

FORGOTTEN REALMS

MISTRESS OF THE NIGHT

THE PRIESTS



DON BASSINGTHWAITE
DAVE GROSS

MOONSHADOW HALL

OBSCURED BY SHADOW

CURSED WITH DARKNESS

The high priestess's eyes focused in the shadows and she said, "The dreams fade quickly but with each one I remember a little more on waking. The situations vary from dream to dream, but some things are always the same—a profound unease that builds to horror. Sometimes I'm walking through a dark passage. Sometimes I'm just sitting in the courtyard of Moonshadow Hall at night, with nothing reflecting in the sacred pool but stars. Sometimes I'm actually swimming in the pool—or maybe in the sea—alone. Wherever I am, the unease comes over me. Suddenly there are voices and something is dreadfully, terribly wrong. I know the voices, but what they're saying makes no sense. They're all around me, threatening to overcome me."

Dhauna's voice tightened. Her hands were wrapped around the arms of her chair.

"And there's something behind them," the old woman continued, "something very old, and no matter how terrifying the voices are, that *thing* is even worse. No matter how I try to escape it, I can't. Sooner or later, it's going to catch me and it's going to consume—"

She gasped, and her voice broke.

Co-authors Dave Gross and Don Bassingthwaite tell a tale of magic, loyalty, and ritual that can only be made by the hands of

THE PRIESTS



THE PRIESTS

Lady of Poison

BRUCE R. CORDELL

Mistress of the Night

DON BASSINGTHWAITE & DAVE GROSS

Maiden of Pain

KAMERON M. FRANKLIN

Queen of the Depths

VORONICA WHITNEY-ROBINSON

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The Yellow Silk

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FORGOTTEN REALMS®



MISTRESS OF THE NIGHT

DON BASSINGTHWAITE
and
DAVE GROSS



MISTRESS OF THE NIGHT

The Priests

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THE **N**RIESTS

*Month of Kythorn, the Year of Rogue
Dragons (1373 DR)*

The black wood screens that lined the Fane of Shar on Shade Enclave had been oiled and polished over long centuries until the reflections of those who passed them flickered like specters in their ancient surface. Legends whispered among the faithful claimed that the wood of the screens came from trees that had grown in a mountain valley so deep that light touched its floor for only minutes each day, around a clearing where Shar herself had once danced alone in the shadows.

In fact, Variance Amatick knew, they had been carved by a once-famous artisan from perfectly ordinary wood and had originally graced the temple of another god entirely. An account of the looting of that rival temple and of the rededication of the screens to the glory of Shar resided in the vaulted archives beneath the Fane. Variance saw no good reason to dispel the legends, though. They served Shar at least as well as—and perhaps better than—the truth.

Variance's own dim reflection rippled along the wood of the screens as she strode through the Fane. Gray-black skin, black hair, a black mantle over black clothes embroidered in the darkest shades of purple—her reflection might have been her shadow. She might have been her shadow.

“Mistress of the Night,” Variance whispered, touching the symbol she wore beneath her mantle, “guide me in what I must do.”

She found the man she sought in one of the rooms that lay behind the Fane's great altar. He and the seven men and women who sat with him around a broad table littered with papers looked up in surprise as she entered. Variance bent her head.

“Rivalen Tanthul,” she said humbly, “Flame of Darkness, Singer after Twilight. Father of the Night, I ask your permission to leave Shade Enclave at once.”

Surprise crossed Rivalen's face, momentarily furrowing skin as gray-black as Variance's own. The others at the table—two of them shadow-skinned as well, but the rest pale human—glanced at the high priest. He gestured in dismissal and they rose silently and without question to file out of the room. When the last of them had closed the door, Rivalen rose and waved Variance to one of the vacated chairs.

“You wouldn't interrupt me without serious cause, vigilant sister,” he said. His voice was rich, but not displeased. “And I know you wouldn't seek to leave your charge unless the cause was even more serious. What's wrong?”

Variance stepped forward, but didn't sit down. She drew a deep breath. “At the time of the fall of Netheril,” she said, “there existed in the town of Sepulcher a remarkable temple of Shar.”

“The House of Mystery,” said Rivalen. “I remember it.” He seated himself and leaned forward, fingers steepled under his chin, to look at her intently. “What about it?”

“Among the mysteries within the House, there was reputed to be an ancient text, *The Leaves of One Night*.”

Rivalen’s eyebrows rose. “I’ve never heard of it.”

A trace of irritation had entered his voice. Variance inclined her head. She waited. After a moment, the high priest bent his head in turn.

“The Dark Goddess does not surrender her secrets lightly,” he said. “Vigilant sister, I am rebuked.” He smiled thinly and abandoned formality. “What of this text?”

Variance spread her hands and said, “It was lost—like so much of the empire while our cities were sheltered in the Plane of Shadow. It is referred to only sparingly in our own archives and none at all outside of them. I had thought it vanished for all time, if it was real at all.”

“But it is real, isn’t it?” Rivalen guessed. His smile grew wide and genuine. “And it has been found?”

“I ... I hear it,” said Variance. “Here—” she touched her temple, then the symbol of Shar under her mantle—“and here. The Mistress of the Night wishes that what once was lost be returned to her possession.”

“It will be.” Rivalen stood up. “What do you need?”

“Nothing.” She lifted her mantle to reveal a satchel of black leather, packed for a journey. “Except your permission to leave Shade.”

“You have it.”

Rivalen stepped around the table and laid his right hand on her head. His fingers were cool. Within them, Variance could feel the even colder touch of the goddess.

“Shar bless you,” the high priest intoned, “vigilant sister, keeper of secrets, and recorder of doctrine.” He lifted his hand. “Be subtle, Variance.”

“Always, Father Night.”

Variance bowed her head to him once more, then turned and left quickly. Outside, the men and women who had been speaking with Rivalen were still waiting. They bowed to her as she passed. Variance ignored them. She swept back out through the Fane, past the great altar of Shar, and past the black wood screens. The acolytes tending the doors of the Fane pulled them open in respectful silence as she approached. She stepped through.

The flying city of Shade, last enclave of an empire that fell out of Faerûn’s history seventeen hundred years before, spread out below her. Overhead, eternal shadow churned in black clouds, a reminder of the dark dimension that had given sanctuary to the city during—and for centuries after—the cataclysm that had laid Netheril low.

And that had given birth to the powers within her.

Variance took a step forward. Shadows wrapped around and through her, sliding into the shadowstuff that took the place of her flesh and soul. She stepped out of another shadow hundreds of yards along the street. Two human Shadovar dipped their pale faces to the dark shade suddenly standing beside them, but Variance walked on. A few long strides carried her to the very edge of Shade. Scant feet away, the ground dropped off. It was a long fall from the floating city to the soil of Faerûn.

The shadows that wrapped the city were thinner at its edge. Stars glinted among the strands of darkness—stars and the silver-white radiance of a gibbous moon, waning but still

bright. Variance clenched her teeth at the hated light and stepped back into deeper shadow. Calling to mind the location that Shar had revealed to her, the city to the south and west where *The Leaves of One Night* waited, she wove the shadows tight around herself and vanished into darkness.



Dhauna Myritar's eyes snapped open. Her body jerked and she sat upright, sucking air into her lungs in painful, wracking gulps. She stared around the dimness of her bedchamber. For a moment, everything seemed preternaturally clear as her mind and body struggled for unity, then the hazy nausea of interrupted sleep swam over her. Dhauna shook her head, trying to clear it of the terror that had awakened her. She only succeeded in making her stomach churn. She sat back, propping herself against the headboard, and forced herself to breathe slowly.

A nightmare, a part of her mind urged her, it was only a nightmare. Lie down. Go back to sleep. You've already forgotten what happened in the dream, haven't you? By morning, you will have forgotten you dreamed at all.

"But it's not always 'just a dream,' is it?" Dhauna muttered. "Not always."

The high priestess of Selûne reached down and untwined the bed sheets—damp with sweat born from another stifling summer night in the Sembian city of Yhaunn—that wrapped around her like a shroud, and swung her legs over the side of the bed. There was a robe of clean white linen on a chair next to it. She wrapped the robe around herself, then stretched to reach her canes. Bracing them against the floor with one hand she levered her old body up off the bed, then stood still for a moment and steadied herself. When she felt balanced, she wobbled carefully across the bedchamber and out into her sitting room.

Moonlight slanted through the many panes of the big window in the south wall. Selûne's celestial face was a waning gibbous tonight and at that hour, well past its zenith. Was that a bad omen, Dhauna wondered, a nightmare just as the moon entered its period of descent? She grunted. She was just imagining things.

She continued walking. The door of her sitting room opened into the hall outside, where sconces of frosted glass glowed with pale magical light. Dhauna shuffled her canes with care. Julith's room was next to hers and her secretary could hear a quill fall. No sound came from behind Julith's door, though. She was fast asleep.

To reach the head of the ramp that led down to the ground floor of Moonshadow Hall, Dhauna had to walk almost a quarter of the way around the temple. Under her breath, she cursed whatever ancient architect had decided that the high priestess's rooms should lie so farthest from the head of the ramp. Maybe the idea had been, as Julith often argued, to allow the head of the temple some peace and quiet rather than having novices and junior priestesses and priestesses continually tromping past her door. That was a stupid idea, Dhauna thought. The novice and junior clergy were young. They should be the ones walking the farthest!

She focused on getting along the corridor then down the long ramp, turning each slow step into a meditation, trying to remember her nightmare. There didn't seem to be much to remember, only her terror. There was something to be frightened of, she was sure of that, but just what ... she couldn't remember. Even her terror was fading away, leaving her on the ramp with a vague sense of unease.

At the bottom of the ramp she turned, stepping through a door and out into the cloister around the temple's central courtyard. A night breeze tugged at her robe and wrapped its hands around one of her canes. Dhauna paused and shook the fabric free. The waning gibbous moon was only a few shuffling paces farther. With a small sigh of relief, she stepped through the gate and into the courtyard. The dew-cool grass was soft under her feet and much more pleasant to walk on than hard stone. She stood for a moment, digging her toes into the grass—and realized for the first time that she had forgotten to pull on her slippers. Had the nightmare really disturbed her so much?

Walking with more care, she made her way down the courtyard to the sacred pool and the low stone wall that surrounded it. Selûne's light entered the courtyard at a sharp angle, but as long as some light entered the courtyard, the moon was reflected in the still water. Dhauna sought out a patch of moonlight, settled herself sideways on stones that had been worn smooth by countless clerical hands and backsides, and stared into the water. Silhouetted by the moon, her reflection stared back at her. Dhauna closed her eyes, reaching deep within herself for the fleeting memories of her dream. They eluded her like fireflies, leading her on with flickers and flashes, only to vanish, leaving her lost in darkness. Dhauna ground her teeth in frustration and strained, trying hard to remember what had frightened her in her waking.

Moonmaiden guide me, she prayed silently. Help me remember—

More quickly than she could have thought, she brushed against a memory and a dread she couldn't name or even comprehend filled her. An old horror. So very, very old—but close and well. Very close. Her chest clenched and a thick bitterness choked her. She forced her eyes open.

She was staring up at the moon, Selûne's light falling full across her face. The memory—whatever it had been—was gone again. But there was a new, dreadful certainty in her belly.

"You sent it," she whispered to the moon. "You gave me a warning. But of what? *Of what?*"

Her last word came out as a shout. Dhauna clapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late. The windows of the temple's bedchambers overlooked the courtyard, and at Julith's window there was a flash of light. Dhauna muttered a curse. She wouldn't be alone for long.

The danger was close. But where? Within Yhaunn? Within Moonshadow Hall? A sharp ache throbbed in Dhauna's head as she struggled with the question. If the danger was so close, she needed help. Someone she could trust.

Julith's footsteps echoed on the flagstones of the cloister.

Dhauna dipped her hand in the sacred pool. "In the name of the Bright Lady, hear me," she prayed softly, "Feena of Arch Wood, daughter of Maleva, come to me!"

A single ripple shimmered across the surface of the water as her prayer took flight.

"High Moonmistress?" called Julith. "Is something wrong? Are you all right?"

Dhauna turned to see the young priestess hurrying across the grass. She smiled and shook the water of the pool from her hand.

"Nothing's wrong, Julith," she lied. "I'm fine."

Two Sisters

*From the shadows of chaos, two sisters are born,
One bright Selûne, the other dark Shar.
A harmonious balance soon to be torn
When Selûne gifts life with flame from afar!*

*At the dawn of the world, two sisters contest
Over dark, over light, over life, over death.
Shar seeks the void and with shadows coalesced
Snuffs Selûne's bright lights and with them her breath!*

*In the twilight of battle, one sister falters,
But Selûne hurls magic in desperate power.
From two sisters, one child the balance alters—
Mystryl's aid to Selûne ends Shar's dark hour!*

*Selûne, Moonmaiden—Shar, Mistress of Night,
Two sisters divided by one sister's spite.*

—composed by Veseene the Lark
Presented to Dhauna Myritar of Moonshadow Hall
in the Year of the Turret (1360 DR)



THE **N**RIESTS

*Month of Eleasias, the Year of Rogue
Dragons (1373 DR)*

The little clearing beside the road to Ordulin just outside of Yhaunn was quiet except for the sluggish gurgle of a summer-warmed stream. All was still but for the slow dance of leaves stirred by an evening breeze. Quiet. Still. Peaceful. Even so, the wolf that squatted in the twilight shadows at the edge of the clearing waited a few minutes more—a lesson of caution learned the hard way—before stepping out into the open. Between its jaws, it clenched the loop of a strap that bound a tight bundle of rags. The animal dropped the bundle beside the stream, then sat back and with a silvery jingling of the chain collar that circled its neck shook itself.

With every shake, the wolf's russet pelt grew shorter, except at its head where a mane of red hair billowed free. Canine features flattened and smoothed as limbs grew long—almost human. The change took only moments.

Feena rose up on two feet, naked except for the chain she wore. Out of reflex, she put her hand to her throat checking to see that the medallion hanging from the chain had survived her journey. It had, of course. Battered and scratched, the disk of silver that bore Selûne's symbol of bright eyes and seven stars seemed able to survive anything even a werewolf could throw at it.

She hoped it would survive what she was going to face in Yhaunn.

"It's been a busy month, High Moonmistress," she said, rehearsing the excuse one more time as she reached for her bundle. "I couldn't come any sooner. Two of the village women were pregnant, then one had a difficult birth and the baby was sickly—I had to watch over him, Mother Dhauna."

The strap around the bundle had slipped tight. She picked at it in frustration until it opened and her clothes spilled out onto the ground: light sandals, a simple blue skirt of homespun wool, and a blouse of linen dyed yellow with yarrow. Feena shook the dirt out of the skirt and pulled it on.

"What was wrong with him? A twisted leg, Mother Dhauna—and jaundiced, too, the poor little thing!" She bit a corner of her lip as she cinched the drawstring of the skirt tight around her waist. Was the excuse too much? "Maybe just the twisted leg," she muttered.

"There's nothing twisted about your legs, missus, not from where I'm standing!"

Feena snatched up her blouse and spun around. At the edge of the clearing, two men emerged from the trees. One carried a short sword, the other a heavy club. Neither looked particularly honest. Both wore unpleasant leers.

"See, Stag, I told you I heard a jingling like silver! I'm never wrong about that!" said the man with the club.

He pointed his weapon at her—specifically at her chain and medallion. Feena twitched her blouse up to cover both the medallion and herself.

“Oh, now don’t do that, missus,” Stag said as he slid forward. The other man circled to her far side. “Drik and I were just enjoying the scenery. Pretty clearing this, isn’t it? Favorite stop for travelers. Not sure why you’d want to take your clothes off, but I’m not complaining.”

Feena cursed herself. The bandits had come from downwind—she’d missed their scent entirely—and she’d been too caught up in practicing her excuses to notice their approach.

“Stay back,” she warned them, taking a step back herself to keep both men in view.

Stag chuckled, “Don’t be frightened, red bird. We’ll take what we want and if you behave yourself, you won’t get—”

Feena’s toes found the straps of one of her sandals. With a snap of her leg, she sent her footwear flashing at Stag’s face. The bandit’s sword swooped to swat it aside, but Feena was already spinning around, shifting her balance and driving her other foot hard into Drik’s belly. His breath whooshed out of him and he staggered back, doubled over. Feena stepped clear, thrust her arms into the sleeves of her blouse, and jerked it on.

“—hurt?” she asked Stag. “Is that what you were trying to say?”

The swordsman growled, a pitiful sound, and charged at her. Feena met his charge with a rush of her own, throwing herself down at the last moment to knock his legs out from under him. Stag fell flat on his face and went skidding along the ground. Feena rose to confront Drik. The bandit looked pained, but he was upright again. He swung his club at her.

Feena ducked under his swing and grabbed his opposite shoulder, twisting him around with the force of his own blow. His arm came around again and she plucked the club out of his hand and drove it sharply into his already tender belly. When he doubled over, she brought it down hard against the back of his head. Drik sprawled bonelessly across the ground.

“Nice moves, missus,” Stag said. He was back on his feet, his face streaked comically with dirt and grass stains. His sword, however, was held low and menacing. “Got any more?”

“Yes,” said Feena. The fingers of her left hand touched her medallion while the fingers of her right stabbed at Stag. “*Bright Lady of Night, stay his hand!*”

Like moonlight itself, the cool power of Selûne flooded through her, drawn by her faith and shaped by her prayer. Feena felt rather than saw the magic that reached out and wrapped around the bandit—freezing him in place. Feena walked up to him and stared into his startled eyes. She hefted Drik’s club. Stag’s eyes turned frightened and pleading. Feena shrugged.

“It is a pretty clearing, isn’t it?” she said.

She slammed the club into Stag’s head. Stag went down to join Drik in the dirt. Feena looked down at the bandit, then kicked his unconscious form.

“Don’t you have any—” she spat, delivering another kick—“respect—”

A third kick.

“—for the clergy?”

Feena snatched up his sword and hurled both it and Drik’s club away into the bushes, then found her sandals and pulled them on. She pushed a stray lock of hair out of her face and turned back toward the road and Yhaunn.

“Moonmaiden’s grace,” she cursed, “I hate the city!”



Yhaunn had begun life centuries ago as a cluster of crude cabins caught between the quarry where workers hewed out great slabs of granite and the docks where they shipped them off to cities around the Sea of Fallen Stars. Many great buildings in Selgaunt, Saerloon, Westgate, and Alaghôn—even far off Cimbar in Chessenta and Velprintalar in Aglarond—had been built with Yhauntan stone. By the time the quarry was played out, Yhaunn had become a city in its own right. Its buildings had spilled out of the narrow strip along the bay and right into the old quarry itself, with the city's wealthier citizens building higher and higher onto the quarry walls until habitations filled the rocky basin.

In the gathering night, Yhaunn was filled with shadows. Feena stood at the city gates high atop the old quarry cliffs and stared down at the tightly-crowded bowl of the city. Selûne had risen and her silver light fell over Feena's shoulders, illuminating the streets of Yhaunn but casting darkness between the buildings. Feena's hand reached for her medallion, but she stopped it and lifted her chin. It's no different than a forest at night, she told herself. A black stone forest.

With no trees and a lot of people. She swallowed.

"Never been to the city before, countrywife?" laughed one of the guards at the gate. "Be sure to keep a tight hand on your purse!"

Feena glared at him and started down into the city.

Even among all the buildings, Moonshadow Hall stood out, both from the heights of the city and from street level. The temple of Selûne was a big, round structure that shimmered a pale gray in the moonlight, a counterpoint to the full moon rising into the sky. Depicted in tall relief on the temple's walls were Selûne's seven Shards, the goddess' winged servants and warriors. Together with sculpted owls, the Shards stood guard over the many gates that stood along the temple's outer walls. Only one of the outer gates was real, though. The rest were merely symbols of the true gates that represented the phases of the moon around Moonshadow Hall's sacred inner courtyard.

Feena strode up to the main entry gate and the acolyte who stood guard at it. She couldn't have been more than fourteen years old and the blue and silver robes that she wore fit her awkwardly. A mace, its head etched with a crescent moon, hung from a belt around her thighs. Feena wondered if she could actually use it. As she approached, the girl glanced at her indifferently, looked away, then looked back as she realized that the woman in homespun and lined robes wore the same symbol she did.

"Welcome to Moonshadow Hall, sister," the girl said in greeting. She sounded as if she didn't quite know what to make of the rough woman in front of her, but Feena had to admit that even so she managed to force a pleasant, welcoming note into her voice. "Is this your first visit to the hall?"

Feena couldn't suppress a slight twitch. "No," she said,

"it isn't. But—"

"Feena?" called a voice from within the gate. "Feena, is that you? By Our Silver Lady, I knew you couldn't stay away from me forever!"

A man came bounding out of the temple, a pale blue half-cape flowing behind him, and swept her up in his arms. Feena forced herself to smile and accept his embrace, but she gripped his arms the instant she felt his hands slide toward her bottom.

She pressed her cheek to his and whispered in his ear, "I wouldn't like to thump you."

front of the girl, Mifano.”

Mifano kissed her cheek and laughed, his hands moving back to a more brotherly position. His breath smelled of cloves and cinnamon.

“Ah, Feena, silver flame of the immortal moon—how my heart has missed the blunt impact of your wit.” He turned to the acolyte and said, “Jhezail, this is Feena. We trained together here when we were younger than you.”

Feena saw the acolytes’ eyes widen at the introduction, but once again it seemed that the girl managed to hold her composure. She bent slightly and dipped her head.

“Elder sister,” she murmured formally.

“Younger sister,” replied Feena, bowing her head in return. As Mifano took her arm and escorted her through the gate, she muttered, “I see my reputation is intact.”

“You were a ... unique novice, Feena. Not many clergy of Selûne are blessed the way that you are.”

“Not many would consider being a werewolf a blessing,” Feena snorted, “even among Selûne’s clergy. Remember, my mother sent me here to learn how to control that ‘gift’ as much as to be initiated into Selûne’s mysteries.”

“Not that you needed much initiation, as I recall.”

“My mother taught me well.”

Mifano fell silent for a moment, then said quietly, “We were all sorry to hear about your mother’s death. In spite of her choices, she was an example to us all.”

Feena looked at him out of the corner of her eye. Though he was no older than her own almost thirty years, when he chose to be serious Mifano seemed to age into sudden maturity. Maybe it was because he always played the role of the flirt that he usually seemed younger. Maybe it was because his prematurely silver hair that some claimed was a mark of Selûne’s favor lent him a strange sense of agelessness. Either way, she could in that moment see how the man she remembered as a clownish adolescent could have risen to prominence as a priest.

“Thank you,” she said. She let the awkward silence drift for a heartbeat longer, then cleared her throat and added, “I hear that you’ve been making a reputation for yourself as well.”

“I’ve taken on some extra duties at Moonshadow Hall,” Mifano said with mock humility.

He gave a casual shrug that shifted his half-cape back behind his left shoulder, exposing the sword that rode on his hip. Feena’s eyebrows rose at the sight of the weapon. The hilt that curled out of the scabbard was forged from bright steel, decorated with silver and mother-of-pearl, and marked with a crescent inside the circle of a full moon. Mifano’s smile grew wider.

“Why, Feena,” he asked suggestively, “are you staring at my sword?”

“Give it up, Mifano.” She pointed at the sword and asked, “Is that really the Waxing Crescent?”

He grinned and nodded. Feena whistled. The sword was an artifact of Moonshadow Hall, traditionally given as a symbol of office to the priest or priestess who represented the business of the Hall in the city at large. It was a high honor and one of the most powerful positions within the temple.

“You have made a reputation for yourself! But I’ve never seen the Waxing Crescent carried outside of ceremonies before.”

“Why shouldn’t I carry it? It’s a badge of honor and a fine weapon.” He stroked the hilt

“And other than you apparently, women love—”

Feena wrinkled her nose. “I get the point,” she said as they stepped through another set of doors and into the cloisters around the temple courtyard. “So if you hold the Waxing Crescent, who holds the Waning Crescent?”

Mifano grimaced and flicked a finger along the open air passage.

Coming along the cloister toward them was a small cluster of priestesses. In the lead, issuing instructions as she walked, was a tall woman with soft brown hair that fell to her shoulders. On her belt hung the sword that was the twin to Mifano’s: the Waning Crescent, a symbol of administrative authority *within* Moonshadow Hall. She looked up and met Feena’s gaze.

Feena suppressed a scowl and said, “Well met, Velsinore.”

Velsinore looked as though she was choking back similar distaste but answered, “Well met, Feena.”

Velsinore murmured something to two of the three women following her and they scurried away, leaving one to trail in Velsinore’s wake as she paced forward. With every step, the Waning Crescent slapped against Velsinore’s leg and Feena wondered why she even bothered to wear it. Then she saw the look of hostility that passed between Velsinore and Mifano and understood.

She wears her sword because he wears his, thought Feena. Moonmaiden’s grace, whatever else Dhauna wants me for, I’ve arrived in the middle of a power struggle!

“I was looking for you earlier,” Velsinore told Mifano. “I had assumed you were out in the city pursuing one of your dalliances in lieu of your duties.”

“My ‘dalliances’ are part of my duties,” Mifano replied. His voice was as smooth as oil. “Of course perhaps you’d prefer to see the cupboard bare as donations fall. But I wasn’t dallying. Not outside of Moonshadow Hall at least.”

He slipped his hand around Feena’s arm. The visiting priestess jerked free and gave Mifano a scowl as Velsinore turned her attention back to her.

“Mifano met me at the gate and escorted me here,” Feena explained.

“I’m sure he did,” Velsinore murmured as she looked Feena up and down, examining her country skirt and blouse. Feena flushed. The tall priestess wasn’t dressed quite so fancifully as Mifano—she wore a simple high-collared robe of dove gray. The very simplicity of the robe, however, spoke of sophistication and authority. Feena’s clothes, on the other hand, spoke of dirt, labor, and the country. A long crust of wolf spittle stained her skirt. She must have drooled during her travels. Angry, she wiped at the stain.

Velsinore’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “So you’ve returned to Moonshadow Hall. Have you given up your mother’s vendetta against the servants of Malar?”

Feena flushed even deeper and said, “Do you mean ‘have I stopped defending Arch Woodvillage against the predators of the Beastlord to fight the shadowy minions of Shar because Shar should be the only enemy that really matters to a priestess of Selûne?’ ”

“When you put it that way,” said Velsinore, “yes.”

“No.”

“Ah,” Velsinore said as she folded her hands. “Then why have you come back? I imagine Mifano was too busy flirting with you to ask.”

Mifano’s eyes narrowed. “I was offering her hospitality.”

“Which is my responsibility,” said Velsinore. She glanced at Feena. “We have space in the acolyte’s common room, of course. You’re welcome to it.”

“I don’t think I’ll be staying,” Feena growled—at both of them. “I’m only here because Dhauna Myritar sent for me.”

Both Mifano and Velsinore stared at her.

“She *sent* for you?” asked Velsinore.

“A prayer carried on the Moonmaiden’s beams,” said Feena. She crossed her arms. “Do you doubt me?”

Velsinore and Mifano exchanged a glance, then Mifano looked back to Feena and asked “When?”

Feena bit her tongue. “Recently,” she said, evading. “Where is she? I’ll talk to her and bring her on my way.”

“In her quarters, preparing for the Full Moon Blessing,” Velsinore told her. She seemed to hesitate for a moment, then gestured for the priestess who had remained with her. “Take Feena to the High Moonmistress.”

Feena froze the younger priestess with a glare and said, “I know how to get there.”

She strode off along the cloister, leaving the startled priestess in her wake. A heartbeat later, rapid footsteps followed her.

“Feena!” called Mifano. “Wait!”

“Why?” Feena swung through another door and back into the interior of the temple. The ramp that led up to the second floor and the high priestess’s quarters was just beyond.

Mifano caught her hand. “You should know,” he said hastily. “Dhauna has ... things have changed at Moonshadow Hall. They’re complicated.”

Feena pulled away. “Things never change,” she said. “They’re always ... complicated.”



Feena raised her hand to knock on the carved wood of the High Moonmistress’s quarters and was suddenly reminded of a precocious fifteen-year-old acolyte summoned before the high priestess of Moonshadow Hall for pummeling a silver-haired boy who had presented her with a collar and leash. She forced the memory aside. Some things *did* change. She rapped on the wood.

When there was no immediate response, she knocked again.

“Mother Dhauna, it’s—”

The door opened partway before she could finish. A young, dark-haired priestess peered out. She wore a harried expression.

“Please,” she said quickly, “this isn’t a good time. Can you come back later?”

Feena blinked. “I’d rather—”

“Feena?” Dhauna’s voice rose from somewhere inside. “Feena, is that you?”

The dark-haired woman winced, but Feena raised her voice and called back, “It’s me, Mother Dhauna!”

“By Our Silver Lady!” The high priestess’s voice was shrill and excited. “Finally! Let her in, Julith! Let her in!”

The dark-haired woman—Julith—sighed and swung the door wide. “She’s in her bedchamber,” she whispered. “Please, try to keep her calm.”

Feena looked at Julith, but the other woman was already turning away. Feena stepped inside and shut the door. Dhauna's sitting room was cluttered with stacks of books and bundles of scrolls. Papers hid the desk. She stared at the mess in surprise as she passed into the bedchamber.

"Feena!" Seated in a chair before a dressing table, Dhauna Myritar twisted around to greet her.

Feena only barely managed to bend in respect. Somehow, it seemed, her muscles had forgotten how to move and her eyes had forgotten how to blink.

The High Moonmistress of Moonshadow Hall was all but lost within the silver lace and blue silk of her vestments, her head and face overshadowed by a high, stiff collar. For as long as Feena had known her, Dhauna had been a cheerfully plump priestess often mistaken for a woman twenty years younger than her actual age. But no one would underestimate the woman's age again. Her brown skin had faded to the color of crumpled parchment, and her dark gray eyes had lost their luster. She was not merely thin, but so gaunt that her gown was loose on her wasted frame.

"Mother Dhauna ..." Feena murmured in shock.

"Oh, stand up!" Dhauna's gesture was sharp, making her irritation plain. "It's the vestments. They make me look like a starving dwarf. Life waxes, life wanes—time catches up with all, eventually." She swatted at Julith's hands as the priestess attempted to brush her fine white hair. "It looks fine, Julith!" Her eyes focused on Feena again. "You took your time."

Feena finally blinked and fumbled for the excuse she had spent so long fussing over. The shock of the changes in the high priestess had her shaken. Was that what Mifano had been trying to warn her about?

"I couldn't come any sooner, High Moonmistress," she managed. "It's been a busy month. Two of the village women were ..." Her carefully rehearsed words began to slip away from her. She clutched at them desperately. "... were sick. And one was pregnant with a difficult boy."

Dhauna grinned and replied, "In my experience, all boys are difficult."

"He had a jaundiced leg," said Feena hastily. She grimaced as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

"And the rest of him?" asked Dhauna.

"Twisted," Feena said.

Dhauna laughed.

Julith stood behind the high priestess, a simple circlet of silver bearing the disk of the full moon in her hands, staring open-mouthed at their exchange. Dhauna stretched around and glanced at the circlet.

"Not that one," she ordered. "The moon's road tiara! You know that!"

"But Mother Dhauna—"

"The tiara!" As Julith laid down the circlet, Dhauna turned back to Feena. "Why didn't you come, Feena? The truth this time."

Feena looked down at her feet. Above the soles of her sandals, they were very dirty.

"I didn't want to face Moonshadow Hall and Yhaunn again," she confessed. She glanced up. "You know I don't belong here."

"You're happier in the fields and woods, I know. It's your nature, just as it was yours."

mother's nature. Even more so, I suppose." Dhauna winced as Julith set an ornate confection of a tiara—six crescent moons surrounding a full moon—on her head. The white puff of her hair sank under the weight and Julith reached for a comb to fix it in place. Dhauna ignored her, keeping her gaze on Feena. "But I *called* for you, Feena." A pleading tone entered her voice. "I called for you at every turning of Selûne's face."

"I know," said Feena. "I heard every call."

"Then why didn't you come?"

"I couldn't just drop everything and abandon my village!" Feena protested. "The people need me."

"I know that! I gave you time," Dhauna's voice rose in accusation.

Feena's rose as well. "Eventually!"

"When I realized you weren't going to come quickly enough."

"'Be here for the full moon of Eleasias,' you said." Feena spread her arms. "Here I am!"

"Just barely! *Ow!*" The High Moonmistress let out a shriek. She clapped one hand to her head and whirled around in a cascade of silk and lace to snap at Julith. "What are you doing?"

The young priestess stood with the tiara in one hand the comb in the other, and a look of dismay on her pale face. "The moon's road tiara is too heavy, Mother Dhauna. Your hair's too fine to support it, even with a comb—"

Dhauna's face twisted and her eyes came back to life with sudden rage. "Then give me the full moon circlet, you stupid girl!"

Silence fell over the bedchamber like a shroud. Julith's eyes went wide and Feena was certain that she saw her hands tremble. There must have been surprise on her own face as well. Dhauna stared for a moment—then seemed to crumble.

"Julith," she whispered, "I'm sorry." She gestured with withered fingers. "Please—go on ahead to the courtyard. Feena will help me finish and walk with me to the Full Moon Blessing." She looked over her shoulder at Feena and asked, "Won't you?"

Feena nodded. "Of course."

Julith set the moon's road tiara on the dressing table and bent deeply to the high priestess, then fled the room. Dhauna sat back with a sigh. Feena stepped up to her cautiously. More had changed about the High Moonmistress than just her wasting body.

"Mother Dhauna," Feena asked, "are you all right?"

"No, Feena, I'm not," Dhauna replied, sitting up again. "There's not much time before the ceremony." She pointed to the dressing table. "If you could help me...."

Feena picked up the lighter circlet and settled it over the high priestess's hair. Dhauna looked at herself in the mirror that hung over the table.

"Good enough."

"Why did you call me here, Mother Dhauna?" asked Feena. "What's wrong?"

In the mirror, Dhauna's eyes shifted to look at her. "Selûne has been sending me dreams about Feena." She looked at the mirror again. "Though it seems that the Moonmaiden measures her sendings by the strength of my faith rather than the strength of my body."

Feena knelt beside the wizened priestess's chair. "What are these dreams?"

"Warnings," Dhauna said as she wrapped her hand around Feena's. "Impending danger—great danger—from within the faith, I think. Possibly even from within Moonshadow Hall."

She smiled at Feena's look of alarm. "Or so I have come to believe. The wisdom of gods is a mystery to mortals. I'm still searching for the deeper meaning of the dreams."

"The books in your sitting room," said Feena.

Dhauna nodded and said, "Guidance from those who came before us. The books come from the archives. I have even more spread out there. I don't believe I've read so much in my entire life."

"What have you found?"

"Nothing yet. Scraps. Clues." She released Feena's hand and brushed fingers through Feena's hair. Feena could smell old parchment and fresh ink on them. "Julith helps me. I couldn't hide the dreams from her for long. But if the danger is within Moonshadow Hall, I need help from someone outside the hall. Someone I can trust. Someone who isn't afraid of controversy."

Feena closed her eyes and said, "I should have come sooner."

"It would have been better if you had," said Dhauna. "Will you help me?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." Dhauna's hand rested briefly on Feena's head in a blessing gesture—then the high priestess sighed and struggled to sit upright. "Though I think the first thing you could help me with is getting out of this chair!"

The High Moonmistress's ornate vestments were beautiful and in times past Feena had known her to wear them as easily and as casually as an old shawl. She found herself holding billows and bustles out of the way as Dhauna eased herself out of the chair and reached for a pair of canes. Feena took one from her and offered the old priestess her arm instead. Dhauna accepted it gratefully. Their progress along the corridor outside her quarters and down the ramp to the temple's ground floor was still slow, however. Just inside the door that led out to the cloisters and the temple courtyard, Dhauna paused, her head bowed for a moment in prayer, and Feena sensed the divine surge of the goddess's touch. Dhauna breathed a sigh. Releasing Feena's arm and shifting her grip on her cane, she stood solidly on her own two feet.

"For ceremonies only," she told Feena with a smile. "Such is the price of vanity."

She strode through the door a little awkwardly, but with renewed strength. Feena followed in her wake.

Outside, the temple courtyard was filled with the clergy and novices of Moonshadow Hall, as well as with those citizens of Yhaunn who paid honor to Selûne. Dhauna circled around the cloister to the full moon gate. During the day, the courtyard could be entered freely through any of the seven open gates that led into it, but tradition dictated that by night only the gate corresponding to the phase of the moon could be used—and since the closed gate of the new moon was nothing more than a brick-filled arch, the courtyard was never entered during the dark of the moon. Feena remembered youthful frustration at being forced to walk all the way around the cloisters when cutting across the shadowed courtyard would have saved her precious time. Having grown older, she found the walk strangely comforting, a moment of contemplative transition between outside world and sacred ceremony.

As Dhauna stepped through the full moon gate, clergy and worshipers parted before her, making a wide aisle across the moonlit grass to the sacred pool at the courtyard's far end. The High Moonmistress proceeded down the grassy aisle at a stately, measured pace. On either

side, men and women bent in respect as she passed.

Feena, however, stopped just inside the gate. Julith stood at the back of the crowd, and Feena slipped in beside her.

“I’m sorry for what happened in Dhauna’s bedchamber,” Feena whispered.

The young priestess sighed and shrugged. “I’m getting used to it,” she murmured back. “Some days she’s better than others.”

Her eyes were fixed on the other end of the courtyard. Dhauna had set aside her cane and was standing in front of the sacred pool, her back to the crowd. Overhead, the moon was almost perfectly aligned with the courtyard, the high priestess, and the pool. Dhauna raised her hands. “Selûne,” she called, “Moonmaiden, Bright Lady of Night, Our Lady of Silver—tonight we honor your fullest aspect and pray for your blessing of strength ...”

As Dhauna continued her invocation, Feena leaned in closer to Julith.

“Some days?” she whispered. “Getting used to it?” She pressed her lips together, then asked, “The dreams?”

Julith started, then nodded.

Selûne’s warnings were taking their toll on more than Dhauna’s body, it seemed.

Feena leaned back toward Julith and asked, “How long has she been having them?”

Julith’s gaze darted to her. “Feena!” she hissed and nodded at Dhauna and the sacred pool.

Feena rolled her eyes and said, “We’re not novices, Julith. No one is standing over us to make sure we follow the ceremony. How long?” Feena nudged the other priestess. “Come on.”

“A little bit less than a month.” Julith managed to speak almost without moving her lips. “Since the waning gibbous moon.”

The night she had first sent for me, Feena thought. She winced.

“Do you know what happened?” Feena asked.

Julith gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. “I found her barefoot in the courtyard in the middle of the night, almost at moonset. She’s been barely eating since then. She’s developed an obsession with the archives. And her moods ...” The priestess fell silent for a moment, then added, “There are only a few of us in the temple who really notice the lapses of her mind, but it’s clear that her health is failing.” She glanced sideways at Feena. “If you’re her friend, you should probably know that there’s pressure on her to step down.”

Feena’s eyebrows rose. Dhauna Myritar had led Moonshadow Hall for well over twenty years—it was hard to think of the temple without her at its head.

“Pressure?” she asked. “Who from?”

Before Julith could answer, the High Moonmistress lowered her arms. On cue, a chorus of novices began to sing a hymn. After a few bars, the crowd joined in as well, a sweet roar of sound that would have been impossible to hear over. Julith and Feena dutifully added their voices to the song, but Julith caught Feena’s eye and nodded toward the sacred pool again.

Four figures had stepped forward from the crowd. Two were acolytes bearing silver pitchers. Dhauna took the pitchers and poured their contents—milk and pale wine—into the sacred pool as a sacrifice to Selûne.

Flanking the acolytes, however, were Mifano and Velsinore. Feena’s eyes narrowed as another piece of the rivalry between the two fell into place.

The hymn ended. Feena leaned toward Julith once more as they knelt along with the rest

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