the waterfront—”

“Which was disturbed by the urchin who lifted your purse.”

"If your Varisian amounted to more than a few phrases for ordering beer and engaging the services of prostitutes, you would have understood that the man was only doing his duty."

"Then why was he holding his hand out like this?" I showed him.

Nicola looked down at my hand. I wasn't exaggerating much, but there was no way to mistake the invitation. "I assumed it was just a local gesture," he said. "Besides, he went away, didn't he?"

"Yeah," I said with so much sarcasm I was afraid I'd bloodied my lips. "When exactly did he do that again?"

"Right after you shook his . . ." He stood there a few moments with a comical expression as the first drops of understanding fell upon his face. "You paid him a bribe."

"The last of my loose cash," I said, "which is why I need to dip into the acquisitions fund." Now was the time for Nicola to realize it was easier to pay me. For a wrist-sniffing sycophant, he wasn't completely stupid. Sometimes he just needed a little nudge in the direction of reason. I waved my hand and held it out the way the city watchman had done.

"You can forget it, Radovan," he said with a sour look. "I have tried to be a friend to you, despite your obvious resentment of Count Jeggare's trust in me. No doubt you have enjoyed a more informal relationship with the master in past, but his appointment of me should leave no doubt in your mind that he prefers a more traditional hierarchy among his servants."

"Actually, I'm not a servant, I'm—"

"Please show me the courtesy of not interrupting. I am trying to help you, Radovan. Many in my position would not do the same. No, I am not referring to the unfortunate circumstances of your ancestry; naturally, I defer to the master's judgment in all such matters, and as he has seen fit to employ you despite the infernal blight on your family tree, I unreservedly

support his selection. Rather, it is the cloud under which your own actions have cast you, Radovan, that prevents others from seeing you in so sympathetic a perspective as I have. Did I speak a word of condemnation after the regrettable incident of the master's wine? Radovan, I did not."

If he said my name one more time, it was going to be hard not to give him the big smile, and that always ended badly. Instead, I took a deep breath through my nose and said, "You told him that I was the one who told the sailors there was wine in the hold." I didn't know that for a fact, but the way the boss had glared at me after his conference with Nicola was a pretty good clue. The boss should have been grateful. I'm the only one who ever tells him when he's been swimming too deeply in the purple seas. All I did was mention, in a casual manner and in the hearing of the crew, that there might be a few dozen bottles of good Chelish wine stored inside the cab of the red carriage they had labored so hard to stow in the upper hold. That had to have been thirsty work, I remarked, innocent like. How could I have known the teetotaling captain would order the rest of the wine thrown overboard? I couldn't have been the only one to overhear him cursing Cayden Cailean and all his drunken minions while barking orders at his hung-over crew.

Nicola arched an eyebrow in a poor imitation of the boss, and I knew I'd guessed right. He said, "The master desired me to speculate on a likely cause for the disappearance of his personal stock, and it was my duty to obey. I did not, however, venture into disparagement of your character or any expression of certitude of your guilt. As I was saying, however, if you have lost the master's trust, it is through your own failings, not because of any imagined competition from me. Furthermore, while it pleases you to disparage the term 'servant,' my family has served the lords of Egorian with grateful distinction for generations, and I am no less proud than

my great grandfather Orellius, who daily shined the boots and scabbard of the great General Fedele Elliendo, to tend the needs of our esteemed lord and master, Count Varian Jeggare.”

I waited a moment to see whether Nicola had lost track of his point or had just winded himself. When he looked to me as if expecting a reply, I clapped him lightly on the arm and said, “Well, Nicola, you’ve got me there.”

“So you understand?” he said tentatively.

“Perfectly,” I said, patting him again.

“Excellent,” he said. “For a moment there, I feared you might lose your temper. I am glad we had this opportunity to clear the air. Now, if you will excuse me, I must acquire a few more items for the next leg of the master’s journey.” He tugged at the front of his jacket, watching to see whether I would put out a hand to shake. I did, giving him a good squeeze, not quite hard enough to wet his eyes.

“Thanks, Nicola. I’m glad we had this little talk.” I waved and sauntered away—I practice that saunter for exactly these occasions—patting the fat purse I’d lifted off of him. Pretty soon, Nicola was going to be the one to lose his temper.

Apart from the absence of the cries of the slave sellers from atop their scaffolds, the immediate difference between the markets of Caliphaz and Egorian is the smell of garlic. We Chelaxians like the stuff just fine. We just don’t steep everything in it the way these Ustalavs do. Maybe I should get in the habit of saying “we Ustalavs,” since that part of my blood that doesn’t come straight from Hell is all Varisian, maybe all Ustalav. I’d ask my mother, but we haven’t talked much since she sold me.

Garlic is one of those things, like the storied mists, that everyone down south associates with Ustalav. Since the population is mostly Varisian, you expect a certain amount

of spice along with the bangles and the veil dances, but I was beginning to wonder which came first, the garlic or the vampire?

The boss is not humorless, although he comes across that way to those who know him casually, so when he told me that the people of Ustalav eat garlic at every meal to ward off vampires, I wasn't sure whether he was having one over on me. I mean, yeah, one of the crates Nicola had on his inventory was full of silvered blades and bolts for the crossbows, plus phials of holy water, bunches of wolfsbane, all that kind of thing. That didn't bother me so much, since I had a few clashes with wererats back when I ran with the Goatherds, so I knew it was more practical than superstitious.

But the garlic, really? If that stuff worked, vampires would take one whiff at the walls of Caliphas and never come back. On the other hand, maybe that's proof that the stuff works, since most of the vampire stories I've heard take place in remote villages. Maybe the vampires of Ustalav prefer a diet of shepherds and milk maids.

As for me, I'd be happy with a loaf of that seedy black bread and a ladle of mushroom stew. As I reached the grand market, where earlier I'd picked half a dozen guards for our journey inland, something distracted me from my growling stomach. I was following the song before I realized what was drawing me in.

At first I couldn't discern its melody from the half-dozen other tunes drowning in the market noise. There were a couple of small groups of buskers, one of them including a woman with an operatic voice the boss might have enjoyed if he weren't still gazing into Elfland; no doubt his local peers were keeping him well irrigated with the local stuff. I dropped a coin into the basket beside a young girl who hammered on her dulcimer with an expression better suited to swatting flies. I stopped for a minute to watch a whiskered gnome playing

the shepherd's pipes and capering around a drumming bear. He was the first non-human I'd seen in Caliphas, apart from me and the boss.

The song grew louder as I approached a crooked lane bordered by striped tents. Pinned to each of them was a sign, some with Varisian words, others with images of orbs, wands, cards, and cups. I got the picture. It was an oracle's row, and through the opening of the tents I spied palm readers, crystal gazers, bone casters, and diviners of tea leaves. Most of them were old women, one or two younger and prettier. One was a frail old man wearing a purple turban and a pound of face paint in a vain attempt to resemble a Vudran mystic. He mouthed a silent word and reached a withered talon toward me, but I walked on.

The song was close enough that I could hear the lyrics and even understand some of the words. Around the last crook of the oracle's row I found a crowd of townsfolk encircling another peaked tent, clapping their hands in time to the song. I pushed through for a better look.

The singer was a young man with long black mustaches and a little patch of a beard just below his lip. He was shirtless beneath an embroidered vest, his skin tan. His clear tenor twined with the melody of a skirling fiddle played by a lean old man with gray hair and identical facial hair. They and their fellow musicians performed on a circular pile of worn carpets, while the rest of their clan mingled among the audience, encouraging everyone to join in on the chorus. The moment I saw them navigating the audience, I knew what they were: Sczarni.

All over the world, these particular clans of the wandering Varisians are thieves, vagabonds, con artists, bandits, pickpockets, murderers, smugglers, and scoundrels of every hue from middling gray to bloody red. They're my kind of people.

The Sczarni sang of running through pine forests, ranging the green hills, bathing in the mists of his country, something like that. Even without understanding half the words, I could tell it was joyful anthem. The audience liked it, too, adding their voices to the chorus and clapping in time to the three box drums. When the song ended, the city folk showered the carpet with red and silver coins. I plucked one from Nicola's purse and threw it, realizing only after it caught the light that it was gold. What the hell? It was a good song.

The color of my money caught the eye of one of the Sczarni women who gathered the coins. She was as pretty as a spring morning, with a faint blush upon her cheeks and just enough color on her eyelids to let you imagine it was nature rather than design that had put it there. Her eyes were the color of new moss, and when she bent to fetch my coin, the chime of her bangles drew my eye to her delicate wrists.

She knelt there a moment and looked up at me. The corner of her unpainted lips quirked, and for a second I couldn't tell whether her expression was a smile or a sneer. Before I could come up with one of my useful Varisian phrases, a boy called out to her.

It was the pickpocket I'd dunked in the harbor. His hair had dried, but his woolen clothes still drooped, and I saw a piece of gray seaweed clinging to his trousers. He spat out a few more words in Varisian, several of which I knew well. I shot him the tines, a nasty gesture with my outer fingers on either side of my throat. It's worse if you know how we execute criminals in Cheliox.

The boy complained to the Sczarni at large. The young man who had been singing asked him a question, and again I caught only a couple of words: "money" and "foreigner." It was then that I realized how foolish I'd been to flash my gold. While they wouldn't fall on me right there before the crowd, I could grow a long tail of cutthroats as I walked away.



The gray-haired fiddler said something that reduced the entire Sczarni camp to laughter, but by the boy's reddening face I knew it was at his expense, not mine.

"We do not take from those who give freely," said the beauty before me. Her Taldane was excellent, if heavily accented. "Dragos is right. You gave Milosh good lesson."

I showed her my little smile and pinched my nose. "And a good bath, I hope."

A few of the Sczarni laughed right away, and after the fiddler translated, so did the others. Milosh shot me a look meant to burn a hole through me.

"I am Malena," said the dancer. Her hair was darker than a new moon midnight, with jewels glittering like stars among the clouds.

"Radovan." I gave her the simplified version of one of those fancy bows the boss practices before the mirror when he thinks no one is looking.

Malena squinted at me. "You look Varisian," she said, "but your clothes are foreign." I was particularly fond of my new red boots and jacket. Both tooled of fine Chelish leather, they concealed the better portion of my working gear. Her compliment made my perpetual negotiation with the boss to avoid wearing the Jeggare livery worth every argument.

"My name is Varisian," I said. "I was born in Cheliast."

"But your parents come from Ustlav?"

"Maybe," I shrugged. There was a pretty good chance of that, but I didn't know enough about my parents to make a conversation of it, so I changed the subject.

"I like that song," I said. "What's it called?"

"It is 'The Prince of Wolves,' an old song," she said. "Vili sings it well." Without taking her eyes off me, she tilted her head toward the singer, who was giving me that territorial look I so often catch when talking to beautiful women.

“He certainly does,” I said, attempting to throw him a bone. I could see from Vili’s face he didn’t understand a word of Taldane.

“You know Varisian dancing?” She shook her hands, ringing the bangles on her wrists and striking a pose I’d seen in cheap copies of famous paintings, many of which looked an awful lot like her.

Before I could answer, the fiddler struck up a dance tune. Before the second beat the audience was clapping, hands above their heads. This time the musicians moved back toward their tent, leaving the carpet free, and Malena whirled into the center like a queen upon her dais. There she struck another iconic pose, and the crowd shouted her name.

At first she barely seemed to move, but the bangles at her wrists and ankles chimed in time with the music. Then she spun, and the hem of her skirts floated up to unveil lean, muscular legs. It was a rare woman in Egorian who did not shave, and something about her downy calves tickled the back of my neck. It was either that or the scent of her natural musk as she twirled close enough to brush her hair against my face.

I know an invitation when I see it, so I followed her back onto the carpet, adding a slide to the tap-house three-step to match her rhythm. The crowd laughed, but Malena met me halfway with a side step that kept me in pursuit while she painted the air with a flimsy scarf she’d conjured from her sash. Soon the locals cheered as much as they laughed, especially when I slipped an arm around Malena’s waist, then let her escape when she pushed me away in a big gesture. I made a show of touching my purse to make sure she hadn’t come away with it, and the crowd howled approval. They liked laughing, and I’d given them a clown.

Malena spun away, challenging me with a pout. I mimicked the henpecked husband I’d seen in street burlesques, hands

spread wide and low, face pleading forgiveness. I knelt and offered her an invisible bouquet.

She played coy, dancing around the circle to float her scarf upon the face of one man after another. Some of them waved her off as their wives scowled at them, while others reached after her, none quick enough to touch her as she faded back.

I took a step after her, but then I paused. The last time I'd taken a shine to a beautiful woman, it had all gone to hell fast. In the months since, I hadn't even returned the winks of the working girls, and they'd begun to resent it. Still, months later and so far away from home, maybe it was time to put the past behind me, move on, and assorted other platitudes. While I was thinking, Malena must have sensed my hesitation, because she drifted close past me. Her hair smelled of late summer fields, and I made up my mind. I snaked an arm around her waist, bent her low in my arms, and kissed her.

As kisses go, it wasn't my best work. I was too concerned about posing for the crowd, and she was too surprised to decide whether to give it her all or push me away. I lifted her back upright. Setting her back on her feet, I confirmed my guess that she was only a couple of inches taller than me. I took a step back, almost inviting a slap, but when she put her hand to my cheek it brought only a light caress. She smiled full into my face.

Something smashed the back of my skull hard enough to knock the sight out of my eyes. I turned and stepped back, raising my fists to protect my head from another blow. My vision cleared enough to reveal Vili pulling Malena away from me. She shouted at him in Varisian, too fast for me to follow. He ignored her, glowering at me.

Now there was something I wanted even more than a tumble with Malena. I tipped a wink at Vili and beckoned him toward me with the time-honored gesture. The other Sczarni moved away in unison, as if they'd known in advance what

was going to happen. Of course, they did know, as did the audience who leaned in for a better view.

The Sczarni began to clap an irregular rhythm, and many in the crowd joined them. They'd seen this dance before. I let Vili take the lead, and he began to circle me sunwise, the way a serious fighter never does. He was making a show for the crowd, for his fellows, and mostly for Malena. I let him get comfortable with his performance while I sized him up. He was five or six inches taller, but I outweighed him by a good stone or two. I dashed forward.

A knife appeared in his right hand. It was a neat move, fast as magic. The crowd gasped, and I stopped in the middle of the carpet. The blade was the length of his hand and looked sharp. It was a simple weapon, well kept and often used. I reevaluated Vili's ability. He was dangerous.

I pulled my own knife from its built-in sheath along the spine of my jacket, where its inverted haft looked like the tail I do not have, no matter what any of those lying Trick Alley doxies say. It was twice the size of Vili's, with the diabolic curves favored by Chelish rakes and priests of Asmodeus. I had keened the edge that morning, and the afternoon sun set the silver filigree on fire.

Vili kept his mouth straight, but the gleam left his eyes. He reversed course, circling moonwise until he paused and made a show of laying his knife on the carpet. I shook my head in mock disappointment, but I stepped back and stabbed my knife deep into a jeweler's block beside a nearby tent. In my peripheral vision I saw the darting figure of the pickpocket. Keeping my eyes on Vili, I said in Varisian, "No." Then, hoping someone would translate, I added in Taldane, "Touch it, and I will beat your ass and throw you back in the harbor."

I meant it, too. That was an expensive knife.

Vili rushed me. I faded left and hooked his leg with my foot, shoving him as he hurtled past. He stumbled but turned fast,

much more agile than I'd have guessed. He lowered his head and growled, showing his teeth. His canines were long and yellow. An animal stink rose from his skin, and the light hair on his bare shoulders grew thick.

I wished I had that silvered knife back in my hand.

The circle around us widened and grew quiet. Vili's growl grew deeper, and his face began to change. His heavy eyebrows grew together, the hair spreading down his widening nose and across his low forehead. His jaws lengthened, and those big teeth swelled even bigger. Before you could say 'werewolf,' he was on me.

I grabbed his long ears and held tight. His fists battered my ribs, but I was more worried about the teeth. While I focused on keeping his jaws away from my throat, his knee shot up into my groin. He howled as the spike in my leather cup split his kneecap. I'd need a tailor tomorrow, but he'd need a crutch.

I pulled him over my leg and threw him to the ground, still hanging onto his ears. He clutched at me, and I could feel his fingers turn to steel spikes, digging hard into my neck. I put my face close to his and gave Vili the big smile.

It's something I try not to do often because my teeth are not my best feature. I have to pay the street barbers extra when I want a scrape, and the kindest thing anyone ever said about my smile is that it reminded him of a box of good silver the butler had dropped.

Someone in the crowd screamed, and half the audience ran for home or temple. Even the Sczarni ceased their clapping.

"Don't make me bite you, boy," I said, heedless of the fact that he looked a good five years older than me. Judging from the smell, I was pretty sure he was the one I'd just scared the piss out of.

One of the other Sczarni shouted out a translation. Vili gradually relaxed his grip, his eyes never leaving mine, and

lay still on his back. I stood up, watching for any sign of fight to return to him.

When I moved out of reach, I saw that most of the crowd had vanished. Soon I would be alone with the Sczarni, so it was definitely time to leave. I turned to see the kid fleeing from my knife, which was still stuck fast in the jeweler's block. I wish I'd seen him straining to remove it. I pulled it out, lifting the heavy block an inch before the blade came out.

Vili slunk back into the group of Sczarni. Without the crowd to mask their numbers, I counted fourteen. They cast sidelong glances toward the gray-haired fiddler, and I realized he was their boss—chief, headman, or whatever. I touched my chin to him before realizing the Chelish gesture might not translate, but he returned it in a way that made me think it did. That might mean things were settled and done, or it might just mean I could have a head start.

As I moved away, Malena said, "Wait. Do not be angry with us, Radovan. Let me cast the Harrowing for you. A gift."

All the best sayings about revenge come from the Sczarni, so I knew it was a bad idea to linger among them without a crowd nearby. Also, I've never liked Harrowers. They're worse than most other fortune tellers because every once in a while you find a true Harrower, one of those card-readers who can actually see something from a distance of a thousand days. More often you've just paid a few silver to a con artist, and you walk away thinking you've learned something about yourself, but it's just the usual Sczarni patter, some bullshit about love, some bullshit about wealth, some other bullshit about your generous nature tempered by your inquisitive mind. I could do it myself, if I could keep a straight face.

No matter how I looked at it, there was no good reason to stay for a card trick. Still, the idea of slinking off looking no braver than Vili in front of Malena—that rankled.

Before I had made up my mind to leave, a couple of Sczarni women brought out a little round table and two stools before retreating, leaving only Malena and me in the center of the carpets. The fiddler lingered nearby, maybe thinking of himself as a chaperone.

It was all out in the open in the middle of Caliphas, and there was still plenty of daylight. What the hell? I took a seat across from Malena.

She left out the introductory mumbo-jumbo I'd seen before and simply passed me her Harrow deck. The cards were old, but the edges were still sharp enough that I didn't immediately notice the marks of a card sharp. I turned them over and looked at the faces: The Juggler, The Peacock, The Queen Mother, The Paladin. I'd seen them all before, painted by other artists. Whoever had created this deck had a creepy sort of talent, or maybe the images just seemed more ominous in my current circumstances.

Satisfied that I'd smeared enough of my spirit or whatever all over her cards, Malena took them back. "Why you have come," she said while shuffling the cards. She riffled them like a dockside gambler and lay them face up not in the familiar box but in a crescent pattern with the horns facing me. "What you will find."

Finally, without comment, she placed a single card face-down between the horns of the crescent.

She began from the center with The Fiend. "This is where you come from," she said. "A place of strength."

"That's incredible," I said. She ignored my sarcasm. If her fingers were as keen as I imagined, it was no great trick to place the cards where she wanted, and after seeing my big smile, she couldn't help but realize I had ancestors from a warmer climate.

"Here are forces that compel you." She indicated the adjacent cards, the tyrant and the wanderer. She waxed poetical

about the aspects of the mind and personality, and I nodded without really listening. Her eyes were greener than I had realized earlier, and she had extra piercings on each earlobe. The tattoo of a snake ran across her neck and down one shoulder. I wanted to follow it, but there was the fiddler looming nearby. Would I start another fight by brushing a lock of hair off of that bare, tanned shoulder?

“These are forces that oppose you,” she said. There were The Idiot and Betrayal, good choices. “And these may aid or mislead you.” The Mute Hag and The Dance. That one seemed about half-good to me, present company considered, and I was getting nervous. I glanced around to see no one else in sight.

She had reached the horns of the crescent and described The Twin and The Empty Throne as the shadows of my destiny. Perfect, I thought. Next she’d tell me I was to inherit the riches of a long-lost brother, and then the fiddler would offer to sell me a land deed.

I stood up. She looked up at me with an enigmatic expression. Was she waiting for me to ask a question now? To offer her money? I touched my purse to make sure it was still on my hip, but then I noticed she had not touched the final card. I flipped it over.

The card depicted a man standing atop a moonlit hill, a scepter in his hand and a crown at his feet. Below him, a dozen glowing eyes peered out from the shadows as if waiting for a command from above.

“No!” shouted the fiddler. He kicked over the table, scattering the cards.

Something in the tone of his voice gave me a start. I’d backed up several steps before I realized what I’d done. Malena bent to pick up the cards, and the fiddler scolded her in Varisian. I caught only a few words, but their body language told me



everything I needed to know. She had done something wrong, and he was furious.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

“Quickly,” said Malena. She pressed something into my hand. “Here is your coin. Now go!”

The fiddler pointed at me with his outer fingers, sort of a reverse of the tines. “Get away from my family, devil,” he said. “You are cursed!”

“Well, yeah,” was the snappiest remark I could muster. Still, I knew my cue when I heard it. I backed away from oracle’s row. Only after I’d turned the corner did I look at what Malena had given me.

A copper piece, and not even a shiny new one. The head of the ancient lord on its face was verdigris against the black grime of decades, maybe centuries. Maybe more than that. He was a handsome fellow, but with a sour look on his face, as if he’d just tasted something he’d expected to like but had to spit it out.

“You and me both,” I told him.