



The Tomb of Horrors

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Prologue

He measured time in bursts of pain.

This one pulled him from sleep with terrible insistence, like a lover who would not be sated. He tried to scream when the forge-heated blade licked across his stomach with its razor tongue, but he managed only a feeble gurgle. The joints in his shoulders had long-since popped from the weight of his body, and breathing was difficult. Thankfully, he could no longer feel the fiery kiss of the steel nails holding his wrists and ankles to the wall.

Agony flared again. He felt the bruised muscles of his inner thigh shred beneath the blade's touch, and this time he forced out a scream. He did not waste time begging for mercy. There would be none. He simply screamed until his throat bled.

It wasn't until the cloying scent of incense nearly choked him that he realized the pain had faded into a dull throbbing, an ever present caress. He must have lost consciousness. Soft voices raised themselves in a whispered chant. Though the harsh language was unknown to him, the urgent cadences were horrifyingly familiar. He felt lightheaded as the chant gradually grew louder. A filmy layer of gauze had wrapped itself around his thoughts; he shook his head in a vain attempt to clear it, though he knew there was no hope. He wanted to cry, but even this was denied him. The first thing that the black-cloaked bastards had done was pluck out his eyes—leaving him in darkness.

But not alone.

Something Else brooded silently in the darkness with him, a Presence that lurked in the vast wasteland of his nightmares. It watched him, waiting for the right moment. He could sense it growing stronger now, could feel it slide across some vast distance, drawn by the twisted words of the ancient chant and the intoxicating offering of his pain. He gasped once as It entered his mind.

His last thoughts were of his wife and children, then the will of the god took him.

* * * * *

The screams of the crucified seer shattered night's dark silence. Caught and magnified by the broad hills of the Fellreev forest, the sound rang out across the monastery's ancient grounds, an unholy call to prayer.

Durgoth Shem answered.

With a soft exhalation, the balding cleric gathered up the fragments of parchment lying in front of him, careful lest the already ancient and decaying vellum crumble beneath his touch. Needles of pain stung his fingers as they came into contact with the remains of the book. He grimaced but accepted the pain, as he accepted all of the Dark One's gifts, with hope and something of a deep hunger.

The sensation intensified, and Durgoth nearly gasped at the force of it. He could feel the flesh of his fingertips blistering beneath the assault, and then, just as suddenly as it had occurred, the pain disappeared. He rose gingerly from his seat upon the floor. Knees stiff from long hours of meditation cracked and groaned. Durgoth regarded the tome with a thoughtful scowl as he placed it carefully behind two loose stones in the ruined wall. Purple runes splayed across a cracked leather cover he suspected had been fashioned from

human skin. The ancient symbols writhed before his eyes, slithering and bending like serpents. Long accustomed to the dark book's power, he concentrated until the runes settled into a familiar pattern.

So much had happened since the day he had found the *Minthexian Codex* in the dank chambers hidden deep beneath the monastery. Before that, he had been nothing more than a fugitive, a once-proud Hierarchy of the Horned Society whose power was shattered the night Iuz and his host of fiendish servitors breached the Society's citadel and scattered its leaders to the corners of Oerth. The memories of those years, spent living like an animal, an object of scorn and derision to all he met, still ate at the cleric.

But power does call to power, and it was such a call that led Durgoth to the ruins of this monastery where, in its crumbling stone and rotten timber, he had unearthed the book and discovered a god of truly awesome power. Other, weaker men called the codex by its common name, *The Book of Nine Shadows*, but he knew that the roots of its true strength went beyond darkness to the heart of Nothingness itself. Long were the months that he wrestled with the secrets contained within the *Minthexian Codex*, until he had finally pierced its veil of mystery. Harnessing the power of its ancient rituals, the cleric built a place of refuge, a sanctuary from the predations of the Old One and his pet demons. In time, others came to the monastery's desecrated grounds, drawn by the power he had unearthed and the dark dreams of a god. Now, after the long tread of years, he was about to set in motion a plan that would shake the foundations of the multiverse. Not for the first time, he wondered if the screams of the gods would be more satisfying than the tormented cries of the mortals who worshiped them.

Such idle speculation would have to wait, he realized, as the sweet song of the crucified seer's pain surrounded him with its

intoxicating melody. It was almost time. Placing the stones carefully to seal the codex's hiding place, the cleric bowed once, palms pressed together, and uttered the words to a prayer he had learned from his studies of the dark book. A blue glow circled round the area of the wall before him and then faded away. Satisfied that his mystic protections would hold, the cleric snubbed out the last thick bar of burning incense on the makeshift altar he had created for his private meditations and gathered his heavy black robes about him. With a sigh of anticipation, he turned to leave the room, only to find his way blocked by a shadowy figure.

"It has begun, my lord," the figure intoned in a raspy voice.

Durgoth cursed silently as he recognized the familiar tones of Jhagren Syn. Hoping that the room's dim light covered his startled reaction, he spoke harshly into the darkness, "Jhagren, I left strict instructions that I not be disturbed until my meditations were complete."

"Yes, blessed one," the man replied. The words were simple, almost uninflected, like most of the speech that came from this man. They neither betrayed guilt nor asked forgiveness, and like the speaker itself, they offered the cleric no key to unlock its secrets.

Of all the people who had found their way to the dark monastery, Jhagren Syn stood apart. The others stayed for reasons Durgoth easily understood—they lusted for power, they craved the Dark One's touch, and some, the cleric admitted, were simply mad, consumed by their own dark demons. Jhagren, however, was different. Though his skills and sharp mind quickly distinguished him as a man of true usefulness, the monk's motives remained a mystery, and Durgoth hated mysteries. For what he could not understand, he could not control.

And what he could not control, he feared.

As if sensing the dark cleric's thoughts, Jhagren stepped out of the shadows. Flickering candlelight washed over his

pockmarked face, revealing a thick nose and full mouth.

“The god has come, blessed one,” the monk said. “Even now the seer speaks words of prophecy.”

Ruddy, olive skin stood out even darker in the illumination, and to Durgoth’s sight, the deep red robes of the Scarlet Brotherhood flowed around the man like a cloak of blood.

The cleric nodded curtly, his frustration almost forgotten in light of his advisor’s message, and motioned for his companion to follow. The two walked across the monastery grounds in silence, surrounded by tumbled stone buildings and burnt timbers, the echo of history. Durgoth sniffed the chill winter air and surveyed the ruin. Centuries of dedicated prayer, lives lived and lost in service to an ideal, a holy cause, still offered no protection against death and decay. Only entropy, he thought with some satisfaction, held any constancy.

When they finally arrived at the remains of the monastery’s sanctum, which stood lost and alone at the center of the ancient compound, the dark ceremony was in full sway. Twelve black-robed figures knelt in a circle, silver-wrought censers cupped between both hands. Thick plumes of incense rose from them, swirling in dark clouds around the ragged gaps in the stone ceiling, and the air vibrated with the layered harmony of chant.

But the cleric’s gaze was drawn to the crucified figure above the circle of cultists. Arms and feet spiked to the stone-worked wall, the seer raised his head and stared out of the wreckage of his eyes, no doubt fixed upon a glorious vision of the Dark One.

Though Durgoth’s followers called him “Blessed One” out of fear and respect, the cleric knew that it was this man, gazing upon the true face of divinity, who was truly blessed. Rescued by Durgoth’s followers from what would have been a life of endless toil trying to eke a meager existence from the stony soil of a farm north of Redspan in the Bandit Kingdoms, the seer

would now spend the remaining days of his existence as the holy prophet of an ancient god. Durgoth wondered if the man had finally accepted the grace that had been given to him.

A torrent of words spilled out from the seer's bloody mouth, capturing Durgoth's attention. He recognized the flowing lilt of Ancient Suloise. Though he could not understand the old tongue, he noted with satisfaction that Jhagren's young apprentice, himself already familiar with the vagaries of that almost dead language, sat beneath the seer, soft-boned face held tightly in concentration as he painstakingly copied each word. Durgoth watched as the boy pushed back a strand of blond hair, head cocked slightly to the side.

Adrys. He recalled the boy's name after a moment. A bright lad, if a bit too devoted to his master, yet still useful. Though the boy did not quite move with the practiced ease and calm deadliness of Jhagren, Durgoth had witnessed the novice training. Adrys would prove a versatile weapon with the right encouragement. He reminded himself to reward the boy well when all of this was over.

His thoughts were interrupted as Adrys let out a shout in another unfamiliar tongue. This time, it was Jhagren who responded, firing what were obviously questions to his excited student. After a moment, the monk bowed low and made his way to Durgoth.

"Blessed one," he said, with more intensity than the cleric had ever heard him use, "the final quatrain is in place. We now have the location of the key's resting place."

At first, Durgoth simply stared blankly at his advisor, unable to register what he had said. As the monk's words sunk in, however, his heart raced.

"Jhagren," he almost shouted in his excitement, "cut the seer down when he has finished, but make sure he does not die. I have another use for him. And then summon everyone into the main hall. We have much to do."

The cleric smiled as he watched his followers complete the rite and scramble to obey Jhagren, who walked among the cultists like a predator stalking prey. Soon, Durgoth thought, he would avenge years of humiliation. Once they had retrieved the key, his ultimate plan would come to fruition

At last, Tharizdun would be free.

Part 1

“Terror is a Holy Gift . . .”
—*The Book of Nine Shadows*



Kaerion thought it might be different this time.
But it never was.

The walls were white, the pure white of marble cut from mines in the Cairn Hills. Elaborate stonework decorated the walls and recesses of the temple, relieving the simple, austere lines of its basic design. Statues of strong-jawed men and women, shields held forward, swords raised, gazed proudly back at him. Everything here bespoke strength and courage, forthright commitment in the face of adversity.

From a distance, the soaring lilt of a warm soprano cut across the silent temple, caressing each note, spinning a gossamer web of sound. He recognized the hymn, one of his favorites. He had chosen it for his own Dedication.

In came the procession, a line of gray-robed figures, hoods drawn, heads bowed, their stately gait carrying them forward as if they were floating. The boy walked at their head. Clad in a simple white tunic, his serene face broken by the hint of a smile, he marched toward the simple stone altar in the center of the chamber with wide-eyed innocence.

Kaerion wanted to step forward, armed with the knowledge of what was to come, and carry the boy away, but some force held him back. He tried to shout a warning, but the sound of a rich-voiced alto singing a harmonic line swallowed his voice as soon as he had opened his mouth. He looked around desperately for someone to help him, but could not find a single ally.

That's when the screaming began.

In a single, dizzying moment, the beautifully rendered hymn shattered into painful dissonance. Kaerion clapped dirt-crusting hands over his ears, desperate to escape the cacophony. Slowly, the screams faded, yet he could hear another voice, distant and faint but growing louder. He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the scent of blood that had begun to pollute the air, and strained to make out what this new voice was saying. It came to him slowly—

“Kaerion, get your gods-blasted ass out of that bed!”

The nightmare shattered as a boot connected hard with his side. Kaerion groaned, his already full bladder protesting the abuse, and swatted feebly at his attacker. His stomach twisted fiercely, nearly disgorging last night's gristly mutton. Only sheer force of will and a tongue swollen to twice its normal size spared him that indignity.

Another groan escaped his lips, this time in response to the throbbing in his head, which had quickly outstripped the pain in his side. Rubbing scarred hands across eyes nearly crusted shut, he forced himself to gaze upon the visage of the demon that had ripped him from sleep.

A harsh, angular elven face stared back at him, arched brows raised even higher—in anger or amusement, it was always difficult to tell. The elf raised a gloved fist, obviously prepared to strike again, but Kaerion held up one arm in entreaty, wondering when the gnomes would finish their incessant hammering inside his skull.

“Peace, Gerwyth,” he mumbled, “or so help me I'll throw your bony elven carcass right out the window.”

A ghost of a smile cracked the elf's imposing façade, drawing the alien features in starker relief. Delicate cheekbones rose even higher, accenting the angular lines of his face. Long blond hair, pulled back from a high forehead by a silver circlet, flowed around the curved expanse of ears, only to fall

into a jumbled cataract around shoulders covered by a dark green cloak. Beneath the folds of the cloak, metal studs glinted softly in the candlelight.

“Damn it, Kaerion, this is serious.” All trace of levity fled from the elf’s face. “We’re in trouble again, and I’ll be hung and quartered if I’m going to die because you can’t get your ale-sotted wits about you.”

“What now?” Kaerion asked, rising unsteadily to his feet. The room spun viciously, but he managed to catch himself before he fell by grabbing on to the stone wall to his left. His hair stank of tabac, and the sour reek of his sweat filled the small room. It nearly made him vomit, but he mastered his rebellious stomach once again, instead releasing only a single noisy belch.

“Gods’ blood, Kaer!” the elf shouted. “How long are you going to go on doing this to yourself?”

Kaerion ignored the question—as he always did. He was far too sober to think about the circumstances that had brought him to this place. All he really wanted to do was find a dark corner and drink his throbbing headache into quiescence.

“You said we’re in trouble,” he replied, with considerably more aplomb than he felt. “What kind of trouble?” He thought perhaps reasoning with his old friend might reduce the likelihood that he would continue to shout.

“Do you remember the merchant who needed caravan guards to help transfer his assets from Hammensend to Woodwych?”

Kaerion nodded. The greedy bastard had hired thugs to steal valuables from certain families and then tried to sell them back to these families for twice their value. It was a good thing they hadn’t made it back to Hammensend, he thought wistfully, or that pile of filth would have had to deal with him.

“You mean Master Hemon, the thief who—”

“I mean the merchant who *hired* us to protect his interests,” the elf interrupted. “The one connected to half of the crime lords in this city.” He paused, obviously looking for some

sign that his companion understood where he was heading.

Kaerion opened his mouth to protest, but was cut off with a sharp gesture.

“Gods! Did you have to take it upon yourself to ‘redistribute’ those gold nobles?” Gerwyth asked.

Kaerion felt his own temper rise, and the pounding in his skull intensified. “It wasn’t really his money, anyway,” he said through gritted teeth.

Five years they’d traveled together across the roads and byways of the southern Flanaess and Gerwyth still didn’t understand. Even after everything that had happened to him, after he’d proven his own guilt and cowardice a dozen times, there were still a few things that mattered.

Like getting stinking drunk, another part of his mind thought, instead of standing here arguing like an old married couple.

“Yes, well,” the elf responded, with all the grace of a spurned fishwife. “Now he’s taken the money that is his and placed a bounty on our heads. I was down by the docks when I found out. It seems that there are quite a few people who won’t mind sharing the reward, and they are apparently going to try and collect soon. We’ve got to leave Woodwych for a bit. If we hurry, we can start our journey as soon as the gates open. I have a purse set up for us in Rel Mord. It’s a big enough city that we can lay low until we meet our contact.”

“Contact?” Kaerion questioned sarcastically. “Who are we working for now, the Circle of Eight?” Truth be told, he didn’t feel much like working for anyone and had told his friend that on occasions too numerous to count. “I’m not taking on any more work, Gerwyth,” he stated flatly.

The elf’s eyes flashed emerald green. Nearly a decade of familiarity allowed Kaerion to read his friend’s moods. When his almond-shaped eyes took on that color, it meant the ranger was at his most dangerous.

Gerwyth, however, did not challenge his companion. “We can argue about this later,” he replied. “Right now, we need to get out of here before it’s too—”

The sharp crack of splintering wood echoed loudly from a distance.

“Late,” the elf finished.

Kaerion heard the deep-throated grumble of voices followed by several muffled screams and knew that trouble had indeed found them. He only hoped that the bastards left the innkeeper and his family unharmed. The Griffon’s Wing wasn’t the best inn within the walls of Woodwych by any means, but its owners were decent people, even if their patrons left something to be desired. If any of their family were hurt tonight, Kaerion thought angrily, he just might make a personal trip back to Hammensend and gut that fat merchant himself.

The door to his room shuddered beneath a fearsome blow.

Instinctively, Kaerion reached for his sword and cursed when he discovered his scabbard was not buckled on. He scanned the room, trying to remember where he had dropped it. Battle tension ran through his system, chasing away a good portion of the aftereffects of the previous evening, as it always did. His head, however, still remained a bit fuzzy, and it took a few moments to locate the well-worn scabbard beneath a filth-encrusted cloak.

Kaerion drew the sword just as the door rocked beneath another blow. He could clearly see the door’s thick wood beginning to split, and he looked to Gerwyth. The elf had just finished stringing his bow and held the weapon in one hand. Silver runes ran down the curved ash-wood body, bathing the room in cold fire.

Kaerion gripped the worn hilt of his own weapon tightly. Years of habit brought his thumb forward to rub the pure white diamond set deeply into the leather-wrapped pommel. The action always calmed him before a battle. He stifled a

curse as his finger touched only simple steel, and he cast a bitter glance toward the corner of the small room, where a finely wrought jeweled scabbard lay against the wall.

Galadorn, he spoke the sword's name silently, longingly, as if calling out to a long-lost lover. Where once he would have heard its response, deep-voiced and regal, sonorous tones ringing with unearthly purity, he sensed only the slightest of responses, like the tremulous whispers of that lover's farewell, and he nearly staggered under the familiar weight of loss that descended upon him.

Forged with powerful magic and blessed, legends said, by the hand of Heironeous himself, the mystic sword would protect its wielder from all but the most powerful spells, and its holy might would cut through the thickest of armor. But the power of the sword lay beyond him now, lost the moment his faith in his god shattered under the vaulted domes of a hellish temple. Try as he might to separate himself from this poignant reminder of his past, the sword always remained. He'd tried everything from weighting it down and tossing it into a river to hiring hedge wizards to cast spells of holding. The result was always the same. He'd wake up from a drunken stupor with the sword only a finger's breadth from his hand—and permanently sheathed in its jeweled scabbard. Thus, he was forced to wield a simple piece of cold, dead steel.

"We should climb out the window and make for the roof." The elf's voice broke through Kaerion's mournful thoughts. "It's too far to jump down to the lane below."

"Gerwyth, you know I will not run from this."

The ranger smiled, tossing his cloak behind one slender shoulder. "Who said anything about running? The roof will make it far easier for *her*," he said, indicating the glowing bow, "to pick off whoever is after us."

Kaerion shrugged and followed his friend to the window. There was no time to put on any armor, and the close quarters

of the room made it more likely that he could be cornered and overmastered by a rush of bodies. The roof was just as good a place as any to send these ruffians back to the dark mother who bore them.

The door finally gave way under the combined attack of several figures, and they let out a shout of victory as the last plank shattered. Before he climbed out the window, Kaerion made out the glint of chainmail beneath some of the attackers' cloaks. At least that will slow them down somewhat, he thought, as he pulled himself up over the jutting lip of the window.

Above him, he could make out the scuttling form of Gerwyth. The nimble elf was already rolling quietly on to the rooftop. He caught the howls of outrage from the thugs in his room as they realized that their quarry was escaping. A few quick pulls brought Kaerion to the roof, where he took a moment to catch his breath.

The gray light of false dawn hung over the rooftop, giving everything a dim, muted feel. Patches of fog rolled past, touching his face with its cool fingers. He spotted Gerwyth standing to one side, head cocked slightly, eyes scanning the urban horizon. Kaerion knew his friend had sensed something amiss and now relied on his hunting instincts—instincts which had made him one of the best trackers and guides in the southeastern Flanaess—to unearth the source of his unease.

"We've got company," the elf said after another moment.

The twang of a bowstring and the sharp hiss of an arrow cut through the predawn silence. Kaerion leapt to one side and noticed with satisfaction that the ranger had done the same. The arrow shattered as it struck stone.

He wasn't prepared, however, for the sudden emergence of six figures from the gloom. He had a moment to watch Gerwyth deflect two sword strokes with the hardened curve of his magic bow before his attackers were upon him. He ducked quickly as the blade of a sword came whistling for his neck,

and he brought his own weapon across in a quick cutting stroke, satisfied when he felt the blade slash deeply into the stomach of his opponent.

His other attacker wasted no time, however, taking advantage of the opening presented by his defensive move, and Kaerion grunted hard as a mailed boot connected with his side. He used the momentum brought on by the kick to place some distance between him and his opponents.

There were four of them, hard-eyed and steel-jawed all, each with the look of practiced killers. The heavy-booted one wore chainmail and carried a wicked-looking curved sword. Of the three, his eyes were the coldest, like blue ice, and Kaerion knew he'd have to take that one out fast. Two others wore no armor, but each wielded long daggers in either hand. The fourth lay on the ground, holding in the bulge of guts that threatened to spill out.

Kaerion opened his stance and shifted his weight toward his center, taking deep, easy breaths. The last remnants of the previous evening's debauchery fled beneath the familiar thrill of battle. Let them come to me, he thought. They'll have to fight me on my terms.

The sounds of battle rang out over the rooftop, and he risked a glance at his friend, noting with satisfaction that the elf had dropped his bow and now wielded two gleaming short swords with expert precision. One of the figures, a grizzled human, lay at Gerwyth's feet, clutching the juncture of his neck and shoulder. Blood spurted out between the man's fingers, raining down upon the cold stone of the rooftop.

A furious snarl brought his full attention back to his own problems. He raised his sword to parry as the mailed figure ran toward him, swinging his weapon in a wide arc. Kaerion gave a curse as the two blades clanged together with great force, nearly shattering his wrist. Gods this man was strong!

Both dagger-wielding men moved in swiftly as Kaerion grunted with the effort of freeing his sword from the curve of

his opponent's blade. He sidestepped the first viper-fast dagger by stepping inside his main opponent's guard with his left foot and bringing his right foot behind him while twisting his hips. The momentum freed his sword, but made his right side vulnerable to the second man's daggers. He cried out as the twin blades punctured shoulder and forearm.

Sensing victory, the mailed warrior redoubled his efforts, and Kaerion found himself hard pressed to block the vicious cuts of the man's powerful attacks—especially while minimizing his exposure to the two other men who circled him like wolves waiting to pounce on a wounded elk. Sweat poured down his face now and his breathing grew labored. Grimly, Kaerion tried to summon his reserves. While years of heavy drinking had not quite erased the effects of a lifetime of training and battle, he was like a weapon dulled by abuse and neglect.

He saw his opening when one of the unarmored figures darted in for a quick attack. Kaerion brought his sword up, feinting a strike against the leader. Sidestepping the dagger, he reached out with his right hand and grabbed the collar of the man, throwing him into his mailed opponent. While the two stumbled against each other, Kaerion aimed a blow at the man's weapon, grimacing only slightly as his sword neatly sliced off his opponent's arm at the elbow. The mailed figure screamed and fell to the ground. His severed hand landed with a metallic clang several feet away, still holding the scimitar.

Kaerion took advantage of the distraction and quickly ran one of the dagger wielding figures through with his blade. The remaining attacker turned to flee. Kaerion cursed and started to take off after him, but stopped short as the figure stumbled once and then pitched forward, an arrow protruding from his throat.

Kaerion turned to see Gerwyth lowering his bow, an exultant smile on his face. The elf's cloak and studded leather

armor were spattered with gore, and his blond hair was streaked red with blood. In the lanes below, the two companions could make out the stirrings of the city watch come to investigate the early morning disturbance. The remaining assassins would no doubt have high-tailed it out of the inn, not wishing to be exposed to the authorities.

“So, Kaer, what do you think now?” the elf asked as the two caught their breath.

“I think,” Kaerion replied, wiping blood from his blade, “that you are an insufferable fool who is right more times than is good for him.”

“Does this mean you’ll come with me to Rel Mord?”

Kaerion nodded in the first rosy light of day. The shouts of the watch grew louder and more frantic as they neared the Griffon’s Wing.

“What choice do I have?” he replied.