

NaNoWriMo 2004

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I. The Ring of Sensation

"Seven little mice were running through a maze.

"One let its heart direct its ways;

"One preferred to do without;

"One let deduction guide its route;

"One sought the maze's works to know;

"One looked within, and strove to grow;

"One found the maze gave means to rise;

"The last won through and got man's prize."

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

The old woman's left eye, which had been wide open during the odd recitation and blazing with a strange blue fire, was now again closed, and she squinted up at Keliander with her rheumy, red-rimmed right eye. "Eh? What was what?"

"What you just said, about the mice in a maze?"

"Eh? Did I say something?"

"Never mind," Keliander said, and turned to leave.

"Ah!" the old woman exclaimed. "I know! It was a prophecy, that's what it was. They come on me sometimes. I don't have no control over them, an' I don't remember 'em afterward, but I charge three

coppers a piece for 'em. A silver if it was a really good one." She peered at Keliander doubtfully. "Was it a really good one?" she asked plaintively.

Keliander hesitated, then turned to the younger man accompanying her. "Selburn, give the old woman a silver piece."

"What?"

"You've got our jink; give her a silver."

Selburn opened his mouth as if to object, but instead he dug into his coin purse and dug out a coin, which he tossed to the old woman. She caught it with a gleeful chirp and skittered off down an alley.

"You don't really believe that was a valid prophecy," Selburn said after the old woman had left.

"No, I don't," Keliander said, brushing back her bright red hair. "But I *do* believe that that old woman looked like she needed the jink, and we can afford it."

She started off down the street again, and the silvery-skinned young man hurried to keep up.

"Won't we need it? I mean, we don't know how long we're going to be here, and I'm sure in a city run by baatezu food and lodging won't come cheap."

"We won't have to pay for food and lodging here, Selburn."

"What? Why not?"

"Don't you remember your briefing?"

"They didn't give me a briefing."

Keliander stopped again, and Selburn almost ran into her. "They didn't give you a briefing?"

"No. I was just told to go with you and help you out in any way necessary."

"Hmph. I suppose they must have expected me to lann you about what you need to know. Well, it would have been nice if they'd thought to *tell* me. All right, once we get a place to stay for the night I'll fill you in on everything."

"Right."

She started walking again, and again the younger man followed.

"You know," Keliander said, "there's a lot I didn't like about Sarin's policies. I don't like speaking ill of the dead, but the truth is that in a lot of ways, I think Faith's a much better factol for the Harmonium than Sarin ever was. But...say what you will about Sarin, there's no denying he ran a tight ship. Whatever else he did, he kept everything running smoothly. Nowadays, sometimes I wonder how the Harmonium keeps from falling apart, with all the little details that seem to go wrong."

She sighed. "But then, I suppose Faith hasn't been a factol for long, and this is a hard time. It's a hard time for all the factions. She'll get things together, maybe get things running even better than Sarin had them. But it's going to take time. And we're stuck in the transition."

"Right," Selburn said again.

They walked in silence for a while down the bustling street, until finally Selburn spoke again. "Did she say 'man's prize', or 'man's surprise'?"

"What?"

"The old woman. Did she say 'prize' or 'surprise'? It sounded like 'prize' at first, but now that I think of it there was kind of a pause before that, and there could have been an extra syllable there. Especially since that first s could have blended in with the end of 'man's'. I'm not sure whether she said 'prize' or 'surprise'."

"If it wasn't actually a prophecy, does it really matter?"

Selburn paused before speaking. "No," he said, "I guess not."

Keliander stopped in front of a two-story building made of some sort of glowing red brick. "Well, I suppose this looks like as good a place as any." She turned sharply and strode inside.

As she walked toward the counter at the back to see about getting a room, though, a voice hailed her from one of the tables in the spacious common room.

"Keliander! Hey! Fancy seeing you here!"

She turned toward the voice, which came from a table full of people, who she thought had until recently been engaged in raucous conversation, though now most of them had turned to look at her. The speaker was a thin man with a broad grin and twinkling eyes, and with one shoulder higher than the other.

"You know," he said, "for a huge collection of infinite planes, the multiverse sometimes seems like an awfully small place."

"Is that someone you know?" Selburn asked.

Keliander approached the table. "Yeah, he's an old...friend of mine. Selburn, let me introduce you to Gamlin of the Mews. Gamlin, this is Selburn."

"Call me Claw," the man at the table said, holding up the oversized hand apparently responsible for this nickname. "Everyone else does."

The appendage in question might not *quite* be a claw in the strictest sense of the term, but it wasn't far off. It was large, red, and scaly-looking, with thick, sharp nails, completely failing to match the normal hand on his other side, which was currently resting on the opposite shoulder of an attractive, slightly wild-looking young woman beside him. He saw Selburn quail a bit at the sight of the red hand, and laughed amiably.

"Heh. Don't worry; cutter. There's nothing fiendish about it. I've just got a bit of chaos in my blood, that's all, and I guess this is one way it came out." He glanced at Keliander and quickly went on. "Not that there's anything *wrong* with having a fiend or two in the family tree, of course."

"So what are you doing here, Claw?" Keliander asked, trying not to feel self-conscious about her tail and her slitted eyes. There was no reason to be, after all; Selburn already knew she was a tiefling.

Claw withdrew his arm from around his companion. "Eh, well, me an' a few o' my fellow Sensates heard tell o' this place, and decided to come down here and see what it's all about. I daresay we haven't been disappointed. The Ring of Sensation lives up to its reputation and then some. 'Course, a body can get tired of it after a while...but I suppose that's the point, isn't it? Anyway, how about you? This doesn't seem like the sort of place you'd take a shine to. Or " his eyes flickered to Selburn, and to the Harmonium symbol on the clasp of his cloak "I suppose maybe you're here on faction business?"

"Actually, we are. We're pursuing a dangerous criminal. A half-fiend assassin named Kurlamber."

"Ah, so that's the lay of it. And pursued him straight here to the City of Man, did you?"

"This is where he was last sighted, yes."

"Well, I wish you luck. But anyway, the two of you look tired, and I'm sure you're wanting to call it a night. Maybe we can meet up tomorrow and talk over old times."

Keliander hesitated. "I'd love to catch up, Claw, but "

"But you've got your duty, I know. But hey, we've been here a while now, me friends and I, and maybe we can help out in your search a bit?"

She hesitated again, and then nodded. "All right. No harm in that, I suppose."

"There's a place down the road a bit tall round building, green rock, can't miss it, stands above everything else for hundreds of feet on a side--serves a kind of food I suspect you'd like. Why don't we meet there, say around midday, or what passes for it here? This place, the food's, well, *interesting*, but I don't know that it would suit your fancy."

"That's fine; if you've been here a while and know the area, we'll take your advice."

"Fine, fine. Oh and if you were looking to stay the night here, I wouldn't recommend it."

"Why not?"

"Oh, this place has interesting food, but not the best rooms." He waved around vaguely with his claw hand. "The glowing walls, for one thing. Keep a sod up at night. There's a place across the street might suit you better. A little hard to find; it's underground, and you have to look out for the metal arch that marks its entrance. But though it may not look like much from the outside, once you get down in there you'll find the most comfortable rooms this side of the Gilded Hall."

"Thank you. We'll try that."

"They've got the best scented baths you could ever ask for, too. And if you've been traveling 'cross Minauros to get here, I'd expect you could use a good bath."

"Maybe we could, at that. Well, as you said, Selburn and I should probably be getting some rest. We'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Right. Sleep well, now."

Claw and his companions had already returned to their loud, boisterous conversation before Keliander and Selburn had left the room.

"So. What do you know about the City of Man?"

"Not much," Selburn admitted.

It was the morning after their arrival; Keliander and Selburn had jointly decided that the younger man's briefing could wait until they'd gotten some rest. Now the two of them sat in an isolated alcove in the main hall of the underground inn Claw had recommended; on the table in front of them was a parchment Keliander had taken from her pack.

"All right. Well, maybe it's best to start from the beginning."

"Is it always so hard to get in here as it was for us?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. There's nothing special about *us* that made us have to take that roundabout route. That's the only way to enter the City of Man, strange as it may seem. But there's not much point in talking over that; we're in now and it's what's *inside* the city we'll have to worry about next."

"Right."

"So." Keliander sketched a series of concentric circles on the parchment. "The City of Man is made up of nine concentric rings. Each ring is smaller than the one outside it."

"Right."

"Right now, of course, we're in the first ring. The outermost." She labeled the circle on the parchment. "The Ring of Sensation."

"Right."

"Now, connecting the rings are nine streets." She drew lines on the parchment in the appropriate places, triads spaced a hundred and twenty degrees apart. "Three that run between the first four rings, three that run between the third and seventh, and three that run between the sixth ring and Alasta's palace at the center."

"Who's Alasta?"

Keliander sighed. "They really *didn't* give you any briefing, did they?"

"I told you they didn't."

"Alasta the Keen runs the city at least in name. But don't worry about her. We're not going anywhere

near her palace, and I certainly don't expect to meet her."

"What do you mean 'at least in name'?"

"Like I said, don't worry about her. Let's stick to what we need to know."

"Right."

"Actually, you've probably already got as much as we need to know. I doubt we're going to have to go beyond the first ring."

"Why not?"

"I don't see Kurlamber overcoming the temptation of his senses."

"What do you mean?"

Keliander sighed. "Well, you see, you can't pass to the next ring in till you've overcome the temptation of the ring you're in. You can't enter the second ring until you've overcome the temptation of the first ring."

"Why not? Is there some sort of magical barrier?"

"No...not really. I think for one thing, a body isn't going to *want* to go to the next ring in as long as there's enough around in the current ring to tempt him. But anyway, just in case, there are cornugons positioned along the walls to physically restrain people who try to go inward before they're ready."

"How do the cornugons know when the people are ready?"

"Who knows? Ask the baatezu. Not that they'd give you a straight answer."

"So what does it mean to overcome the temptation of the first ring?"

"Well, I suppose it's to no longer feel the need to linger for the sensory experiences. That's what the first ring's all about. Delighting the senses or tormenting the senses, for those who are into that sort of thing."

"Ah. So that's why your Sensate friend and his companions came here."

"Apparently. I suppose it makes sense; this place has just about everything a Sensate could ask for."

"I can see it. Even in the short time I've been here. The food's been *really* good, that bath last night was great, and "

"Yeah, well, there's a lot more to it than that. If you know where to look, you can get just about any sort of sensory experience you want here. And that's what keeps people from going to the second ring. As long as they're stuck on getting all they can out of this ring, they'll never pass on to the next. It's only when they've had their fill of such physical sensations that they're allowed to go to the second ring."

"So what's in the second ring?"

"Doesn't really matter for our purposes, does it? Like I said, I don't see Kurlamber leaving the pleasures of the first ring to go there."

"He might, if he's got the motivation. And fleeing justice might be enough motivation for him. Anyway, there's no harm in knowing, is there?"

Keliander sighed again. "All right. They lanned me about all the rings; I guess I might as well pass the word on to you. So. The second ring is the Ring of Desire. The temptations there are well, I guess you can fill that in."

"I guess I can," Selburn said, his cheeks flushed red, which looked odd against his silvery skin.

"Then the next one in from that is the Ring of Purity. I'm not sure exactly what that's about, other than the name, but like I said I don't suppose it matters. Together, these three rings are called the Walls of the Body. And the three roads running through them are the Route of Health, the Boulevard of Strength, and the Avenue of Grace."

"Right."

"Now, the next three rings are called the Paths of the Mind. In order, they're the Ring of Emotion, the Ring of Logic, and the Ring of Understanding. Connecting them are the Lane of Memory, the Path of Politics, and the Way of Philosophy."

"Do the names of the roads mean anything?"

"What?"

"I mean, okay, the rings are named after the particular temptations they represent. I get that. But what about the roads? Does it make any difference which road you go down?"

Keliander licked her lips with her sharp-ended tongue. "You know, honestly, I'm not sure. I don't think that was mentioned in my briefing. But it's "

"...Probably not important, I know, I know. Right. So what are the last three rings?"

"The last three rings are the Temptations of the Spirit. The seventh ring is the Ring of the Body. The eighth ring is the Ring of the Mind. And the innermost ring is the Ring of Power."

"And past that?"

"Hm?"

"Well, if it's a ring, there's got to be something in the center, doesn't there?"

"I already mentioned that, I think. Alasta's palace."

"Right."

"But we're *definitely* not going there."

"Now, you said last night that we didn't need to spend money here."

"And we didn't. You'll notice we weren't charged for our stay here. Or for our meals last night or this morning."

"Right. But why not? I mean, this place is run by the baatezu, right?"

"Of course. Alasta herself is an erinyes, and there are other baatezu helping direct things."

"Right. But so why would the baatezu just give things away for free? That's not like them. Baatezu don't just give things away. Not without a price."

Keliander shrugged. "Actually, no one really knows *why* the baatezu let people go through for free. It seems they want to encourage people to walk all the rings, to overcome their temptations and get to the center, but no one really knows why."

"Right, that does seem bally. Baatezu wanting to help people *overcome* temptations?"

"Well, some say that those who get to the center and reach Alasta's palace become baatezu themselves. But it doesn't have to be anything quite that dramatic. The baatezu are lawful as well as evil, remember. Maybe just by helping people become more *lawful* they're tipping the balance in their

favor. Along that axis, anyway. So maybe that's the point."

"Maybe, but they're just as evil as they are lawful. It doesn't seem likely there's not some evil involved. And another thing--the baatezu may run the place, but I've noticed a lot of the staff here, the people running the shops and all, well, they're not all baatezu. And what about that old woman? If we don't need money, what did *she* need with it? Maybe *visitors* don't need jink, but it looks like people *living* here do."

"Maybe so."

"But then where do the people who live here come from? Do people settle here by choice? Is it part of the baatezu's plan? There's more to the City of Man than meets the eye, I'm full sure of that."

"I'm sure there is, but no one really knows the dark of why the baatezu made the City of Man, or how they run it. And it's really not "

"Not important for our mission. No, I suppose not. Still, though, I'd really like to know."

"You know, Selburn, sometimes I wonder why you joined the Harmonium instead of the Fraternity of Order."

"Can't a body be curious?"

"Well, no harm done, anyway. But I think by now you know all we need to know for our mission."

"Right. But what happens if we end up having to pursue Kurlamber all the way to Alasta's palace?"

"We won't. I grant you the *remote* possibility that he'll get past the first ring. But I *really* don't see him getting much farther than that."

"Right. Well, we'll see what we'll see."

Keliander rolled up the parchment. "Anyway, I think by now it's about time for us to meet Claw."

[Continued...]

I. The Ring of Sensation

[Continued]

Claw was already there when Keliander and Selburn arrived. Only one of his companions from the previous night was with him, the straw-haired, doe-eyed girl he'd had his arm around. Also at the table, however, were three people Keliander was sure had *not* been with him the previous night, githzerai all of them, wearing light grey robes with angular black embroiderings.

They had almost reached the table before Claw spotted them, but when he did he raised his red hand and motioned them forward. "Ah! Keliander! And...I'm sorry; I forgot the name."

"Selburn," the young man said.

"Selburn, right. Sorry. I'm bad with names sometimes. I'll try to remember it, though. Have a seat, the both of you."

"Looks like you've already picked up some other new friends, Claw," Keliander said, nodding toward the githzerai.

"Them? Ah, just some temporary traveling companions. They share our interest in seeing the inner rings."

"The inner rings? I thought you were only here to experience the Ring of Sensation."

"Well...that's what most of us came for. Most of my fellow Sensates, I mean. But me, after being here a while, I wanted to experience what was farther in. I mean, there's more worth experiencing than just *physical* sensations, ain't there? And I figured, a true Sensate, he'd want to experience it *all*, not just the physical but what lay beyond. Well, *we* figured. Me and Aebre here. You haven't met Aebre, have you?"

Aebre was apparently the wild-looking girl. "No, I don't think we've met," Keliander said.

"She came here with me an' the other Sensates, but she's the only one besides me that decided to go further on. And in case you're wondering about her looks, she don't look quite human 'cause she ain't, no more than you an' I are. Aebre's mostly human, but she's got a touch of the fey. Had a dryad ancestor way back, or some such."

"Pleased to meet you," Aebre said, holding out a hand. Keliander noticed the nails had an odd glassy

transparency. Keliander shook it, and the girl returned it to her side.

"And speaking of being not quite human," Claw said, peering at Selburn through one eye, "you, I'm guessing...aasimar?"

"My great-grandfather was an astral deva," Selburn confirmed.

"See, I knew it was either aasimar or tuladhara, an' I thought you looked a little more t'other than the one. Well, look at us here. A chaond, a tiefling, and an aasimar." He turned to Aebre. "If you were a zenythri, m'dear, we'd have the full set. All four sides. 'Course, we'd still be missing the center, but what can you do?"

"I still don't think we've been introduced to your other companions," Selburn said.

"Right, right, where were we. Well, then, these three gentlefolk came here all the way from the monastery of Turkazeck in Limbo. Which I've probably just horribly mispronounced."

"You have," confirmed the tallest of the githzerai emotionlessly. "It's Ter'Ka'Zek."

"Ah, well, anyway, I'm sure you can tell the story better'n I. Why don't you go ahead an' tell it?"

"As you say," the tall githzerai agreed. "We were sent to the City of Man by our head teacher, Master Aalzar, in order to strengthen our resolve. Master Aalzar said that if we could withstand all the temptations presented by the City of Man, and walk the rings to their end, then we would have shown that we had the clarity of vision to truly excel in our studies. I am Hailephon, this is O'Ale, and he calls himself Straitwill." She motioned first to the githzerai at her right, a squat woman whom Keliander didn't recall having seen move since she and Selburn had entered, and then to the man on her other side, a slight, light-eyed githzerai who was the only male of the three.

"You can call me Will," the last said in a clear, flat voice.

"Is this a usual test for monks of your order?" Selburn inquired.

"We shall be the first," Hailephon said. "Master Aalzar wishes to see how we do, and how those of us who make it through are changed. But he has expressed great confidence in us."

"It does seem a lot of pressure, though," Will muttered, staring down at the table. Hailephon glanced at him with what looked to Keliander like mild disapproval.

It was at that point that a waitress, a pert genasi with hair as red as Keliander's, came by with a tray full of plates and started placing them on the table.

"I took the liberty of ordering for you while we were waiting," Claw said. "Hope you don't mind. If you don't like it, you can always send it back. It's not like they'll charge for it."

What Claw had ordered for Keliander turned out to be a hunk of black bread, a cut of juicy meat swimming in thick red sauce, and some yellowish vegetables she didn't recognize. It all smelled good, the meat in particular having a rich, oddly but pleasantly earthy aroma. Keliander tried a forkful of the vegetables and found their flavor a bit like a cross between carrots and pineapple—strange, but definitely not bad. A second waitress arrived with the rest of the plates—the first had only been able to carry four, including Keliander's—and the conversation continued as they all ate.

"Anyway, like I said," Claw cut in, "our friends from the monastery I can't pronounce are going the same way Aebre and I are toward the center of the city so we've decided as long as we're going along that way we may as well go together. I guess we'll see how long that lasts before we get on each others' nerves too much, eh?"

"I can believe that ascetic monks can overcome the temptations of sensation to get to the second ring, but Claw, do you really think you're up to it?"

"I *know* I'm up to it. Fact is, I've already been there."

"You've already been to the Ring of Desire?"

"Sure we have. Once you've gone further in, you can go back to the outer rings all you want, you know. Aebre and I decided we were ready to move on and went in to the second ring some sixty days ago or so. We're just back in the first ring for a spell to visit some of our friends who stayed behind. Matter of fact, I think I've had my fill of the Ring of Desire enough to be ready for the third ring, meself."

Keliander permitted herself an indulgent smile. "I'll believe that when I see it."

"Oh, I'm not saying I'll make it all the way to the middle, necessarily, but I mean to get as far as I can. Experience as much of the City of Man as I can manage."

"Well, I wish you luck."

"You're more'n welcome to come along with us too, if you'd like. I wouldn't say no to a bit more o' your company."

"Thank you, but I don't think we'll be going to the second ring."

"Why not?" Aebre asked.

"Selburn and I aren't here to walk the rings. We're here in pursuit of a criminal. And I doubt he's heading to Alasta's palace."

"Hey, you never know," Claw said.

"So how do you expect to find the criminal?" O'Ale asked, looking at Keliander for the first time. Her voice was soft but harsh, seeming to come from somewhere in the back of her head.

"Well, for the moment, all we can do is try to ask around and follow his trail."

"You weren't given any better means than that?"

"We *were* given a magical compass that would lead us to him," Keliander said, somewhat offended by the critical tone of the githzerai's voice and trying not to show it, "but unfortunately it requires us to have something of his in our possession for it to work."

"And you don't have anything?" Aebre asked.

"Not yet. But I'm hoping at some point as we're following his trail we'll run across something he left behind. That'll make it all the easier to follow him further."

O'Ale looked back down at her plate, and said nothing further.

"Well, you know, maybe we can help you find your criminal," Claw said. "We've been here a while, met some of the locals, maybe we can help ask around before heading back to the Ring of Desire."

"Thank you," Keliander said. "I'd appreciate the help."

"So what did this criminal of yours look like?"

"He's a tall man, sallow, with dark hair. Unkempt on top, but coming down to thick mutton-chops that don't stop till they get to the chin. Thick eyebrows, too, and reddish eyes. He's got a hook nose, pointed ears, and a small mouth, and his teeth are sharp like a cat's. He's got wings, too, though they're not big enough for him to fly with, wings like a bat, but red. Also, he's got spines sticking out of his elbows and shoulders not really big spikes, but big enough they can't be easily hidden under clothing and his hands are...well, actually his hands are something like your left hand, but not quite so big."

"Aw." Claw waved his hand in mock disappointment. "And here I thought I was unique."

"Sounds like someone who'd be hard to miss," Aebre observed.

"Oh, he'll stand out in a crowd, I'd think," Selburn said. "Of course, maybe not so much here as elsewhere. This is Baator, after all; I'm sure there are plenty of half-fiends around."

"Oh, there are, but not too many that look quite like that," Claw said. "I don't think it'll be much of a problem finding him, if he went this way. The City of Man is a big place, but there aren't that many roads it's just that those roads that are there are full long. Still, that means there ain't that many ways he could've gone, and I'm sure it's just a matter of askin' the right people an' we'll track 'im right down."

"Well, as I said, I'd appreciate any help you could give me."

"No problem at all. So who'd he put in the dead-book, anyway?"

"Eh?"

"You said earlier this half-fiend of yours was an assassin, didn't you? So who'd he kill?"

"Oh. Well, he's probably killed a number of people, but the particular one that's set us on his trail is Laedeth Terial. He was a factor in the Sons of Mercy not one of the most important factors, but a factor nonetheless, and Sons are still new enough this wasn't an easy blow to take. The Harmonium had been keeping an eye out for Kurlamber anyway, but after this we decided it was time to make his capture a priority. We found out he'd fled to the City of Man, and I was sent to take him in."

"Just the two of you?" O'Ale said. "Doesn't seem like that much of a priority."

"He shouldn't be hard to take down if we can find him," Keliander said. "He's good at striking when he's unexpected; I don't think he'll pose much of a threat to us in a face-to-face confrontation."

"Don't sell Keliander short," Claw said to the githzerai. "I've seen her in some tough spots, and she can hold 'er own, believe me."

"Well, we wish you success on your quest," said Hailephon. "We have no particular attachment to the Sons of Mercy, but we have no quarrel with them either, and surely such an assassin is a force of chaos that must not be tolerated."

"Well, he's not exactly *chaotic*," Selburn said. "He's apparently the son of a pit fiend "

"Nevertheless, he is a lawbreaker, is he not?"

"He definitely is that," Keliander said decisively, "and we fully intend to bring him to justice."

Hailephon nodded.

"And what if he *does* go to the Ring of Desire?" Aebre asked, smiling mischievously.

"As I said earlier, I hardly think it likely."

"Maybe, but it's not impossible. What are you going to do if he does go there?"

"Then we're going to follow, of course."

The feytouched's smile broadened, showing far-too-perfect teeth. "You asked earlier whether Claw and I really thought we were up to leaving the Ring of Sensation. What about you? You and your deva-touched friend there really think you can tear yourself away to make it to the Ring of Desire?"

"I haven't seen anything here that I've found all that tempting," Keliander told her dryly.

"Ah, but you've been here less than a day. You've barely seen *anything* yet. And the guards won't let you through until you've seen. You can't pass the test until you've taken it."

"I don't think either Selburn or I is going to have much problem 'tearing ourselves away' from the Ring of Sensation. Sensual pleasures have never been too enticing for me. I find my satisfaction in work well done, in doing good and upholding the law."

"Ah," the feytouched said, raising her glass to her lips, "but I can't believe you can possibly find *all* your satisfaction there." She drank deeply of the clear blue liquid, watching Keliander impishly over the rim of the glass.

"I don't think either Selburn or I will have any problem getting to the Ring of Desire if it comes to that," Keliander repeated. "But, as I've said, I seriously doubt it *will* come to that. Kurlamber is a criminal. I don't see him as being disciplined enough to overcome *any* sort of temptations."

"You haven't known many criminals, have you?" Aebre grinned. "Not *well*, at any rate. Someone can resist one temptation to fall to another, you know, and different people have different wants, different... *weaknesses*. This Kurlamber may be a murderer, but who's to say he's just not just as unenticed by sensual pleasures as you say you are? You find your satisfaction in work well done. Good for you. Only maybe he does too...he just does a different kind of work."

"*If* Kurlamber makes it to the Ring of Desire," Keliander repeated, trying not to let her irritation show and knowing she was failing, "then we will follow. It's as simple as that."

"And you're sure you can do it?"

"I don't think either Selburn or I will have any difficulty doing so."

"Ah. Well, maybe you should have a chat with your friend before trying to speak for him."

"What do you mean?" Keliander asked, but then she glanced at Selburn. The young man was looking down at his plate, his face flushed, and his hand, which clutched his empty fork, was trembling.

"Selburn?" Keliander said. "Are you all right?"

He looked up at her. "I don't know. What if she's right? I mean, sure, it's easy to *say* I won't be tempted by physical pleasures, but...like she says, I haven't seen them yet. I don't know if I'm good enough."

"Selburn, you'll do fine."

Selburn looked around the inn. "It bothers me. It really does."

"I have confidence in you, Selburn. I know you can do it if you need to."

"Not just that." He motioned with the hand that still held the fork. "All of this. The city. We still don't know why the baatezu built it, why they run it, what it's *for*, and that bothers me. It seems to me like just a big trap. And I don't like walking into traps, especially without knowing how they work."

"Visitors to the City of Man are allowed to leave freely," Hailephon said. "Of course, we don't intend to leave until our pilgrimage is complete."

"Well," Keliander said, "if all goes well, we just have to snatch Kurlamber and get out. So even if this *is* a trap, we're not going farther into it."

"I'm sorry," Selburn said. "I should be stronger than this. It's just...I don't like mysteries. I like knowing what's going on."

"Ah, now what would the multiverse *be* without its mysteries?" Aebre chuckled.

"One cannot know everything," O'Ale said. "The best one can do is to seek to do the most one can with what one *does* know."

"In case you were wondering," Aebre said, "yeah, she *does* always talk like a bloomin' fortune-teller."

O'Ale didn't react to this, but Hailephon frowned slightly. On Will's face, though, Keliander thought

she saw a brief smile, quickly suppressed.

Keliander turned to Claw. "Speaking of snatching Kurlamber," she said, "you said you might be able to help us find him?"

"I think we just may. Like I said, we know people here, and we can ask around and see who's seen him. We were planning on returning to the Ring of Desire, Aebre an' me, but I daresay I don't mind hanging around the Ring of Sensation a little longer. It's not like there's nothin' to do here. An' even if Aebre an' I have 'passed the temptation' of the Ring of Sensation, and don't find the need to go out of our way to find sensory pleasures...hey, that doesn't mean we can't enjoy 'em if we have to be here anyway." He winked. "Anyway, we'll turn up your crook, don't you worry about that."

"Well. I suppose perhaps the thing to do would be to split up, make our inquiries, and then set up a time to meet up again. Perhaps in three days?"

"If you think it'll take that long. I wouldn't be surprised I'll have some chant for you tomorrow."

"Well, we have to eat anyway; I suppose we may as well meet up for it and compare notes. Shall we meet here again?"

"We can, if you want to. But I'd have thought you'd be up for a little variety. There's a place just down the street, yellow building shaped sorta like a giant toad. They serve nothin' but fruit there, but it's fruit from all over the multiverse, an' you'd be amazed at the variety you can get with just fruit. I think you'd find you "

"All right. We'll meet there tomorrow." She was almost done with her meal, and it looked like the others were too, except Selburn, who had been more picking at his meal than eating heartily. He didn't look like he was in the mood to eat more right now anyway, though. "So. I suppose we might as well get started." She got to her feet.

"I suppose we might as well," Claw said. He turned to the githzerai. "Well, it looks like we won't be traveling together after all. I suppose the three of you'll be eager to get on with your journey, so you won't want to wait up for us."

Will looked up. "We don't have any specific time limits. I don't see any reason we can't wait for you; it would be good to have the company. Besides, as Hailephon said, you're trying to bring a lawbreaker to justice; it would seem to go against the principles of our monastery not to do what we can to help you out."

"That isn't our current mission," O'Ale said. "We are to go to the center of the City of Man. I see no purpose in delaying that. We need no companions, and we were not sent here to apprehend lawbreakers."

"I think I agree with Will," Hailephon said. "We were not sent here to apprehend lawbreakers, true, but that doesn't mean that we should not do so if such a situation comes up. More importantly, while we do not *need* companions, there is strength in numbers. Master Aalzar said that the trials of the City of Man would be more difficult than we might expect. It could well be that we will need that strength."

O'Ale looked at her, wrinkling her beaky nose. "Well," she said finally, "I do not know that we need *such* numbers, but I will not be so foolhardy as to try to make my pilgrimage alone. If the two of you are determined to wait, so be it. I too will wait until this matter is over so that we can all leave together."

"So it looks like we'll be sticking together after all," Claw said. "Glad to hear it!" He joined Keliander in standing, followed quickly by Hailephon. "All right, then, we'll meet tomorrow at the yellow building over yonder. And then we'll see what we've turned up."

Claw had certainly been right about the variety of fruit available. There were fruits here that tasted like nothing else Keliander had ever had before. At least they were pleasant enough, though, although she couldn't help but be put off by the scent of a large fuzzy brown oblong thing Aebre was eating. If it tasted anything like it smelled, then Aebre was certainly following the Sensate philosophy of experiencing the bad along with the good.

The chaond had insisted on waiting to talk business until they were all settled in and had started their meals, but now that they had Keliander decided it was time to talk. "So, Claw, have you turned up anything?"

Claw spat into his napkin some bright yellow seeds from the red crescent-shaped fruit he was munching on. "Matter of fact, we have. A hamatula down that way " he waved his claw hand to indicate a direction "saw your assassin headin' in somethin' of a hurry down the road there. An' a few more inquiries in that direction turned up more o' the same. Looks like he's makin' his way widdershins around the ring."

"Then we'll follow. He's got to stop eventually."

"As you say."

"So, you still haven't found anything that tempted you?" Aebre asked.

Keliander glanced at Selburn, who was blushing again. Selburn had had to be dragged away from a certain massage parlor, but in the end he'd come willingly, even if he'd dawdled a bit in doing so. And he'd kept a wide berth around some of the more decadent pleasures the Ring had to offer and there were plenty of those. She had confidence in him. He was young; he was understandably drawn to experience new things. But he'd come around.

"Nothing we couldn't handle," she said.

"Well, you still haven't been in the Ring long. It's still got *much* to show you yet."

"I don't hope to be in the Ring much longer. We'll make more inquiries along the road in that direction, where you left off, and we'll meet again tomorrow at a place further up that way. Does that sound reasonable?"

"Sounds good to me," Claw said. "I passed a place on the way that looked worth checkin' out. There's a statue of a lupinal out front, can't miss it. A very realistic statue, too, and life-size; a body can't help but wonder "

"So. We'll meet there tomorrow, then."

Keliander let herself fall wearily into her seat. "By the Lady. It's been what, forty days we've been following him now? Is he just going to keep running circles around the Ring?"

"He hasn't even run one full circle yet," O'Ale pointed out. "We've only followed him about a third of the way around the Ring so far."

"Yes, but the Ring is awfully big. How long is he planning on keeping this up?"

"Not much longer, as it turns out," Claw said. "Least, not much longer running around the Ring of Sensation."

Keliander perked up. "You found something?" There had been days when she and Selburn had picked up his trail, but today wasn't one of them. There had also been days when none of them had any luck, though those were few; usually if Keliander and Selburn didn't find anything, Claw and Aebre did and

apparently that was going to be the case once again today.

"We found something, all right," Claw answered, "but I'm not sure how you'll like it."

Keliander glanced at Aebre, who was grinning like a cat. "Well, let's have it out, anyway."

"We talked to some bashers what'd seen him goin' down the Avenue of Grace."

"Going down the Avenue of Grace? You mean "

"Looks like he made it to the Ring of Desire after all," Aebre said gloatingly.

Keliander drummed her fingers on the table. "You're sure about this?"

"Hey, I wouldn't play nothin' but fair with you, Kel," Claw said. "You know that."

She drummed her fingers again. She glanced at Selburn, who was looking at her as if waiting for her guidance.

"Fine," Keliander said. "Then that's where we're going."

i. The Avenue of Grace

Perrish slit open the envelope with one gold-enameled fingernail. She unfolded the letter within and quickly skimmed its contents, and then turned to the attentive bladeling that stood by her side.

"They're in the second ring."

"The second ring?" the bladeling asked. "Why? Did Kurlamber go there?"

"Apparently, yes, he did. I admit I'm a little taken by surprise, too, but we knew this wasn't entirely impossible."

"So they made it to the second ring. That means they overcame the temptation of the Ring of Sensation, then."

"I never doubted they'd manage that, Ilxax. Keliander's got a strong will, and a firm devotion to our cause. And Selburn may be young, but I see much potential in him. I knew once they were in the city they'd be able to pursue him to the second ring if they had to though I confess I *did* doubt for a while they'd make it into the city at all."

"Why?" spoke Nemera from the padded chair where he lounged at the other end of the room, far enough away that Perrish had thought he wasn't listening to the conversation but apparently she'd been mistaken. "Did you doubt the information I'd given you? Don't you trust me?"

As a matter of fact, she didn't, not for a second, not least because she could sense the evil that surrounded him. There were some evil individuals even among the members of the Harmonium, as much as Perrish personally disapproved of that and she thought Faith was bothered by that as well, even if she hadn't yet changed her predecessor's policies to disallow such members. But even those Harmonium members in whom Perrish could sense evil only radiated a shady, ambivalent sort of evil, the evil of the weak or of the uncommitted. She had never met a Hardhead and hoped she never would in whom was the sort of vast, overwhelming evil she could sense in Nemera. The Fraternity of Order, of course, was less picky about this sort of thing than the Harmonium was; they much more freely admitted evil applicants into their ranks, and so it wasn't surprising, really, that a Guvner could be as evil as Perrish could sense Nemera was. But she still didn't like the idea of someone of Nemera's evil being here in the Palace of Harmony.

"I have no reason to doubt that the information you provided us about the City of Man was accurate," Perrish said, choosing her words carefully. "But you must admit the means you described for entry was complicated. Threading through the empty and apparently ruined city three times, along a certain specific route, until suddenly a corner is rounded and the city springs to life "

"Complicated, but necessary," Nemera said languidly, his head lolling back on the chair as he gazed up at the ceiling at least, Perrish *thought* Nemera was a he, although between his mincing manner, his androgynous features, and his high, wheedly voice, she wasn't entirely sure and the makeup he wore didn't help matters. "The baatezu don't like making things *too* easy for their supplicants, after all."

"Well, at any rate, they made it," Ilxax said. "And now they've made it to the second ring, even."

"Yes," Nemera said. "But will they make it to the third?"

"I don't think they'll need to," Perrish told him.

Nemera turned to look at Perrish, and blinked his blue-lidded eyes. "Oh, it wouldn't surprise me. It wouldn't surprise me one bit."

II. The Ring of Desire

The food wasn't as good in the Ring of Desire as it had been in the Ring of Sensation. That wasn't surprising. After all, taste is a physical sensation, and that was the province of the first ring. This was a different ring, now, and here food was mere sustenance. This ring was about...other things.

"He's continuing clockwise around the ring still," Keliander said, repeating what she had discovered from a pair of halflings that morning. "It looks like he's continuing the sort of quick progress he was making in the Ring of Sensation, but in the opposite direction."

"And perhaps with the end of dashing down the next road to the third ring," Hailephon said.

"We don't know that."

"We don't know it isn't true."

"If he was going to the third ring," Selburn said, "why didn't he just continue down the Avenue of Grace? Why go around the ring all the way to the next road?"

"Perhaps he isn't ready for it yet," O'Ale said. "Perhaps he needs to learn the lesson of the Ring of Desire first."

"And with any luck we'll catch him before he does," Keliander replied.

"But maybe you won't," Aebre said. "Maybe he'll make it to the third ring before we catch up with him. And what are you going to do then?"

"Then we'll follow, of course. Just as we did here."

"Will you? Do you think you can?"

"You asked the same question of us in the Ring of Sensation, and we managed that just fine."

"Not *too* easily, though, I note. Not, at least, for your companion."

Selburn was blushing again, Keliander saw. "Look, I made it, didn't I?" he snapped at Aebre.

"You did, yes, and I admit I'm impressed. But...you *almost* didn't. You were tempted. I could see that. If we'd reached the Avenue of Grace a few days sooner...you would have wanted to stay behind."

The aasimar's blush deepened, and he stared into his plate. "Well, maybe I would have," he muttered, "but we didn't."

"No, we didn't, and it doesn't matter now," Keliander said loudly. "The point is, you overcame the temptations, and we're here. And I don't think you'll have any trouble with anything this ring is going to throw at us."

"Oh, you don't, do you?" Aebre said.

"Not really. The Ring of Sensation had a lot of things to offer. Sensations of every kind. Wonderful food, lovely aromas, beautiful art, sublime music, and...and so much more. Here, as far as I can tell, there's nothing but a bunch of brothels and cathouses."

Aebre laughed. "Oh, no. That's *not* all the Ring of Desire has to offer. That's not *nearly* all."

"Well, it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it? You may have to follow the assassin to the next ring, remember. And to do that, you'll have to have learned the lessons of this ring. Maybe Claw and I should show you some of what you're missing in this ring. There are the halls where you can construct the perfect lover, create your ideal mate according to your specific desires. Or, perhaps you might be more interested in...ooh, I know. The Mirrors of Yearning. Yes. I think you should see that."

"We don't have time for sight-seeing."

"But what if Kurlamber *does* go to the next ring? If you're going to follow him, you'll have to pass the test of this ring. And...like I said before, you can't pass the test if you don't take it."

Keliander looked at Claw, who was in turn regarding Aebre uncertainly. She turned back to the feytouched. "Thanks for the offer, but I think we'd like to stick to the business at hand."

"I think this *does* relate to the business at hand," Aebre said. "And it'll only take...what, an hour of your time? Perhaps two? We could do it tonight. Claw and I could show you. You wouldn't mind, would you, Gamlin?"

"Eh...well, no, of course I wouldn't mind, if Keliander wants to go," Claw stammered.

"What if I can't handle it?" Selburn said.

Keliander turned to him. "What?"

"What if I can't handle what they'd show me? What if the temptation's too much for me, and I can't go on?"

"Well, then you wouldn't have been able to go on in any case," Aebre said. "You have to face the temptation to continue. You can't get to the next ring by *avoiding* it."

"You made it past the last ring," Keliander said. "You'll do fine."

"You're not the only one who found the Ring of Sensation tempting," Will told Selburn quietly.

"What?"

"I was tempted too. I...I felt the wish to stay behind."

"You?" Selburn looked stunned. "You sure didn't look it."

"I wasn't tempted enough to actually stay. I'm here, so I wasn't tempted enough to stop me. But...I was tempted more than I should have been. I found the pleasures of the Ring of Sensation more to my liking than I should have."

"Look," Keliander said, "we're all here, and there's no point in worrying about whether any of us almost didn't make it past the last ring. The fact is, we all did, and now we've got to concern ourselves with this one."

"Which is exactly why you *need* to see the Mirrors of Yearning," Aebre said. "You can't progress to the next ring if you don't face the lessons of this one."

"Maybe we won't *have* to progress to the next ring."

"But maybe you will."

Keliander sighed. "All right, fine. You can show Selburn and me the Mirrors of Yearning tonight. But after that we're back to concentrating on the search for Kurlamber."

"Of course."

The building that Claw and Aebre led them to didn't look like much. It was a squat gray building of a single story, with uninspired architecture that was mostly bland rectangles. A single door led to the interior, and Aebre gleefully ushered them through.

Inside was nothing but a single large hall, lined with mirrors on each of the longer sides. The mirrors were as uninteresting as the building itself, plain rectangles with dull metal frames. A few other people milled about within, a few gazing at mirrors and a few leaving, most of the latter linked arm-in-arm in pairs.

"Step up, step up!" Aebre cried.

"Step up where?" Selburn asked.

"To a mirror, of course!" And with that, she scampered off herself toward a side of the hall.

Keliander followed, but as she did she glanced toward one of the other people gazing into a mirror and was surprised by what she saw. Where a young tiefling woman was staring into a mirror, suddenly a brown-skinned man stepped *out* of the mirror itself, and he and the tiefling fell into an embrace. Keliander hadn't seen whether or not the man had appeared in the mirror before he emerged, but he had definitely come out of it. She looked apprehensively at the line of mirrors ahead.

Aebre stepped up to one of the mirrors now, and Keliander watched it. At first there was nothing in the mirror but the reflection of Aebre, and of Keliander and the others behind her, and of the hall itself just what would appear in an ordinary mirror. But then suddenly behind Aebre in the mirror reflection was a very young man in a ragged loincloth, with tanned skin and a boyish smile. Aebre beckoned, and the young man stepped around her in the reflection...and then stepped out of the mirror, just as the brown-skinned man had in the other mirror. Keliander opened her mouth to ask a question, but then saw something that alarmed her.

Selburn had stepped up to the next mirror over. And beside his reflection in the mirror was a young woman with flaming hair.

Selburn seemed more surprised by this development than Keliander was. He stepped backward, in shock. "Terasine!"

Aebre giggled, watching Selburn, her hand down the back of her man's loincloth.

The flaming-haired woman stepped out of the mirror. "Selburn," she said.

Selburn staggered back another step. "You're not real. This is just an illusion."

"As long as we're here, I'm as real as you want me to be, Selburn. Please. Don't be scared. Let us have this moment."

"But...but you're..."

"I'm real here, Selburn. I'm real as long as you're here."

Selburn was crying, his tears glittering in the half-light provided by the torches set between the mirrors. He took one more step back, but it was a small one, and when the flame-haired woman reached for his hand he didn't stop her from taking it.

"Selburn. Please. Let me be here for now. Let us be together."

Selburn looked at Keliander, but she didn't know what to say. She turned to her other companions. "Claw?"

"Well, it's not like he's going to hurt her," Claw said uncertainly. "It's look, I don't understand it all myself. But there's no harm done, I suppose. Anyway, maybe we should be moving on."

"Yes, perhaps we should get to bed," Aebre said, and kissed the man who had stepped out of her mirror. Her hand hadn't left his loincloth. The two of them headed for the door, and Claw, after a glance at Keliander, followed. The flaming-haired woman led Selburn, who still seemed in something of a daze, after them.

Keliander turned to follow as well, but then hesitated. *You can't pass the test if you don't take it*, she thought, and she stepped up to the mirror Aebre had vacated.

She saw her reflection, and the reflection of the others departing, and the reflection of the hall behind them. And nothing more.

She waited a few moments, but nothing appeared in the mirror with her. And finally, she turned and ran after the others.

Given Selburn's obvious unease, Keliander didn't try to speak to him until they were in the room they had chosen for the night. The flame-haired woman was still with him; she had spoken to him a few

times on their walk to the room, too softly for Keliander to make out the words, but he hadn't replied.

Now that they were back in the room, as Selburn sat down on the bed, and his companion beside him, Keliander turned to him. "Selburn?"

Selburn looked up at her. His face was still stained with tears, but he wasn't crying now. The woman spoke before he did, however.

"He's just in shock a little. It's understandable. He'll get over it." She ran her fingers through his dark hair tenderly, and then rested her hand fondly on his cheek.

"Selburn, who is " She thought better of asking him, and decided to face the mystery woman directly "Who are you?"

"My name is Terasine," the fiery-haired woman said. "Selburn and I knew each other years ago. Didn't we, Sel?"

Sel looked at her, and sniffled, and then managed a weak smile that quickly vanished.

"Sel, you don't have to be so mopey," Terasine said. "I'm *here*. I'm *real*. I I'm sorry. I didn't want to bring back bad memories. But I'm here now. I really am. For as long as you want me. This isn't some fake phantom, some fiend in my form; this is *me*. It's really me. As real as I was back then."

"Bad memories?" Keliander asked.

Terasine opened her mouth, then looked at Selburn. "Sel, maybe you should field this one. It's going to sound really odd coming from me."

Selburn swallowed, and then looked up at Keliander and spoke for the first time since the hall. "Like she said, Terasine and I knew each other...years ago. We were hardly more than children. We met... we met at a function of the Guardians. That was before I was a member of the Harmonium. I was thinking of joining the Guardians then. So was she. So...that's how we met," he finished lamely.

Keliander considered her flaming hair. "Is she a fire genasi?"

Selburn shook his head. "No. She was a half-celestial. Asura. Her mother was an asura. She took after her, too. I mean she was as good as a pure celestial. Always kind, and...and fun to be around." Another weak smile, vanishing almost as quickly as the last one.

"So then the bad memories..."

Selburn swallowed again. "Tanar'ri. Tanar'ri attacked a city on Bytopia. I don't know how they got there. There were lots of them. They were led by a hezrou, but there were lots of others too. The two of us fought, we fought against them. Not just us, of course, there were a lot of people fighting, but she and I were among them. Terasine and I fought. The tanar'ri were driven off. But but Terasine was " The tears returned, and Selburn hunched over and sobbed, unable to continue. Terasine patted his back comfortingly. Finally, still crying, Selburn looked up and went on.

"It was a vrock," he said. "It was injured, badly injured, but still moving. It had a scimitar. Or not exactly a scimitar, but a kind of a scimitarish thing. The fight was almost over, almost, but not quite. Terasine had just slain a jovoc. She had a big sword, cut it right in two. And then she turned to the vrock. And it " he sniffled "it just..." He drew back an arm and then thrust it forward, pantomiming the action of the vrock. "It stabbed up, stabbed her, right through the chest, just below the heart. It she bled, and I went over to her, I had a potion, I tried to heal her. But it wasn't enough. I called out for someone to help her. She said something; I couldn't hear it over the din. I called out, but it was too late. She she was in my arms, and she..."

"I said 'serve well'," Terasine said quietly.

"What?"

"'Serve well'. Those were the words I said that you couldn't make out. Sort of a banal thing to say, I know, but then dying words can't always be profound. There are probably many other things I could have said that would have been better."

Selburn sniffled again, and the tears shimmered in his eyes.

"Sel," Terasine said, "it was a long time ago. It wasn't your fault; you know that. But what's done is done. I'm here now, for as long as you want me to be. Let's not dwell on the past."

Selburn looked at her, but didn't say anything.

"Well, I don't know about you," Keliander said, "but I need to get some rest. I think it's probably best if I get my own room, though."

Terasine smiled. "The way Sel is taking this, I'm sure there won't be anything going on between the two of us tonight."

"Maybe not, but...I'd just feel more comfortable, anyway. Selburn, I don't know what's going on either, but when we meet Claw and Aebre tomorrow maybe they can fill us in."

"Ah," Aebre said, "I see you've still got your friend from last night, Selburn. I don't think we've ever been introduced."

Selburn still looked a little light-headed, but he was much better than he had been the night before. The tears had dried from his cheeks, and the red had faded from his eyes. "This is, uh, Terasine. She's... sort of an old friend of mine."

"Of course she is."

"I'm pleased to meet you all," Terasine said.

"Speaking of friends from last night," Keliander said, "where's *yours*?"

"Oh, him?" Aebre said dismissively. "I just wanted him for the night, that's all. He was just someone I'd had a good time with once, a long time ago, and I thought I could pass a good night with him again. He was never anything more to me than that."

"Well, he had to be a *little* more to you than that," Claw said, "or he wouldn't have come from the Mirror of Yearning for you."

Aebre looked at him. "Maybe a *little* more," she admitted reluctantly. "But no more than a few dozen other men. I I don't get attached."

"What do you mean, he wouldn't have come?" Keliander asked Claw.

"Well, that's the way the Mirrors of Yearning work," Claw said. "The Ring of Desire isn't about *physical* desire. That's all covered in the Ring of Sensation. If all you're looking for is a good night's lay, you can get that there, and more. The Ring of Desire is about deeper feelings between people. It's about desire that goes beyond the purely physical. It's about "

"Love," Selburn finished.

Claw regarded him. "Well, I don't know that I'd put it quite so bluntly. Certainly the baatezu wouldn't. But...all right, sort of, yes."

Keliander spoke next. "But what about all those brothels? Those aren't something you associate with anything but physical desire usually, are they?"

"Well, the ones here aren't the sort of brothels you're thinkin' of. The ones here *ain't* associated with physical desire. The bodies there actually try to make a *bond* with you, try to connect with you at some level other than just physical. An' more often than not, they succeed. That's not to say they *don't*, well, connect physically, but they make sure their relationship is more'n that. They're mostly for the sods who, you know, don't really have anyone they're close to, but *want* to get close to someone."

Keliander spoke next. "So what comes out of the Mirror of Yearning "

"Is someone you loved, yes," Claw said. "Well, someone you *desired*; I'm not convinced it's *exactly* the same thing as love. Someone you desired who, for whatever reason, is no longer with you. If there's someone you had a deep desire for, whose loss you genuinely and greatly regret, that person'll come out of the mirror for you without your even thinkin' it. If there's no such person in your life, you can still think of a specific person you desire, and he'll come for you."

Keliander looked at Terasine. "And how long will the person from the mirror stay?"

"Long as you want 'em to, and long as you're here in the Ring of Desire. Least, that's what I've gathered; I don't pretend to know *all* the workings of it."

"Is it the real person, brought back from the dead, or just an illusion?"

"Oh, I don't think the person has to be *dead* to appear in the Mirror. Just...*lost*, however that is. But as far as I can tell, it's the real person, or an exact copy. Real enough. But like I said, I don't understand it all."

Terasine put her hand on Sel's arm. "Sel, I like having this time together again, after so long, but if my being here bothers you...you can just make me go..."

Sel shook his head violently. "No. That would bother me more." He looked into her eyes.

"Terasine if this is you I *don't* want you gone. I just...I don't know what I want."

"I don't want to get in your way, Sel. If you've got something that needs doing...don't let me stop you. You've lived without me for six years." She smiled. "I'm sure you can live without me for more."

"I don't *want* to live without you."

"I know, Sel. I know."

Keliander cleared her throat uncomfortably. "So, has anyone had any luck following Kurlamber's trail?"

"Nah, but then I guess today we had some distractions," Claw said.

"Well, then I suppose we'll try again and meet up again tomorrow."

"All right."

[Continued...]

II. The Ring of Desire

[Continued]

When they met the next day, Keliander was surprised to see that the company's number had increased yet again. Sitting between Will and Claw was a short young woman with stony-looking grey skin. And based on the way that Will was looking at her and the disapproving looks O'Ale and Hailephon were giving the two of them Keliander had a pretty good guess who she was there for.

Will confirmed her guess as soon as Keliander and Selburn were seated, and Terasine with them. "I'd like you to meet Gray Marla," he said. "She's someone I met on a trip to the Elemental Plane of Earth a long time back. We...we hit it off well, but I'm afraid we lost track of each other since."

"You've been to the Mirrors," Keliander said, though she didn't really need to.

Will bit his lip nervously. "It's what Aebre said yesterday. About having to take the test to pass. I knew I'd be tempted to keep her with me again, and I had to...I had to go to the Mirrors to face that. And so...here she is."

"And how are you doing with overcoming the temptation?"

The githzerai seemed to be carefully avoiding looking at anyone. "Well...I have to admit, if we were going to set out right now for the Ring of Purity, I...I don't think I'd make it." He turned around, and though he was answering Keliander's question he looked at Hailephon. "But that's *why* I had to go. I have to overcome this temptation to go on."

"So now I'm a temptation," Marla said. Will turned toward her, an apology clearly on his lips, but she laughed. "No, Will, I know what you mean. You never *could* get a joke."

"I...I'm not sure I can learn not to desire you. Can you help me?"

"Oh, sure. I'll be as unpleasant and undesirable as you want. Do you want me to start by dumping your soup over your head? I can do that. That would be annoying, wouldn't it?"

"No, I don't mean "

"*Joke*, Will, joke." She laughed. "You haven't changed a bit."

"If you cared about her so much that it's this much a temptation to have her back, why did you lose touch with her in the first place?" Selburn asked.

Will's shoulders dropped. "I don't know. I just well, some things came up, and I couldn't write her for a while, and the next time I did there was no reply. I don't know if she was offended that I hadn't written, or if she moved, or even if she died. And I was never able to find out."

"And I'm afraid I can't help clear it up," Marla said, sounding sincerely regretful. "I'm Gray Marla, but I'm Gray Marla as I was when you last knew me. I don't know what's happened with the original me outside the city since then." She leaned closer to Will. "I *can* tell you, though, that I didn't not reply because I was offended. I knew you might get busy, and I wouldn't have held it against you. So whatever the old me is doing, I'm sure she's not angry with you. In fact, if she's still alive, I have no doubt she still thinks of you fondly to this day."

Will looked at her, and smiled shyly.

"I hope this won't interfere with your pilgrimage, Straitwill," Hailephon said.

"But that's the point, isn't it? I *have* to overcome my feelings to progress. I *have* to face them."

"Well...perhaps. We shall see how you...*feel*...when it's time for us to move on to the next ring."

"Speaking of moving on," Keliander said, "any news about Kurlamber? Selburn and I and, er, Terasine didn't have any luck asking around today."

"Well, fortunately, Gamlin and I did," Aebre said. "And I think you can probably guess what we found out."

"He's still heading around the ring."

"Still is. Possibly making for the Boulevard of Strength, so he can hit the next ring." She gave Keliander a vicious smile. "My, but you do look nervous, Keliander dear. Afraid your companion there can't make it? He does seem as if he'll have a difficult time tearing himself away from his

ladyfriend. Perhaps you'll have to leave him behind."

"I have faith in Selburn," Keliander said. "I'm not worried about him."

"Well, you're very clearly worried about *something*."

"If Kurlamber doesn't make it to the next ring before we catch him, there won't be anything for us to worry about. So let's try to make sure of that. We'll go along the ring as far as we can today, and meet up again tomorrow."

"As usual," Aebre sighed, and then smiled again. "Personally, I'm kind of hoping he *does* make it to the next ring. I'm curious to see what happens then."

They followed Kurlamber's trail for many days; as before, some days they failed to turn up any news of him, but when they did it was always the same: he'd been heading clockwise around the ring. He was keeping ahead of them, but he was always going in the same direction.

But he wasn't going as fast as he could have been. He was dawdling. Perhaps he didn't know he had pursuers. But in any case, if the information that Keliander and her allies were picking up was accurate, they were gaining on him.

But they weren't gaining on him fast enough. Not unless he went a whole lot slower. And then came the day that they reached the Boulevard of Strength. This is what it came down to: had he gone inward, toward the Ring of Purity, or continued along the Ring of Desire?

"We've got news," Aebre sang as soon as they were all together, and given her cheerfulness Keliander was sure what the answer was.

"Well, let's have it, then."

"We found a kyton who saw him. Saw him heading...straight down the Boulevard of Strength. He's in the Ring of Purity now."

Keliander hit her fist on the table. "The Lady take him! He has to make things difficult."

"Oh, but as I recall, the idea was that if he went there, we were going to follow him, weren't we? But... are *all* of us going to follow, I wonder?" She looked pointedly at Selburn, then at Will.

Will turned to Gray Marla. "I am glad we had this chance to renew our acquaintance. But I must continue my pilgrimage."

"Of course," Marla said. "I don't want to hold you back, Will. I'm glad I could help you overcome your desires." She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek, and then stood. "If you ever come back this way, I'll be here."

"Thank you," Will said softly. His face contorted in a grimace briefly as Marla left, and then was calm.

"Are you certain you're ready to leave the Ring of Desire, Straitwill?" Hailephon asked.

He nodded, though it seemed reluctantly. "I have my desires, but I can suppress them. I think I have learned the lesson I had to learn here. I can go on. I will always miss Marla, but...I can understand there are things more important than missing her. I understand that we have our memories, and that even if that is all we have, it is better to cherish those than to long fruitlessly for what I do not have. I did enjoy the time we had together here...but I understand that it must end."

Hailephon nodded. "Well. Then we can all continue our pilgrimage."

"I don't know that *I* can, though," Selburn said.

"Selburn, what are you saying?" Keliander responded.

He licked his lips. "I *haven't* learned my lesson yet. At least, I don't think I have. I want to stay here with Terasine. I know I shouldn't. I know I have my duty to do. But I can't help *wanting* to. And and if I understand it, as long as I *want* to stay, I can't leave."

"Sel," Terasine said, "please. Don't let me hold you back."

"It's not you. It's...it's my *desire* for you. Even if you weren't here in person, I'd still have that. And as long as I have that, I can't go on to the next ring."

Keliander looked at Selburn closely. "Selburn, I don't think this is a good idea..."

"I *know* it's not a good idea! But I can't help it!"

Terasine patted his arm consolingly.

"Well, if you are to catch your assassin, you cannot afford to lose time," O'Ale said to Keliander. "We don't know how long it will take your companion to learn his lesson. And anyway, you don't need him now. If it comes to a fight, you have us to help. It's clear the most rational course of action is to go on without him."

"I don't want to desert a fellow soldier," Keliander demurred.

"Keliander, no," Selburn said. "She's right. You have to. I'm sorry. I really am."

Keliander looked long at him, and then stood. "All right. If that's the way it has to be...then so be it. I'll return for you if I can, Selburn." She stood.

Selburn stood as well. "Wait. Terasine and I can at least accompany you to the gate, even if we can't go through it."

"Well, let's be off, then," Claw said, rising.

The gap in the wall that led to the Ring of Purity stood before them. Keliander looked up at the top, where the guards patrolled the battlements. Despite what she'd been told in her briefing, they weren't *all* cornugons. Most of them were, but there were a few others scattered here and there, some spinagons and malebranche, and even a few humans or at least, beings that *looked* human.

She watched the guards as they approached the gate. Many of them had bows or crossbows, and as Keliander and the others came closer, the guards drew their weapons. Keliander swallowed nervously, keeping a careful eye on the guards as they continued. They notched their bows, or readied their bolts, and seemed to take aim. Keliander's group was almost to the gate now all but Selburn and Terasine, of course, who hung back to watch them go, but as she took a closer look at one of the guards, one with a wicked bow and an arrow that shone with poison, she was sure that the guard was looking *straight at her...*

"Wait!" Keliander cried out, and Claw, who was in the lead, stopped. The others halted behind him.

"What's wrong, Kel?" Claw asked.

"It's me. *I'm* not ready to go through the gate either."

"*You're* not?" Claw asked incredulously, walking back toward her. "What do you mean?"

"I haven't overcome the temptation of this ring. I have...a have a desire I haven't come to terms with."

"You do? Whatever for?"

"For..." Keliander exhaled, and tossed her head exasperatedly. "For *you*, Gamlin! I desire *you*!"

They had reconvened quickly in a nearby inn all of them, including Selburn and Terasine.

"I have to say that's taken me by surprise," Claw said. "I...I didn't really know you felt that way about me, Kel."

"Well, I did. I still do. I left you because...because we were clearly going along different paths, but...but I never stopped wanting you."

"And you think that's stopping you from going on to the Ring of Purity?"

"Gamlin, I *know* it is! I can't...I can't overcome my desire. And until I do, I can't go on."

Claw scratched the table idly with one of his oversized nails. "Kel, what exactly do you mean by desire?" he asked finally.

"You know. Desire. The...affection for somebody. No, more than affection. Like Selburn said that first day you explained it. Love."

Claw was clearly uncomfortable, but he managed to compose himself and talk. "No. Desire *isn't* the same thing as love. I told you that, remember? Love...that's not what this ring's here to make you overcome. 'Least, I don't think so. Love's not something that *ought* to be overcome, in this chaond's advised opinion, and it's not something even the baatezu can take away."

"All right, then what *is* desire?"

"Well, if you ask me which I suppose you just did desire, in the sense o' this ring's lesson, isn't just how you *feel* about someone; it's what you want to *do* with them. Not just for the physical sensation, of

course; that's taken care of in the first ring. We've been over that. But...the wish to be *with* someone, to *share* your experiences with them. Love comes first, I guess, but it's wanting to *be* with the person you love...that's desire. I think Will here had the right idea. You can have the memories, you can have the feelings...you can have the love, if you want to use that word...but it's what you want to do about it; that's where the *desire* comes in."

"But I *do*...I *do* want to be with you, Gamlin. I *want* to share my life with you."

"Of course, that's natural. I mean, not that it's natural that you'd want to share your life with *me*, specifically, but I mean it's natural that you'd want to be with a person you loved...er...look, this is really awkward for me to be talkin' about, under the circumstances. Anyone else want to give it a try?"

"No, go on, Gamlin," Keliander said. "You're doing fine."

"Er...well, I dunno. Is what I'm saying helping any?"

"I think I understand what you're saying," Keliander said, "but the fact is I do still have that desire. And I'm not sure how to stop having it. I'm not sure I *want* to stop having it."

"Right, well...here we are. The first ring. The Ring of Sensation. It didn't make everyone numb, did it?"

"What do you mean?"

"After passing through the ring, we can all still feel things, right? We can all still enjoy a good meal, we can all still appreciate a pretty face."

"Yes..."

"See, that's the thing. It wasn't sensation itself the first ring's supposed to rub out of you. It's the *desire* for sensation. You can still feel things; you just have to come to the realization that other things are more important. Which I guess we did, because we're all here. Now, the way I see it, the second ring's the same way. You don't have to cut out your desire. I don't know if that's even possible, really. What you've got to cut out is...your *desire* for desire. Eh, that's badly put. Your *want* for desire, let's say. You can still have desire; that's natural. The point is, you've got to see that you don't *need* it. You've got to...you've got to see that you *can* have the feelings and memories, that even if you want the person you love with you there are more important things, and your feelings can survive the separation."

Selburn struck the table with a hand. "I didn't think of it that way! That makes sense! And you're right, now that you put it that way. The feelings *are* the most important thing." He turned to Terasine. "Terasine, I love you. I've always loved you. I wish I could stay with you. But I do have to go on. Please. You understand."

"Of *course* I understand. I've been telling you all along not to let me hold you back, haven't I?"

Selburn smiled. "Maybe I can come back here later. I guess there's no harm in that. But...I can't let my wish to stay here with you stop me from doing what I need to do."

Terasine smiled, and patted his arm. "Of course." She leaned closer. "You know, Sel, I don't have to stay in this ring. I could go with you to the inner rings."

Selburn straightened. "Really?" he said eagerly. But then he slumped. "No. I...I'd like that, but it's probably not a good idea. You'd...you could distract me from my duties. Maybe I can come back here later, like I said. But...but for now I have to go."

Terasine smiled again. "That's the right thing to say, I think. And I was hoping you'd say it." She stood. "But I had to make the offer for the test to be complete." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Anyway, maybe if you make it through the rings you can come back and visit me again. But you're right; for now you have to go on."

Selburn looked intently at her, as if trying to fix her in his memory. "I'll always love you, Terasine."

"I love you too, Sel. But you have things to do. And...if nothing else, we'll always have our memories."

Selburn watched her as she went out the door. Keliander watched Selburn, and sighed.

"Well, I'm glad *you* were able to get the lesson of the ring, Selburn, but I'm not sure I'm there yet."

"Come on, Keliander. If I can do it, you can. You could have gone on without me, but I can't go without you. You're my commanding officer."

"Maybe I just need to think things over for a few days. Maybe I can come to terms with my feelings then. But I don't know if we can spare three days."

"We have to. If that's what it'll take, I'll wait."

"Perhaps it would be best to leave without her," O'Ale suggested.

Selburn rounded on her. "No! I can see her leaving without me, but not me without her. Not unless I have to. I I didn't know how long it was going to take me to get over my issues, if I ever did, and you couldn't all wait indefinitely. But for Keliander, we can wait three days."

O'Ale wrinkled her nose, but said nothing.

"We will wait," Hailephon said. "We are in no hurry on our pilgrimage, and perhaps it will be worth our while to wait and see her progress. Perhaps we can learn something from her experience."

O'Ale nodded curtly. "As you wish."

"It'll only be three days, and then she'll be ready to go," Selburn said. "You can count on that."

Keliander smiled sadly, wishing she had the confidence in herself that Selburn had in her. But in three days...yes, maybe in three days she'd be ready. She understood what she had to overcome; she knew, in her head, what was wrong with her feelings. But it would take some time for her head to get the message to her heart.

"Well, Keliander," Selburn said, "so how do you feel?"

Keliander hadn't slept much in the last few days, and when she had looked in the mirror this morning she saw that it showed, in the bags under her eyes and the pallor of her skin. But for all that, the last few days had not been wasted.

"I think...I think I'm ready," she said. "I still...I still have my feelings, but I've come to accept that there are more important things, and that...that it's not important what I'm *doing* with the person I care about, just how I feel about him."

"Well, we'll be together a while yet anyway," Claw said, winking at her. "At least to the next ring, if you're up for going."

"I think I am. We've got to catch Kurlamber."

Once more they approached the gate. Keliander looked up again at the sentries at the wall, expecting hoping that this time they would let her pass.

But again, bows were drawn, and arrows nocked. Again the weapons were pointed at the path.

Except...this time, when she looked closer, she saw that the guards weren't looking at *her*. They were

looking in front of her. They were looking at

"You know," Aebre said, "I don't think I'm done here just yet."

"Eh?" Claw said. "What's that?"

"Oh, there's plenty yet in the Ring of Desire I still want to experience. I still have lots of desires I want to fulfill." She grinned.

"Well...if you're sure...I guess maybe we can catch up later."

"Oh, maybe we can. But I don't know how long I'll be. You have fun, Gamlin." She gave him a quick, passionless peck on the cheek. "I'll be seeing you around. In the meantime...I have *other* people I'd like to see around too." She smirked, and headed off back around the ring.

The guards lowered their weapons.

And Keliander followed Claw, Selburn, and the three githzerai down the Boulevard of Strength to the Ring of Purity.

ii. The Boulevard of Strength

"They're in the third ring."

Perrish glanced at Nemera, who was once again sitting in the plush chair at the other end of the room. "Yes, as a matter of fact, they are."

"I knew it. I could see it in your face. Well. Just how far in will they end up having to go, I wonder?"

Perrish re-folded the letter she had been reading, and handed it to Ilxax. "They're gaining on the assassin. So hopefully not any farther."

"Ah, yes, well, one can always *hope*."

Ilxax took a step closer to Perrish, and whispered to her hissingly, obviously so that their epicene guest wouldn't overhear. "How much longer is he or she, or it, whatever going to be here? He's given us all the detailed information about the City of Man we should need; hasn't he served his purpose?"

"He's here in case some new questions arise about the city that he may be able to answer."

"Does he really have to stay here for that?"

"Ilxax, I don't like his being here either. But politically, we don't have much choice."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, thanks to the Menausius affair, we're not on good terms with the Fraternity of Order. Refusing hospitality to a representative they sent to help us out might make things worse, and we have enough going on without open hostilities with the Guvners that we can't afford that."

"If they dislike us so much, why'd they send someone to help us out in the first place?"

"Because it's a Martyr factor that Kurlamber killed. We and the Fraternity of Order are still both close to the Sons of Mercy, so it's for their sake that the Guvners are helping us out with the investigation."

"I can't help but wonder if they've sent someone as unpleasant as Nemera as a deliberate insult, though."

Perrish's mouth tightened. "I have to say I've wondered that myself."

"My ears are burning," Nemera sang out. Perrish turned. The evil Guvner was watching them amusedly, his red-glossed lips quirked in a simpering smile.

"My apologies, Nemera," Perrish said. "I didn't mean to be rude."

"Oh, no apologies necessary." Nemera waved a delicate, powdered hand. "I do wonder, though, how your *internuncios* are going to fare on the third ring."

"They've been doing fine so far. I'm sure they'll do fine there, too."

"One can't help but wonder. There's a reason the rings get smaller as you go further in, you know." He gave Perrish another simpering smile. "Fewer people *make it* to the inner ones."

"I have every confidence in the abilities of Keliander and Selburn."

"I'm sure you do." Nemera made a show of examining the red-painted nails of his right hand, and then looked up at Perrish and smiled again. "Well, of course, if there *is* any trouble...I'll *certainly* be here to help."

III. The Ring of Purity

The Ring of Purity was very different from the two outer rings of the City of Man. Of course, the Ring of Desire had already been quite different from the Ring of Sensation; it lacked the outermost ring's wide variety of hedonistic pursuits, and its often bizarre panoply of visual adornments. But compared to the Ring of Purity, the Ring of Desire had been downright luxurious.

It hadn't had the great profusion of sometimes beautiful and sometimes clashing colors that the Ring of Sensation had sported, but the Ring of Desire had still been colorful enough. Here, though, everything was gray. The ground was gray. The buildings were gray. Even the water, the grass, and the trees were gray.

And there was plenty of water, grass, and trees far more so than Keliander remembered seeing in either of the first two rings. Compared to the Ring of Sensation and the Ring of Desire, the Ring of Purity had plenty of open space. Vast swards dotted with trees and ponds, huge lakes undisturbed by boats, copses of surprisingly similar trees, and all flat gray, or near enough to gray that a body had to look close to pick out any hint of color. Gray stone paths picked their ways along the grass and through the trees, either flat ribbons of rock or dotted lines of round slabs.

Not that there were no buildings in the Ring of Purity. There were. But there were far fewer than in the outer two rings and the buildings that were here were of a very different sort. There were no inns here, for one thing. This didn't mean they'd had to starve here there was plenty of food. Abundant fruit grew on the trees and bushes, and it seemed substantive enough to keep a body alive, and there was no shortage of water, either; even leaving aside the lakes, which may or may not be clean enough to be considered potable, there were sparkling (if unadorned) fountains everywhere that could be drunk from. Unfortunately, the fruit had little or no taste. It was palatable, but only just, and while it might keep a body alive it wasn't the most pleasant stuff to live on. Keliander thought back a little wistfully to the place she had eaten on her second day in the City of Man, with the great variety of different fruit. Here, the fruit may *look* different, but it all tasted almost exactly the same, and it wasn't much of a taste anyway.

So there were no inns in the City of Purity; there were certainly no brothels; but there were buildings. But they were more hollow shells than anything else. Blocky, rectangular structures of featureless gray stone, with no interior walls and in many cases with no roofs. The only purposes they served seemed to be to give protection from the weather and to give people a little privacy, and even those purposes they didn't serve well. There wasn't much weather here to need protection from; the sky over the Ring of Purity was as gray and unchanging as the ground which in itself was odd, since it hadn't been that way over the outer two rings, but things

often worked oddly on the planes. And as for privacy, the lack of interior walls meant that the inside of each building was one vast room, so the gain in privacy wasn't as much as it could have been.

For all that, though, the Ring of Purity *did* seem to give more privacy than the first two rings, in a way there were, it seemed to Keliander, much fewer people here, even given the smaller size of the Ring. Or maybe it was just that without the narrow roads and crowded common rooms of the outer rings, the people were spread out more and seemed fewer, but she wasn't sure that was all of it. In any case, many of the people here were as gray as the rest of the ring. There were people here who, like Keliander and her party, still wore ordinary clothes, but there were many who wore nothing but undecorated robes of some plain gray fabric, and quite a few who wore nothing at all. Their first day in the Ring of Purity, Selburn had approached such a person, a young woman who looked to have a bit of dragon in her ancestry, and asked her she was naked.

"I have chosen to eschew anything unnecessary to a contemplative existence," the young woman had said. "I have only all I need within myself."

Keliander had a good guess that the other nudes in the Ring of Purity had the same idea. They certainly *seemed* to be trying to lead contemplative existences and the robed people, too. The people in the ring, save those like Keliander and her companions who were clearly either new to the Ring of Purity or just passing through, never congregated, and seldom spoke; they stood apart, or kneeled on the ground, meditating with their eyes closed or staring unseeing at points in space. Often they chose one of the buildings to do their meditations in, probably more for the fact that it offered blander surroundings and fewer distractions than the outdoors. Many buildings contained a number of people standing or kneeling, not interacting with each other in any way, each apparently there on his own and lost in his own thoughts.

But despite all this, at least there were enough people around to keep it from being too difficult to follow Kurlamber's trail. The Ring of Purity may seem sparsely populated compared to the outer two rings, and the people who *were* here may not be particularly talkative, but it was still usually possible to find *some* people who were willing to talk, and among them one or two who remembered seeing someone of Kurlamber's description. In fact, in a way there was a benefit to the ring's emptiness, in that Kurlamber stood out more; there may be fewer people to see him, but those who did were certain to remember him. So far, it seemed Kurlamber had been continuing as he had been in the Ring of Desire, moving clockwise about the ring. Keliander and the others had been in the Ring of Purity for six days now, and while they'd been able to follow Kurlamber's trail, and Keliander was pretty sure they were even gaining on him a little, he was still ahead.

"You know, the Ring of Purity's got its own kinda beauty to it," Claw remarked as they sat down to eat that day, squatting around a large gray stone set in the grass to partake of their bland repast.

"That's an odd thing to hear, coming from you," Keliander said.

"Why odd? I'm an artist. That's how I've made me living; you know that. I think I've got some sense of beauty."

"Yes, but I've seen your work. It's very brash. Full of bright color and motion. This seems like just the *opposite* of what you'd be into."

"Just because it's not the kind of thing I make doesn't mean I can't appreciate it. It *is* beautiful, in its own way. More so than either of the first two rings, I think. Sure, they had more *to* them, but maybe that's the thing. Maybe they had too *much* to them. Too garish; too much tossed together to really make a whole. Here...it's simple, but it's beautiful. Really. And you know, maybe in the past my art's been a little *too* colorful. Maybe I hadn't really had enough respect for the power of simplicity. I think I may be learning a lesson from this place, even if it's not the one the place is supposed to teach."

"I had wondered why a person such as yourself had been so set on passing through the City of Man," O'Ale said. "Is that your reason for coming here? To...to be inspired by its *art*?" She curled her lip when she said this, clearly not approving of the concept.

"Heh. Nah. Art ain't somethin' the City of Man's known for. If I'd just wanted artistic inspiration, there are a lot of places in the multiverse I could find it much easier, without having to pass a bunch of trials to get through 'em. Nah, like I told Kel here earlier, I'm just here to experience what the City of Man has to offer."

"There are a lot of places in the multiverse you could find new *experiences* much more easily, as well," O'Ale said.

"Yeh, maybe, but maybe I wanted the particular experiences the City of Man has. Anyway, that's neither 'ere nor there. Art's not what I'm here for, but that don't mean if I find it here I can't appreciate it. Art's in me blood. It's what I'm best at, I think. It's what I like doing best, anyway." He laughed, a bit ruefully. "You know, it's a good thing the City of Man don't have a Ring of Art, or a Ring of Creation, or some such. If it did, I don't think I'd ever be able to tear meself away. But then, I suppose the baatezu are canny enough to know art's not a temptation that ought to be overcome."

"Well, beautiful or not, I'll be glad to be out of here," Selburn said.

"Why's that?" Claw asked.

"Oh, come *on*." He indicated the pasty fruit on the slab before him. "*Look* at this stuff. This

place is really...well, it's just so *tedious*. I mean, maybe there being nothing here is all beautiful from an artistic standpoint, but it sure doesn't make it pleasant to travel through here."

"I confess I've been finding the trip a welcome break," Hailephon said.

"A welcome break from what?"

"The outer two rings struck me as...well, as *garish*, as our chaond friend said. I, too, prefer simplicity, not just in art but in life. That is the way we must strive for. And here, at last, after the bustle and the business of the first two rings, we have a taste of it."

"Well, good for you," Selburn muttered. "I still know *I'll* be glad to leave here, though."

"I wish I were enjoying this ring as much as I should be," Will said quietly.

Keliander turned to him. "What's that?"

"The first two rings...both of them tempted me. Tempted me sorely. I *wanted* to stay behind in the Ring of Sensation; I *wanted* to experience more. Only just before we reached the road was I finally sated. I have said before that if we had reached the Avenue of Grace a few days earlier I would have been unprepared to follow it. I still believe that to be true. And then the last ring... parting with Gray Marla was hard. Even now, I find myself hoping she will reappear, hoping she will follow me to this ring, if such a thing is possible. I managed to make myself understand that there are things more important than this hope, that I should not let it rule my actions. I suppose I must have succeeded in making myself understand that, since I made it to this ring. But that does not make the hope less sharp, or make me miss her the less, even though I know it is not important that she be with me. Now, here is a ring that represents what I *should* have. A ring that represents the escape from unwanted longings, unwanted desires and here I find myself unable to enjoy it. I find myself feeling like Selburn here, that this purity is *boring*, that I must pass through it as quickly as possible...and yet I know that I should *not* feel so. I know that this ring represents what I should be striving for, and yet I don't want it."

"Well, in my case, I think I may be enjoying this ring a little too much," Keliander admitted.

Selburn gaped at her. "*Enjoying* this ring? How?"

She sighed. "I almost didn't make it here. I almost didn't make it out of the Ring of Desire. I learned something about myself there, Selburn. Before, I'd been sure I was ready for anything; I thought my duty to the Harmonium was what mattered the most to me. Now...I've realized I'm as human as anyone else. And the Ring of Purity...it's like a breath of fresh air. Freedom from distractions. Freedom from myself. If we weren't in pursuit of Kurlamber, I'd want to stay here for a while and meditate, like all those people we've seen. And that's the problem."

"What do you mean, that's the problem?"

"Well, the fact that I *want* to stay may mean I can't leave. What happens if Kurlamber goes to the fourth ring I certainly wasn't expecting him to, but I wasn't expecting him to get *this* far, either. If he makes it to the Ring of Emotion, am I going to be able to follow? Or will my desire to linger here hold me back? Will I be ready to leave the Ring of Purity?"

"Well...we've got a while before we have to worry about that," Selburn said. "I'm sure you'll get over things by then."

"We may not have as long as we've had before," Keliander said. "Not only do the rings get smaller as they go in, but the next road's only one sixth of the way around the ring, not one third like the previous times. If Kurlamber takes the next road in which would be the Way of Philosophy he could be to the Ring of Emotion very soon."

"Keliander, you made it this far. I know you can do it."

"He's right, Kel," Claw chimed in. "You've got it in you; I'm sure of it."

"You don't actually *know* that," O'Ale disagreed, but nobody replied to her.

As it happened, Kurlamber *didn't* take the Way of Philosophy. Either he wasn't going to the Ring of Emotion, or he was, for some reason, taking a different road there. Still, Keliander continued following his trail. She solved one other minor mystery along the way too, that being where exactly the people here were getting those plain gray cloaks from. She'd been wondering about that, since she hadn't seen any clothing stores here or any other kind of stores, for that matter. But one day, when the paths seemed unusually empty and she couldn't find anyone nearby to ask about Kurlamber, she had looked into a small building outwardly just like all the other buildings here, gray, rectangular, and undecorated and there, inside, she had seen piles of robes, stacked neatly all over the floor. That was it. No shelves, no workers, no signs of how the robes had gotten here. But if the baatezu had managed to build this city in the first place in the endless swamps of Minauros, had created the Mirrors of Yearning, had developed a way to detect whether or not travelers had passed the tests of the rings, then their ability to transport cloaks to isolated buildings was the least of the things in the City of Man to wonder about.

Keliander was getting hopeful, though, that even if Kurlamber was heading for the Ring of Emotion, they would catch him before he got there. They were catching up to him; the sightings of him that they were told about were getting more and more recent. But it was going to be a close thing. They were almost caught up with him now, the locals or fellow travelers they inquired of having seen him only a day or two ago, but on the other hand they were also almost to the Route of Health, the next road that led inward to the next ring. If Kurlamber *wasn't* planning to go down the Route of Health, then they'd have him; they were close enough behind him now that she was sure of it. But if he *was*...then it seemed a close question whether he would get to the road before they got him. Keliander thought there was a good chance they'd catch him first...but she wasn't by any means sure of it.

And then they were there, in sight of the Route of Health, and the gate through which the road connected the Ring of Purity with the Ring of Emotion. Perched atop the gate were more cornugons, and other guards these, Keliander noted, didn't have the bows that the guards at the last gate had, but mostly bore spears instead, not that that mattered. She didn't get too close to the gate. She knew she wasn't ready to go through, she hadn't passed the test of the Ring of Purity...and she didn't want to see the guards raise their spears at her and confirm it.

But she did ask a red-painted modron she found standing nearby if it had seen anyone of Kurlamber's description.

"This one has seen the one you describe," the modron replied, its voice oddly deep for a modron and making Keliander wonder if somehow something had been hollowed out inside it. "That one went inward down the Route of Health."

[Continued...]

III. The Ring of Purity

(continued)

As was often the case, Claw was the first to speak when they all met that day to compare notes.

"Well, looks like we've still got his trail," the chaond said. "According to a spinagon we asked, he headed down the Route of Health just this mornin'."

"Yes, we found that out as well," Keliander said.

Claw looked at her, concerned. "You don't sound happy about it. Look, he's only got a few hours on us; we've almost got 'im."

"Well, we would if we could go to the Ring of Emotion." She sighed. "I'm not so sure I can."

"Why not?"

"Remember what I was saying back our first week here? About maybe liking the Ring of Purity too much?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, I've still got that problem." She looked around at the grayness surrounding them. "What I see here is... what I feel like I should be aspiring to. Freedom from the distractions that would get in the way of doing what I need to do. I don't know if I'm ready to leave it. I *want* to leave it to catch Kurlamber, but...if that's the only reason I want to go, then I think that means I haven't overcome the temptation of this ring yet. Which means I can't leave even if I want to...because I don't want to for the right reasons."

"Kel, what do you think *is* the temptation of this ring?"

"You know, honestly, I can't say I'm even sure of that." She sighed again and hunched over, staring down at the gray grass before her. "Wait, yes I am. The point of this ring is to drive home the lessons of the first two rings; that seems to be it. To help a person to wholly purify himself from physical temptations. The first two rings start it; this ring finishes it, brings it to its apex. And clearly I'm not there yet."

"Wrong."

She jerked her head up. "What?"

"Well, maybe I'm just blowin' steam here, an' o' course I don't claim to have any special insight to the way the baatezu think far from it but I don't think that's the point of this ring at all. I think the point of this ring is just the opposite."

"The opposite? What do you mean?"

"Well, look, you've already passed the temptation of the first two rings. You have to have, or you wouldn't be here. So this ring's got to have a different temptation; it wouldn't make sense for it to just repeat things. An' it seems what this ring's going for it is just the *reverse* of the first two rings. The first ring was all about gettin' over your attachment to physical sensations. Fine; we're over that; we're here. The second ring was all about not gettin' too stuck on longings and wishes for you know intimacy. We're over that too."

"I almost wasn't."

"Maybe not, but you're here, so you got over it. Right? So. What's this ring? Why, it's *all about* forsaking completely those things in the first two rings. About isolating yourself from sensations and intimacy. An' I think that's what the temptation is it's the temptation to go *too far*. The temptation to discard those things *completely*, and not just to know when to stop. I think moderation's the keyword here. I think this ring's all about realizin' that there's a time an' a place for sensations and intimacy, even if you shouldn't let them guide your life."

"I admit, his explanation makes sense," O'Ale sniffed. "It's consistent with the way the rings have worked so far, and with what we know about the City of Man."

"So you see, you *don't* have to shuck everything. You *don't* have to strive for total purity, and the coneys here just haven't tumbled to that. Sensation and desire are fine in moderation. You've got this far by learning how not to have too much. Now all that you need to do to go on is to realize there's also such a thing as having too *little*."

"Maybe you're right."

"Of course I'm right. Even O'Ale here said so, and it's not often you hear her agreeing with anyone, is it?"

"I only speak my mind, and say what seems clear to me" O'Ale said. "It's simply that most of you don't seem to strive for clarity of thought, so we're often not in agreement."

"No, Claw, you *are* probably right," Keliander said. "You're right. That *is* what I need to do."

"So you ready to go on an' catch your assassin?"

She grimaced. "No, actually. I'm afraid I'm not. Knowing how I need to feel is different from actually feeling that way. I can know in my mind that you're right, that I *shouldn't* long to stay here and meditate, and put all my longings away from me...but I still want to do it. It's still hard to get away from the fact that I still *feel* like I belong here, even though I understand why I shouldn't."

Claw twiddled his fingers, thinking. "Yeah. I see what you're sayin'. But...could be there's another way that

can shake you out o' this."

"What's that?"

"What say you go back with me to the Ring of Sensation?"

"The Ring of Sensation? It was hard enough for me to get to this ring in the first place; I don't really want to go *backwards*."

The chaond waved his clawed hand dismissively. "You've passed the test of the first two rings; you can go back an' forth all you want between the first three now. You've learned the first two lessons, an' I'm pretty sure you can't *unlearn* 'em. Well, maybe you could by takin' a drink o' the Styx, but I'm sure neither of us has that in mind."

"You're probably right, I suppose...but *why* go back to the Ring of Sensation?"

"Well...there are some things I'd like to say to you in private, an' I'm sure you've noticed here there ain't much privacy."

"All right." She stood. "The rest of you don't have to wait for me."

"We'll wait," said Selburn. "I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be a match for Kurlamber without you if we *did* catch him."

"It wouldn't be just you. The monks would help too, wouldn't you?"

"It would be better if you were there," Selburn insisted.

"I am willing to wait as well, if you prefer it," Hailephon said. "As I said, I've found this ring refreshing, and have no objection to lingering here a bit longer if necessary."

"In case it has escaped you," O'Ale said acidly, "we are on a pilgrimage. Our goal is to reach the center of the City of Man. Not to linger and enjoy ourselves along the way."

"Our *goal* is to learn from our experiences," Hailephon said. "I think waiting here a bit longer and seeing how Keliander overcomes her obstacles may be educational. Of course, you're welcome to leave if you wish. I know Straitwill has expressed an eagerness to leave the Ring of Purity."

"No, that's okay," Will said. "I'll wait."

O'Ale wrinkled her nose. "Very well. I'll wait as well, then. But I have ever more serious doubts that *all* of us are ever going to reach the center."

"Master Aalzar said the journey would be difficult," Hailephon said. "I am not sure he expected that we would all make it."

"We'll be back in, say, four days," Claw said. "If we ain't back by then, I guess you can go on without us."

Although she knew Claw was probably right about being able to travel freely between rings already passed, she still felt a strong sense of losing progress as the two of them went back along the Route of Health to the Ring of Desire. She glanced at the buildings, shuddered a little in thinking how close she had been to being unable to leave this circle, and followed Claw up the road all the way to the Ring of Sensation. After the austere asceticism of the Ring of Purity, the garish colors, manifold shapes, and raucous noise of the Ring of Sensation were almost physically painful at first.

"Well, we're here," Keliander said. "What did you want to tell me?"

"Just a sec. Let's get a room first."

They found—or rather Claw led her to—a large, lumpy building, its red color and striated texture making it look to Keliander like some kind of grotesquely oversized and out of place internal organ. She wondered if that were the intent behind its design. In any case, the decoration on the inside was surprisingly tasteful, and when she

and Claw were in the room they had been directed to they found it empty except for a couple of chairs and a bed, all simple in design but the chairs, at least; she had yet to try the bed surprisingly comfortable. She had expected Claw to speak as soon as they were seated, but after they had sat for what seemed a few minutes in awkward silence she supposed it apparently fell to her to begin.

"So, I guess we have as much privacy as we're ever likely to," Keliander said. "What did you want to say to me?"

"Right." Not looking at her, Claw scratched the back of his head uncertainly with his taloned hand. "The thing is, see, it's like I was saying. The point is, desire's something not to guide your life by, but it's something that, well, it's worth having, in moderation."

"You said that in the Ring of Purity. Why did we come *here* just so you could repeat it?"

"Well...it's like this." He sighed, and met her eyes for the first time since their arrival. "You know how you were saying back in the Ring of Desire that you'd kind of had desires for me? Well...I didn't want to say anything about this at the time, 'cause I didn't want to make things harder on you than they already were, but... the truth is, that kind of went both ways."

"Went both ways? You mean "

"What I mean is, well, Keliander, I'd had feelings for you too." He swallowed, hesitated, and went on. "Fact is, when I first...well, you know how when we ran into each other in the Ring of Sensation I'd said Aebre and I'd already spent a lot of time in the Ring of Desire, and were ready to move on? Well, when I first came to the Ring of Desire, I'd looked in one of the Mirrors of Yearning...and, well, *you* came out."

"I came out?"

"A copy of you, another incarnation of you, however you want to say it. Remember I said the mirrors brought to you someone you'd desired and lost, whose loss you deeply regretted? Well, I guess..."

He trailed off, but he didn't need to say more. Keliander put her hand over his clawed one.

"Gamlin, I " She felt she ought to say something, but couldn't think of what would be appropriate to say.

"I've always had a lot o' respect for you, Kel," Claw said. "I mean, my feelings for you go far beyond *respect*, or I wouldn't have seen you in the mirror, but...that's a big part of it. How you...well, how you overcame your blood, for one thing."

"Overcame my blood?"

"You know what I mean. You're a tiefling; you've got the blood of fiends. But you've overcome that; you've proven yourself stronger than that. You've got the blood of fiends in your veins, but you're good, powerfully good, so good you've managed to work your way to a fairly high position in the Harmonium. That takes...that takes real strength of character, Kel. That's something I really admire about you."

"I'm not the only good tiefling in the multiverse, Gamlin."

"No, o' course not, but there ain't all that many of 'em...and you're one of the goodest. Er...the most good. You know what I mean."

"I wouldn't say *that*."

"Well, one of the most good I've met. And like I said, overcoming your fiendish heritage like that...that's really something worth looking up to. I don't think I'd have been able to do it, in your place."

"Don't put yourself down, Gamlin. You're a good man. I don't think I'd care about you the way I do if you weren't."

"Yeah, but there's nothin' special about that in my case. I didn't have to overcome any blood longings to stay good. Sure, I'm a chaond, but that just means I've got chaos in my blood; that doesn't mean it's any harder for me to be good."

"Honestly, Gamlin, I've never really been all that *conscious* of my fiendish blood. Beyond the fact that it gives me a tail and some other odd physical features, it really doesn't have any impact on my life. It's not like there's something whispering within me trying to tempt me to evil, something that I have to consciously overcome."

"No offense, Kel, but I'm not sure don't believe that. Or at least, I don't think that means you haven't had to

overcome it. I'm planetouched too, remember, and I *do* feel it. I can *feel* the chaos in my blood; I can *feel* it pulling me along. And I don't see why fiendish blood would be any different. Maybe it's just that you've got such a strong mind, such a will to be good, that you don't even have to think about it, that resisting the pull of your blood just comes naturally...but I'd wager it's still in there, whether you're thinking about it or not. An' if you can overcome it without even thinking about it, I'd say that reflects on you all the better."

"Maybe you're right. But Gamlin, we've all got our barriers to overcome. I'm sure you've had yours just as I've had mine. And there are things I admire about you, too. Your creativity. I've I've sometimes wanted to create, too. I've tried to write poetry in the past; did you know that?"

"I don't remember you ever showing me any."

"I never showed *anyone* any of it; I was ashamed at how it turned out."

"Eh, well, poetry's not my forte either. Just puttin' together a bunch o' fancy words; guess maybe some cutters have the knack for it, but I'm not one of 'em."

"No, but you have your art. Poetry's the only creative outlet I ever seriously tried, and I wasn't good at that. So you've still got one over me on that respect."

Claw scratched his nose. "Well, anyway, we're getting off the point. What I wanted to bring you here for... what I wanted to say to you...is that, well, desire's an okay thing to have. You have it, I have it, and I think we'd both be lesser people without it. You don't want to be *ruled* by it, but to *have* it...well, I wanted to show you the good side."

"To *show* me? What do you mean? I notice you got us in a room with a bed. Did you have a...consummation of the desire in mind?"

"Oh, no, I mean, well, not if you don't want to. I wanted to leave the option, I suppose, but I certainly wasn't going to bring it up unless "

"Claw," she interrupted, putting a finger on his lips, "*I do* want to."

For the next four nights and days, Keliander and Claw were rarely out of bed, and then only to get something to eat or to go to a different room for a different kind of experience. By the time they returned to the Ring of Purity, it looked to Keliander a very different place. Where before the gray uniformity had seemed clean and tempting, now it seemed only empty. There was a beauty in its emptiness, certainly, and there was even something there to be savored, but not to be dwelled on; this emptiness, just like the sensations of the first ring and the desires of the second, was something to be experienced in moderation. She had intellectually understood what Claw had been saying when he spoke of that before their return to the Ring of Sensation, but it hadn't really reached her deep down. Now it had, and now she felt she was ready to move on.

Selburn and the githzerai were waiting where they had parted. Hailephon was the first to see Keliander and Claw approaching, and raised a hand in greeting. "I was beginning to think you weren't going to return."

"I know we're cutting it close," Claw said, "but we had things to work out."

Selburn stood. "Keliander! Do you think you'll be able to go on to the Ring of Emotion now?"

Keliander took a deep breath. "Yes," she said. "You know, I think I will."

Selburn grinned broadly, exposing perfect teeth that sparkled like diamonds, another mark of his aasimar heritage.

"Well, we've wasted more than enough time waiting," O'Ale said. "Let us then continue our pilgrimage."

The six of them walked back to the Road of Health, but before they had quite reached it Will called out. "Wait."

"Yes, Straitwill?" Hailephon said. "What is it?"

"I think I think I should stay here."

She raised an eyebrow. "I had been under the impression that you disliked it here."

"I do. Very much. But that is why I feel I should stay."

"You're not making a lot of sense," O'Ale snapped.

"As I said before, although I did not like it here, I felt that I *should* like it here. That I *should* find it peaceful, cleansing, and calming, though I did not. I do not like it here, but I *want* to like it here. I *want* to be focused enough that I have no need of sensation or desire."

"Here now, remember what we'd talked about," Claw said. "That's the trap of this place; you're not *supposed* to want purity that badly. The whole idea is to strike a balance."

"I understand that. But...nevertheless, I think I want more of the purity than I have. I'm staying here. At least for a while. I don't like the Ring of Purity, but I want to stay here until I *do* like it. I don't think I'm ready to go on."

"And what if you *do* stay here till you like it?" Claw asked. "Then maybe you'll like it so much you'll never want to leave?"

"I will stay here until I feel I have attained the purity I need. After that...then I will see what happens next."

"If he wants to stay, let him stay," O'Ale sniffed. "We've wasted enough time already waiting for Keliander."

"Please, go on without me. I know the two of you have to catch your assassin. And of course, you two have to finish the pilgrimage. I...I just know there's more here I have to do. How much more, I don't know...but I'm not ready to leave yet." He looked out at the gray expanse. "Perhaps I never will be."

He turned back toward the others. "It has been pleasant traveling with you, but it seems here our ways must part." He dropped his pack, and pulled off his robe, and before any of the others could react he stepped out of the loincloth he wore underneath. "I will have no further need of any of this. I will try to focus only on what I have within myself." He looked out once more at the ring, then, without looking at his former companions, said "Farewell", and walked off.

Hailephon picked up the clothing and equipment he had left piled where he had been standing. "I will carry this in case we meet him again. I hope that eventually he may yet follow."

"Oh, yes, let's all *hope* that eventually he may follow," O'Ale said. "When you say that, though, you mean that you know perfectly well he won't."

"We will see what we will see."

"By which you mean we're not going to see *him* again."

Hailephon looked at her, then turned away.

Keliander was still watching Will walk off, distant but still visible across the vast gray sward. "You know, a part of me still can't help thinking maybe Will has the right idea."

"Well, Kel," Claw retorted, "as much as I personally might like to see you go about in the nude, there are those who might think it improper."

She turned to him, laughing. "That's not what I meant, and you know it. I meant "

"Yeah, I know it." Claw's smile faded, replaced by a look of concern. "You sure you're ready to go on, Kel?"

"Yes, I'm sure. A part of me thinks he's got the right idea but deep down I know now what this ring is really about. Let's go."

iii. The Route of Health

"Ah, Lady Terial, I'm so glad you could make it."

Perrish wasn't, in fact, at all glad that the other woman was here, but she thought it would be politically wise to pretend otherwise. Perrish knew very little about Kierne Terial, but the brazen forcefulness of her insistence upon being here was already enough to give her a bad impression of the younger woman.

"I'm here to check up on the progress of the hunt for my brother's murderer," Terial said.

"Of course. And I assure you we've been doing all we could. We have two excellent men pursuing the assassin right now."

Terial looked Perrish up and down. "You're human?"

"Um...yes. Is that important?"

"I just like to know what I'm dealing with. I've met far too many people that looked human that weren't. Not that I have anything against nonhumans...I just like to know."

Kierne Terial looked human herself, or very nearly, though Perrish thought she might have a touch of elvish blood. Nothing that made her stand out as planetouched, however. She was somewhat small of stature, but with a firmness to her posture and attitude that would make no one mistake her for a person easily dismissed, her black hair cut short in a simple bowl haircut that might have looked ridiculous on someone without her particular sharpness of facial features.

"So," Terial said, "you have two people pursuing the assassin. Only two?"

"These are good men; I don't think more than two are necessary. And they're in a place where it may be difficult for greater numbers to move freely."

"The City of Man, I understand."

"Yes."

"I've been reading up on that city. It seems it's difficult to move inward through the rings."

"That is the reputation it has, yes."

"And yet the assassin's evaded them all the way to the third ring."

"Actually, we just got word that they've now pursued him into the fourth."

"I see." Terial rubbed her chin. "Give me all the details. Everything you know."

Perrish tried to keep out of her voice her resentment at being addressed like a servant. Terial may have been a Martyr factor, taking her late brother's place, but that didn't give her the right to be so condescending toward her. "Certainly, Lady Terial. Ilxax here will explain everything."

"Follow me," the bladeling said. "I've got all the documents in the study."

Nemera, still sitting in his now accustomed seat at the distant end of the room, hadn't spoken all the time Terial had been there, but almost as soon as she left Perrish heard his drawling voice.

"What a *delightful* young woman. I *do* look forward to getting to know her better."

IV. The Ring of Emotion

While not nearly as gaudy as the Ring of Sensation, the Ring of Emotion was still a stark contrast to the Ring of Purity. Here there were buildings again, and plenty of color in fact, blocks of buildings seemed to have different hues. The buildings immediately past the gate had been various shades of blue; when Keliander had entered one to look for someone to ask about Kurlamber she had been struck by what she found inside. The interior was nearly as barren as that of one of the gray block buildings of the Ring of Purity though at least this building did have separate rooms and what was here was decorated with an oddly depressing dripping motif. Everyone in the room seemed to be downcast about something, from the man in the corner who hunched gloomily over a table to the old woman at the counter who was openly bawling. Whether it was the décor or the effect of seeing everyone else here so miserable, or whether it was something else entirely, Keliander felt a great sadness fall over herself as she entered the building. She did her best to shake it off, and asked the nearest person a young woman with tear-stained cheeks who stared vacantly at a wall for news of Kurlamber, but got no response and left quickly.

In another building, just as depressing as the last but in a subtly different way Keliander couldn't quite put her finger on, she found a woman who had seen someone of Kurlamber's description. The witness remembered him turning right after entering the gate, but didn't know where he had gone after that. So Keliander and Selburn took the street she had indicated, and the blue buildings gave way to purple. Though there was nothing about the purple buildings that stood out as obviously wrong, they still struck Keliander as off in some baffling but indefinable way. The inside was even worse; the dimensions just didn't seem quite right, and the details went together in a strange way that Keliander was fairly sure they shouldn't have been able to go, though she couldn't define exactly why. Those within the building seemed just as confused by it as she was, some of them goggling at their surroundings in evident amazement, others withdrawn and muttering to themselves, still others looking frantically from place to place as if searching for clues to some insoluble puzzle. Everyone here seemed so completely bewildered that Keliander found it impossible to get a straight answer out of any of them, and the fact that she was feeling increasingly befuddled herself didn't help her questioning any. She tried a few other nearby buildings, with similar results, and finally gave up on the purple block completely and decided to ask around in the neighboring blocks.

By the time she'd finally picked up Kurlamber's trail again, it was getting dark, but she thought she understood the pattern. This being the Ring of Emotion, every color of building, she supposed, represented a different emotion. Besides the blue of sadness and the purple of confusion? Wonder? Was that an emotion? she had encountered yellow happiness, red anger, green hope, orange ennui. All, she thought, in slightly different shades; the subtly different colors of the buildings seemed to represent different gradations of the emotions that she didn't know if there were words for. And the effect she had felt on entering the buildings *wasn't* just a reaction to their design, and *wasn't* only due to the emotions of the others there; she was sure of that. There was something intrinsic to the place that *brought about* these emotions, that instilled them in her heart. She wasn't sure she liked that; it seemed she was being manipulated in ways that seemed quite inappropriate. But, on the other hand...the time

she had entered a yellow building, she had found it hard to leave. The happiness there was alluring, even if she knew it was really an artificial and meaningless happiness that would never lead to anything greater.

Finding a room for the night required quite a bit of deliberation. It's not that there were no rooms available; there were plenty of places to stay, and, just like in the other rings, and like throughout the City of Man according to the information she had been given, it was all free of charge. The problem was that it was a hard decision what kind of district they should stay in. The yellow blocks were obviously tempting, but she wasn't sure that was a good idea; an entire night of their euphoria might make it far too hard to move on in the morning. But most of the other emotions she found downright unpleasant, and a night of any of them seemed a very unappealing prospect. She finally found a new type of block, a cluster of pinkish buildings whose associated emotion she thought could best be defined as *determination* (though again, she wasn't sure that really qualified as an emotion), and she thought here would be the best place for them to stay. After all, in the worst case it would only increase the determination she and Selburn already had to catch Kurlamber, and even if that was possible she didn't think it would really be a bad thing.

"Well," said O'Ale when the five of them were gathered together the next day to compare notes and plan their progress. "I daresay the highest emotion this place is going to excite in me is relief when we leave it."

"Eh, I don't see it's all that bad," Claw disagreed. "I have to say I kind of enjoyed some of the emotions in those places."

"I still don't get it," Selburn said.

O'Ale rolled her eyes. "What's not to get? It makes perfect sense, in a twisted, devilish sort of way. This is the Ring of Emotion. And following the pattern of the previous rings, the idea is to get you to overcome your emotions, obviously. And, again following the pattern, it goes about this by giving you a surfeit of emotions. I suppose the more emotionally *susceptible* you are, the stronger the emotions you'd feel, but there seems no escaping them altogether." She wrinkled her nose. "I admit even I felt a twinge of emotion on entering the buildings and I don't like it."

"I can see how that applies to the *pleasant* emotions, like happiness and pride," Keliander said she had run across that morning a block of golden buildings that seemed associated with the latter emotion "but what about the emotions like sadness and anger? Do people really need to overcome an attachment to emotions like those?"

"You haven't known anyone who seemed determined to wallow in depression? Who seemed to cling to sadness as if they actually *enjoyed* it and who perhaps, on some level, did? And people to whom anger seemed the natural state of things, who seemed to feel more complete, more *alive*, when they were furious? I've met people like that. I'm sure you have too. They seem disturbingly common. The emotions you'd consider unpleasant have an allure to some people as well, just as happiness and pride do to you."

"I suppose you have a point. Well, anyway, I think we'll just avoid the buildings from now on, except to sleep, and then we'll try and pick the mildest ones we can."

"Oh, *will* you?" O'Ale smiled slyly. "Then have you really faced the ring's temptations, I wonder?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"How did Claw's feytouched friend put it? You can't pass the test if you don't take it."

"So what about you? Are you taking the test?"

She frowned. "I've already told you the buildings have little effect on me. I'm not emotionally... *vulnerable*."

"Don't worry, Kel," Claw said. "I'm sure this ring won't be any problem for *you*."

"Let's hope not," O'Ale said distastefully. "It seems to me to take a particularly weak will to be slave to one's emotions. I'm sure I'd have very little respect for anyone who couldn't leave *this* silly little ring."

"O'Ale, be careful with your words," Hailephon admonished her. "We don't know yet if any of our party is going to have trouble leaving here."

"Well, if they are, they deserve to be insulted," O'Ale muttered, but she said nothing more.

"But that's not what I meant I didn't get," Selburn said, taking advantage of the brief silence. "It's the city. The whole thing. Why is it here? Why did the baatezu build it? What good does it do them?"

"We discussed that our first night in the city, remember?" Keliander told him. "No one really knows what the City of Man is for, but there are any number of theories."

"Yeah, but...I don't know. None of the theories really rings completely true to me."

"That's probably because none of them is complete. The baatezu are notorious for their complex plans; it's likely the City of Man serves a very complicated and subtle purpose, maybe many purposes at once."

"I'm curious now," Claw broke in. "What theories have you been telling them?"

"Well...the usual. That those who reach the center become baatezu. That the City of Man is only to tip the balance in favor of law, and doesn't necessarily have any great evil."

"I'm quite sure the former is not the case," Hailephon said, "or Master Aalzar certainly would not have sent us on this pilgrimage."

"Does he know the baatezu's reasons behind the City of Man?"

"No," Hailephon said. "I don't believe he does. But certainly he would not have sent us if he believed there were any possibility of that."

"It's just one story among many," Keliander said. "I'm not saying it's true."

"What about D'Mar's theory?" Claw asked.

"Whose theory?"

"Golon D'Mar. He's a zenythri graybeard from Delon-Estin Ótí. You haven't heard of him?"

"Hmm...actually, the name *does* sound vaguely familiar. But I don't know what theory you're referring to."

"Ah, see, ol' D'Mar thinks he's tumbled to the purpose behind the City of Man. See, most bashers who go into the City of Man don't make it to the center. Right? I mean, already two of our fellow travelers have decided to stay behind in the outer rings, and maybe they'll catch up with us later, and maybe they won't. Fact is, most people don't. Don't make it to the center, I mean. A great lot of people don't even make it past the Ring of Sensation. And that's where D'Mar's idea comes in. See, he says the real purpose of the City of Man *isn't* to help people reach enlightenment at the center the *real* purpose is to get people to go on the journey, but to get them stuck along the way."

"I still don't see how that helps the baatezu," Selburn said.

"Well, there's more to it than that. Who's most likely to get stuck in the outer rings, do you think?"

"I don't know. People who are going through the city for the wrong reasons?"

Claw shook his head. "Nah. *Chaotic* berks. The lawful ones are more likely to have the discipline to

reach the center. Besides, it's the chaotic ones who are more likely to go through the city for the wrong reasons anyway, coming to experience all the sensations and wonders and not to run the rings."

"Straitwill stayed behind in the Ring of Purity," Hailephon said, "and he was quite lawful."

"Well, there are exceptions, o' course. But by an' large, the lawfuls have a better chance of making it through. Least, that's what D'Mar thought."

"So the city exists to trap chaotic people?" Selburn asked.

"But not just chaotic people. If they're on the Lower Planes, chances are better'n even they're chaotic *evil*. An' if they stay in the City of Man, they ain't going to the Abyss and becomin' tanar'ri. So thanks to all those potential tanar'ri gettin' stuck in the City of Man, there are that many fewer tanar'ri in the multiverse."

"I don't know...it's a big city, but it doesn't seem it would make a significant difference in the number of tanar'ri."

"Maybe every little bit counts. Maybe it's just gettin' started. Maybe the city's even bigger'n it looks. But anyway, I'm just tellin' you D'Mar's theory. I'm not sayin' I believe it myself, necessarily."

"Well, I suppose it's as good as any other I've heard so far."

"Oh, but the story's got a topper, yet. See, later on it came out that D'Mar'd been garnished by the baatezu to tell his theory."

"So it was all a peel, then?"

"Well, maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. See, still later it turned out that the evidence of the payoff had been a fake that D'Mar hadn't got any jink from the baatezu after all, and that they'd just spread the chant to discredit him."

"The baatezu aren't usually that sloppy," O'Ale objected.

"Exactly. Which is why some bashers think the baatezu *wanted* the fake payoff to be discovered."

"But why would they want that?" Selburn protested.

"Well, maybe so people would think if they went to all that trouble to throw people off the scent, D'Mar's theory was all the more likely to be true."

"So if the baatezu want them to think that, that again means D'Mar's theory *isn't* true."

"Unless they were counting on people to think of *that* conclusion."

"So is it or isn't it oh, by the Lady; I suppose they've just done a marvelous job of muddying the waters."

"The baatezu are good at that," Claw agreed. "So maybe the dark of the matter will never be known. But it's an interesting theory, isn't it?"

"Well, like I said, it's as good as any other I've heard so far."

"Course, even if that *is* one reason the baatezu built the City of Man, it don't mean it's the *only* reason. Like Kel said, the City could serve many purposes at once."

"Even if it's true, though, that still doesn't fully explain all the inhabitants. I get that people don't always make it to the center, but those that don't, do they just stay in the ring they're stuck in forever? Do they *become* the folk who run the city? If everything's free for visitors, but not for residents, do the visitors *become* residents if they stick around long enough?"

"Selburn," Keliander cut him off, "let's leave those questions to the Guvners. We've got a job to do here, and I don't plan on sticking around long enough to see what happens if we stay behind."

"Keliander is correct," Hailephon said. "I, too, find your questions interesting, Selburn, but they are not

the issues we should be focusing on. We all have other purposes here. It seems we have all finished our meal; perhaps we should go out again and continue along the assassin's trail."

"Right," Claw said. "So, where shall we meet tomorrow?"

(continued...)

IV. The Ring of Emotion

(continued)

Keliander did not, in fact, end up avoiding the buildings; she thought there was enough of a chance that O'Ale might be right about having to face the test that she wanted to make sure she could, and that she would be ready to move on when the time came. *If* the time came there was, of course, always the chance that Kurlamber wouldn't make it past this ring, that they'd catch him before he could get to the Ring of Logic, assuming that was even where he was going. But there was, of course, also the chance that they wouldn't. And Keliander wanted to be ready just in case.

But the emotions of this ring really *weren't* a temptation. Oh, she had to admit that the happiness of the yellow buildings was pleasurable enough, and the hope of the green, and even some shades of purple those that tended more toward awe and wonder rather than just perplexed confusion. But none of them were tempting enough to distract her from her mission. None of them made her think she'd have any trouble leaving the ring when the time came.

She did see some things that gave her pause, however. In several of the red buildings, she saw people blast each other with fiery bolts, and inflict pain with touch. In the blue buildings, some people seemed to be slowly turning themselves to stone, or isolating themselves within opaque barriers. In the orange, people erased words and objects they seemed to dislike with the wave of a hand. All of this was explicable by magic, of course, but it seemed to happen a bit too often to make it plausible that all the people doing it had magical abilities, especially since the particular abilities displayed seemed to tie so closely with the buildings though not always; once she saw an angry man walking down the street in a yellow-orange district whirl and blast flame at someone nearby. Keliander didn't really understand what she was seeing until many days later, when the whole group met again for a meal.

"Still runnin' counter-clockwise," Claw said. "An' we're gainin' on 'im again. 'Course, the Way of Philosophy ain't far off, an' I don't know that we'll catch 'im before he gets there but it'll be close." He smiled. "Not that I'm in too much of a hurry, mind you. This ring's an amazin' place."

He reached for his mug, and just before his hand got to it it suddenly burst into pale flame, outlining the mug without consuming it. Claw looked considerably less startled than Keliander felt.

"What the "

"Eh, I dunno what that is either," Claw said, "but things like that've been happening to me all day. Just one more mystery of the city, I suppose." He grabbed the mug despite the pale flame and drank down its contents.

"I suppose this shouldn't be surprising," O'Ale said.

Keliander turned to her. "What shouldn't be surprising?"

"That one among our party would be taken in by the allure of emotion. I don't understand the allure myself, but it certainly seems some people *are* susceptible to it."

"What are you talking about? What does *that* " Keliander motioned toward the mug "have to do with emotion?"

"This whole *ring* has to do with emotion. That's sort of the point, isn't it? But as for the mug...well, you've been here as long as I have. Surely you've seen the pattern."

"I've noticed people doing a lot of strange things, but I don't know ."

"Strange things associated with emotion. You've seen that, haven't you?"

"Well...sort of. I mean, it did seem, for example, that the people able to shoot fire and inflict pain were people in the anger buildings, or who were angry outside of them."

"Exactly. And what do you want to do when you're angry? You want to *hurt*. You want to *destroy*. And so this ring gives one the opportunity to *do* that. The emotion fuels the ability, I think. If you have the emotion strong enough, you can do what the motion makes you want to do."

"So sad people want to...to wall themselves off? To turn themselves to stone?"

"Don't they? They say misery loves company, but I'm not convinced that's true. I think most people caught in the depths of depression want to be left alone with their feelings. And in severe cases even want to, well, to *cease to exist*, at least as thinking beings. Yes, I'd say that follows the pattern."

"So what about happiness? Is there nothing happy people want to do?"

O'Ale smiled. "Been avoiding the yellow buildings, have you?"

"No, but I haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary happening inside."

"Then you haven't been paying attention. Yes, there's a power associated with that, too. The power to heal, and to give pleasure. You haven't seen people in the yellow buildings seem to excite physical pleasure in each other merely by a touch? Or heal wounds by contact?"

"I'd only seen the latter once, and assumed it was a cleric doing it. And as for the first well, I thought people were just, you know, taking pleasure from the happiness."

"Then you hadn't been thinking the matter through. You'd been letting the emotion distract you."

"Anyway, what does this have to do with Claw's mug? What emotion should *that* be associated with?"

O'Ale pursed her lips. "Wonder, I shouldn't doubt. Your chaond friend has been showing enough of it. And if there's any sort of emotion that would be associated with useless but showy random phenomena "

"Hey, like a rod of wonder," Claw said. "I wonder if there's a connection there. I mean, are rods of wonder really impregnated with the stuff of wonder? Is that what gives them their power? Heh...so I'm wondering about wonder. Didn't mean to put it that way."

"I suggest you try to curtail your *wonder*," O'Ale said, "if you want any possibility of leaving this ring. We're almost to the Way of Philosophy, you know."

"Yeah, I know," he said, suddenly sober.

The conversation during the rest of the meal stuck to business, and plans for Kurlamber's pursuit, but after they were done Claw stood and seized Keliander by the elbow as she was leaving.

"Kel? Can I talk to you?"

The githzerai had already left now, and just Claw, Keliander, and Selburn remained by the table.

"Alone?"

"Yeah. Well I suppose it doesn't matter if Selburn's there. It's nothing *that* personal this time, and no point in sending the sod out by his lonesome."

"Walk with us," she said. "What is it?"

"What O'Ale said, about the possibility of leaving the ring," Claw began as they walked out of the inn.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it. Sometimes I think O'Ale just says things for the sake of being disagreeable."

"No, but about this, I'm worried she's right. I don't know that I *will* be able to leave the ring. And it's not just because of what O'Ale said; I'd been thinking it long before she said it. The truth is, the emotion's got me caught up. Maybe it's the artist in me, I dunno, but emotion...it really does have a great attraction for me. An' I'm not sure I can overcome that attraction."

"Claw, you'll do fine. *You* helped *me* through the last two rings. I don't know that I'd ever have passed either the Ring of Desire or the Ring of Purity without you. You'll get through this one."

"Maybe. But...well, maybe this time I need help from you."

"I I'm not sure what I can tell you. I mean, you know how the rings work. You know what the tests are. You've explained it to me."

"Yeah, I know. But it's like you said back in the Ring of Purity knowing it is one thing. Really accepting it is another. I *know* I have to overcome the lure of emotion, allow for other things...it's just not easy for me to do."

"Really, Gamlin, you don't seem all that emotional. If you can hide your emotions this well, you must be a terrific card player."

"Nah, the emotions...I'm *tryin'* to keep them inside, *tryin'* to hide them in the hopes that that'll help them go away. But I'm not sure it's *workin'*."

"Maybe it's not. Maybe you need to do just the opposite."

"Eh?"

"Maybe you *need* to let them out. Experience them fully, so you can be sated with them."

"What about you? You lettin' everything out?"

"I'm...I'm not sure I have much of what O'Ale called 'emotional susceptibility'. I'm really not affected by this all that much. But maybe...maybe that's because I already had my catharsis."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"The Harmonium training regimen is strict, Gamlin. Or was, under Factol Sarin; under Faith it's a little less harsh, but not all that much. Anyway, they drill out of you anything not important to the cause. And that includes emotions that would hamper your progress. I had quite a temper when I started with the Harmonium. During my induction I was constantly shouting at the trainers, shouting at the disciplinarians, shouting at everything. Until finally it got to the point that...I didn't have any shouting left, I guess. It'd all come out of me. Oh, I suppose there's more to it than that; I'm sure we've all met berks who never seem to run out of rage. But I think that was a part of it. There may have been other factors at work in helping me overcome my anger...but I don't know that it ever would have happened if I'd denied it."

"Huh."

"And then...well, even then there were other times I was beset by emotion. When...when I left you,

Gamlin, because...because our paths were diverging, I cried for six days straight."

Claw's eyes widened, as he looked at her. "You...you what?"

"But I got over that, too." She smiled ruefully. "Well, maybe not completely over it, or I wouldn't have had such trouble in the Ring of Desire, would I?"

"That's why you left?" Claw asked. "Because our 'paths were diverging'?"

"Well...there were a lot of reasons that seemed important at the time." She sighed. "I had to work up the ranks in the Harmonium, and you didn't seem like someone an ambitious young Hardhead should be associated with. Now...I think maybe it was a mistake. Like I said before, you're a good man, Gamlin, even if you don't exactly embody the Harmonium ideals. But anyway...well, I suppose that gives me leave to have a tinge of regret is that an emotion? But then, I suppose it's not *having* the emotions that holds us back; it's being a slave to them."

"Then isn't giving full rein to my emotions exactly what I *shouldn't* do?"

"I don't think so. I think maybe you have to understand what it *is* to be a slave to your emotions before you can reject it."

"Huh. Maybe you're right."

"I hope I am. I don't want to leave you behind, Gamlin."

"Well, I'll give it a try. Only...I'm not sure we'll have enough time before we get to the Way of Philosophy."

When they met the next day, Claw was boisterously happy, laughing and joking and clearly causing O'Ale no end of discomfort. Hailephon's only reaction was a raised eyebrow. And indeed O'Ale's explanation of the powers granted here by happiness was correct, because when he touched Keliander she felt a distinct thrill of physical pleasure that couldn't be explained by the mere contact. The day after that he was back to wonderment, more strongly than before. And again, he had the concomitant abilities: at one point, leaves sprouted from the table at his touch; at another, when he gestured as he spoke a stream of butterflies poured forth from his hands; at yet another, his knife turned blue when he picked it up. Claw reacted to all of these phenomena with the same wonder in which he seemed to regard the city as a whole.

The third day after his talk with Keliander, however, Claw was in the throes of a less positive emotion. He was clearly disheartened, and while he wasn't turning to stone or surrounding himself with a barrier, he *was* growing oddly transparent. It seemed like depression, but Keliander wondered exactly what he was depressed about.

"I don't think I'm ready, Keliander," Claw murmured as they sat down, and Keliander realized it wasn't just depression he was suffering from at all. It was a slightly different shade of sadness...specifically, it was doubt. And she understood why he had it...they had reached the Way of Philosophy. If Kurlamber had gone inward to the Ring of Logic, this was where they would have to follow.

"You'll do fine," she said, though inwardly she thought he *wasn't* ready. Not if he was still giving

himself over to emotion like this.

"I can't do it. If you have to go to the Ring of Logic...you'll have to go on without me."

"We can wait a few days, Gamlin. Maybe that'll be enough. Everyone waited for *me* last time around."

"Well, it seems, under the circumstances, that perhaps we have good news," Hailephon broke in.

"Good news?" Selburn said. "What?"

"It seems the assassin *didn't* go down the Way of Philosophy."

"He didn't?" Keliander said. "He just kept on around the ring?"

"Actually, he doubled back along a different road and started moving clockwise."

"By the Lady. If we'd known he was doubling back, we could have cut him off."

"Obviously," O'Ale said. "But of course we *didn't* know, and had no way of knowing."

"Well, I guess we'll follow him back clockwise, then." She put her hand on Claw's shoulder, and was a little disturbed to find how insubstantial he felt. "Well, Gamlin, it looks like you're going to have a little while longer to try to get over the lure of your emotions after all."

By the next day, Claw was back in good spirits, and thereafter, as they followed Kurlamber's trail around the ring, his emotional state varied from day to day again, and while he sometimes seemed doubtful of his ability to pass the test of the ring, his despair never again quite reached the depths it had during that day near the Way of Philosophy, and Keliander allowed herself to be hopeful all the more so when she was in the green districts, of course that he would be able to make it past the Ring of Emotion after all.

She was also hopeful, though, that it might not end up coming to that. Kurlamber no longer had all that much of a lead on them, and they were catching up. They might yet catch him before he got to the Lane of Memory, the next road leading in to the Ring of Logic. His lead had shrunk from four days to three, then to two, and now, as they were nearing the Lane of Memory, it was less than one. By this point Claw's emotions, having become less and less extreme as they traveled, had pretty much returned to how they had been before he and Keliander had had their talk which, assuming he wasn't just keeping his emotions hidden inside again, apparently meant he was succeeding in overcoming their lure. And indeed that seemed to be the case, for as they met again for what should be the last time before their trip to the Ring of Logic, if Kurlamber did in fact take the Lane of Memory there, Claw smiled. "You know, Kel, I wasn't sure I was going to be able to make it, but now...I think I really am. You were right. Letting the emotions out...well, after all these days of letting my emotions run free, I can see how sometimes it's better to be guided by other things."

"Well," O'Ale said. "I don't see why it should have taken this long to see the obvious, but at least it came to you eventually."

"An' I've got some other good news, too, and it's news I'd better be quick with."

"What's that?" Keliander said.

"I asked around about Kurlamber again, just before coming here? He was seen headin' toward the Lane of Memory, all right. But *very* recently. Not more'n a couple of hours ago. An' according to the bariaur I got the story from, he didn't seem in any particular hurry."

Keliander stood, her food almost untouched. "Then if we hurry, maybe we can still catch him! Come on!"

She ran for the Lane of Memory, pacing herself enough to let the others keep up, but it was a bit too far to run all the way, and she settled for a brisk walk. Even so, she thought there was a chance to still get to Kurlamber before he got to the Ring of Logic if they hurried. But while she had that hope, it was still a surprise for her to actually *see* him.

He stood there, at a corner just by the Lane of Memory, with his back to her but even from the back, his large mutton-chops, his pointed ears, and his red wings gave him away. Keliander thought she might be able to catch him by surprise from behind before he even knew she was there, but as she approached he turned, his dull red eyes catching hers, and he smiled, exposing gleaming, pointed teeth. "Kurlamber!" Keliander shouted at him. "Stop! In the name of the Harmonium, you are under arrest!" "Now," Kurlamber said in a deep, syrupy voice that didn't seem loud enough that it should have carried all the way to where Keliander was but did notwithstanding, "you didn't really expect me to come *quietly*, did you?"

What happened next was something of a blur. Kurlamber slipped around the corner. Keliander followed. She saw him there, standing a little ways down the Lane of Memory, with a bow cocked and readied and an arrow pointed at her. He released the arrow, but she managed to get off a spell to protect herself from him, but it wasn't enough, and she felt a sharp pain as the arrow thudded into her shoulder. And then Kurlamber saluted and ran off down the Lane of Memory toward the Ring of Logic. Keliander started after him, but felt someone grab her arm. She looked back and saw Selburn, holding her arm with one hand and with the other offering her a flask that she recognized as containing one of the potions of *remove poison* that the faction had provided for their trip.

"Keliander, drink this!"

"We have to hurry," she said, but she did take the flask and down its contents.

And then she ran after Kurlamber into the Ring of Logic.

iv. The Lane of Memory

"He was always the protector of the family," Terial said. "Even when we were children. He would always look after me. It it just seems strange to not have him around."

"There, there," Nemera said sympathetically, patting Terial's shoulder. "I know this is a difficult time for you."

"I just don't understand it. Why Laedeth? Why was he killed? And why his soul bound so he couldn't be resurrected?"

"The bound soul should still exist somewhere, you know. Maybe you'll have him back yet."

"Maybe. But...it all still seems so strange. He was always the protector. He was always there for us. It just...it just doesn't seem right that he be gone."

"Am I the only one uncomfortable with how well the two of them are getting along?" Ilxax whispered to Perrish. Perrish motioned for him to follow her into another room; Nemera seemed to have an

uncanny ability to hear their whispers even when he seemed too far away, and she wanted to be sure they had privacy.

"I don't like it either," Perrish said once they were alone, "but mostly for her sake."

"I know what you mean. I don't really like Lady Terial, but...at least at some level she seems to be good-intentioned. Namera...I just don't trust him at *all*."

"My feelings exactly." Perrish sighed. "Though I must wonder if some of this is my fault."

"Your fault how?"

"For not showing more sympathy to Lady Terial on her arrival. Something about her rubbed me the wrong way, and I'm afraid I may not have been as understanding as I should have been. She *has* just lost a brother; this must be a difficult time for her. But...when I didn't give her the sympathy and the listening ear she apparently needed, and Namera did..."

"Well, let's just keep an eye on them. It wouldn't surprise me that Namera's up to something."

"I've been sure Namera's up to something since almost the moment he arrived. But come on; we need to get back to them. We don't want to seem ungracious by leaving them alone too long."

She left unspoken the second part *or leave them alone long enough for Namera to try something* but she saw from Ilxax's expression that he had understood it anyway.

V. The Ring of Logic

The Lane of Memory entered the Ring of Logic in a sizeable plaza, one in which it should have been easy to spot Kurlamber even with the slight headstart he had. He shouldn't have been able to get out of sight in time but somehow he had. Keliander looked all around her, and didn't see him.

What she did see was an intricate network of roads and buildings, one that she got the impression had some underlying pattern to it that she couldn't quite make out. Most of the people here walked with a definite purpose, clearly knowing exactly where they were going. Those who didn't were a stark contrast; they mostly looked totally confused, wandering dazedly or taking tentative steps as if afraid of what they might come to.

But Kurlamber was not among them, in either category. Somehow he had just disappeared.

"Blast! Where *is* he?"

"Apparently, he used magic to escape," O'Ale said. "I should think that would be obvious."

Keliander frowned. The githzerai was right; it *was* obvious. There were any number of ways he could have done it. Kurlamber certainly had the expert assassin's magic abilities to change his appearance, turn invisible, or *dimension door* away, and very possibly was carrying any number of magic items that could have given him other escape routes as well. He could be anywhere. He could be right there, disguised or invisible, or he could be hundreds of feet away elsewhere on the ring. There were ways to find out which was the case, but they would take some time.

"Anyway, he doesn't have much of a lead on us," Claw said. "We'll get 'im. In the meantime, I reckon the first priority is to tend to that wound of yours."

"I'll be fine," she said through clenched teeth.

"Sure you will, right after we get that looked after. I know you can lay hands on yourself and heal

yourself, and like as not Selburn can do that too, but first we've got to pull that arrow out an' make sure there's nothin' more to it than the wound. Come on; let's find an inn."

As much as she wanted to pursue Kurlamber, realistically Keliander had to admit that Claw was right; her wound probably should be tended to so she'd be in good shape to fight the half-fiend if necessary when they met again. She let herself be led along as Claw went up to a nearby half-elf to ask directions. "Say, friend, do you know where there's an inn nearby?"

The half-elf's eyes narrowed, he looked back across the plaza, and then he turned back to Claw.

"Certainly. Certainly I do. There's an inn on that street right there."

"Ah. Well, thank you kindly, then."

"Only...there are fifty-two buildings on that street. Neatly arranged, twenty-six on a side, directly across from each other. And none of them have any signs, or other outward markings as to what they are."

"Er...okay. So how do I find the inn?"

"Well, you see, eighteen of the buildings on that street are private residences. Another eighteen are shops or markets of one sort or another."

"I thought the stuff here was free for visitors."

"Well, yes, but we still call them shops. What else would you have us call them?"

"Whatever. Anyway, you still haven't told me how to find the inn."

"Another six buildings provide services of one sort or another...healing, information, and so forth. And another six are various sorts of public buildings. Two buildings are academies, and the last is a bathhouse."

"Academies?"

"Places where the principles of logic and clear thought are taught. There are many such academies here."

"Right, I see. But all I wanted to know was where the inn is."

"Well, each market is directly across from a private residence. In fact, no building is directly across from a building of the same type."

"But if there's only one inn, I don't see how that helps "

"And the residences occur in groups of three. No more and no less. No four residences occur adjacently in a line, nor are there groups of only one or two."

"I know what 'no more and no less' means, thanks. But the inn "

"Each service building is adjacent to a public building, and at least six buildings away from the nearest other service building on the same side of the street. And by 'at least six buildings away' I mean there are at least five buildings between the nearest service buildings on the same side."

"Okay, I've got that, thanks. But that still doesn't tell me where the inn is."

"Now, if you go down the street from here, the first academy you come to will be on your right. And the bathhouse will be on your left."

"Sure, but where's the inn?"

"Ah, that you should know by now."

Claw looked blank. "I should?"

"I've given you enough information for that, yes."

"Ah...can you put it a little more directly?"

The half-elf laughed musically. "That's the most direct answer you'll get *here*," he said, and skipped

off. Claw stared after him.

"For a place called the Ring of Logic, people here sure do behave peculiar."

"Well, I guess he probably did give us enough information to figure it out," Selburn said. "Let's see...if each residence is across from a marketplace...then that means, uh, I guess each marketplace must also be across from a residence, since there are the same number of residences and markets, right? So...that means the marketplaces must also be in groups of three. Now, let's see...the inn...obviously it can't be across from a residence or a marketplace...which leaves...well, I guess that still leaves a lot of possibilities. Let's see...I think I'm going to need some parchment for this."

Selburn unslung his pack and dug through it until he produced a quill and parchment, then he sat down in the middle of the plaza and started sketching.

"Okay...now, I'm pretty sure the buildings on the end have to be residences, because...no, wait, never mind. Maybe they can be spaced this way...hmm..."

"Oh, for the love of Zerth," O'Ale broke in exasperatedly. "Follow me."

Selburn stood, looking a little confused, as she led them down the street and stopped in front of one of the buildings there, which didn't look to Keliander much different from any of the other buildings nearby.

"Here. If the half-elf was telling the truth, this is the inn."

"Er...thanks, O'Ale," Claw said. "I guess we owe you one." He entered the building, and Keliander followed, the others behind them.

"Ere now," Claw said to the innkeeper, a portly woman who looked to have maybe a bit of gehreleth blood, "can we have a room?"

She glanced at them, and then looked over at the corridor that led to the rooms. "Yes, of course." She reached behind her for a key hanging on a hook on the wall and put it on the desk. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Claw picked up the key, looked at it, and looked back at the innkeeper. "Er...which room does this key go to? I don't see a number or anything..."

"Oh, the rooms are numbered."

"Maybe so, but the keys aren't."

"Well, I can tell you the number of the room that key fits. Or at least, I can tell you enough for you to know it. You see, if you double the room number, you "

"How many rooms are there here?" Claw interrupted quickly.

"Eighteen, but "

"Then you know, I think we'll just try the key on the doors ourselves, if it's all the same to you," Claw interrupted. "Come on, then."

The first door he tried, someone inside apparently heard the key rattling and barked out a guttural

"What?" They moved on quickly; the key didn't fit the second door, or the third, and the fourth door was apparently already unlocked and swung open when Claw tried the key in the lock to reveal a man and a woman asleep inside. He closed the door quickly and moved on; the fifth door didn't yield to the key, but the sixth did, and at last this room they entered.

"Let me see the wound," Hailephon said. "I've had some experience with this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing is that?" Claw said.

She looked at him. "In my youth, there was a time I had romantic dreams of being a member of a strike force that would act against the githyanki, a secret agent of a sort who would, alone or in a small group, infiltrate enemy areas and take out important foes or artifacts. I eventually decided that the life of a

monk, while less flashy, provided more service to the githzerai people in the long run...but I never forgot what I learned on my earlier career path."

She examined the arrow as she spoke, and then gingerly put one hand on Keliander's chest, the fingers flanking the arrow, and carefully pulled on the arrow's shaft just behind the buried head. Keliander winced as the arrow came out, but then felt much better once the initial pain had subsided.

"Did you ever go on any strike force missions, or was it just something you dreamed of doing?" Selburn asked.

"I did. Several. Once to the city of Tu'narath itself. I made many good friends on those missions, and many more bitter enemies. But...those are stories for another time. That's not who I am now."

"Still, that must be something, to have done all that."

The githzerai smiled. "And what about you? You're going on some significant missions yourself, it seems to me. Very few people of your youth or of any age, for that matter have entered the City of Man, let alone penetrated this far into it. And I'm sure this can't be the first thing you've done for your faction, or you wouldn't have been selected for this mission."

"Yeah...I guess I've done some myself. It's just well, I guess other people's stories always seem more interesting, don't they?"

Hailephon examined the arrowhead, which still bore traces of a black liquid. "The arrow was indeed poisoned." She ran a finger through the substance, and then rubbed it between a finger and thumb.

"Deathblade, I believe. Very dangerous."

"I guess it's a good thing I gave you that potion, then," Selburn said to Keliander.

"Selburn, I was in a hurry to catch up with Kurlamber, and " She sighed. "Yes, you're right. It was a good thing you gave me that potion. Thank you."

"Here, let me heal your wound." Selburn put his hands on Keliander's head despite her half-hearted attempts to bat them away, and the tiefling felt the wound close up and mend.

"Selburn, I could have done that."

"I know, but I wanted to. Besides, we may have more need of your power later."

"Well, even if he did use magical means to escape us at the entrance," Claw said, "he can't be all that far ahead. We'll catch up with that berk yet."

"You know," Keliander said, "I really think we may. He made one significant mistake."

"What's that?"

Keliander stood, and took the arrow from Hailephon. "This."

"The arrow?"

"I told you our first day in the city that Selburn and I had a magical compass that would lead us to Kurlamber if we had something of his," Keliander said. "Unfortunately, until now we didn't have anything of his we could use. Now we do."

"Ah. I see what you're gettin' at."

"Selburn, can you get out the compass, please?"

"Right." The young aasimar took off his pack and rummaged through it, finally producing a golden disk-shaped object about the size of a cupcake. "Here you go."

Keliander lifted the lid on the object Selburn gave her, revealing inside a plate that gave off a soft white glow, and a silver needle that rested on the plate. She touched the arrow to the compass and murmured a few words, and the needle rose, suspending itself in the air above the plate, and then slowly rotated.

Keliander looked at it carefully, then considered her surroundings and did a few quick mental

adjustments.

"I think he's still in this ring," she said. "Still moving counter-clockwise."

"So with that thing, we can follow him now without having to ask people if they've seen him?"

"That's the idea, yes."

"Well, *that's* a ful good thing. If we've been havin' to put up with many of those addle-coved two-doors-in-a-row answers every day I'd be driven stone barmy by the time we got out of here."

"It's just simple logic," O'Ale told him. "It's not as if they were being deliberately cryptic."

"If they aren't bein' deliberately cryptic, why can't they just say somethin' like 'It's the second building on the left'? You give people a trail of clues to tell 'em somethin' you could have said straight out, I call that bein' deliberately cryptic."

"There's a beauty in logic that you apparently fail to see. No doubt they're only behaving as they do in reverence to that."

"There's also a beauty in gettin' an answer that actually makes sense."

"Because you don't understand the answer doesn't mean it doesn't make sense."

"Eh, maybe not, but I'd like it a lot better if I did understand it."

"Well, the wound seems to be tended to, so perhaps we should part here and meet again tomorrow."

"Hold on," Claw said. "Maybe we shouldn't."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, now that we don't have to ask around anymore, I don't see much point in splittin' up. We may as well stay at the same place. Maybe in separate rooms, sure; we don't have to all cram together *that* close. But we may as well stick together from here on out."

"There may be different things we wish to see in the rings."

"I'm not sayin' we have to stay together *all* the time," Claw said. "But we may as well stay in the same place, so we don't have to hunt down inns separately. Look, I'll level with you, O'Ale. I'm not even sure I could *find* an inn in this gods-forsaken ring on my own. We could use your guidance, since you seem to speak the language, if you know what I mean."

"It's not a separate language," she said impatiently. "It just requires a little *thought* about what's being said "

"Yeah, yeah, I understand that. Point is, you seem to have a better capacity to think along the right lines than the rest of us. We could use your help."

"Actually, there's another reason it might be a good idea to stick together," Selburn said. "Kurlamber knows we're following him now. He might try to strike back somehow. We'd be safer if we were together so we could protect each other against him."

"He knows you're following him *now*?" O'Ale said. "It seems fairly obvious he knew you were following him all along. Or at least, for much of the way."

"Why do you say that?" Keliander asked.

"Well, the pattern of his running, for one thing. If he didn't know someone was after him, it's hardly likely he would have been in such a rush to get through the city. In fact, from what you've said of him, it doesn't seem particularly likely he would have wanted to get to the inner rings at all, if not to lose pursuit, does it? Even if he did, I'd think he'd take more time about it."

"That may not mean he knew *we* were following him specifically. He may have just suspected someone might be following him, and not want to take chances."

"Oh, that would be possible, I suppose. Except that when we *did* catch up with him, he looked right at

you. And he certainly seemed to know who you were."

"You've got a point," Keliander said. "It did look like he recognized me. Still, that doesn't mean he knew we were following him all along, does it? It could be that someone tipped him off. Maybe when he doubled back "

"Perhaps, but again, why would he have doubled back in the first place if he didn't know he was being pursued?"

"Well, whether or not he knew we were following him all along, he certainly knows it now. So maybe Selburn has a point; it might be better to stick together so we're safer against him."

"I don't believe he has any interest in Hailephon and me," O'Ale sniffed. "I believe it's you and Selburn he'd be after."

"And are you saying you think it would be appropriate to just leave them to their fate?"

"Well, no, of course not, but..." O'Ale sighed in frustration. "Very well. We'll stick together for now. But if you're to have my guidance through the ring, you're very well going to have to learn to think for yourselves. We are going to stop at some of those academies the half-elf spoke of."

"O'Ale," Keliander protested, "I don't know that we have time "

"We certainly do have time. It should take no more time than we'd been spending before asking around after the assassin, and now thanks to your compass we no longer have to do that. It may be a necessity, if we're going to reach the inner rings. Haven't we been operating under the belief that one has to fully experience each ring before one is ready to leave it?"

"All right. We'll spend some time at the academies. But not too much. We have to catch up with Kurlamber."

"Yes, yes. I'm aware of your priorities."

As it turned out, Keliander was very thankful for O'Ale's guidance. It wasn't just when they asked for directions that things got confusing; the streets themselves were laid out in patterns that seemed difficult to navigate, and Keliander could swear that they sometimes moved and reconnected in different ways. O'Ale seemed to have no trouble anticipating where they would need to go and which route to take, but the Keliander and apparently to the rest of the party, with the possible exception of Hailephon the matter remained completely mystifying.

As for the academies, they were actually much more interesting than Keliander had expected. She had feared she had been in for just a lot of graybeards rattling their bone-boxes about tedious esoterica, but what they taught was a sort of exercise in clear thinking and in association of ideas that she found quite illuminating, and more than a little useful. Little by little, she began to understand the patterns of the city, comprehend more and more how its change and its configurations could be anticipated, and she felt less and less baffled by the directions given by the locals, though she still wasn't able to fully solve the enigmas without O'Ale's help.

Selburn, however, worried her. Not that he wasn't taking to the instruction in the academies. He was. In fact, the problem was that it seemed he might be taking to it a little too much. He listened with rapt attention when the lecturers were speaking, threw himself with admirable fervor into the exercises they

recommended, and by the time they were halfway to the Path of Politics the next road leading in toward the Ring of Understanding, and very possibly the one that Kurlamber would take, though the compass still indicated he was ahead of them in the Ring of Logic for now he was getting to the point that most of the time he could correctly interpret the puzzling directions of the inhabitants without O'Ale's help, if not quite so quickly as she did. O'Ale seemed pleased with his progress, and actually started smiling at Selburn when he came up with a new idea, and doing him small kindnesses like reserving for him a softer chair when the party ate together. But Keliander saw a cause for concern. If Selburn found the Ring of Logic this attractive, would he be able to leave it when the time came? Finally, when they were about two thirds of the way to the Path of Politics and by now Keliander, too, was able to figure out the conundrums of the locals' directions more often than not, though still not nearly as reliably as O'Ale and Selburn, and only Claw was lagging behind in his learning, though even he was making progress Keliander decided the most logical thing to do was just to *talk* to him about it. She had the opportunity when they were at an academy that offered instruction in several different levels and aspects of logic; O'Ale and Hailephon attended one lecture, Claw another more introductory one, and she went with Selburn to a third. The speaker focused on the application of logic to the navigation of Mechanus, a topic Keliander had certainly heard brought up before, but had never really had the background to understand. Now, she thought she understood most of what was being said, and gained a new appreciation for the intricate working of the gears. But as the speaker finished, and Selburn got up with most of the rest of the audience to leave, Keliander clutched his arm.

"Just a moment, Selburn. I want to talk to you."

He sat back down, looking at her quizzically. "Is there something wrong?"

"That's what I want to know. You're taking well to the lessons here."

"Well, you're doing well too. Actually, the directions that annizu gave us this morning involving the seven right turns and the five intersections...I have to admit that one had me stumped, but you got it. And you do seem to be thinking more clearly. I mean, not that you weren't thinking clearly before, but now it's, you know, even more so."

"What worries me, though, Selburn, is that you may like it here *too much*."

He raised his eyebrows. "Too much? You mean..."

"Selburn, when it comes time to leave the Ring of Logic, if we have to follow Kurlamber inward to the next ring...are you going to be able to?"

"Oh, is that what has you worried? Yes. I don't think it's going to be a problem. These lessons in logic and all are very interesting. But I know that's not all there is to it."

"You're sure."

"Yes. Look. You know I've always been interested in...in finding things out. You said, back in the first ring, that sometimes you wondered why I'd joined the Harmonium instead of the Fraternity of Order. Well...the truth is, I *did* almost join the Fraternity of Order. The reason I opted for the Harmonium instead was because...well, because it seemed more *benevolent*. I wanted to learn, but I also wanted to do something to make the multiverse a better place. There's also too much evil in the Fraternity of Order for my taste. Not that there aren't plenty of good Guvners, and even a few evil Hardheads, but...by and large, the Harmonium was definitely more engaged in acting for the greater good. And that, well, that got to me over the call for learning. But...it was a close call. And if there were a version of the Fraternity of Order that focused on using knowledge for good, instead of just for law...well, I would have joined that in a heartbeat."

"That doesn't really lessen my concerns, Selburn."

"But the thing is, there's *more* to learning than just logic. I realize that. Logic's important, but I know it's not all there is. And yes, when it comes time to leave the ring, I'm sure I won't have any problem doing it. I want to see what comes next. I want to learn all the city's secrets not just stop here at one part of it."

"I hope you're right, Selburn."

"I almost had to stay behind at the Ring of Desire. You remember that. But I *knew* then I was in trouble. I *knew* I wouldn't be able to make it. I think if I were in trouble here, I'd know it too. Seriously, Keliander. You have nothing to worry about. I do like logic; I like it as one way to learn new things...but I also realize it's not the only way, and I want to learn the other ways too."

"All right." She looked around; the academy auditorium was empty now except for the two of them.

"Well, come on. We'd best get going before Claw and the giths wonder where we are."

But as they neared the Path of Politics, Keliander had someone new and unexpected to worry about.

"You know, Kel," Claw said over dinner one day, leaning close to her to whisper in her ear, "I'm a little worried I could get to like it here too much."

She started. "*You?* I wouldn't have thought logic was your thing, Gamlin."

Keliander didn't whisper, but really Claw needn't have bothered to either. Selburn was engaged in an animated conversation about the deep applications of logic with Hailephon and O'Ale, and none of the three was paying her and Claw any attention.

"Well, I didn't think it was, either, but then I'd never been exposed to it. And now that I am...well, I think I'm liking it."

"Liking it *too much*? As in you're not going to be able to go on?"

"Well, as in I guess I'll see what I'll see. We've still got a few days till we get to the Path of Politics, after all. Maybe it's just the novelty that's got me, mostly. Maybe I'll get over it. But...I can't help but think maybe, in all my chaotic upbringing, there were some things I was really missing."

"I don't think logic and chaos are inherently inimical."

"Depends on the brand o' chaos." Claw laughed briefly. "See, from what I understand, the high-ups of the forces of chaos can't totally agree on what chaos is, either. To some, it's just randomness. To some, it's individuality. Right now, it's the former camp that has the advantage. But I can't say now I'm not feeling more sympathy with the latter. Or...that I'm wonderin' whether chaos is really the way to go at all."

"Well...that's a big matter to think over, and not one I suppose you have to decide right now. The important thing is, I suppose, to realize that, while logic may have its uses, it's not the only thing to go by."

"Yeah. And I suppose I know that, really. It's just...like I said, it's new to me. I guess by the time we get to the Path of Politics, I'll be okay."

"You sure, Claw?"

"Yeah...I'm pretty sure. Eh, I suppose I had you worried for nothing."

"I hope you're right."

"Eh, don't worry. I'll be fine."

The wall to their right opened to the gate through which the Path of Politics led inward to the Ring of Understanding.

"Well, here we are," Claw said. "And what does your compass say, Kel?"

She opened it and looked down at it and was not surprised by what she saw. "Inward. He went on. To the Ring of Understanding."

"S'pose we'd all kind of expected that by now, hadn't we? All right, then. I suppose we follow."

"You sure you're ready for it, Claw?"

"Still thinkin' about what I said about likin' it here too much?" He laughed. "Yeah. I'm ready. This was new to me, and it was bracing at first, but...well, I do like the broadening of my horizons, but I'm not so stuck on it that I can't move on to see what else the city has to offer."

"Good. What about you, Selburn?"

He nodded. "I'm ready. I told you that. I want to see what else the city has to offer, too."

"Good." She started forward, the others with her...but a quartet of cornugon guards swooped down from the top of the walls and blocked the road in front of her, brandishing their maces menacingly.

"Step back," the largest of the cornugons said, and ran a tongue over its pointed teeth.

Keliander briefly stopped to wonder whether, with all her concern over Claw and Selburn, she had failed to really analyze whether *she herself* was ready to move on but no; she was sure the Ring of Logic didn't have that much attraction for her. "Is there a problem?" she asked.

"Not a problem if no one tries to go where they shouldn't. Most of you are free to go through. *She* isn't ready yet."

As it spoke the last sentence, the cornugon pointed its large mace directly at O'Ale.

"That's ridiculous," O'Ale said. "I have the greatest respect and understanding for logic. Perhaps more so than anyone else here."

"Maybe that's the problem, O'Ale," Claw said. "Remember, the point of the rings isn't to get respect for what they represent. It's to overcome its temptation to avoid giving in to them too much."

"That's ridiculous. Logic isn't a temptation. It's it's the best guide through life."

"Then why is there a Ring of Logic? You follow the pattern, and if it's like the other rings the point is to see when *not* to let logic be your only guide. You're good at seeing patterns; you ought to figure that out."

"I refuse to accept that. If the baatezu expect me to dismiss logic, then then they're being entirely illogical."

"O'Ale can be very stubborn," Hailephon said sadly. "I'm afraid it may take some time for her to be ready to pass on, if she ever is. You have an assassin to catch. We cannot wait for her."

"You won't *need* to wait for me. I'm coming."

O'Ale stepped forward toward the gate, but the cornugons moved to block her way. When she continued on, they grabbed her limbs, physically restraining her.

"Hailephon's right," Selburn said. "We'd better get going."

"Wait," O'Ale said. "I'm sure I can convince these cornugons of their error."

But the others were already going through the gate. The guards did nothing to impede them

"Farewell, O'Ale," Hailephon said, turning before she left the Ring of Logic entirely. "I hope that eventually you may yet follow. But we will see what we will see."

And then she turned back and followed Keliander and the others, and the last Keliander heard of O'Ale was her plaintive wail of "But this doesn't make *sense!*"

v. The Path of Politics

"Oh, there are others to blame than just Kurlamber, of course," Nemera said silkily. "Others who also must be punished."

Perrish hadn't been listening to the conversation between Nemera and Lady Terial, but on hearing this she perked to attention. This sounded ominous...

"And just who are you suggesting?"

"Oh, well, his guards were lax, weren't they? Something should be done...an example made...and of course...Kurlamber has to have *help*. There should be an investigation."

"Perhaps you're right."

"Of course I'm right. It's all too easy to find *one* guilty party. The problem is, it *never* ends there. There's always someone else behind them. And until you find that someone else...until you get to the root...it isn't over."

Perrish glanced at Ilxax, who was busy looking over some documents and apparently hadn't heard the conversation. Which was lucky, in a way, because Ilxax, while a very good man, tended sometimes to be a bit impetuous, and might have said something not entirely wise from a diplomatic point of view. Still...this conversation was treading on dangerous ground. Perhaps it would be better to stop it somehow.

Then Ilxax came out of the office brandishing a letter. Perrish glanced over it briefly and saw her way out. Letter in hand, she started stepping toward the Martyr and the Guvner.

"Now how long is *she* going to be staying here?" Ilxax whispered to her. "Is she really intent on staying until Kurlamber's caught?"

Perrish glanced at the other two, but if either of them had heard him they didn't react. "Apparently, yes," she whispered back. "I don't particularly like it either, but we'll have to make the best of it. For the sake of faction relations."

Ilxax nodded glumly, and Perrish continued on to where Nemera and Terial were sitting.

"Of course I want to do everything possible to make sure that those responsible for my brother's death are prevented from perpetrating another such act," Terial said, "and "

Perrish cleared her throat, though it really wasn't necessary. Nemera had seen her coming, and Terial had noticed the movement of Nemera's head and had likewise looked up and stopped talking.

"I thought you'd like to know the latest news."

"Of course," Lady Terial said. "That's why I'm here. I asked to be apprised of any new developments

as soon as they occurred."

"Well, this one just occurred. They've followed the assassin into the sixth ring."

"The sixth ring? So far? And are they actually making any progress."

"Here, Lady Terial. Perhaps you'd like to read the letter for yourself."

"Thank you."

As Terial bent over the letter, Perrish glanced at Nemera. The Guvner was looking up at her with a smug, oily smile, one that gave her the uncomfortable feeling that Nemera knew perfectly well that Perrish had intentionally interrupted his conversation with Terial and that, Perrish notwithstanding, Nemera had every intention of picking up the threads of the conversation at his earliest opportunity.

IV. The Ring of Understanding

Of all the rings of the City of Man Keliander had seen so far, the Ring of Understanding had the largest buildings. Not every building, of course; there were a few small inns and shops nestled between the lofty edifices. But those lofty edifices, all different in design but all looking quite majestic and important, certainly stood out.

Supposing that she might as well see immediately what the great buildings were about, she went to the nearest one almost as soon as she entered the ring. And what it was was something she supposed, given the nature of the ring, she should probably have expected. It was a library.

Selburn's eyes lit up when he saw it. "Imagine what there must be here, Keliander! If they have the amount of knowledge collected here as they did sensations in the first ring, or...or emotions in the fourth...there must be *so* much here to learn!"

"Careful, Selburn," Keliander said. "I was afraid of losing you in the last ring when you seemed too caught up in logic. I don't want to lose you here either."

"But we can't *not* take advantage of this! There may be so much here that's worth our while to learn, that could help the Harmonium's cause! We may even be able to learn more about the city that could help us in our pursuit of Kurlamber. You know I've been asking a lot of questions about the City of Man. Well, here...maybe here are the answers!"

"Do you really think it's worth our time to pore over a lot of old books?"

"I don't know that we can afford *not* to. Remember, we have to take the tests to pass them."

Keliander sighed. "As I recall, O'Ale was the last person to say that, and look what happened to her. For that matter, Aebre was the *first* to say it, and she didn't make it past the Ring of Desire."

"Yeah, but...but they were *right*, weren't they? Look. We're gaining on Kurlamber. We'll get him.

But we *won't* get him if he makes it to the next ring and we don't, and we won't make it to the next ring if we don't do our best to really take in the lesson of this one."

"Could be he has a point, Kel," Claw said. "And there *may* be some useful dark we can find out here. I've never been what you'd call bookish, but I wouldn't mind havin' a skeg o' some o' the matter here meself. Though...I think you may be right to be worried about Selburn here. He may be gettin' a mite

too excited over this, it's true. Still, we won't make the next ring if we don't take in the lesson o' this one."

"I concur," said Hailephon. "With the point about making use of the libraries, at least. As to Selburn's danger, I'm less convinced of that. I think he may have more in him than you're giving him credit for. But yes...I certainly would not like to pass up a chance to look over some of the lore here. There are certainly many matters I would like to learn more about, and this seems an excellent chance to do so. In fact, I'm afraid that if you do decide to press on I shall have to hang back. My quest is the pilgrimage to the center of the city, learning all the lessons along the way, and so I certainly cannot skip this city's lesson."

Keliander sighed. "All right, all right. We'll check out the libraries along the way, I suppose. Maybe you're right; maybe it is necessary for progression. But I just know I'll be *incredibly* glad when we've finally caught Kurlamber and this is all over."

"Seriously, Keliander, don't worry about me. In the last ring, sure, I was interested in learning more about logic, but I knew there was more to real knowledge than that, and I was able to move on, right? Well, the same here. Sure, I want to study up, learn more about the city, but there's more to really comprehending things than just book-learning."

But, as it turned out, there *was* more to the libraries than just "book-learning". Keliander supposed she should have expected that; it was called the Ring of Understanding, after all, not the Ring of Knowledge. There were plenty of books, to be sure...but there were also countless helpful librarians who were eager to help the reader put things in context, to connect concepts, to understand what lay *behind* the words on the printed pages.

And, for that matter, there was more to the Ring of Understanding than just the libraries. The first large building they had entered had happened to be a library, but not all of them were. There were also museums, which had curators who functioned much as the librarians in the libraries, helping guide visitors to a full understanding of what they were seeing. Though the museum exhibits already were very helpful to understanding, as they were more than static objects to be looked at and not touched. Visitors were *encouraged* to touch them, to manipulate them, to do with them whatever they needed to to understand them to the fullest. The curators didn't seem at all bothered by the possibility that their exhibits would be damaged or stained; they were interested only in making sure all the visitors had the best understanding possible of what they were. That went for all the exhibits from fragile devices of exotic manufacture, designed to serve a variety of esoteric purposes; to the assorted magic items and even a few artifacts that another museum had on display; to the museums where the exhibits were living organisms, some of them intelligent, that willingly let themselves be put on display and be felt, fondled, and manipulated by visitors seeking to understand their anatomy. Some of the creatures in this last museum were even cut open but magically kept alive, and the visitors were encouraged to touch,

squeeze, and examine their internal organs. Keliander didn't want to spend too much time in that museum, but Claw seemed fascinated.

And then there were the spas. That was perhaps the best word for them, but they weren't really like any other spas Keliander had seen. They were buildings full of rooms that seemed designed to be nondescript. Some of them were filled with fluid, others with mist, others empty but with egg-shaped, featureless walls that seemed to go out to infinity even when the rooms were really only a few yards long. These rooms, the attendants explained, were for *meditation*. And there was maybe something in the fluid and the mist, or maybe in the music or stranger sounds that played in some of the rooms, or, maybe most likely, some sort of ambient magical effect, that really made the meditation effective. When she sat in those rooms, she really felt like she was learning about herself, exploring her body and her mind and her inner workings and motivations in ways she never had before.

It was in the spas, in fact, that Keliander and Claw spent most of their time in the Ring of Understanding, when they weren't eating or sleeping or tracking Kurlamber. Though they did visit the occasional library or museum, they spent many hours in the spas, together, exploring themselves and each other. Hailephon, on the other hand, while she occasionally visited the spas and museums, devoted most of her time to the libraries. And Selburn divided his time between the libraries and museums more or less equally, spending only a little time in the spas.

As for Kurlamber, he was still ahead of them, counter-clockwise around the ring, and from the direction the compass showed Keliander thought they were keeping very close behind him, if not actually catching up much. He seemed to anticipate their actions to some degree, however; the one day that Keliander had decided to push on without visiting any of the buildings, in hope of catching Kurlamber in one great rush, he too had pushed on, moving farther that day than he had any of the previous days. He seemed to be intentionally keeping just a few steps ahead of them, never letting himself get close enough to be caught, but never making any attempt to gain on them either. That worried Keliander; he seemed to be up to something. If he really wanted to escape them, why not just keep moving as fast as he could? Granted, perhaps he too had to experience the full potential of the Ring of Understanding before he could pass further inward, but the fact that he *had* moved at full speed the day that Keliander's party had also done so seemed to suggest he knew what they were doing. Which was bad, because it meant not only that it would be harder to catch up with him, but that when they did catch up with him he was likely to be prepared for them.

But they kept following his trail around the ring, with the aid of the compass, occasionally splitting up during the day to follow their separate interests in their studies though Keliander and Claw usually stayed together, and Selburn was often either with them or with Hailephon and meeting again to compare notes and plan the next day. Finally the day came that the Way of Philosophy was in sight... and as Keliander had expected, the needle swung to indicate that Kurlamber had taken it. He was farther inward now. In the Ring of the Body.

"So he's in the next ring, then?" Claw said, peering at the compass over Keliander's shoulder.

"Looks like it. I guess we should tell the others."

"Right. It was about time we were going to be meeting up anyway."

They went first to the library where Selburn was doing his reading, but as soon as they entered the lobby and before they went to look for him among the shelves the young aasimar came running out to meet them.

"Keliander!" Selburn said excitedly. "I *understand* now!"

"You understand what?"

"The city. I mean, not everything about it. Not its full purpose; not what happens at the center. But at least I understand more about it than I did."

"So what is it in particular that you think you understand now?"

"Oh, I don't *think* I understand. I'm sure of it. There're plenty of pieces of independent evidence backing each other up...I've got no doubt about what I've learned. Well...maybe it's dangerous to have *no* doubt. But in any case, I've very little."

"All right, Selburn. Let's hear it. What have you learned?"

"It's about the inhabitants. Remember back when someone said I think it may have been you that maybe the visitors who stayed too long became inhabitants?"

"I don't know that that was a serious suggestion. Just more of a guess, really."

"Maybe, but it was a *right* guess. That's *exactly* what happens. You stick around too long in the same ring, and you're considered a resident of the city. You're not a visitor anymore; now you live here. And yes, that's where the people who run the shops come from, the bashers who look like they've been here forever and are here to stay. That old woman in the first ring, the one you had me give a silver to...I'm sure she was a visitor to the city, once, too. But she stayed too long. And now...she's here for good."

Keliander hadn't thought of the old woman since they left the Ring of Sensation. She remembered something in the back of her mind about a supposed prophecy the old woman had spoken, and for some reason it bothered her. But now wasn't the time to think of that.

"So when you become a resident of the city, the goods are no longer free for you," Keliander said tentatively. "You have to start working for them."

"Oh, yes...as I said, the residents run the shops and services, though I suppose the baatezu probably provide them somehow with raw materials. But the residents can't stay at the inns for free, and eat for free, and so on, like visitors do. They have to pay their own way. Well...I suppose it depends on how they live. I guess the residents of the Ring of Purity don't really have anything to pay for, if they just sleep outside and eat fruit. But anything that you'd have to pay for in another city, but that visitors can get for free here...the residents have to pay for it like anywhere else."

"So, stay here too long and the stuff's not free anymore," Keliander said. "Makes sense, really. I mean, the baatezu wouldn't want people just sponging off their uh, their hospitality, for lack of a better word indefinitely."

"Oh, but there's more to it than that. The visitors, they're free to come and go as they want. They can leave the city, and nobody's going to bother them. The residents they're stuck here. They *belong* to the city now, and if they try to leave the baatezu hunt them down and bring them back. They can pass freely between the rings, at least between those rings they've already reached but they can't leave the city without the Alasta's permission, and even then they can only leave for a limited time at once."

"So once you're a resident of the City of Man, you're stuck here forever."

"More or less. Oh...a resident can become a visitor again, if he manages to go inward to a new ring he hasn't been to before. But I gather that hardly ever happens. Once a sod's been stuck enough on a ring's lesson to become a resident of the city, it's not likely he's ever going to learn it."

"Hm."

"So how long does it take to become a resident?" Claw broke in. "How long do you have to be stuck for?"

"I don't think there's a set amount of time. I think you just become a resident when the baatezu know you're not going to make any progress."

"How do they decide that?" Keliander asked.

"I don't know. The same way they know when a person's not ready for the next ring, I guess. They just *know*. Like I said, I haven't figured out *all* the secrets of the City of Man yet."

"So Aebre... Will... O'Ale... they're all going to be stuck here forever now?"

"Maybe. Not necessarily. I don't know. It depends on...on what their prospects are of making further progress, I guess. Maybe they're just delayed, and maybe they'll go on eventually, or maybe they'll give up and leave the city before it's too late. But maybe...well, I don't think there's any way for us to know."

"I have to admit I wouldn't mind seein' O'Ale get stuck here, but Will seemed a good enough kid, and Aebre...well, she has her moments, but she don't deserve *this*..." Claw sighed. "Eh, even O'Ale I can't really wish it on. I hope they all get out of it."

"Maybe they will. Like I said, I don't know."

"But you seem to have a pretty good handle on things. What do you *think*?"

Selburn hesitated. "Well...as I said, I don't really know."

"I'm not askin' what you know. I'm askin' for your opinion."

"Well...based on what I know of them, and what I now know of the city...I don't think any of them are going anywhere. O'Ale...I see her protesting a lot at first, trying to bully her way through, but eventually...eventually accepting her place, even enjoying it, seeing herself as fitting in so well in the Ring of Logic that she can't imagine ever having lived anywhere else. Will...I don't like to say it, but I don't see him moving on, either. I don't see him necessarily staying forever as focused on the self as he is now. He really did seem to care for that genasi Marla, was it? Maybe in time he'll admit there's a place for some desire. I think he will. I think maybe she'll even come to the Ring of Purity and join him the images from the Mirrors of Yearning *can* travel between the rings to follow those who long for them; Terasine was telling the truth about that. But even if Will softens that much in his desire for purity...I don't see him bending enough to leave the ring. I think all that'll mean is that he and his Marla will both be stuck in the Ring of Purity forever."

"Can't they go back to the outer rings?" Keliander asked.

"They can, but why would they? If Will's so set on purity, he's going to stay right there. But then...if Marla's with him, I suppose he may not be unhappy."

"What about Aebre?" Claw asked.

"Well...she wasn't with us as long, so it's harder for me to say not that I can claim to have known Will or O'Ale all that well, either, of course. But from her attitude as we were leaving the Ring of Desire...and from what I now know about how the rings work...well, I really don't think you're going to be seeing her outside the City of Man any time soon, either."

"No offense, cutter, but I really hope you're wrong."

"So do I. Anyway, these are just my opinions. As I said, I don't know for sure."

They were all silent for a while, until finally Keliander spoke.

"Huh, well...if people *do* get stuck in the city, I guess that lends some more strength to that trap-the-

tanar'ri theory you were telling us about back in the Ring of Emotion, Gamlin."

"Oh, that could be *part* of it, but I'm sure that's not all of it," Selburn said. "It's like you said before, Keliander the City of Man could serve multiple purposes at once. It could be that, *and* to promote law, *and*...whatever happens to people who get to the center."

"And you still don't know that."

"No. What happens to people who get to the center, I still have no idea. I suppose they're then free to travel all the rings the city as much as they want...but beyond that..."

"An' that's assumin' they still exist as...well, as what they were," Claw said. "That they don't get turned into baatezu or nothin', I mean."

"Oh, I don't think that's likely," Selburn said. "Not that they get turned into baatezu. Then again, I suppose it's not completely *impossible*..."

"So what do you think happens?"

"I don't know. I don't I do have some *guesses*, though."

"Like what?"

"Well, if the City of Man is supposed to remove the character flaws that hold you down, there's a big one that it misses. One that, maybe even, it *encourages* in those that run the rings."

"What do you mean?"

"Pride. That's what I mean. We've all felt it, haven't we? Be honest. *Oh, I got to the sixth ring. Oh, so few people make it this far. Most people can't even get past the first ring or two. I'm so much better than all of them.*"

"I don't know that I was thinking that, precisely," Keliander temporized.

"You weren't proud you'd gotten so much farther than most people? That you've shown yourself made of sterner stuff?"

"Well...maybe a little, I guess. But "

"In fact, Keliander, I still remember back in the Ring of Emotion. As I recall, you numbered pride among the *good* emotions."

"Well...it's pleasant, isn't it? But I recognize it isn't always healthy...I don't think the Ring of Emotions was very healthy in general."

"And pride is certainly associated with the baatezu. It's a favorite tool of the Lords of the Nine to tempt mortals. If they can appeal to a mortal's pride, they've got a big hold over them."

"So what does this have to do with the City of Man?"

"See, maybe that's the thing. The farther you go in, the...the more you're standing out. The more you're proving yourself to be, well, *stronger*, in a way, than all those people who didn't make it so far. And the fact a berk keeps going means he believes he's stronger yet. The fact he tries to make it to the center means he believes there's at least a possibility that he's one of those very, very few with the stuff to make it there. And...it seems to me there's a lot of pride involved there."

"I don't think pride is the same thing as self-confidence."

"Maybe not, I guess...but you have to admit sometimes the boundary's pretty thin."

"So you're saying that if someone builds up his pride as he goes inward through the city, by the time he gets to the center he's so full of it that he's easy prey for the baatezu?"

"Well, I'm not sure it's *quite* that simple. But I do think pride might have something to do with it. I'm not quite sure what."

"Besides, we're not aiming for the center of the city to show we're made of great stuff, or anything. We're not aiming there at *all* if we can catch Kurlamber first. We just want to stop an assassin. That's all."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe it *does* matter what you're here for. Or...maybe everything I've said is just a load of screed. After all, like I said, most of this is just guesses. I'm not sure of it. Not yet. It'll need more study."

"Well, we don't have time for more study. We have to go on to catch Kurlamber."

"No...*you* have to go on."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm staying here. There's so much I still have to learn about the city. I want to *understand* the city before I go any farther into it. I want to know what I'm getting into before I reach the center."

"I don't expect we'll be reaching the center at all. I certainly don't think Kurlamber can get there, and even if he's heading there we'll catch him before he reaches it."

"When we'd just entered the city, you said you didn't think Kurlamber would even make it to the second ring. Now he's just made it to the seventh. I'm not that confident that he *won't* make it to the center, and I don't think you are either."

"So...what? We should just let him go? For fear of what's there?"

"If you want to pursue him, that's your decision. Me...I want to learn more about the city first."

"You were just talkin' about the risk of becomin' a resident and gettin' stuck here permanently," Claw said. "Don't you think if you stay here you're running that risk yourself?"

Selburn hesitated. "I don't think I'll be here that long. I just want to learn a little more about the city. I just want to know what I'm getting into. I don't plan to stay here *too* much longer."

"And you're sure you'll be able to tear yourself away?" Keliander challenged him. "You were just lecturing me about the *pride* involved in thinking I could make it to the city center. Aren't you showing some pride in thinking you can stay here conscious of the risks and know when to quit?"

He hesitated again. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps it *is* a risk for me. It may even be prideful of me to think I'll be able to pull myself away before it's too late. You're right; maybe I *will* end up stuck here forever. And I'm not saying I relish that." He looked around the library. "But there's so much here... so much here I want to understand. I...I don't want to leave yet. I'm not *ready* to leave yet. And until I am...I can't leave anyway, can I?"

"Selburn, you wouldn't leave me back in the Ring of Desire. I'm not leaving you here now."

"I seem to recall your being ready to leave *me* in the Ring of Desire."

Keliander winced. "Selburn "

"No, no, please, don't get me wrong; I don't mean that as an attack, or a criticism. I think you were right. And I think you'd be right to leave me now. You have to catch Kurlamber. And I can't go with you."

"I was going to leave you in the Ring of Desire, yes," Keliander said. "But...but that was before we knew the risks. I don't want to see you be stuck in the City of Man forever, Selburn. You don't deserve that. And if you stay here...I'm afraid that's what will happen."

"Keliander. You have to go. You have to catch Kurlamber. As for me...well, even if I *do* end up stuck here forever, I can...at least I can have Terasine with me, thanks to the Mirrors of Yearning. I'm not saying I'd stay here just to be with her. If I still felt that way, I'd never have been able to leave the

Ring of Desire. But...if I *do* end up stuck here, at least I'll have her with me. So..." he smiled wanly..."at least it won't be *all* bad."

"Selburn, how long do you honestly think it would take you to be ready to go?"

"I don't know. Maybe five days. Maybe, as you say, never. You can't afford to wait. Go. *Please*. Either I'll make it out later on my own, after I've learned all I wanted to learn here, if the gods are willing, or...in the worst case, at least I'll have Terasine with me."

"I don't want to leave you here, Selburn."

"You have your duty to the faction, Keliander. Do you have a choice?"

Keliander looked up at him.

"I don't like it either, Kel," Claw said, "but we can't *make* him go with us."

Keliander sighed. "All right. After we've caught Kurlamber, Selburn, I'll be back for you if I can." He smiled. "Thank you, Keliander. And don't worry. I'll be okay. One way or another."

The prolonged conversation with Selburn had, of course, made Claw and Keliander late to their meeting with Hailephon, and the monk was standing there quietly when they arrived. On seeing them, she cocked her head quizzically. "Where is the aasimar?"

Keliander sighed. "Selburn has...decided to stay behind."

Hailephon raised an eyebrow. "He's staying here in the Ring of Understanding?"

"He says he's not ready to go, and he asked me to leave without him."

The githzerai regarded her for a long time, and then nodded. "Well. I can see you are already quite troubled by his decision, and I will not trouble you further by dwelling on it. I wish I had had a chance to bid him farewell. He seemed a good lad, and I saw much potential in him. I would have liked to say a few words of parting."

"I would have liked to not have had to," Keliander said.

"Of course...but you understand what I mean." She looked back at the building Claw and Keliander had come out of, and where Selburn presumably still was. "Still...it could be that we can return this way after the pilgrimage is over. If so, perhaps I will see him then. I would like to speak with him a little further." She turned back to Keliander. "But I said I would not dwell on this now. Let us go on, and see what lies in store for us in the Temptations of the Spirit."

Keliander let Claw hold her arm comfortingly as the two of them followed Hailephon down the Way of Philosophy to the Ring of the Body.

vi. The Way of Philosophy

"So they still haven't caught him?"

Perrish sighed, put down the letter, and turned to Ilxax. "They've pursued him to the Ring of the Body."

"The Ring of the Body? Are they going to chase him all the way to Alasta's Palace?"

"If it comes to that, I suppose they will. But I hope it doesn't come to that."

Nemera's laughter rung out from the main room, barely visible here in the study, and Perrish looked out the window. Nemera and Terial were talking, of course. Perrish hadn't heard the previous part of the conversation, so she didn't know what Nemera was laughing about, but their continued conversations worried her. Terial didn't seem *evil*, just...well, frankly unpleasant. But Nemera...the evil around him was as intense as ever.

Ilxax's brow wrinkled. "I wish she'd leave."

"Nemera, or Lady Terial?"

"Lady Terial. Nemera's a he."

"Is he? I'm not quite sure."

"Actually, neither am I, when it comes down to it."

"I'd rather see Nemera leave than Terial, myself, if I had to choose one or the other," Perrish said.

"Terial, I don't *like*, but Nemera..." She shivered.

"Well, yes, I'd like to see him leave too, but he's not going to," Ilxax said. "Terial might. She has things to do elsewhere."

"True."

Ilxax wet his lips. "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"Just to get something I brought in today. I'd been meaning to use it, and now's as good a time as ever."

As the bladeling left the study, Perrish reread the letter. She hadn't told Ilxax about Selburn's decision to stay behind in the Ring of Understanding. That worried her. That worried her very much. And with Nemera and Terial, she had more than enough to worry about already right here in the Palace of Harmony.

She was rereading the letter for the third or fourth time when Ilxax returned. Perrish looked up at him and saw the bladeling put a large red gem to his eye and look out the window at Nemera and Terial.

Ilxax gasped, and his flesh paled as he lowered his hand.

"Ilxax? What is it?"

Turning away from the window with apparent difficulty, the bladeling passed the gem to Perrish.

"Here. It's a gem of seeing. Look through it at Nemera."

Perrish did as the bladeling had suggested, and frowned deeply.

"I should have known."

What she saw through the gem was a terrible sight. Instead of the effeminate man who had seemed to occupy the chair, what was there was a huge, bloated monstrosity, with tiny wings, a pocked complexion, and horrible long, twisting claws. Nemera's chair faced away from the study, but even from the back Perrish recognized exactly what she was seeing.

A paeliryon.

A baatezu.

VII. The Ring of the Body

"So," Claw said. "It's down to one monk, one Sensate, and one Hardhead. Wonder which of us is goin' to reach the center. My jink's on the monk. 'Course, if I'm right, I guess I won't be around to collect."

"It could be that none of us will reach the center," Hailephon said.

"It could also be that we *all* will," said Keliander. "Let's not be pessimistic."

"Right. Well, three rings to go, at any rate. We're gettin' there. He looked around. "And by Ssendam, ain't this a strange one?"

The Ring of the Body was indeed quite strange. Keliander hadn't really known what to expect before she came here. At first she had expected the Ring of the Body to have to do with physical *feelings*, perhaps with hunger and itching and, well, and the good feelings, satiation and arousal...but no, those were *sensations*, and they had already been covered in the first ring. Then she had thought perhaps it had to do with relying *only* on the body, that its theme would be to avoid relying on separate weapons and items...but no; there had already been people who were trying to do that in the Ring of Purity. Then perhaps the Ring of the Body was about substances that altered the body's balance, about alcohol and pipweed and other narcotics? But no again; she remembered having seen those in the Ring of Sensation, though she hadn't partaken herself, and she supposed that made sense; it was for the *sensation* of being drugged in one way or another, after all, that people took them.

But there certainly seemed to be some focus here on altering the body, if not exactly in that way.

Walking about the ring were some of the strangest creatures Keliander had ever seen. Men and women with six long legs sprouting from their abdomens. With three heads and with tentacles all over their bodies. Joined together into a four-headed, eight-armed thing that clearly had once been four separate individuals. Split apart into a number of small, wormy things that somehow stuck together into a humanoid form. And those were only a few of the more understandable permutations; there were forms much more bizarre, forms like she didn't think would be often seen outside the Far Realm. Not that there weren't ordinary people, too. There were. But most of the ordinary people seemed, from the way they were looking around and from the packs they carried, to be visitors like Keliander and her companions. She wondered how many of the other visitors would end up staying behind in the Ring of the Body. She wondered if any of the three of them would.

"I suppose I can understand the temptation to mold the body however one wishes, if that is what's going on here," Hailephon said, "but I confess it holds little interest to me."

"Wonder if it's reversible," Claw said.

"Gamlin! What are you thinking?"

"Well, I'm thinkin' that if it is we almost have to go through with it, don't we? It's like has been said before, we can't pass the test if we don't take it."

"Gamlin, please, don't say that!"

"Why not? It's the truth, ain't it?"

"Because the last three people to say that have ended up staying behind in the rings where they said it."
"Oh, don't worry, Kel. I ain't gonna stay behind here. Might be fun to try on a different shape for a while, see what it's like to have four arms, or none, but I'm not particularly focused on the body. I'm an artist, an' art's up here in the brain-box, it is. Oh, it may take some measure of coordination to get the brush or the chisel to go where you want it to, but that's not the point of it. That's just a tool to get out in the physical world what you've already got up in the head. If anyone knows there's more to life than just the body, it's an artist, an' I may not be no phenomenon famous across the planes, but I guess I'm enough of an artist to at least know that much."

"I hope you're right. I really don't want to lose you here."

"Hey, trust me, Kel. Some of the earlier rings did tempt me, I admit, but here...we'll just see what it's like and move on."

"Again, I think the chaond is correct," Hailephon said. "We *do* have to experience what's here to fully run the gauntlet. I admit I'm not particularly fond of the idea of...of being reshaped, if that is indeed what's going on here...but perhaps it is something we need to experience if we are to progress."

"Oh...oh, fine. I'm sorry. It's just...I just *really* want to catch Kurlamber and be done with this; I don't like the distractions. But you're right. It may be necessary."

"Come on, then," Claw said. "Let's ask one of the local oddities how things work here."

It turned out Claw's guess had been right; there *was* actual physical modification of bodies going on here, some of it magical and some surgical, and it was or most of it was reversible, though the former more than the latter. That wasn't all that went on here, however. There were also gymnasias, where people could and did work to hone their bodies by more natural means. And at one point they ran across a monodrone or something that *looked* like a monodrone, though based on the way it was acting Keliander was really sure it was some other creature that had decided to take on monodrone form pacing the streets calling out something about spare bodies. When Keliander had approached it to ask exactly what it was going on about, the pseudo-monodrone had explained that it sold temporary duplicate bodies; that with its services you could find out something about what it was like to exist in two bodies at once or three, or even more. Claw had made some remark about a two-person orgy that had made Keliander blush for, as far as she remembered, the first time since she was a girl, and they had left the monodrone to continue its rounds, Keliander making some noncommittal remark about perhaps looking up its services later, though having of course no intention of actually doing so.

"If we're going to get in on the body-changing," Keliander said, after they had investigated enough to know more or less how things worked on this ring and where they could go to be modified if they chose to, "let's put it off till tomorrow. Today, let's press on as quickly as we can and see if we can get lucky and catch Kurlamber."

"Well, I do think it'd be interesting, but I'm not in any particular hurry," Claw said. "Tomorrow I suppose it is, then."

But, inevitably, Kurlamber stayed ahead of them, apparently having also chosen that day to press on quickly, heightening Keliander's misgivings. They stopped for the night, and after asking around briefly found an inn. There really weren't many buildings here, now that Keliander thought of it; more than in the Ring of Purity, but fewer than in any of the other rings of the first two trios. There was plenty of open space, plenty of grass and greenery and wide plazas and squares. She supposed that it had to do with fewer people reaching the Ring of the Body. Even with the fact that it was already smaller than the other rings, it didn't require as many buildings to serve its population.

The cheerful innkeeper, who looked something like an ursinal but enough unlike one that especially given the locale Keliander was certain he wasn't one, or hadn't been one originally, led them back to a pair of rooms, one for Keliander and Claw and one for Hailephon.

As the innkeeper turned to leave, Keliander tapped him on the shoulder.

"Yes? Something wrong?"

"Did the bed just move?"

"Yeah, it does that. Just makes it all the more comfortable. Like a massage when you're sleeping."

"Is it *alive*?"

"Course it is. That bed used to be a tiefling, as I recall. Maybe will be again someday, if he decides to. Don't worry; he ain't here against his will. All the furniture is here voluntarily."

"All the furniture? It's *all* alive?"

"Sure it is." He thumped the wall. "The building too."

"It looks like stone."

"Looks like it, an' maybe it is now, but it was flesh once, an' maybe will be again if it decides to. That's the way things work here. All the buildings are just people formed into walls an' such."

"All the buildings? Really?"

He laughed. "Well, no, not really *all* of 'em. But a lot of 'em are, and you can't always tell by looking which is which. At least here they've chosen to *look* like ordinary furniture. If that disturbs you, you don't want to try the place down the way where the furniture *looks* and *feels* like flesh and limbs."

"No...that's okay. I guess we'll stay here for tonight."

"Oh, almost wherever you go here, you'll be in contact with somethin' that used to be human or humanoid, an' maybe will be again someday. Even the trees and the grass...well, most of 'em are ordinary trees and grass, but a few of 'em ain't. You know?"

"Right. Thanks."

The innkeeper nodded, and left. Keliander started to sit down on the bed, then thought better of it and stood back up.

"You okay, Kel? Sure you want to stay here?"

She sighed. "You heard what he said. Anywhere else we stay in this ring is likely to be just as bad."

"I couldn't help hearing your conversation," Hailephon said, entering Keliander's and Claw's room. "I wouldn't worry. He did say all the furniture was here voluntarily. You won't be hurting anything."

"No, but...it still feels *weird*." She looked at the bed. "Why would anyone voluntarily *want* to become a piece of furniture?"

The bed moved its sideboards in a way that somewhat resembled a shrug.

"I wasn't talking to you," Keliander told it.

"Well, like he said, it's not permanent," Claw said. "Maybe they just want to...see what it's like for a while."

The bed nodded its headboard.

"People want a lot of strange things," Hailephon said. "If this ring is all about people experiencing all they can with their bodies...then it's evident that can take some very strange forms."

"Anyway, it's gettin' late. Let's hit the sack." Claw turned to the bed. "You won't mind, right?"

The bed shook its headboard and threw off its covers invitingly.

Hailephon smiled as she went back to her own room

"I'm going to be *so* glad to get out of here," Keliander said as she got into the bed. She stiffened as it

moved underneath her, then tentatively eased herself in.

Claw undressed and followed her in, and was asleep almost immediately. Keliander couldn't stop thinking about the fact that they were sleeping on a living person in altered form, and didn't manage to get to sleep for several hours, though eventually she did drop off.

The next day, though, when she and Claw did try out the body modifications, Keliander found that the experience was much more interesting and less unpleasant than she had anticipated. They spent much of the first day as two vines, their tendrils intertwined, and the next as deer that bounded across the swards. The third day, on Claw's insistence, they each spent as a pile of slugs, the slugs from each of them crawling over each other and intermingling. Keliander had tried that only with great reluctance, and only after Claw had begged and promised the next three days to do whatever she wanted, but once she got past the psychological ickiness of the concept, she actually found that existence as a pile of slugs was surprisingly enjoyable. There was something oddly satisfying in the squelchy way the slugs adhered slightly to each other and came apart again, and the pressure as they slithered all over each other seemed at times nearly erotic.

The fourth day, they went to one of the gymnasia. Claw had mentioned wanting to go to one of those before, and although he protested that based on his promise of the previous day they should do something that day that *she* wanted, Keliander had simply told him that this *was* what she had decided she wanted that day, and he would have to go along with it. Truthfully, though, of course, she was going there for his sake, and she thought he knew it. To Keliander, who had long followed a strict exercise regimen as part of her training in the Harmonium, the gymnasium offered little new. Claw, though, hadn't been as disciplined in his exercise, and while he certainly wasn't in *bad* shape his arms were muscular enough, and he had well-defined pectoral muscles he did have a little bit of a paunch, and it was clear that visits to gymnasia weren't a regular part of his life, and this would be something new to him.

It offered, in fact, something new even to her, though to a lesser extent. She had certainly been exercising regularly for much of her life, but here there were exercises that she hadn't seen before, and that seemed to work out muscles and stretch tendons that she hadn't known existed. She didn't feel as sore as Claw looked after the exercise session, based on the ginger and slightly hunched way he walked after they were done, but she was certainly more so than she had expected to be.

Of course, they worked their way around the ring in pursuit of Kurlamber he was going clockwise now, opposite his direction in the Ring of Understanding and Hailephon stayed near them at night and met with them for meals, though she went her own way during most of the day. Based on what she spoke of while they ate, she had been focusing on experiencing body modifications, and had been largely unimpressed, though she had enjoyed the sensation of flight when she was given wings, and she'd also liked the experience of being a long-legged quadruped that could canter across the fields with

stupendous speed. By the fifth day, the githzerai hadn't tried the gymnasium, since she, like Keliander, had been used to regular exercise anyway, and didn't see that there was anything new there to experience but Keliander had told her of her own experience, and that there might be some exercises she was unused to, and Hailephon had said she would try it. And when they met again that night, she admitted that she, too, had found some ways to exercise in the gymnasia here that she hadn't experienced before.

"Gamlin," Keliander said one day, when the two of them were experiencing what it was like to have the bodies of hollyphants, "there's something I realized back in the Ring of Understanding that I'd been wanting to talk to you about."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Actually, it has to do with what you said back in the Ring of Purity. About...about your admiring me for being able to overcome my fiendish blood."

"That still holds, you know, Kel. Even if you don't look very fiendish right now." He smiled, quirking up the edges of the base of his trunk.

"You also spoke then about your worry that you couldn't overcome your own blood, that you were chaotic because you were a chaond and not because of yourself."

"Yeah...yeah. I still wonder that sometimes."

"Isn't being a chaond part of who you are?"

"Well, yeah, but...I mean, it shouldn't *define* it."

"Does it define it?"

"Well, is being a tiefling part of who *you* are?"

Keliander looked down at her diminutive elephantine body. "Well...not right now. But yes. I think it is. It comes with barriers to overcome, but yes, it *is* a part of who I am. My being good doesn't mean I've stopped being a tiefling."

"Well, no, but you did have to overcome what came with it."

"I think what your question really comes down to is, would you still be chaotic if you weren't a chaond?"

"Well, I guess..."

"But, Gamlin, I don't know if that question is really meaningful. If you weren't a chaond, you wouldn't be *you*."

"I'm not a chaond right now, and I'm still me, ain't I?" He sighed. "But no. I know what you mean. And maybe you're right. Only...only I still can't help but wonder whether, you know, whether I *ought* to be chaotic, whether I *ought* to give in to what I am."

"That's why you came to the City of Man, Gamlin, isn't it? You thought if you ran the rings you might become lawful, and overcome your heritage?"

"Heh. You really did take a lesson from the Ring of Understanding, didn't you? You know, I don't think I was really even admitting that to myself, at first, but...yeah, really, I think that *is* why I came here. Part of it, at least. But a very large part."

"Do you still think that?"

"Well...I think it's already happening, to some degree. I already said back in the Ring of Logic that I was thinkin' maybe chaos wasn't all it was cracked up to be, I think. Now, I still don't know. I think maybe I *have* become more lawful by runnin' the rings than I started out, though I don't think I'm all the way there yet." He laughed briefly and mirthlessly. "Maybe there's somethin' to the idea that the City

of Man is supposed to make sods lawful, eh?"

"Maybe."

"Why are you bringing this up, anyway?"

"Does it bother you?"

"No...I guess not. Not really. Not comin' from you. I was just wondering what brought it on."

"I'm not sure. Except that I wanted to tell you that...whatever happens, and whether you change or whether you stay the chaotic chaond you always were...I'll still care for you."

He smiled again. "Thanks, Kel. I appreciate that."

Despite their delays to experience the trials of the ring, Keliander and her companions still seemed to be doing a good job of keeping up with Kurlamber. He seemed to be taking the very long way around, and Keliander allowed herself to be hopeful that he wasn't going in to the next ring after all. He'd already passed the Route of Judgment, the Boulevard of Wisdom; if he passed on by

Religious Avenue

he would end up going full-circle around the ring. Now he was again less than a day ahead, and

Religious Avenue

was only a few days' travel off.

And then those few days were over, and it was there. Keliander looked at her compass.

"According to this, he should be right down the avenue, toward the Ring of the Mind..."

She was cut off by something jumping down on her from a rooftop, knocking her to the ground and briefly cutting off her breath. She saw the glint of a knife, and managed to roll over and throw off her attacker. To her surprise, she saw that it was Kurlamber, though he hadn't come from the direction the compass had indicated. There was no time to deliberate on that, however, because he was coming at her with his knife, and she thought there was a very good chance that the black stuff dripping from it was more deathblade poison.

She dodged her attack and drew her own sword. Kurlamber reared back the knife to throw it, but Hailephon kicked him from behind, and he turned on her and stabbed at her with the knife instead. It nicked her robe, but didn't look like it had penetrated to her flesh. Then Claw drew his own knife, which till now Keliander hadn't seen him take out of its sheath in the City of Man except to cut his food, and he moved in to help fight the assassin as well.

Keliander had her own sword drawn now; she wanted to take the assassin alive, if at all possible, but the more important thing was just to *take* him, and do so before he could turn invisible or *dimension door* away. Her swing took him solidly in the side, and while he was apparently wearing some armor underneath his clothing that softened the blow somewhat it still had obviously hurt him, the more so thanks to its enchantment that made it burn hot when fighting evil creatures as which the half-fiend

assassin surely qualified.

Despite his apparent pain, Kurlamber smiled toothily. "What, letting your friends fight with you? Three against one. That's hardly fair."

"You strike from the shadows, and poison the innocent," Keliander said, as she parried the assassin's dagger blow. "You're hardly one to talk about fighting fair."

"Still, though, I'd have expected better from you."

"My mission is to bring you to justice and to stop you from hurting more of the innocent," Keliander said. "I'll do what it takes, within the law, to do that. And I don't see anything wrong with having a few friends fight with me."

The assassin had managed to wound Claw once with his dagger, and Keliander tossed him one of her remaining potions of *remove poison*. Claw had gotten in a few good blows of his own, and the monk had proven herself a capable combatant against the half-fiend as well. One wing crumpled, a tooth broken, Kurlamber definitely seemed to be coming off the worst in this fight.

But he was still smiling.

And then he disappeared.

Cursing, Keliander consulted her compass. It still pointed toward the gate.

"Over here," Kurlamber called from across the road, however, and Keliander looked up in time to see another arrow flying at her from his bow. It caught her in the shoulder, and she took out the last of her potions of *remove poison*, then thought better of it and decided to save it for the end of the fight, in case she was poisoned again or Hailephon or Claw seemed to need it worse than she did. Probably there was somewhere in the city she could get more potions anyway, if she needed them. She hoped there was.

The githzerai and the chaond were already running toward the assassin, Hailephon snatching his next arrow out of the air as they came. He dodged back into the shadows, and Keliander looked again at her compass, which still pointed toward the gate. By now, though, she was distrustful of it, and looked around carefully, spotting the assassin hiding in the shadows further up the street just as he let loose another arrow.

"Look out!" she called to Hailephon, but the monk again snatched the arrow from the air before it connected. Now Claw ran toward the assassin, knife at the ready, but Kurlamber had melted into the shadows again.

Keliander sheathed her sword and drew her bow, thinking the assassin was more likely to appear at a distance again. She kept an eye out, knowing he could reappear anywhere, knowing he could very well be invisible or have altered his appearance to look like someone completely different...and found that the last was indeed the case, when what had looked like a nondescript water genasi on the near side of the road suddenly drew back an arrow and fired. This time Hailephon failed to catch it, but the arrow missed her anyway, thudding into a building nearby. The assassin disappeared again into the shadows; Keliander kept her bow at the ready, kept watching...

...And this time the assassin appeared right next to her. Without really thinking about what she was doing, Keliander stepped back and fired an arrow, and it went right through the assassin's shoulder and pinned him to the wall. Kurlamber cried out, dropping his bow, and Keliander had her sword back out and at his throat.

"Gotcha," she said. "You're coming with us."

Despite everything, Kurlamber still smiled. "By all means do whatever you like with this body," he said. "It's dissolving in an hour or two anyway."

"Dissolving? What do you "

"This is just a temporary duplicate body I acquired recently, you see. The real me is over there by the gate."

At first Keliander was sure this was a trick, then remembered the compass and realized that would explain its apparent unreliability. Claw by now had arrived by her side, and she let him cover the assassin with his knife while she looked around the corner to check.

Indeed, there was Kurlamber the real Kurlamber, apparently , and he saluted her, grinning, and ran off down the road.

Keliander growled in frustration, and turned back.

"He's right. The real Kurlamber just went to the Ring of the Mind. And we're going after him."

VII. The Ring of the Body

"So," Claw said. "It's down to one monk, one Sensate, and one Hardhead. Wonder which of us is goin' to reach the center. My jink's on the monk. 'Course, if I'm right, I guess I won't be around to collect."

"It could be that none of us will reach the center," Hailephon said.

"It could also be that we *all* will," said Keliander. "Let's not be pessimistic."

"Right. Well, three rings to go, at any rate. We're gettin' there. He looked around. "And by Ssendam, ain't this a strange one?"

The Ring of the Body was indeed quite strange. Keliander hadn't really known what to expect before she came here. At first she had expected the Ring of the Body to have to do with physical *feelings*, perhaps with hunger and itching and, well, and the good feelings, satiation and arousal...but no, those were *sensations*, and they had already been covered in the first ring. Then she had thought perhaps it had to do with relying *only* on the body, that its theme would be to avoid relying on separate weapons and items...but no; there had already been people who were trying to do that in the Ring of Purity.

Then perhaps the Ring of the Body was about substances that altered the body's balance, about alcohol and pipweed and other narcotics? But no again; she remembered having seen those in the Ring of Sensation, though she hadn't partaken herself, and she supposed that made sense; it was for the *sensation* of being drugged in one way or another, after all, that people took them.

But there certainly seemed to be some focus here on altering the body, if not exactly in that way.

Walking about the ring were some of the strangest creatures Keliander had ever seen. Men and women with six long legs sprouting from their abdomens. With three heads and with tentacles all over their bodies. Joined together into a four-headed, eight-armed thing that clearly had once been four separate individuals. Split apart into a number of small, wormy things that somehow stuck together into a humanoid form. And those were only a few of the more understandable permutations; there were forms much more bizarre, forms like she didn't think would be often seen outside the Far Realm.

Not that there weren't ordinary people, too. There were. But most of the ordinary people seemed, from the way they were looking around and from the packs they carried, to be visitors like Keliander and her

companions. She wondered how many of the other visitors would end up staying behind in the Ring of the Body. She wondered if any of the three of them would.

"I suppose I can understand the temptation to mold the body however one wishes, if that is what's going on here," Hailephon said, "but I confess it holds little interest to me."

"Wonder if it's reversible," Claw said.

"Gamlin! What are you thinking?"

"Well, I'm thinkin' that if it is we almost have to go through with it, don't we? It's like has been said before, we can't pass the test if we don't take it."

"Gamlin, please, don't say that!"

"Why not? It's the truth, ain't it?"

"Because the last three people to say that have ended up staying behind in the rings where they said it."

"Oh, don't worry, Kel. I ain't gonna stay behind here. Might be fun to try on a different shape for a while, see what it's like to have four arms, or none, but I'm not particularly focused on the body. I'm an artist, an' art's up here in the brain-box, it is. Oh, it may take some measure of coordination to get the brush or the chisel to go where you want it to, but that's not the point of it. That's just a tool to get out in the physical world what you've already got up in the head. If anyone knows there's more to life than just the body, it's an artist, an' I may not be no phenomenon famous across the planes, but I guess I'm enough of an artist to at least know that much."

"I hope you're right. I really don't want to lose you here."

"Hey, trust me, Kel. Some of the earlier rings did tempt me, I admit, but here...we'll just see what it's like and move on."

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"Oh...oh, fine. I'm sorry. It's just...I just *really* want to catch Kurlamber and be done with this; I don't like the distractions. But you're right. It may be necessary."

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"Is it *alive*?"

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She sighed. "You heard what he said. Anywhere else we stay in this ring is likely to be just as bad."

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"Anyway, it's gettin' late. Let's hit the sack." Claw turned to the bed. "You won't mind, right?"

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Claw undressed and followed her in, and was asleep almost immediately. Keliander couldn't stop thinking about the fact that they were sleeping on a living person in altered form, and didn't manage to get to sleep for several hours, though eventually she did drop off.

The next day, though, when she and Claw did try out the body modifications, Keliander found that the experience was much more interesting and less unpleasant than she had anticipated. They spent much of the first day as two vines, their tendrils intertwined, and the next as deer that bounded across the swards. The third day, on Claw's insistence, they each spent as a pile of slugs, the slugs from each of them crawling over each other and intermingling. Keliander had tried that only with great reluctance, and only after Claw had begged and promised the next three days to do whatever she wanted, but once she got past the psychological ickiness of the concept, she actually found that existence as a pile of slugs was surprisingly enjoyable. There was something oddly satisfying in the squelchy way the slugs adhered slightly to each other and came apart again, and the pressure as they slithered all over each other seemed at times nearly erotic.

The fourth day, they went to one of the gymnasia. Claw had mentioned wanting to go to one of those before, and although he protested that based on his promise of the previous day they should do something that day that *she* wanted, Keliander had simply told him that this *was* what she had decided she wanted that day, and he would have to go along with it. Truthfully, though, of course, she was going there for his sake, and she thought he knew it. To Keliander, who had long followed a strict exercise regimen as part of her training in the Harmonium, the gymnasium offered little new. Claw, though, hadn't been as disciplined in his exercise, and while he certainly wasn't in *bad* shape his arms were muscular enough, and he had well-defined pectoral muscles he did have a little bit of a paunch, and it was clear that visits to gymnasia weren't a regular part of his life, and this would be something new to him.

It offered, in fact, something new even to her, though to a lesser extent. She had certainly been exercising regularly for much of her life, but here there were exercises that she hadn't seen before, and

that seemed to work out muscles and stretch tendons that she hadn't known existed. She didn't feel as sore as Claw looked after the exercise session, based on the ginger and slightly hunched way he walked after they were done, but she was certainly more so than she had expected to be.

Of course, they worked their way around the ring in pursuit of Kurlamber—he was going clockwise now, opposite his direction in the Ring of Understanding—and Hailephon stayed near them at night and met with them for meals, though she went her own way during most of the day. Based on what she spoke of while they ate, she had been focusing on experiencing body modifications, and had been largely unimpressed, though she had enjoyed the sensation of flight when she was given wings, and she'd also liked the experience of being a long-legged quadruped that could canter across the fields with stupendous speed. By the fifth day, the githzerai hadn't tried the gymnasium, since she, like Keliander, had been used to regular exercise anyway, and didn't see that there was anything new there to experience—but Keliander had told her of her own experience, and that there might be some exercises she was unused to, and Hailephon had said she would try it. And when they met again that night, she admitted that she, too, had found some ways to exercise in the gymnasium here that she hadn't experienced before.

"Gamlin," Keliander said one day, when the two of them were experiencing what it was like to have the bodies of hollyphants, "there's something I realized back in the Ring of Understanding that I'd been wanting to talk to you about."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Actually, it has to do with what you said back in the Ring of Purity. About...about your admiring me for being able to overcome my fiendish blood."

"That still holds, you know, Kel. Even if you don't look very fiendish right now." He smiled, quirking up the edges of the base of his trunk.

"You also spoke then about your worry that you couldn't overcome your own blood, that you were chaotic because you were a chaond and not because of yourself."

"Yeah...yeah. I still wonder that sometimes."

"Isn't being a chaond part of who you are?"

"Well, yeah, but...I mean, it shouldn't *define* it."

"*Does* it define it?"

"Well, is being a tiefling part of who *you* are?"

Keliander looked down at her diminutive elephantine body. "Well...not right now. But yes. I think it is. It comes with barriers to overcome, but yes, it *is* a part of who I am. My being good doesn't mean I've stopped being a tiefling."

"Well, no, but you did have to overcome what came with it."

"I think what your question really comes down to is, would you still be chaotic if you weren't a chaond?"

"Well, I guess..."

"But, Gamlin, I don't know if that question is really meaningful. If you weren't a chaond, you wouldn't be *you*."

"I'm not a chaond right now, and I'm still me, ain't I?" He sighed. "But no. I know what you mean. And maybe you're right. Only...only I still can't help but wonder whether, you know, whether I *ought* to be chaotic, whether I *ought* to give in to what I am."

"That's why you came to the City of Man, Gamlin, isn't it? You thought if you ran the rings you might

become lawful, and overcome your heritage?"

"Heh. You really did take a lesson from the Ring of Understanding, didn't you? You know, I don't think I was really even admitting that to myself, at first, but...yeah, really, I think that *is* why I came here. Part of it, at least. But a very large part."

"Do you still think that?"

"Well...I think it's already happening, to some degree. I already said back in the Ring of Logic that I was thinkin' maybe chaos wasn't all it was cracked up to be, I think. Now, I still don't know. I think maybe I *have* become more lawful by runnin' the rings than I started out, though I don't think I'm all the way there yet." He laughed briefly and mirthlessly. "Maybe there's somethin' to the idea that the City of Man is supposed to make sods lawful, eh?"

"Maybe."

"Why are you bringing this up, anyway?"

"Does it bother you?"

"No...I guess not. Not really. Not comin' from you. I was just wondering what brought it on."

"I'm not sure. Except that I wanted to tell you that...whatever happens, and whether you change or whether you stay the chaotic chaond you always were...I'll still care for you."

He smiled again. "Thanks, Kel. I appreciate that."

Despite their delays to experience the trials of the ring, Keliander and her companions still seemed to be doing a good job of keeping up with Kurlamber. He seemed to be taking the very long way around, and Keliander allowed herself to be hopeful that he wasn't going in to the next ring after all. He'd already passed the Route of Judgment,

Religious Avenue

; if he passed on by the Boulevard of Wisdom he would end up going full-circle around the ring. Now he was again less than a day ahead, and the Boulevard of Wisdom was only a few days' travel off.

And then those few days were over, and it was there. Keliander looked at her compass.

"According to this, he should be right down the avenue, toward the Ring of the Mind..."

She was cut off by something jumping down on her from a rooftop, knocking her to the ground and briefly cutting off her breath. She saw the glint of a knife, and managed to roll over and throw off her attacker. To her surprise, she saw that it was Kurlamber, though he hadn't come from the direction the compass had indicated. There was no time to deliberate on that, however, because he was coming at her with his knife, and she thought there was a very good chance that the black stuff dripping from it was more deathblade poison.

She dodged her attack and drew her own sword. Kurlamber reared back the knife to throw it, but Hailephon kicked him from behind, and he turned on her and stabbed at her with the knife instead. It

nicked her robe, but didn't look like it had penetrated to her flesh. Then Claw drew his own knife, which till now Keliander hadn't seen him take out of its sheath in the City of Man except to cut his food, and he moved in to help fight the assassin as well.

Keliander had her own sword drawn now; she wanted to take the assassin alive, if at all possible, but the more important thing was just to *take* him, and do so before he could turn invisible or *dimension door* away. Her swing took him solidly in the side, and while he was apparently wearing some armor underneath his clothing that softened the blow somewhat it still had obviously hurt him, the more so thanks to its enchantment that made it burn hot when fighting evil creatures as which the half-fiend assassin surely qualified.

Despite his apparent pain, Kurlamber smiled toothily. "What, letting your friends fight with you? Three against one. That's hardly fair."

"You strike from the shadows, and poison the innocent," Keliander said, as she parried the assassin's dagger blow. "You're hardly one to talk about fighting fair."

"Still, though, I'd have expected better from you."

"My mission is to bring you to justice and to stop you from hurting more of the innocent," Keliander said. "I'll do what it takes, within the law, to do that. And I don't see anything wrong with having a few friends fight with me."

The assassin had managed to wound Claw once with his dagger, and Keliander tossed him one of her remaining potions of *remove poison*. Claw had gotten in a few good blows of his own, and the monk had proven herself a capable combatant against the half-fiend as well. One wing crumpled, a tooth broken, Kurlamber definitely seemed to be coming off the worst in this fight.

But he was still smiling.

And then he disappeared.

Cursing, Keliander consulted her compass. It still pointed toward the gate.

"Over here," Kurlamber called from across the road, however, and Keliander looked up in time to see another arrow flying at her from his bow. It caught her in the shoulder, and she took out the last of her potions of *remove poison*, then thought better of it and decided to save it for the end of the fight, in case she was poisoned again or Hailephon or Claw seemed to need it worse than she did. Probably there was somewhere in the city she could get more potions anyway, if she needed them. She hoped there was.

The githzerai and the chaond were already running toward the assassin, Hailephon snatching his next arrow out of the air as they came. He dodged back into the shadows, and Keliander looked again at her compass, which still pointed toward the gate. By now, though, she was distrustful of it, and looked around carefully, spotting the assassin hiding in the shadows further up the street just as he let loose another arrow.

"Look out!" she called to Hailephon, but the monk again snatched the arrow from the air before it connected. Now Claw ran toward the assassin, knife at the ready, but Kurlamber had melted into the shadows again.

Keliander sheathed her sword and drew her bow, thinking the assassin was more likely to appear at a distance again. She kept an eye out, knowing he could reappear anywhere, knowing he could very well be invisible or have altered his appearance to look like someone completely different...and found that the last was indeed the case, when what had looked like a nondescript water genasi on the near side of

the road suddenly drew back an arrow and fired. This time Hailephon failed to catch it, but the arrow missed her anyway, thudding into a building nearby. The assassin disappeared again into the shadows; Keliander kept her bow at the ready, kept watching...

...And this time the assassin appeared right next to her. Without really thinking about what she was doing, Keliander stepped back and fired an arrow, and it went right through the assassin's shoulder and pinned him to the wall. Kurlamber cried out, dropping his bow, and Keliander had her sword back out and at his throat.

"Gotcha," she said. "You're coming with us."

Despite everything, Kurlamber still smiled. "By all means do whatever you like with this body," he said. "It's dissolving in an hour or two anyway."

"Dissolving? What do you "

"This is just a temporary duplicate body I acquired recently, you see. The real me is over there by the gate."

At first Keliander was sure this was a trick, then remembered the compass and realized that would explain its apparent unreliability. Claw by now had arrived by her side, and she let him cover the assassin with his knife while she looked around the corner to check.

Indeed, there was Kurlamber the real Kurlamber, apparently , and he saluted her, grinning, and ran off down the road.

Keliander growled in frustration, and turned back.

"He's right. The real Kurlamber just went to the Ring of the Mind. And we're going after him."

vii. The Boulevard of Wisdom

"We have to tell him it, whatever to leave. Consorting with fiends is against the Lex Harmonium."

"Calm down, Ilxax. I don't like him being here any more than you do. But you know it's not that simple. We can't risk making relations with the Guvners any worse than they already are."

"You don't think they knew what they were doing when they sent a baatezu to the Palace of Harmony?"

"I think they very likely did, but we can't rise to the bait."

"So what about the Lex Harmonium?"

"We're not consorting with Nemera. We're trying to avoid him as much as possible."

"You can't quibble with words that way."

"Ilxax, do you want to be partly responsible for the start of a new Faction War?"

The bladeling looked rebellious for a while, then sighed and relented. "I suppose you're right. But shouldn't we at least tell Lady Terial what he is?"

"And gain what? Either it looks like we're just trying to drive a wedge between the Fraternity of Order and the Sons of Mercy...or she resents us not having told her sooner...or "

"I've heard the things Nemera's trying to convince her to do."

"So have I, Ilxax. And I'm worried. I'm *very* worried. But I don't know that we "

There was a knock at the study door.

Perrish glanced up. Nemera was still visible at the far end of the room through the window. So it wasn't *him* knocking, at least.

"Come in," she called.

The Lady Talien entered, looking weary and sad.

"Ah, Lady Talien," Perrish said. "We were about to inform you of another letter we just received. It seems our agents well, our remaining agent has pursued the half-fiend to the eighth ring now "

"That's good. I hope they catch him, but...it won't bring Laedeth back, will it?"

Perrish opened her mouth, then paused before speaking. "No. I suppose it won't."

"I just wanted to say good-bye," she said. "Good-bye, and thank you. And...I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize? For what?"

"For my manner when I first arrived. I'm afraid I was a bit officious and demanding. I was...well, I was emotional, and I didn't see why you weren't doing more. But it's clear to me now you've been doing all you can do. And that you've had other problems to put up with."

"Other problems? I "

Talien inclined her head toward the back of the room. Perrish was briefly puzzled, until she realized she was trying to indicate Nemera.

"Ah. Yes, he...has been a handful."

"You wouldn't believe some of the things he's tried to get me to do."

"Oh, I can believe it. I can believe almost anything of him."

"I suppose I can see why you have to put up with him, though. For the sake of the good relations with the Guvners."

"Well...yes, actually. That's it exactly."

"The Fraternity of Order can be difficult at times. But you and we, the Harmonium and the Sons of Mercy...we have more of a common cause."

Perrish stood. "I suppose we do. And I want to apologize to you as well."

"To me? Whatever for?"

"For thinking badly of you when you first came here. You were under a lot of emotional strain, and I should have taken that into account. I'm afraid I judged you rather too harshly."

Lady Talien smiled, a little wanly. "Well...I suppose we may have both been guilty of that. But now that we know each other better, perhaps we won't make the same mistake when next we meet."

Now Perrish smiled. "Assuredly we won't, Lady Talien."

"Please. You may call me Kierne. But I must be getting back to Bytopia."

"Ilxax will escort you out."

"Thank you. And, seriously, thank you, Commander Perrish. For everything."

"I hope the next time we meet will be under better circumstances."

"This way, milady," Ilxax said, showing Lady Talien to the door.

As soon as they had left, Perrish looked back at Nemera. He was leaning back in his chair, his hands behind his head.

One problem down...and in fact shown not to be a problem at all.

One big, ugly, bloated, and very, very evil problem remaining...

vii. The Boulevard of Wisdom

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VIII. The Ring of the Mind

As before, by the time they got through the gate, there was no sign of Kurlamber. Even though this time Keliander hadn't stopped to down a potion.

Which reminded her she really ought to do that before the poison on Kurlamber's arrow finished running its course. She quickly drank down the draught, and then put the flask away uncomfortably, hoping they'd be able to find more here. They'd have to confront Kurlamber at least once more, after all.

Claw followed a little after, with the duplicate Kurlamber in tow. "I thought I'd bring this one along... just in case this was another trick."

She looked at them. "Good thinking. I'm pretty sure it's not, because my compass was pointing toward the gate...but I can't absolutely guarantee that Kurlamber didn't have a way of meddling with the compass heading, and I'd hate to have chased Kurlamber into the Ring of the Mind only to find that *that* was a fake and that the real Kurlamber was still back in the Ring of the Body snickering at us."

"Besides, if it's not a trick, it might be interesting to see just how the duplicate dissolves," Claw added, poking his prisoner, who sneered at him.

"It will be difficult to proceed far with him in tow," Hailephon said. "He said he would dissolve in a few hours. Perhaps we should wait that long before trying to go further to see if this is true."

Keliander sighed. "Well, I suppose Kurlamber's already managed to escape us again. A few more hours won't make any difference."

She looked around at her surroundings. Like the Ring of the Body, the Ring of the Mind was fairly

sparsely dotted with buildings, leaving wide open spaces of vegetation between. There was little to mark the meaning of the few buildings that *were* there. They came in many different colors and shapes, though they did have a tendency toward austerity, and more toward cooler colors than warm. None of the buildings, she noticed, had windows, at least not the ones she could see from here. Doors, yes, but no windows. She wondered if that meant anything.

What *was* apparent from where they stood was that a lot of the people here had special abilities as they had in the Ring of Emotion, but not in exactly the same way. Not that there were many people here to begin with; the ring was at least as sparsely populated as the Ring of the Body. But in the time she spent waiting on the road for the fake Kurlamber to dissolve or not to dissolve, and so to be proven not a fake she saw quite a few people get a brief glow in their eyes as they did something, or cause a shimmer in the air, or exude some sort of translucent substance that evanesced almost as quickly as it appeared. She was confused for a while, until she realized what she was seeing. Psionic manifestations. She hadn't been around psionics enough to recognize them immediately, but she had seen them in use occasionally, and this was what she thought it looked like.

She still wasn't sure, but it occurred to her there was someone with her who might know.

"Hailephon."

"Yes?"

"Do you know much about psionics?"

"Well, all githzerai have *some* innate psionic abilities, of course. Beyond that...I used to be a psychic warrior, before I turned to the path of the monk. I still remember most of the abilities I learned then, I suppose, even if I no longer use them often. Some of them I found quite useful in my earlier career.

Why do you ask?"

"All those things that are happening to people around here, the glowing eyes, the...that's ectoplasm, isn't it, or something like that? The voices...those are psionic manifestations, aren't they?"

"They certainly appear to be so, yes. It would appear that the Ring of the Mind is home to a great many psionicists."

Keliander wondered briefly if a body had to have psionic abilities to reach the Ring of the Mind. She rejected that almost immediately, of course after all, *she* didn't have psionic abilities, and *she* was here. But maybe psionic abilities somehow made one more likely to get here, although she didn't see how. Or...more likely, there was a way in the Ring of the Mind to *gain* psionic abilities.

Hm. *That* was an interesting thought...

Claw prodded his prisoner. "Hey, you?"

"Yes?"

"So you're a copy of the assassin we're after, are you?"

"So it would seem, yes."

"How good a copy *are* you, then?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you know everything the real Kurlamber knows?"

"Everything he knew when I was created, yes."

"So maybe you could tell us a little about his plans."

"Maybe I could, but I don't see any reason why I *should*. I'm going to be dissolving in a little while anyway; it's not like there's anything you could really hold over me as a threat."

"I'm sure we can think of something."

"I'm not. But if you want to talk, I'm certainly willing to. What would you like to talk about?"

"Maybe why you killed Laedeth Terial," Keliander broke in.

"Certainly. And I think the best answer to that would be...because I wanted to."

"I very much doubt that was the only reason."

"It was the most important reason to *me*, I assure you."

"How far in toward the center of the City of Man are you planning on running?"

"I'm not planning on running anywhere. I believe the plan is for me to stay right here as your prisoner until I dissolve into nothingness."

"You know what I mean. The *real* you. How far are you planning on running?"

"Oh, you'll find that out soon enough anyway. Why should I tell you now, and spoil the surprise?"

"I doubt he's going to tell us anything useful," Hailephon said.

"Yeah," Claw concurred, "you're probably right."

"Oh, now, that all depends on what you mean by *useful*," the assassin said. "I can tell you a great many things that *might* be of use to you, if you took them to heart. I can tell you how ridiculous I find the Harmonium's do-gooder philosophy, and how much better off you'd be if you stopped trying to get the planes to conform to a sort of morality that clearly just doesn't work. I can tell you that you, Keliander, are a particularly interesting do-gooder, in the same way you might find an unpleasant but novel sort of grub interesting, in that you have fiendish blood yourself and have deliberately turned against it to follow the Hardheads' cause. And I can tell you how much better off *you'd* be if you gave in to the evil impulses I *know* must be inside you. Would you consider that useful? I think I would. But I don't suppose you'll follow my advice. At least, not right now."

"No," Keliander said firmly. "I don't suppose I will."

"Ah, but there's time yet. Who knows what the future may bring. After all, you haven't reached the center of the city yet. Are you going there? Will you go there if I go there? Ah, but *am* I going there? We haven't established that yet."

"If you go there, I'll pursue you if I can," Keliander said. "An evildoer like you must be brought to justice."

"Ah," Kurlamber said, smiling, "I *thought* you might say something like that. But you see, there are still surprises in store for you. I'm...I'm looking forward to what's going to happen in the next while. Oh, yes, I'm looking forward to it *very* much. Perhaps there's a side of you, Keliander, that even you have yet to see..."

Claw pulled a handkerchief from his vest pocket, and looked at Keliander. "Gag him?"

"Gag him," Keliander agreed.

When the fake Kurlamber did dissolve, it happened quite suddenly. He smiled one last time, and then suddenly seemed to melt, his hair and flesh slipping into foaming whitish ooze. Then that spread out and quickly evaporated, a few bubbles lasting a bit longer than the rest, and there was nothing there but

the clothing he had been wearing and the equipment he was carrying.

"Huh," Claw said. "Well, the body may have been a temporary duplicate, but it looks like the goods he had on him were real and permanent enough. Wonder if that means the real Kurlamber is running around naked?"

"He's not," Keliander said. "I saw him, and he was dressed the same as the duplicate. I guess he got a spare set of clothes and equipment."

"That's funny. I wouldn't have thought they'd have happened to have another set of clothes that matched his here."

"There's another thing that's odd," Hailephon said. "Where did the spare weapons come from? Almost anything in the City of Man is free, but Master Aalzar told us they didn't stock weapons here; the baatezu don't want to arm the inhabitants and encourage revolt. And I've certainly seen no weapons shops, or anything else that would suggest Master Aalzar was mistaken."

"You're right," Claw said. "But if he didn't get 'em here, that means he must've had the spare weapons on him when he came in."

"Why would he carry a spare set of weapons?" Keliander said.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Actually, I *have* a guess. But I'm not sure I like it."

"Well, what is it?"

"That he anticipated doing this. That he planned all along on getting a duplicate body when he got to the Ring of the Body, and brought an extra set of clothing and weapons to arm it."

"But that would mean he must have known ahead of time that duplicate bodies were *available* in the Ring of the Body. That would mean he knows the inner rings of the City of Men well, blazes, a lot better than most cutters."

"That's why I don't like it. Along with the way he's always keeping just ahead of us, it makes it seem like he knows exactly what he's doing, that he's anticipating our every move, that he's...that he's brought us here for a *purpose*. Well, brought *me* here. I suppose you just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Hey, it brought us together again, it can't have been all that wrong a place. But, yeah, you're right, this does put a bad spin on things."

"Your conclusions...seem probable," Hailephon admitted. "This would also explain why he's been navigating the inner rings so well. It would seem quite likely he's been here before."

"Well, I guess that means gettin' to the center won't *kill* you, if he's done it," Claw said.

"We don't know he made it to the center," Hailephon said. "He may have made it only as far as the ninth ring, and then left. For that matter, he may have made it only as far as the *eighth* ring and then left. We don't know he's capable of going in any farther."

"We don't know it," Keliander muttered, "but I wouldn't bet against it."

"We must be ever more cautious now," the githzerai added. "If he knows the inner rings so well, he can prepare other surprises for us that we must be ready to deal with."

"How can we be ready to deal with them if we don't know what we are?"

"I suppose only by being ready to deal with anything."

"Well, I suppose right about now we're probably all ready to deal with findin' an inn an' scopin' out the lay of the place, seein' just what the Ring of the Mind is like. What say the two o' you?"

"You're right," Keliander said, starting to follow him off. "We may as well get started."

"What about this?" Hailephon asked, spreading her hands to indicate the fake Kurlamber's equipment.

"Are we just to leave this here?"

"Nah." Claw returned and started to gather it up. "No use wastin' it. Doesn't look to be in bad shape, most of it, an' we can probably sell it for a pretty batch o' jink when we get out of here."

"If we get out of here," Keliander said under her breath before she could stop herself. Claw paused in his gathering of the equipment and looked at her, but said nothing. If Hailephon heard her, she made no sign.

"Right, well," Claw said when he had all the fake Kurlamber's equipment in hand, "so off to the inn it is, right?"

"Do you have any psionic abilities? Would you like to?"

Those were the first two questions Keliander's "No" coming in between them that the halfling woman at the nearest psionic conservatory asked Keliander and Claw when they entered. As they had found out asking around, in the Ring of the Mind one could indeed develop psionic abilities, even if one had never shown any sort of psionic aptitude in the past. That wasn't all that was here, though. Psionics might represent the more active, external use of the mind, but there were also lycaea dedicated to the discussion of philosophy, schools where new methods were taught to focus the mind and use its strength, and all sorts of games and contests that engaged the intellect. Under the principle that had served them well enough so far that one had to experience what each ring had to offer before moving on, Keliander and Claw had decided to go ahead and see about getting some psionic powers of their own at the nearest conservatory. As for Hailephon, as she already had psionic powers, she had said she was going to spend most of her time here learning to hone her mind in other aspects, though she did mention she might see later about the possibility of increasing her existing psionic abilities.

Obviously, psionic abilities weren't something either of them was going to develop great proficiency in overnight but even the few little tricks and trifles she did learn to do seemed much more satisfying than they should have. Perhaps it was the fact that she was doing them only with her mind, with no outside agents or forces necessary. Looking at it that way, even moving a scrap of paper across a table seemed quite an accomplishment.

She and Claw spent some time at the lycaea and the other places the ring had to offer, too, but it was the psionic conservatories that interested Keliander the most. Briefly, she worried that she might not be able to leave when the time came. But no; she found the development of psionics interesting, and certainly fulfilling, but not *that* engrossing; she had other priorities, there was more beyond this, and she knew it. When they had to leave for the Ring of Power *if* they did, she reminded herself, though she had little doubt it would come to that she didn't think leaving would present any problem for her.

"You know," Claw said one day, as they were just settling in for the night, "I still haven't heard any of your poetry."

"I told you, it was pretty awful. You really don't want to hear it."

"Maybe I do."

"I mean it. It was terrible."

"Hey, you haven't seen my first art projects. Some o' them were pretty terrible too."

"You really want to hear it?"

"Sure. It came from you; it can't be that bad."

"All right, but don't say I didn't warn you. Hold on; it's been a long time since I thought about that.

Let's see if I can remember any. Ah yes...

"The Heavens of the Mount

"Go as high as you can count,

"If you can't count past seven,

"Cause that's the highest heaven."

Claw snickered, and then struggled to keep a straight face. "Sorry. It wasn't *that* bad, really."

"Yes it was, and you know it."

"All right, it was."

"Of course, I now know that there's a school of thought that there actually *are* more heavens beyond the seventh, and that we don't know about them only because nobody's ever gone there and returned...but I didn't know that at the time."

"Well, I can't say that takes away from the stark beauty of the poem," Claw said, and snickered again.

"Hey, I warned you it was bad."

"And it was bad, sure as you said." He grinned widely. "Let's hear another."

"Oh, come on."

"Hey, Kel, I'll make you a deal. You tell me more of your bad poetry, and when we get out o' here I'll show you some o' my bad early artistic masterpieces."

She laughed. "All right, Gamlin. It's a deal. Now, let me see what others of my oeuvres I can remember..."

This time their journey through the ring turned out to be relatively short; this was the smallest ring they'd been in yet, after all, and as the compass finally showed Kurlamber had only gone a third of the way around and then taken the next road inward the Route of Judgment. Keliander looked up from the compass at the gate, through which she could see the ninth ring and Alasta's palace. She had seen glimpses of the palace's spires over the wall in this ring and the Ring of the Body, but here for the first time she had a clear view of the base of it, as well. The Ring of Power, beyond the gate, seemed completely empty at least, the area immediately within. But that was where they had to go.

"Well," Keliander said, "I guess it's on to the ninth ring."

"The two of you will go on," Hailephon said. "I'm afraid I shall have to stay here."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Claw said. "You may never be able to leave."

"Yet I certainly cannot leave now. I have not fully taken in the lesson of this ring." She sighed. "And yes, intellectually I know what it is. That there are things beyond the mind, more powerful forces. But I have always learned to use the body and mind together, in harmony. And that is what the last two rings have been about. It is difficult for me to see beyond this. Even if I know intellectually there must be something beyond it, it is difficult for me to accept it. Until I come to terms with the idea that there is *more* than the body and the mind that must be respected, I'm afraid I'm not ready to leave this ring."

"Well, you know what that more is, don't you?" Keliander said. "It's the soul. It's got to be. You know about souls."

"No. I mean, yes. I know about souls, of course; how can I not? The petitioner souls of the departed surround us on the planes. But I don't think that's the point of this plane. I don't think the soul is what we're meant to see here. The soul is, after all, little more than a mind incarnate, is it?"

"So what *do* you think is beyond it?"

"If I knew that, perhaps I'd be ready to go on."

"Wait," Claw said. "Maybe what's beyond is...the stuff of the outer rings. Desire, emotion, *feeling*; all that goes along with the body and the soul."

"Isn't that part of the mind?"

"Well, maybe, but..."

"Except sensation, of course, which is part of the body. Then again, emotion partakes of both aspects, I suppose."

"But there is *something* more to reach. That's clear. You can't just focus on the mind."

"I'm not. It's the mind *and* the body. I suppose I passed the previous ring because I saw beyond the body, because I saw the importance of the mind as well. But I can't yet see beyond that. And until I can, I cannot leave."

"Hailephon, there's something you should know. About what Selburn figured out in the Ring of Understanding. You weren't there when he told us, but...if you wait too long in a ring, if you go too long without progressing, you become a resident of the city. And then you're stuck here."

"Yes," she said, "I'd come to that conclusion on my own. And certainly, it's a risk I am loath to run. But...the fact remains, I *cannot* leave until I've passed the test of this ring. And I have not yet passed it. You must catch your assassin; you must leave without me. As for me...either I will eventually come to the comprehension I need, and pass this ring and complete my pilgrimage, or...or I will not. But either way, I see nothing you can do for me now - except go, that I may not feel guilt over having stopped you from your purpose."

"All right, we're going. But I hope you make it."

"As do I." She smiled. "But even if I don't, I've learned much on this journey."

"Well, I guess this is good-bye, then," Claw said. "An' here I thought if any of us made it to the middle, you'd be the one to do it. Guess that's a bet I would've lost." He turned to Keliander. "Well, I guess the two of us have an assassin to catch."

viii. The Route of Judgment

"This is it," Perrish said, looking over the newest letter.

"This is what?"

She looked up. "They've got to the ninth ring. I doubt there's any new advice or information Nemera could give us at this point that we'd really need."

"So you're saying..."

Perrish stood up from her desk and started toward the door. "I'm saying I think it's time we politely asked our guest to leave."

"Ah, Commander Perrish!" Nemera enthused as Perrish and Ilxax entered the main room. "I haven't seen much of you lately; you've spent so much time holed up in your study. *Lovely* day, isn't it?"

"We received another letter from Keliander."

"Ah, did you? So what's she up to now?"

"She's followed Kurlamber into the ninth ring."

"Indeed? Good for her! I *knew* she could do it!"

"Nemera, do you know what's in the ninth ring? Or in Alasta's palace?"

"Well...honestly, even if I did, I don't think I'd be able to *say*, could I?"

"That's what I thought. Then I suppose your services here are no longer necessary. Thank you very much for the information you've given us, but I think you can return to Mechanus now."

"Commander? Are you asking me to leave?"

"I'm only saying that I think you've done all you can here. We're grateful for your services, but I'm sure you'd like to get back to your own faction."

"Now, Commander, let's not beat around the bush. You *do* want me to leave, you know. You've been wanting that for a very long time. Almost since I got here. And all the more so since you found out what I really am."

"I " Perrish stopped, unsure of what to say. "I'm only saying "

"Oh, yes, I know you know. I could tell in your eyes, in your manner, after you found out. So...really I suppose there's no sense in keeping up this pretense, is there?"

And suddenly Nemera ballooned up to his true, hideous form, clownish in a twisted way and utterly obscene.

Perrish wiped a hand over her brow. "I've let you stay this long, but...you've given us all the information you can, haven't you? You have no further reason to stay."

"Oh, but I do so enjoy it here. Unless of course you *want* me to go."

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I do. It's nothing against your faction, and I hope the Fraternity of Order isn't offended, but...it's a part of the Lex Harmonium, you know. We do not consort with fiends."

"Oh, I wasn't asking you to *consort* with me. Not that I'd object if you wanted to," the paeliryon purred, touching under Perrish's chin with one of its grotesquely extended nails.

"Please. I don't wish to be rude, but...I do think it's time you leave."

Nemera laughed. "Why, certainly, Commander. Perhaps it is. I've done all I can here, I suppose, I don't want to *inconvenience* you, do I? Don't bother showing me out; I'm sure I can find the way."

Well. Perhaps we'll meet again?"

And with that, the fiend disappeared. Both Perrish and Ilxax breathed out audible sighs of relief. Though Perrish couldn't help but worry exactly what the baatezu might have *done* here that she might not yet know about...

IX. The Ring of Power

"Where *is* everyone?" Keliander breathed as she and Claw entered the final ring.

The ring wasn't completely empty but it did seem to be completely empty of people, at least, other than the two of them. Unlike the last two rings, it was also empty of trees and grass. Just a flat, paved vastness smaller than any of the outer rings, to be sure, but in its emptiness still seeming enormous. And in the middle, Alasta's palace, an enormous structure of spikes and spires with several doors leading in. Keliander wondered if her path would yet take her there. It depended, of course, on Kurlamber. And there was no more sign of the half-fiend here than there was of anyone else. There were buildings in fact, that seemed to be the *only* thing here, outside of the palace. And what buildings they were. They were smaller than Alasta's palace itself, but still dwarfed any buildings Keliander had seen elsewhere in the ring, including the enormous libraries in the Ring of Understanding. And they were intricately designed and decorated, more ornate and complicated than anything else Keliander had seen. But all very different, each in a completely distinct style. No two even remotely similar.

"I guess if there's anyone else here, those buildings are the only place they can be," Claw said.

"I suppose that's true. But...I'm not sure I want to go in there."

"Nor am I, but if you want to find your assassin I'm afraid we may have to."

The two of them walked across the empty pavement, their footsteps echoing in the void, Keliander feeling very lonely and insignificant and wondering if Claw was feeling the same. Close up, the nearest building looked even larger than it had seemed from a distance. It was mostly blue, in various shades, and roughly ovoid in shape, but that barely began to describe it the way pillars and pilasters seemed paradoxically at once to hold up the walls and be held up by them, the way that long tendrils spun off from the sides of the building to form intricate geometric shapes that at first glance looked like curves and then a body realized they were actually made up completely of straight lines, the way that each of the small cavities in the walls seemed to have something inside that gleamed when it shouldn't have and seemed to do something indescribable when a body wasn't looking at it...just fully examining the outside of the building would take days, if not longer. The only entrance was a single door, up a ribbed ramp that at first seemed to be standing on a number of thin, slanted posts until she realized the posts weren't actually touching the ground beneath it. Within the door there was nothing visible but blackness.

They had reached the top of the ramp now, and they both hesitated before entering.

"Just a moment," Claw said. "I'm not goin' in there without seein' what happens to somethin' else first." He took out the dagger he had picked up from the remains of the Kurlamber copy, and stuck it into the blackness up to the hilt, meeting, as far as Keliander could see, no resistance. He withdrew it,

and it looked the same as ever.

"Hm," he said. "But I don't feel safe just yet."

He rummaged through his pack and got out a rope and a small wooden box, tied the rope to the box and tossed it through the door. After waiting a few moments, he pulled the rope back in. The box was still on the end, and when he touched it he didn't seem to feel anything awry.

"Well, I'm still not convinced it's completely safe, but I can't think of any better tests."

"Other than to make sure there's a floor there."

"Eh?"

Keliander drew her sword and tapped the ground just within the door. And it seemed there *was* ground there, which was good to know. If they entered, they wouldn't be falling into nothingness, which is what she had been afraid of. She resheathed her sword.

Claw was looking at her. "Right. So do you want to go first, or should I?"

"Let's both go in together."

"Right. At the count of three, then. One. Two. Three..."

Keliander's senses were assaulted so powerfully that at first she wasn't sure exactly which senses were being assaulted or whether it was all of them, or none. Or, perhaps both...there was something for all of her senses to experience here, but there was also something that was coming through some other channel altogether, that was letting her know where they were, what was inside the building.

It was a world.

Perhaps many worlds. Perhaps a multiverse.

And she and Claw were falling toward it. Or through it. Or...not falling, exactly. It was all very confusing, and she wasn't sure just *how* she stood in relation to the world, or if she even really existed right at that moment. But then she felt something grab her wrist, or do whatever the equivalent was in this place and in her current condition, and she was pulled in something that she could consider a direction and might as well consider backward, and then she and Claw were back on the ramp, both supine and breathing heavily.

"What was that?" She still remembered the world she had seen the nearest one, for she wasn't at all sure the building didn't also contain others. It was entirely covered by water, and populated by sea creatures of many kinds, including some that she was pretty sure existed nowhere else. But within the water, anomalously, were shifting blobs of magma, the barrier between the water and the magma being wait a minute. She hadn't *seen* that. How did she know it? She wasn't sure. But she did.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Claw said. "Though I think we both have better guesses than we'd probably like to admit."

Keliander raised herself on an elbow, looking back the way they had come...and was surprised to see two more buildings there that she was certain hadn't been there before. One of them was tall and golden, looking something like a cathedral to outshine all the cathedrals she had ever seen, and something like a castle or a monastery designed to welcome friends at the same time it forbade enemies. The other was irregularly shaped, but with a bizarre and perhaps illusory irregularity that seemed to have a purpose behind it, mostly gray but with spots of bright color just where they somehow seemed to be needed. It was strange, but beautiful, maybe in its own way the most beautiful building she'd seen here yet.

"What are *those*, and when did they get here?"

"Ah, those are *our* buildings, I gather," Claw said. "The gold one's yours, and the gray one's mine."

"*Our* buildings? But "

"Sure. To build our own multiverses inside. Just like the cutter this building belonged to built his here, though apparently he didn't feel like coming out to greet us when he dropped by."

"We can create our own multiverses here?"

"Sure we can. Now that we've reached the Ring of Power, while we're in the City of Man and especially while we're in this ring, and most especially while we're in our own buildings we are *gods*. Not to be irreverent or nothin'; I know you've got a god you worship, an' I mean him no disrespect, but that's the truth. We may not have any more power after we leave the city than we had goin' in, 'cept what comes from the lessons we've learned here, but while we're here there's almost nothin' we can't do." He waved his arms around. "These buildings...they're all...temples of a sort. Houses of gods. But not just of the gods. Of multiverses. Inside each of 'em, there are all the worlds a new god created."

"Even if that's true, how do you know it?"

"I just do. Like I said, we're *gods* here, an' I guess omniscience comes with the territory. I'd wager you'd know it too, if you let yourself."

And quite suddenly, she *did* know it too. Every word of it. They *were* gods here, and those two new buildings were their temples and their...playgrounds? Construction yards? The places for them to build whatever worlds they wanted, with little more effort than thought and imagination.

Only there was something missing...something she had to do...

"Kurlamber!"

"Eh?"

"Where's Kurlamber?"

"Well, I suppose here he's a god too, ain't he?"

"So...one of these buildings is *his*, too, then?"

"I guess it is. Now there's a building I'm sure we'd both like to avoid."

"But where is he?"

Claw shrugged. "That I dunno. I s'pose our omniscience don't extend to knowing things our fellow gods want to keep secret."

Keliander clenched her fists in frustration. "So it's a dead end then. We chased him all the way through the City of Man, only to be stymied at the end by...by his becoming a *god*, of all things. A god who we can't track."

"But we know he's still in the City of Man, or he wouldn't *be* a god, and we could track him, right?"

"Well, yes...but if he stays here..."

"You know what I think? I think as we...as we get more into our divinity, so to speak, we'll get more used to it, and maybe even the other gods' secrets will become a little less secret to us. I think we'll find 'im, Kel. When the time is right, we'll find 'im. But in the meantime, I guess the best we can do is settle into our new temples an' start building worlds."

And Keliander knew, somehow, that that wasn't just what Claw *thought*. It was what he *knew*. And she knew it too. It was right.

Keliander decided to start simple. A nice, pastoral world, similar to places she was used to. Sheep, maybe a few other grazing animals. No predators at first. And certainly no intelligent beings. They'd introduce far too many complications. They could come later.

But no...there had to be predators. Otherwise, the sheep's numbers would grow too large, and they'd starve themselves. Predators had a role in her world. So she made a few wolves.

There had to be other tweaks made, other modifications; creating a world was hard work. And this was without really making anything *new*; it was just putting together elements of worlds she was familiar with. Trying to make a world with original elements...well, maybe she'd try that later if she was up to it. Right now, just trying to put old elements together in a way that made sense was more than enough. She was ready for intelligent beings now, and so she made some. Just humans to start with; no need to confuse the issue with other races. Humans living peacefully off the land, in harmony with each other...

Except that they weren't. Despite her best efforts, the humans in her world would fight, and war, and kill. She knew that, and couldn't see any way around it. No way other than removing their free will, and *forcing* them to do what she wanted them to...but that seemed wrong; that seemed like a...a *violation*, somehow.

The thought occurred to her that maybe she was seeing a flaw in the Harmonium philosophy. Maybe they *couldn't* get everyone together in harmony; maybe their task would be as fruitless as her attempts to establish order on her personal worlds. But no; that wasn't necessarily the case. She was trying to impose harmony on her worlds from without. The Harmonium were working from within. That was different; maybe a world couldn't be created in harmony *ab initio*, but could evolve into it by the efforts of its inhabitants.

Besides, even if the goals of the Harmonium *were* unrealizable though she didn't really think they were they would still be well worth pursuing.

Unable to find a way to get the people of her world to live together in complete harmony, she at least found a way to minimize the disharmony as much as she could. Then she thought about what to add next. She had animals, plants, predators, people...gods? Could she add new gods below her, unique to this world, and not existing her own multiverse? She thought perhaps she could...after all, in the multiverse she knew there were overpowers. But the creation of new gods wasn't something she thought she ought to get into right away. That was a daunting task, and there were other things she could try first. Perhaps...perhaps another intelligent race. Or perhaps another plane. Yes, that was it. Right now the humans lived on the only world in their multiverse. Perhaps it would be good to create another plane that touched it.

At times she had to remind herself of her ultimate mission, and wonder whether she was allowing herself to become distracted from it. Then she reminded herself that, no, she *had* to do this, she had to embrace her godhood so that she could really understand it and make use of it, so that eventually she could find Kurlamber with it, and follow him. And would she be able to follow him, if he went inward yet again? Yes...she was sure she would. The power of this ring was a novelty, was an experience she was glad she had...but not one that she thought would keep her here. She had her duty. She would

move on.

But what lay within? What would happen to her if she *did* follow Kurlamber into Alasta's palace? Well, if it came to that...then she'd find out.

Claw visited her world, on occasion, and she his. Claw's world was very different from hers his worlds, for he'd already created several different planets and planes. Where she had deliberately started out only arranging elements she already knew, Claw had thrown himself with abandon into innovation, fashioning new creatures, new forms of magic, whole new types of plane unlike any that Keliander thought existed in the real in their old multiverse. In the multiverse where she still had to bring Kurlamber to justice. One of Claw's worlds was covered in spongy turf and oddly banded trees, and populated by great squidgy things that looked something like giant ambulate sponges twisted and torn into weird, multiply connected shapes, but not really like anything she had seen before. Another was all squarish and smooth, the residents having regular geometric forms that despite their innate simplicity seemed to lead to an endless variety of combinations. The most conventional of his worlds, the most similar, at least, to what Kurlamber was used to, did indeed have humans populating it, but along with all sorts of strange creatures of Claw's invention, and with some equally strange social and cultural systems. And that was all without even touching on the other planes, where the laws worked totally differently...Keliander had admired Claw's creativity before, but now she was awestruck by it, and his modest reaction did nothing to lessen this.

So things went on this way; Keliander and Claw each worked on their worlds, frequently visiting each other, and frequently spending time with each other and experiencing the sort of intimate relations of which gods alone are capable. Then, one day, she knew Kurlamber was outside, waiting for her. Just like that. She just *knew*. Of course, he knew she knew...but that didn't matter. It was time to finish the pursuit.

"He's outside, waiting for you," said Claw, who hadn't been there a moment before, and strictly speaking wasn't exactly there now.

"I know," Keliander said, though she knew he knew she knew.

"You're going out to meet him, aren't you?"

"I suppose I have to."

"Well...no. I was going to say you didn't have to, but I suppose you do. That's who you are."

"What about you, Gamlin? Are you coming?" She knew the answer, somehow, but she had to ask anyway.

"I don't think I am," he said, as she had known he would. "I think I have to stay here."

"Why?" she asked, though again she already knew the answer.

"I'd said before that if there was a Ring of Art, or a Ring of Creation, I'd never be able to tear myself away. Well, it turns out there is, only it has a different name. This...this ability to *create*, not just paintings and sculpture, but *anything*, worlds of my own I can populate however I please...this is the artist's ultimate dream, Kel. You realize that."

"Yes," she said. "I do."

"Maybe I'll get tired of it and move on someday...but I don't think I will."

"No," she said. "You won't."

"I guess this is good-bye, then."

"You're going to be trapped here," she said. She knew exactly how the conversation would go, but she

still had to say her part.

"I know that. But...in another way, I'm not. In this multiverse, maybe I won't be able to leave the City of Man...but inside the building, I'll have a whole multiverse of my own, where I can go wherever I want to. Do anything I want. So I'm trading most of one multiverse, I guess, for the whole of another... but another where I have the freedom to create like I've never created before. The greatest artistic freedom any cutter could ask for."

"Yes," she said. "I guess this is good-bye."

Her building would remain here. She knew that somehow. Her multiverse would remain, even without her personal supervision, although she wouldn't be able to add anything new to them without returning here to do it. It seemed sad to leave her multiverse to stagnate. Maybe she could leave it in Claw's care. And then she knew she could, and she did. And then she left.

She was again standing outside, on the empty pavement. Claw was standing a few feet away.

"Just had to come out to see you off in person," he said. "I wish we didn't have to part here. But I can't go on, and...like you said, you have to."

"I'm sorry."

"So'm I. But...I just wanted to ask one last favor."

"Anything, Gamlin. What is it?"

"Well...this may sound a little weird, and if you're turned off and you say no, I'll understand right off. But...well, my multiverse just wouldn't be the same without you in it. I don't want to be creating copies of you without your permission, but I'd really like you to be in my multiverse, and if you don't mind "

She put a finger on his lips and smiled. "Yes, Gamlin," she said. "I think I'd like that."

They kissed, a long kiss that seemed to Keliander to last for ages, though it was probably less than a minute. And then, schooling herself not to look back, she walked toward Alasta's palace, where even now she could see Kurlamber leaning insouciantly against a side of the nearest door.

Kurlamber straightened when she approached. "So. You've followed me this far."

"It wasn't easy, but I made it."

"Are you prepared to follow me all the way?"

"I've been entrusted with the mission of bringing you to justice, and I'll follow you as far as I have to."

"So," the assassin said. "Here we go, then."

And he ducked inside the door.

ix. Religion's Avenue

"Keliander!" Perrish exclaimed. "It's so good to see you back. I have to confess I was really worrying about you; I didn't know what was going to happen if you entered Alasta's palace. So...did you catch the assassin?"

"You won't have to worry about Kurlamber anymore," Keliander said. "He won't be bothering anyone ever again."

"Er...so does that mean he's dead, or..."

"I'll give you a full report in the morning, if you don't mind."

"Yes, of course. You must be tired. Ilxax, you have one of the spare rooms ready?"

"Right this way," the bladeling said.

"Oh...by the way," Keliander said. "There *is* something in Alasta's tower. Something I think you should see."

"Oh? What is it?"

"No...I don't think I can tell you. I'll have to show you." She looked into Perrish's eyes, and the human woman felt unaccountably uncomfortable. "It's something I really think you should see in person."
