

The Cloak and the Dagger

by Dusty Monk

Barak sat at the table, sipping his tea quietly. It was just after dawn, and he was the taproom's sole occupant. Even the innkeep was nowhere to be seen, undoubtedly in the back somewhere making preparations for what was probably going to be another blistering day. Barak didn't mind the heat. He had been raised in climes much warmer than this, and what was to everyone else scorchingly hot was to Barak tolerably warm. He pulled the collar of his gray robes up a bit, and took another sip of the steaming tea. It's just as well the innkeep's not here anyway, he thought to himself. He felt it was a credit to the man's intellect that by now he had figured out that during these morning sits, Barak wanted nothing more than a large mug of herbal tea, and to be left alone. For the past two weeks Barak had been renting one of the rooms upstairs, and each morning, at precisely the break of dawn, he went down to the taproom. There he spent exactly thirty minutes -- the amount of time it took for the sun's rays to go from the first barstool to the third floor plank from the wall -- just sitting and sipping his tea. Barak found the ritual relaxed him. It allowed him to collect his thoughts, and to prepare his mental faculties for the trials of the day ahead.

And trials they were. Not since graduating from the seven year tutelage had he faced a chantmaster as rigorous as Master Nevelm. Each day he and his fellow student had been put through the paces by the chantmaster. Hour upon hour of verbal exercises, followed by equally long finger and hand dexterity drills, and that itself often followed by obscure and cryptic riddle games -- until by the end of each day he could barely speak, his hands felt that they would fall off at the wrist, and his mind was numb from the work. Barak looked down ruefully at the sleeves of his robes. All just for a slightly darker shade, he smiled to himself.

But the work was worth it. Besides the magic itself, Barak enjoyed the secrecy -- the mystery that went with his profession. He wouldn't give it up for a dragon's eye. The robes marked his profession to anyone in Athania as that of a sorcerer -- no mystery there. But of the three schools of magic practiced, sorcerers were without a doubt the most secretive -- most discreet group of them all. It was common enough knowledge that initiates just entering the seven year tutelage wore robes of white. And that only the Grand Sorcerer wore robes of black. But between, all sorcerers wore some shade of gray. The darker the shade, the more skilled the sorcerer. But in typical fashion, only those that had completed the seven year tutelage knew exactly how many shades of gray there were to the sorcerer's ranks. Barak chuckled to himself. It just typified the whole belief system of sorcerers -- keep them guessing. Barak glanced down at the floor. The sun's rays had withdrawn almost to the third plank from the wall. It was time to go. Master Nevelm would not tolerate tardiness. He finished off the last of his now cool tea, set a few copper pence under the cup, and strode out into the already warm day.

There it was again! That insistent pounding! Who in Nagesh's black name was it! Devon buried his head under the pillow, but it was no good. He could still hear the pounding. "Go away!" his muffled call came from beneath the pillow. "Before I come cut off your arms and feed them to you!" The pounding stopped. For a few blissful moments, there was silence. But then a plaintiff voice called from beyond the door.

"But Master Winter sir.. Master Lacroft was most specific. He told me you were to come see him at once! His instructions were quite clear sir!" Devon fumed. That was it. He hadn't lay down more than three hours ago -- and it was the first bed he'd seen after two weeks of sleeping outside. He rolled out of bed in a fury and grabbed his sword. "I don't care if the King of Calor himself summoned me!" He drew his sword loudly as he stormed towards the door. "If you're there when I open this door, I swear I'll--" He jerked open the door to his room. The hallway was empty. He grinned to himself. That had to have been Gareph -- Lacroft's lackey. Boy's smarter than he looks, Devon chuckled to himself. He closed the

door, and turned back to face the room. It was a mess. Dirty, travel-worn clothes littered the floor. His bed was in chaos. He had arrived at the inn the previous evening, after a two-week journey performing Lacroft's last assignment. The trip had been a success, and he had celebrated enthusiastically. He glanced at the window. It was midmorning judging by the light and the activity on the street. He looked back at the bed longingly, and sighed. What in bloody Asu did Lacroft want with him now. Devon ran a hand through his disheveled hair, and eyed the chamber pot unpleasantly.

An hour later found Devon dressed, reasonably presentable, and standing before the door to the Mission Hall in Port Kaleer's wharf district. He opened the door and entered into a narrow, dimly lit hallway. Devon moved down it quickly. He expertly stepped from one unseen panel on the floor to another, taking giant, leaping strides, without even thinking about it. He moved past several doors on both sides of the hall without slowing. They were all fake anyway. They either led to a brick wall or a quick death. At the end of the hall, ten feet past the last door on the right, he stopped, and turned to face the blank stone wall. With barely a moment's thought he reached out and touched a certain stone in the wall masonry -- unremarkable against the others. The stone slid in a fraction of an inch, there was a satisfying snick, and Devon tilted his head sideways just as several darts erupted from the wall in front of his face and whistled past his head, imbedding in the wall behind him. Devon knew that a guard would be along in a few minutes to remove the darts from the wall. A large, rectangular crack appeared in the wall, and then widened as a section of the wall slid towards him. The section of wall rotated on its center, and he squeezed through the opening into the room beyond -- the Mission Hall.

The Mission Hall was a largish room, and richly furnished. Large tapestries with intricate design adorned the walls, and numerous pieces of weaponry hung on display at various locations. The floor was of highly polished white marble, and set in the center of the room was a large ornately carved table of dark thistledale wood. Plush high-backed chairs ringed the table, and there was sitting for at least ten people. Opposite the room from where Devon stood a pair of gilded double doors served as the room's main entrance. The entrance Devon had taken was the guildsmen entrance -- more heavily trapped, but much less guarded. The main entrance was used by those visiting the guild, requesting some specific task or service. He walked over to the table, pulled out a chair, and sat down. He knew that Lacroft was watching him, and would undoubtedly be along in a few minutes.

It took, in fact, less than five before Lacroft's wiry form came through the doors, his face in a scowl. "You're late," he said without preamble. "I summoned you over an hour ago. What was the matter -- couldn't get the harlot out of your bed?" Lacroft's scowl turned into a toothy grin. It really wasn't very pretty, Devon thought. The scowl was much more appealing. Lacroft bore more resemblance to a badger -- both in appearance and manner -- than to any of his fellow humans. He pulled out a chair and sat down across from Devon. "Whatever it is Lacroft," Devon said wearily, "find someone else. I just got back into town yesterday, and I'm taking a break."

"I'm well aware of when you got back Devon," Lacroft said grinning. "And I agree, you do need a break. But it'll have to wait. Until tomorrow."

"I don't think you understand," Devon said evenly. "I'm taking a break. Beginning today. Find someone else to pilfer House Vindel's china".

"And I don't think you understand, Mr. Winter," Lacroft replied, his voice taking on an edge. "There is no one else. This is not some house burglary. It's a delicate job, and you're the only one that's really qualified." Lacroft paused, and then added emphatically, "You have no choice."

Devon sighed, and rubbed his forehead. The headache that had started on the way over from the inn was beginning to get worse. He waited a long moment, his head in his hand. Finally, without looking up, he spoke.

"What is it that is so important it can't wait another day? What is it that must be done by my special talents?" His voice was thick with sarcasm.

"That's better." Lacroft's grin returned. "Don't worry, you'll like this one. It's a sorcerer". He paused, to let that sink in. Devon lifted his head to look at Lacroft levelly. He hated working with mages in general -- but sorcerers were by far the worst. His eyes narrowed.

"Continue," he said levelly.

"Of course. Two weeks ago, a sorcerer took up residence at The Roc. We've been watching him, and we believe he has in his possession a Cloak of Obscurement. Do you know what that is?" His tone took on the barest hint of belittlement. Devon ignored it.

"Somewhat. It makes the wearer harder to see."

"That's close enough. We believe he's keeping the cloak in his room. Someone else has paid us a large sum of money to retrieve this item. You are to do it. Today."

"Today?" Devon asked incredulously. "That's ridiculous! I have to prepare! I'm not just going to walk in on a sorcerer without spending at least a week studying him! What you're asking is suicide."

"We've been watching him for you," Lacroft replied smoothly. "And we've determined all you need to know. The sorcerer is here for training from Nevelm. Each morning he leaves his room, is gone all day, and doesn't return until just before dark. Undoubtedly, his room will be warded, but I'm confident you can handle that. We have further reason to believe that today will be his last day of training. That's why it must be done today. We've already agreed to the contract, and you just got back, and well, you're really the only one that can do it." Lacroft leaned back, grinning widely. He seemed immensely pleased with himself.

Devon just sat across from Lacroft, staring at him numbly -- his mind pondering murder. He couldn't believe it. Not only was he being asked to break into a sorcerer's personal quarters -- risky business under the best of circumstances -- but he was being told to do so virtually blindfolded. Devon didn't like it. Lacroft had sent him on some damned fool missions before, but this was the first time he could recall being asked to do something so blatantly poised for disaster. Something here wasn't right. Nevertheless, he knew he really had no choice. To walk out on Lacroft and this assignment was to walk out on the guild -- and Devon really wasn't ready to do that. He sighed heavily and stood up.

"I'll get my stuff. You'll have your cloak by this evening." He gave Lacroft a cold look. "Do not call me tomorrow." He turned and walked from the room, going out the main entrance. As he closed the door behind him, he saw that Lacroft was still sitting at the table -- grinning that damned toothy grin. "Well," Devon said to himself. "The easy part's over with. Now to earn my keep". He stood at the top of the stairs in The Red Roc Inn, looking down a long hallway. His mood had brightened considerably, as it usually did when he was in his element. And sorcerer or no, this was his element.

He turned and glanced back down the stairs, to the taproom below. It was still empty. It was by now mid-afternoon, and most of the inn's usual patrons were still busy down at the docks. So far, things had gone exceptionally well. He had made his way to the help's entrance at the back of the inn, and let himself in without preamble. A quick jaunt through the kitchen, where he helped himself to a slice of ham, a creep behind the bar, and a quick trot up the stairs had gotten him to the inn's upstairs rooms without being spotted by a sole. Still, Devon knew to be wary. Secretive and deceitful, sorcerers could make a rock look like a chest, and a thief could waste hours carefully trying to open a lump of granite.

The hallway went straight ahead for several dozen feet before ending. There were three guest doors on

the right, and two on the left. First thing to do was to figure out which was the sorcerer's. He went to the first door on the right, and examined the lock. Unlocked. Not a chance. He moved to the second and examined it. Also unlocked. Extremely trusting people, he thought to himself. He moved to the third door on the right. Locked. He bent down, and peered at the lock more closely. It was locked, but it didn't appear to be anything too difficult. Just the standard lock the innkeep placed on all the doors. This wasn't the sorcerer's door -- just someone with sense. He moved back down the hall, to the first door on the left. This one was also locked. He took a closer look. Skull Eyes!

There were intricate quill lines in a complex pattern around the knob and the lock. He sat down and studied the lines for a few minutes, letting the sigils drift through his head, looking for a pattern. It took a few moments, and then it clicked. The spell was a derivation of an alarm spell. "Huh," he grunted. Big surprise there. He couldn't tell if setting off the trap would cause a loud noise or not, but it really didn't matter. The sorcerer would be alerted immediately. Disarming the trap would be tricky -- but not impossible. He sat for a few more moments, just looking at the lock. Something didn't feel right. He couldn't place his finger on it, but it just seemed -- somehow -- wrong. He stood up and went down to the last door on the left. Also unlocked. This has to be it, he thought to himself as he returned to the trapped door. You're just nervous about disarming a sorcerer's trap. Quit stalling and get to work. He walked back to the top of the stairs, and took another look. The taproom was still empty. He reached into his pack and pulled out several handfuls of little sharp pieces of metal, which he scattered about the floor at the top of the stairs. Cattrips. Certainly not lethal, but annoying enough to give him warning if someone came up the stairs. He returned to the trapped door, and sat down in front of it, cross-legged. Rummaging through his pack, he produced a small pouch, containing various picks, brushes, and quills. He selected a quill, and bent close to the lock. Once you knew what you were looking for, it wasn't too difficult to see. He reached up, and was just about to touch the first line when it hit him like a bucket of ice water. The sigils aren't that hard to see! He froze. This is a sorcerer's trap! Sweet Asu! A sorcerer's trap would never be this easy to find! He put down his quill, stood up, and walked back to the last door on the right -- the only other door that had been locked. He peered at it. Nothing.

"Yeah right," he said to himself. He went over to his pack and retrieved a small pouch, filled with fine gray sand. Returning to the door, he began to sprinkle the sand around the door's jam and lock. If his theory was correct.. some of the sand should.. there! As the sand fell around the door lock, some of it stuck in place, forming little lines and patterns -- like iron shavings to a magnet. Within minutes, he could clearly discern another trap -- one far more complex than the last one. "There you are sweetheart," he breathed. Devon returned to the first trapped door to retrieve his pack. As he did so, he looked again at the false trap. No -- not false, just not the right one. He shook his head in disbelief. The alarm trap was totally real. The man actually took the time to trap two doors every morning -- one real, the other a fake. Devon shook his head in disgust as he returned to the real trap. Sorcerers!

Devon sat before the new trap -- the real one, and studied it. The lines and sigils were of a pattern he didn't recognize. He retrieved a small leather-bound book from his pack. Opening it, he thumbed through the pages, comparing the notes and pictures on the pages against the sigils before him. There. He tapped the page with his index finger. This was it.

"Acid spray," he said aloud. "Marvelous." He put the book down, rifled through his tool set, and selected several quills and a thin brush. The trick with magical traps was to rearrange the symbols in such a way so that they thought they were still connected, when in fact they weren't. He would have to create a new set of sigils to serve as the receptacle of the trap, and then painstakingly route each symbol from the lock to the new set of sigils. It was slow, tedious, and deadly work. One missed quill stroke -- one botched mark, and Devon knew he'd be getting a nice bath of highly corrosive acid. Carefully, he made the first stroke.

An hour later he was finished. He selected a pick from his tool set, and picked the lock on the door without hesitation. The door opened -- and the trap held. He allowed himself a moment of smugness.

He stiffly rose to his feet, opened the door, and looked inside. Yep. No doubt about it. This was the sorcerer's room. Books scattered about the table, reading candle burned down to its wick, numerous scrolls, papers, and more books strewn about the rest of the room. He glanced around. There was a small chest at the end of the bed. It looked to be the only thing in the room capable of concealing the cloak. And that was what bothered him. He didn't even go to the chest. Instead, he continued to stand in the doorway, looking at the room. Look for the pattern -- and then find the glitch. Chest, bed, table, chair. That pretty much did it for furniture. He let his eyes fall over the rest. The arrangement of the books on the table. The table itself. The layout of the books on the bed. The chair. Wait. The table. Something wasn't right about the table. He walked over to it slowly. He peered at the top of the table, and then crouched down to peer underneath. Like most tables, the legs were uneven. One leg, the near one, was shorter than the others. It rested about a half-inch off the floor. Devon frowned. That wasn't right. He stood up and looked at the top of the table. All the books were on the near side -- the weight of the books should be pushing the short leg against the floor. Hmmm. He looked over the table. There was a clear spot, about a foot square, on the back side. He grinned. He reached into his side pouch and produced another small packet of powder -- flour. He sprinkled the flour over the clear space. As it fell, it gathered on something solid. A chest. Skull Eyes! he thought triumphantly. He sprinkled more flour, until the entire box was revealed. Then he bent close, and examined the lock. Trapped and locked, but nothing he couldn't handle. Fifteen more minutes, and the lock was open. He opened the chest carefully, and looked inside. Folded neatly within was a soft, gray cloak. Excellent. He reached for the cloak.

"Find what you're looking for?" a voice said from behind him. Devon whirled and crouched at the same time, a dagger slipping into his hand. A man stood in the doorway, resting against the door jam. He was clad entirely in a darkish gray robe. Ash's Ghost! The sorcerer!

"I have to admit -- I'm fairly impressed," the sorcerer continued. "I thought I had taken sufficient precaution, but I can see that I was mistaken.

Fortunately for me though, you didn't see all the triggers." His eyes flickered to the floor. Devon swore to himself. He could now see the tiny swirls and sigils marked in fine sand on the room's floor -- just in front of the door. Of course the sorcerer wouldn't have relied only on the lock on the door! The sorcerer had been alerted the moment Devon entered the room.

"Also fortunately for me, it appears I have arrived just in time. It would seem you have not yet purloined my belongings. As that is the case, I will be content for you to simply leave. I feel no need to--" Devon didn't hear the rest of what the man said. At that moment, another man moved into view behind the sorcerer. He was unkempt in appearance, and his identity was hidden by a bandana tied around his face. He stood directly behind the sorcerer, wielding a long scimitar. He raised the weapon high. The sorcerer continued, totally oblivious. At that moment, Devon did something he really wouldn't understand until years later. He warned the sorcerer. He gave the briefest of nods, and let his eyes flicker over the sorcerer's shoulder. It was enough. The sorcerer deftly stepped in and to the right of the doorway just as the scimitar came whistling through the space where he had been standing. Then chaos erupted.

The man came after the sorcerer, swinging wildly. The sorcerer was backpedaling furiously, attempting to avoid the assailant's blows. He was already chanting, and his hands were working furiously. At that moment, a buckler-protected arm crashed in the window behind Devon, and as Devon turned he saw two more men come crawling through. These men were also wearing bandanas. They charged towards Devon. Devon reversed his dagger, and hurled it at the closest one. It embedded in his shoulder, and the man staggered back a step with a cry. He recovered quickly though, pulling the dagger from his shoulder,

and continuing on. Another dagger slipped into Devon's hands, replacing the first. Just then, the first swordsman with the scimitar let out a blood-curdling scream, and backed away from the sorcerer, his eyes wide with terror. He turned and fled the room, running for his life and dropping his weapon in the process. As Devon prepared to meet the charge of the man engaging him, he wondered briefly what demons the sorcerer had made the man see to cause him to flee like that. The second man from the window turned and closed with the sorcerer, whom barely had time to get out his dagger and fend for his life. Devon knew that as long as he was engaged in combat, he'd have no chance for more spells.

Then his opponent was upon him. He came in high, with a side slash, which Devon easily ducked under. Then the man backed up, and began to circle Devon, looking for a better angle. Devon circled with him, keeping him in front. As he did so, his mind worked furiously. Who were these men? What were they after? Him? The sorcerer? The cloak? The man lunged forward. Devon met the attack head on -- or so it seemed. He jerked his head left, then right, narrowly avoiding two vicious cuts. Then he thrust his dagger forward with his right hand. The man dodged left, avoiding the dagger, and met Devon's onrushing left fist. Devon punched the man squarely on his shoulder -- directly on top of the knife wound. The man cried out, and stepped back. Devon pushed the advantage. He feinted high with the dagger. The man threw his sword up to block the blow, and before he could recover Devon thrust the dagger under the man's guard, burying the blade deep in the man's belly. The attacker staggered back, stumbled over the chair, and went sprawling. He writhed in pain, the dagger still buried in his stomach. Devon turned to the sorcerer.

The other man had the sorcerer backed into a corner. The mage was defending furiously, but the swordsman had the advantage, and knew it. Already the sorcerer was bleeding from several cuts. Just then the swordsman connected with a solid cut that bit deeply into the sorcerer's arm, causing him to cry out and drop his dagger. The assailant raised his sword for the death blow. A dagger sprouted from the back of his neck. He cried out, dropping his blade to reach for the buried dagger. He turned to see Devon crouched on one knee, his throwing hand still extended. The man gurgled once, and crashed to the floor. The sorcerer rose from the corner.

"I'm not sure why you saved my life," he said. "But I'm thankful."

"Right now I'm not sure either," Devon replied. He wasn't all that terribly concerned about the sorcerer. His mind was on other things. He had a hunch. He went over to the man with his dagger in his belly, who was still writhing on the floor, moaning in pain. Devon rolled the man over roughly, and jerked the bandana from his face. His eyes widened in recognition. Sweet Mother of Asu! These were guild thieves! Why were guild thieves here? Devon's mind was racing. This was bad. This was very bad. He retrieved his blade from the man's stomach, causing him to cry out in pain, and clutch at the gaping hole. Devon ignored the man, cleaning his blade and re-sheathing it. He turned to the sorcerer. "We definitely should be leaving here. Now." While Devon had been examining the thief, the sorcerer had retrieved some bandages from his chest, and had bound his wounded arm.

"Agreed," said the sorcerer. "But first I have to get something." He went to the flour-covered chest, and with a level gaze at Devon, withdrew the cloak. Devon didn't really care. He had been stealing the cloak for the guild, and the guild had just tried to kill him. As far as he was concerned, his contract was null and void. For that matter, so was his membership. Now if he could just keep his life from becoming the same.

He turned and headed out the room and down the corridor, not really caring if the sorcerer followed him or not. He reached the top of the stairs. Looking down, he noticed all his cattrips had been swept aside. He saw with chagrin four more men making their way through the taproom, towards the stairs. He turned and headed back to the room, just as the sorcerer was coming down the corridor.

"Not that way," he said as he passed him. "Out the window!"

He re-entered the room and went to the window. Leaning out he looked down. All clear. He turned back into the room. The sorcerer re-entered, and closed the door. He began chanting, waving his hands over the door. Devon turned back to the window. Looking out, he eyed the wall. Not too bad. He would be able to climb down easily enough. He turned back in just as the sorcerer finished the incantation.

"That should hold them for a bit," he said as he came over to the window. He looked out, then looked back at Devon. "That way?" he asked dubiously. Devon nodded.

"I can climb down. But I don't know how you're going to get down."

"Don't worry about me," the sorcerer replied. "I'm not without resources. You go ahead. I'll be down right behind you." He stepped back from the window and began another incantation. Devon shrugged his shoulders. Whatever. He climbed out the window and sat on the sill. Then he turned and, facing the wall, lowered himself down until he got a foothold. He then began to scale down the wall, carefully finding footholds and handholds in the aged brick and mortar. Just then he looked up, and nearly lost his grip with what he saw. The sorcerer was crawling down the wall face first! As each hand and foot touched the wall, it stuck like it was covered in glue. The sorcerer moved briskly down the wall, quickly passing Devon. He grinned hugely at the thief as he did so. Devon just smiled and shook his head. Just as Devon reached the bottom, he heard a loud crash from above him, followed by a brief yell. The thieves must have finally broken through the sorcerer's door, Devon mused, and ended their companion's misery. Just as well -- it could take a long time to die of a gut wound. He stepped back and looked up. Two bandana-covered faces poked their heads out the window. Devon grinned and waved, and then took off after the already departing sorcerer.

Barak ducked into the first narrow alleyway he came to, a block from the inn. He figured the thief would want to get out of the open as soon as possible. He was right. The thief ducked into the alley as well, directly on his heels. He drew up short when he saw Barak waiting for him there.

"Well," said the thief, glancing around. "There's that. Nothing personal you understand -- I was just doing a job." His face had a hard look. "Now I've got another job. Good travels." He turned to leave.

"Wait!" Barak said. The thief paused, and turned. Barak knew better. Just let him go, the reasonable part of him said. But Barak was in his debt. "You saved my life back there. If you had not warned me, the man would have cleaved me in two while I stood there lecturing you about the evils of thievery." The thief grinned at this.

"Yeah well.. I don't know why I did that. I guess I just hate someone else interfering in my business."

"Well," Barak continued. "I am in your debt. And I am a man who repays his debts. What is it you plan to do?"

"It's really not your concern," the thief sighed. "Look.. I'd love to stay and chat with you, but those rogues will be on us in about ten seconds."

"It is my business!" Barak insisted. "Those men attacked me as well. If you know what's going on.. and if you intend to go after them.. you're going to need help. And I am helping you."

The thief stood and looked at Barak in silence for a moment -- as if sizing him up. Finally, he sighed.

"All right. Let's go. We'll have to stay out of site until tonight. I know a place." He turned and took off down the alleyway.

"Oh -- by the way," Barak called after the thief as he took off after him. "My name's Barak. Barak Taranton."

"Great," the thief said over his shoulder as he cut out of the alley and ducked into another one. "My name's Devon. And if you don't stop hollering and start running, your name's going to be splitgut!"

Barak crouched in the shadows with Devon at the base of the house. It was well past midnight. The sorcerer's dark robes and the thief's black leather made the pair virtually invisible in the darkness. They were in the watergarden district of Port Kaleer, hiding between two of the district's many large homes and mansions. Across the street ran a row of similar houses, each one attempting to out do the other in its opulence. Their attention was focused on one of the homes in the middle of the row -- a sizeable estate in its own right, but unremarkable against the others. The mansion was cloaked in darkness. Barak could just barely make out the form of a man leaning against the wall near the estate's main door.

"Is that the only one?" Barak whispered.

"On the outside, yeah," Devon returned. "But there'll be three more inside -- Lacroft's personal guard. However, only one will be on duty at a time, patrolling the house."

Barak nodded. Lacroft. Apparently, he was head of the local thieves guild. Inwardly, Barak shook his head. He didn't much like the idea of attempting to take out the head of the guild. Those men didn't get into those positions by being sloppy or incompetent. But Devon had been insistent. The two of them had spent the afternoon hiding out in the berth of an abandoned fishing boat. During that time, Devon had explained that he was a member of the thieves guild, and that the theft of Barak's cloak had been a guild sanctioned job. But it had been a setup. It had been guild thieves that had attacked them. Devon was sure of this. That could only mean one thing. Lacroft had wanted Devon removed. So Devon intended to find out why. He had been in the guild for a long time, and never once had he crossed Lacroft. He had to know why the guildmaster had ordered his assassination. So together Barak and Devon had come up with a plan. And now here they were. Across from Lacroft's personal residence, in the dead of the night.

Devon turned back to Barak. "Ready?" he whispered. Barak nodded. He began the series of intricate gestures, and whispered the incantation, his voice barely audible. When he finished, he gestured towards the far corner of Lacroft's mansion.

A large crash sounded there. The guard at the door was on his feet in an instance, peering into the darkness.

"Would you be careful!" a voice whispered overly loud near the crash. "Or you'll get us caught for sure!"

"Me! You're the one that forgot to bring some light!" a second voice whispered back.

"C'mon!" the first voice returned. "Around the back. I'm sure there's an entrance there."

The sound of a sword being pulled from its scabbard floated across the street as the guard left his post and disappeared in the darkness around the corner of the house, in the direction of the departing voices.

Devon didn't hesitate a second. As soon as the guard was gone, he leapt from his position in the shadows and sped silently across the street, to the mansion's door. Barak followed after. By the time he got there, Devon already had the door unlocked.

He opened the door a crack, the two of them slipped in, and then he closed the door behind them,

relocking it. Barak glanced around, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness within. They were in a large, marbled-floored foyer. Directly in front of them an ornate staircase led to the second floor. Barak could barely make out Devon's form in the darkness beside him. Devon held one finger up to his lips, and then pointed across the foyer. Barak looked in the direction he pointed. He could just barely make out a figure seated at the base of the stairs. Barak couldn't tell in the darkness if the man was asleep or awake. Devon was motioning again. He pointed to Barak and pointed to the ground. Then he pointed to himself, and pointed to the figure. Barak got it. Wait here. Devon would handle the guard. He nodded, Devon turned, and was gone, his form completely disappearing in the darkness. Amazing, Devon thought. Not that he could make himself disappear so readily -- but that he did it without any magic! Barak turned to look where the guard was seated at the base of the stairs. He could still just barely make him out. Suddenly the guard stirred, and stood up. Barak froze, afraid even to breathe. The guard looked around, and stretched hugely. Then he was gone. Devon blinked. What had happened? He rubbed his eyes, and looked again. The guard was just gone. Ash's Ghost! Barak breathed. He wondered for the first time -- though it wouldn't be for the last -- if he was as good a sorcerer as Devon obviously was a thief. Devon's form emerged from the shadows, and he motioned for Barak to follow him.

They reached the top of the stairs, and then headed down a hall. Along the hallway every so many feet were hung what appeared to be extremely expensive paintings. Devon passed two doors on the left, and then stopped at a third. Here, he paused, and turned to the sorcerer. He nodded meaningfully at Barak. Okay, Barak thought. This is it. He began another incantation, barely whispering the words, his fingers moving rapidly in the darkness.

Devon watched the sorcerer begin the incantation. He still had his doubts. Devon had never worked with a partner -- he preferred to work alone. But the sorcerer had certainly proved his worthiness. And if he could pull off what he claimed -- well -- this just might work. Barak completed the incantation, reaching into his belt pouch at the very end and flinging a pinch of what appeared to be gold dust into the air over his head. The dust settled over the sorcerer, glittering like pinpoint fireflies. As it did so, the sorcerer's form shimmered, and began to fade. As Devon watched, Barak slowly disappeared. Devon grinned. This just might work. He turned to the door.

It took less than ten minutes to open the lock, and the ease of the door served as further confirmation of what Devon already suspected. Lacroft knew he was coming. But Lacroft didn't know everything. And now Devon was playing the way he liked to play best -- with weighted dice.

Devon opened the door, and crept in. He held the door open a second longer than he normally would have, praying the sorcerer got in the room. Then he pushed it shut. As it clicked close, a voice spoke out of the darkness. "I hope you didn't kill Elias and Reginar. They're good men, and will be difficult to replace." A spark flared in the darkness, and a lantern sputtered to life. It illuminated the wiry form of Lacroft, sitting easily in a chair across the room, facing the door. His bare sword lay across his lap. Devon stood and took a step away from the door, towards Lacroft.

"Sorry. Elias has slept through his last duty. And you should have replaced Reginar a long time ago." Devon fingered the dagger in each of his sleeves. A quick flick would drop them into his hands.

Lacroft shrugged. "Agreed. Neither of them would ever have been half the thief you are -- but they've been unquestionably loyal. And in this business, that's a trait hard to find." Devon's face hardened at this.

"I've been loyal Lacroft. In the four years I've been in the guild I've never lifted a blade against you, or ever spoke a word about you. That certainly didn't seem to keep you from trying to kill me." Devon's eyes were cold. "What in Nagesh's name happened today?" Behind Devon, and blocked from Lacroft's

view, the door's bolt slowly slid home, securing the door. If Lacroft noticed, he gave no sign. He stood up slowly, taking the sword into his hand as he did so.

"Don't tell me that with that gifted intellect of yours you haven't figured this one out yet," Lacroft sneered. "No? Well let me explain." He took a step forward. Devon tensed. It was close. Any minute now. Hold off a bit longer Barak, he thought to himself. Lacroft continued. "How do you think it is I've been leader of this guild for over ten years? Cunning? Hard work? Hah! I've kept the top spot through one simple policy -- eliminate the competition. And you, my boy, are the best competition I've seen since I took over this Asu-forsaken group of cutthroats."

"That's it?" Devon breathed. "You ordered me killed simply because you feared for your job?" Devon's voice was incredulous. "You could have spared yourself the worry! I don't want your job!"

"Sorry boy," Lacroft grinned. "But in this business, you can't take chances. And you were a chance. But don't worry. If there's one thing I've learned, it's how to tip the odds in your favor. You've been an outstanding thief, Devon. But your services are no longer required. Goodbye." He paused for a brief second, grinning that toothy grin. Then he cried out "Guards! Danaar! Belath! He's here!" and lunged at Devon with his sword.

Devon deftly sidestepped Lacroft's thrust, and circled around, daggers flashing in each of his hands. He grinned. "Sorry Lacroft. But no one out cheats me. Not even you." At that moment, arcane words of magic erupted near the door. Lacroft's eyes widened in sudden realization.

"The sorcerer!" he exclaimed. He turned, and in one fluid motion drew a dagger from his boot and hurled it at the door, towards the chanting voice. The dagger imbedded solidly in the door, and the chanting continued. Then it finished, and the form of Barak shimmered into view -- behind Lacroft, across the room from the door. The sorcerer was holding a large lump of clay. As the incantation died on his lips, the clay disappeared in a small flash of bright light. Both Devon's and Lacroft's features began to shift and flow.

"No! What have you done!" Lacroft cried as he looked down at his arms and body in horror. He dropped his sword and staggered against the wall. His features writhed and squirmed. His clothes changed, his jaw widened, and thick, wavy hair sprouted from his head. At the same time Devon's form was changing as well, his arms getting thinner, his clothes shifting to match those of Lacroft, and his hair receding to near baldness. A crash resounded against the door. The guards were trying to get in. Devon knew he didn't have much time. He dived for Lacroft's sword. He picked it up and rolled away just as the door crashed in, and the two well-armored forms of Danaar and Belath came bursting in. Barak stepped back into the shadows.

Danaar saw Lacroft standing off to his right, wearily holding his sword. Devon stood directly in front of him, unarmed, with a stunned look on his face. "It's about time!" Lacroft snarled. "Take him!" Danaar and Belath both knew Devon well, having been bested by him numerous times in various guild jobs. They both hated Devon, and raised their swords with a vengeance. Suddenly Devon seemed to realize what was about to happen.

"No you idiots! It's not me! It's--" He never finished. The two guards made short work of it against the unarmed thief. When they were done, Danaar turned back to Lacroft, who was standing against the wall.

"Well done," Lacroft said. He gestured to the bloody remains of Devon. "Take this -- refuse -- down to the docks, and see that it is disposed of properly." "Yessir," Danaar answered. He and Belath gathered up Devon's corpse, and dragged it from the room. When they were gone, Barak stepped out of the

shadows.

"So. How's it feel to be the new head of the guild?" he asked with a grin. "In a dragon's eye!" Devon spat. He rubbed his hands over his jaw, and looked down at his form. "Asu.. this feels so real!"

"It is real!" Barak retorted. "At least, as real things go, it's real." Devon didn't want to think about that.

"How long is this going to last?"

"Oh.. no more than a week or two."

Devon sighed. "Okay. Well, I intend to be long shed of Port Kaleer by that time." He looked at the sorcerer. "Care to come?"

Barak's grin widened. "Well, seen's how you asked. I don't mind if I do."

"All right then," Devon replied. "Let's go before the thugs get back and decide to make me stay and run the guild." Barak nodded, and together he and Devon slipped out of the mansion and into the darkness.