

STONE OF TYMORA BOOK II
THE SHADOW MASK
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CHAPTER ONE

“Where is the stone?” the raspy voice whispered from above me.

I scrambled back on all fours. Asbeel’s boot paced me. I felt the dull impact in my midsection, but I hardly noticed the pain through the mental fog that clouded my memory. Where had the stone gone?

“Where is it?” Asbeel’s boot lashed out again.

A black mask of carved obsidian, a shadow beneath the hood of a flowing black robe, leered at me from my mind’s eye. She spoke, her voice so soft, so gentle. Her voice . . . I had heard it only once, yet it felt so familiar.

The boot leaped at me again, aiming for my head. I brought my arms up, absorbing the brunt of the blow, but the force was still enough to send me into a roll. The wall of the narrow alley met me halfway through the tumble, and the impact knocked the breath from my body.

I turned my gaze upward, following the arc of the muscled leg hidden beneath black breeches; to a leather vest, and the red-tinted arms crossed in front of the chest; to the leering face, angular and bald, its red eyes glowing with angry fire. And beside the creature's head, the hilt of a sword, a horrible creation of jagged metal—an evil blade to match the demon's evil soul.

The demon. Asbeel. He had pursued me across the length of the Sword Coast. His sword. That same blade had felled my mentor Perrault.

Time moved more slowly, all sensations becoming more distinct: the loose sand of the alley; the rough stone of the wall behind me, unfinished and easy to climb; the sky above, lightening with the sunrise, taking away the demon's advantage of darkness. Without realizing I had moved at all, I found my hand resting on the hilt of my own weapon, the stiletto Perrault had

once wielded. The fog lifted from my mind; my vision was suddenly remarkably clear.

Asbeel spoke again. "Where is the—"

"I do not have it." My voice did not crack, did not waver at all. "And neither shall you."

I jumped to my feet, and my hand snapped forward, bringing the narrow dagger to bear in front of me. The momentum of my sudden motion rolled down the blade, lengthening the weapon into a fine saber. I fell into a lunge as the sword tip leaped for Asbeel's black heart.

But Asbeel simply stepped backward.

I teetered at full extension, my trailing foot against the wall, the tip of my sword a foot from Asbeel. My moment of vengeance turned to defeat; my elation turned to fear. My mind raced as I tried to recall the swordfights I'd read about or seen. My feet scrambled to form an L shape, and I struggled to hold the sword vertically in front of me.

Asbeel reached up to his shoulder. Somehow he found a handle to grip among the sharp, twisting spikes on his sword. The wickedly serrated, curved blade slowly rose from behind him. As soon as its tip cleared its sheath, the whole blade burst into red flame. Still

moving slowly, deliberately, Asbeel gripped the hilt in both hands and tapped the dull edge of the blade to his forehead in a mock salute.

The blade's fire danced wildly, mesmerizing, tantalizing, beautiful and horrible all at once. My heartbeat drummed in my ears.

With a snarl, the demon leaped forward. He swung his sword in a wide arc. The fire seemed to hang in the air behind the curved blade.

But I was ready. I brought my sword to bear against his in a textbook-perfect parry.

Or so I thought.

The sheer force of the demon's blow nearly ripped my saber from my hand. I tried to roll with the momentum of the strike, to absorb some of its power. I could not hold my footing, and my skull cracked hard against the ground.

I felt warmth on the back of my head, a trickle of blood. A wave of dizziness washed over me. I could not catch my breath. The demon would be upon me before I could right myself.

But the killing blow did not fall.

After what seemed an eternity, the world stopped spinning. I rose unsteadily and turned to face Asbeel.

The demon had not moved. He matched my stare, but in his eyes I saw not rage, only amusement. Again he tapped his sword to his forehead, saluting me, mocking me.

“You wear his clothes, boy,” said the demon. “But you do not honor him with your fighting.”

“You know nothing of honor,” I growled.

“I know your mentor would be ashamed to see you fight so wretchedly.”

“The only thing he wouldn’t like,” I said calmly, “is that I bothered to talk to you.” I lunged forward suddenly. Steel clashed against black iron, but my blade cut nothing but air.

I retracted my arm quickly and struck again. I did not fully commit myself, but shortened my lunge. When the demon brought his blade across to parry, I rolled my wrist, twisted my saber around the demon’s sword, and pushed my leading leg forward, extending my arm to its full length. My sword’s tip reached out for Asbeel’s chest, stretching, reaching. . . .

Asbeel’s empty hand shot across his chest and grabbed my sword by the blade. My sword slipped a bit. Its perfect edge drew a line of blood across the demon’s hand, but he did not seem to notice.

“You do not deserve that sword, boy,” he said with a wicked laugh. “So I shall take it from you.”

I gritted my teeth and yanked at the sword. I felt its edge dig in to the demon’s flesh, but he only tightened his grip in response. The sword would move no further.

I wanted to release the sword, to leap at Asbeel’s smug face, to punch him, kick him, whatever I could do to fight back. But the idea of my sword—Perrault’s sword—in that beast’s possession, even for a moment, made me ill. How many times had I seen Perrault use that sword—for show more often than for combat—twirling it about expertly, mixing the straight lines of lunges with dazzling curving strikes, the blade’s magical blue flame trailing behind it.

Blue flame . . .

A brilliant line of cerulean fire pierced the dark air, engulfing my sword from crosspiece to tip—and Asbeel’s clawed hand with it.

Asbeel’s unearthly scream cut the stillness of the dawn. The alley became a clutter of motion as rats and bats fled its shadows. I wanted nothing more than to turn and follow them. But I stood my ground.

Asbeel's face twisted in pain. After a long moment, he released the sword, and I stumbled back.

For the first time, I had the upper hand against the beast. I took a step toward him, then another. I would kill Asbeel with the sword of my fallen mentor. I was worthy of the weapon.

I lunged ahead one final time, lunged right past the demon's outstretched arms, lunged right at his black heart.

But as my sword reached the demon, he disappeared.

Asbeel's fist clubbed the back of my head. I tumbled forward, away from him, yet somehow I landed right at his feet. He kicked at me several times. At last I managed to scramble away.

I pulled myself up to all fours and took an awkward half-running, half-leaping step, propelling me over the short stack of crates separating the alley from the market square.

But he was already there as I landed. He stood over me, his sword upraised.

"Stop."

The word was whispered, but its effect was immediate. The demon and I turned in unison to face a

hooded figure emerging from the shadows across the square.

She wore a black robe, her cowl pulled low, her face hidden in shadow. No, not shadow, but a shadow-mask, black as night and carved into an expressionless human face. A cold chill ran down my spine. It was the same woman, the same creature, who had assaulted me the previous night, the same being who had stolen from me that which was most precious.

"Child, come to me," the woman said, beckoning. I took the first steps to oblige, relieved to step away from the demon and be rescued from the impossible fight. But I stopped after a few short paces.

The demon cackled behind me. "You call to him now, do you? Twice you abandon him, yet now you call to him?"

"Ignore him," she said sweetly. "Come to me."

Every instinct I possessed cried out that I should go to her. But somewhere in my rational mind I remembered her words from the previous night, and how I had fallen asleep against my will. Was there magic in the words she uttered?

How else could she have stopped Asbeel so completely, just as he was readying a killing blow? Or

was she in league with the demon, tricking me into letting my guard down so he could kill me with ease? What more could she want from me, given that she had the stone?

I flexed the fingers of my left hand instinctively, and a slight tingle traced its way from my fingertips to my heart, to the hollow of my chest where the stone had once rested in its leather pouch.

I yearned to be reunited with that stone, wanting it back with every fiber of my being. It had been my curse. Before I returned to Memnon, I had intended to be rid of it. It was powerful, to be sure, and the luck it provided had saved my skin more than once. But its power was not the reason I craved its return. It was my destiny, my legacy, the only thing that remained of my family. And yet the masked woman had the stone. She had stolen it from me, and it belonged to me, not to her.

I raised the sword, still burning a fiery blue. "Where is it?" I asked her. "Where is the stone?"

Again Asbeel cackled. "Yes, do tell," he said sarcastically.

"Begone, wretch!" Gone was the woman's whisper, replaced by a roar as loud as a riled bear's. A group

of ravens lifted off from the rooftop above me, their wings shining in the light of the new dawn.

I heard a faint popping sound. When I turned, Asbeel had disappeared.

I dropped to a crouch and brought my sword above me. I looked up, scanning the rooftops for the demon. I was certain he would be swooping in to attack me at any moment. But the first rays of sun broke over the horizon, illuminating the sky, and no dark shadows floated there.

Asbeel was simply gone.

I glanced back at the cloaked woman just in time to see her fade into the shadows of the market's eastern edge.

"Wait!"