

far to the west that no trading ships from the Twin Seas find it worth the effort to venture there, is that so?"

"'Tis so, indeed," he replied. His voice was deep and his speech was tinted with a foreign but cultured, articulate accent.

"Ours is an isolated shore—outlanders are seldom welcome, and we are under constant plague by coast raiders and threat of invasion from neighboring kingdoms. It is for this reason that we have come here, and why we wish to hire you and your crew."

"Permit me to explain, my lord," said the seated woman, rising and stepping forward.

"This is Zadeshkem, a priestess of the Voiceless Ones," said Menalkoric, in lieu of a more formal introduction, before retaking his chair. Now that she was near and within the soft glow of the candles, I was able to see her better as well. To the best of my estimation I judged that she could be no more than twenty-five or thirty years of age, but this assessment had to be made largely without attention to her facial appearance, as the whole of her countenance was a mar of ashen, scarred flesh, saving only a small space around each eye. But she spoke with tones that were silken and pleasant to the ear; the skin of her hands was young and unwrinkled; her hair, locks of which peeked out from within the hood she wore, showed a vibrant sable brown; and the form of her body looked to be shapely and feminine under the slightly loose robes in which she was dressed.

Although I gave no outward sign, the woman's face repelled me upon sight of it, and I couldn't help but wonder what misfortune had once befallen her to have so distorted what might once have been true beauty.

AN ANCIENT WEAPON

She turned to a cloth bundle that lay upon the table and gathered it up in her arms. Bringing it forward she loosed a flap of the fabric and undraped the hilt of what appeared to be a sheathed sword, which she proceeded to unwrap and hand to me.

To my bewilderment, the blade that whispered out of the sheath was not a length of metal, but instead of cold grayish stone, shaped and