

SKY OF SWORDS

A Tale of the King's Blades

by
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SKY OF SWORDS

It is not true that calamities come only in
threes. They often come in sixes or nines.
ANON.

After that, the day could get no worse, but it
certainly did not improve, at least not until

close to midnight, when Malinda was able to cuddle into Dog's embrace and weep all over his fuzzy chest. The wonder was probably that her Council had not just resigned en masse and left her to her fate. Why appoint a Council and then make crazy decisions like that without consulting it?

"So why did you?" Dog growled.

The Queen sniffled in very unregal fashion.

"I was being kind! Neville had done nothing wrong. Stupid, stupid, stupid! Dominic tried to tell me and I shouted at him! I didn't see that Neville had inherited his father's claim and would be just as dangerous or even worse, because he was born in wedlock, which will carry weight with the snootier nobles. Even if he would have a baton sinister on his arms, plenty of them do. He can turn Granville into a martyr."

"He swore allegiance?"

"He can always claim he did it under duress."

"I'll kill him for you. Where is he?"

"We don't know! I sent him to Constable Valdor, who says he never showed up--but he may be lying, playing on both teams. Grand Inquisitor says the Dark Chamber has a sniffer spell it could use to track him if we had a suitable key--meaning something closely identified with him, that he'd owned for a long time. Which we don't. He's almost certainly far away by now. ... Oh, Dog, I feel such a fool!"

Her father would never have made that mistake. Ambrose would have let Neville molder in a dungeon for years, just in case. If she ever did get to sleep tonight she was going to have nightmares of her own head on a spike alongside Granville's.

Nobody had been so disrespectful as to call the Queen an idiot, but the Duke and Chancellor together then took over the proceedings and abandoned any pretense of being mere advisors. They arranged everyone in chairs around the table and kept the meeting going until sundown.

The Council agreed that nothing could be done about Neville unless and until he showed up, and nothing should be done about the holdout garrisons at present. The Council summoned Parliament for the fifth day of Tenthmoon. The Council decided it needed more members and discussed names; Malinda humbly agreed to appoint the half dozen selected. The Council even found some money, or Master Kinwinkle did, when he pointed out that a tax known as "relief" must be paid whenever a vassal of the crown died. The Treasury and the College of Heraldry, he said, had been working all summer, calculating the relief due for the nobles who had died in the Wetshore Massacre, and most of it had not yet been collected. With ill grace, the Dowager Duchess confirmed that the

De Mayes relief was still owing; Baron Dechaise was ordered to raise ready cash by mortgaging these prospects.

The Council even had the audacity to start discussing possible royal husbands. Then Malinda slammed her fist on the table and shouted that when she wanted advice on that matter she would ask for it. The Chancellor frowned at her as if she were still only nine years old and changed the subject, but the implication remained that the sooner they found a man to take the stupid girl in hand the better.

"So what can you do?" Dog growled.

"Just this." She kissed him. He needed no more encouragement than that, having managed to lie still in uneventful embrace while she recounted her woes. The resulting frenzy drove her worries away, for a while.

They returned later, when she had her breath back. "It isn't fair. A man makes mistakes and he needs experience. A woman makes them and she needs a husband!"

"You've got a man already." The turmoil had left them turned over so that Dog's head lay on her breast.

"And a wonderful one, the only man in the kingdom who isn't seeking preferment." The Council meeting had been followed by a long audience and even longer dinner, honoring the nobility flocking to court to pay its respects to the new Queen. "They all want appointments or settlements or their daughters made maids of honor or grants of this or that. You don't expect me to dress you up in jewels and make you a marquis ... do you?" The thought of the Council's reaction made her mind boggle.

Dog just snorted.

"You never ask me for anything," she whispered. "What do you want?"

He took a while to answer. "To be your man always. To have you as my woman." He nuzzled her breast.

She stroked the massive muscles of his arm. "All the Guard knows you're my lover, so I don't suppose it will stay a secret much longer."

"What the Guard knows Ironhall knows. Heard you're going there to harvest more Blades."

"That's a state secret. Nobody's supposed to know that, except Audley and Dominic and Chancellor Burningstar."

"Probably just someone's lucky guess, then. Makes sense. I heard Grand Master has a dozen ripe ones for you to pick."

"So did I," she said, annoyed. "Why can't men keep secrets? I expect you're the subject of political classes. You suppose they're holding you up to the juniors as

Royal Gigolo, an example of rewards
available to the diligent student. You want that?"

"No."

He moved his tongue and lips to her other
breast, making it even harder to concentrate on other
matters. They were experienced lovers now, knowing every
pore of each other's bodies, every secret whim,
every unspoken thought--and also every evasion.

"You haven't told me what else you want.
Crave a boon, Trusty and Well-Beloved
Subject. Anything."

"Send me back to Sixthmoon of 350
to tell my pa not to kill my ma by making me."

She shivered and stroked his hair. There was no
arguing with him on this. No such enchantment existed
or could exist, she was certain, for it would create
an impossible paradox. He wanted to cancel out
his own existence, but if he did not exist he could
not do that, so he would exist after all and could do it, and
so on, round and round forever. Conjunction could do many
things, but that was not one of them.

"Then you will never meet me and become my
man."

He did not answer. He could not accept that his
desires were contradictory, let alone
impossible. Crushed by guilt for deeds that were not his
fault, Dog was not always entirely rational.

"Listen, love," she said. "As queen, I can
give you a letter to Grand Wizard ordering him to find
you the spell you want or make it up. If he
says it's impossible, will you believe him?"

Dog stopped his foreplay. "I won't understand
his talk. Can I take Winter with me?"

"Yes, love, you can take Winter with you."

They lay in close and sticky silence for a
while, then she said, "Aren't you going to finish what
you were doing?"

"You go ahead," Dog said. "I'll catch
up."

On the twelfth day of her reign, Queen
Malinda rode off to Ironhall, escorted by the
entire Royal Guard. Her purpose was not
only to raise the strength of the Guard by adding a
dozen recruits; she had also summoned a
general assembly of the Order. She left
by moonlight and did not travel the most direct
road--precautions her father had taken during the
Monster War, and which seemed only sensible now,
when a dozen garrisons scattered around the coasts
had either declared for King Neville or refused
to declare allegiance at all.

Circumstances had changed since her first
visit to Starkmoor. The presumptuous
princess had become queen, overturning a
revolution while losing only a single Blade.
The entire school was assembled at the main door
to cheer her arrival, and Grand Master had become
a model of cooperation. Hammered by the Old
Blades and forged in the fires of necessity, he

declared, a dozen sharp and shining youngsters were ready to serve Her Majesty; indeed he would now venture beyond his written reports and release fourteen. Starting with Prime and Second, they were summoned in groups and asked in turn if they were willing to serve. Each declared his readiness and knelt to kiss the royal hand. With a couple of exceptions, they all looked absurdly young, but of course she did not say that; she reminded them instead that they were special, because they were the first to be bound by a reigning queen in almost a hundred years. She did not mention that they might be the last Blades ever bound, if Parliament proved as antagonistic as she expected.

The following day she had no trouble finding food for thought during the hours of meditation that must precede a binding. On her first visit she had spoken with the candidates out of boredom, this time she did so to take her mind off her troubles. Hunter and Crenshaw she recognized, but there were another dozen names to memorize: Lindore with the smile, Vere the tall one, Mathew the freckled one, Loring the gorgeous, Terrible the fidget ... all eager, all scared. They all had their sword names ready: Avenger, Glitter, Lady, Gadfly, and so on.

Several times Sir Lothaire, the Master of Rituals, came around in his fussy, absentminded fashion. Uncertain how to address his sovereign when she was sitting on the floor leaning back against the side of a raised hearth, he tried to bow while kneeling, which was not a success. And once, after a fatuous query about her preference in wine for the banquet, he said brightly, "Sir Dog is performing satisfactorily?"

Anything the Guard knew, Ironhall knew. Malinda turned to him in shock. Did he not realize she could have his head for that remark? His eyes were hidden by the reflection of firelight on his glasses, but the inane grin on his mouth seemed innocent enough. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, she decided that the school bookworm was unaware of the gossip. The onlookers were not--fourteen young faces around the octogram struggling very hard not to leer. Her cheeks were probably as red as the coals in the grates.

"Of course. He wields a mighty sword," she said.

Vere and Terrible developed coughing fits, confirming her suspicions.

Lothaire was still not flying with the flock. "Ah. I am pleased to hear that. It is wonderful how the binding solves problems, sometimes." There must have been some other purpose behind his question. Here it came --"I was just talking with Sir Jongleur ... old classmates ... both here and later at the College. He mentioned that Sir Dog came to see him, posing a problem in conjuration. Apparently--"

"Sir Jongleur is here?" She had given

Dog the letter to Grand Wizard, but he had not taken Winter with him when he went to the College--probably because he still could not bring himself to reveal his secret past to a friend. Grand Wizard had referred the question to another conjurer. Dog had refused to say much about their discussion, meaning he had not understood a word of it.

"He's come for the assembly. Lots of knights--"

"Go and fetch him," the Queen said. "Now!"

As Lothaire scrambled to his feet and scurried away, she glanced around the circle. Twenty-eight eyes avoided hers. She was almost as angry at herself for being embarrassed as she was with the conjurers for discussing Dog's private problems. She rose in silence and headed for the stair.

The door led out to a grassy space between the gym and the perimeter wall at the northeast corner of the complex, not overlooked by anyone. She was standing there, studying cloud shadows on the sunlit tors, when Lothaire came hurrying back with another sword-bearing knight. He was in his forties, with a belly and jowls, which were unusual on any member of the Order. His beard was streaked with gray and hung halfway down his chest, but he bowed nimbly enough. Lothaire fidgeted, uncertain whether to go or stay.

Malinda ignored him, concentrating on the conjurer. "Last week we sent Sir Dog to see Grand Wizard. He told us later that he had been sent to you."

Jongleur chuckled lightly. "Blades in the raw unnerve the old gaffer, so he always refers them to me. Sir Dog is a deeply troubled young man, as I am sure Her Majesty is aware."

Her Majesty was mainly aware of hunger and worries and shortness of temper. "Then why do you breach professional ethics by discussing his case with an outsider?"

His eyes narrowed. "I am sure Sir Lothaire will be discreet."

"Why should he be, when you are not? Furthermore, the letter Dog brought bore our seal. That made it crown business. You have violated your oath of allegiance."

He fell on his knees and bowed his head. He said nothing, which was his wisest option. Malinda looked at Master of Rituals, who promptly dropped beside his friend. She let them shiver for a moment before she spoke.

"Taking the inquiry on that basis, what answer did you give our messenger?"

"What he wanted would not have worked, Your Grace," Jongleur told her shoes. "It would violate the laws of conjury." He was almost as pompous as the Duke of Brinton.

"What laws of conjury?"

"Well, to start with, Damiano's Axiom and the

Prohibitions of Veriano, my lady."

"I am aware of Damiano's Axiom:

"Action prescribed without available resolution will dissipate the assemblage." Alberino Veriano's Prohibitions are merely a list of things that he considered conjuration could not achieve, many of which have been accomplished since his day. Be more specific." Malinda had put her mother's library to use during the summer, seeking either a solution to Dog's problem or proof that it had none. She had found neither.

The men looked up in surprise. Sunlight flashed on Master of Ritual's spectacles; Jongleur tugged nervously at his beard.

"Your Majesty shames me. ... The principle of superposition."

"Continue."

He gulped, worried now. "To assemble elementals and command them to perform an impossibility is extremely dangerous, leading to uncontrolled release of spiritual power. It is impossible for one thing to be in two places at once, which rules out traveling in time --even conjury will not let you go back and strangle yourself. Nor can you exist when you do not exist, that being another forbidden outcome. Sir Dog's desire to visit his childhood cannot be satisfied by any means known to modern spiritualism."

"And did you explain that to him in words he could understand, or did you amuse yourself by confusing him with technical jargon and overblown vocabulary?"

Jongleur hung his head. "I did not understand that he was acting on Your Majesty's behalf."

"Well you do now. You will go and find him at once and explain the problem in detail, until he is completely satisfied. Do you understand? Furthermore, since my request was directed to Grand Wizard, I shall expect a written reply from him to be delivered to my secretary, Master Kinwinkle, before I return to Grandon. Otherwise you may see the inside of the Bastion." She turned her glare on Lothaire. "And you, Master, will remember that Sir Dog's past is none of your business. Nor his future, either."

She stalked back into the Forge, leaving them on their knees. The whispering there stopped abruptly when she entered.

Now she had something else to worry about. She should not have lost her temper! Dog was her weak point. Enemies could strike at her through him. She did not have time to work up a good fret over this, though, before Audley came trotting down the steps and presented her with a dispatch just in from Chancellor Burningstar.

The ports of Horselea and Tharburgh had declared for Fitzambrose. Neville himself had been reported in Pompifarth, claiming royal honors and issuing a summons for Parliament

to meet there, instead of in Grandon.

Members of Your Grace's Council, the letter concluded, respectfully recommend that Your Grace consider declaring Pompifarth to be in a state of insurrection and in breach of the Queen's Peace; and that Your Grace may wish to charge the Black Riders with freeing its loyal inhabitants from the traitors who have deflected them from their true allegiance and to bring all contumacious subjects under the royal mercy; but the Council will of course loyally wait upon Your Grace's instructions. The Council, in short, was not going to start a civil war without the Queen's command but was protecting itself in case things got worse before she returned.

The Queen was in no mood to start a war, civil or uncivil, but as she rammed swords through fourteen young hearts that night, she found herself wishing that one of them belonged to Neville Fitzambrose. That one, she would cheerfully chop in slices.

She still had to preside over the general assembly before she could leave Ironhall and race back to the capital. Knights and some private Blades had been flocking in ever since she arrived; and on the morning after the binding the Loyal and Ancient Order of the Queen's Blades assembled for the first time since 361, when Sir Saxon had been elected Grand Master. Master of Archives, that professional pedant, muttered that there was no record of a general meeting of the Queen's Blades, not ever. Now there was, for the Head of the Order, seated below the broken sword of Durendal, was Queen Malinda the First, bejeweled and wearing a crown.

More than six hundred men had gathered in the hall. The entire Royal Guard was present, still in the old blue liveries, alas, because the Queen could not afford to outfit them with new. Snake and his Old Blades were there in force, as were knights so ancient that they could remember Ambrose II and would insist on doing so if given the slightest encouragement. Every private Blade in the land had begged and bullied his ward to attend, and many had consented. These non-Blades were shunted off to a safe, quiet corner to dispose of a butt of fine wine from the royal cellar, but no other strangers were present.

The ceremony was brief and matter-of-fact, yet many an eye blinked tears. Grand Master read out a blood-chilling list of additions to the Litany, including a "Sir Wolfbiter, slain in a far country" and ending with Sir Abel. But the main business of the meeting concerned the three Blades who had been crippled at Wetshore: Sir Bellamy had lost a leg, Sir Glanvil the use of an arm, and Sir Dorret had been both blinded and horribly mutilated by a kick from a horse. For half a year they had

lived in torment, driven by their bindings to defend their ward and balked by physical inability.

The conjuration to release them could hardly have been simpler, yet only the sovereign could perform it, and Amby had not been capable. Each in turn knelt before the Queen with bared shoulders, and she dubbed him knight, touching his flesh with the sword that had bound him. Right after that, as Snake cheerfully remarked, they could go off and get roaring drunk for the first time in their lives.

Commander Audley floated in bliss, ever at the Queen's side, being Leader before the entire Order, the youngest ever recorded. No other man had ever gone from Prime to Leader in just half a year, either. Much drollery was being lobbed around just behind his ears, on the lines of "do-you-suppose-his-fencing-will-improve-when-his-comballs-drop," but he could pretend not to hear that. He was not allowed to hear the praise, of which there was considerably more; the Guard had developed an affectionate respect for its mascot commander. He had made no mistakes, and that was a talent swordsmen valued highly.

Malinda, for her part, could breathe more easily. As long as she had the power to release Blades, she was sovereign. They recognized her, their bindings recognized her, and no one could deny her.

That situation might change very rapidly, though, and her intention was to leave as soon as possible. If she went by midday she could reach Bondhill by sunset and be home before noon tomorrow. She would find more trouble waiting there, she had no doubt. So she fretted through the ceremonial meal--which was barely appetizing, because Ironhall was neither staffed nor equipped to create banquets--and through some very windy speeches after it. She cut her own remarks to a barely decent brevity and departed, knowing the knights would now indulge in a memorable orgy of drinking at her expense. Companions were kept sober by their bindings.

Even in Ironhall she went nowhere without an escort, and she was dogged upstairs by fourteen young men who could hardly endure to let her out of their sight. She went straight to the royal chamber, a solitary oasis of luxury in Ironhall's stony austerity, furnished with her father's taste for overstuffed, overcrowded mishmash. There she found Dian laying out her riding clothes, but she also found Winter.

"What are you two getting up to?" she said cheerfully, then saw that he had more on his mind than Dian. She dropped the smile. "Spit it out! And I don't mean your thumbnail."

"Your Grace ... I've been talking to knights." Winter was rarely so hesitant. Either he had not finished solving his problem or he could not convince himself of the answer he had found. "There are knights from all over Chivial here."

"And?"

"There's something strange going on just west of

here." He pulled his hat off and scratched his hair. "At Lomouth, Waterby, Ashter ... all around Westerth, southern Nythia ... Mayshire."

She waited, knowing that interruptions would only slow him down. Hunter and Vere were quietly inspecting the room for hidden assassins, while the rest of the fourteen had packed up in the doorway and corridor behind her, reluctant to push past their sovereign.

"Lots of knights," Winter mumbled. "Sir Florian from Waterby mentioned it first, then Sir Warren, who's running a private fencing school near Buran. ... They're good men, my lady! So then I started asking, and hunting out others to ask, and I got eight or nine certians and a couple of probablies. ..."

"Tell her!" Dian snapped.

"Please do," Malinda said.

"Hiring swordsmen, Your Grace! And men-at-arms. And even farmhands. Strong arms and weak heads, if you know the expression. Several hundred, at least. I think someone's building a private army out in the west, here, Your Grace." He stared nervously at Malinda, like a child expecting a scolding.

She was training herself to take time to think. So she took time to think. Her first conclusions remained unchanged. In troubled times, men of property naturally wanted protectors, no matter what the law said about private armies. Half a dozen bullyboys to guard a mill or dockyard were of no account. A thousand or two with weapons and veterans to train them would be something else entirely. But who could find the money to do that? She couldn't!

"Is it only hereabouts? Have you asked?"

Winter nodded vigorously. "There's some of it going on all over, yes. Fitzambrose is openly hiring in the north. Farmers everywhere are screaming about a shortage of hands to bring in the harvest. But, it does seem a lot just west of here, Your Grace."

What else was bothering him? "Any idea who's behind it?"

"Mayshire seems to be the center, Your Grace." Winter drew a deep breath.

"Several people mentioned your cousin, Prince Courtney." He waited anxiously to see how Her Majesty liked hearing her heir being accused of treason.

Until death do us part.

CHIVIAN MARRIAGE CONTRACT

The members of the Council rose when their sovereign entered--three women and sixteen men

around a paper-littered table. She and her Guard had spent the night at Bondhill and been on the road again before dawn, pounding along in a blustery wind that threw rain and sleet by turns. At Abshurst she had told Audley to send his best two horsemen on ahead to warn Chancellor Burningstar to call the Council into immediate session. She stalked in with Audley and Winter, all three of them soaked, windswept, and muddy.

"Please be seated, Excellency, my lords and ladies." Malinda squelched down on her chair at the head, facing down the length of the table to Chancellor Burningstar.

Everyone had noted Her Majesty's evident displeasure and was trying to appear noncommittal, with varying degrees of success. The new Mother Superior, especially, tended to simper or chew her lip as conditions warranted. She was a pale little spider of a woman; it seemed she and her predecessor belonged to different factions of the Sisters, because they obviously detested each other. Today lip biting was in vogue. The Dowager Duchess of De Mayes was doing it too. None of them could come close to Grand Inquisitor's graven inscrutability. Master Kinwinkle remained standing at his writing desk.

Malinda chose to give the suspect a chance to redeem himself. "What bad news do you have this fine day, before I tell you mine?"

The Chancellor peered over the eyeglasses she had recently adopted. "The members of your Privy Council are, as always, deeply honored to have you join their deliberations, Your Majesty. We were considering a map Master Kinwinkle has prepared, showing the insurgent garrisons."

A paper was hastily passed along and spread out before the Queen. She frowned at the red names disfiguring the outlines of her realm like festering pox. The north was especially bad, for Neville's supporters were concentrated near the Wylderland border, but there were pustules less than a day's ride from Grandon itself. The absence of trouble spots in the southwest now seemed ominous.

"None of this is especially new. Can we continue to deny that we have a revolution on our hands?"

"Local unrest," grumbled the Duke of Brinton. "Horse of a different color. These towns are being held against the Queen's Majesty by armed bands of malcontents. The inhabitants in general are, we can be certain, loyal subjects of the crown."

"Is that true, Grand Inquisitor?" Malinda asked.

Lambskin spread his hands. "We have conflicting information, Your Grace. In some case yes, in others no."

"So you see no imminent armed rebellion springing up?"

"Certainly not imminently, no."

He had been given his chance. He had failed.

"Setting Fitzambrose aside for a moment, I believe the Council should hear certain information we obtained at Ironhall. Sir Winter?"

Winter stepped forward and began to recite. He was more confident now, having had time to prepare, and he spouted a damning stream of names and places. The last name, of course, was that of Prince Courtney.

"Have the honorable members any questions to put to the guardsman?" Malinda inquired sweetly.

Most of the honorable members were staring hard at Grand Inquisitor. It isn't just me, she thought. They all suspect him. They don't think it's just age and incompetence.

The old man glanced calmly around the table, waiting for others to speak first.

Burningstar, who detested him, said, "Grand Inquisitor?" Her cheeks bore little red rosebuds of anger.

"It is an impressive indictment," he said. "All hearsay, of course, but still disturbing. If I may presume, without prejudice to your royal cousin's loyalty, Your Grace, would it not be advisable, in these uncertain times, to summon His Highness to court to explain what, if anything, may lie behind these rumors?"

"What can, other than treason?"

Lambskin cracked his knuckles.

"Defense. Baelish ships have been seen skulking in the Westuary several times in the last few months. The locals fear a major Baelish raid, which is something we have all dreaded since the collapse of the treaty last spring. Before Your Grace was born, King Aeled scored the greatest triumph of his bloody career by seizing, looting, and razing Lomouth. While still not what it was, the city is now prosperous enough to repay another rape. Since his son has never touched it, Lomouth would not be an unlikely target for him to choose now." He scanned the company again, as if assessing reaction. "Your boy may merely have stumbled on traces of many landowners looking to their own protection. To assume that His Highness the Duke of Mayshire is behind all the recruiting is to jump to unwarranted conclusions."

Butter should be so smooth. Malinda kept tight hold of her temper. "We fully intend to summon him before this Council. Would you care to explain why we learned of the situation at a drinking party, instead of from our Office of General Inquiry?"

He shook his mummy head sadly.

"Overtaxed resources, mainly, Majesty. The inquisitors have been concentrating on Fitzambrose. I did withdraw five agents

from the north last week and dispatch them to the west country to investigate why our permanent personnel in the Prince's household had fallen behind in their reports."

"What in flaming britches do you mean by, "permanent personnel," eh?" the Duke demanded, suddenly scowling. "You dare to plant spies on a prince of the realm, the Heir Presumptive?"

Grand Master's glassy stare avoided him, wandering around the rest of the company instead. "Her Majesty's Office of General Inquiry keeps watch on anyone who might present a threat to the Queen's Grace."

Brinton spluttered. "You implying the Dark Chamber spies on me too?"

"Such matters should be discussed in private, Your Grace."

"I take the matter extremely seriously," Malinda said. "I am more concerned about Courtney than I am about Fitzambrose." To back Neville would be open rebellion--and there had been few signs of general support for him as yet--but many people who would draw back from that grim plunge into rebellion might see little wrong in forcing a juvenile queen into marrying a mature prince who was her heir and next of kin anyway. Even, perhaps, some of this very Council. Like grim old Horatio Gallows, there. Never treason! Oh no, just rationalizing the lines of command. ... How many of the other councillors were in his power?

"Is it agreed that we summon Prince Courtney?" she said harshly and watched the heads nod. "Then, if there is no new business, we can adjourn. Perhaps you would bring me the warrant to sign in an hour or so, Chancellor?"

It was the twentieth day of her reign. Already she had defeated one rebellion, and now she faced two more.

The Queen's Chamber was the largest and finest room in the Royal Suite at Greymere, large, and commanding a fine view above huddled city rooftops to the hills of Great Common. It was renowned for its framed Duville tapestries, whose improbable shepherd youths and maidens frolicked in an idyllic landscape and a much warmer climate than Chivial's. Queen Haralda had often threatened to hang smocks on some of them.

As a child Malinda had wondered why her father did not claim the best room as his own, but she had guessed the reason after the Night of Dogs; and when she returned to Greymere as queen she made the Guard show her the secret door and the spyholes concealed by the famous tapestries. They posed no real problem, though, because they led through to a bedchamber in the attendants' wing, and the door to that was fitted with a lock and a strong bolt. That was how

Dog came calling after curfew.

She had bathed, dressed in a comfortable gown, and was nibbling a snack of fruit and cheese when Chancellor Burningstar was shown in. As soon as her guest was seated and had accepted a glass of cordial, she went straight to what they both knew was the main reason for the meeting.

"Is Lambskin playing me false?"

Burningstar sighed. "I honestly do not know, Your Grace. I personally despise the man, but I feel that way about all inquisitors. To most White Sisters, a Blade smells like hot iron and an inquisitor of rot and decay. He reeks stronger than any. If your cousin is gathering and training an army, as you obviously fear, then you certainly have cause to dismiss your chief of security for not warning you of the danger."

"The next question is: Can I do it?"

"Indeed it is! Who defends the hunter from his dogs? Your father always appointed elderly persons to head the Dark Chamber, on the theory that none of them could ever be trusted for long, and it was much safer to let them die off than to try and remove them."

Lambskin had not been many years in his post. Malinda could remember his predecessor, a huge and sinister woman, dramatically dropping dead at a concert.

"Forgive my asking, but you are worth a hundred Lambskins to me. If he has any hold over you, I will sign a pardon for it, no matter what it involves."

Burningstar smiled, obviously pleased by the compliment. "I have nothing on my conscience except maybe some sarcastic comments when Your Grace was much younger. I fear that others on your council are more vulnerable. Your honored uncle, for example."

"Brinton?" Malinda said incredulously.

"How can anyone blackmail a duke? Dukes can get away with anything." Perhaps not murder or treason, but she could not conceive of the bovine Brinton murdering anyone. Boring them to death, maybe.

"Well ..." said the first minister of her government, "it is old gossip, and I swear I have never repeated it to anyone before ..."

Malinda grinned and leaned closer. "But when it is a matter of fealty to the crown ...?"

"Exactly. Do you know why he's never fathered any children?"

"Um, no. Do tell."

"When he was about ten," the old lady said in a conspiratorial whisper, "he watched a mountebank juggling axes. He was so impressed that he went off behind the barn and tried it himself."

The Queen guffawed, much to her shame. "I can see why he would not want the tale told, but I don't think he would let it trap him into open treason."

"It might sway his judgment if there were

doubts. Add a few more cases like it, and your Council may have trouble supporting you against Grand Inquisitor."

"I don't need its support in a case of treason," Malinda said grimly. "And this time I would not make the mistake of emptying my dungeons too quickly. But we have no proof yet. Let us see how Courtney responds to the warrant, and then decide."

She read over the summons to her cousin, which the Chancellor had brought, then moved some plates to make a space for signing it. When she looked up, she caught Burningstar staring at the tapestries.

"My great-grandmother's choice. I like the lad with the drinking horn. Impressive, isn't he?"

"Oh, I beg pardon, Your--"

"Don't apologize. Everyone reacts that way at first. For sheer beef, perhaps the one with the plow, and I don't mean the ox in front." For sheer beef, Dog put them all to shame. "I doubt if Prince Courtney will look much like that with his clothes off, but I know of course the Council wants me married, so--"

"Not at all, Your Majesty! Far from it! You don't think we're enjoying ourselves? No, most of your Council ... if you will pardon my presumption, Your Grace ... we really think you are doing very well, and with a little more experience ... and when we ourselves have more ... I doubt if any of us wants to see Prince Courtney wearing the crown matrimonial. Most detest him."

"Thank you for this assurance. I am less worried by Fitzambrose's threats of armed rebellion than I am by an insidious campaign to pressure me into marrying my cousin."

"Ah," the Chancellor said sadly. "That wasn't quite what I said. If Lambskin has sold out to him ... The Prince has been around court all his life and may be as well equipped to apply blackmail as Grand Inquisitor is. Together they would be formidable indeed."

"I wonder why everyone claims to despise Courtney and yet he always rises to the top?"

"Scum always does," said the Lady Chancellor. "Begging Your Grace's pardon."

"Pardon granted. What about that?" Malinda pointed out at the view of Great Common, still disfigured by rows of tents, a deliberate threat to the city. "I don't want the Black Riders there when Parliament meets."

"Your Council recommends sending them to Pompifarth."

"So you said in your letter. But to turn mercenaries loose on my own people! That is abhorrent! And unpd mercenaries, at that. I wish I could pay them off and ship them overseas." She had been glad of their help three weeks ago, but drawing a sword was always easier than sheathing it again.

"We do not propose storming the town, Majesty!" the Chancellor said, looking shocked. "We merely want to invest it, to block Neville's call for an anti-Parliament to meet there. We expect very few lords or elected commons to attend, probably none, but he may claim that they have. If he puts on a puppet show, people may be hoodwinked."

"Starve him out, you mean?"

"Not even that. Pompifarth is a major port, which we cannot hope to blockade without attracting the attention of the Baels, who would love to feast on your troubles. We propose throwing a cordon of Black Riders around the walls and declaring a siege. The inhabitants will not starve. I doubt very much that Neville himself is even there."

Malinda scowled at the window. The rain had started again, blocking out the view of Great Common. "Let us discuss it at a full meeting of the Council tomorrow," she said reluctantly. She could not hold back forever; she must do something about Neville.

Continuing rain ruined the roads and threatened the harvest. With Parliament due to convene in another four days, members were still struggling toward the capital, and messengers returning from Mayshire were long in coming. Prince Courtney's reply to the warrant was a curt note pleading indisposition.

By the time the Council assembled to discuss this defiance, Malinda was so furious that she could not bring herself to take her seat. The weather was murky outside and the mood inside even grimmer. Only the lashing of rain against the windows disturbed the silence as she paced back and forth on the rug; her ministers stood around the table and watched her. All except one.

"Where is Grand Inquisitor? By the eight, if he does not appear in five minutes, I will send the Royal Guard to fetch him! What news from Pompifarth, Chancellor?"

"No change, Your Grace. The town is sealed off from the land, but boats continue to enter and leave the harbor. There has been no fighting."

"And no news from Mayshire?"

"Nothing official ... rely on Grand Inquisitor ... more rumors, of course."

Rumors, indeed! Lord Candlefen, Malinda's squirrel-brained cousin, had arrived from Westerth that very morning with a whole cartload of rumors. He had been more interested in describing the hardships of his journey, but when pressed he had passed on stories of Prince Courtney raising an army with the help of Isilondian military advisors.

"Where is he getting the money?" she demanded, still pacing. "Constable, how much has he spent already?"

"Depends how many men he has hired, Your Grace," Valdor rumbled. Before she could call him an idiot, he added, "Warm bodies come cheap, but assume at least one crown per man so far, including board and shelter. The problem will be weapons. Even a pike needs first-quality steel. Ash poles are cheap enough by the dozen, but just try to collect a thousand! Shields and arrows and helmets--all very specialized artifacts. Strong boots, warm bedding. Horses and oxen and carts. But weapons first. A good sword, even, can cost more than a matched team of horses; the Lord Protector stripped the country to arm his garrisons."

"So Neville Fitzambrose has them all now? Very comforting!" Still no sign of Horatio Lambskin ... Had he fled to join his master, Courtney? "Commander Audley, since Grand Inquisitor has refused our summons to this--"

There was a knock on the door.

Audley, whose brows had risen very high at the thought of arresting the head of the Dark Chamber, said quickly, "By your leave, Your Grace ..." and opened the door a crack. And then wider, to admit the gaunt, gibbet form of the missing inquisitor, who entered clutching a bulky mass of papers under his arm.

He bowed to the Queen. She sat down and gestured for everyone else to do the same, leaving Lambskin still on his feet, heading for his usual seat.

"We are not accustomed to being kept waiting."

He looked at her reproachfully, making her wonder if he had deliberately staged this entrance.

"I humbly crave Your Grace's pardon. I tarried to finish gathering some savory tidings, and I trust that they will compensate for my tardiness."

"My cousin is not raising an illegal army?"

Shaking his head sadly, Grand Inquisitor laid the papers on the table.

"Indeed he is, Your Grace. About a thousand men, as near as my office can calculate. Abandoning subterfuge, he has now concentrated them in a camp just outside Lomouth."

"So we face two armed insurrections!" Malinda looked around at the shocked faces of her Privy Councillors and wondered which rats would start launching lifeboats first. "I thought you said you brought good news?"

She had never seen Grand Inquisitor actually smile before. She hoped she never would again.

"It seems very good news to me, Your Grace. Two nights ago, the Baels landed in force near Lomouth and attempted to seize the city. As I said, the Prince had just established his camp there. He organized resistance and sent out a sortie that engaged the Baels in battle and routed them."

They withdrew to their fleet and attempted to depart, but another contingent of the Prince's forces had so damaged the longships on the beach that a great many of them sank when they were launched. Hundreds or thousands of the invaders were drowned. At latest word the survivors were being hunted down in--"

The room exploded. Even the Chancellor was on her feet shouting, waving her arms overhead, looking ready to start dancing. Never in the long and blood-soaked struggle had the Chivians ever managed to bring any significant Baelish force to battle. There was no precedent for even a real fight, let alone a victory. That Courtney should be able to claim credit! Among all the tumult of joy, Malinda sat in silence, wondering why the spirits of chance were being so kind to her cousin and so unfair to her.

No, this could never be coincidence! She had feared all along that Courtney was being backed by Baelish gold, because Radgar Aeleding had more money than anyone. Must she believe that the invincible Bael had blundered so badly?

When the pandemonium faded enough for her to be heard, she said, "Are you quite certain this battle was genuine, Grand Inquisitor? Is there a reliable body count? Can we really believe such an improbable story?"

The room fell silent, and the councillors sheepishly resumed their seats. This time Grand Inquisitor sat down, too.

"I believe it, my lady. There are some questions still unanswered, yes. The messenger arrived just after dawn, exhausted, having ridden all night. He was still being interrogated when I came away to attend this meeting. I left instructions that I was to be informed at once if deeper probing revealed any inconsistencies in his story."

Malinda shuddered. "What does "deeper probing" mean? You put your own agents to the Question?"

"Oh no, nothing so severe, just a mild conjuration to search out details or omissions. The subjects rarely show much permanent impairment. The man is merely a part-time agent, you see. A trained inquisitor can be emptied like a bottle."

"It is not like the Baels to leave their ships vulnerable," Constable Valdor rumbled.

Grand Inquisitor favored him with a snakelike stare. "I hear of hundreds of dead and a large number of prisoners. Including one whom Her Majesty may wish to identify personally." He paused to let the implications penetrate, eyes to widen. "Radgar Aeleding."

Amid the renewed tumult his words had caused, ancient Horatio Lambskin sat in brooding stillness like a reef in surf, but his gaze was restless, assessing everyone's reaction. Malinda was doing the same. The Chancellor had

smiled at first, but now she was frowning. Master Kinwinkle was another who had seen that this seeming triumph held dangerous implications.

"Military protocol is not my speciality," Burningstar said when order returned. "Am I correct in thinking that a royal prisoner automatically belongs to the monarch?"

Several men spoke up in agreement, including Valdor and even Kinwinkle, the former herald.

"Whistle for him right away!" the Duke boomed. "Have him brought to Grandon posthaste. Bird in the hand, what? A king ought to be worth a king's ransom."

"Not in this case," said Grand Inquisitor. "Granted he is rich beyond measure, he has no close family to ransom him, while he certainly has many rivals who would seek to block such a move. And his person is of no value, since kings of Baelmark are elected by the moot. The moment his capture becomes known, the earls will assemble to elect another. After that he will be just another pirate."

"He may be willing to ransom himself," Chancellor Burningstar said. "I agree with the Duke's suggestion that a troop of lancers be dispatched to Lomouth to remove the royal prisoner here. We should not give him time to buy his way out of jail."

"Not unless he pays the rent to Her Majesty!" Brinton said, much taken with his own wit.

Malinda sprang to her feet in fury. "I remind you, Cousin, that Radgar Aeleding murdered my father and broke a formal treaty to do it. All he will buy from me is a stroke of the headsman's ax and for that I will not charge him one copper mite. Constable? Go and get him!"

THE TRIAL, DAY THREE

"You killed him," the chairman rasped. "The moment you heard that the King of Baelmark had been taken prisoner, you dispatched a troop of lancers posthaste to Lomouth with a royal warrant to seize him and bring him back to Grandon. Is that not correct?"

"Yes," Malinda said wearily. It had been a hard day, the third of three hard days. Dusk was settling on Grandon and its Bastion. Workers must now be heading home to their families, wives preparing the evening meal, footsore horses munching oats in warm stalls. On the river ships rode at anchor. In the Hall of Banners flunkies were setting out candelabra so the commissioners could see the witness and clerks record proceedings.

The farce was almost over. She had almost ceased to care. Her first brave illusion of something approaching a fair trial had been as

ephemeral as a rainbow. With distortions, half truths, browbeating, and his own lies, Horatio Lambskin had served her up to his master like a trussed calf. He had also intimidated the commissioners until they had abandoned any pretense of having authority. They asked no questions now. She was obviously guilty and they would vote as instructed.

"So, without even an attempt at a trial, you struck off his head and stuck it on a spike. You put your husband's head alongside your brother's?"

Some faint remnant of the famous royal temper stirred--"If Radgar was my husband, then my claim to the throne was invalid, so why did you pledge allegiance to me right here in this hall, Master Lambskin?"

"The inquiry will take note that the witness refused to answer."

"The answer is simple--I followed the advice of my Privy Council, to which you belonged. It was you who instructed us, Chancellor. If we wanted to execute the King of Baelmark, you said, we must do so quickly, before he could be demoted."

"But did I not argue that so important a prisoner should first be put to the Question, or at least thoroughly interrogated?"

"I do not recall." She half expected the inquisitor jailers standing alongside her to call her a liar, but she spoke the truth and they remained silent. "He had been thoroughly interrogated, in Lomouth, before my men even reached him. Interrogated most horribly! I did not see him myself, but I was told that, as Lord of the Fire Lands, he bore some sort of conjuration that made him immune to fire. Flame would hurt him but not burn him. He had already been tortured out of his wits.

"Besides, I saw what the Question did to Lord Roland and I vowed I would never treat any man so, no matter how evil he was. Am I charged with being too soft-hearted? The Council agreed to Radgar Aeleding's execution and you were present at the meeting." She could not remember which way he had voted in the end, though. She certainly remembered the Radgar she had met briefly on the longship at Wetshore, and her conviction then that he was not the monster of his reputation. She remembered her revulsion at the thought of turning such a man into a gibbering rabbit.

The chairman peered along the table, first left, then right. "The honored commissioners may well wonder whether the Bael's hasty execution was designed to suppress his version of what exactly passed between the two of them before her father was assassinated. A transcript of the testimony he gave in Lomouth will be placed before the commissioners in due course."

"Testimony given under torture?" Malinda

shouted. "Or did you write it yourself this morning?"

"The witness will speak only when addressed. But let us by all means discuss Lord Roland, since you mention him." The chairman bared yellow stumps of teeth. "The traitor Roland. Now that one was put to the Question, whereupon he confessed to treason against the Council of Regency, the supreme authority in the land. Before he could make a full and detailed statement, your agents took over the Bastion and you ordered the prisoner released from his cell."

"I did. I still have nightmares about what you had made of him. How do you manage to sleep at all, Chancellor?"

"You ordered the prisoner moved to--"

"He was not a prisoner then."

"Be that as it may, that night he was murdered. Who killed him?"

"I do not know." The Blades, of course, but she did not know which.

"Who do you think killed him?"

"My suspicions are not evidence."

"The inquiry takes note that the witness refuses to answer. Was he not murdered so he would not testify to your part in his foul treason?"

"I do not know why he was killed."

"The witness is lying!" barked one of the guards alongside, her chair.

"All right, he was murdered out of pity! Murdered by one of his best friends--and I do not know which--because your horrible conjurations had turned him into--"

"Silence! The witness will speak only to answer a question." The chairman sighed. "Radgar, Roland --I am sure the honorable commissioners have noted that witnesses to your crimes had very brief lives. Now let us consider Pompifarth. You sent the mercenary troops known as the Black--"

"You were at that meeting! You know how I fought to have the terms of engagement restricted! You know--"

"If you persist in interrupting the court," the chairman said hoarsely, "then I will have the guards gag you and allow you to testify only by gestures. Your seal was on the warrant by which those mercenary brutes sacked Pompifarth. Those violent men were ragged and hungry, yet you sent them to storm a city you claimed to rule. The killing, rapine, and looting were done in your name and by your authority."

"Is that a statement or a question? In either case it is a lie. Souris was strictly forbidden to enter any part of the city other than the fortress that abuts it on the north. The massacre was ordered by--"

The chairman nodded and a hard, rough-skinned hand clapped over Malinda's mouth, banging her head back against the wood of the chair. Other hands grabbed her arms, immobilizing her.

"This is your last warning. The next time you speak unbidden, you will be gagged and bound." The

chairman glanced to left and right. "At this hour we usually adjourn for the day. Howsoever, I do believe that we can wind up this tedious business fairly rapidly now. May I suggest that the honored commissioners take a brief break to partake of some of Governor Churle's splendid hospitality and then reassemble in about an hour? At that time we can question the witness about the last and perhaps most terrible of her crimes, the murder she committed with her own already blood-soaked hands."

We see most clearly out of the backs of our heads.

FONATELLES

News of the Pompifarth disaster reached Grandon early on the fourth of Tenthmoon. Malinda's first notice of it came while her maids were dressing her--Chancellor Burningstar was in the anteroom, begging an audience at Her Majesty's earliest convenience. She called for a robe and the visitor and shooed the girls away.

Burningstar came hurrying in, her flustered manner utterly out of character. She bobbed a small curtsey at the door, came close, and then lowered herself unsteadily all the way to her knees.

"Something is wrong," Malinda said, offering a hand. "And that is not a good position for clear thinking. Here, let me help you up."

"But I am tendering my resignation, Your Majesty. I have failed most--"

"Your resignation is refused. Come and sit here." Rejecting protests, she led the old lady over to the chairs by the fire, and only when they were both seated would she listen. "Bad news, obviously." Was there any other kind?

Out it came: Pompifarth, sack, murder, looting, mass rape ... Within minutes Burningstar was close to tears, and the redness of her eyes said she had wept hard and long already. "Even the Baels are never that bad!" she finished. "They leave the towns standing so the people can generate more wealth to be looted the next time. This was total destruction. I cannot continue as Your Majesty's--"

"You will continue." Malinda felt no desire to weep. She wanted to kill someone. "I think you have been doing amazingly well, and you know I speak the truth. Did I fall into the same pit as Granville, trusting unpd mercenaries? Souris has switched sides again, obviously. Who put him up to this?"

"Fitzambrose himself, of course! The fake call for an Anti-Parliament ... it was a trap and I led you into it. His men opened the gates for the killers, I'll swear! Look at the timing --Parliament meets tomorrow and now everyone thinks you

made an example of the city."

Malinda sighed. "You are right, I fear. Well, write the truth into my speech and let's hope they believe me." She looked at the Chancellor's careworn expression. "There is more?"

A nod. "A letter from Prince Courtney. I beg your pardon, my lady, but I forgot to bring it. If I may send--"

"Just tell me. I think I can guess."

"He wants ... he demands that you marry him, my lady. He wants the crown matrimonial."

Malinda sat in silence for a while. It was a month since Amby died. They had not given her much of a chance to show how a queen would rule.

The next day, she addressed Parliament.

Although she had never met one before, Malinda had enough experience in public speaking to recognize a hostile audience. As she paraded after the sergeants-at-arms with their maces and Blades with drawn swords, down the aisle between the kneeling Lords and Commons assembled, she could smell hatred in the air. When she sat enthroned, with Audley standing beside her holding Evening, she looked out over an ocean of angry stares. The Lords were splendid as kingfishers, robed in scarlet and ermine, crowned with coronets--a real crown was a horrible thing, and she was going to have a deathly sore neck by the time this nonsense ended--but in back of them the Commons were a flock of drab sparrows, two knights from every shire and two burgesses from every town.

She swore the enthronement oath again. The ancient promises flew away like bats into the sullen silence. She read her speech. No one was rash enough to boo a monarch, but several times she sensed a low rumble of disapproval--notably when she mentioned her renewal of the campaign against evil enchantment. Only her account of the capture and execution of Radgar Aeleding won a cheer, but everyone knew that Courtney deserved the credit. They even knew that Courtney had been industriously torturing the monster until the Queen's men stole him away; they thought that a much better idea than just chopping off his head.

Courtney was not present. Courtney had not resisted when her Yeomen seized the captive Baelish king, but his refusal to appear before the Privy Council and now his absence from Parliament were acts of rebellion. How could she denounce him when chance had made him the greatest hero in the land? She could condemn Neville, of course, and did so. She laid the blame for the Pompifarth massacre on him, but who believed her?

When she spoke at last of the crown's desperate need for money, she thought she heard knives being whetted, but perhaps it was only teeth grinding. Parliament traditionally demanded

redress of its grievances before voting supply, and this Parliament was going to pile corpses at her door--Granville, Pompifarth, the carnage at Wetshore, Sycamore Square. Parliaments impeached chancellors quite regularly, but none had ever tried to depose the monarch. That record might be about to change. Her Heir Presumptive was the new national hero, Prince Courtney.

Dog came to her that night as soon as Dian had left, and their lovemaking was even more urgent and passionate than usual. Either he took his cue from her or he had worked out the situation for himself. Later, in the lull after the storm, she broke the news. "It is nearly over, love. We have very few nights left."

He just grunted. He rarely spoke much, and it was almost impossible to make him speak of bad things.

"We always knew it could not last. We have enjoyed much longer than I expected."

"I have brought shame upon you," he said bitterly. "You heard what they were shouting at you in the streets. They know you have a lover named Dog."

"Perhaps just coincidence," she said, but not believing that. "Not the scandal ... Parliament will force me to marry Courtney so it can make him King. No, don't offer to kill him for me. I know you would if I said please, but that would probably mean Neville succeeding, so killing Courtney would only make things worse."

"How can they force a queen?"

"By refusing me money." She sniffed away a tear. "He's a lot older than I am. I'll outlive him, I swear! I'll be older then, and have some experience, and ... Oh, Dog!" She started to wail, so he kissed her and went on kissing her. It wasn't possible to kiss and blubber at the same time. After that he would not let her speak about the future at all.

The following morning Parliament set to work. At first there was only angry talk, but soon resolutions were being moved, bills read, committees formed, petitions introduced, questions asked. A motion declaring a female chancellor a breach of parliamentary privilege was defeated, but narrowly. The crown's appeal for supply was ignored.

Day by day Burningstar's reports to the Queen grew grimmer, until, at the end of a turbulent week, the first bill cleared both houses and arrived at the palace for the Queen's signature. It was very brief and unambiguous, and exactly what she had feared it would be.

That evening she held a private party in the quarters she had occupied before her departure for Ness Royal, and the participants were those who had shared them with her--Ruby, Dove, Alys, and

Sister Moment. Laraine had vanished into matrimony, but Lady Arabel had just returned from Ness Royal plumper than ever; and naturally the three surviving Blades of the Princess's Guard were there. The night twinkled with music and dancing and brave efforts to be merry.

Next morning, Malinda addressed the Guard --not all of them, but the dozen or so who were then attending her, for they comprised a fair sampling, from Fitzroy, the eldest, down to Vere and Terrible, the most junior.

"You have heard, I am sure," she said, "that Parliament has sent me a bill dissolving the Order. This is a foggy area of law, because ever since Ranulf, the Blades have been regarded as being within the royal prerogative. Ironhall is paid for out of the privy purse. On the other hand, Parliament does vote taxes to cover the cost of the Royal Guard, and it did approve the Charter, which exempts bound Blades from criminal penalties and so on. I do not intend to sign this bill."

They waited in silence. They were bright young men; they knew the relevant law and history, but they also knew that when Parliament clashed with the sovereign, although it might not get all it wanted, it rarely came away empty-handed. The most affected were the youngsters, who had been sure of many years' employment in the Guard, whereas the seniors would have already been looking forward to release and private life. Eventually Winter took his finger from his teeth just long enough to say, "The Commons will withhold supply."

"You are right," Malinda admitted, "up to a point. Since this is the first bill they have passed, it obviously lies near to the members' hearts. They will bluster and blather; they will pass bills, motions, and resolutions galore, but eventually Parliament and I must come to agreement. The country is close to civil war; the burgesses know that and do not want it. In the end I must grant redress, they must vote supply. If they will not see reason, then I will dissolve Parliament and run the government on funds gained by suppressing evil elementaries." Snake had not clinked any gold into her hands yet, though.

"But--" Winter thought better of what he had been about to say and went back to nibbling.

"But," she said, "Parliament does not want me to do that, and knows I would not dare challenge the enchanters without you to protect me. There are many layers to this. I assure you that if this matter has priority with the members, it certainly does with me. I am as bound to the Blades as you are to me."

Fitzroy thanked Her Majesty for her gracious words. She did not think she had convinced her troops.

Everything fell apart very rapidly after

that. The Commons began debating the Queen's marriage. Malinda summoned the ringleaders, including the Speaker, Alfred Kildare. She left them on their knees while she roasted them with a tirade on the royal prerogative. She warned them that any further discussion of that subject would see them all in the Bastion. Her father had done it and she would. She used words she had overheard in stables.

At the next meeting of the Privy Council, Constable Valdor gave a review of the military situation in his bone-grinding bass. "Fitzambrose is definitely on the march," he said. "He's bringing all his father's troops south from Wylderland, pulling in the garrisons that support him. I expect the Black Riders will join him. If he meets no resistance, he should be here in nine or ten days."

Studying those coarse and ruthless features, Malinda wondered whether Valdor himself would stay loyal that long. "How many men?"

"Probably less than three thousand in total, Your Grace, but at least three quarters of them are battle-hardened professionals. The rest have been intensively trained over the last few months."

"And Courtney?"

"He hasn't moved yet, that we know of."

No doubt he was too busy showering the nobility with blackmail notes. Courtney would always prefer subversion to overt military action, in spite of his stunning victory over the Baels --or even because of it. Malinda was convinced that the true story of that engagement had yet to be told.

"We estimate the Prince has five or six thousand men at his disposal," Valdor growled.

"Not close," Grand Inquisitor snapped with the delicacy of a falling tree. "Less than half that, and most of them untrained, unequipped farm boys."

"How sure are you?" the Queen asked. She no longer believed much of what he told her, but she dared not beard the lion until Burningstar found a replacement lion. Even the Blades might not be able to defend her if Lambskin's Dark Chamber supporters chose to retaliate.

"Courtney had about a thousand when he attacked the Baels--he only won because he took them by surprise and caught them with their force divided. They lost far more men to drowning than--"

"And the bodies were washed out to sea, of course?"

"Some of them, Your Grace. Some were washed up on the beach. A victorious commander never has trouble recruiting, but most of those who have gathered under his banner since then are untrained and armed with pitchforks." Lambskin's insistence on downgrading the Courtney threat did not necessarily mean he was not corresponding with

Neville as well, of course.

"Constable?" Malinda said.

Valdor growled. "I agree that he needs weapons. The drowned Baels took theirs to the bottom with them. You can't buy a good armorer now for his weight in rubies. Arms are the biggest bottleneck."

Malinda had always understood that the problem bottlenecks were the small ones. Which side was Valdor on? Having killed Granville, he ought to fear Granville's son, although Souris seemed to have made the reverse switch easily enough.

"We cannot assume," the Chancellor said, "that they will kill each other off and leave the realm at peace. Is it not time and past time, for Her Majesty to call up the levies?"

The bitter truth was that the Chivian crown had no permanent army, other than the Household Yeomen and the mercenary forces in Wylderland that were now supporting Neville. To go to war, Malinda must call on the peers to muster and arm their tenants; cities would supply money or raise regiments. She had wide estates of her own, of course, but Granville had drained them of men to garrison his strongholds.

Valdor shrugged. "But how do you arm them? You have the same problem as the Prince. Will you fight a civil war with fists and pitchforks?"

"The lords are already arming," Burningstar said bitterly. "Half of them have left town. Spirits know which side they'll be on in the end."

"I suspect most of them will lean toward Prince Courtney," Malinda said. "Does anyone disagree with that? No? So the plan, I suppose, is that I am expected to appeal to my cousin for help against my nephew, and the price of his help will be the crown matrimonial." She looked around the table, searching for dissent. "I do not--"

The door flew open. Audley jumped like a cricket and came down with sword drawn, but the intruder was only Sir Piers-- hatless, hair in wild disarray, doublet hanging open, and half-unlaced shirt exposing an extremely furry chest. He stopped just inside the doorway, seeming quite unaware of Evening's razor edge almost touching his throat.

"Ironhall!" he howled. "Your Majesty, they have sacked Ironhall!" By then the Council was on its feet, everyone shouting at once, so the rest of his announcement was barely audible. He rattled off unfamiliar names ... "rode all night ... drove them into the moors ... burned ... dead ..." He belatedly went down on one knee, and tugged his doublet closed. Audley slammed the massive door in the faces of the Blades gawking outside.

Malinda alone had remained seated. Again a Blade had brought her a fateful message.

How many times had that happened in her life?
Dominic bringing her summons to court and thereby
provoking Godeleva's suicide. Lord Roland
telling her of her betrothal to Radgar.
Marlon's frantic ride to Ness Royal
to warn of Amby's imminent death. Now Piers.
She waited until the others sat down again,
abashed.

Piers said, "I most humbly beg Your
Majesty's--"

"Repeat your report. Who did this?"

Courtney's men, of course.

When he had finished, Malinda said, "Thank
you. You may withdraw. I will address the entire
Guard in the Rose Hall, right after this meeting.
Bring as many private Blades as you can find,
even if you have to drag them there. First I want
to speak with Sir Dog."

As the door closed behind the Blade, she
surveyed the shocked faces of her Privy
Council.

"Absolute idiocy!" Constable Valdor
growled. "What sort of military objective
was Ironhall? A few boys and old men? If
that's the best his Isilondian advisors can do,
the Prince is no threat to her Grace."

"Parliament will be pleased," the Chancellor
muttered hoarsely. "That finishes the Blades.
Popular move."

"I doubt if that was the main reason,"
Malinda said. "Now you know how to arm an
army of farm boys, Constable--there were five thousand
swords just hanging there for the taking. However, it is
an act of overt rebellion against the crown.
Chancellor, summon Parliament into joint
session. Announce the news and ask for a loyal
address attainting Courtney a traitor.
Better prepare a writ of dissolution for my
seal and take it with you, to be used if necessary, at
your own discretion. If they get the bit between their
teeth, send them home."

"And call out the levies?"

Malinda thought of men slain, men crippled and
mutilated, perhaps towns burned, women raped
... just so she could choose who would lie in her bed?
She sighed. "No. I think they would simply
join one rebel or the other, not me. I am not
going to throw the land into worse turmoil than it is
in already. Does anyone have any better ideas?"

No. Heads shook in morose silence.

They all knew that it was over.

When everyone had left, they sent in Dog.
He glanced curiously around the Council
Chamber, strode purposefully across to where
Malinda was standing, crushed her into his arms, and
kissed her. She had not expected that, but she
cooperated.

Then they looked at each other, still embracing.

"I want you to go first, love," she whispered.

"They know what you mean to me, so it will help the others. Can you do that?"

His ugly face twisted in pain. "Must this be?"

She nodded. "I'll explain to them. And then I want you to do something. This is just as hard for me ... I'm going to send Winter and Dian back to Ness Royal. I want you to go with them, see they arrive safely. Wait there. If I need a place to hide, that's best."

"And who gets you there safely?"

"I'll set up something with Snake. Promise me!"

Dog argued, of course. He couldn't help but argue. She won his promise eventually, but she could not be sure that it would last long enough.

As she entered the Rose Hall, the waiting Blades sank to their knees, which was a breach of normal procedure, a unique tribute. It brought tears to her eyes. It would not make things easier. She went to stand behind the red cushion that lay on the edge of the dais. She looked over the assembled Order--Snake and some other knights in the background ... half a dozen private Blades also. She gestured for them to rise.

"Ever since Durendal and Ranulf," she said, "your Order has been the bulwark of my house, an unfailing source of honor and duty, of courage and dedication. More than once it saved the dynasty. Now, alas, times have changed. The Litany itself has perished in flames. The sky of swords has fallen."

She located Dog, at the back. She could not read his expression.

"Worst of all, I must tell you that, through no fault of yours, you have become a liability. If you insist on remaining to guard me, I shall be in greater danger than if you disperse. Your predecessors protected my ancestors from death, but the rebels who destroyed Ironhall and now march on Grandon are intent on marrying me off, not beheading me." Courtney, yes, but Neville might prefer to avenge his father. "Forced marriage is a peril of queens, not kings. From choice I would not wed either my royal cousin or my nephew, but unwelcome marriage is a common fate for women and we survive it. I will still be Queen of Chivial. On the other hand, if you stand in the rebels' way, they will slay you to the last man. It will be a bloody battle, and I will be blamed for the slaughter. I may even perish in it, so you serve me best now by disbanding. I ask you all to make this sacrifice. Companion Dog?"

Would he? Could he?

For a long moment she held her breath. Perhaps she had been wrong to ask him. All Blades resisted release, although they were usually very glad of

it afterward. She was counting on Dog's love to overcome the conjured reluctance, but perhaps it would make the struggle harder for him.

Then he shouldered Fury and Winter aside and strode forward to the cushion. A sigh seemed to fill the whole hall. He hesitated again, staring at her in puzzled agony, before he drew his broadsword and offered it, hilt first. She had forgotten how much that great slab of steel weighed. He had refused to name it when he was bound, but one night at Ness Royal she had teased him that it must be called "Sword," and later he had shown her that word clumsily scratched on the blade near the hilt. She saw it again now:
Sword.

Dog never did things by half measures. Instead of fumbling to unlace jerkin, doublet, and shirt, he just put both hands to his neck and ripped, hauling the remains down to his elbows. Shoulders bare, he knelt for the dubbing.

"Arise, Sir Dog."

She returned Sword to him. As he backed away, rubbing his eyes, Audley turned to face the throng. "Companion Dominic!"

Dominic hesitated, face twisted in horror. Bloodfang shoved him and he stumbled forward.

"Arise, Sir Dominic ..."

"Companion Oak!"

Dog took Oak by the elbow and delivered him to the cushion as surely as a team of horses would have done.

"Arise, Sir Oak."

Dominic brought the one after, and then the pattern was set. A few wept, but none of the Guard made a serious attempt to resist.

Sir Reynard ... Sir Brock ...
Sir Crenshaw ...

Most of the private Blades had to be dragged forward, although not one drew his sword or tried to flee. Normally only the death of his ward could release a private Blade, but in this dissolution of the entire Order, the effort was worth making. It might work for some of them.

And last of all: "Arise Sir Audley

...

"I thank you all from the bottom of my heart," Malinda said, "and wish you long life and happiness. The Treasury will distribute some funds ... not nearly what you have earned, but all I can spare. I hope some of you will write a proper history of the Blades to replace the archives lost in the destruction."

She stepped down and Dog offered his arm to lead her out. The knights bent their knees to her as she went by them, but no one could manage to raise a cheer. After nearly four centuries, the Blades were finished. Radgar Aeleding, once himself a candidate in the Order, had destroyed it with a single bolt. It was small consolation that his head

now adorned a spike in Grandon.

I will be your friend, the lion told the antelope. The antelope replied, Then I shall not fear my enemies.

FONATELLES

On the twentieth of Tenthmoon, Courtney's army pitched camp on the outskirts of Grandon, having marched from Ironhall without meeting resistance. Grand Inquisitor reported that Neville's forces were scattering and retreating northward. Parliament had adjourned, with many members hurrying away to join the triumphant Prince, and most of the Privy Council had gone with them. Even the Queen's ladies-in-waiting had headed home to visit their families, just in case.

The palace seemed deserted. As the sun was setting, Malinda sat in her private withdrawing room with Burningstar and Secretary Kinwinkle. They were eating sweet cakes and sipping dry mead. There was nothing more to be done.

"How early it is getting dark now," the Chancellor remarked.

"Very symbolic," Malinda said. "Tell me, both of you, what did I do wrong? If I ever write my memoirs, what lessons should I pass on to the next queen regnant, if there ever is one?"

Burningstar displayed one of her grim little smiles. "You first, Master Secretary."

Kinwinkle looked stricken at the thought of criticizing a monarch, but he plunged bravely ahead. "I think you did very little wrong, my lady, nothing to be ashamed of. The dice were loaded against you right from the start. Lord Granville ruled badly and waited far too long to face Parliament, so you inherited a bankrupt realm. The manner of your father's death ... if you will forgive me, there is still some lingering doubt about your part in that. And the Blades' rampage alienated everyone, so perhaps you should have disowned them instead of supporting them." He stopped, watching nervously to see how she reacted.

"Thank you." Disown the Blades after three hundred years? Malinda looked to the Chancellor, who sniffed.

"I blame your father. He should have either named Lord Granville as his heir or left him out entirely, certainly never made him Lord Protector. Your claim was left foggy. It was a miracle that you managed to win the throne at all, Your Grace."

"And you are too kind to tell me I was too kind to keep it?"

Burningstar took a sip of mead in ladylike fashion. "Perhaps. You should certainly have left

Prince Courtney and Master Fitzambrose in the Bastion until you had established your rule. Your leniency was an error, although one that does you credit. Apart from that, you made no real mistakes. Your father certainly blundered more than that in his youth, before he learned that kings must listen to their councillors and take time to weigh their actions. Courtney's capture of the Bael was a drastic interference by the spirits of chance, against which no mortal can stand. Without that, we might have Neville at the gates instead of him."

That was no figure of speech; Malinda thought she could hear cheering in the distance.

"I am too softhearted. I did not want even Granville to die as he did. As one of my Blades did ... and other men ... I did not want to cause any man's death."

The Chancellor emptied her goblet in one swallow and clinked it down on the table. "If I may say so, Your Grace, you may still have time to redeem your final mistake." Her eyes drilled holes in Malinda. "You admit that you do not wish to marry your cousin."

"I always found Courtney amusing, but as far as being married to him ... I hope he still uses love potions."

"With respect, my lady, I have met your nephew only briefly, but he seemed a pleasant enough young man, quite ordinary. He ought to be a lot more malleable than your cousin. If you really want my opinion, I still believe you should have headed north to join him--yes, married him and made him King Consort! That debauched butter churn of a Courtney will be a hopeless disaster. There is probably still time."

"Unlikely, I'd say." Malinda sighed. The cheering was growing louder. "I have thought much on this, these last few days. Neville seemed like a strapping stripling, I grant you, but he thinks I killed his father. He broke his oath to me. If I flee to him, I shall be throwing myself on his mercy and will end up a prisoner, not a wife or co-ruler." She, too, drained her goblet. "It would still cause civil war. I do not want innocent people to die because of me!"

After a moment she added, "Love potions or not, I can outlive Courtney."

The door swung open. Lady Burningstar and Master Kinwinkle rose. Two burly men-at-arms entered, Grand Inquisitor peered over their heads, and then all three went out again. Courtney came mincing in, resplendent in gold and scarlet, the feather in his hat as long as a scythe. He paused to consider Burningstar, who was halfway to the door already. She offered him a barely visible curtsey.

He pouted. "You should have stayed with the wimple, darling. That neck is an eyesore. I'll take the chain now." He held out a finely manicured hand.

She straightened so she could look down at him from as high as possible. "Her Majesty gave me this chain and until Her Majesty--"

"Let him have it, Chancellor," Malinda said. "He's spiteful. And thank you again for all you have done."

Burningstar angrily lifted the golden chain over her bonnet and relinquished it.

"If you are wise, lady, you will now return to Oakendown and stay there." Courtney turned away from her and frowned thoughtfully at Master Kinwinkle, who wilted.

"Footman? Gardener? Night soil attendant? No ... You were the herald who read out Uncle's will so badly. Well, run along and find something useful to do."

Dismissing them with a flick of his fingers, Courtney pranced the rest of the way to Malinda, bringing a powerful odor of cloves. The door closed, leaving them alone.

"I did warn you, darling." He helped himself to a chair and held the flask of mead up to the light to see how much remained.

"You have still not sworn allegiance. I should not have let you get away with that."

"No, you shouldn't." He filled Burningstar's discarded goblet. "But you did. And now you are going to be swearing wedding vows. I did warn you." He sipped. "Mm? Too dry for my palate. We are currently preparing a brief ceremony, at which you will sign and seal a few simple documents: our betrothal, a proclamation announcing it and setting the date for our wedding, a bill granting me the crown matrimonial--and precedence--and letters patent appointing me regent in the meantime with plenipotentiary powers to stamp out the current unrest." Removing his hat briefly, he looped the gold chain over his head.

She did not bother to hide her contempt. His face was freshly powdered, the rich red velvet of his jerkin displayed not one speck of dust, and his fingers glittered with gems. He smirked like a satisfied child and took up his goblet again.

"Can't you at least say you are glad to see me? Even relatively speaking? Would you rather have that ghastly Fitzambrose boy sitting here? A marriage knot is preferable to a hangman's. He has sworn to post your head next to King Radgar's."

"He's no threat now," she said. "He must be scampering back over the Wylderland border about now."

Courtney smirked. "Um ... no, darling. You have been misinformed. He's south of Pompifarth, heading this way. But I am advised that we can meet him and wipe him out before he disturbs the peace around here. That's assuming he turns down my final offer, which he probably won't--it's very generous. He will live in

luxury for the rest of his days, few though those will undoubtedly be. Forget him, beloved, and think only of our future together. Tomorrow we shall hold the formal betrothal ceremony for the peers and diplomatic corps and so on. Then I will go off and deal with the Fitzambrose pest. You will stay here to bake the wedding cake."

"You must be the only general in history to lead his army in a coach and four."

He winced. "Dearest! You are not suggesting I should ride a horse are you? I leave all the nasty sweaty, smelly rough stuff to underlings. Except for breeding heirs, of course. I'll attend to that in person."

"And if I refuse this romantic proposal you ply me with love potions as you did all those other women?"

Courtney chuckled, laid down the goblet, and rose to his feet. He came close, and she instinctively leaned away from him. She had never cared for cloves.

"Daaaarling!" he said, smiling down at her. "Do you know the nicest part of having an army at your back? You don't have to keep being nice to people all the time! It did get to be wearing sometimes. No, my love, no potions. Have you ever heard of the Quiet Pool?"

Something unpleasant was coming. "No."

"Well, you know those elementaries your father suppressed so energetically? All their books of evil enchantments were supposed to be destroyed, yes? Well, they weren't. Very few, in fact. The College managed to get their palsied hands on some, but the Dark Chamber collected most. The Quiet Pool is a conjuration that used to be especially popular with henpecked husbands and bullied wives." He chuckled again, studying her with bloodshot eyes.

"You wouldn't dare!" she said, her mouth suddenly dry with fear.

Grinning inanely, he nodded and chucked her under the chin. "Oh, yes I would, kitten! Let's settle it right now. Which is it to be? Will you be a good, obedient, and passionate wife, or do I have Grand Inquisitor turn you into royal jelly?"

"He wouldn't dare!"

"No? He drools at the thought. You really should not have struck him that night in the Bastion, my sweet. He even dreams of being Chancellor-- we'll let him dream a little longer. Now, beloved, will you marry me?"

That it had come to this! She wondered how bad Radgar Aeleding would have been, really.

"Yes, I will marry you. I have no choice."

"With passion and babies and all the naked-body-in-bed stuff?"

"I will provide the body, as required. You'll have to supply the passion."

He lifted her hand and kissed it. "Tonight, beloved, I will test your commitment. Until then,

keep me in your heart."

She had always suspected that Courtney's cynical mask hid a wounded, sensitive soul. Now she knew that the inside was much nastier than the outside.

He paused on his way to the door. "I'll have you fetched when we're ready for the signing ceremony. Meanwhile, stay here, out of trouble."

THE TRIAL, DAY THREE

(Concluded)

The Governor's hospitality must have been even more splendid than the chairman had predicted, because Malinda was left to her own devices for several hours. She paced her cell frantically, planning what she would say in her defense. "I know he's vindictive," she told Winter, "but even Horatio Lambskin will have to allow me a chance to speak. He must! Briefly, maybe, but he must let me make a statement and have an inquisitor tell them I am speaking the truth. Even in treason trials, they all get that grace. So what do I deny first?"

Winter did not answer. Nor did Horatio, and poor little Moment down on the floor had been washed away by the fish soup Malinda had dropped two days ago, or had fled from it. Malinda had looked everywhere for her.

Eventually she realized that she was staggering with exhaustion, weakened by the ordeal of the last three days on top of the months of physical and mental inaction. She fumbled in the dark to find her chair and flopped down on it. She had waited too long. It seemed only a few minutes before a chink of light crept in under the door, the lock clattered, hinges creaked. In came Nightmare, holding a lantern. Pestilence followed her and headed straight to Malinda, reaching for her, one-handed. Malinda leaped up and backed away, but there was nowhere to go. She was slammed back against the masonry with fingers at her throat choking her. A fist pounded into her chest--once, twice.

She croaked, trying to protest. Her head was ground against the stonework. She knew better now than to struggle or fight back. That brought much worse hurt and humiliation.

"This is a warning," Pestilence snarled. Her breath was rank. "Tonight you behave yourself, or tomorrow we put the men to work on you. You think this hurts?"

A foot stamped on her instep. Malinda squealed.

"That was nothing, nothing at all. Now go!" The jailer hurled her across the room in the general direction of the door.

Obediently, the prisoner limped down the gloomy, twisted stairs, with Pestilence and Nightmare and the lantern at her back, giant shadows swimming on the stonework ahead.

At the bottom the usual squad of men-at-arms waited to escort her along tunnel-like corridors, back to Great Hall and her solitary chair in the center.

Two of the commissioners already had their heads on the table. Another three arrived late, weaving along the walls in efforts to make inconspicuous entrances. Several of the foreign observers came with them, in a similar unsteady state.

"The inquiry will come to order," the chairman said, folding his snaky hands. He frowned to right and left, until the sleeping commissioners had been prodded awake by their neighbors. "We must now consider the last and perhaps the most despicable of this woman's crimes. She will describe to the honorable commissioners her actions on the night of the twentieth of Tenthmoon."

Malinda gathered her wits for the battle. "I went to bed. I had instructed my ladies not to open the outer door of the suite to anyone or for any reason short of the palace being on fire. I bolted myself in, lay down, and went to sleep."

"There were how many doors to your chamber?"

She was not going to let Dog be dragged into this. She had sent him away days before, and by that night he should have already been safe in Ness Royal. She hoped desperately that he was still safe, not caught up in the web of the Usurper's vengeance.

"Officially one. There was also a secret door known only to me, the sovereign, and senior members of my Royal Guard. The Guard had by then been disbanded and--"

"A secret door to a lady's bedchamber would be for purposes of illicit fornication?"

"If you say so, Chancellor. It dates from long before my time."

"But you had a lover who used it?"

Malinda stayed silent. She was not going to implicate Dog in this, no matter what. She had nightmares of him already chained up in a dungeon, tortured or mutilated. They might even try to shock her into some dangerous admission by producing him here.

The clerks' pens had stopped scratching.

"The inquiry will note that the witness refused to answer."

"Was that a question?" she said. "It sounded like a statement."

"How many lovers came to your bed?"

She thought she detected a shimmer of disapproval among the commissioners, although none protested. "That question is indecent and irrelevant, and I demand that it be withdrawn."

"It is not irrelevant, as we shall see. So there was a second door. Did you also bolt that or leave it unbarred for your paramours?"

"The secret door led through to another room and I made certain that the outer door to that was firmly bolted also."

"You claim you slept. When did you awaken?"

"Around dawn."

"Who or what roused you?"

The commissioners had come alert, all of them, and she suspected that all the foreign observers had, too. This was the story they had been waiting for, the mysterious palace murder that must have been the talk of all Eurania for months.

"A very bad smell."

"And the cause of that smell?"

"A corpse on the floor beside my bed."

Yes, she agreed, it was--or had been--her cousin, Prince Courtney. Yes, he was naked, and yes he had been run through by a sword. How long he had been dead she did not know, but of course death had loosed his sphincters. In his final appearance onstage, Courtney had not smelled of cloves or roses or lavender.

Being unfamiliar with sword wounds, she did not know whether he had been impaled from front to back or back to front, but the chairman was careful not to ask her that. He and other inquisitors had arrived at the scene within minutes and had questioned her then; he knew that her statements had been truthful and her bewilderment genuine. Wanting now to brand her a murderer, he must allow her no saving denials.

"What did you do?"

"I screamed for help. For all I knew the killer was still there." It was a lame excuse; in fact the scream had been sheer reflex. "I unbolted the door to let my ladies in. Then they screamed, too."

"The secret door?"

"Was closed."

"And the outer door to the other room?"

"I was informed later that it had been found bolted on the inside."

"This was a few hours after your betrothal was announced?"

"It was."

"Had you agreed to receive your fianc`e in bed that night?"

"He had implied he was planning to drop in. That was why I had made sure both doors were bolted."

There was a pause, as if the chairman was mapping out his route very carefully. He risked another question. "You honestly expect the honorable commissioners to believe that both the Prince and an assassin entered through a bolted door and then the killer went out again, bolting the door on the inside?"

"No."

"Inform the commissioners of the names of the lovers who regularly came to you by the secret door."

"Again I protest that question."

"Again I insist that it is relevant and your refusal to answer is to be taken as admission of guilt. However, I can inform the commissioners that the

testimony of several former members of the notorious and disbanded Royal Guard will be placed before them tomorrow and--"

"What did you do to them?" Malinda screamed.

"Produce the men themselves and let the commissioners see what--"

"Silence! One more unauthorized remark and you will be charged with contempt of Parliament." In the murky candlelight and under the brim of his hat, the chairman's face looked even more like a skull than usual, and the shadowed eye sockets directed their ghoulish stare at Malinda in warning. He meant contempt of Pestilence and Nightmare, of course: behave or suffer.

Why did it really matter if he painted her an assassin when he had hung enough other crimes around her neck to sink her without a trace? Why was he risking so much on this last accusation? Because in the eyes of the other ruling houses of Eurania, assassination was the great unforgivable, the supreme villainy, worse even than the trumped up charges of treason--all dynasties were rooted in treason if one looked back far enough. It was the false friend and poisoned kiss that kings really feared. If she could clear herself of this taint, then there might still be enough foreign outcry to save her neck from the block. It was a long shot, but the alternative was certain death.

"The witnesses affirm," Lambskin said, "that the accused accepted at least one guardsman into her bed every night. She herself has testified that only members of the royal family and swordsmen of the Royal Guard knew of the secret door. So now, mistress, will you admit that the most logical explanation of your cousin's murder is that either you murdered the Prince personally or one of your lovers did and you bolted the door again after he left?"

"That is not the most logical explanation."

The inquisitors flanking her chair did not accuse her of falsehood. The commissioners stirred and exchanged glances. She had won a point! Now the chairman would have to ask her to elaborate. However much he could and would make her suffer for it later, tonight she could clear herself of this, the most dangerous charge.

He chuckled mockingly. "I doubt that the commissioners agree with your peculiar personal logic." His rasping voice was hoarser than ever after three day's haranguing and badgering. "However the hour is late, and we are all anxious to adjourn. Guards, you may remove--"

"Wait!" said a shrill voice. All eyes swung to the Honorable Alfred Kildare, Speaker of the Commons, four seats to the chairman's right. "I wish to hear the witness's explanation."

The chairman scowled. Whether his feelings had for once escaped his control or whether he sought to intimidate the Speaker, he scowled most

horribly. "I repeat, the hour is late."

"A few more minutes will not hurt." Kildare had withstood King Ambrose in full roar; compared to him, Horatio Lambskin was an ill-tempered butterfly. The last time Malinda had seen the Speaker she had called him a lowborn meddling upstart and worse; she had threatened to throw him in a dungeon in the Bastion. But today he was the only one of them with the manhood to do his duty. Good chance to him!

The chairman conceded defeat. "Very well. Witness, you will be brief. What in your view would be a more logical explanation?"

Malinda drew a deep breath and began to gabble as fast as she could. "First, my ladies found no weapon in the room, so I could not have been the murderer." It must have been a rapier or a stiletto. Dog's Sword would not drill a hole through an opponent, it would chop him in half. "Second, I am a light sleeper and would certainly have heard a struggle or a body falling, so the corpse was brought in already dead and placed where I would fall over it; furthermore it was lying on its back and there were blood smears on its chest, so it had been stripped after death--my cousin was killed with his clothes on. As for the locked door, it is common knowledge that the Dark Chamber has a device called a Golden Key that will open any door; whether it will draw a bolt closed also is something the chairman can discuss better than I."

As Lambskin opened his mouth, she rushed on. "There is no need to invoke conjuration, though. Prince Courtney may very well have known of the secret doors--he had been snooping around court for forty years--but it is absolutely certain that the Dark Chamber did, because its records go back before the palace was built, and therefore the most logical explanation of the paradox is that there is another secret way into one of those two rooms."

The chairman said, "That is the most absurd--"

"Let her finish!" Kildare squealed.

"Thank you, Mr. Speaker," she said. "I am grateful for a little courtesy. As a final fact to be weighed, I remind you of the legal maxim: Who benefits? What good came to me from that bizarre crime? Within an hour my own Grand Inquisitor returned with a squad of men-at-arms and carried me off, prisoner, here to the Bastion. The case against me is ridiculous, but the case against Horatio Lambskin, who was then Grand--"

"The witness is lying!" one of the inquisitors shouted at her ear. "The witness is raving!" the chairman snapped. "Guards, remove--"

"Wait!" shouted several of the commissioners in tumult. Truly, it was a night of miracles, for the spokesman who emerged from the hubbub was the

chinless Lord Candlefen, on his feet, flushed and squeaking with rage.

"Your evident bias is unbecoming, Lord Chancellor. I am quite put off by it, I must say. You have accused the witness of innumerable rather unspeakable crimes; it is only fair that she be allowed to, er ... register a few remarks. ..."

"Thank you, Cousin," Malinda said as his outrage dwindled. She could hardly breathe for the pounding of her heart; sweat ran into her eyes, making her blink. "You all know that Lambskin here was my Grand Inquisitor, a sworn member of my Privy Council. He betrayed his oath by plying me with false information on the strengths and whereabouts of both rebel armies, and probably in many other ways. He was eating out of all three bowls, and when Prince Courtney reneged on the promise of the golden chain, Lambskin had him slain and his body left in my bedroom to dispose of me also. He then claimed the chancellorship as his reward from his other traitor master--"

"Silence!" The chairman slammed his fist on the table. "The witness may denigrate me, but this inquiry will not hear sedition against our Sovereign Lord King Neville! I trust that none of the noble lords or honorable members supports such treasonous remarks?"

He glared to left and right, and the commissioners subsided into tremulous silence. The penalties for treason would cow anyone.

"I have not finished!" Malinda shouted. "I claim the right to make a statement in my defense."

"This is not a trial," the terrible old man said sourly, "so there is no such right. However, the witness will be provided with pen and paper and allowed to submit a written statement to the inquiry."

"Silence, mistress! One more word and you will be removed."

"Honorable commissioners, over the last three days you have heard the witness confess that even as a child she was in frequent rebellion against her father and liege lord, King Ambrose IV; that she gave her aunt, Princess Agnes, a conjuration that caused her death; that she connived at a massive deception to conceal the true facts of that murder; that she and the traitor Roland between them arranged for her father to be at Wetshore at a time known to his sworn enemy, the Baelish King; that she spoke with the Bael on his ship and obtained promises from him, and that he, having allowed her to disembark, then slew her father, the said King Ambrose of Chivial; that when Master Secretary Kromman was murdered shortly thereafter, she was cognizant of the killers' identity and failed to report it to the authorities; that she proceeded to Ironhall and bound a troop of half-trained swordsmen as her personal Blades upon improper

authority; that while under her direction these killers caused the deaths of fifteen innocent people in Sycamore Square the following day; that she conspired with the traitor Roland, accepting money she knew to be embezzled; that she suborned the servants of the crown in raising a private force, although she was aware that this was a treasonous act; that she flouted a lawful command of the Council of Regency by leaving the place where she had been confined for her protection and coming into the presence of the King's Majesty, namely her brother, the late Ambrose V; that she deliberately shortened the child's life by withholding spiritual treatment from him in his sickness; that he died very soon after she had fed him his last meal with her own hand; that she then conspired with others to slay her brother, Lord Granville, and did claim the throne of Chivial although she was excluded from the succession by reason of her marriage to Radgar Aeleding; that the confessed traitor Roland was treacherously assassinated here in the Bastion while her guest, but that she passed off his death as natural and failed to initiate a proper inquiry or hunt for the murderers; that in her unlawful position as ruler of the land, she committed divers acts, including the improper execution of her husband, the said Radgar Aeleding, in a hasty and illegal manner before he could be properly questioned about the conspiracy in which they had joined; that it was by her warrant that mercenary troops sacked the town of Pompifarth, causing the death of hundreds of people and widespread loss of property." The chairman paused, and for a moment even he displayed normal human weariness. Then he rallied in a final burst of venom. "You have also just heard her peculiar explanation of how unknown malicious persons disfigured her bedchamber floor by leaving upon it the naked body of her cousin, Prince Courtney.

"Guards, remove the prisoner. The inquiry is adjourned."

I told you so.

SIR DOG

Back up the twisted stairway she went, back to her cold, cramped, and lonely little cell. The men-at-arms thumped the door closed behind her, clattered the lock shut, and doubtless then marched away. There was no sign of Pestilence or Nightmare, but a stub of candle stood upon her chair, flickering a tiny flame in the windy darkness, and beside it an inkwell, a quill, and a single sheet of paper. Exhausted, the Queen flopped down on the pallet and huddled herself up small to stare at this wonder.

The Chancellor had kept his word! She could write out her defense. She had only one page and perhaps one hour left on that candle; no doubt the

paper would be removed at dawn, ready or not. She wondered whether it was Lambskin or his master who was so spiteful--whether she was being punished for slighting the grim old man or for the death of Granville. Neville might not be the master in that team, only the puppet. After so long in her solitude, she could not even guess.

The lock clattered again, hinges squeaked, and she cringed, fearing it would be Pestilence and Nightmare coming to carry out the Chancellor's threat to hand her over to "the men." They had not specified whether they meant the Bastion's professional torturers or miscellaneous ruffians. She had gambled that their intimidation was only bluff. They would gain nothing by maltreating her now. All the same she was relieved when a single man-at-arms entered and closed the door quietly behind him. He seemed no threat so she ignored him.

After three days she still did not know what the trial had signified. That brief intervention by Mister Speaker--may the spirits favor him forever!--suggested that Parliament was not totally under the Usurper's heel yet. Alas, the powers of the crown in dealing with treason were almost unlimited. More than likely the inquiry would wind up its parody hearings tomorrow ... approve a report the day after ... allow one day for each house to debate. ... Probably they would move right after that, before foreign governments could lodge protests.

"Five days!" she told Winter. "In five more days they'll come for me and cut off my head!"

"Over my dead body," Dog said.

She hit the far door with a bruising crash and turned around to scream at the apparition--not madness! Not that! She was not going to go crazy like her mother--

He caught her in his arms and ended the scream before it properly got started. He had sounded like Dog. His kiss tasted like Dog's. He hugged like Dog. He smelled like Dog. He was much lumpier than she remembered Dog; under his peculiarly flimsy cloak he seemed to be studded with a variety of odd packages and hung about with a coil of rope--but he was Dog.

Eventually they came apart one finger width.

"You're all bones!" he growled.

"You're all sharp edges." They kissed again.

"You're trembling."

"You're real! It's really you. Not a prisoner too?"

"Hope not. Brought you this." He fumbled under his cloak and pulled out something that had once been a flower. It was badly mangled and smelled more of him than of rose; she could not see it in the dark, but she did not need to. She choked on tears.

"Oh, Dog, Dog, Dog darling! No one has ever given me anything more welcome."

"Better go now. Finish this later. What's outside?"

"Just a walkway."

He grunted. "How far are we from Rivergate?"

"Right above it. The walkway is, I mean."

He made a pleased sound. "Couldn't be better. Let's try that."

"But--"

He eased her aside, although she wanted to cling to him like ivy. He did something to the lock, and it clicked.

"Golden Key?" Her voice was lost in the squeak of the hinges. Of course there had to be enchantment involved when a rescuer appeared like this. It was not illusion! It was really Dog! "They have White Sisters!" That use of spiritual power might have been detected.

"Didn't meet any." Dog strode out and stopped to survey the iron bars overhead. Even as he did so, the moon fled behind a silver-edged cloud, leaving him in starlight. The wind ruffled his cloak, his hair shone like milk. "Was afraid ... might have to kill some. Where does that other door lead?"

"Don't know." She was staying very close, unable to keep her hands off him. "The Rivergate's just below us." And if that conjurement he had just used had been detected, then the Yeomen would be on their way already. Tower windows overlooked this walkway.

He pulled off the lumpy cloak and the coil of rope he wore over his shoulder, dropping them both. He jumped, caught hold, went up, swinging his boots up to hook in the bars farther along. He clung there like a bat, face up and back down, with Sword dangling below him like an icicle. He grunted, came down again. "Any of these bars loose? Rusted? Need to move two, maybe three."

Her mind was muddled by shock. She could think of nothing except DogDogDog ... loose, rusted? "Along here," she said, and took his hand--that big, hard, familiar hand--to lead him to the far end, where water dripped off the other tower and moss had crumbled the mortar. "Try here. I'll get the chair."

The moon peered out cautiously, just enough to give her a shadow as she ran to her cell and hurried back with the chair. Dog stood on it, peered, fingered. Then he said, "Stand clear!" and went up again. The moon vanished as if it disapproved, leaving him only a dark shape against the shining clouds. He grunted. She realized he was trying to pry bars loose, pulling with hands, pushing with feet. In a moment he came down and rubbed his hands, muttering angrily under his breath.

"It can't be done!" she said. "We'll have to leave the way you came. Let's go, love! Let's hurry, not waste time here."

"I would if I thought you could use the cloak. Here." He lifted his baldric over his head and handed her Sword in its scabbard. "Keep this handy." He went up again to try another place. "Must have been given these muscles for a reason ... ah!" Something scraped, metal on stone.

She hugged herself, shivering, wishing she had her blanket but terrified to go and leave him again in case he vanished like a bubble. Besides, she was guarding Sword. Somewhere in the distance men's voices spoke loudly in the still of the night. Not shouting, not raising an alarm. Probably just changing the guard. Another bar scraped ...

Escape, escape, escape ... It might have taken half an hour. It felt like years. At the end of it, Dog stood upright to catch his breath, rubbing one bleeding hand on his cloak and hugging her to him with his other arm. He had pulled two bars completely out, but they were not adjacent. He had loosened several others at one end only and bent them down, but he had not yet made a hole large enough for an escape.

"Need more light," he muttered, and kissed her again. "They've been starving you," he mumbled when they broke loose.

"Not really. How did you get here?"

"Walked in the gate. Followed them when they took you back to your cell. We weren't certain where you were being held, see?"

"This is conjuration!"

"The cloak is. It's a Dark Chamber secret, but the College has copied it. ... Lothaire stole one for us ... not really invisibility, just unimportance. You knew I was there and paid no attention."

"I was sure I was seeing a man-at-arms."

"It does that." He hugged her tighter.

"I'd put it on you and send you out, but it doesn't work for smart people. Ah!"

The light was brightening as the moon headed bravely for a wide expanse of black sea between cloud islands. Dog knelt to fumble through the cloak.

"Got more tricks in here ... You're sure we're right over the Rivergate?"

She nodded, then said, "Yes."

"Going to send a signal ... Got a boat standing by, but the Yeomen may get here first. I'll lower you on the rope to the dock. Do whatever I say, no arguing. Ready?"

"Yes. Oh, I love you!" She kissed him, but he cut it off.

"And me you." He stepped up on the chair and reached out through the bars. He must have thrown something down to the dock, because a moment later a brilliant flash lit the towers overhead. A ball of white fire sailed up from the landing into the sky, brightening the entire Bastion before it faded and disappeared.

Dog grabbed Sword from her hands, unsheathed it, and repeated, "Stand back!" Then he swung it against one of the bars he had bent down. Clang! Clang! Like a woodsman loping branches, he chopped iron, abusing that magnificent weapon, treating it like an ax. Clang! Clang! Clang! After the third blow there was a quieter ring as the bar broke off and hit the flagstones. But the racket must have been audible all over Grandon; and voices were raised now, candles flickering in windows, sounds of men running. Then a drum, rousing the Watch. Clang! Clang! Ring. Another bar fell.

"There!" Panting, Dog dropped Sword and grabbed Malinda in both hands. He almost threw her up through the gap he had made. Voices high overhead showed they had been seen. She felt her dress tear on a jagged end, found a purchase, doubled over on the ladder to haul herself up, and Dog transferred his grip to her feet, pushing her. She scrambled onto the bars and rolled to the flat top of the outer wall, which was four or five feet thick. She turned to help Dog and a coil of rope was thrust in her face. Then Sword in its scabbard. Then Dog himself, who did not need help. Voices were shouting all around, the drum beating. She heard the hard thwack! of a crossbow, but could not tell where the quarrel went.

"They're coming!" Dog said. "There, see?"

Moonlight glimmered on a sail. Heeled over by the wind, a boat sped toward the landing stage, and it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Thwack! again and now the clink! of the quarrel bouncing off stonework, much too close.

"They're shooting at us!"

"Let them," Dog said, looping rope around her, under her arms, knotting it. "Lucky to hit a tower in this light. Got you. Go!"

Trusting him, she stepped backward off the edge and began walking down the wall. The rope cut into her ribs. It was hard to keep herself away from the rugged, abrasive stonework--she had not realized how weak she was. Unexpectedly her feet met air and she swung free, striking her shins against the capstone of the Rivergate arch. Then she spun, banging a shoulder against iron-studded timbers as Dog lowered her the rest of the way. She landed in a heap at the base of the gate. The rope went slack. She freed herself and jumped up.

The landing stage was a stone shelf along the base of the wall. It was closed off at the ends by the protruding towers and could be reached only from the Rivergate or the river itself. The tide was in, so waves slapped foul-smelling spray up onto the paving.

Time had stopped. The boat was coming, but painfully slowly. It had seemed much

closer when viewed from above. She could see faces, though, and light flashing off steel.

Dog was visible against the clouds, climbing over the top of the wall, starting to work his way down the rope. Crossbows sang their death song, thwack! thwack! and the quarrels replied from the stones: clang! clang! Fortunately crossbows took time to reload. The archers were up in the towers, shooting, she supposed, at Dog. The great Rivergate itself was still closed but even as she stood up, a smaller postern beside it swung open and a Yeoman ducked through and straightened up. Moonlight flashed on the spike and blade of his pike. She turned to flee on legs that suddenly felt like reeds. A quarrel rang off flags at her feet.

She came to the end of the quay, right under her cell, and there was nowhere left to go. She turned at bay. A dozen Yeomen had emerged now, and the leaders were on her already. A hand grabbed her arm. She tried to claw at the man's face and that wrist was seized, also, and twisted up behind her back.

"Take the bitch back to her kennel!"

They pushed her forward so she almost fell. That seemed like a good idea, so she let herself go limp, and as a result dropped to her knees. She screamed and went on screaming. She tried to kick, without much success.

"Behave, bitch!" one said. The rest of the troop arrived and got in the way. The two holding her hauled her upright, took her by the arms, and began to run her back toward the gate. She screamed, yelled, tried in vain to struggle, but they kept her moving. Despite all her efforts, she was too weak even to slow them down.

The boat caught an eddy of wind off the Bastion. The sail went limp, then rippled. Voices cursed. It rolled, momentarily helpless. Slowly it regained way, but it was not coming fast enough for the men on board to save her. Once she was through the postern, she would be lost. She was too weak; they were too many. They were at the gate. Feet stumbled on the unneeded coils of rope.

She looked up. Dog had stopped halfway and had somehow turned over, so that he was looking down at her and the Yeomen. He had his feet against the wall and the rope over one shoulder; he was stretched out from the stonework like some bizarre gargoyle. As the two men holding her were about to push her in through the postern, he howled at the top of his lungs and let go. It was deliberate --he threw himself down on them. Several of the men were hurled to the ground, including one who was gripping her. She went with them in a tangle of limbs and bodies and pikes. A couple were flung into the river. There was shouting, screaming, confusion. As the boat swept in, a dozen swordsmen leapt across the gap, some falling on the stones, two in the water, the rest landing on their feet. Battle was

joined--but briefly, because a Yeoman against a Blade was a very unequal struggle and the newcomers had the advantage of numbers.

Malinda was not interested. She was on the ground, tending to Dog. Blood was jetting from his chest, a black fountain in the moonlight. His eyes were wide, stark white.

"They're here!" she said. "You've saved me ... Dog? Dog?"

He tried to speak and made horrible grating noises.

"What?"

It sounded like, "Told you ..." but more blood gushed from his mouth and the sentence was never finished. It was probably, "Told you I would die for you."

"Come quickly, my lady!" Audley shouted.

"Oak, Fury, get him aboard--"

"No!" Malinda screamed. "No! I will not allow this."

The invoked are in no wise to be trusted and assuredly will seek to bend the vaticinators to their purpose, for they hold firm to the desires they held at their dissolution, yet know not the gentler prospects of the living, viz., not pity, love, nor hope.

ALBERINO VERIANO, INVOCATION OF
THE DEAD

Judging by its smell, the boat's normal business was something involving fish. Caught in the lee of the Bastion walls, crammed to the gunwales with the living and the dead, it responded reluctantly to its rudder, tipped dangerously as it scraped along the tower's masonry, and took several more hits from quarrels before it broke free to open water. After that it was out of danger.

Shivering, Malinda crouched on the boards with Dog a dead weight in her arms and his lifeblood cold all over her. No tears, not yet. Perhaps never. This could not be true. He must not be dead. It was some horrible illusion, some torture Horatio Lambskin had dreamed up.

"We must go to an elementary quickly," she said.

"Dog needs healing."

Audley beside her: "He's dead, my lady."

"He must not be!"

"He fell on pikes, Your Grace! It was quick. But he is dead."

"No!"

He sighed and looked up at the faces gathered around. "What's the tally, other than Dog?"

Men's voices answered from the dark.

"Bullwhip."

"Reynard."

"Victor's missing. Could he swim?"

"Lothaire took a bolt through the gut, needs healing soon."

"Brock?" Audley said. "You bring those conjured bandages?" "Be all right," said a shaky whisper.

"Mercadier and Alandale need healing too."

"Piers has concussion, can't be sure how bad."

"Jongleur's wrist is broken."

"Just sprained," said another voice nearby.

"Nothing serious."

Then others still: "And a dozen Yeomen!"

"I only counted eight."

"Not enough of the bastards, anyway!"

More chorused agreement.

The words were slow to line up and make sense to her. So many men dead or injured. Just to rescue her. And many of the enemy, who had only been obeying orders. She struggled to free herself of Dog's dead weight; willing hands helped her. They sat her on a thwart, wrapped her in two blankets, and gave her a flask of strong wine to drink. The boat rocked on over the dark waves. The moon had gone, but the helmsman seemed to know where he was headed.

"Thank you." It was hard to talk, her teeth kept wanting to chatter. "I am very, very grateful to you all. I am heartsick at the losses. It may not be so bad, if we get them to an octogram right away."

Audley said, "They all knew the risks. They all came freely, unbound."

"How did you do it? I know Dog had a conjured cloak." Why had they sent Dog into the worst danger?

They were huddled around her, anonymous shapes in the dark, about a dozen of them. Some of the names she'd already heard were of much older men than Audley, yet he still seemed to be Leader.

"We knew we couldn't do it without spiritual help," he said. "Lothaire ... you remember Master of Rituals? He'd gone back to the College. We got his help, and Sir Jongleur's. You may not know him ... older knight, senior conjurer--"

"Yes, I know him." A pompous graybeard, and she had left him on his knees in the mud.

"Well," Audley said, "between them they provided us with all sorts of gadgets, mostly inquisitors' tricks, like that light and the cloak. Trouble with the cloaks is that they're pissy hard to use. Most people never get the hang of them. Dog did it first try."

"Why?" Why must chance be so cruel? Why Dog of all of them? Why couldn't she think? Her mind was a tub of slop.

"It needs a special sort of courage, Your Grace," Jongleur said. "The cloaks require total concentration, so any hint of fear in the wearers disables them. Sir Dog didn't seem to fear anything. We had him walk right in the

Bastion gate and out again in broad daylight and the guards never batted a lash."

"Explains a lot," someone murmured.

She would never forget him on the anvil, calmly waiting for her to put Sword through his heart. Even their first kiss had taken courage after what had happened to Eagle. "Tell me about Chivial. I know absolutely nothing since I was put in that cell. Neville took the throne-- I know that much, but that's all."

"Winter?"

"Smaile put him on it," Winter said.

"Lord Smaile, the former Lambskin, who was your Grand Inquisitor. Suddenly Courtney was dead, Smaile locked you up for murdering him, and Neville was the only candidate left. Lambskin put Neville on the throne; Neville made Lambskin an earl and chancellor, and now he's running everything."

"Is he doing a good job?"

"No!" voices shouted.

Audley said. "There's a lot of unrest, Your Grace. They deal with it roughly-- bloodshed, torture, mock trials, executions. Lot of peers are in the Bastion and others have fled overseas. Of course, you're the rightful queen, so nobody could do much while they had you in their clutches, but Blades are being hunted down--Snake, Grand Master, Felix. ... Half of Parliament seems to have gone into hiding."

She recalled how easily Lambskin-Smaile had cowed the commissioners at her trial. "Has Eurania acknowledged Neville?"

The boat was into the Pool, now, where the oceangoing ships anchored. The helmsman changed course through the swaying forest of rigging; spray whipped over the boat. Lights twinkled and flickered.

"Some countries have. Isilond, for one. Some are still considering. Baelmark ... They did end the Baelish War, but that was the new king in Baelmark, mostly. Now you're safe, we expect people to start declaring for you."

Civil war? There had to be a better way out of this. She thought she knew what it was. Whether she could persuade anyone to try it was another matter altogether.

"Where are we going?"

"To a ship. Thergian. Seahorse. You have a friend."

Even from the lowly aspect of the approaching fishing boat, Seahorse did not seem much of a step up. Winter said, "In Thergy they call this a staten jacht, Your Grace, a sort of dispatch boat. Also used by important people in a hurry." It was single-masted and sat low enough in the water to be boarded without the need for unpleasant rope ladders. A sailor on board dropped a

set of steps, and Audley handed the Queen up to the deck in her regalia of two very smelly blankets.

A man bowed to her. "Welcome aboard Seahorse, Your Majesty. You do us honor."

"I am infinitely more pleased to be aboard than you can possibly be to welcome me."

"Sir Audley? You were not followed. I hope?"

"Not that we could tell," Audley said warily. "This is Sir Wasp, Your Grace."

"I should prefer to sail at once, if that be possible," Malinda said.

The Blades at her back were passing up the bodies. The crew was a vague group of shapes in the background, watching and waiting to see what decision was reached.

"Your Majesty will understand," Wasp said, "that navigating a winding river like the Gran at night in a half gale without a local pilot would be a somewhat desperate endeavor. We are showing no lights and you left no footsteps. Here, in a crowded anchorage, we should be safe from detection."

"No," she said, nettled. Did he think she was some halfwit female scared without reason?

"The Dark Chamber has a conjuration called a sniffer. I have slept for the last six months on the same straw mattress. It should bear enough imprint of me for spirits to track me down."

"Your pardon, my lady. I was not aware ..." He spoke in a tongue she supposed was Thergian and one of the sailors replied at length. "Captain Klerk says we can ride the tide and carry only enough canvas to maintain steering way, but we still risk running aground, and then we shall be in the pillory when the sun rises."

And then there would be more deaths. Too confused to make the decision, she said, "Leader?" desperately.

Audley said, "I think the Usurper will go to any lengths to recapture Her Grace. We must get our injured to an elementary soon and nowhere near here will be safe. Weigh anchor, if you please, Sir Wasp."

The man sighed and spoke again to the captain.

Malinda said, "You are still Leader, Sir Audley? This does you great honor."

"Indeed it does, my lady, but they are loyal to your cause, not to me. We are pitifully few now, the last of the Blades. We call ourselves the Queen's Men."

Wasp said, "This way, if it please Your Majesty ..." He led the way aft--only a few paces--then rapped on a door. After a moment it opened and he stood aside to let her enter.

She stepped into darkness with Wasp and Audley at her heels. After the door closed someone unshuttered a lantern, then another and

another. She screwed up her eyes against the golden glory. The cabin was no larger than her cell in the Bastion, yet it must occupy the rear third of the ship. After the night outside it seemed numbingly warm and bright with soft rugs, gleaming brass, fine paintings on the walls, furnishings of bright leather and polished wood. The benches would make into bunks; they concealed chests and cupboards. Important people were rich people, of course, and this was real luxury, all the more imposing after half a year in a stone box. Clearly the whole purpose of Seahorse was to move this cabin and its occupants wherever they wished to go. So into this sumptuous place came a deposed queen wrapped in bloodstained rags and stinking blankets, with her hair in rattails and a reek of wine on her breath.

The woman curtseying to her was Chancellor Burningstar in robes of sapphire blue. She rose with fury in her eyes and surged forward to clasp the visitor in a very informal embrace. "How dare they! Come and sit here, Your Grace. How dare they treat you so? I am overjoyed to see you free again. You are hurt?"

Malinda shook her head. Feeling dizzy, she sank gratefully on the bench and huddled herself in her blankets. Voices shouted outside in a language not Chivian, feet pounded on the ceiling, the anchor chain clanked.

"Then whose blood is that?"

"Sir Dog's," Audley said. "We also lost Reynard, Bullwhip, probably Victor. Lothaire took a bad one. A couple of others hurt a bit, but the rest of us came back still breathing. I won our bet, Your Excellency."

"You think I care about losing?" the old lady snapped. "I never thought they'd get Your Majesty out at all. Wine, Your Grace? Food?"

Malinda shivered. "Not wine." She hoped that they were taking proper care of Dog.

"Wash that blood off? Clothes? We have some garments, better at least than those."

"Not yet. Soon."

"Then what? Sir Wasp can produce any miracle you want on this boat of his."

"Ship!" he said sharply. He was around thirty, with lines starting to show in his face. Short and trim, he had the rapier look of a Blade, yet he did not wear a sword. What he was wearing was obviously worth a tidy sum, and she would not have expected any man less than a duke to own a vessel like this. Just the emerald at his throat would buy a coach and four.

"Ship then."

"If you can manage some hot soup," Malinda said, "I will believe in miracles."

"That one's easy." He blew into a speaking

tube, listened for acknowledgment. "A jug of hot soup right away." He replaced the tube on its hook.

"Majesty," Burningstar said, "may I have the honor of presenting Sir Wasp? He owns this floating palace. He claims to be Your Grace's loyal servant and I can detect no falsehood in him."

"I am greatly in your debt, Sir Wasp."

He bowed low. "Nay, Your Majesty, I owe you great redress, whatever I can ever do to make amends." He took a quick step to catch his balance as the ship heeled.

"Please be seated, all of you," she said.

"Sir Wasp, you are a Blade?" Why would a Blade have trouble with balance?

All three of them settled on the bench opposite her.

"I was, Your Grace. I would still be a companion in good standing if the Order had not been dissolved." He shot a smile at Audley.

"I am honored to be included in the Queen's Men."

"I am grateful to them all. Where will you take me?"

"Drachveld, by your leave. Queen Regent Martha promises Your Grace asylum with full royal honors. You can be Queen in Exile while your supporters prepare to wrest your crown from the Usurper."

Again the awful prospect of civil war loomed. No, she would not go to Thergy. The answer lay at Ironhall. Could she hope to convince them of the truth she had worked out over the long dark months? Would she even have the courage to face it herself if Dog were here with her now? And who was this cryptic ex-Blade who wallowed in such wealth?

"Who was your ward, Sir Wasp?"

"Radgar Aeleding, Your Grace."

They all watched for her reaction.

"Sir Piers told me that my father had not only allowed the Baelish heir to slip out of his fingers but also had deeded him a Blade. It was fear of ridicule, I am sure, that made him insist on keeping the matter so secret." Even male monarchs could make mistakes. She glanced around her other companions, especially looking at Burningstar, who claimed to find no untruth in the man, but who still seemed unworried. "You know it was my signature that bereft you of your ward, Sir Wasp."

"Not so, Your Majesty. I was released from my binding many years ago, under very unusual circumstances, but Radgar and I remained close friends. Until a year ago." The ship heeled, Wasp shifted position, and Malinda saw that there was something wrong with his left arm. He was not using it, and that doubtless explained the awkwardness she had noted earlier.

"Two years ago, my lady, when I was

Baelmark's consul general in Drachveld, Lord Roland came calling with a proposal to end the war by a marriage between you and King Radgar. I took that proposal to Baelmark and talked Radgar into it. I thought I had talked him into it. When the day came, you know what he did." Wasp sighed.

"Believe me, Your Grace, I was appalled! I had no inkling that this was what he intended. I would almost swear he did not know it himself. Even the earls and thegns were horrified at the breach of faith, and it takes a lot to scandalize Baelmark. For the first time in his long reign, his hold on the throne was put in doubt. If it please you, you may suppose that his treachery destroyed him, for I strongly suspect that his attack on Lomouth was betrayed."

"I am certain of it. Someone provided my cousin with money and information. The quarry was not I, but Radgar."

Wasp nodded grimly, accepting that theory. "I had always known he could be a hard man, brutal if necessary, but in all the years of our friendship I had never appreciated the depth of his bitterness against your father, whom he blamed for his own father's murder. You know the story, I am sure, so I need not tell it again. He was obsessed by that foul act. Yet one treason does not justify another. I broke with him over it, Your Grace. I took my wife and children and walked out of my fine house in Drachveld and went to serve another master. I told Radgar to--"

"What other master?"

A flicker of a smile lightened Wasp's somber mood. "The King of Thergy. We had a longstanding rivalry to see who could drink whom under the table. He usually won. I lost two royal friends in short order last year." Another sigh, a shrug. "So my sacrifice was not as dramatic as I made it sound. And Radgar never gave in easily. He sent me the deeds to the house and its contents, the papers of this ship, everything. I sent them all back to him. He sent them back to me. And so on. When he died, they were in my hands, so chance decreed that I kept the ill-gotten gains of my friendship. When I heard of your misfortune, I resolved to see what I could do to make amends, because much of the blame rests on my shoulders. I misjudged Radgar."

Malinda sat for a while, struggling to think her way through a thicket of weariness and sorrow and confusion. Likely she would trust this Wasp even without Burningstar's endorsement. He had an air of competence and frankness, of simplicity even, and yet there were depths to him. No lightweight, certainly, this friend of kings.

"You admit you were Radgar's friend, yet I cut off his head."

The former swordsman met her gaze steadily. "Should I seek revenge for that, Your Grace? From what I heard I had rather be grateful to you for

ending his suffering. If I did want vengeance, would I not leave you where you were an hour ago?"

She nodded dumbly. "Then I gladly accept you as one of the Queen's Men and I am grateful to you for your service this night, as I am grateful to the others. But I will not go to Drachveld, much as I appreciate the Queen Regent's kindness in her own sorrows."

The other three exchanged worried glances, perhaps wondering what her captivity might have done to her thinking. They would have much more to worry about soon.

"Then where would you have us go, my lady?" Audley demanded.

Not yet. She must be certain. "First let me speak with Sir Winter and Sir Jongleur."

The lanterns had to be shuttered before the door could be opened, and it was several minutes before the cabin was bright again. By then the others had arrived and Malinda was sipping a mug of meaty soup, which seemed to boil all the way down her throat and burn through every vein. Sir Wasp had a skillful cook, although anything would have tasted good after prison fare. The cabin was crowded; she had moved to the chair and left the benches for Burningstar and the four men.

Winter's fingernails had grown in and his chin had sprouted a whimsical little beard, so being an ex-Blade must agree with him. He beamed when asked about Dian. "Safe in Ness Royal, Your Grace. The gatehouse is unmanned and there is not even a seneschal just now." He grinned bashfully. "She is counting the days until Ninthmoon!"

"Congratulations! I am sure Dian will be a wonderful mother. That is wonderful news." It was terrible, horrible news. It was going to make things much harder. "Sir Jongleur? Considering my intemperate language to you the first time we met, I am doubly in your debt for your gallant service tonight."

"Your remonstrance on that occasion was well deserved, Your Majesty. I am glad to have had the chance to redeem myself." Jongleur's beard seemed grayer than she remembered, and his left arm was in a sling, but he was as pompous as ever.

"You do recall the subject of our discussion upon that occasion?"

"The query posed in your letter?" he said cautiously. "Yes, of course."

"Six months in the Bastion have provided me with unlimited time to think over what you said then."

He paused a moment as if to plan his words. "I shall never again make the mistake of underestimating Your Grace's learning in the spiritual arts."

"I am only an amateur, but perhaps my lack of formal training allows me to see paths that have never been adequately mapped. And in my

dungeon, I was free to let my mind roam,
if you understand that expression."

He nodded warily. "Of course."

"A certain inquisitor once revealed to me
that the Dark Chamber obtains prophecies, which it
refers to as readings, by a sort of inverted
necromancy. It summons the spirits of the dead from
the future instead of the past."

"That is a gross simplification of ... Your
Grace has stated a very generalized
view of a very complex process, which rarely works as
well in practice as it does in theory. Few
authorities would place as much faith in the
procedure as the Office of General Inquiry
seems to."

"But the point I wish to make is that spirits,
unlike material objects, can be in two
places at once! Minds can roam! Don't
you agree? Please do not digress into the distinction
between spirit and mind."

"We can agree that both may wander freely in
space and time, certainly."

"So why is the translation Dog wanted not
possible?" Alas, Dog's spirit was gone,
disassembled, returned to the elements.

Jongleur seemed as genuinely puzzled as the
others were. "You are talking now only of the mind
going back to a specific date and time in the
past, not a corporeal body?"

"A mind--a word--an idea." Malinda
resisted the temptation to grab the man's broken
wrist and twist. The ship was winding and turning as it
edged its way down the river, but Captain Klerk
was probably having much less trouble than she was
trying to extract a straight answer from this
pompous oaf. "Do go on, Sir Jongleur."

"The hypothesis would seem to have some theoretical
merit, but I still believe that such a conjuration is
impossible in practice."

"Why?"

Jongleur stared very hard at her for a moment.
"You are still speaking of the dead boy, Your
Majesty? You are not contemplating essaying this for
yourself?"

"Just list the difficulties."

"There is a saying, my lady, that a little knowledge is
a dangerous thing."

"I could hardly have any less knowledge than I have
managed to drag out of you so far. Are you loyal
to me or the Usurper?"

Jongleur's plump face turned very red.

"I am Your Majesty's man."

"Then answer my questions. Is what Sir Dog
wanted possible or not?"

Audley looked completely lost. Winter was
frowning, hanging on every word. Burningstar was
probably keeping up also, for although the White
Sisters' knowledge of enchantment was more empirical and
empathic than theoretical, the former Mother
Superior was a very bright lady.

"Even if it were," Jongleur protested, "it would be futile. When the subject went back in time, he would be faced with the same situation he had met before, so he would act in the same way as before, and nothing would change. Unless, of course, he was possessed of the experience and memories he had gained in the future. Since he has not yet lived that future, that cannot be. You create a logical circularity, and the Prohibitions of Veriano still apply."

Malinda said, "Are you familiar with Hoffman's Uncertainty Principle?" She saw Winter jump and raised an eyebrow to invite him into the conversation. "You are?"

"Chance is elemental," my lady?"

"Meaning?"

He put a finger to his mouth and hastily removed it. "It's why no conjuration works perfectly every time. The Destroyer General doesn't always hit the target. Ironhall bindings can kill."

"But in this case, the uncertainty is an advantage. Right, Sir Jongleur?"

Hating to admit anything, he muttered, "Possibly ... You imply that translation might not be instantaneous. True, there could be a slight overlap, a few seconds or minutes when the subject should be regarded as existing in both times. If so, he would carry a transitory memory of the future and of his reasons for making the translation. Do I correctly comprehend Your Grace's hypothesis?"

"Those few moments might be enough for his purpose."

"Perhaps so," the conjurer agreed, adding with a sour hint of triumph, "however--with all due respect, Your Majesty--the same uncertainty must apply to the overall translation, and on a larger scale. Even if we could invoke time elementals to carry us back, we cannot hope to aim them like crossbows. The boy would have had to revisit one exact instant in his past, because an hour too late or too early would make the exercise futile. Going back many years, as he wished, might introduce an error of weeks. Chance wins again. He presented an intriguing problem, but not one with any practical applications."

"That is the only objection you can raise?"

"It is enough, my lady."

Winter had turned as white as snow. He had seen the next step in the path.

"You have a suggestion?" she asked.

He gulped. "Necromancy?"

Sir Jongleur sat bolt upright, Burningstar muttered, "Oh, no!" and everyone stared in horror.

"The moment of death," Malinda said. "The deaths of many men occurring very close together. Instead of invoking elementals to send you back, Sir Jongleur, consider invoking compound spirits, the souls

of the dead, to pull you back to that climactic moment. And, yes, you could trust their aid in this instance, because what you want for them is what they want--a chance to live again!"

Pompous or not, Jongleur must be clever to have won admittance to the College after a career as a swordsman. His eyes glazed as he weighed the possibilities. "You mean Wetshore, of course ... But the risk, Your Grace! Invocation of the dead is the only conjuration I know where the enchanters stand outside the octogram. For what you propose, the--subject? the traveler? --would have to be inside with the reassembled souls. The danger of death or madness ..."

"I am on intimate terms with danger. What other objections can you raise?"

"One spirit likely would not be enough ... as you infer, you would have to invoke several, but those men did not all die at the same instant. You might be scattered. ... Then there is the problem of a key, or bait, as it is vulgarly called. Some object the soul can recognize and crystallize around, something long familiar to--"

"Their swords?" Winter wailed. "It would have to be their swords. But Ironhall was sacked, Your Grace! All the swords are gone."

"I doubt if the swords of the Wetshore dead were ever hung in the sky of swords. Sir Lothaire will know. Assuming we can find them, would it work? I never loved my father, but he was a strong and capable ruler. Chivial has suffered greatly since he died and seems doomed to suffer more. If--and this is what I need to know--if the souls of the lost Blades can call me back ... all I need is a minute! Just one minute! If I can be returned to the moment when I left the longship and walked along the jetty; if instead I can run along the jetty shouting a warning to the Guard ... Surely if I just cry, "Crossbow!" to them they will bury my father under a mountain of flesh and Radgar will lose that easy shot. All our troubles come from my father's death. One word of warning--"

She had grown too emphatic.

"More soup, Your Majesty?" Burningstar said, reaching for the jug. "This is a fascinating concept you spring on us. Don't you agree, Sir Wasp?"

Winter and Jongleur were staring hard at each other. Then the older man turned again to Malinda, but now he spoke without patronizing.

"It is a terrifying concept! I need to think about this."

She found no satisfaction in being right, having had so long to work it out. "Time may be something we do not have! Lambskin--or Smaile or whatever his name is now--will be searching for me already. If his spies and arts gain him one whisper of what we plan, then he can block us utterly." Every day they delayed was one more day when Dog was dead. "The

answer lies at Ironhall. When Seahorse has cleared the river, Sir Wasp, pray set course for Ironhall."

Into the frigid silence stepped Countess Burningstar. "Your Grace, you have just emerged from a terrible ordeal. A few days' rest to regain your strength will--"

"No!"

"Sir Lothaire is in grave need of an elementary," Audley said. "We did bring conjured bandages, but he is still in great pain. And we have funerals to arrange."

"No!"

"Your Majesty," Jongleur protested, "you are proposing a major innovation in conjuration. I would expect to take months to finalize the invocations and revocations required, and many trials before it would work."

"You can have all night. Get to work."

Worried glances were passed around. Sir Wasp tried next.

"We lack adequate supplies for that voyage, even if we do not expect to return. Furthermore, although Seahorse is very close-winded, we should have to tack off an unknown coast, lacking both charts and pilot."

"Stop making excuses!"

Winter said, "If Lambskin has spirits seeking you, then you must not head for Ironhall. A day or two in Thergy will put him off the scent."

Malinda turned away from the look of horror on his face and felt her resolution deflate like a pricked bubble. "I suppose I am being hasty. To Drachveld then, Sir Wasp, if you please."

I just wish his wife wasn't quite so crazy about seahorses.

RADGAR AELEDING

Drachveld, the capital of Thergy, was laid out on a perfectly flat surface with the precision of a formal table setting. Seahorse sailed right through the city on a busy canal and continued a mile or so inland, to Sir Wasp's desirable waterfront residence; there she tied up at the edge of the rose garden. His house was smaller than a royal palace but few dukes would have spurned it. The designers' flair was evident everywhere from the water lilies by the dock to golden cupolas on the roof--wealth and good taste in perfect unison. Even a queen could be impressed, and an escaped prisoner who had spent half a year in jail was overwhelmed. Had she been compelled to find fault, Malinda would most likely have criticized an excessive use of seahorses as a motif. The gateposts

were marble seahorses of more than human height; lesser seahorses appeared on china, towels, and cushions; in mosaic, fresco, and tapestry; as doorknobs and bedposts.

Lady Wasp, who greeted her guests at the front door, combined the beauty of a porcelain figurine with the sparkle of diamonds. Her earrings were jade seahorses.

Sir Lothaire and the other wounded were rushed to an elementary for healing. The other Blades set to the sad task of acquiring lumber and building a funeral pyre for the dead. Burningstar made repeated attempts to tuck Malinda into bed, but Malinda refused to be tucked. She greeted other members of the Queen's Men--Fox, Jarvis, and several she knew less well. Informed that certain other exiles driven from Chivial by the Usurper dwelt in the city, she insisted on summoning them. She tried to help with the funeral preparations or at least assist Sir Jongleur with the incantations he was outlining. By the time she had been persuaded that her help was actually a hindrance, the pyres were ready, the wounded had returned healed, and the funeral could proceed. They let her light the balefire.

It took several hours to burn out, but she stood watch there with the swordsmen. Many of them wept, but she shed not a single tear. She could not regard Dog's death as permanent--she was resolved to go to Ironhall and revise the course of events. He would live again; they would all live again. When at last the evening shadows lengthened, Burningstar managed to drag her indoors and feed her. She still refused to go upstairs, or even sit down for more than a few moments at a time. She wanted to talk politics with Winter, inspect the conjurers' work, see to the outfitting of Seahorse--anything at all except rest.

It was then that Queen Regent Martha arrived, coming incognito and without ceremony. The two queens were left alone to talk and Malinda found herself talking--as she never had before, even to Dian--about the man she had loved and had now lost. The storm broke. She fell into Martha's arms and wept inconsolably until the recently widowed queen joined and wept with her.

She barely remembered being led upstairs and put to bed.

It was about noon the next day when she met with her council-in-exile: Burningstar, Audley, Wasp, Jongleur, and Lothaire, who was now healed but obviously still shaky. They were all grim-faced. Yes, the conjurers admitted, what she proposed seemed possible.

"The risks of outright failure," Sir Lothaire put in, "are less than the risks

of disaster--death or madness. With respect, my lady, you would be utterly crazy to stand within that octogram."

"If I am already crazy, that halves the risk." Dog had gone into danger to rescue her; could she do less for him?

Jongleur had been up all night and was having trouble smothering yawns. "But we must have the swords and we don't know where they went."

"I am sure they were returned to Ironhall," Lothaire said. "The law required that. I don't remember them being mentioned. What happened to them would be up to Grand Master. He was hanged a month ago, so we can't ask him. Master of Rituals or Master Armorer would know, but where they are ..." He shrugged. "Seventy swords? Even if they hung them in the sky without a ceremony, I'm sure I would have noticed. Most likely they were taken to the Forge and disassembled, blades and hilts melted down separately, cat's-eyes put in storage. ..."

"The blades alone might suffice," Jongleur said without much confidence, "but the rebels may have taken them also."

"I know where they are," Malinda said. "When can we leave?"

Before she could be questioned, Audley intervened. "As soon as possible! If you are adamant that you must try this, Your Grace, then we must move as fast as we can. Sir Wasp, can we sail tonight?"

Wasp shook his head in disbelief. "Captain Klerk has not stopped gibbering after that trip down the Gran. ... Yes, if we must, but why?"

Audley stared glumly at the floor, meeting no one's eye. "Because we have almost certainly been betrayed."

"Winter?" Malinda asked quietly.

"He or others. Jarvis and Mercadier disappeared right after the funeral. They may or may not have learned what Your Majesty proposes. But Winter certainly knew, and he has gone."

No one spoke for a long, hurtful moment. She had started with four Blades, and those four had seemed special even after she inherited the rest. But Abel had gone very quickly, then Dog, and now Winter. "I cannot blame him. He knows that if I succeed, Bandit will not have died, so Dian would not be a widow and the child she is now carrying will never be. If I can undo disaster for myself and my country and for the Blades, then I must undo good fortune for others. How will he try to block us?"

"Chivial has a consulate here," Burningstar said. "The Dark Chamber will have agents watching this house and your supporters in general. His hardest job will be to make them believe his story. Once he does that, then they must send word to Grandon and Grandon must dispatch troops to Ironhall."

"We can be there before them?"

Wasp sighed. "Depends how much

start ... But the wind is fair. Yes."

"Can we muster enough men?"

"Yes," Audley said, "but only just."

"Have you completed your rituals, conjurers?"

Jongleur tried to speak and was caught by a yawn. Lothaire nodded.

"Then let us sail tonight, and go to Ironhall."

Home is where journeys end.

FONATELLES

Newtor, the nearest port to Ironhall, comprised a dozen cottages around a fair natural harbor. It was much too small a place to support a livery stable, but it had always had one, secretly subsidized by the Order and run by a knight who was thus well placed to send advance warning of visitors arriving by sea. Ancient Sir Cedric, the last incumbent, had never had cause to do so. Now, with the Order dissolved and Ironhall itself in ruins, he had resigned himself to never setting eyes on another Blade. Common sense dictated that he should close down the business, sell off his few remaining nags, and go to live with his daughter in Prail, but either sentiment or inertia had so far stayed his hand. Hence his joy, that early morning in Fifthmoon, when a young man sporting a cat's-eye sword turned up on his doorstep demanding his nine best horses and no questions asked. As luck would have it, his nine best were also his nine worst, that being the exact number he had in the meadow, but he parted with them all most cheerfully and was almost reluctant to accept the gold coins proffered in payment. He took them, though. Later he noticed a small craft of unfamiliar lines heading out to sea and a line of riders heading off over the moor; he wondered what strange nostalgia drove them.

Much the same question spun in Malinda's mind. These men were not being moved by loyalty to obey her commands--she was certain they considered her crazier than Queen Adela had ever been. Rather, they must feel a desperate yearning for the Blades themselves, the old Order, the ideal that had shattered so horribly at Wetshore. If her mad plan succeeded, she might save them from that. If it failed, they would have lost very little. She, of course ... but she would not think about that.

The Queen's Men, last of the Blades. They were down to eight on this final outing. The conjurers, Jongleur and Lothaire, were both in their forties, but the rest were youngsters, with Oak the oldest, at about thirty. Audley was not quite nineteen yet, although he tried to keep this shameful fact a secret; Savary, Charente, Fury, and Alandale fell somewhere between. Wasp had very much wanted to come, but the

conjurers had forbidden it. He was too closely associated with Radgar, they said, and his presence would enrage the invoked spirits. While it was unlikely that they could escape the octogram to attack him, they might well vent their fury on Malinda.

The mood was somber as the nine rode up the gentle rise above Newtor, but once the sea was out of sight and sunlit moorland lay all around, Audley increased the pace and a mood of brittle humor began to show. Savary started a song that would not normally be heard in the presence of royal ladies, and some of the others joined in. Malinda wondered if they would sing on the way back tomorrow, if there was a tomorrow. It all depended on the swords. Had they been stolen or melted down or what? This whole expedition would be a futile waste of time unless they could find the swords.

Or it might be a trap. When they came within sight of Ironhall, Audley called a halt and sent Fury forward alone to scout. Malinda thought he was being absurdly cautious. Even if Winter had betrayed them, the government could not possibly have reacted quickly enough to have troops there already--governments never did. Even so, it was a relief when a chastened-looking Fury returned to report that the coast seemed clear. They rode back with him in silence. From a distance the complex seemed much as it always had, and only when the pilgrims drew close did their eyes start to pick out missing roofs and daylight showing through windows. Then an eddy in the wind brought a rank stench of disaster. All burned buildings smelled bad, and Ironhall had been so meticulously burned that many buildings had collapsed. Even the moorland sheep and ponies seemed to shun it, for weeds already grew in the courtyard.

Without a word spoken, the Queen's Men dismounted. Audley handed Malinda down. In silence the group walked up the littered steps and into Main House until their way was blocked by piles of ashes and fallen masonry. From there they could just see into the open court that had once been the Great Hall. Half-melted fragments of chain still hung from the blackened walls, but any swords that had been overlooked by the looters were certainly buried deep under the ruins.

"Come!" Jongleur growled. "Let's try the Forge."

The Forge was in better shape, because it contained nothing flammable except stacks of charcoal for the hearths, and those had not been touched. The tools had been stolen and windows smashed, but the gloomy crypt itself was little changed. Water still welled up in the stone troughs, overflowing into gutters, and finally trickling down the drain. The heaps of ingots and scrap metal were scattered as if someone had picked through them; they certainly did not

contain seventy-two ownerless swords. The very few blades the visitors could find were obviously unfinished blanks or discarded failures.

"The spirits are still present?" Oak demanded suddenly, his voice echoing.

Fury, Savary, and the two conjurers were shivering as if about to freeze to death. No one bothered to answer. Instead, everyone gathered around the hole where the gutters ended as if to listen to its monotonous song.

"Surely not!" Savary said. "They wouldn't do that, would they?"

"If someone thought it up three centuries ago, they'd still be doing it last year," Lothaire answered, reasonably enough.

"It's what Durendal told me," Malinda said. "And he would know." But he had only been talking of one instance, Eagle. They struck him off the rolls, dropped his sword down the drain, and impressed him as a deckhand on a square-rigger trading to the Fever Shores.

Now she must gamble everything on that chance remark. Roland might have meant some other drain, real or figurative. Or that ultimate disgrace might be reserved for those who betrayed their loyalty--as, for example, by kissing their ward's daughter. Perhaps the Blades who rampaged and died at Wetshore had been seen as less despicable and their swords had been hung in the hall for Courtney's army to steal. She remembered the hole in the floor as being covered by a bronze grating, but that had gone. The hole itself was barely a foot across, too regular to be entirely natural, not regular enough to be completely artificial. What lay below? Did it twist down into the earth as a bottomless crevasse, or did it widen into a cavern?

If, if, if ... If she succeeded, Dog would not be dead.

Charente said, "I'll get the chains." He trotted out and Alandale followed. Audley sent Savary after them, to stand first watch.

Charente and Alandale returned, weighted down with saddlebags that clinked as they were dropped. From them came long lengths of fine brass chain and a selection of hooks.

"Who's the best angler?" Alandale said cheerily. No one answered. It was Charente who lowered the first hook down the hole, and all the rest stood around him, listening. Clatter, clatter--no clink, clink. The hole swallowed it all. Oak went to help him. They attached the second chain to the first and began to feed that down also.

"Fasten something to the other end," Jongleur suggested. "We don't want to see the whole contraption disappear."

Lothaire fetched one of the unfinished sword blanks, knotted the chain around it, then stood on it.

"Anyone hear something?"

The running water sang its own song and no one would admit to hearing anything else. Soon there was almost none of the second chain left in view. The chasm seemed to be bottomless.

"Know something?" Oak said, puffing. "This isn't getting any heavier! It's piling up on something down there."

"Go to the end anyway," Audley said. "Then haul it back up."

"Your lead, Leader!"

With good grace Audley stripped off his cloak and jerkin. Alandale copied him and the two of them began to haul the chains back in. They retrieved the second chain, then about half the first.

"Listen!"

Under the chattering of the water, something rattled, clanged, and faded away. ... When the hook came into sight, it was empty.

Jongleur stated the obvious: "You caught something and dropped it! Try again."

On the second try they failed to gain even that much satisfaction. By the third try, the chain was allowed to feed itself into the ground, which it did with great speed. It came out no faster, of course, but this time the hook emerged from the waterfall with a catch. Many hands grabbed for it--a rapier, snagged by its finger ring. The superb Ironhall steel was as shiny as new and a cat's-eye still gleamed on the pommel.

Fury ran it over to the nearest window for light.

"Suasion!" he read out, and the Forge rang with cheers and whoops of triumph. Where Bandit's sword lay, so would all the others. Surely it was an omen that Leader's sword had come first? Audley so far forgot himself as to grab his Queen and hug her.

Her heart fluttered with sudden terror. She had been proven right, so now she would have to go through with this.

Necromancy must be performed at night. Audley ordered Savary off to Blackwater to alert the Order's agent there, if he was still at his post.

It took the rest of the day to retrieve enough swords. The conjurers said they wanted eight and then slyly withdrew to a quiet place to go over their rituals once again. The five younger men stripped off jerkins and doublets and took turns at the backbreaking work. Most casts came up empty, but not all, and each time another sword was recovered its name was read out and identified in a bittersweet mixture of sorrow and joy by those who had been friends with its owner.

Farewell? "That was Fairtrue's!"

Justice? "That was young Orvil's, wasn't it?"

Inkling? "Herrick's!"

Gnat? No one was familiar with Gnat. It might belong to some other century. It was laid aside. Doom the same ... Malinda hoped that they would not find Stoop, which had been Eagle's. It was in there somewhere.

Lightning? "Falcon's."

"I'd rather not use that one." Malinda had killed Falcon with that sword, but they would not believe her if she said so. She ignored the puzzled glances.

They laid Lightning aside also.

And Finesse, too, because no one could identify its owner.

It was Malinda who attributed Master to Sir Chandos. Dian had told her.

Savary returned to report that old Sir Crystal was now keeping watch on the Blackwater road; he claimed his grandson could outride anything that ate grass and would bring word of any suspicious travelers heading west.

As the light began to fade, the swords stopped coming. Then Screwsley's Leech broke the drought. That made six in all. After that, again nothing. ... The men took turns eating while others kept the hunt going. The two conjurers were shamed into helping. Malinda made herself useful with the tinderbox, building charcoal fires in the hearths, adding scrap wood and brush to give light.

They tried casting only halfway down; they tried different hooks, singly or clustered, but it seemed that the rest of the swords must lie either deeper than they could reach or around bends where their chain would not go. The men's hands were swollen by the icy water and cut by the chain; midnight was fast approaching, the best time for necromancy.

"It's useless." Jongleur said. "Six? Or seven?"

"Seven," Malinda agreed. She would have to risk Falcon. "Let's give it one more try!" She picked up the hook and kissed it. "Please," she said. "Go find me a man."

The weary men all chuckled, as she had hoped they would. She tossed the hook into the hole and watched the chain pour after it until stopped by the bar at the end. She even tried to start the pulling and was appalled by the effort required. Audley and Fury eased her aside and took over, but even they ran into trouble. The chain had jammed. More men went to help and managed to pull it free. Three times the same thing happened, and when the hook finally came into view, it was holding two swords-- Mallory's Sorrow and Stalwart's Sleight. They had eight without a need to invoke Falcon.

"I suggest we take a brief break," Jongleur said. "We suspect that closer to dawn might be advisable in this instance. And we all need to rehearse our--"

Oak was on watch and now he came

clattering down the steps; his voice reverberated through the crypt. "The boy's here! Says they're coming ... about fifty Yeomen, right on his heels."

Seconds matter more than years do. One instant can change your whole life forever.

SIR DOG

"We must leave!" Malinda said. "We have the swords. Any octogram will do."

"Not as well!" the two conjurers said in unison.

"Not nearly as well," Lothaire added.

"They will answer a call from here when they might not--"

"Besides," said Jongleur, "other people handling the swords will weaken the personality imprints."

"Then start!" Audley shouted. "No arguments!" That command was directed at Malinda.

It was crazy. The lancers might arrive before they had finished their first attempt, and a new invocation almost never worked on the first try. The Queen's Men would be trapped; she would be taken prisoner again or just quietly murdered. Flight was the only sane course. But Audley rushed her over to the center, where Savary and Charente were busily wrapping rope around the great anvil. She sat on it, then changed her mind and knelt instead. The conjurers wanted the swords upright; and as it was obviously not possible to plant them in the ground when the floor was solid rock, they set them in the rope binding. She sat back on her heels within a wall of steel: Sleight, Sorrow, Suasion, Leech, Farewell, Justice, Master, Inkling. She thought of Sword, which had been lost in the confusion and was probably somewhere at the bottom of the Gran. The men lined up as they had been rehearsed, one at each point; outside the octogram they should be relatively safe. Lothaire handed out the scripts. There was some cursing as the men peered at them in the uncertain, flickering light. For some clandestine reason, sorcerers always wrote spells on scrolls, which tended to roll up at inconvenient moments.

"I will summon Bandit to Suasion," Jongleur said. "Please read off the names you are assigned."

"Sir Chandos to Master ..."

"Sir Stalwart to Sleight ..."

And so on around the octogram.

"Thank you. Face toward me, if you please, Your Grace. This is death point. You have your lines ready?"

She nodded. "Even if this doesn't work--and even more if it does ... Thank you all."

"It is for us to thank you, Your Majesty,"

Audley said. "We--"

Jongleur cut him off, bellowing in a highly discordant voice. The s@eance had begun.

Malinda had nothing to do until--unless--the dead appeared. Not being sensitive to spirits, she might have very little warning. The Forge was cold. Its bizarre acoustics sometimes made the eight voices reverberate and echo, and at others swallowed them like a winter's night. The men invoked time, revoked death. They summoned the dead by name, each in turn. They revoked death again, invoked air and fire to reassemble the souls. On and on, singly or in unison, back and forth across the octogram.

She had memorized her invocation; it was very simple, little more than a plea to be taken back to the moment before the rampage began, before Radgar squeezed the trigger on the crossbow. That scene was burned into her memory--the Blades clustered around her father at the top of the steps, making him an impossible target, and then opening a way for her, exposing him. No one had thought of archery, Radgar had cleverly distracted all of them, as Durendal had pointed out.

He had been a despot, King Ambrose, but Chivial had needed him, his iron will, his supple hand, his very devious mind. One word from her would save him and see Radgar sail away frustrated. Princess Dierda would become Queen Dierda and produce countless litters of princes to secure the succession, while she, the disgraced Malinda, rejected by a common pirate ... well she must just face a furious father and be married off to some other horror--not that Radgar had impressed her as a horror at all in the few minutes they had spoken. Queen Regent Martha had spoken very highly of him.

The fires were dwindling. The Forge was growing darker and colder, very much colder. Goose bumps marched on her skin.

The voices seemed locked in endless wheels of invocation, repeating and repeating the names: Chandos, come! Screwsley, come! Stalwart, come! Time had been revoked; perhaps it would never return. Heat had been revoked; she was freezing.

The chanting had faded into the distance and the trickle of water had stopped. The glow of the fires had faded away, and yet the Forge was not dark, rather it seemed ... foggy? Was this what it was like to be blind? Even to recognize darkness must be a kind of seeing. Everything seemed hidden behind smoked glass, as if the very air were becoming opaque. She could not see the chanters, only ... only eyes looking down at her. Disembodied. A pair of eyes, a faint outline of a hand resting on Suasion's hilt ... More eyes, to right and left. Behind her? Yes, some there, also, staring down at her.

Her mind went blank. She fumbled with the scroll with her invocation on it. Inevitably it

rolled itself up; she unrolled it, and an icy breeze lifted it from her hand.

Traitor! The voice was no more than a thought in her mind.

"No!" she cried, struggling to remember what she must say. "Blades, you must save your ward--"

This is the traitor.

She betrayed us, said another.

They were faint, insubstantial, no more than reflections on water, clustered menacingly all around her, hands on swords.

Kill her. Take her mind. Twist, rend, scatter ...

Icy touches, wind or fingers ...

"No!" she screamed. "Save the King! Save your ward! There was a massacre. You died. Hundreds died." She had forgotten her text. She gabbled. "The baby prince died later and I was dispossessed." She wondered why the chanters were still wailing away in the distance. Could they not hear her screaming at the ghosts? "Take me back with you! Back to that moment and before. When I was walking back along the jetty--I will shout--"

Traitor, traitor!

Make her plead.

Make her scream.

She slew our ward. ...

"I did not! I want to save him now, save you, all of you. Start again. I will shout a warning. You cannot shout, but I can. Take me back--"

Make her suffer, suffer, suffer. ...

"Sir Bandit!" she yelled. "Dian was left a widow. She wept for you, but she married another man."

Dian? Must I remember Dian? That silent thought was Bandit's voice, all that was left of a fine man.

"Take me back to the jetty! I will save you all."

Ghostly anger.

Brothers, she also was our ward, our ward's heir. That was Bandit. We swore, brothers. Let us trust her a little. If she fails us, we can still twist and rend.

Ghostly murmurs of complaint ...

"Yes, yes, please!" she shouted. "Quickly! To the jetty. The Usurper's men are coming."

She betrayed Eagle! That was Chandos.

"I didn't! Aid me and you will live again, the Blades will live again."

Let us do what Leader says, brothers. ... That was young Stalwart. Remember our oaths.

A surge of giddiness, of nausea ... Light? The fog brightened. A scent of water, the sea. A faint memory of rain. Grass under her feet.

And screams, screaming people, screaming horses.
"No!" she yelled. "This is too late. This
is when you were dying."

Ghostly moans and wails of despair:
See, we fall! Madness! Shame! The
eight wraiths were still with her, figures of mist
around her, and apparently too engrossed in viewing
their own deaths to heed her pleas.

"Take me back! Back farther, before my
father died. Back, farther back ..."

Somewhere a new voice shouted, "Surrender in
the name of King Neville!" and the distant chanting
became shouting and clashing swords. The Yeomen
had arrived at the Forge. More blood, more death.
Malinda was in two places at once, two
times at once. She was going to go mad. The
conjurers had warned her. ...

"Quickly!" she cried. "Spirits! Save the
King! These are the last of your Order, save them.
Take me back to give the warning!"

Brothers, we must help her! Again, that was
Bandit, and then she felt Chandos add his silent
voice. And again Stalwart: She can save us.

Another surge of giddiness, the anvil
rocking, the grass moving under her feet, a misty
rain in her face ... A smell of the sea
filled her nostrils, and she stared up at two
brilliantly green eyes.

"How kind of him!" Radgar said angrily.
"Such was not his opinion when we met twelve
years ago. It seems he came very close
to lying to you about our acquaintance. Would you agree that
he was trying to deceive you?"

Too soon! The spirits had placed her back
on the longship as it still drifted aimlessly on the
rain-speckled water. The crew sat in silence,
watching their king interview his new bride. The
oars were spread out like wings, motionless. She could not
disembark yet.

"An honest answer, my lady! Did your father
deliberately hide from you the fact that he and I
know each other personally?"

She heard her own voice reply. "Perhaps he
forgot--" In some far corner of her mind she could
still register the screams and swords, back in ...
in the Forge! Hard to relate to that and to this other
place. Two places at once. Must not forget
why she had come back. Soon she would disembark and
warn her father that this green-eyed pirate was a
monster. Must remember.

The eight shades would be no further help--
Killer! Monster! Oath breaker!
Murderer! They were still there, but now their attention was
all on the hated King of Baelmark. Liar!
Deceiver! They flitted and flickered around him in
frustrated, transparent fury, slashing at him
with ghostly swords. Traitor! Traitor!
Obviously neither Radgar himself nor any of the
crew could see or hear them as Malinda could.
Her mind was being ripped in pieces.

"I am sure he did not!" Radgar snapped. "What other tricks did he use on you? What threats did he make to force you into this marriage?"

Again her voice spoke for her--the other Malinda spoke for her. "Your Majesty, I wrote to you! I testified before the--"

"Yes, you did, because I would not sign the treaty until I was given assurances that you were not being forced into a union you found distasteful. I must still hear it from your own lips."

Thwack! Clang! Those were the terrible sound of crossbows. The Yeomen were shooting through the windows at the men trapped in the Forge and at Malinda herself. The quarrels rang from the stones. She was going to die there. The last of the Queen's Men were going to be picked off like fish in a barrel, dying around her corpse.

"Your Grace ..." The multitude onshore had fallen silent, staring at the longship. They did not know what was going to happen, which was, er ... which was a murder. Someone, yes, her father ...

"Why did you not wait for your two ladies to board?"

"My lord husband, why don't we sail?"

"Later!" he said angrily. "Because you knew they did not want to come? Because they had been forced into accompanying you? So what about you? You are happy at the prospect of spending the rest of your life in Baelmark bearing my children?"

"I am honored to wed so fine a king!" Could this man really be as bad as he was painted? Yes, yes! That was why she had come back! Back from where? Remember! She was fading. The real Malinda was driving out the wraith from the octogram. She seemed to be losing power. She wanted to scream. Perhaps she was dead. Was that Audley screaming?

"Oh, rubbish!" Radgar said. "You may be terrified or disgusted or shivering with excitement. You cannot possibly feel honored. I'm a slaver and a killer of thousands. But my mother was forced into her marriage, and I will not take you as my wife unless I am convinced that you are truly happy at the prospect. I think you were bludgeoned into it. Speak! Persuade me otherwise."

He was bullying her, just like her father. "You call me a liar?" Without thinking, she swung. Her hand struck his cheek with a crack like an ax; with all her strength behind it, the blow made him stagger.

The crew whooped and roared approval. The crowd ashore rumbled. She gasped with horror at her folly.

The wraiths had gone.

Radgar straightened up, rubbing his face, which was already turning pink. His eyes were wide with astonishment, and yet they shone with devilment. "Do that again!"

The eight had gone; the chaos in the Forge continued. Yes, Audley screaming, and Lothaire ... and Malinda. Pain! ... More dead. And all of this was ultimately Radgar's fault--

"Your Grace, I beg your--I can't imagine what--"

"Do it again!" he said. "Go on, I dare you!" He offered his face.

Dare her? How dare he dare her? Crack! Right hand last time, left hand this time.

The sounds of the Forge stopped instantly, and she had a sudden vision of History like a huge rambunctious scroll breaking loose and rolling itself up. ...

Radgar had been expecting the slap, but she was still fast enough to connect. He reeled back against the side of the ship. Her hand stung. Spirits! What would he do to her?

The pirates cheered, howled, stamped feet, and shouted obviously lewd suggestions. The King reached out and gripped Malinda's shoulders. The marks of her fingers were clearly visible on his face, yet he was grinning widely, like a boy. "You have convinced me! No one bullies you into anything. Make a wake, helmsman! I have a bride to take home."

Leofric yelled, "Yea, lord!" and something else in Baelish. His mallet hit the rail, the oars dipped and bit. The ship leaped forward. Malinda staggered. Radgar folded her into an embrace and kissed her. He was not Dog.

The scroll, rolling faster, ever faster, ever shorter ...

But the ship was moving! She had not done what she intended, but she had done enough. Radgar had discarded his planned assassination. SHE HAD WON! It was enough. Ambrose would live. There would be no Wetshore Massacre. The eight wraiths would live again. All of them would live. Dian would stay married to Bandit. There would be no massacre at Sycamore Square. Granville would never rule. Horrible Lambskin would never rise above Grand Inquisitor. Courtney would rot away in Mayshire. Neville would never rule. Malinda would never rule, but she had beaten them all in the end! TRIUMPH! Ambrose might go on for years. Dog would live again--she would never meet him and even if they did meet, they would mean nothing to each other, but he would not die for her. Take back your life, darling, and find happiness. ... The man kissing her was not Dog, but it was with a sense of farewell that she returned his embrace, putting fervor and her heart into it. Good-bye ...

Click! The scroll closed.

Radgar released her, eyes like green fire.

"My lady, you honor me!"

"Your Grace, I am so ashamed!" Surely

ladies did not behave like that when they were being kissed? What an astonishing slobbery business! And her fingers digging into him like that! What must he think of her? "I swear I will never--"

He misunderstood. "Don't swear! Any time you think I deserve a good whack, whack away! Always, always tell me when I am wrong, because that is what I need more than anything. Even the friends of my boyhood will not tell me what they really think now, because they all have too much to lose. Be my conscience, Malinda." He released her, but carefully, for the ship was pitching as it cleaved the swell in the open river, heading toward its two sisters. "Such fire can only be honored with fire." From a pocket he pulled a rope of rubies like a snake of flame. "I am sure these were stolen from somewhere, but they have been in my family longer than the crown of Chivial has been in yours."

"Oh, they are magnificent!" she said, completely bewildered by this extraordinary man and also annoyed that there was something niggling at the back of her mind that she could not quite put a finger on ... something she must at all costs remember. ... But whatever it was, it was good. Mostly good.

He hung the rubies around her neck and kissed her again. Evidently he wanted more of the tongue contact and hands-on-the-back procedure, so she cooperated hungrily. The crew cheered even louder.

Radgar paused in his wooing to glance back at the vanishing shore. "If you want to wave good-bye, Wife, you had better do it now."

"No! If you will grant me a single wish in all our marriage, Husband, it is that I need never more have anything to do with Ambrose of Chivial. I have paid any debt I owed him a thousand times. I despise him!"

"Well, that's certainly something we have in common," the pirate said cheerfully. "But you don't need my permission for that, my lady. Short of bearing children for the wrong man--and even that can be negotiated sometimes--a Baelish wife can do pretty much anything she pleases. I have far more important worries than making my wife answer her father's letters."

He hugged her to him and beamed at her. He was taller, but not by much, just right. A powerful man. "There's a wind coming, or I'm a Thergian. I have a carousel standing by off the mouth. We can transfer to it for the trip home."

"I don't mind a longship!" she said bravely, although the prospect was more daunting when seen firsthand.

Radgar chuckled. "I do! I was conceived in one, but I don't intend to subject you to that." He regarded her quizzically. "There is an alternative. If the weather does as I expect, we can be in Thergy before midnight."

"Yes?"

"Then ... " He laughed and shook his head as if changing the subject. "Taking a girl home? You know, you make me feel like a boy again, my Malinda? Mael-lind! You shall be my Mael-lind!"

"Meaning?"

"Mael is "time" and lind "a shield." You will keep me young."

He was certainly not acting as if old age was a problem yet.

"What were you going to say about Thergy?"

"Ah. My consul in Drachveld has built himself an emperor's palace there--at my expense, of course, but he did a fine job of it."

"Seahorses!"

The coppery eyebrows shot up. "What about seahorses?"

"I don't know," she said, confused. "I must have dreamed about ... It's nothing. It's gone. Carry on." It had felt like relief so perhaps it was just the knowledge that this bridegroom she had been dreading for so many months was turning out to be a very pleasant surprise.

"As it happens, I just wish his wife wasn't quite so crazy about seahorses, but it's fit enough for a royal honeymoon. We could spend a week or two there--incognito, of course." His tone was wistful, almost pleading. His arms were iron bands around her. "Let you learn to be a wife before you have to practice being a queen as well. Drachveld's a fair enough town, a bit dull, but we could have a few days there to get to know each other and then perhaps have a proper wedding, with both of us present. King Johan and Queen Martha are wonderful people; I'm sure they'd love to be witnesses."

She studied his angular face for a moment, that juvenile gleam. She recalled Dian saying that eagerness never failed, and no one was going to question his virility. Built like an oak keel, her father had said. He felt like an oak keel.

"I thought we were married this morning," she said.

"Do we have to waste time going through it all again?"

That was definitely the right answer.

"Helmsman!" Radgar roared. "Can't you move this bathtub any faster?" He kissed his bride again, even more thoroughly than before.

Yes, she could probably learn to enjoy this. Tonight she would find out what all the rest of the fuss was about.

Aftermath

The reading is that you will be Queen of Chivial, Your Grace, although not for very long.

IVYN KROMMAN, PERSONAL

COMMUNICATION TO PRINCESS MALINDA

It was a fairly typical Firstmoon day in Baelmark, which meant that the sleet moved horizontally, stung like needles, and tasted salt even far inland. The Queen's route home led her right into the teeth of it, so she could barely see the front of her horse.

Hatburna was set high on the slopes of Cwicnoll--a good summer home, but not the most comfortable place in midwinter. The family celebrated Long Night there only because it was more intimate than any of the formal palaces. This year, the weather had been so excessively horrible that they had lingered longer than usual, no one wanting to face the ride back to Catterstow. So why was she out in it now? Probably just because it made coming home feel so good. A plunge in the hot spring would definitely be in order, followed by a toasting at the fire, a steaming mug of hot mead and honey, and then perhaps roast boar with apple sauce.

She was returning from visiting Fosterhof, mother house of the many Queen's Orphanages she had established throughout the archipelago. She sometimes complained to Radgar that she had a thousand children to worry about. He usually replied that he found their own three more than enough and she shouldn't try to solve everybody's problems. But he never stinted when she asked for money for any of her causes.

Hands came running to take her horse as she slid from her saddle in the stable yard. She splashed over to the door, stamped in the porch, shook herself like a wet dog--of which half a dozen were presently trying to paw and lick her dry. Usually a servant would be there to take her cloak, but not today.

"Here you are, Mother," proclaimed a husky treble. "Hot mead and honey, just the way you like it. I put cinnamon on top--that's right, isn't it?" Sigfrith thrust a steaming mug at her. Atheling Sigfrith was her youngest, five feet of juvenile cunning clad in armor of pure charm--red-gold curls, huge eyes of emerald green, a million freckles.

"Well, thank you!" Malinda accepted the drink; it was much too hot to sip at, but the pottery warmed her hands nicely. "You think I will feel better able to cope with your confession after I drink this?" Why was the young rascal wearing a leather rain cloak that showed no signs of wet? Why had he chased all the servants away?

"Confession, Mother? Me?"

"Well, I admit that you usually manage to make it seem someone else's fault, but I really would prefer to be sober when you tell me. You wouldn't want me to fly into a murderous drunken rage, would you?"

"Would you?" he asked with interest. Innocence

shone in the jewel eyes. Maybe it was someone else's fault this time, whatever it was.

"Probably not. Where are we going?"

He pouted at being outguessed. "Over to the Old House. Would you like me to carry your drink for you, Mother?"

"Yes, please. We old folk are so clumsy." She resigned herself to postponing that appointment with the hot spring. "Let's go. I am getting more worried by the minute."

The Old House was officially used for servants' quarters, although it frequently became infested by the ragamuffin poets, artists, and musicians who swarmed around the throne. As she followed her hurrying guide through the storm, Malinda realized that it would also make a very good hideaway for a young atheling wishing to get up to mischief without his parents' knowledge. Fortunately, Sigfrith was too young to be molesting the servant girls. She thought he was. She certainly hoped he was. His brothers were quite bad enough.

The building seemed deserted, as it should at that time of day. By the time she had struggled out of her cloak and hat and boots, he was offering her the mead again and her favorite slippers, too, which normally remained in her bedroom. This was becoming serious!

The great hall there had never been very great, and after New House was built, it had been mostly hacked up into sleeping cubicles. All that remained was an artists' studio with a gigantic hearth and some large, glass windows providing a spectacular view of the volcano. Spectacular on good days. Today the prospect was of fog and a few misty pine trees. She could smell linseed oil, although she was not aware of any painters battenning on the royal hospitality at present. She had certainly not authorized the enormous and extravagant fire in the great hearth. There was a painting on an easel.

"Like it?" her youngest son said gleefully. It was a portrait of Sigfrith himself, curled up small in a chair with two puppies and a kitten.

"Surprised?"

"Astonished! It's superb. I don't recognize the artist."

"Thomas of Flaskbury."

She had never heard of the man and felt warning prickles on the back of her neck. There was more than a boyish prank involved in this.

"It drowns me in cute. Who planned the composition?"

"I did," Sigfrith said proudly. "We all did. See over here?"

He led her to two more easels, and predictably they bore portraits of Aethelgar and Fyrbeorn. Someone had gone to considerable trouble and expense. Aethelgar had the money, but only Radgar himself was capable

of pulling this off without her finding out. This was not just a belated Long Night gift for her.

"They chose their own designs, too, did they?" she asked while her mind raced. She took a sip of the scalding mead.

"Oh, yes," Sigfrith said eagerly, too young to catch all the implications. "Master Thomas said he wanted to make us look just the way we wanted to look. He is good, isn't he!"

Obviously. Sigfrith and his kitten-- Radgar always said that their youngest would never make a pirate because he would only have to ask for loot and his victims would give him everything they owned.

The pirate was their middle son, Fyrbeorn, shown in full war regalia on the deck of a dragon ship. At sixteen he was already taller and wider than his father, and the artist had made him look even larger. The pink fuzz on his chin had become a bristling copper beard; his muscles bulged. This was Fyrbeorn as the throwback warrior he dreamed of being, sword drawn, steel helmet, fearful green stare, the terror of all the oceans. With brawn like that, brains were redundant. Piracy was out of fashion these days, but he and a crew of young terrors were planning to sail off to ravage the coast of Skyrria and get themselves blooded as soon as the weather turned.

Aethelgar, the eldest, had chosen to be shown with a falcon on his wrist, standing beside his favorite horse and hound. In reality his hair was redder than that diplomatic auburn and his eyes not so yellow and he rarely chose to dress in such grandeur. To the best of her knowledge he owned no garments like that cloak, jerkin, doublet, ruffled shirt. ... The artist had caught the inscrutable smile perfectly, though. Clever--or even sly ... Fyrbeorn would take anything he fancied by brute force, Radgar said, and Sigfrith by charm, but Aethelgar would just prove to you he had been its legal owner all along. The sword at his side was a gentleman's rapier, a Chivian gentleman's rapier.

So why was their mother being let into this secret now? She skewered her last-born with a menacing royal glare. "Your father put you up to this!"

Sigfrith Radgaring was innocence personified. "Up to what, Mother? Don't you like the pictures?"

She eyed the gaping door to the sleeping quarters. "Radgar!"

He emerged smiling. There were depths to that smile. He came to her as if intending to embrace her, and she backed away a step.

"Explain!"

He shrugged, discarding most of the smile. "They were made for your father."

There were depths to that sentence, too--Firstmoon was churning the ocean like a cauldron. So why now?

"Shouldn't I have been consulted?"

"Twenty years ago you told me you wanted to have nothing more to do with him."

Had it been that long?. Close enough. Those years had been kind to Radgar Aeleding. There were few threads of silver in his beard; he was almost fifty, but a stranger would have guessed ten years short. In all history no man had reigned in Baelmark half as long as he, and even the fire-breathing terrors of Aethelgar's set were still loath to challenge the Ironhall-trained king. The moot always voted him a champion to fight in his stead, but he preferred to do his own dirty work--and the last contender had lost his right thumb in less than a minute.

Radgar shrugged. "I never promised that I wouldn't, though, did I? I have to keep up with what's going on in Chivial."

She shivered and moved closer to the fire.

"What is?"

Of course she had not been able to remain totally ignorant. Dian wrote regularly--Baroness Dian since Bandit became Sheriff of Waterby--still popping out children with no sign of even wanting to slow down. Little Amby had died only a few months after her marriage and Queen Dierda about five years ago, still childless. Ambrose would be over seventy now ... in poor health, the last she had heard. Things must have gone beyond that.

Radgar shrugged. "He wanted to see his grandsons. Durendal sent an artist."

"And a good one," she admitted. "That slime bucket is still around is he?"

"Roland? Still chancellor ... well, he was."

"Why did you say wanted, not wants?"

Radgar hesitated long enough to convey the news without words. He did not say he was sorry.

"About a week ago. He'd been failing for some time, but the end seems to have been ... peculiar. Worth looking into."

She turned and walked over to the window to study the fog. She could not mourn Ambrose. After so long she could no longer find it in her heart even to hate him. She had done so once, but mainly for forcing her into marrying Radgar, who had turned out to be the finest man she knew. She could not imagine what her life would have been without him. He was ruthless to his enemies, yes, but infinitely generous to friends; a doting father and husband, yet so astonishingly self-disciplined in his own life that he often seemed indolent or uncaring. When the time came, he acted as required, berserk or icily rational.

However sordid her father's motives might have been, to bear a grudge for her marriage would be impossibly petty. He had let another man break the news to her, and that she would not forgive. Probing her feelings, she realized that what hurt most at the moment was purely selfish--her life

had passed a milestone. She was next up. She had become the old generation and her sons the new. She resented that.

"Peculiar how?"

Radgar was right at her back. She had not heard him approach. "According to present information, Durendal murdered him. I find that a little hard to swallow."

"And who succeeds?" she asked, knowing the answer.

"You know who."

No! Ambrose was trying to mess up her life again, just by dying, and she would not allow it. "Chivial won't accept a queen regnant. It tried two and they were both miserable failures."

"You'll be different."

"In what way?"

"First, he's left you a land prosperous and at peace. Second, you're supremely well qualified. You've had practice. The witan say the country's much better run when I leave you in charge than when I'm around to do it myself."

"That's nonsense!"

"And third," Radgar continued, unruffled, "the House of Ranulf has fallen on hard times. There really isn't anyone else. Everyone expects you. They're reconciled to it."

"You put it nicely." But she knew Radgar always had his own sources of information and drew his own conclusions. He would have made it his business to keep track of Chivial affairs.

"And if I refuse?"

"No one seems to know. More women, I think. I may even be the closest male. I suppose the real answer is "civil war.""

She spun around to face him. "No! Baelmark is my home now. I am not qualified. I have a family to care for here, quite apart from the orphanages, the hospices, arts schools, and a dozen other important projects that will all crash into immobility if I take my eyes off them."

Radgar grinned. She had not presented a very convincing argument.

"Oh, they may put the crown on me," she said, "but there'll be all sorts of people lurking around trying to take it away from me."

Radgar laughed aloud.

"What is so fiery funny?" she barked.

"I know you too well, Malinda! If they try that sort of game with you, you'll turn the world upside down and shake them off before you admit defeat."

"Burn you!" she said. And burn that old blackguard Ambrose for dying at such an inconvenient time. A couple of years from now, when ... Ha! She was overlooking something and apparently Radgar was, too. He had been hiding over there. ... She turned more toward the

draperies on the other side. "I shall refuse the throne on behalf of myself and my descendants forever!"

Young Sigfrith's eyes stretched wide with astonishment, but she saw movement in the shadows. Sure enough, Aethelgar stepped forth--slim, subtle, and sardonic.

"My sympathies on your bereavement, Mother."

Radgar scowled, but he should have guessed that their eldest son would know what was going on. Eels were brambles compared to Aethelgar. On the other hand, there was no use shouting for Fyrbeorn--he would be off fighting, hunting, or seducing; politics were not his sport. To Aethelgar there could be no other sport. As a child he had ruled the rat pack of Catterstow. He had thought to have himself painted as a Chivian gentleman, expecting that King Ambrose would see those portraits and perhaps display them to Parliament.

"Have you something to contribute to this discussion?" Malinda demanded.

He displayed the cryptic, conspiratorial smile that Thomas of Flaskbury had captured so surely. "I'm a thegn now. I won't be bound by your renunciation."

"And I'm still king," his father growled. "You'll be bound what I tell you to be bound by."

They scratched like blade and grindstone, those two. Malinda intervened.

"All right, Radgar Aeleding! What solution will you impose?"

"I impose nothing on you," Radgar said softly, "as you very well know, my lady. But I have always believed that royal blood brought royal duty. Can you in good conscience let your homeland collapse into chaos just because you're too busy to bother?"

She shrugged angrily. "I have enough to do here."

For the first time a ripple of worry disturbed Aethelgar's serene confidence. "Any sword-wielding thug can make a try for the throne of Baelmark, Mother, but Chivial goes by primogeniture. Even if you bar me from putting in my claim now, my sons and sons' sons will always be a threat to them." He had worked that out years ago.

So had Radgar. He sighed. "I'm afraid he's right. Spirits help Chivial! If you turn it down, love, then we'll have to send them Snakeblood."

But Snakeblood wasn't old enough yet. Aethelgar was about the age she had been at her marriage, a brash but inexperienced child; like her then, he thought he knew everything. Burn Ambrose for dying just now!

"You won't consider abdicating and coming with me?"

Radgar laughed. "With my past? My existence will be extremely brief if I ever show my face in Chivial. Besides, I do want to put Fyrbeorn up here, and he isn't quite ready

yet. You see that painting? You'd think we whittled him out of oak just to be King of Baelmark." A very fond, very stupid smirk disfigured his face. He actually kept the Baelish thegns on very tight reins these days, but Fyrbeorn inspired brainless attacks of piratical nostalgia in his father.

In Malinda's opinion, while that big lunk looked the part, he lacked the wits to rule Baelmark for long. Radgar's sons had shared out his talents between them, and she often wished she had borne more of them, just to see how many varied chips the old block could produce. None of the three could match him for versatility yet. Perhaps when they were older ...

"What about Sigfrith?"

Radgar chuckled. "This one? This one with the big ears flapping? He'll get whatever he wants out of life and let the other two do all the work."

Sigfrith squealed with laughter and hurled himself into his father's arms, which was perfectly typical.

Radgar spun his youngest son upside down and deposited him gently on the floor. He turned to embrace his wife instead. "You don't think I want to lose you, do you, love? I'd come if I could."

"What do you suggest?"

"Give it two years. You go home to Chivial now; take Aethelgar with you and set him up as Crown Prince. They'll love him, may the spirits have pity on them. In two years he'll have the whole kingdom marching to the beat of his drum. Fyrbeorn will be ready to take over here. We'll retire together and live happily ever after."

She laid her head on his shoulder while she thought about it. Queen Malinda the Brief? Malinda the Unwilling?

"You promise?"

"I promise. Do you?"

"I'll have to think about it for a day or two."

"Can I come with you, Mom?" Sigfrith asked excitedly. "Can I?"

"In the spring, maybe. The sea's too dangerous just now. How did you hear?" she asked Radgar's collarbone.

"Durendal warned me months ago it was coming. I posted Ealdabeard in Lomouth with a fast ship. This morning he unloaded Commander Dragon of the Royal Guard on the beach at Catterstow, breathing and rational, if only just."

Malinda chuckled to herself at the thought of a Chivian crossing the ocean in midwinter in a longship. Even a Blade would not come through that ordeal unscathed. And she remembered that twice before in her life she had received bad news from Blades--from Dominic at Ness Royal when she was a child, and when Durendal came to tell her of her betrothal to Radgar. Well, she had thought it was bad news, and both times

things had turned out well in the end.

"I might add," Radgar said acidly, "that if Sir Dragon is the best your father could find to be Leader, then either the Blades have slipped a long way from my day, or else it was past time the old man moved on."

"That makes you sound old yourself." She straightened up, kissing his cheek in passing.

"Where's he now--Dragon?"

"Over at New House, eating the furniture until you return from your outing to unknown parts."

"And Durendal killed my father?"

"So he says."

Malinda sighed. "I suppose if anyone could outwit the Royal Guard it would be that one. Well, I'll think about it."

She was fairly sure she would agree, though. She could stand anything for two years, even the agony of being separated from Radgar. And she had a score to settle with Sir Durendal.

Note: The ensuing encounter between Queen Malinda and Lord Roland is recounted in the closing pages of *The Gilded Chain*.

THE END

