

Sorcery, like any other branch of knowledge, must be learned, used, and mastered. The young apprentice to the blacksmith does not begin by forging a fine sword for the prince. The young apprentice to the weaver does not with her first thread weave the queen's hearth rug. So the rhetor makes her first speech to her mirror, not to the marketplace, and the young man-at-arms fights his first battle against the tilt, not against his liege's mortal enemy. So did the blessed Daisan proclaim the Holy Word for twentyone years before even He mastered the art of prayer well enough that He might by His own prayer and meditation ascend to the Chamber of Light. Learn these things, Liath. You cannot use them, for you are deaf to magic, but you may think on them, you may practice them as if you were a mage's apprentice, and in time you may have gained a sorcerer's knowledge. To master knowledge is to have power from it."

There, on the gate that rested only in her mind, stood a constellation of jewels like a cluster of stars, tracing the form of a rose. And on each farther gate, a new constellation, sword, cup, ring, and so on, as was appropriate. For these constellations also shone above in the heavens, together with the twelve constellations that made up the Houses of Night, the world dragon that bound the heavens, and the many other constellations arrayed as emblems on the sphere of the fixed stars, set there by the infinite wisdom of Our Lady and Lord.

Eyes still closed, she drew, in her mind, the form of the rose, but its shape and airy substance vanished like bird tracks in sand washed by the tide; she could not keep hold of it. But she could use the table as a kind of engraving surface. She set her hand lightly on the polished wood grain and carefully, precisely, traced out the dimensions of the Rose on the wood. Such a slight task to make her sweat so; her face flushed with heat, and she felt warm all over.

Hand drawn to the end of the pattern, palm hanging half over the lip of the table, she paused.

A sudden noise jolted her out of her concentration.

"Liath? Is there a fire in here?"

Liath jumped up so fast she banged her thighs on the table's edge. Cursing under her breath, she spun around. "Hanna! You startled me!"

Hanna wrinkled up her nose, sniffing, and cast about, rather like a dog. "Your brazier must have overheated. It smells like burned wood. You'd better" But even as she spoke, the scent dissipated. Hanna sighed, heartfelt. "At least you have color in your cheeks." She walked forward and took Liath's hands in hers. "I hate to always see you so pale."

"Does Hugh know you came here?" Liath asked, darting to the door and looking, out. The passageway remained empty. She heard Lars chopping wood outside.

"Of course not. I saw him riding out

"He'll know you're here. He'll come back."

"Liath! Take hold of yourself." Hanna grasped Liath's hands and chafed them between her own. "How can he know if he's gone from the village? He didn't see me leave the inn."

"It doesn't matter. He'll know." Liath was shaken by a sudden swell of emotion. "You're all I have left, Hanna," she said in a hoarse voice, and then, abruptly, hugged her fiercely. "It's all that's kept me safe, knowing I can trust you."

"Of course. Of course you can trust me." But Hanna hesitated and slowly pushed back out of Liath's arms. "Listen. I've spoken to Ivar. He needs servants to go with him, to keep him in proper state at the monastery. He's taking me." Liath, stunned, heard the rest of Hanna's confession through a veil of numbness. "I'm sorry, Liath. But it was the only way I could get out of marrying young Johan. Mother and Father have agreed to it."

With nothing left to hold her up, Liath sank down onto the chair.

"Oh, Liath. I knew I never meant" Hanna dropped to her knees. "I don't want to leave you."

/ don't want you to leave me. But Liath knew she could not speak so.

"No," she said instead, so softly the words barely took wing in the air. "You must go. You can't marry Johan. If you go with Ivar, then you can find a better marriage or a better position. Quedlinhame is a fine town. Both monastery and convent are ruled over by Mother Scholastica. She is the third child of the younger Arnulf and Queen Mathilda. She is a learned woman. That is why she has the name, Scholastica. She was baptized as Richardis." It was all there, in the city of memory, all the knowledge that Da had taught her neatly lined up in niches, along avenues, under portals and arches, but what good was it if she was utterly alone? She wanted to cry but dared not, for Hanna's sake. So she kept talking. "Queen Mathilda retired to Quedlinhame after King Arnulf the Younger died and their son Henry became king. All of Quedlinhame is under her grant, her special protection, so it is a very fine place, they say. I believe the king holds court at Quedlinhame every year at Holy Week, when he can, to honor his mother. There will be every opportunity for someone as clever as you to advance yourself in service. Perhaps you can even attach yourself to the king's progress, to his household. He has the two daughters, Sapientia and Theophanu, who are old enough now to have their own entourages, their own retainers."

Hanna laid her head on Liath's knees. The weight and warmth were comforting and yet soon to be gone from her forever. "I'm so sorry, Liath. I would never leave you, but Inga will be coming back from Freelas in the summer with her husband and child, so there isn't room for me. It must be marriage or service."

"I know. Of course I know." But hope leached out of Liath like water from a leaking pail. She shut her eyes, as if by being blind she could cause this all not to come to pass by not seeing it happen.

"Liath, you must promise me you won't lose hope. I won't desert you. I'll try every means to secure your release."

"Hugh will never release me."

"How can you be so sure?" Hanna lifted her head. "How can you be so sure?"

She sighed deeply, without opening her eyes. She left the city of memory behind, left the jeweled rose and Da's words. "Because he knows Da had secrets and he thinks I know them all. Because he knows I have the book. He'll never give me up. It doesn't matter, Hanna. Hugh is to be invested as abbot, as Father, at Firseburg. We will leave as soon as it is possible to travel south." She opened her eyes and leaned down, whispering, although there was no one to hear them. "You must take the book. You must take it away from here. Because he'll get it from me if I have it. Please, Hanna. Then if I'm ever free of him, I'll find you."

"Liath"

But she would never be free of him. He knew. Of course he knew.

She let go of Hanna's hands and stood. Hanna scrambled to her feet and turned just as Hugh opened the door.

"Get out," he said coldly. Hanna glanced once at Liath. "Out!"

He held the door until Hanna left. Then he shut it firmly behind her. "I do not like you having visitors." He crossed to Liath and took her chin in his left hand; his fingers cupped her jaw. He stared down at her. The deep azure dye of his tunic brought out the penetrating blue of his eyes. "You will no longer entertain any visitors, Liath."

She wrenched her face out of his grasp. "I'll see whom I wish!"

He slapped her. She slapped him back, hard.

He went white, except where her fingers had left their red imprint on his fine skin. He pinned her back onto the table, pressing her wrists painfully against the hard wood surface, and held her there. He was pale with anger, and his breath came ragged as he glared at her.

"You will not" he began. His gaze shifted over her shoulder. He caught in a breath. He dragged her off the table and shoved her away. Whatever will had momentarily possessed her was already sapped. She stood numbly and watched as he brushed his palm over the tabletop. He inscribed his hand in a circle, narrowing, spiraling in, to trace the outline of a rose burned lightly into the burnished wood grain. His expression was rapt, avid. Finally he turned.

"What have you done?"

"I've done nothing."

He grabbed one of her hands and tugged her forward, placed her hand over the table where she had to see, although the outline was almost invisible. The lines felt like fire along her skin.

"The Rose of Healing," he said. "You have burned its shape into the table. How did you do this?"

She tried to pull her hand out of his, but his grip was too strong. "I don't know. I don't know. I didn't mean to."

He grabbed her by the shoulders, shook her. "You don't know?" If anything, he looked more furious than when she had slapped him. "You will tell me!"

"I don't know."

He struck her backhanded. His heavy rings scored her cheek. He struck her again. He was diving into a rare fury. "How many years have I studied to find the key to the Rose of Healing, and you don't know! Where is your father's book? What did he teach you?"

"No," she said, while blood trickled down her cheek.

He lifted her up bodily and carried her out of the room and into his own cell. There, he dropped her onto the bed. There she lay, staring up at him. He studied her, and all the while his left hand opened and shut to a rhythm known only to him.

Finally he knelt on the bed beside her. He wiped the thin film of blood off her skin. His touch was gentle.

"Liath." His voice was coaxing, persuasive. "What use is knowledge if it is not shared? Have we not learned well together this past winter? Can we not learn more?" He kissed her cheek, where the rings had cut it open, then her throat, then her mouth, lingering, insistent.

But the fire had woken in her, however damped down it might burn. Ever since she had drawn the rose, a thin edge of sensation burned inside her where before she had felt nothing. Fire melts ice. Each time he kissed her she shuddered away from him.

"No," she said softly, and braced herself for the blow.

"Liath," he sighed. He ran a hand along the curve of her body. His breathing came in unsteady bursts, more ragged even than it had been when he was angry. "I have never treated you ill, in my bed."

"No," she said, compelled to answer with the truth.

"You could have pleasure. But you must trust me. I have seen how quickly you learn. How much you want to learn. That you want to learn more." He laid his full weight on her. Even through their clothing, she felt the heat of his skin, burning off, enveloping her. "You know very well, my beauty, there is no one else you can ask. No one else you can turn to. I am the only one. There were rumors about

your Da, dear old Master Bernard, but these villagers let it alone, let him alone, because they liked him. Because the biscop of Freelas has worse things to worry about than one stray sorcerer who sets hex spells to keep foxes out of henhouses."

Trapped in this tiny cell, the walls so thick, the air so still, she was already walled up, lost in a prison of Hugh's making.

"But you would not be so lucky, as young as you are, and the way you look." He stroked her hair in that way he had, running a hand up her neck and catching the hair on the back of his hand, in his fingers, stroking free. "This hair is too fine and too lovely, your skin stays dark through the winter, like the folk from the southern lands, and who in these Ladyforsaken parts has seen such folk, or even believes in them? And your eyes. As blue as the deep fire, or did you know that? I know. I have sought since I was a boy to unlock the secrets of sorcery. There are others like me, others who struggle to learn and to master. Somehow you were born with it in your blood. I know what you are, but I will never betray your secret to anyone else. Do you believe me?"

Even trapped under him, knowing he would say anything to convince her to give him the book, to tell him everything she knew, the horror of it was she did believe him. She had a sudden premonition he had spoken those words rashly and without thinking he might be swearing himself to them.

"I believe you," she said, but the words hurt. He knew what she was. A sorcerer makes herself, but two sorcerers must never marry. Her mother had said it once, placing a hand on Liath's brow. Because the child of two sorcerers might inherit a wild streak of magic more dangerous than the king's wrath. Except Liath had inherited a kind of deafness instead. Da taught her, but only so she could protect herself by having that knowledge. "You cannot use them, for you are deaf to magic."

Or so she had always thought. But now she had burned the Rose of Healing into the wooden grain of the table.

Hugh would put no barrier in the way of her studying Da's book, other books, as long as she shared everything she knew and learned with him.

"I will be faithful to you, Liath," he said, cupping her face in his hands, a lover's gesture, a lover's sweetness, "as long as you are faithful to me."

Ai, Lady, but it burned, this new fire. It hurt so horribly, running out like lines burned into her flesh, long since dormant. She could no longer cloak herself in lethargy. So it was, so she felt: A momentous decision was about to be made.

He shifted, rolling slightly off of her, and made a low, contented noise in his throat. "Liath," he said, softly, gently, coaxingly, and he tightened his embrace on her.

Hanna was leaving. She herself would leave, to be alone in Firseburg with Hugh. To go on in this fashion, always resisting him, always frozen, listless, numb. Barely able to acknowledge any human contact but his; forbidden any human contact other than with him, as he strove to isolate her.

Wouldn't it be easier to give in? To give him what he wanted? Mistress Birta had herself said that Liath's position was enviable. She would not be treated badly. She would probably be treated well.

She had burned the Rose of Healing into the table. Lady's Blood, she might even learn enough to see if she truly was deaf to magic. Or if Da had truly not known, and she was born with a mage's power. Or if Da had known all along, and lied to her.

Why would Da lie to her? Only to protect her.

Hugh ran his hands up her arms. He brushed her throat, tracing an oval there, like a jewel, and she shivered. He sucked in his breath hard and reached to unbuckle his belt. "Stop fighting me, Liath. Why should you not have pleasure? Why?"

Her skin tingled where his lips touched. Why, indeed? It had come time, at last, to choose.

"I will not be your slave," she whispered. She would have wept, it was so hard to say, but she was too terrified to weep. She placed her hands against his chest and pushed him away, locking her elbows and holding them rigid.

He went quite still. "What did you say?"

Having said it once, she knew she must hold to it as strongly as ever she might. She twisted away from him and slipped off the bed to land bruisingly on her knees, huddled on the rug, her gaze on him the way a trapped rabbit stares at a fox. But she raised her voice above a whisper. "I will not be your slave."

He sat up straight. "You are my slave."

"Only by the gold you paid."

His mouth pulled to a straight line. "Then it is back out with the pigs." But he smiled as he said it, knowing full well that after a winter of luxury she could never face that again.

Liath thought this over: the dirty straw, Trotter's back, the cold spring nights. "Yes," she said slowly. "Yes. I'll go back out with the pigs." She climbed stiffly to her feet, walked stiffly to the door. None of her limbs worked right.

He was off the bed in an instant. He grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around and hit her so hard that she staggered. Hit her again. She fell back and hit her head against the wall. She stopped her fall with a hand and shoved herself back up. With a hand shielding her face, she moved to pass him, to get to the door. He struck her. Again. This time, she fell right to her knees and had to huddle there, panting. Pain flamed through her. Her ears rang. He kicked her in the side, and she gasped in pain, gagging.

"Now," he said, his voice taut with fury, "the pigs, or my bed?"

Carefully she rose to her feet. Her balance did not quite work right, and her right eye could not focus. She took an unsteady step, caught a breath, took a second step, and rested her hand on the door latch. Lifted it.

The door opening, and the blow, occurred at the same time. She fell forward into the corridor, onto her hands and knees. Another blow, along the ribs perhaps it was his boot. She struggled to get to her feet, but each time she rose and showed the slightest movement forward, he hit her again.

Blood hazed her right eye, but it didn't matter, because she couldn't really see out of that eye anyway.

She got a hand on the wall and pulled up, and then was flung hard into the other wall. Her head slammed into stone, and she dropped hard. When she tried to stand again, she could not. She lay there, whimpering, trying not to whimper, trying not to make any sound, trying to get her legs to work. His boot nudged her side.

"Now, Liath. Which will it be?"

"The pigs," she said. The words were hard to say, because her mouth was rilled with blood. Since she could not rise, she found purchase with her elbows and tried to crawl forward. This time, when he hit her whether with hands or boot she could no longer tell a swirl of blackness flooded her. She heard her own labored breathing. She could not see. Her vision grayed, then lightened. She saw the narrow passageway as a hazy pattern of stone and shadow, but that was enough. She heaved herself up on her elbows and drew her body along after her. Forward, toward the pigs.

She heard words, a horrified exclamation, but it was not attached to her.

She hurt everywhere, stinging bruises, sharp deep pain in her bones, a fiery stabbing at her ribs; blood trickled, salty, from her mouth, and yet her mouth was dry. She was so thirsty. She could picture the pigs perfectly in her mind. They lived outside the city of memory, in pleasant comfort: Trotter, who was her favorite, and the old sow Truffling, and the piglets Hib, Nib, Jib, Bib, Gib, Rib, and Tib, some of whom she could tell apart, but she could not now recall which ones had been slaughtered and salted and which ones kept over the winter.

He hit her again, from her blind side, and she collapsed onto the cold floor. Rough stone pressed into her face, but the tiny irritating grains helped her stay conscious; she counted the grains, each one pressing into her cheek, into the open wound, like salt. She just breathed for awhile. Breathing was hard. It hurt to inhale and exhale, but eventually she had to get out with those pigs. She would be safe with the pigs. The book would be safe with the pigs.

Pain like a hot knife stabbed through her abdomen. She screamed out of stark fear. He was going to kill her rather than let her go. Kill her! That hadn't been the choice.

She opened her left eye to see Hugh standing more than a body's length away from her, staring at her, his face as cold and stubborn as the stone. But he had not touched her.

The pain lanced again. Warm liquid trickled down the inside of her thighs. Pain stabbed again. She tried to gasp out words, but she couldn't make them form on her tongue. Ai, Lady! It hurt. She curled up into a ball, and fainted.

Came half conscious when Lars picked her up. Dorit was speaking. Liath caught a glimpse of Hugh and then lost him again. Her thighs were sticky with dampness. The cool afternoon air struck her to shivering as Lars carried her outside. Pain coursed through her abdomen again. She twisted, tossing her head back. Dorit was speaking to her, but Liath could not understand.

Lars' jolting walk sent flares of pain up her legs. She fainted.

This time, when she recognized she was awake, she tried not to panic. She was lying on a hard surface. She couldn't open her eyes. Something cold and clammy covered her eyes, like the hand of a dead, decaying corpse. . . .

She jerked, clawed at it, but her hands were captured and held tight in another's strong grip.

"Liath, it's Hanna. Stop that. Stop it. Trust me."

Hanna. She could trust Hanna. She clung to Hanna's hands. What had happened? She was naked from the waist down, legs propped up, lying flat on her back, awash in pain.

Another voice intruded. "Can you sit, Liath? You ought to, if you can."

"Here," said Hanna in that wonderful practical voice she had. "I'll put my arms under you and hold you. Just lean on me, Liath."

Rising up, even to a half sit, made her head throb. The pain in her abdomen came and went in waves. The clammy hand dropped away from her face, but it was only a cold rag. Through her good eye she saw Mistress Birta and, in the background, Dorit. Mistress Birta straightened up from her crouch at Liath's feet. Her hands were blood red.

Dizziness swept Liath. "I have to lie down," she gasped. Even as Hanna lowered her, she fell completely out of consciousness.

Came up again, still lying on the hard surface. Mistress Birta was speaking.

"We'll move her upstairs. I've done all I can."

"I've seen him hit her a few times, now and again," said a new voice which Liath vaguely

identified as Dorit's, "but with that temper she has, and her his bonded slave, I've never blamed him. But this." There was a heavy silence, followed by the clucking of tongues. "It's a sin against Our Lady, it is. I couldn't let her lie there, bleeding, when I saw she was losing a child."

Hanna and Birta carried her upstairs. It took that long for Dorit's words to sink in.

Losing a child.

They laid her on Hanna's bed and padded her with moss to absorb the blood still flowing from her. Birta pulled a shift down over her hips, so she might rest modestly.

She choked out the words. "Is it true? Was I pregnant?"

"Well, surely, lass. Do you suppose you can bed with a man all winter and not become pregnant? Hadn't you noticed that your courses had stopped?"

Liath just lay there. She felt Hanna's warm hand come to rest on her hair. So comforting. Dear Hanna. "I'm so tired," she said.

"You sleep, child," said Mistress Birta. "Hanna will sit with you for a while."

"Why did I never think of that?" Liath whispered. "Hugh's child. I could not bear to have Hugh's child."

"Hush, Liath," said Hanna. "I think you ought to sleep now. Lady and Lord, but he beat you. You're all bruises. He must have gone mad."

"I won't be his slave," whispered Liath.

When she woke again, much later, she felt a pleasant lassitude. The little attic room was dim, but some light leaked through the shutters. The old blanket draped over her was scratchy but warm. She was exhausted, but she was at least alone; Hugh was not here.

That counted for something.

Then she heard the pound of footsteps on the back stairs accompanied by raised voices.

"I will not let you wake her, Prater!"

"Let me by, Mistress, and this time I will ignore your impertinence."

"Prater Hugh, it may not be my place to speak so to you, but I will, so help me God, send my husband with a message to the biscop at Freelas about this incident, if you do not listen to me now."

"I am sure, Mistress, that the biscop has greater concerns than my taking a concubine."

"I am sure she does," replied Mistress Birta with astonishing curtness, "but I do not think she will look so mildly on your taking a concubine and then beating the young lass so brutally that she miscarries the child conceived of this illegal union."

"It was no child. It had not yet quickened."

"Nevertheless it would have become one if the Lady willed had you not beaten her."

"I remind you that she is my slave, to do with as I please. You forget, or likely you do not know, Mistress, that the biscop of Freelas, though a noblewoman of good character, does not have powerful kin. But I do. Now stand aside."

"But she is still a child of Our Lady and Lord, Frater Hugh. It is Her Will, and not yours, that chooses whether a child be lost before its time. For we women are the chosen vessel of Our Lady, and it is by Her Will that we have been granted the gift of giving birth, a gift accompanied by pain, for how else shall we know the truth of darkness in the world and the promise of the Chamber of Light? I have midwived many a woman in these parts, and I have seen many a woman miscarry from illness or hunger

or by the chance lifting of Her Hand, and I have watched women and their babes die in childbed. But I have never seen a woman beaten so badly that she lost her child, not until now. And I will testify so, before the biscop, if I must."

There was a silence. Liath measured with her eyes the distance from the bed to the shutters, but she knew she hadn't the strength to get there, to open them, to throw herself out in order to escape from him; and anyway, even now, she did not want to die. Light bled into the room and from the yard she heard the cock crow. It must be early morning. The silence made her skin crawl. She waited, shuddering, for the latch to lift.

Finally, Hugh spoke. His voice was stiff with controlled fury. Ai, Lady, she knew him so well, now, that she could see his expression in her mind's eye. "You will return her to me when she can walk. We are leaving for Firseburg in ten days."

"I will return her to you when she has recovered."

He was furious. She heard it in his voice. "How dare you presume to dictate to me?"

"She may yet die, Frater. Though she is not my kinswoman, I have a certain fondness for her. And she is a woman, and like myself and all women, under the special care of the Lady. For is it not written in the Holy Verses: 'My Hearth, where burns the fire of wisdom, I grant to women to tend' ? You may threaten me if you like. I do not doubt you could easily ruin me, for we all know your mother is a great noblewoman, but I will see Liath well before I let her travel such a difficult road."

"Very well," he said curtly. Then he laughed. "By Our Lord, but you've courage, Mistress. But I will see her before I go today."

Liath shut her eyes and hoped against hope that Mistress Birta would send him away.

"That is your right," said Birta finally, reluctantly. The door opened.

"Alone," said Hugh.

Liath kept her eyes shut.

"I will wait outside," said Birta. "Right out here."

Hugh shut the door behind him and latched it. She heard the sounds he made, the slip of his boots on the plank flooring, his intake of breath, the creak of a loose plank under his weight, the door closing, tugged shut, the snick of the latch, sealing them in together. She did not open her eyes. He said nothing. She was so alive to him that she knew exactly how close he stood to her, how a bare turn would brush his robes against her blanket, how near his hands hovered by her face.

But she knew very well he would not go away just because she kept her eyes shut. Da always said you must face what you feared or otherwise become its victim. Of course, Da had always said it with a derisive smile, since he had been running ever since her mother died.

She tightened her grip on the blanket, took in a deep breath, and looked up at Hugh. He studied her with a curious, intent expression. She stared back at him, suddenly so overwhelmingly tired that fear could take no grip on her.

"Why didn't you just kill me?" she whispered.

Hugh chuckled, smiling. "You are far too precious a treasure to cast away so carelessly." Then his expression changed, so fast, like a black storm rushing in from the sea. "But you must not cross me, Liath. Not ever, not like that, again."

She looked away from him to the coarse wooden slats of the wall. A few stray pieces of straw poked through from the loft beyond.

He settled down comfortably beside her. "You will need some kind of servant while we travel,



and I am sure you would feel more comfortable settling in, in Firseburg, if you had someone you knew with you. There was some talk of the Mistress' daughter marrying one of the freeholders, and also some talk that she was unwilling to. I think it might be well if the girl came with us. Then you would have company, and someone to do the work and perhaps, even, if she proves herself clever, to become chatelaine of our household. That would be a fair opportunity for someone of her birth. If you would like that, then I will speak with Mistress Birta now."

Our household.

No matter what she did, no matter how strong her will to resist him, no matter how angry he became with her, how cold she remained to him, no matter how well she had locked away her heart or how well she had hidden Da's book and knowledge, Hugh's sheer stubborn persistence would eventually wear her away to nothing. He was utterly determined to possess her. And if she ran away, where would she run to? To death, most likely, or to a life far far worse in degradation and hunger and filth. If she even could run away. No matter how great a head start she gained, Hugh would catch up to her. He always knew where she was and what she was doing. As long as he owned her, as patient as he was, she was helpless against him.

"Count Harl has granted Ivar permission to take Hanna south with his party, to Quedlinhame," Liath said. Her voice was a little hoarse; she didn't know why. She hardly knew she was speaking at all.

"Hanna? Ah, is that the girl's name? Well, I will be abbot, Liath, and in a few more years I will be elevated to the rank of presbyter and gain the ear of the skopos herself. I can offer her better prospects than a common monk can. If you want her, I see no difficulty arranging the matter with her parents. Do you want her?"

Why not give in to the inevitable? If she had only managed Da's affairs better. If she had only insisted he live more frugally. If she had not begged him last spring to let them stay just one more summer in Heart's Rest.

What good did it do to fight this incessant struggle, when she could not possibly hope to win? She could not go on and on and on and on. And if Hanna was with her, surely everything else would not be so bad? She could study, and learn, and divine the secrets of the stars and perhaps far more besides. Perhaps she would discover the mystery of the rose burned into wood. That would be her consolation.

"Yes," she said. Her voice emerged thickly. "I would like Hanna to come with us."

"Where is the book, Liath?" His expression did not alter.

"The book."

"The book," he echoed. "The book, Liath. Tell me where the book is, and I will allow you to bring the girl with us."

She closed her eyes. He touched her, drawing his fingers delicately around her collarbone, tracing her slave's collarbone actual substance, not iron or wood or any element one could touch, but just as binding.

He had won. He knew it, and so did she.

She did not open her eyes. "Under slats, beneath the pigs' trough, in the inn stables."

He bent to kiss her lightly on the forehead. "I will arrange for the girl to accompany us. We leave in ten days."

She heard the latch lift and then Hugh's voice as he spoke to Mistress Birta, drawing her away down the stairs to the common room below. Ten days.

She covered her face with her hands and lay there, despairing.

days dragged by for Liath, one long day after the next. It took her far longer to recover her strength than even Mistress Birta had expected. At first she slept most of the time, an aching, fitful sleep made worse by the uncomfortable straw ticking of Hanna's bed. Even getting up to relieve herself in the bucket by the door exhausted her.

By the time ten days had passed, she could negotiate the stairs once a day. She was sitting slumped on a bench downstairs at midday, waiting for the Mistress to bring her a meal, when Hanna came in from the yard.

Hanna's face was red from the sun, but her eyes were red from tears, and she wiped her nose with the back of a hand, sniffing as if she had caught a cold. She sank down on the bench next to Liath, looking no less dispirited. "Ivar left this morning. I ran down when I heard, but he'd already gone. He didn't even leave a message for me."

Bitter shame wormed its way into Liath's heart. "Mine is the fault. I'm sorry. He needed you. I shouldn't have begged you to stay with me. He never wanted to be forced into the church. He wanted to ride in the Dragons. And he could have, if it wasn't for me."

"Ai, Mother of Life, spare us this!" exclaimed Hanna, letting out an exasperated sigh. "You're as bad as he is. Of course he'll be fine. Count Harl sent two servants with him, so he'll have familiar faces with him at Quedlinhame. And if it's true that King Henry stops there each spring, then he'll be able to see his sister Rosvita, too. She's a cleric in the king's schola. So between her position and the gift Count Harl is making to the monastery, I'm sure Ivar will be treated very well. Probably better than his own father treated him, for there's only the one child younger than him, and she's the apple of her father's eye. With the help of his sister Rosvita, Ivar might even come to King Henry's notice. Don't you think?"

Liath was able to emerge far enough out of her own misery to recognize that underneath Hanna's practical assessment of Ivar's situation lay a real misery of her own. "Yes," she said, because it seemed to be the reassurance that Hanna wanted, "I'm sure he will. They'll educate him." She paused and took one of Hanna's hands in her own. "Hanna." She glanced around the empty room, listened, but they were alone. "I know you can tally well enough, but I'll teach you to read and write. You'll need to know, if you wish to rise to the position of chatelaine."

Like an echo, Hanna looked around the room also, then toward the door that led out to the yard and the cookhouse. It sat ajar, and through it they heard Mistress Birta ordering Karl to run eggs down to old Johan's cottage to trade for herbs. "But I've no church training. If I know how to read and write, won't people call me a witch or a sorcerer?"

"No more than they'll call me one." She let go of Hanna's hand and wrung her own together, suddenly nervous. "Listen, Hanna. You'd better know now, before we're in Firseburg. Da

"Liath. Everyone knows your Da was a sorcerer. A fallen monastic, too, but one lapse, one child, isn't enough to get a man thrown out of the monastery. There must have been something else as well, disobedience, defiance, something more, like studying the forbidden arts. Deacon Fortensia has told us as many stories as I have fingers and toes about monks and nuns reading forbidden books in the scriptorium and falling into love with the dark arts. But your Da never did anything the least bit harmful, not like old Martha who tried throwing hexes on people who offended her, after she got proud about old Prater Robert sleeping with her. But she stopped that, once it was made plain to her that no one

here would tolerate such things. But your Da was generous. What's the harm in magic if it's a helpful thing? So says the deacon."

"But Da wasn't really a sorcerer. I mean, he had the knowledge, but nothing he ever did"

Hanna looked at her strangely. "Of course he was! That's why we were all so glad he put roots here and stayed each year, when we thought he meant to move on. You didn't know? People don't visit a sorcerer whose spells are useless. What about old Johan's cow that wouldn't calve until your Da wove a

spell to open up its birth canal? What about that first spring, when the snow wouldn't melt, and he called up rain? I could tell you twenty other stories. You really didn't know?"

Liath sat stunned. All she could remember was the butterflies, fluttering and bright and then fading into the warm summer air like the phantoms they were, like the phantom his magic was, which had all faded and vanished after her mother died. "Butbut did it ever do any good? A storm can come by itself, you know. The weather can change, even without tempestari to call it up."

Hanna shrugged. "Who's to know if it was prayer or magic or just good fortune? What about that wolf, then, the one that eluded everyone else until your Da trapped it in a cage woven of reeds? That must have been magic, for any wolf could have escaped such a delicate trap."

Liath remembered the wolf. Da had been terrified, hearing reports that a wolf was lurking in the hills but not killing the sheep. He had trapped it, though he had let others kill it and had wept for days afterward. It had taken her three weeks of crying and pleading and arguing to get him to agree to stay in Heart's Rest after the wolf.

Hanna was still talking. "Maybe he wasn't a true sorcerer, like the devils who built the old Dariyan Empire, who built the wall south of here that stretches all the way from one sea to the other. It's all fallen over now that there are no more sorcerers of that lineage to keep it standing."

"I don't think Da was that kind of sorcerer," Liath said, more talking to herself than to Hanna. "Maybe he pretended to be, even tried to be, even once or twice succeeded. But it was my mother who was one. A real one. I remember that, if nothing else. She was murdered for it. I was only eight years old, but I do know that she had true sorcery, and that she worked . . ." Here she paused to glance around the room again, although nothing had changed. Her voice dropped to a whisper. ". . . old Dariyan magic."

Hanna considered this revelation in silence.

"The book

"It's gone," said Hanna. "Hugh came and took it. I couldn't stop"

"Of course you couldn't stop him." Liath was too numb to cry. "It's a sorcerer's book. It has so much knowledge Da collected over the years" In his own writing. Lady, how she hated herself. She had betrayed Da by losing the book. "You don't have to come. I should have told you sooner, about Da and the book, even before Ivar left. You might not want to stay with me, knowing the truth. You could have gone with Ivar

"As if I would have changed my mind! If Prater Hugh is truly going to be abbot, then he must know what he's doing, taking you as his concubine."

This, strangely, was easier ground "He says there are folk in the church who study magic. Da says Lady Sabella shelters heretics as well as sorcerers, to aid her against King Henry."

"Well," said Hanna, thinking it over, "better to be burned than married to young Johan. Lady Above! You need someone to shelter you from Prater Hugh. You're still pale, but at least your appetite is good. Mother always says that so long as you're hungry, then you're not sick enough to die."

Liath managed a chuckle.

Behind her, the door that led out front opened. Hanna stood up, lifting her chin defiantly. Liath stiffened. Why did he come every time she was beginning to feel free of

him, of that interminable weight he laid on her? Was this his magic, to find and to know, to hunt and to devour? She wanted to crawl under the table, but she forced herself to sit without moving. She felt him, the heat of him, the simple physical presence, as he came up behind her. His hand touched her arm.

She flinched.

He grabbed her arm and hoisted her up and she stood, not fighting him. Tucked under his free arm, as if like Dahe dared never leave it unattended, he carried The Book of Secrets.

"You look well enough," he said brusquely. "We're leaving." He glanced disinterestedly at Hanna. "Girl, fetch whatever you mean to take with you and tell the Mistress that my plans have altered. We are leaving now. My wagon is packed and waiting at the church. Go."

Hanna gaped at him, then bolted for the door that led out back.

"We're going," he repeated.

There was a puzzling urgency about him she could not understand. Certainly there was no point in resisting. She had already lost everything. He led her to the door and thence outside. Hanna came running from around the inn.

"I'll just collect my clothes and such," she called, out of breath. "I'll be there. Don't leave without me!"

Hugh gestured impatiently and kept walking. Liath was already too out of breath even to beg him not to leave Hanna behind.

She struggled to keep up, but they had not gotten a quarter of the way to the church before she slumped, dragging on him. "I have to rest."

"You're gray," he said, not with sympathy but as an observation. "I'll carry you."

"I just need time to rest." Lady's Blood! She didn't want to be seen carried by him, like a shameless whore!

"We've no time." He thrust the book into her hands and caught her around the back and under the legs and swung her up. Even with her weight in his arms, his pace did not slacken. Some other need drove him. She clutched the book against her chest, head swimming, so faint she feared she would drop it.

At the church the wagon did indeed sit outside, heavily laden, covered with a felted wool rug. Three men Liath vaguely recognized as Count Harl's men-at-arms loitered by the church door, armed and outfitted for a long journey. Dorit stood, wringing her hands, by the cart horses, which Lars held by their harness.

Hugh dumped Liath unceremoniously into the back of the wagon, onto the featherbed. A fourth soldier appeared from the stables, leading the piebald mare and the bay gelding. Only the gelding was saddled. Hugh took the gelding's reins and mounted.

"Where is that girl?" he demanded. "We can't wait. If we don't see her by the inn, Dorit, and she comes here, tell her to follow us down the south road. If she hurries, she'll catch us before nightfall."

"But you can't leave her," Liath cried, roused out of her stupor. "You promised me!"

"We can't wait."

"There she is!" called Dorit. Hanna came running along the road, a leather sack thrown over her back.

Hugh urged his gelding forward. A soldier leaped up into the wagon, and Lars jumped back as the cart horses started forward. The wagon jolted under Liath and began to roll. The three other soldiers, one still leading the mare, fell in behind. They eyed Liath and her single possession—the old leather book surreptitiously but otherwise kept silent. Their path met Hanna's, and she swung in beside the wagon.

"You'll walk," said Hugh from the front. Then added, as if an afterthought, "but you may rest the sack in with the rest."

Hanna tossed her sack into the back beside Liath and trudged alongside.

"What happened?" Hanna asked in an undertone. "He looks in a passion."

"I don't know. But he gave me the book, Hanna."

Hanna said nothing, and by that Liath realized the bitter truth. Hugh let her hold the book because he knew he could take it back any time he wanted. Behind them, the church receded. Dorit and Lars stood by the great front doors, watching the party head away back into the village, to the road that led south. They traveled in silence until, reaching sight of the village and the inn, Hugh cursed suddenly.

Liath raised herself up and looked around.

Four riders an unusual sight on any day waited in front of the inn. She recognized Marshal Liudolf. The other three wore the scarlet-trimmed cloaks and brass badges embossed with an eagle that marked riders in service to the king: the King's Eagles. Two were young, one man and one woman. The eldest was a grizzled, weather-beaten man who looked strangely familiar, but she could not place him.

"That's the traveler who rode through last autumn," said Hanna in a whisper. "He asked about you, Liath."

"Keep moving." Hugh's order was sharp.

"Prater Hugh!" Marshal Liudolf raised a hand. "If you will, a word."

Liath could see by the set of Hugh's back that he wanted to ignore this summons. That he wanted to keep riding. But he reined the bay aside. The soldier driving the wagon pulled the horses up. Mistress Birta emerged from the inn and stopped next to the door, watchful, silent.

"As you see, Marshal," said Hugh, "we are just setting out. It is a long journey south, ten or twenty days, depending on the rains, and we have little enough daylight for traveling this early in the year."

"I won't delay you long, Prater. These riders of the King's Eagles approached me yesterday, looking for healthy young persons who might be suitable for service as messengers for the King." Then, oddly, Marshal Liudolf stopped and looked questioningly, almost obediently, at the elder rider.

"I am Wolfhere," said the older man. He had deep-set eyes under silver brows; his hair was almost all silver, with a trace of ancient brown. "You must understand that with the increase in Eika raids, and rumors of trouble in Varre with Lady Sabella, we are in need of young persons suitable to ride messages for the Eagles."

Hugh held the gelding on an uncomfortably tight rein. "I am sure you are. I believe Count Harl has two younger children he might be persuaded to part with."

"We are not looking for children of the nobility," said Wolfhere smoothly, "as you know, Prater Hugh, since you were educated in the king's schola. Indeed, I have always heard it said you were one of their finest students."

"I learned all they had to teach me. You, of course, would not have had the opportunity for such an education. I don't recall your parents' names, or their kin."

Wolfhere merely smiled. "None of the Eagles come from the king's schola. But neither are we looking for landbred children who are unsuitable for this responsibility. I understand that you have recently acquired a young woman who might be of interest to us." He said this without glancing at Liath, although surely he knew she was the young woman he was talking about.

"I paid her father's debt. I am not interested in selling her." Hugh's tone was cold and flat.

"But my dear frater," said Wolfhere, smiling suddenly much like his namesake might bare its teeth in a wolfish grin, "I bear the King's seal. Marshal Liudolf tells me you paid two nomias for her. I have the gold. I want her. You may protest this action, of course, but you must do that in front of King Henry. Until such time as King Henry renders a judgment, it is my right to demand her presence in the king's service."

It was so quiet Liath could hear the soft wind rustling in the trees and the stamp of the old plough horse in the inn stables. Sunlight painted the road the yellow of light clay. The marshal's horse flattened an ear. From out back came the sound of Karl, singing offkey as he worked.

Hugh sat, stiff with fury, on his bay. The old man still did not look at her, but the younger Eagles did. They looked very tall, seated upon their horses, the woman in particular. She had a bold face, and a bolder nosea hawk's nose, they called it hereand a bright and open gaze. She studied Liath with an interest piqued with skepticism. Her companion looked coolly curious. Their cloaks draped across their horse's backs, revealing a fur lining within. They shifted, glancing at the old man, and their eagle badges winked in the sunlight.

Finally Hugh spoke. "I believe the young person's consent is required."

Unruffled, Wolfhere inclined his head. "That is true."

Hugh dismounted and tossed the reins to a waiting manatarms. He walked back to the wagon. Liath wanted to shrink away into nothing, but there was nowhere to run. Hanna hesitated, then moved away to make room for him. He leaned in and pried one of Liath's hands free of the book, clasped it in his, his grasp painfully tight.

"Look at me." Obediently, she looked at him. He lifted her chin with his other hand so she had to look directly into his eyes. Why had she not remembered that his eyes were so complex a blue, not made up of any one shade but a multitude blended together?

"What do you say, Liath?" he asked, so softly but with all his will of iron pressing onto her, all the force of him, all the cold cold winter months. That was what his eyes were like: the pale blue of ice, splintered with cold sunlight, dazzling, but as bleak as the winter winds cutting across fields of ice and snow.

She tried to pull her gaze away, but she could not. He would never give her up. Never. Why even try? She found the city, standing fast in her memory. There, in the treasurehouse, she had locked away her heart and her soul.

No. Fire fluttered, banners rising from the seven walls ringing the city. No. But she had no voice. He had taken her voice.

There, like a beacon, she heard the jingle of horse's harness as one of the Eagles' horses shifted, waiting. Waiting for her.

"No," she said, almost a croak, getting the word out.

"You see," said Hugh, not letting go of her, not breaking his hard gaze from her, "that she does not consent to go with you."

There was silence.

Terror seized Liath. They would turn and ride away, leaving her here, forever in Hugh's grip.

"No," she said, louder. And again, "No!" She tried to pull her head out of his grip, but she could not shake it. "No. I don't want to stay with you. Let me go!" But her voice was so weak.

"What did she say?" demanded Wolfhere. A horse moved, hooves clopping, but Liath could not tell whether it moved toward her or away. Please, Lord, not away!

"She says she doesn't want to stay with you, that she wants you to let her go," said Hugh steadily but not without triumph.

"No, she didn't," said Hanna suddenly, her voice carrying clearly across the yard. "She doesn't want to stay with him. He's twisting her words."

"Prater," said Wolfhere in a deceptively gentle voice, "I suggest you let the girl stand alone and speak."

Hugh did not let go of Liath immediately. But slowly his grip slackened and then, his face white with anger, he let her go and took one step back from the wagon.

With no warning, Hanna snatched the book from Liath's grasp.

"Get away!" snapped Hugh, grabbing for her.

Hanna leaped back and bolted to stand in safety between the two younger Eagles "She's been ill," she cried, appealing to Wolfhere. "She's not well enough to travel. I'll have to help her out of the wagon." Yet she hesitated, not knowing what to do with the book.

But hope burned like fire in Liath now, a banked fire come to life, scouring despair out of her. She struggled to her knees, inched over to the side of the wagon. Caught herself on the side, swung over, and staggered, almost falling. But with sheer dogged stubbornness she held herself up. She did not look at Hugh. That was too dangerous by far. She caught her breath, first. Tried to calm the fire. She was burning hot but, slowly, that subsided. At last she looked at Hanna, for strength.

Hanna gazed back at her, cleareyed, guileless, and smiled, nodding encouragement. In her arms, clasped like a precious child, she held the book. Liath took in a breath and lifted her gaze to meet Wolfhere's squarely. The old man had moved his mount forward and she saw that his eyes were a peculiar, penetrating shade of gray. "I want to go with you." Her voice gained in strength with each word. "I want to be an Eagle." She ducked her head to hit her.

But the hawkfaced woman had already dismounted and crossed the stand between Liath and Hugh. She was, indeed, almost as tall as Hugh, and she wore a sword at her hip and a knife at her belt.

"So be it," said Wolfhere. He took two coins from his pouch. They were as yellow as the sun and at this moment twice as welcome. He handed them to the marshal. "Let you witness this transaction, Marshal Liudolf, and pay this gold to Prater Hugh, in recompense for the young person here." (

"I witness this transaction," said Liudolf, "and I take these nomias and transfer them into the keeping of Prater Hugh, in recompense for this young person, Liath, daughter of Bernard."

"I won't take it," said Hugh. "I protest this theft. I deny any payment has ever taken place. I tell you now, Wolfhere, that I will bring this matter before King Henry."

"You are welcome to do so," replied Wolfhere. "Nevertheless, the girl comes with me. These are not your men, I believe, to fight this sort of battle, and if any of us are harmed, you yourself would be brought before King Henry to answer for the crime. Whatever benefices you have received, such as the abbacy, would certainly be revoked."

"This is not ended!" said Hugh. And then, in a lower voice, "You are not free of me, Liath."

Liath dared not look at him. She kept her gaze fixed on the fine burnished Eagle's badge that clasped the woman's cloak at her right shoulder: an Eagle, rising on the wind, with an arrow clasped in its beak and a scroll held in one talon.

If she did not look at Hugh then, free of him or not, she was at least for the moment safe from him. If she could ever be safe from him.

"Marshal," said Wolfhere, "I request that you receive this gold and hold it as witness, and witness

as well Prater Hugh's refusal of it."

"I so witness," said Marshal Liudolf.

"I so witness," said the younger Eagles.

For a long drawnout while no one moved, as if the stalemate, having been reached, could not be resolved. Only the song of birds in the trees, and the distant shout of a farmer at plowing, pressing his ox forward, disturbed their silence. The smell of cooking beans wafted out from the cookhouse. The wood of the wagon felt chary under Liath's hand.

"This is not ended," said Hugh finally. He moved and she flinched, but he was walking away, walking to his bay, mounting, giving the signal.

She let go of the wagon just in time to avoid getting a splinter as it jerked forward and, just in time, grabbed Hanna's sack out of the back. Hugh did not even seem to notice. Without another word, without any acknowledgment of what he was leaving behind, he rode south, the wagon and his tiny retinue following.

Liath dropped the bag and slumped to the ground.

"Do you need aid?" asked the hawknosed woman curiously.

Da's four books were gone with Hugh, but their texts remained in the city of memory, together with everything else Da had taught her. And Hanna had the other one. "No," she whispered. "No. I just need to rest a moment." She looked up to meet the woman's steady, measuring stare, then broke away from it to look up at Wolfhere. He studied her calmly.

Why? But she could not say it out loud.

"Before you leave, Marshal Liudolf," said Wolfhere into the silence, "I will write a manumission for her. We do not admit the unfree into the Eagles. I need another witness besides yourself."

"I will witness, sir," said Mistress Birta suddenly, stepping forward. "I am a freewoman, born of a freewoman."

"Ah," said Wolfhere. "You are Mistress Birta, if I recollect rightly."

She flushed with surprise and pleasure. "I am, sir."

"And this, I believe," he added, transferring his keen gaze to Hanna, "is your daughter, Hanna."

"Yes, sir, she is."

"Is it your wish that she might be invested into the king's service as well?"

Mistress Birta flushed so deeply, and looked so entirely discomposd, that Liath forgot her own fears and hopes for an instant to wonder about Mistress Birta's secret dreams. "Sir, you must know that for my daughter to become an Eagle would be the greatest honor for my house."

Wolfhere did not smile. Rather, he nodded gravely, acknowledging the truth of her words. "Let us not keep Marshal Liudolf any longer than need be. We will write and seal the manumission now. Then I have business in Freelas. Since I can see that the girl looks exhausted and is too unwell to travel, I propose that I ride north alone, leaving the girl here for a tenday. If that will suit you, Mistress Birta. Manfred and Hathui will stay as well, in case the frater chooses to attempt something rash. Is that well?"

Birta nodded her head. It was the first time Liath had seen her at a loss for words.

Wolfhere dismounted. Manfred swung down and took the reins of the old man's horse, and the reins of Hathui's horse as well, and led the animals away to the stables.

"Hanna," said Mistress Birta, recovering quickly, as any good innkeeper must, "help him with the



horses." Hanna nodded and hurried after the young man.

Liath tried to stand but could not. In an instant, Hathui had an arm around her. "I'll help her inside," said the young Eagle.

"Upstairs," said Mistress Birta. "In bed, with a bit of dinner in her. She needs to rest."

"Yes, Mistress," said Wolphere genially, "I see I can trust you to take best care of her. Marshal Liudolf, shall we finish our business?"

Liudolf's reply was lost to Liath as she entered the warm confines of the inn common room. She barely made it up the stairs, even with Hathui's support, and when she collapsed onto the bed, she simply laid her head down, shut her eyes, and let herself be overcome with the exhaustion of hope fulfilled.

She was free of Hugh. She still had the book. She was an Eagle. All that she needed now was to get her strength back. She could scarcely believe it was true. She slept.

Mistress Birta brought her a bowl of bean soup and good dark bread. Hunger brought her fully awake and she wolfed down her food. She hadn't realized she was famished. Mistress Birta retreated as Wolphere entered the little attic room. He sat on the edge of the pallet and held out a simple brass ring engraved with the seal of the King's Eagles. He smelled of rain and of damp wool. She took the ring gingerly, and while she held it, not sure what to do, she heard the patter of rain on the roof. Cloudy light slanted through the closed shutters. She had slept most of the day. "This ring represents the seal of our bargain," said

Wolphere mildly, "that you will offer your name and lineage to the Eagles as payment for your service with them."

She was afraid to look at him. "My name is Liath," she said, but her voice sounded false to her own ears. "My father's name was Bernard."

Wolphere sighed heavily, whether disappointed or sad she could not tell. "Liath, you must either trust me or else it is of no use that I have freed you and brought you into the Eagles. I knew your mother. I have been looking for you and your father for eight years now."

Like a rabbit frozen in the sight of a wolf, she stared at the ring. Outside, the rain slacked off, fading to intermittent drips.

"Had I found you sooner," he added sternly, "then perhaps your father would not now be dead." He lifted a hand, and she flinched away from him. "Ai, Lady!" he swore under his breath. "Now listen you to me, young woman. Listen and heed me well. I will not compel you to enter the king's service as an Eagle. You are free, whatever you choose next, and you may go your own way if you so choose."

"Where else can I go?" she asked bitterly, "but back to Hugh? And I'll never go back to him."

"I will not compel you," he repeated. "But neither will I take you into the Eagles unless you trust me with your full name and lineage. Which will it be?" He took the ring out of her hand and weighed it, such a light thing as it was, in his palm. "To ride with the Eagles, you must give your trust wholly to your comrades. Otherwise it is worth nothing. If you do not trust me in this small a thing, then you are too dangerous, to weak a link, for us to trust you in our turn."

"Names are not small things."

"That is true." He bent his head, acknowledging her point. "That is why we ask for them."

"Why did you free me?"

"Because I knew Anne." She started. It was so strange, almost frightening, to hear that name from any

voice except her father's. Wolphere smiled wryly. "I knew you as well, when you were still a

babe."

"I don't remember you!"

"Nevertheless," he replied, as calm as ever, "Anne asked me to watch over you, should anything ever happen to her."

She wanted to trust him, but after Hugh she dared not trust anyone. As he studied her, looking more patient than amused, she studied him in return. Advanced in age he certainly was, but vigorous still and with the natural authority that comes to any man who has lived long years and survived hardship. An old scar traced a line down his neck, missing the throat vein by a finger's breadth. He sat with the steady imperturbability of a man equally used to the councils of kings and the gossip of farmers in a local inn. It would be so easy to just give in to his request, but that was not what he asked of her. What he asked was infinitely harder.

Maybe, just maybe, it was safe to open the first, the lowest, gate in the city of memory. Maybe she could learn to trust him, to trust the other Eagles, as comrades. Her hands shook as she took the ring out of his open palm. "Liathano is my true name," she said, her voice scarcely more than a murmur. "I am the daughter of Anne and Bernard. I know nothing more of my lineage."

So was it done. She was shaking so hard she could barely slip the ring onto her finger, the seal of their bargain. He stood up at once, and though he was not a particularly tall man, he was, without question, imposing. "Welcome, Liath," he said somberly, "into the Eagles. You will find your service hard, but I do not think you will ever regret choosing it. When I return from Freelas, we ride south."

So he left her. "We ride south." This morning, those words had filled her with despair. Now those same words held all the world of possibility in them.

She lay down, but although she was still exhausted, she could not sleep. The straw ticking stuck her in new places every time she shifted on the pallet. The rain had started to pound again, a new shower, and the damp air brought the scent of mold creeping out from the wood. She sneezed.

A scratch came at the door and Hanna peeked in. She, too, wore a ring, symbol of her new status. "I thought you would want to know," she whispered, sitting on the bed next to Liath, "that it's back in the hiding place. You're free, Liath."

Free.

Liath was too tired to reply, so she simply laid her head against Hanna's arm.

Where was Hugh now? Getting farther away with each step, please the Lady. And yet was Wolfhere any better or just another one who wanted to imprison her in a cage of his own making? How had he known her mother? Had he known Anne was a sorcerer? Why had he sought and how had he found Liath over such a long trail, pursued for so many years? Why had Da never spoken of such a man, and why did she herself not remember him, from those old dim memories of the fine cottage and the bright garden?

Yet what was it Da always said? "Wo use regretting that you 're going to get wet, Liath, once you 've closed the door behind you on a rainy day."

The rain, and Hanna's warmth, lulled her to sleep.

LEAVETAKING ALAIN never found Lackling's body, although for days after, when he got a chance and deemed it safe, he went up and searched through the ruins for any sign of newly turned earth.

But he did not truly expect to find anything. The morning after that horrible night, by design he strayed past Lady Sabella's livestock train out beyond the palisade and took up a station where he might observe the shrouded cage and its mysterious occupant. With his oddly keen hearing, which he still had not grown used to, he overheard the keepers of the shrouded cage speaking among themselves.

"Not much meat left on the carcass but, aye, that will satisfy the beast for now, thank the Lady."

He only stopped looking after Lady Sabella's entourage packed up and left, a grand procession winding its way southwest on the road that led toward the lands controlled by the duke of Varingia. That night, Lavastine called all

his people together into the great hall and stood before them. Chatelaine Dhuoda and the clerics waited behind him, but to Alain's eyes they looked as mystified as the rest.

Lavastine looked pale and listless. He stood without moving for a long time, staring into the air as if he saw something there none of the others could see. It was so unlike him, a man made decisive by long habit and a tendency to impatience, that Alain felt a sick sour feeling growing in his stomach feeling of dread. The hounds whined, crouching at their master's feet. Rage and Sorrow, as was their wont, sat panting and watching at Alain's heels; they remained, since the night of the sacrifice, remarkably subdued.

This, too, was marked. Most everyone in Lavas Holding now treated Alain with a skittish deference tinged with disgust, like a man who is afraid to spit on a leprous beggar lest he turn out to be a saint in disguise.

"We will leave," said Lavastine suddenly. "We will arm ourselves with weapons and supplies and leave on St. Isidora's Day. We will celebrate the Feast of St. Sormas at the hall of Lady Aldegund, wife to my cousin Lord Geoffrey. There they will be given a choice: join Sabella's rebellion, or lose their lands."

Everyone spoke at once, a rushing murmur.

"But that's barely twenty days!" exclaimed Cook indignantly. "To outfit all that, and do the spring sowing? There won't be time to do either right."

Others agreed, but Lavastine only stood and stared and eventually all the folk quieted, waiting for him to go on.

"After that," continued Lavastine in that same monotone voice, as if he had heard no objections, "we will ride on and join up with Lady Sabella and her army. We ride against Henry, unlawful king of Wendar and Varre." He lifted a hand imperiously. "So do I speak. Let none question me."

At first Alain could only sit stunned. Cook was right, of course; she usually was. It was a mistake to march out before the spring sowing had been completed. But after a time, like a puppy worrying at his boot, a kind of terrible helpless anger began to gnaw at him. He slipped a hand inside the slit neck of his outer tunic and felt down the leather string until he touched the rose. Its petals brushed his skin, and which was warmer, skin or rose petals, he could not tell.

Lavastine was leading his people to war.

But somehow this didn't seem right.

As soon as he could, Alain excused himself from the hall. He made his way to the chapel, ordered Rage and Sorrow to sit, and there he waited by the light of the seven candles that illuminated the Hearth. As he expected, Agius soon arrived to pray. He knelt awkwardly, because Sorrow's bite still hampered his movement.

"Prater," said Alain softly. "Do you think it is sorcery?"

Agius made an impatient gesture. He knelt on the bare stone, but he did not rest forehead on clasped hands as he usually did. For once he was preoccupied by the events of the world. "The count might well have deemed this the wiser course. I cannot say."

"But what do you think?" Alain demanded. "He never showed Lady Sabella such favor when she

was here. He avoided all her questions. He made no commitments. And we can't just plow half the spring fields and leave the autumnsown wheat and all of that work to" He broke off. He had been about to say, "to Lackling and the others who aren't fit for war." But the words choked in his throat.

Startled by Alain's vehemence, Agius looked up at him. The frater was revealed, by candlelight, as a younger man than he usually appeared. The candle flame softened his harsh features, and the lines that scored his face blended with shadow to form a smoother profile. They were the lines, Alain realized, of a man who is never at ease with himself. He was probably not much older than Bel's eldest daughter, Stancy, who had celebrated twentyfive or so Penitires.

"She killed Lackling," Alain managed at last. "She killed him, and she a holy biscop!" This betrayal was perhaps the worst of all. Only imagine what Brother Gilles, that good gentle soul, would have said had he witnessed such a thing! "And now Lavastine says we will march to war when there's work in the fields to be done, and he even speaks of fighting against his own beloved cousin! It isn't natural!"

Agius sighed. "Come, Alain. Kneel beside me. There is much for you to learn about the ways of the world. Perhaps someday you will be allowed to turn your back on the intrigues of the world, as I have sought to turn mine. What the biscop did" He grimaced as he shifted weight onto his injured leg. Alain crossed hesitantly and knelt beside him. "Be sure that I will report it, if I can. But I may not be believed. She is a holy biscop, ordained by the hand of the skopos herself. Although my word is worth a great deal, there were yet only you and I who witnessed the act. If you were acknowledged, Alain, as Lavastine's bastard, your word would be worth more."

But at this moment, seeing the pale face and remembering the flat voice of Lavastine as he had announced his allegiance to Sabella in the hall, Alain was not sure he wished to be acknowledged as that man's kinsman. Especially if it would bring further notice upon him.

"But nevertheless, Alain, there are many reasons why noble lords and ladies change their allegiances. Many reasons, and few of them good ones. With such games do the great princes while away their days, for they do not turn their hearts and eyes to the Hearth of Our Lady as they ought. They are beguiled by the world and its pleasures. We cannot know that sorcery is the cause of the count's decision.

"But I know it is!" Alain burst out. "I know\

Agius raised an eyebrow. He looked skeptical. "By what means do you know? Are you an adept? Have you received training in the forbidden arts?"

Alain resisted the urge to bring the rose out, to show its bloom, to make Agius smell its fragrance. It was not the season for roses, certainly, but the count had a small garden protected from the winds, open to the sun and often warmed by braziers; roses there bloomed early and late. What if Agius, not believing his tale of the visitation of the Lady of Battles, accused him of stealing it?

Or, worse, what if Agius believed him? What if Agius decided that Alain's destiny was something that he, Agius, must manage?

"No," Alain said finally, humbly, bowing his head. "I know nothing of sorcery except the stories any child hears and the tales told by our deacon."

Agius made a gesture of dismissal, turning the conversation away from this discussion of sorcery. "You must wait and see, Alain. But in any case, these matters no longer touch me. I will remain here at Lavas Holding to continue my preaching."

"You're not coming with us?" At once, guiltily, he recalled Sorrow's bite; had he managed the hounds better, Agius would not be injured.

But Agius made no mention of the wound. "I am a frater, bound by my oath to serve Our Lady.

Though I have stopped at this holding for a while, I do not serve the count, not as you do. As you must."

Sorrow, sitting patiently by the door, whined. Alain was reminded of his duties: Master Rodlin would be waiting for him. He rose.

"But, Brother Agius, what if Count Lavastine orders you to follow in his train?"

Agius smiled thinly. "Lavastine cannot order me, Alain. Nor will he try."

Nor, to Alain's surprise, did he try. They marched out on St. Isidora's Day soon after dawn, twenty mounted soldiers and eighty on foot with a train of twenty wagons. Frater Agius did not march with them. Chatelaine Dhuoda also remained behind to tend to Lavas stronghold.

Alain could not be sure whether he was sick at heart or terribly excited. Everything he knew he now left behind. Though he had not seen Osna town for over a year, still, it did not seem in his heart too far away; it was four days' journey in good weather and was part of familiar lands. Now, familiar lands vanished behind him, setting west. They crossed the Vennu River and marched east through unknown fields and strange hills.

He swung back and forth between these two emotions, dread and excitement, all that first day. But by the third day the intermittent drizzle and the slogging pace of the march dampened his spirits and left him with a persistent cough and a constantly dripping nose. His boots were caked in mud, and by the end of each day his feet and hands were chilled through.

Only during the day, if the sun came out while they were marching, did he feel comfortable. He and the hounds slept under a wagon at night, just outside the tent that was always pitched for the count. This way, at least, he stayed dry. Many of the other men-at-arms weren't so lucky, and they grumbled.

On the fourth day of the march, while he was watering the hounds at a stream, someone threw a stone at him from the bushes that grew in profusion along the stream's edge. The stone hit hard enough to bruise his shoulder. He yelped, and there came a snickering from the dense thicket. Then, of course, the hounds surged out of the stream and, growling and yipping, made for the bushes. By the time Alain restrained them, his tormenters had gone, shrieking and scattering away into the wood. He did not see their faces, only their backs; there were three of them.

After that he was mostly left alone, although now and again a dead rat would turn up in his porridge. But because Agius was not there, he had no one to talk to, not really. Master Rodlin treated him politely but coldly, and for the rest, they either avoided him or were too important to notice him. Count Lavastine spoke to no one, except to issue curt orders. Care of the hounds was left to Alain and though the hounds were good companions

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and increasingly obedient to his commands Alain was pretty much miserable through and through by the time they arrived at the stronghold where Lord Geoffrey and Lady Aldegund made their home.

Lord Geoffrey was surprised to see his kinsman, but he came out from the stronghold with the household clerics and his wife's chatelaine and various of her kin to greet Count Lavastine on the last stretch of road. They walked out on foot, as was customary. Lavastine did not dismount to embrace his cousin.

The bluff Lord Geoffrey looked taken aback. "I beg your pardon," he said, struggling for words as he examined Lavastine with alarm. "My dear Aldegund is in bed with a fever, but as all the children have had the affliction and recovered from it we do not fear for her. There is a healer with her." He hesitated on the word healer, as if he meant to substitute a different word and had thought better of it, then went on. "But the babe born at Lavas Holding is a fine healthy child, almost six months in age now, and has celebrated her first Penitire. There we anointed her with the holy water and gave her the name Lavrentia, as we promised you. What brings you to this holding, cousin? Have you come to celebrate the

Feast of St. Sornas with us? And with such a retinue?"

For no one could overlook Lavastine's entourage. Even Sabella and her great retinue, when Alain had first seen them, had not appeared so obviously battleready and intended for war.

"I have come to get your pledge, your person, and your menatarms, to join with Sabella."

Lord Geoffrey started visibly. To Alain, this was confirmation of his own belief that Lavastine was ensorcelled. Surely Geoffrey knew his cousin's mind on this matter better than any other person might. "To join Lady Sabella?" he stammered.

"So I said," snapped Lavastine.

"But that is treason against King Henry."

"It is treason not to take up Sabella's cause against

Henry. She is the elder child, the named heir. Her mother was queen of Varre in her own right."

"But by right of fertility" protested Geoffrey.

"Sabella has a daughter, born of her womb. By what right does Henry claim the throne? By the right given him by a bastard child born to a creature who cannot even be called a true woman? Is it imagined this creature's oath, before the assembled bishops, is worthy of being called truth? How can we know Henry got the child on her? How can we trust the male line at all? It is only through the female line we can be sure."

Geoffrey appeared staggered by this argument. "But, cousin. Your own line, your own father . . . Lavas has for three generations passed its inheritance through the male line."

"Do you stand with me?" asked Lavastine without apparent emotion. "Or against me?" He raised a hand, calling his troops to order. His captain actually hesitated, he was so surprised by this command.

"I must have time to think!"

"There is no time to think! You must choose!"

Lavastine urged his horse forward and drew his sword. Joy and Fear loped beside him. Geoffrey was too stunned even to shy aside as the count bore down on him, sword aloft. But Geoffrey's clerics and retainers were not so slowwitted. Several threw themselves in front of their lord, so that when Lavastine cut down, it was a man in wool tunic and leggings who took the blow meant for his lord; Geoffrey merely cried out in shock.

It was a cleric in the simple robes of a frater who turned and sprinted for the gate. Perhaps he ran for safety. Perhaps he meant to warn those left inside.

Alain could not know. A crossbowman shot, and the quarrel hit the frater in the back. He went down to his knees, for an instant caught in an attitude of prayer, and then tumbled forward into a puddle. Mud splashed over his robes. The water turned a muddy red.

Lavastine rode on past Geoffrey and the knot of men clustered around him, leaving them to the mercies of his menatarms. He passed the dying frater. His captain spurred his own mount forward, calling to the other mounted soldiers to follow, and they galloped after Lavastine. Ahead, at the palisade gateway someone was trying to get the gate shut.

"Hai! Hai!" shouted Sergeant Fell, running forward along the line of foot soldiers. "Form up and drive forward at a trot!"

What happened next happened so quickly that afterward Alain could never entirely make sense of it. He surged forward with the other menatarms. He could not help but do so. The hounds barked and nipped at the air, scenting battle. Some he restrained, but three more broke away and these tore after

Lavastine.

A struggle had erupted around Lord Geoffrey, though Geoffrey's few retainers could scarcely hope for victory. But they beat about themselves with hands and sticks and their ceremonial spears, even with the lance that held the banner of Lady Aldegund's kin, a white hart running against a background colored the deep blue of the twilight sky.

Lavastine, backed by his mounted soldiers, reached the gates. What resistance they met there was cursory. How could Geoffrey's soldiers have ever imagined their lord's cousin would attack them? But one man had kept his wits about him. One man remained in the lookout tower with crossbow in hand.

Perhaps he meant to shoot Lavastine and his hand wavered. Perhaps he meant exactly what happened. Alain knew of it only because when the crossbow quarrel hit Joy and pierced her heart, the other hounds went wild.

Not even Alain could control them.

Lavastine had vanished into the stronghold. Alain ran. He ran in the wake of the hounds and did not even have to shove his way past Sergeant Fell and through the other men-at-arms; they had scattered when the hounds raged through and began to ravage Lord Geoffrey and his men, the closest targets.

With his spear, Alain beat them back, though in their madness the hounds bit at him. Some of the men he could not save, but he straddled one poor frater with his feet and knocked the hounds away from Lord Geoffrey ten times at least before they growled even at him and then turned and ran toward the stronghold. Their eyes were wild, red-rimmed with the battle madness. Blood and saliva dripped down their muzzles.

What they left behind them was terrible to see, one man with a hand bitten clean off, others with flesh torn to expose bone. One poor lad, the banner bearer, had his throat ripped open. Lord Geoffrey had a number of bites, but he could stand. He swayed; Alain could not tell whether he staggered from the shock of his wounds or from the shock of his cousin's attack.

To be attacked by one's own kinsman was the worst kind of betrayal.

Was this the kind of war the Lady of Battles intended him for?

It could not be. Lavastine had always walked the middle road. Hadn't the count understood that a war between Sabella and Henry would be the worst possible thing that could happen?

At that moment, Alain knew that Lavastine no longer moved and thought under his own free will, whatever Agius might say. Even Frater Agius would have been stunned by this unprovoked attack on Lord Geoffrey, whom everyone knew was Lavastine's most favored kinsman. Lackling's blood and Lackling's life had been stolen in order to give Biscop Antonia the power to steal Lavastine's heart and will.

"I will stay with him," Alain murmured to himself, half embarrassed by his own arrogance in stating such a thing. "Someone must protect him." Even if that someone was a common boy, who was nothing, who had nothing except a rose that never ceased blooming.

Sergeant Fell sent half of his men ahead to the stronghold, but the brief flurry of shouts and cries that had erupted from inside the palisade walls had already faded. With his other men, Fell cleaned up from the skirmish.

He appeared profoundly uncomfortable as he placed Lord Geoffrey in custody; a frater known to have healing skills hurried forward from Lavastine's train to attend to the wounded men.

"Hai, you! Lad!" Sergeant Fell caught sight of Alain. "Go on, then. Go on. You must fetch them hounds and tie them up. Think of the children in there."

Several of the men-at-arms quickly, reflexively, drew the circle at their breasts. For who among them could forget that those very hounds had killed Lavastine's wife and child? The full story Alain had never heard, since no person in Lavas Holding would speak of it.

"Go!" ordered Fell.

"My wife!" gasped Lord Geoffrey. "The baby!"

Had Alain waited ten breaths longer he would have been too late. It was easy to follow the path of the hound pack: Alain counted two dead men and eleven wounded ones strewn in a ragged line across the broad courtyard. Servants cowered by the well, protected by five of Lavastine's soldiers.

Lavastine's horse stood outside the great timber hall that was the lord's and lady's residence. At least half of the mounted soldiers had left their horses there and gone on, into the hall, following their count; several terrified stableboys held the horses. Alain ran inside.

The hounds were swarming up the steps that led to the spacious loft above the long hall where the lady and her kinswomen and children and the servants lived. The battle madness was still in their eyes. Alain sprinted and grabbed the last one in the pack by its thin tail, and yanked it backward. It spun, biting.

"Sorrow! Down!"

Of a miracle, it worked. Sorrow sat. Ahead on the steps, hearing his voice, Rage sat as well. But the others flowed upward like water running uphill: impossible to stop unless one is truly a sorcerer, for only by sorcery can such an unnatural act be realized.

Alain took the steps two at a time. He shoved through the hounds and though they nipped at him, they were

too intent on their prey to worry about one slender youth in their midst. Lavastine walked forward, sword still raised. He appeared oblivious to the hounds and the threat they posed not to him, of course, but to the women and children and handful of men who, step by slow step, cowered back toward the far wall of the great hall.

Only two had the courage to step forward. Alain recognized the young Lady Aldegund at once; she was certainly no older than he was, though clearly she was now a woman, no longer a child. Pale and shaking, she took a staff and advanced toward Lavastine, crying: "What is this, cousin? Why have you come in such warlike guise to a hall which greets you in friendship and love?"

She held her six-month-old infant in her arms, the child who it had been suggested might become heir to the childless Lavastine. One older woman, weeping, stepped out beside her, as if to throw herself before her lady, to save her from Lavastine's sword or the hounds' bloody fangs.

Alain grabbed tails and flanks, but still they slipped out and charged. They meant to kill her. They would kill her, if no one acted, and likely tear the infant child to pieces.

So he laid about him with the butt of his spear, without thought to the consequences. And he cried out sharply as he beat them back.

"Sit! Down! You will obey me, you beasts! Sit!" Terror had actually reached the lady's skirts before Alain hit the hound so hard alongside the head that the animal was stunned. But the rest, finally, sat, though they growled menacingly, eyes fixed on the huddled mass of Lady Aldegund's household.

Lavastine did not sheathe his sword. "You will pledge your loyalty to Lady Sabella's cause, or you will leave," he said.

Aldegund gasped aloud. She looked about to faint, but when her faithful kinswoman touched her on the elbow, she steadied herself. "That is impossible," she said proudly. "My kin traces its allegiance



back to the first King Henry, when Queen Conradina passed over her brother Eberhard in favor of naming Henry, then Duke of Saony, as her heir. Though I married into a Varrish family, I will not betray the faith my kin have held in their hearts for so many generations."

How much it cost her to say this Alain could not imagine. He no longer knew what Lavastine would do. Surely she could not know either and she with a babe in her arms and two young stepchildren to protect. And of course she could not know, not yet, what had happened to her husband.

Lavastine remained unmoved by this brave statement. He said, in that flat voice: "You will give me the children as surety for your good behavior. Then you will leave this place with your retinue and return to your mother's lands."

"These are my mother's lands!" Aldegund protested. "They were given to me upon my marriage! You cannot take them!"

"Can you prevent me? These lands now serve Lady Sabella's cause. I will set a chatelaine over them until such time as you choose the wiser course and support Sabella, or until Sabella herself appoints a new lady to administer them." He gestured, and his men rather hesitantly but without any appearance of moving to contravene his orders came forward, rounding up the children.

Alain had finished tying the hounds together on a long leash. They nipped and snarled at each other, but they no longer resisted him. Only Rage and Sorrow did he trust enough to leave off the leash. They sat by the stairs like sentries, watching.

Aldegund clutched the infant against her breast. "This one I will not give up!" she exclaimed. "I am still nursing her. It is an offense against Our Lady to take children unwillingly from their mothers!"

"Leave her the infant at least, Count Lavastine," Alain

muttered. He could not know whether the count had heard him.

But Lavastine blinked. His pale hard gaze faltered. He batted at his face, as if to brush away a fly. "Just the elder children," he said, sounding uncertain, almost bewildered. But the moment was brief.

Aldegund's mouth trembled but she did not give way to tears. Lord Geoffrey's two children by his first wife were taken away. Lavastine sheathed his sword and glanced at Alain, marking him with some confusion. Then he shook his head and stiffened, losing all expression. He snapped his fingers and the hounds, swarming together because they were tied to the leash, approached him, licking his fingers and fawning at his boots. He took the leash, turned, and with no further speech to anyone left the great hall.

They celebrated the Feast of St. Sormas at the holding, but it was a somber feast. Only Lavastine and his men-at-arms ate at the banquet tables, served grudgingly but without protest by the servants of Geoffrey and Aldegund. Geoffrey was confined to the tower cell and Aldegund and her retinue to the loft upstairs.

In the morning Lavastine allowed the women to leave with only enough food for the five-day's journey east into Wendish lands, where lay the estate of Lady Alberga, young Aldegund's mother. It was a pathetic procession that set out Aldegund, the infant, and her two kinswomen, as well as the wet nurse and only two servingwomen. How could anyone be expected to know she was a lady, with such a paltry retinue? Aldegund was not even allowed to keep her own horses but had to ride on the back of a donkey.

Geoffrey was not well enough to travel; the wounds he had sustained from the hounds were bad, although likely not mortal. He was left in the care of a brother, with orders that he vacate the holding as soon as he could travel.

Lavastine appointed a chatelain from among his own servingmen, a man born of free parents who

had placed himself in the count's service in hopes of gaining something more than the youngest son's share of his parents' farmstead. If Sabella's rebellion turned out to her advantage, this man might well find himself steward of a good holding. If it did not...

But as Alain watched wagons of provisions trundling out of the holding—vegetables and legumes taken from the storerooms, shields, good spearheads and strong wooden shafts, a few swords, old helmets and new, cloth for tunics and tabards, milled grain, leather, and five small coffers filled with the silver and gold that constituted both Geoffrey's movable wealth, brought to the marriage as his groom's gift, and Aldegund's portion of her family's wealth—he saw how Sabella improved her chances of winning the throne by this victory.

They marched south through the borderlands that had once separated Wendar and Varre and which were still lands that had as many hands in one pot as the other. At two holdings they found enthusiastic support, and Lavastine took on twenty-four more men as soldiers, though they marched under their own captains.

But over the next ten days they took over three holdings whose noble lords and ladies professed loyalty to King Henry. Not one of these holdings, after they saw Lavastine's retinue and heard his blunt speech, resisted. All of them kept their lives but lost fully half of their movable goods. Lavastine's supply train grew longer and longer, and the five coffers of silver and gold and gems grew to nine.

Soon they reached lands loyal to the duke of Varingia, and they turned westward, back into Varre, to find and join Sabella's army.

"So were Lady Sabella's followers stripped of their lands and wealth after her rebellion failed eight years ago," said Master Rodlin one night when he came back from tending to the horses. He was obviously deeply troubled; otherwise he rarely spoke to Alain and certainly not to confide in him.

Alain had fed and watered the hounds and tied them under a wagon for the night. There they lay, five of the eight who remained—Fear, Bliss, Ardent, Steadfast, and Good Cheer, their eyes open and unwinking, staring at him and at the snapping fire. Now that Joy was dead, old Terror slept in Lavastine's tent, and Alain let Rage and Sorrow run unleashed beside him because he could now trust them to do as he wished and leave people alone.

Alain wanted to speak. He wanted to say, "Is it any fairer when Henry's supporters are divested of lands or riches that have been held in their family for generations?"

But he did not speak. He dared not. They would think he sympathized with King Henry.

He did not. He knew nothing of Henry except the name, not truly. Nor did he sympathize with Sabella. How could he, knowing what he did of Biscop Antonia's actions and Sabella's willing complicity in them?

He had a great deal of time to think, and think he did. Of course foremost in his heart was God, Our Lady and Lord, and after them his own kin, his father Henri and Aunt Bel and his cousins. But he had left his family far behind, in distance if not in his heart.

It was said often enough in Osna village that Count Lavastine was a godly man, asking fair taxes in exchange for the protection he offered the little port. Because so many merchants lived there, Osna was a target for raiders from all sides, sea and land.

But the protection of the counts of Lavas had served the village well over the years since the emporium there was established in the time of the Emperor Taillefer. No freeholder in Osna village except those who managed their fortunes very badly indeed had ever been forced to indenture themselves in exchange for payment of outrageous rents or taxes. That was the sort of thing the noble lords did in Salia, for they were very greedy there. Not one soul in Osna village had ever had to sell one of their children into slavery in order to meet their debts or taxes; but Salian slaves, children born to free

or onefree parents, were brought to Osna every summer and

king's dragon

sold to families in the lands nearby or shipped onward, to ports farther east.

So that must be his duty. It was the only thing he could sort out from the impossible confusion of his thoughts. He would stay beside Lavastine, as much as he could, as much as he was allowed to. Was that the sign the Lady had meant for him? Was it Her hand that had brought him friendship with Lavastine's hounds, which in its turn allowed him to remain close to the count?

It must be so. Agius thought he was Lavastine's bastard, but why would a noble lord send his bastard off with a freeborn man and not put the child directly into the monastery, if that was his intent?

Biscop Antonia perhaps thought he was the fruit of a Midsummer's Eve seduction, gotten on a human girl by the shade of an elvish prince. But how could a dead creature, elvish or not, get a living woman pregnant?

And the Eika prince had misunderstood his words completely and thought he was King Henry's son!

No. He could just imagine what Aunt Bel would say about such fantasies! "The Lady and Lord act for a reason," she would say. She was a good, practical woman, and to her, as to the deacon of Osna village and the other householders, God worked in practical ways and rewarded those who were faithful, hardworking, and pragmatic. Of course Aunt Bel knew that God worked in the world and that angels might light in modest homes or saints walk abroad to save the weary and forsaken. She would not doubt Alain's rose, or the vision he had seen at the old Dariyan fort.

But she would expect Alain to be made humble by these experiences, not proud.

"Why would these things happen" she would ask, "if there is not a task for you to accomplish, lad?"

It was the only answer that made any sense to him: He was the only one who knew and believed Lavastine rode to war not because he supported Sabella but because he was ensorcelled.

J He did not know what else to do but watch over him. That must be his task.

"WOLFHERE returned from Freelas after fourteen days. He brought bitter news.

Eika raiders had laid waste to the monastery at Sheep's Head and then sailed eastward to join an army of their kind. Already, as rumor told the story, this very army had besieged the great port city of Gent, gateway to the rich heartland of Wendar and the birthplace of King Henry's greatgrandfather, Duke and later King Henry, the first of that name. In Gent's cathedral the first Henry's son, known as the elder Arnulf, had married his sevenyearold daughter Adelheid to Louis, the fiveyearold child king of Varre. The elder Arnulf had, of course, made himself their regent. For good measure, he had betrothed Louis' infant sister Berengaria to his heir, Henry's father, the younger Arnulf. That King Louis of Varre had died young, and without leaving an heir, was simply the Lady's and Lord's Grace in granting fortune to Arnulf's house. That Berengaria had died in childbed some years later only sealed the issue. To the Wendish kings, Gent itself symbolized the passage of Varre's noble house and its right to rule Varre into Wendish hands.

"We must ride east," said Wolfhere, "to Gent, to see for ourselves the truth of these rumors. King Henry dares not ride north unless he must, not now. There are too many whispers about the doings of his sister, Lady Sabella. Some even say she is speaking rebellion outright. What a bitter thing it is, that she should cause so much trouble now, when we need our armies so badly here in the north."

He sat in the inn common room, elbows folded on the king's dragon / table, a mug of ale at his left hand. He spoke mostly to Manfred and Hathui, but now and again his eye lit on Liath and Hanna,

who sat silent but attentive at the end of the table. It was evening, and many of the locals had come in for a drink, mostly, Hanna knew, to watch the Eagles and listen for scraps of news from the great world beyond. Custom had been up for the last ten days because of their guests, who had gone from being a curiosity to an item of gratifying interest eight days ago when Hathui broke the nose of an importunate, and very drunk, young farmer.

Hanna admired Hathui, a bigboned, strong woman who had, by her own account, grown up in horse country far to the east in the march country of Eastfall, beyond which lay the wild lands and the barbaric Quman peoples, the winged horsemenso Hathui called them. They lived in darkness, outside the Light of the Circle of Unity, and Hathui's own brother had walked as a missionary into those dark lands and never returned.

"So I dedicated my life to St. Perpetua, Lady of Battles," Hathui had said, "and swore to fight them instead."

Until the day she took the ring investing her into the king's service as an Eagle, Hanna had not realized how much she wanted to see the world beyond Heart's Rest before she settled down and, like her mother before her, became chatelaine of her own inn. She had not allowed herself to want it, knowing it was out of her reach; what point was there in reaching for something you could never have? That was why inn work appealed to her, because was it not said that "the innkeeper sees the world through the guests that come in through her door?"

And yet, she could have gone with Ivar to Quedlinhame, where she would have seen the king's court. And yet, she might have gone with Liath to Firseburg. But it was better not to think about Firseburg, because that would make her think of Hugh.

"As for you two young ones," Wolfhere added, wrenching Hanna's attention back to the matter at hand, "you will have to learn the ways of the Eagles as we ride. I had hoped to send you" He broke off, took a deep draught of ale, and sighed, setting the mug down so hard that foam spilled over the side. "That will all have to come later. Are you strong enough, Liath? If not, we can leave you here and"

"No! I'm strong enough!"

Hanna placed a hand on Liath's arm, to calm her. Liath was stronger, truly, but she was as skittish as a calf and she wore away at herself with her constant fear. And still, even seeing Liath this way, Hanna dreamed of Hugh some nights. Most nights, if truth be told. But there was no other man like him, or none she had ever seen. Better to let go of his memory, to let it fade. Better not to worry at herself dreaming of something she could never have, and most likely was better off not having. Out on the road there would surely be sights to drive him from her mind.

"I secured horses for you in Freelas." Wolfhere blinked guilelessly at Manfred and Hathui. "Do you judge them able to ride well enough?"

"What?" asked Hathui with a sharp smile. "The horses? I haven't seen the horses."

Wolfhere bared his teeth. "Two horses, spirited, and with stamina. No, my child, indulge me in this. The ride to Gent will be hard, and I do not know what we will find there or how quickly we may be forced to leave. They say a king leads this Eika army, and that he is an enchanter. They say he cannot be killed. If these two will hold us back, then we must leave them in Freelas or at our posting in Steleshame."

Here, now, was something to worry over. Hanna was not nobleborn, to have been trained young to the saddle. That she had any familiarity with horses at all was only because her parents ran an inn. She held her breath. Liath stared at the fire, obviously distracted.

"Hanna is a serviceable rider but no better than that," said Manfred in his blunt way, "but I judge her will to be strong enough that I trust her to keep up, whatever the hardships."

Wolfhere raised an eyebrow. "Praise from you, Manfred, is praise hard won. And Liath?"

Liath stirred, hearing her name.

"Liath," said Hathui with contempt, "can ride perfectly well, though she claims not to have ridden a horse for over three years. She's still weak. But I believe she will recover as we ride. If she has not by Steleshame, we can leave her there."

"Then it is settled," said Wolfhere, and Hanna stopped holding her breath. "Come, my children, and see your new horses. They were the best I could find on such short notice. We will leave as soon as you have saddled them."

Leave! Hanna felt her feet rooted to the floor, growing into the wood, which would never let her leave her beloved home. To leave sounded so wonderful as words. "This soon?" she managed, her voice not quite cracking. "I thought, not until morning

Wolfhere's gaze, on her, was softly reproving. A kind man, she saw, until you went against his wishes. "We are Eagles, Hanna. There must be no delay in the king's business. Do you understand?"

She stood obediently. She had dreamed, and she had been given. She refused to let fear get the better of her and especially not after watching Liath be consumed and controlled by her own fear. "Of course, sir."

He chuckled. "And today is St. Eusebe's Day, is it not? The sixth day of Avril. What more auspicious day to begin your apprenticeship as King's Eagles?" He rose. "Hathui, see to provisions. Come, Liath, it is time to move. You and Hanna will come with me to the stables."

Hanna thought his tone softened a little as he looked at Liath. Poor Liath. Hanna knew very well that Liath did not intend to look quite so exotically lovely and quite so pathetically lost. She touched her friend's shoulder, and Liath started and jumped to her feet.

banging her thighs against the table, as she always did when startled out of a distraction. But this time she cursed under her breath and rubbed her legs, and everyone, even Liath, laughed.

Out in the stables, Hanna examined the rangy whitestockinged gelding Wolfhere had brought for her before venturing forward with a windfall apple as a greeting. Soon enough she was rubbing its flanks and then saddling it.

Liath's bay mare was more restive, and the other horses were all saddled by the time Liath even considered introducing the bridle. Hathui arrived with the provisions, levied from the villagers as part of their tithe to the king. With the speed of long practice, she loaded the pack mule. Then she and Manfred led the mule and the other horses outside.

"Pack what you wish to bring now," said Wolfhere. "But remember there is little an Eagle can afford to possess, besides the trust of her comrades and her own strength."

"I have nothing but the clothes I'm wearing," said Liath.

It was such an outright lie that Hanna looked at her in surprise, but Liath was looking away, at the wall, not at anything or anyone. If the others noticed, they gave no sign. But they did not know Liath as Hanna did.

"I'll go in and get my sack," said Hanna. "I hope you will grant me leave to say goodbye to my family."

"Of course," said Wolfhere.

There Liath stood, still staring at nothing.

Hanna swallowed, and went on. "My mother would be well pleased if you took formal leave of her as well, sir."

"Ah," said Wolfhere, although the soft exclamation betrayed no obvious emotion. He had seen

the book, of course they all had but none of the Eagles had made any mention of it. Did he suspect it was important and that Liath was hiding it from him? She could not tell. "Take your horse out to Hathui, then. I will go to your mother. Liath must finish saddling, of course. She can meet us outside."

Hanna let him go out first, as was polite. Liath mouthed the words, "Thank you." Hanna led her gelding outside.

Outside, the midday sunlight lay softly cool over the distant hills and the closer cropped green of the village common. Hanna's entire family had gathered in the stable yard. Amazingly, Karl brought her sack forward a change of clothes, a pot, a spoon, and a handful of other items and begged to be allowed to tie it onto her saddlebags. His eyes shone as he gazed up at her, and it occurred to her all at once that he admired her, the bright new Eagle, just as she admired Hathui. It almost made her cry.

"You look like neither fish nor fowl," he said impertinently, spoiling the effect.

But she smiled. She had no fine, practical clothes, no long tunic cut for riding, like the other Eagles wore. She, like Liath, wore a mixture of her old clothes and castoffs from her married brother Thancmar, cut down and patched well enough, and likely to last some time. Birta was never one to stint on cloth, or weaving, or leggings, since she reckoned that if you paid half again as much for cloth that lasted twice as long, then it was a bargain. Hanna felt strange, dressed half as a woman and half as a man, but Liath had herself commented that this was what she had always worn, traveling with her Da.

Birta came up to her and hugged her hard. "Now mind you, Hanna," she said into her ear, "that you look after yourself, and after Liath, too, for she's more fragile than I thought and will need some time to heal."

"I will. I promise it." Then she hugged her father, who was speechless as always, and Karl again. "And a devil will plague you," she added, holding onto his tunic, "if you don't obey Mam and Pap in all things. Do you understand me?"

He gulped out a yes and scurried away to a safe distance. Hanna wiped a tear from her eye with the back of a hand.

Liath came out of the stables, leading her bay mare. If anything new and bulky rested in her saddlebags, anything rectangular, like a book, Hanna could not tell; she must have rearranged and reweighted the bags in order to hide the book. She did not look at Hanna but made her goodbyes to Birta and Hansal and Karl. The locals had come out to gawk, but they remained respectfully back.

At last they mounted and followed Wolfhere down the south road. Of the five of them, only Hanna looked back as they passed around the bend and out of sight of the inn and the common. When the trees veiled the last house of the village and they walked their horses along the quiet road edged by broken fields and the steady march of forest, Liath spoke abruptly.

"I will never come here again."

Hanna shuddered and was suddenly afraid.

"Do you so vow?" asked Wolfhere with a hint of a smile.

Liath started as if she had only now realized she had spoken aloud. "No," she said. "No. I wouldn't do anything so rash. It's just I feel it's true, somehow."

"Anne was given to feelings," said Wolfhere blandly. "Of that sort."

Anne. Liath's mother. Who had been a sorcerer. Who had been killed because of it. There is much more here than meets the eye. But Hanna was determined to do whatever needed to be done to protect Liath.

"Come now," said Wolfhere. "We've a long road before us."

So they rode, with little talk and great singlemindedness. Their pace was unslackingnot hard, for the sake of the horses, but constant. By nightfall, Heart's Rest lay far behind them.

## PART TWO

ON THE KING'S PROGRESS ROSIVITA of Korvei, the least of the servants of Our Lady and Our Lord, to her most imperial majesty, Queen Mathilda, sends the most humble protestations of her complete devotion and heartfelt greetings in the Name of Our Lady, Whose renowned wisdom and singular glory illumines you, our gracious queen, mother to our most glorious King Henry, second of that name.

The message from her father lay on top of the next page, covering the words she had written yesterday before being interrupted first by a messenger from the north and then by the news of the argument that had erupted among the king's counselors. She slipped the parchment into the pocket sewn in her outer tunic. Her fingers slipped down the smooth silk of her gold vestment, worn by all the king's clerics. It was very fine to the touch. Like all worldly pleasures, she reminded herself wryly. The gold vestment, symbol of the king's

service, covered the coarse cloth she wore underneath, the black robe that marked her as coming, originally, from Our Lady's Convent of Korvei.

She returned her attention to the book.

At your request I undertake to write of the deeds of the great princes and in addition I have taken pains to write a few words concerning the origin and condition of the Wendish people over whom King Henry, first of that name, was the first to reign, so that in reading of these deeds you may delight your mind, relieve your cares, and relax in pleasant leisure.

Here, yesterday afternoon, she had broken off. It was a relief to return to the quiet of the scriptorium after the uproar last night, which had lasted until King Henry retired from the feast. She consulted her wax tablet, with its worked and reworked sentences, crossed out and scratched over, then set her quill to ink and began writing again.

/ confess, however, that I could not encompass all their deeds, but I am writing them briefly and not at length, so that their narration may be clear and not tedious to my readers. Therefore may Your Highness read this little book, being mindful of us and of the piety and devotion with which it was written.

Here ends the Preface to the First Book of the Deeds of the Great Princes.

Rosvita shifted on her stool. Her back was sore already. When she had first come to the King's Chapel as a twentyyearold fresh from Korvei Convent, she had been able to sit up long into nights broken only by the call to prayer and work by candlelight at the copying and recopying of old texts and, indeed, at texts she had herself composed despite the lack of humility such composition betrayed in one so young. But after twenty years of labor, first in the service of King Arnulf the Younger and now for King Henry, her body was no longer as supple and strong.

But she smiled as she readied a new page. It was as her old Mother Abbess always said: "The pains of age remind us of the wisdom we have won through our trials." Since Mother Otta of Korvei had then been a vigorous old woman past her seventieth year who had never known a day's sickness in her life and who was yet the gentlest, most amiable, and wisest person Rosvita had ever met, the words resonated with a charming and most appropriate humility. Mother Otta yet lived, incredibly approaching

her ninetieth year, a sign of Our Lady and Lord's Grace, although she was now frail and almost blind.

For ten years Rosvita had labored, taking notes, speaking with ancient courtiers and biscoeps, studying old records in the archives of the monasteries and convents through which the King's Court traveled on its endless progress. Now she had begun to write. She hoped she would complete this great project in such good time that Mother Otta might have it read to her before she died.

Here begins the First Book of the Deeds of the Great Princes.

After twenty years of labor in the scriptorium, Rosvita knew well how difficult it would be to make changes once she had begun, the time it would take to recopy an entire page or, worse, a whole chapter. But she had decided at last on the order of chapters, and it was truly time to plan no longer but simply compose.

. First of all I will set down a few things regarding the origin and condition of the Wendish people, following in this matter only hearsay, since the truth of those times is too thickly obscured in antiquity.

Some hold that the Wendish people lived first in the northlands, from which they were driven south by the incursions of those whom we name the Eika, the dragonmen. Others believe that the Wendish came originally from Arethousa, and that they were the remnant of the great army led by Alexandras, the Son of Thunder, which after its final defeat by the armies of the Dariyan Empress Arkuaknia was scattered throughout the world. This opinion I heard in my youth from an old scholar. For the rest, it is commonly accepted that the Wendish were an ancient and noble people, known to the Hessi peoples and written of in their most ancient books, and referred to in Polyxene's History of the Dariya.

We are certain, however, that the Wendish people first came to these lands in ships, and that they landed at the town known as Hathelenga, which lies west of the city of Gent. The natives who lived in those lands at that time, said to be Ostravians, took up arms against them. The Wendish fought valiantly and took the shorelands for their own.

There was a sudden eruption of noise at the entrance to the scriptorium. Clerics and monks, lost in their copying, now started up or turned their heads as old Cleric Monica appeared at the head of a loud and, for the moment, unruly band. But it was not an invasion of the Wendish tribes. It was merely the inconvenient arrival of the youngest members of the king's schola. i Rosvita sighed and set down her pen. She then berated herself for her exasperation and rose to help Cleric Monica herd her charges onto benches at those of the desks which were free. As she sat back down at her own bench, eyeing fresh parchment with the longing of one who knows she will not be able to work any further this hour, a young man slid onto the bench beside her.

"I beg your pardon," he whispered.

It was young Berthold Villam. He smiled winningly at her; he was one of those rare young men who are utterly charming without being the least aware of it. Indeed, of the children and young persons who attended the king's progress, he was her favorite. He had turned fifteen last winter and had, as was customary, been given a retinue of his own. Thus, he was too old for the schoolroom, but he genuinely loved learning or, at least, was desperately curious.

He reached out diffidently and touched the parchment, ink still wet on it, with a forefinger. "This is your HistoryT Rosvita nodded. Other children, she noted, were sharing benches with the clerics who had been at work in the scriptorium. In the last half year the number of children on the king's progress had doubled. This by itself was a sign there was trouble in the kingdom.

Her gaze settled on the girl who sat, silent and with a mulish expression, on the bench nearest Cleric Monica. This latest arrival was the eldest child of Conrad the Black, Duke of Wayland; though she was only eight years old, she knew she was being held hostage for her father's good behavior.



"Now, children," said Cleric Monica. She was quite bent with arthritis but a formidable presence nevertheless. She glared the children into silence and raised a hand. "Attend. There are enough tablets that you must only share with one another person. Some of you boys need only listen."

Berthold fidgeted, fingers toying with Rosvita's stylus. Like many of the boys and young men who were fated to marry and then spend most of their life riding to war or protecting their wives' lands, he had not been taught how to write, although he could read. He noticed what he was doing and, embarrassed, ducked his chin.

"You may use it," she said. He flashed her a smile and laboriously impressed a "B" into the tablet.

"Attend," said Cleric Monica. "To read the works of the ancients you must know Dariyan, for that is the language in which they wrote and spoke in the old Dariyan Empire. Though there is much knowledge we may gain from those works left to us after the fall of that great empire, there is a greater knowledge yet: that the old Empire, the union of elves and men, was fated to fall because its emperors and empresses would not receive into their hearts the truth of the Unities and the blessing of the Light. That is why, when the great Taillefer restored the empire in the year , he called it the Holy Dariyan Empire."

"But no one faults the piety of Taillefer," muttered Berthold, trying to write an "E" that had straight lines, "and yet his empire collapsed and no king or queen has been crowned Holy Dariyan Emperor in Darre since Taillefer. How is that explained?"

"A good question," murmured Rosvita, aware suddenly that Cleric Monica's hard gaze had turned their way. It was too bad, really, that the boy must marry. He would have made a fine historian.

Cleric Monica coughed meaningfully and went on with her teaching. Berthold sighed and essayed an "R." Rosvita found her gaze wandering over the assembled children.

The great magnates of the realm were each expected to send a child to attend the king's progress. Some, usually younger siblings, would be educated as clerics and in time join the King's Chapel and Greater Schola. Other children might only pass through for a year or two as part of their education, to get a taste of life in the everchanging, always moving court as it traveled through the lands ruled over by King Henry.

And a few, whose parents were of suspect loyalty, might stay for a much longer time. Although no one ever spoke the word, these children were hostages, although welltreated ones.

That was not true of Berthold, of course. His father, the margrave Helmut Villam, was King Henry's favored counselor and most trusted companion.

Of the great princes of the realm, the four margraves were usually the most loyal to the king. Of all the princes, the margraves most needed the king's support. As administrators of the marchlands, those lands that bordered the easternmost territories controlled by the Wendish peoples and their allies, they were always at the forefront when the barbarian eastern tribes raided civilized lands for loot and slaves.

From their lands missionaries set out into the wild lands to convert the heathens. Into their lands came the most intrepid settlers, willing to risk the assaults of the heathen tribes in return for good lands to farm clear of obligation to any lord except the king or prince.

For three years the borderlands had been quiet, and because of this the margraves or their heirs were able to spend part of every year in attendance on the king. This spring, besides Villam, the king's progress boasted the presence of the illustrious Judith, margrave of Olsatia and Austra.

She had left her marchlands in the capable hands of her eldest daughter and brought her two youngest children to court. One of them, a sallow girl of about fourteen years of age, sat with a slackjawed expression, staring at Cleric Monica as if the elderly woman had just sprouted horns and wings.

Werinhar, margrave of Westfall, had sent his youngest brother to court. This young man was destined for the church, and like a good cleric in training he was at this moment diligently copying down Monica's speech.

As usual it was the duke, the most powerful prince of the realm who posed the greatest problem. The three dukes whose lands lay in the old kingdom of Wendar remained loyal: Saony, Fesse, and Avaria. All of them had either children or young siblings here now; Rosvita had seen many young people from those families come and go in the last twenty years.

But the dukedoms of Varingia, Wayland, and Arconia lay in the old kingdom of Varre, and the loyalty of their dukes was less constant and more suspect. So Duke Conrad of Wayland's daughter sat at the front of the class and laboriously copied letters under the strict attention of Cleric Monica. So, half a year ago, Tallia, daughter of Sabella and Berengar, had come of age and left the king's progress to return to Arconia. No one had thought anything of it then; it was a natural progression.

But two months ago Rodulf, Duke of Varingia, had recalled his youngest son Erchanger from Henry's side. And now they heard daily the rumors that Sabella meant to rebel again against Henry's authority.

Berthold snorted under his breath, amused. "Ekkehard's fallen asleep again."

"Ai, Lady," murmured Rosvita. She did not at first have the courage to look. When she did, she saw that the only son of King Henry and Queen Sophia was, indeed, asleep, head basketed on an arm, tunic pulled askew to reveal the gold torque around his neck. He was snoring slightly. Ekkehard was a good boy but prone to staying up late at banquets listening to the poets and musicians rather than studying his letters, as he ought.

Monica, blessedly, had not yet noticed the boy was asleep. Most of her attention was reserved for Duke Conrad's daughter, a slender girl who had inherited a full share of her grandmother's blood: She was as black as a Jinna merchant. On her, the gold torque reserved for the direct descendants of kings shone beautifully against black skin.

Berthold, following the line of Rosvita's gaze, muttered slyly: "She'll be very handsome when she grows up."

"So was it said of her grandmother, a great beauty despite that her complexion isn't what we are used to. But the blessed Daisan himself lived in the lands now conquered and ruled by the Jinna, so who is to say he was not himself as dark-complexioned as she?"

'For a person is not accused because she is tall or short of stature, because he is white or black, because she has large or small eyes, or because he has some physical defect,' " quoted Berthold.

"Hush," said Rosvita mildly, covering her lips to hide her smile.

"Lord Berthold," said Cleric Monica. "I trust you will attend to my words or absent yourself so the rest may work in peace?"

He bowed his head obediently. Monica lectured for a while more, the words so familiar they sounded a drone in Rosvita's ears! She stretched and rubbed her back, trying to be surreptitious about it, but Berthold, noticing, grinned at her before he finished writing his name.

Abruptly Rosvita became aware of voices from the garden outside, heard through the opened shutters of the window that let light wash over her desk. The others, children and clerics alike, concentrating on their work or

on Monica's lesson, seemed oblivious. Rosvita could not be.

Blessed Lady! The king's daughters were quarreling again.

"I merely said I think you are unwise to allow such a man so much influence over your councils."

"You're jealous he chose my company over yours!"

"Of course that isn't true. I am only concerned for your reputation. Everyone knows he is a charlatan."

"He's nothing of the kind! They're all envious of his wisdom."

"I thought they were all annoyed by his arrogance and his terrible manners."

Rosvita sighed, laid down her quill, and wiped her fingers quickly on a rag, then rose from her stool, rubbing her aching back. Berthold looked up, startled; she signed to him to stay where he was. Cleric Monica merely nodded curtly at her, acknowledging her leavetaking; no doubt Monica knew and approved what she was about.

Rosvita hastened down the aisle of the scriptorium, cut through the sacristy startling the aged brother in charge who had fallen asleep by the vestments and came out into the rose garden in time to see the two sisters in their full glory by the fountain.

They were a strange admixture of their parents. Sapientia was, like her mother, small and dark and neat, but she had in all other ways the look of her father about her, including the unfortunate tendency to flush a bright red when she lost her temper.

Theophanu had the greater height and the finer figure, robust and wellformed, but also her mother's unnatural coolness of temperament; Eastern wiles, the courtiers called it, and had never entirely trusted Queen Sophia, although they had wept as grievously as any when she was laid to rest. No doubt, thought Rosvita uncharitably, because they knew the accepted order of King Henry's court, molded over the sixteen years of Henry and Sophia's rule, would be thrown all into chaos when he married a new queen.

"You're furious because Father wishes to name me as margrave of Eastfall and give me those lands to administer. You want them yourself!" Sapientia's complexion by now rivaled that of the bright pink floribundas twining up the stone wall that bounded the private garden, although the color did not become her as well as it did the roses.

In eighteen years Rosvita had never yet seen Theophanu lose her temper, not even as a small child. Unnatural girl! She had many more effective ways of making her elder sister angry. "I trust that Father will add to my j estates when he deems it time. I have never found it worthwhile to beg for duties before he is willing to settle them on me."

Rosvita hurried forward. Poor Sapientia, in the face of this insult that so pointedly must remind her of yesterday's tempest, was about to succumb to one of her famous rages.

"Your Gracious Highnesses," said Rosvita just as Sapientia drew breath, "I have found you at last!" The bright statement had its intended effect: Sapientia, [ caught in the moment before speaking, lost hold of her thought.

Theophanu arched one eyebrow provocatively. "You bring news?" she asked politely, although Rosvita knew perfectly well the princess was not fooled by this transparent ploy.

Rosvita recalled the message from her father and blessed Our Lady for the inspiration. "It is only a small family matter, nothing important, but with great humility I venture to speak of it before you, Your Highnesses."

"You must confide in us at once." said Sapientia, coming forward to take Rosvita's hands in hers. "We will do all we can."

Theophanu simply lifted a hand in assent.

"I have a brother, named Ivar, who has just been sent into orders. He is to become a monk at the monastery ruled over by Mother Scholastica, at Quedlinhame. I had I hoped you might show some favor to me and my family by asking your Aunt Scholastica to watch over him in his early days there. He is very young, perhaps two or three years younger than you, Your Highness." She nodded at Theophanu. "And I believe from the tone of my father's letter that it was not Ivar's intention to enter the church."

"He is a younger son," said Sapientia. "What else might he have wanted?"

"I cannot know his mind. I have only met him twice. He was born at least ten years after I left home to become a novice at Korvei. He is the child of my father's second wife, who is a daughter of the countess of Hesbaye."

"Ah, yes, she had three daughters by her third husband." Sapientia released Rosvita's hands and paced over to the dry fountain. Four stone unicorns, rearing back on their hind legs, regarded her calmly, their stippled surface streaked with old water trails from the spray that had coursed out from their manes and horns. Damaged by winter storms, the fountain had not yet been repaired. Father Bardo had apologized most profusely when the king and his court had arrived at Hersford Monastery to find the garden's charming centerpiece not working.

It was a warm day for spring, going on hot. Without a cooling spray to refresh the courtyard, Rosvita felt the heat radiating up from the mosaic tile that surrounded the broken fountain.

"Her daughter, who is now the wife of Helmut Villain, spoke in my favor last night," Sapientia continued, then laughed. "It will be interesting to see who buries more spouses before they themselves die, Helmut Villam or the countess of Hesbaye. But Villam is on his fifth wife now, is he not? The countess' fourth husband is still alive. She will have to send him away to war as she did with all the others."

"That was a tactless thing to say," said Theophanu. "It is no wonder Father won't send you on your progress."

Sapientia whirled away from her contemplation of the fountain, took two strides to her sister, and slapped her.

"Lady preserve me," Rosvita muttered, hastening forward.

Theophanu neither smiled in triumph nor cried out in pain; her face was as flat as polished wood. "Their loss should not be fodder for your amusement."

"Now, now," said Rosvita, hurriedly placing herself between the two young women. "Let us not argue and strike out when we feel the heat of our passions on us. 'It is well to speak first,' as the blessed Daisan said when his disciples asked him what to do when false accusations of sorcery were laid against them."

" 'For the truth shall make us free,' " finished Theophanu.

Sapientia burst into noisy sobs of thwarted anger and fled the garden. From a halfhidden bench a maidservant jumped up and followed her inside.

"I am not sure it is wise to bait your sister in this fashion."

"If she would only think before she speaks " Theophanu broke off, turned, and took several steps forward to greet the man who emerged at that moment into the courtyard. Like the two young women, he wore a gold torque, braids of solid gold twisted into a threequarters circle, around his neck. Theophanu knelt. "Father."

He laid a hand on her dark hair.

Rosvita knelt as well. "Your Majesty."

"You must rise, my most valued cleric," said the king. "I have an errand for you, which I am assured only you can accomplish."

Rosvita rose and faced King Henry. As a young man he had been, like his elder daughter, rash at times; now, as always these days, he wore a grave expression that contrasted well with the bright lights of his silvering hair. "I am your servant, Your Majesty." She could not quite restrain a smile. "Your praise honors me."

"No more than it should, my friend. You will indulge me, I hope, by carrying out this errand at once."

gli "Of course."

"Father Bardo tells me there is a hermit, a holy monk, who lives in a cell in the hills above the monastery. He is old and was once, I am told, a scholar."

Despite herself, Rosvita felt her heart beat faster. An old man, and a scholar as well! Always there were new things to be discovered from the testimony of such people.

"He is known to be well versed in the laws of the Emperor Taillefer, to have knowledge of capitularies of those times that have been lost to us. But he is reluctant to break his contemplation, so says Father Bardo."

"Then ought we to ask him to break his contemplation, Your Majesty?"

"There are some things I need to know about inheritance." His tone, barely, betrayed agitation. Theophanu looked up sharply at her father, but said nothing. "As for you, Rosvita, Father Bardo says this holy monk has heard of your work compiling a history of the Wendish people for my blessed mother and might be willing to speak with you. Perhaps his curiosity outweighs his serenity." He said it with the secular lord's fine disregard for the pursuits of those sworn to the church.

Or his meditations on the Lady's and Lord's Holy Works had not yet quieted his passion for learning. But Rosvita did not voice this thought out loud.

"You are thinking the same thing," said the king, with a smile.

"I am, indeed."

"Then you must speak your mind freely in front of me, or how else will I benefit from your wise counsel?"

Now, Rosvita did smile. She had always liked Henry, as much as one allowed oneself to like the heir and later king; in recent years, however, as he had drawn her more tightly into his orbit, she had also come to respect him. "Then I must ask you if there is some certain thing you are hoping to discover from such an interview."

The king lifted his hand from Theophanu's head and glanced around the courtyard. Behind a hedge of cypress, Rosvita saw two courtiers waiting in discreet attendance: One, the elder man, was Helmut Villam, the king's constant companion and most trusted adviser; the other was hidden by the leaves.

"Where is your sister?" Henry said to his daughter. "I was told the two of you walked here together."

"She has gone inside."

"If you will wait, then, with Villam, I would have you come riding with me."

"I will attend you, Father." She rose and retreated obediently to stand with the others. Rosvita caught a glimpse of Berthold Villam. Evidently he had slipped out after her to find out what all the fuss was about. The other person in attendance, now visible, was the formidable Judith, margrave of Olsatia and Austra. Behind the margrave hovered several servants.

The spring sun, glaringly hot in the enclosed garden of stone and hedge and roses, suddenly vanished, cloaked by a cloud.

"You know what is whispered," said Henry. "What none of them will say aloud."

The dukes and margraves, counts and bishops and clerics and courtiers who populated the king's progress spoke freely and volubly of the great concerns of the day: Would Henry's sister Sabella break into open revolt against him? Was this to be a summer of raids along the northern coast, or would the Eika land, as was rumored, with an army? What did the skopos in Darre mean to do about the whispers of heresy taking root inside the church?

But on one subject they were silent, or spoke in circles that surrounded but never touched the heart of the issue. In the terrible arguments that had raged yesterday afternoon and in the tense feast that had followed, where whispers and glances continued the dispute, one name had not been spoken so that it could be heard.

"Sanglant," she said, pronouncing it in the Salian way: sahnglawnt.

"And what is it they say about Sanglant?"

"They speak not of Sanglant but of you. They say your sentiment has overreached your reason. They say it is time to send Sapientia on her progress so she may be judged worthy or unworthy of being named as your heir. And if not Sapientia, then Theophanu."

"Theophanu is not as well liked."

"Not in general, no."

"Yet she is the more capable, Rosvita."

"It is not my place to judge such matters."

"Then whose is it?" He sounded impatient now.

"It is yours, Your Majesty. Such is the burden laid on the sovereign king by Our Lady and Lord."

He arched one eyebrow; for an instant she saw how much Theophanu resembled him, in wit and intelligence if not feature. The church bell began to toll, calling the monks to the service of Sext. She smelled charcoal in the air and the stench of meat being seared over hot coals in preparation for roasting and the night's feast. After a long pause, Henry spoke again. "What do they say about Sanglant?"

Better to tell him the truth he already knew but chose, out of sentiment, to ignore. "That he is a bastard, Your Majesty. That he is not a true man. Whatever other fine qualities he certainly has, and which are fully acknowledged, can never compensate for his birth and his mother's blood." She hesitated, then went on. "Nor ought they to."

He looked annoyed but he did not respond at once. The bell fell into silence; she heard the whisper of monks' robes as the last stragglers made their way to the chapel within the cloister where they would pray.

"I will attend service," he said. "But you will visit the hermit nevertheless, Rosvita. And you will discover whether this holy monk knows of precedent for a child born to a concubine or other unofficial union being named as heir."

His voice dropped even as he said the fateful words. Only she heard them. But surely every man and woman who followed along on the king's progress knew what was in his mind: that his eldest child,

the bastard son of an Aoi woman who had emerged from unknown lands to enchant the young Henry on his heir's progress, was and always had been his favorite, though he had three legitimate children by Queen Sophia who were each possessed of a sound mind and body.

She caught a glimpse in his face then of an ancient longing, a passion never extinguished, never fulfilled. But quickly it was covered by the mask of stone worn by the king.

"I will do as you ask, Your Majesty," she said, and bowed her head to the inevitable. Although surely nothing good could come of this obsession.

## THE DRAGONS

TEN days after leaving Heart's Rest, Liath sat on the old stone wall and enjoyed the spring sun. She was tired, but not overly so; free of Hugh, she had recovered her strength quickly.

This moment of respite she used to study the layout of the holding of Steleshame: the dye vats sheltered under a leanto; the henhouse; two cauldrons spitting with boiling water attended by three women who stirred wool cloth as it shrank; felters at work in the sun; two of the blacksmith's boys linking tiny iron rings into mail; furs stretched and strung to cure.

Here, within the large courtyard protected by a palisade of wood, lay the remains of an older structure. The Eagles had thrown up an outpost and used the old dressed stone to build a tower for defense. The householder and her relatives lived in a timber longhouse, and the stables were also built of wood. Only the skeleton of the old fort was left, straight lines squared to the equinoxes and the solstices, the map of the sun. She could trace these bones with her eyes, and read, here and there, inscriptions in old Dariyan cut into the stone by the soldiers and craftsman who had inhabited this place long ago.

Lucian loves the redhaired woman.

Estephanos owes Julia eight quiniones.

Let it be known that this outpost has been erected by the order of Arkikai Tangashuan, under the auspices of the Most Exalted Empress Thaissania, she of the mask.

Liath knelt to wipe dirt from this last inscription, graven into a block of stone half sunk in the ground next to the watering trough. For how many years had it lain here, trampled by horses and cattle, scoured by wind and dust, drenched by rain? She coughed, sucking in a mouthful of dust blown up by a gust of wind. Her fingers, scraping, reached beaten earth; the inscription extended farther yet, buried in the ground.

"'She of the mask,'" said Wolfhere, behind her. "The heathen empress before whom the blessed Daisan stood without fear and proclaimed the Holy Word and the saving Mercy of the Lady and Lord of Unities."

Surprised, Liath bolted up unsteadily. Wolfhere smiled, a baring of teeth.

"Do not deny you can read it, child. Both your father and mother were church educated, and when you were but six years of age you could read old Dariyan texts with the skill of a scholar bred in the convent."

"Surely not," she blurted out, embarrassed.

His smile now seemed less forced. "Not with the skill of an adult perhaps, but astonishing in one so young. Come, now. There is an armory here, and we must find you weapons that are suitable. Mistress Gisela's niece is sewing borders on new cloaks for you and Hanna."

Hanna was already at the tower, trying the weight of swords. She handled the weapons awkwardly. They had traveled for ten days and during that time Hathui and Manfred had tested Liath and Hanna in swordcraft and found them sorely wanting.

"Eagles are not soldiers," Hathui was saying to Hanna as Liath and Wolfhere paused at the heavy ironribbed door that led into the round chamber at the base of the tower. "But you must know how to defend yourself against bandits and the king's enemies. Ai! What do you know how to do, woman?"

"I can milk a cow, make butter and cheese," puffed Hanna, "feed twenty travelers a good meal, chop wood, build a fire, salt and smoke meat, ret and spin flax

Hathui laughed, lowering her sword. She was not winded. "Enough! Enough!" The two women had been sparring, circling while Manfred used a staff to fend off the stray children and dogs and chickens which infested the yard. "The Lady honors those who are chatelaine to a hearth, for is She not Herself Chatelaine to us all? But you're hamfisted with the sword, Hanna. Manfred, give her a spear." He obliged, and Hanna had only time to look longingly toward Liath as if to say "/ wish you were here and I there at the door" before she handed him the sword and took up the spear.

"This is like a staff." Hanna settled her hands into a comfortable grip on the haft. She tried a few whacks at the stout post sunk in the ground in the middle of the yard. To Liath's surprise, Hanna grinned suddenly. "Thanemar and I have crossed staves a few times. When we were younger, we sparred with staves to pass the time while we were out with the sheep."

Hathui did not look impressed. "When you've learned to handle a spear on horseback, you'll be able to boast. But an Eagle unhorsed in bad company is most likely a dead Eagle. What the sheep admired will do you little good here."

Hanna only laughed. "I have ridden hard for ten days and not given up, although the Lady alone knows the blisters I have, and where I have them! I can learn this, too, by Our Lord."

"And you'll still have to learn swordcraft, even so," continued Hathui as if Hanna hadn't spoken. The hawknosed woman still looked dour, but there was almost a smile on her face.

"Come inside," said Wolfhere.

Liath ducked under the lintel, built low as an added means of protection, and immediately sneezed. She wiped watering eyes and blinked as Wolfhere lit a brand and searched back into the far shadows of the chamber. Everything was neatly stored away here: sacks of onions and carrots; baskets of beans and peas and apples; jars of oil; wooden barrels of chops packed in lard. Something had gone rancid. Beyond the foodstores of the householder lay five chests closed with hasps of iron. One was inlaid with brass lions. This one Wolfhere opened. The hinges were well oiled, opening without a squeak.

Liath picked her way across to him, once stepping on something that squashed under her boot and sent up the sickly sweet scent of rotting fruit. A fly buzzed in her ear.

"Hathui notes you are adept at knifefighting, which skill I suppose you picked up from your father Bernard as you traveled. I believe there is an old sword here, still serviceable. It was recovered from the fort."

"Which fort?" she asked, then knew what he meant: This fort, the old Dariyan fort built by order of Arkikai Tangashuan seven hundred years ago, reckoning by the calendars she knew. Now of course it was known as Steleshame, a small estate under the authority of the freeholder Gisela that was also an official posting stop for the King's Eagles and thus under the king's protection rather than that of the local count.

Wolfhere lifted out a bundle wrapped in cloth and slowly unwrapped it. "It's shorter and blunter than the swords we are used to, but perhaps you will find it a good tool to use as you become accustomed to swordcraft. Hathui mentioned you wield a butcher's knife with great skill."



As he pulled the last layer of oilcloth off, she looked down into the chest and caught her breath. On yellowed linen lay a bowcase, in it rested an unstrung bow. The case was made of red leather. Worked into the leather was a portrait of a griffin, wings outspread. The creature held in its beak the head of a deer, but the tines of this deer's antlers were transformed into the heads of crested eagles, as if, being devoured, the deer was in the act of transforming into the predator that had killed it. "May I?" she asked.

"What is it you see?" Wolfhere asked, but she had already reached in and drawn out the bowcase. "Ah," he said. "Barbarian work. Look at the shape of the bow."

The unstrung bow curved the wrong way. But Liath knew this kind of bow well enough. She turned the leather case over. Its decoration adorned one side of the bowcase, but there were ten symbols pressed in a circle into the leather, like runes. "Are these letters?" she asked. Wolfhere shrugged. "This is like the bow my father had. He said it came from the east. Da always said this kind of bow had the greatest range and the odd property of being effective from horseback. He taught me to use it, because when we were traveling" She broke off and looked down at Wolfhere, who still knelt on the dirt floor, a short sword laid on oilcloth at his knees.

"You were traveling?" he asked quietly. "You and Bernard journeyed for a long time, Liath, and never stayed in any one place for too long."

"Until Heart's Rest," she said bitterly. Until she had begged him to stay just one more season, and then another, until what Da rightly feared had happened: His enemies caught up with them. Why not tell Wolfhere the truth? He had not been there when Da was killed. She was in his power now, in any case, if he wished her ill. "We were running. Always running." "What from?"

His calmness only made her terrible anger at losing Da, at all the years of fear and hiding that had come to

nothing in the end stand stark in contrast. "Maybe from you."

Wolfhere considered her words for a while, then shrugged his shoulders and rose, lifting the short sword in both hands. "It was said of Bernard that he roved to far and exotic places as a young frater. He was sent out into the dark lands to bring the Holy Word to those who live in night, but I know little of those journeys." "Da was a frater?" Startled, she gaped at him. "You did not know this, child?" She shook her head.

"Where do you think he was educated? Do you not know his kin?"

Again, a mute no. She had wondered if Wolfhere knew her father's history, but she dared not ask in case he asked questions of her in his turn and she had not expected him to volunteer any information.

"Not a strong lineage but known to be of a family that came east in the time of Taillefer's empire, when the emperor set out to bring Wendar under his authority. That Taillefer failed is not to his discredit, for the Wendish tribes in those days were lawless and had not yet come into the Light of God. Bernard's people built estates in what were then wild lands even as King Henry sends freewomen and men into the lands beyond the River Eldar so he can extend the kingdom eastward, into "I have kin living?" She had been alone for so long, first, in faint memories, in the villa with her mother and father and then on the long road with Da, that she could not imagine having kinsmen and women to whom she was bound by ties of blood and obligation.

"Most of that lineage went into the church, so they did not produce many children. In the succession crisis of the elder Arnulf they supported, alas, a claimant against Arnulf and thus lost the royal favor and a not insubstantial portion of their lands. Bernard has a cousin yet living, though the estates she

administers are sadly diminished from what they were under their common grandmother. She has a son who rides with the King's Dragons, whom I imagine we shall soon see. Another son is a monk at St. Remigius Cloister. There was also a daughter, who surely is married by now."

"Where is this estate? How do you know all this?" And the question she could not ask: Why did Da never tell me any of this?

"Near Bodfeld. It has long been my business to know of your background, Liath." The way he said the words, sternly, almost mercilessly, made her shiver and pull a step back from him. "But I was your mother's sworn comrade in other pursuits, and thus I am bound to her in ways you do not yet understand."

"What ways?" she asked, not wanting to ask but unable not to ask. There was so much she wanted to know about her parents.

"Your mother was one of those who are called magi. And so, in a meager fashion, am I."

"Then " She barely managed to get the words out through her choked throat. You are deaf to magic, Liath, Da always said. But she had burned the Rose into wood, without bearing flame in her hand. "Then why are you in the Eagles?"

"A good question. I was sworn into the Eagles at much the same age you are now, child. Once given the the same with those men and few women sworn into the service of the Dragons, where it is said they are more likely to die than retire from that service. So it is said with the king's guard of foot soldiers, the Lions, although it is also said of them that an old Lion is likely to be found at rest in his fields while his wife administers the work."

"Then how did you come to know my mother and father?"

"Our paths crossed. What do you know of magic, Liath?"

"Nnnothing." But her tongue skipped betrayingly over the word.

"You must trust me, child."

"How can I trust you, or anyone?" Suddenly it poured out. She tightened her grip on the bowcase, felt the smooth wood of the bow pressing against her hip. "Da and I ran all those years, for nothing. I don't know who killed him. It might have been you, or people working for you. It might have been someone else, someone to whom you are opposed. But I can't know! Da only taught me a scholar's knowledge. He taught me little enough of the world. I didn't even know he had a cousin living, a home we might have fled to" She broke off, seeing Wolphere's expression, his wry smile, his small shake of the head.

"When Bernard left the church, he was disowned by his kin. He left for a shameful reason, for the love of a womanyour mother, Anne."

She flushed with the heat of her own shame. "Many in the church claim to devote themselves only to Our Lady and Lord and yet do not hold to their vows." She had to look away into the shadows. She began to tremble all over, and her hands went cold. Hugh.

"But they rarely leave the church. We all are dependent on the Grace and Mercy of Our Lady and Lord for forgiveness from our sins. A lapse may be forgiven, if one does penance. But Bernard turned his back on the church. As I understand it, he became involved with the Heresy of the Knife, and then he met Anne. To his kin, who count many holy women and men among their ancestors, he may as well have said he denied the teachings of the blessed Daisan and the Circle of Unity altogether."

"That isn't truer "It is often whispered of the mathematici, those who observe the heavens and chart their movements and their influence on the plane of this earth, that they worship not Our Lady and Lord but the daimones of the air whose knowledge is greater than ours and whose vision is keener, but

who are as ancient as creation, lower than the angels, yet too proud to bow before Our Lady and Lord or to take their place within the Chamber of Light."

"But it isn't true of Da! That he believed any such thing. He was a good man. He prayed, as any other man might."

"I did not say it was true. I only stated what other people often believe of those who are adept in the ancient knowledge of magic. You would do well to remember that, Liath."

"So Da always said," she murmured. "That people believed what they wanted to, whether it was truth or not." She blinked back tears, wiped her nose with the back of a hand. "But I am deaf to magic, Master Wolfhere. So it does not matter what I know."

"Does it not?" he asked softly.

"Are you not finished yet in there?" demanded Hathui from the door, peering in and turning her head to look toward the burning brand which Wolfhere had braced in an iron stand. "Poor Hanna is done for and needs to rest her bruises. Can you bring Liath out for me?"

Wolfhere rose, holding the short sword, and Liath followed him outside. She leaned the bowcase against the stone wall and took the sword, testing its balance. It was heavy, but not so heavy that she could not train herself to hold its weight.

"A good weapon," said Hathui, coming over to examine the sword. "Forged for killing, not to be pretty for some noble lord who has others to do his fighting for him."

"You are not of noble birth, Hathui?" Hanna asked from where she leaned against the wall of the tower. She looked tired but was clearly unwilling to sit down.

Hathui snorted. "Did you think I was? My mother is a freeholder, beholden to no lord. She and her sister and brother traveled east many years ago. That was when the younger Arnulf first offered land to those willing to cross the Eldar and build estates in heathen lands. My aunt is dead now. She was killed by Quman raiders. But

my mother and uncle still work those fields. They have gotten more land under cultivation than any of the other freeholders in our valley. What is this?" Distracted, she rubbed at the blade where it was bound into the hilt. The sheen of her sweat on the iron blade made letters stand out for a moment.

"This good sword is the friend of Lucian, son of Livia," read Liath before she knew she meant to. Had this sword belonged to the same Lucian who had cut into stone his love for a redhaired woman? Then she realized the others were looking at her, surprised, all but Wolfhere. The three children who had been watching crept closer, staring at the strange sight of an exotic-looking young woman not in a deacon's gown who could read and read such ancient words. Liath thought at once of Wolfhere's words: "I only stated what other people often believe."

"I did not know you were church educated," said Manfred, so startled by this revelation that he actually spoke.

Hathui coughed abruptly and moved to chase the children farther back. "Church education won't save your life when the heathen attack you." She beckoned to Liath to step out into the stable yard, which Mistress Gisela kept almost as well swept as Mistress Birta kept her inn yard. "Bear in mind, girl," Hathui added, perhaps sympathetically, "that a cherished weapon is the best kind. Now stand against me. I'll run trials against you."

Hathui was quicker, stronger, taller, and had by far the better reach with her broadsword, but after a few passes she announced herself satisfied that Liath would in time become proficient enough with the short sword to defend herself. Liath was breathing hard, sweating, and had a terrible bruise on her rump from a blow delivered by the flat of Hathui's blade.

"Manfred will cut some wooden staves to the length of the weapons you've chosen," added Hathui as Liath and Hanna exchanged grimaces, "and every day when we stop to rest the horses, we will practice with those."

Liath limped back to the wall, nudging chickens out of her way with her feet, handed the sword to Hanna, and drew the bow out of the bowcase. Hand on the grip, she turned the bow slowly, examining it, then pulled it close. She could discern three layers, a wood core with two strips of horn glued to the belly and sinew layered along the back. The back had been painted crimson; many fine lines and cracks disturbed the sheen of paint. The tips of the bow wore bronze caps, molded into the shape of griffins' heads. These beaks, a thin gash, held either end of the bow string. The bow looked sound.

Nestled in the bowcase she found a silk bowstring. She licked her fingers, then pulled the string through them to smooth down any frayed ends. Finally she braced the bow between right knee and left thigh and, with a grunt, strung it.

She tested the draw by sighting toward the palisade gate. And saw suddenly, on the inside, that the innermost layer of horn was carved all along its length with tiny salamanders twined together like interlinking rings, their eyes flecked with blue paint. Woven into them were ancient letters. She read them falling like the flow of water down the belly of the bow:

/ am called Seeker of Hearts.

Hathui had gone over to the water trough to sluice water down her hair and face. Dripping, she returned and motioned Hanna to go do the same, but stopped to examine the bow as Liath lowered it.

"That's a Quman bowcase," said Hathui, not admiringly. "I recognize its type. We took enough of them off dead Quman soldiers. Then we'd scrape them free of the taint of their heathen hands, all that ugly decoration. The bow must be of their make as well. Their bows were shorter than ours and curved backwards. But they were deadly all the same. And their arrows poisoned, like as not. Savages!" She spit on the ground.

Certainly they resembled old Dariyan letters, but these letters were altered in subtle ways from the letters carved into stone in the old fort or scratched into the hilt of her new sword, from the letters written in old crumbling scrolls she had seen in the scriptoria of monasteries where she and Da had taken shelter as they traveled.

Seeker of Hearts. The words came to Liath's lips, but she could not speak them out loud. No one else seemed to have noticed the strange delicate carvings. The back of the bow was unmarked except for the paint; only on the inner curve, facing the archer, did the bow speak. So did Liath also keep silence. For as Da always said: "Words spoken rashly can be used as weapons against you," and also, many times, "Keep silence, Liath! To speak out loud your secrets is like to a merchant opening a chest of jewels to every passerby on the road and thereby announcing his wealth to bandits."

Like The Book of Secrets. She did not glance toward the stables, where their riding gear was stowed. Surely Wolfhere suspected she carried the book with her; he had seen Hanna with it. He had never mentioned it, never asked any questions about it, and to Liath, this in itself was suspicious.

"Where did it come from?" she asked, indicating the bow.

"I haven't seen this bow before," said Wolfhere, "but it has been five years since I've ridden through Steleshame."

"I was here two years ago," said Hathui. "I remember nothing like. Manfred?"

He shook his head and extended a hand to take the bow. Liath hesitated an instant, then forced herself to give it to him. He turned it this way and that, examining it, took an arrow from his own quiver, and sent a shot at the palisade. The dull thunk of the arrow burying itself in a log sent the chickens scattering and set the dogs to barking and the children to shrieking.

He grunted, looking satisfied, and gave the bow back to Liath. He said nothing about the carvings.

Mistress Gisela emerged from the longhouse. Her court the womenfolk of her holding trailed after her. Liath had seen men and boys and other women at work in the village and fields surrounding Steleshame when they had ridden in that morning. Gisela was a stout woman with the bold gleam of authority in her blue eyes. She was holding a spoon still wet with broth. The smell made Liath's mouth water. Behind her, half grown girls dropped spindles down, then pulled them up again, spinning thread from flax.

"I hope, Master Wolfhere," said Gisela sternly, "that you do not intend to have sport within these walls. Sword practice I do not frown on, but archery belongs outside. My chickens and these children are very valuable to me."

"I beg your pardon, Mistress," said Wolfhere. He gestured toward the bow and case. "Do you recall when this came to Steleshame?"

She frowned. "I haven't seen it before, but you'd best ask the blacksmith. He knows more of which weapons come in and which go out."

That Steleshame had its own blacksmith was a mark of the prestige granted it by the king's protection. But the blacksmith, a short, burly man stained almost as dark as Liath by years of working in fire and ash, did not recognize the bow or the case, nor did he recall when or how the weapon had come to Steleshame. Indeed, no one did, and Gisela soon chased the children back to their chores and the women back to their weaving and spinning.

She presided over the midday meal of roasted chickens, leeks, bread, cheese, honeyed mead, and apples. When the meal was finished and all had toasted St. Bonfilia, whose day this was, Gisela allowed her niece, a handsome young woman with pale blonde hair, to bring forward the two new cloaks.

"Spun last winter," she said, "of Andallan wool from the Pyrani Mountains. The wool from that region is particularly strong and warm. My cousin's husband brought me four bags of it from Medemelacha."

"Medemelacha is a long way from here," said Wolfhere, "He travels by ship every other year," explained Gisela, not without pride. "We have a prosperous holding, enough to feed the king should his progress ever ride this way!"

"Be careful what you wish for," muttered Hanna. "I can only imagine what it must take to feed all the people who travel with the king."

"It has been six years since the king visited Gent," said Wolfhere calmly, not seeming to scorn Mistress Gisela's boast. "And with the current troubles we have heard of, perhaps you will get your wish."

She nodded briskly. "The Dragons rode through not twelve days ago, as I told you. But they rode in great haste, and I could do no more than give them provisions while the blacksmith checked over their armor and gear. Then they were on their way."

As Gisela spoke, Liath noticed to her surprise that the niece blushed a bright red and lifted the bundled cloaks up to conceal her face.

Mistress Gisela clucked, shaking her head. "Ai, yes, I hope the Dragons can drive the Eika away. Gent is only three days' ride from here, if the rains haven't been bad. It is out through Gent that my cousin's husband travels, down the Vesper River and out by the northern sea west along the coast of Wendar and then west and south along the coast of Varre and farther south yet to Salia, to the emporia there. If the Eika continue to raid, or if they invade, as some say they have this spring, then we—" She

threw up her hands in distress, but Liath suspected that Mistress Gisela relished having an audience to appreciate her family's importance and farranging connections. "How will we trade by sea if the river is in the hands of savages?"

"How indeed. Your hospitality had been most gracious, Mistress." Wolfhere now rose, and Gisela rose with him. "But we must ride."

At this command, the others rose as well, moving away from the table.

"Come forward, child," said Gisela curtly. The niece, hesitant and still blushing, presented the cloaks to Wolfhere. He took them, turned, and handed one to Hanna and one to Liath.

"This is very fine work!" said Hanna, taken quite by surprise.

"I thank you," said Gisela. "You will certainly hear as you travel that Steleshame is renowned for its weaving. I only keep in the weaving room those of the women who are in good health and particularly adept at the craft. The others I sell or put out into the fields with the men. And any of my relatives' daughters who show skill in needlework are fostered here with me until they marry."

Liath merely smiled, stroking the thick gray cloak. It was bordered with a scarlet trim, a length of cloth as deep a red as blood, which had been embroidered with gold eagles from top to bottom. She edged past Wolfhere to stand beside the niece.

"Is this your needlework?" she asked. The pretty girl nodded, flushing again. "It is very fine. I will always think of you when I wear it."

The niece smiled tentatively, then spoke in a voice so muted Liath could barely hear her: "You will see the Dragons?"

"I suppose we will."

"Perhaps you could ask" She broke off, looked mortified, then finished in a murmur. "No. He won't be thinking of me."

"I beg your pardon?"

But the others had already moved outside, and Liath had to follow them. Boys from the stable had saddled new horses. Hathui was already mounted, looking impatient to be gone.

"I can ride well enough," Hanna was saying. "But I worry that Liath isn't strong enough yet." She glanced toward the door, saw that Liath had emerged. "You know it's true!" she added snappishly.

"I'm strong enough." Liath did not want to stay on at

Steleshame while the others rode to Gent. She wanted to see the Dragons, to see the soldiers whom Ivar had dreamed of fighting withnot that he ever would now. She wanted to meet Da's cousin's son. A kinsman.

And anyway, she couldn't leave Hanna or Wolfhere. They were all that protected her from Hugh. If she stayed in one place, vulnerable, Hugh would catch up with her. He would know.

"I think Liath is strong enough," said Wolfhere mildly, "though she has recovered even more quickly than I expected. Now." He crossed to them and, with a sign, showed them that he expected them to stand still. With a bronze clasp he closed the new cloak about Hanna's shoulder, then did the same for Liath. His hands were firm and decisive.

"This cloak marks you as riding under the protection of the Eagles," he said, then gestured to them that they should mount and be ready to ride.

"The Eagles also carry the King's seal as a badge," said Hanna, who like her mother always

pointed out these essential details.

"You have not yet earned the right to carry this badge." He touched a hand to the brass badge he wore pinned to his tunic, at his throat. "You must learn the precepts which govern the conduct of an Eagle. And you must swear to abide by them." He paused, glancing toward Hathui and Manfred. Both of them carried the seal, stamped into circular badges. But though they were younger and obviously newer to the service of the Eagles than Wolfhere, the badges they wore did not look newly made, not like Hanna and Liath's new cloaks.

From out in the fields, Liath heard singing. The gate stood open, and now two boys drove two squealing and grunting young pigs in toward the small hut by the far corner of the compound, where they would be slaughtered for the night's feast. Hathui, unable to wait any longer, urged her horse forward, heading out the gate.

"And lastly," Wolfhere said, "no man or woman is given the Eagle's badge until she has seen a comrade die. Death is ever at hand. We do not truly become Eagles until we accept and understand that we are willing to pay that price for our service and our king."

Days after leaving Steleshame, Liath rode with Wolfhere and the small party of Eagles down into the bottomlands to the west of Gent pushing against a tide of refugees. They came on carts, on foot, leading donkeys and cows or carrying crates that confined chickens and geese. They hauled children and chests and sacks of withered turnips and jars cushioned by baskets of rye and barley. The old road was littered with their castoff baggage, those who had managed to leave their homes with any of their possessions and not merely their lives. The damp ground was churned to mud by their passage. Where the forest retreated from the road, trails beaten down through grass appeared as the refugees made new paths in their haste to flee.

Wolfhere spotted a lord astride a horse, dressed in a good linen tunic and attended by two wagons, five servants, and ten fine cows. He left the others and drew the lord aside. Their conversation was brief, and the lord and his party left at once, continuing west. When Wolfhere returned, he looked graver than ever.

"Are these the townsfolk of Gent?" Liath asked, staring. There were not hordes of people, but the flow was steady: She had never seen so many people on the move before. Always, she and Da, the occasional merchant who plied his wares between one town and the next, and the fraters, clerics, and messengers about their business for church and king were the only travelers on the roads.

Thinking of fraters she thought of Hugh, shut her eyes

against the thought of him. Felt sick, for an instant, and stopped herself from looking behind to see if he was dogging their trail. Somehow, somewhere, he knew where she was; she could feel it.

"Nay, child. These are the farming folk from the estates and villages surrounding the city. Gent has walls." Wolfhere's voice steadied her.

"Then why haven't these people fled inside the city?"

Wolfhere shook his head. "That I can't say. But if they have not, then I fear it bodes ill for those inside Gent."

On they rode, and people walking west called out to them:

"Do you bring word from the King?"

"What of Count Hildegard? Has she come yet? They say she has gathered her kinsmen together and rides to save the city."

"When will the Eika leave? When will it be safe to return to my farm?"

"Is King Henry coming himself with an army?" This from an old woman, her skirts spattered with fresh mud.

"Are the Dragons not here?" Wolfhere called back.

"They are so few, and the Eika so many."

"How many?" he asked, but she dragged her cart onward and her six children ran behind, faces pinched with fear.

After midday there was no one except stragglers. They came finally upon a deacon, walking like any common woman, her white robe and tabard flecked with mud and grit. Her servants led two mules, one laden with the massive silver Circle which had once adorned the Hearth, the other with a hastily folded altar cloth embroidered with gold thread and with the chalice and holy books, all saved from the church she had abandoned.

"Go no farther, honored ones," she said to Wolfhere, signaling her servants to halt. "Turn back while you are still safe. Tell the king that Gent is besieged."

"Why have you not fled into Gent?" Wolfhere asked.

"They are laying waste to the countryside all around."

She was, Liath thought, impossibly calm in the face of such disaster. "They are everywhere, good messenger. Gent is surrounded. I minister to the lands and estates west of Gent, so I was able to flee once I saw all my parishioners safely gone. East of the city and the river I cannot say, except that smoke has risen for twenty days, as if many fires are burning."

Hathui inhaled deeply, scenting. "Fresh fires and old," she said. "And dust, as of a great host moving." She swung her head to look west, then back to view the eastern horizon. "You see," she said to Liath and Hanna, "the sky and clouds have a different color. Mark this well, and learn." She inhaled again. "And another smell, like air too long shut within stone walls. Strange."

She made a gesture toward Manfred. The young man rode forward, past the deacon and her servants, and took up a station some fifty strides ahead on a rise, surveying farther toward the east. They could not yet see the cathedral tower above the trees.

Liath could only smell the heavy scent of rain coming from the north, off the distant sea. There, clouds lowered grayblack over the land, though patches of blue still showed through to the south.

"The storm comes from the sea," said the deacon, brushing mud off the sleeve of her robe and then sighing, as if she had just that moment realized it was a pointless endeavor. "I must go, good man. I carry with me a fingerbone of St. Perpetua. Such a holy relic must not fall into the hands of savages."

"Go, then," said Wolfhere.

"And you, with my blessing." The deacon granted each one of them the sign of blessing before she trudged on, her nervous servants glad to be moving again.

Wolfhere's frown was, if possible, deeper than before. They had not ridden more than two hundred strides farther on when Manfred's horse, in the lead, shied suddenly and tried to bolt back. Both Wolfhere and Hathui drew their swords the next instant, while Manfred fought his gelding. The other horses caught the scent and began to sidestep, ears flicking back. Liath braced herself on her stirrups and looped her reins loosely around the pommel. She pulled her bow from the bowcase and nocked an arrow.

The road looped past a knoll of trees which formed part of the eastern horizon, fields half grown with rye lying below within the broad curve of a stream that flowed toward the east and the Vesper River.

"That's where they'll be," said Hathui, nodding toward the knoll.



Too calmly, Liath thought.

"Ai, Lady, I'm terrified," whispered Hanna, pressing her horse up beside Liath. She had loosed her spear from its sling and now rested it against the top of her right boot.

"Out into the fields," said Wolfhere. "In the open, we can outrun them."

They turned left and started out across the fields. Green rye grass bent under the hooves of their horses and sprang up behind. Liath kept looking over her shoulder toward the knoll, one hand on her reins, one gripping bow and arrow. A misting rain began to filter down, wetting her hair, but she dared not pull her hood up for fear she would not be able to see as well. At once, as the wind shifted, she caught the scent that had spooked the horses.

It had a dry taste to it, what one might taste in a heat made dry by dust and wind. It smelled like stones heated until they cracked or the musk of a cave inhabited by dragons.

"Hai!" shouted Hathui.

There! Out of the trees came three irongray dogs the biggest, ugliest dogs Liath had ever seen. Five Eika loped after them. The Eika held spears and suddenly as with one thought they threw their weapons. Most skidded harmlessly over the rye, but one spear stuck, quivering, in the ground at the feet of Hanna's horse; the animal bolted back, rearing. Hanna fell from the saddle and hit the ground hard.

Hathui was off her horse in an instant.

"Liath!" shouted Wolfhere. "Ride for the city!"

From out here, with the knoll no longer blocking their view, Liath could now see the distant tower of Gent's cathedral, gray stone rising toward gray clouds and beyond them, eastward, ribbons of darker smoke.

Hanna scrambled to her feet, then cried out, holding her knee. Manfred had already galloped past Hathui, sword held high, heading to cut off the Eika. The creatures had halved the distance between them already. The dogs broke forward, muzzles to the wind.

/ can't go.

Liath knew it in that instant, knew that she could not leave until Hanna was safe. Without Hanna .

..

"Without Hanna I might as well be dead," she said aloud. Hanna was the only person she could really trust. "My only protector," she said, and lifted her bow and nocked the arrow and drew.

Sighted on one of the dogs. Staring so, she saw it clearly. Saliva dripped from its jaws and from its long, dangling tongue. It was truly monstrous, with great fangs, a hollow belly, and lean, long flanks.

She shot.

The dog tumbled, yipping with terrible shrieking cries. Its two companions crashed into it and to her horror began to tear into its flesh.

This altercation, slowing the Eika, gave her time to nock and draw again. She caught the Eika who ran out in front in her sight down the length of the arrow, had an instant to register the icewhite glare of its braided hair. And shot.

The Eika dropped like a stone, her arrow buried in its bronze chest. Was it armor, or skin? She stared, horrified, and could not act. Her hands groped blindly toward the quiver for another arrow. A terrible wailing rose as the Eika paused to sniff at their dead comrade, but first one, then the second and last the third leaped up again, charging for Manfred. The fourth Eika laid into the dogs and beat them back from the stilltwitching corpse.

Another dozen Eika and perhaps four more dogs emerged from the knoll of the trees. Their keening, their highpitched barking, hurt her ears, though she could not tell which sound came from which creature. They darted down the hill toward the five Eagles.

"Liath!" Wolfhere pulled up beside her. "Go!" He made a gesture with one hand, something meaningless that she did not understand. For an instant she felt the merest tugging at her heart: I should go. I am meant to ride to Gent. Then shrugged it off, found that her hands had grasped an arrow. She nocked it and drew.

This Eika, too, had that startling white hair, bleached like bone. His torso wore a garish pattern of painted colors, blue, yellow, and white, and beneath the paint she caught the suggestion of copper, as if his skin was sheeted by a thin coating of metal. She shot.

The Eika went down, arrow sunk in its chest.

The other three had reached Manfred, who thrust and slashed with his spear. Hathui shoved Hanna up onto her horse and grasped the reins of her own. Thrown spears rained in on them, and Hathui staggered back, her left thigh torn open. Wolfhere pressed forward to aid Manfred. Hanna extended her hand to Hathui, but Hathui gripped her saddle's pommel and threw herself up over the back of her own mount.

Liath nocked an arrow and drew. There! An ax slanted toward Manfred's back. She loosed the arrow.

An Eika staggered back and fell, ax dropping out of its limp hand. Only two were left except for the dozen racing down on them from the hill, and the murderous dogs. A dog leaped in and nipped at the hindquarters of Manfred's horse; the gelding lashed out, kicking hard. Manfred grabbed at his saddle's pommel, almost losing his grip on his spear.

It was all too quick to register anything except her own fear and their utterly inhuman faces, the long lope, faster than any human man might run, the hands bristling with white claws like sharpened bone, and their strange horrible skin more like scaled metal than flesh.

Too quick to register anything except that there were too many Eika and not enough Eagles. She nocked and drew and shot, but her hands were shaking so badly the arrow went wild, skidding over the ground twenty paces from the skirmish flurrying around Manfred. There was no time; in twenty more breaths the rest would be on him.

A horn.

It rang clear and steady. As if to herald its sounding, the drizzle let up and the sun broke through the clouds. Liath heard horses.

There! Breaking around the knoll from the east came six riders in mail and heavy iron helmets trimmed with brass, their bright gold tabards marked with a menacing black dragon, black cloaks thrown back over their shoulders. The two Eika harassing Manfred scuttled back and retreated toward their comrades. From the knoll came a shrill, loud whistle. Liath winced and almost dropped her bow. One of the dogs broke away toward the hill. The other hesitated, then rushed the horsemen, who cut it down almost casually.

The Dragons cantered up and pulled in beside Wolfhere, who had ridden ahead to meet them. Liath came up behind him, Hathui and Hanna behind her, Manfred still away in the field, watchful.

"Eagles!" cried the lead rider. He did not remove his helmet; Liath could just make out blue eyes, blond beard, and a grim expression behind the nasal and cheek guards of the helmet. "That whistle will be a signal for reinforcements. We'll escort you into the city."

"There's a deacon," said Wolfhere, gesturing west. "She carries a holy relic and only left her

church after all her people were safely gone. She and the relic must be protected."

The Dragon nodded stiffly. "We will escort her west as far as we are able."

"What of Gent?" asked Wolfhere.

of the road. Manfred lifted his spear upright and twisted it to unfurl the banner of the Eagles: an eagle with wings outspread carrying an arrow in its beak and a scroll in one talon. But the Eika were closer to the river. Already they ran at a steady lope that ate up the ground between them and their intended victims. Even Liath could see that the Eika would reach the bridge before the three Eagles could get there. She reined in her horse, wheeling around, but behind, back by the now distant knoll, another group of Eika had gathered, more than there had been before. Manfred passed her and kept riding, seeming oblivious to their inevitable fate.

Wolfhere came up beside her and slapped her horse on the rump. She started forward again, following him. To what purpose? At least, she thought bitterly, if Hanna survives she will be invested fully into the Eagles, a right earned by my death.

Wolfhere had sheathed his sword; he drew his left arm, hand clenched, across his chest, and then made a sharp sweeping gesture outward, toward the advancing Eika.

There came a flash, a glittering of light like a fire's light seen from inside a dark room. Liath blinked; the horses staggered, whinnying in terror, and she clung helplessly as her gelding bucked once before calming. Manfred, a hand flung over his eyes, was almost thrown.

The Eika faltered, but only from a lope to a trot. A moment later, far away, a rumbling sounded that ended in a sharp clap as loud as a peal of thunder.

"Lady's Blood," swore Wolfhere, "there's sorcery at work among the Eika. Liath, you must get in to the city, whatever happens to us. Do not hesitate or falter. When you win free, if I am dead, take yourself to the convent of St. Valeria and there throw yourself on the mercy of the Convent Mother. She will give you safekeeping."

The outrunners of the Eika force had reached the bridge, and they gathered, forming a wall with their shields. She was still too far away to see the walls clearly, to see if anyone moved there, if anyone had noticed their plight.

Manfred settled his horse. He and Wolfhere exchanged a glance, and then the young man pressed his horse forward, galloping hard for the line.

"Straight after him!" cried Wolfhere. "And mind you not what you see."

But she saw nothing, though she felt a tingling on her back and a slap of cold air against her cheeks. Manfred's head and shoulders were abruptly invested with the tiny winkings of a thousand firebugs, but the sight faded against the red serpent shields, the Eika setting their trap and awaiting their prey, raising their spears.

She saw behind the Eika soldiers the stone and timber bridge, the gulf of air beneath, where the steep banks fell away to the river's edge, and beyond, so close now that she could see figures standing along the parapet, the walls of Gent.

Without warning, the gates of Gent mawed open with a horrible screeching din.

And out from the city rode Dragons.

They charged at full tilt, lances lowered, teardrop shields as metalgray as the lowering clouds, all blended together with the steady rain. The only colors were the red serpents and yellow shields of the Eika, the gold tabards of the Dragons as bright as if the sun had emerged, and the brass fittings on their

helms like the masks of war.

The Dragons hit with an impact Liath felt as a shuddering in the air. A few broke all the way through and, rather than turning to aid their fellows now struggling with sword and ax against the Eika who had not gone down, they kept coming, heading for the three Eagles. Behind them, the second wave of Dragons hit the disintegrating Eika line. They did not bear lances but rather struck with swords and heavy axes. More Eika swarmed up from the river's banks, and the melee swirled off the bridge and spread out into the fields on either side, a terrible ringing clash. Dogs leaped and ripped at Dragons and horses alike.

Six Dragons pounded up and wheeled round, forming into a loose wedge.

"Behind us," shouted the man who was surely their leader. The broach which clasped his cloak at his right shoulder sparkled with jewels. A golden torque encircled his neck: the mark of a prince of the royal line. His gaze touched on Liath.

She stared, though she could see nothing of his face except his eyes, as green as jade. His helmet was not fitted with brass decoration, like those worn by his soldiers. It was inlaid with gold to form the aspect of a dragon, terrible to look on and yet, together with the other Dragons, all iron and gold and black, beautiful to look on.

Then they were moving back toward the fight. The two soldiers in front of her lowered their lances as Eika sprinted out into the roadway to block them. The weight of their horses drove them through. An Eika sprang up from the roadway and flung itself forward, ax raised high, toward the unarmored Wolfhere. The prince leaned right and cut across Wolfhere's path, swung so strong a blow he cleaved the creature's head from its neck. But more Eika came, and more yet, swarming toward the prince like bees drawn to honey or wild dogs to the hope of a fresh kill. The fighting pressed close all around them, and Liath hunched down, mumbling silent prayers. Manfred stuck one with his spear and then, as another climbed closer and the horses got bogged down in bodies and in the melee, lost it as the Eika fell away off the raised roadway.

They were almost at the bridge, but more and yet more Eika scrambled up, even up and over the stone braces, and formed a thick, living wall.

Dogs poured through their ranks, breaking through the line to spring at the Dragons and the Eagles in their midst. They were horrid beasts, slavering, mad with rage and utterly fearless.

One lunged, barreling against Manfred's horse, then heading straight for her. In that instant, she saw its eyes. They were the color of burning yellow.

Too close to shoot. It sprang.

The prince turned halfway round in his saddle and struck it down, across the back, with a single stroke. It crumpled, and her horse jumped to clear its body. That fast. Too fast.

Eika swarmed everywhere, closing, tightening the noose.

With loud cries a new sally of Dragons hit the line of Eika from behind, riding down on them from out of the gates. Eika fell and were trampled or were carried off by the weight of the charge. The Dragons, still in formation, broke ranks, splitting to either side as the Eagles and their escort pounded through. Stone drummed beneath the horses' hooves; then a shift, a slight jarring drop, and they clattered over the metaltrimmed drawbridge. They rode into the shelter of the walls.

The rain stopped, started again as they came out from under the guardhouse into the open space that fronted the gates. The remains of market stalls some half burned, others in disarray, but all empty stood in haphazard lines in the great square.

Behind a great keening and wailing arose. Together with the sudden pounding of hooves and a

great chorus of shouts, it deafened Liath. She heard no commands, only saw the prince peel away from the escort and ride back out through the gates. Dragons raced through, four abreast, coming back within the walls, and with a winding of gears the gates began to close.

She battled her way through to a vantage point: On the bridge the last dozen Dragons fought a rearguard action to retreat as the Eika hounded them. One soldier had been thrown over a horse. Another lay limp over his mount's neck. But beyond, on the stone and timber span, in the trampled field, she saw no gold tabard, no soldier left lying in the field. The dogs had begun to rip into the Eika dead.

Many of the Dragons were already racing up the stairs to the parapet; the city militiamen rained arrows down onto the bridge from above. The gates swung closed behind the last rider: the prince. He kicked his mount forward just as spears, aimed at his back, darkened the air. The gates slammed shut to a chorus of howls and the peppering smacks of spears hitting harmlessly against the metalplated gates. A new grinding sounded: the men of Gent were drawing up the drawbridge.

The prince's horse stumbled, dropped, and threw him, stumbled again, and went down, kicking hard, trying to get up. He jumped to his feet, pulled off his helm and tossed it to the ground with an astonishing lack of regard for its rich decoration. He grabbed the horse's bridle and yanked its head down onto the ground. Then, while he cursed loud and long, four of his men ran forward to examine the horse. A spear protruded from its belly, sunk deep. Blood spilled onto the packed earth, mixing with rain. The horse thrashed feebly, then stilled, its side rising and falling in shallow breaths. From outside, Liath heard the last howls and frustrated wails of the Eika as they finally retreated. The men stationed along the parapet jeered after them.

The prince's hand fell to his belt. He drew a knife and cut the horse's throat. Its blood poured onto his feet, staining his boots red, but still he knelt there, silent now. His black hair was plastered down on his skull from the rain. He had strange smooth skin, bronzecolored, and a striking face that betrayed by its lineaments that his mother was truly not of human kin.

Strangest of all, he had no beard nor any trace of beard.

He looked up, sought, and found with his gaze a man dressed in a rich tunic, head shielded from the rain by a capacious scarlet cloak held like a canopy over him by four servants.

"Butcher it and salt it," the prince said, standing up and turning his back on the dead animal. He had a hoarse tenor; it carried with the authority of a man who expects obedience. "Or so I suggest, my lord mayor."

"Eat horse meat?" The man could not seem to find a place to rest his eyes: on the prince, on the dead horse, on the Dragons calmly drawing the spear from the body, on the last gush of blood and entrails.

"It will seem like a delicacy come winter, if the Eika lay in a true siege." The prince saw Wolfhere, gestured to him, and stalked away. A Dragon grabbed the prince's helm from the mud and hurried after him.

Wolfhere quickly handed his horse's reins to Manfred and, without comment, followed.

JLLA. Jtl dismounted and huddled close to Manfred, shaking from the aftermath of battle as the rush of energy left her.

"I've never seen a man without a beard before," she whispered. "I mean, except a churchman, of course."

Manfred ran a finger along his own closecropped beard. "Eika don't have beards."

She laughed nervously. Her hands trembled and she thought her heart would never stop racing. "I didn't notice. Did Hanna and Hathui escape, do you think?"

He shrugged.

"What do we do now?"

They took the horses to the barracks where the Dragons had stabled their own horses, rubbed them down, and gave them oats; the activity calmed her. She slung her bedroll and saddlebags over her shoulder and followed Manfred up steep stairs that led to the long attic room above the stables where the Dragons had settled in. Fresh straw covered the plank floor, and bedrolls lay neatly lined up along the walls. The smell of horse and stall was pervasive but not overpowering. Men lounged at their ease, dicing, carving wood, oiling or polishing their gear, making small talk. They glanced at the two Eagles, curious, but made no attempt to speak to them.

Was one of these men her kinsman? She tried to examine their faces surreptitiously, looking for some resemblance to Da.

Manfred led her to the far end of the long, low room. There, shutters opened to admit the gloomy light of afternoon. The rain was coming down harder now, but it was already stuffy inside the loft, sticky like summer heat. The prince and Wolfhere sat on bales of hay, facing each other across a table. The prince had a chess set carved of ivory laid out in front of him, eight squares wide, eight across. He toyed with the pieces as he and Wolfhere spoke, picking them up, setting them down in new places: the eight Lions, the Castles, Eagles, and Dragons and protected by the other the Biscop and Regnant.

Behind the prince, the only woman besides Liath in the loft sat with the prince's helmet on her lap. She polished the helmet with a rag. She wore the tabard of the Dragons, and her arms were muscular, her jaw scarred by many small white lines, and her nose looked as if it had been broken and healed wrong.

Manfred hunkered down onto his haunches, prepared for a long wait. Liath knelt beside him. Now and again a cooling mist of water touched her face from the rain outside. Straw tickled her hands. Her nose itched.

"I judge the city can withstand a siege. But my Dragons alone cannot lift the siege, not with the numbers of Eika who have invested Gent. We have no news from Count Hildegard, whether she or her brother Lord Dietrich mean to lead an army to aid us. And you say now the king will not bring an army."

"I don't know what King Henry intends, Prince Sanglant. But he may not be able to bring an army here, even if he wishes to."

The prince picked up a Dragon and placed it between two Castles, as if trapping it there. This close, Liath could study the line of his jaw. He had either just shaved or else he did not grow a beard. But then how could he truly be called a man?

"I have heard these rumors, that Lady Sabella means to gather adherents and ride against King Henry. But she swore before the Biscop of Mainni eight years ago never to trouble the king with her false claims again."

"So she did," agreed Wolfhere, "but the Biscop of Mainni is rumored to be among her counselors now. And all three dukes of Varre as well as five counts from Varre have refused to appear before King Henry on his progress."

"This is certainly grave news, but what am I to tell the people of Gent? Given enough time, the Eika army outside will burn and batter down Gent's bridges, and when they have done that, they will have free passage up the Veser whether we will it or no. If they sail far enough up the Veser, then it will scarcely matter what the Lady Sabella demands, since the heart of Wendar itself will be at risk."

"You would counsel your father to consider this the greater threat? But always in other years, Prince Sanglant, the Eika have raided and left, content with whatever gold and slaves they could carry away in their ships."

The prince glanced out the window, although only rain and the timbered roof of the mayor's palace were visible. Distantly, Liath heard drums. "This is not 'other years.' This is not a raid. Already the envoy for the Eika general has refused Mayor Werner's offer of ten chests of gold and one hundred slaves as payment for them to leave."

Wolfhere chuckled suddenly. "I hear two things in your words I can scarcely credit. One is that a man sits as mayor in a city. The other is that the Eika have a general. They are bandits, nothing more, with perhaps a captain to lead each ship, if we can even dignify their packs with such a word. More like the strongest beast

who keeps the others obedient by threat of claw and teeth."

Sanglant turned his head to look directly at Liath. She squirmed, horribly uncomfortable; his eyes were so bright and his features so strange and sharp. He examined her with obvious curiosity for so long that she felt the stares of his men, behind her, on her back, as if they, too, wanted to know what interested their captain. For so long that Wolfhere finally glanced over to see what the prince was looking at.

What crossed Wolfhere's expression Liath had never expected to see: He was angry.

Sanglant smiled slowly at her, perhaps with invitation. When he smiled, he had a sudden bright charm, so powerful she felt herself blush. Beside her, Manfred muttered something inaudible under his breath. Sanglant grunted, almost laughing, as if in response. Then, with a shrug and a stretch of his shoulders, he looked back at Wolfhere. The older man's expression was now entirely bland.

"Mayor Werner is an interesting man, overly fond of his family's riches. Is it not said Our Lord judges the worth of his earthly sons by the measure of their generosity to their companions and to the poor? So King Henry would say. Werner's mother was mayor of the town before him, and he was her only surviving son. And, it is said, always her favorite, though certainly the staff of authority should have gone to one of her daughters, his half sisters." He said these words with a trace of bitterness, and yet he also seemed to be laughing at himself. "So far the people of Gent have found no reason to be displeased with his stewardship and thus throw him out in favor of a woman whose authority is, as you say, more likely to receive Our Lady's Blessing. As for the other" He put out a hand, and the woman handed him his helmet, now bright, the gold face of the dragon like cold fire burning on the hard surface of iron. As he spoke, serious now, he ran his hands over the helmet, tracing the delicate gold work with long, dark fingers.

"There is an intelligence out there which directs these Eika. I have felt it. It knows of me just as I know of it, and we are bent, each of us, on the other's destruction."

"A human man, do you think?"

"I think not. And who better than I to know, my friend. Is that not right?"

Wolfhere bowed his head in acknowledgment.

"But whether it is an Eika unlike in mind and craft to the others, or some different creature entirely, I cannot say. I have fought King Henry's wars for eight years now, since I came of age and was given my Dragons to be captain of. As is my birthright, the child born to prove the man worthy of the throne of Wendar." His tone was as cold as a stinging winter's wind. "But the others were ordinary wars, raids by the Quman horsemen, Duke Conrad's rebellion, Lady Sabella's revolt, which I saw the end of."

"Her first revolt," said Wolfhere quietly.

"Rumors do not a revolt make," said Sanglant, equally quietly, then raised a hand to forestall Wolfhere's comment. "But I trust your judgment in these matters, Wolfhere, if you say she is again fomenting rebellion against the king. You have served the throne of Wendar faithfully. Or so I have always heard."

"As have you," said Wolfhere, baring his teeth. "Or so I have always heard."

There was a hiss, an intake of breath, from those of the Dragons close enough to hear the comment. But Sanglant smiled his charming smile, tossed the chess piece carved into the likeness of a King's Dragon up toward the rafters, then grabbed it out of the air as it fell. The movement made the helm roll off his lap, and the scarjawed woman caught it before it struck the floor.

The prince opened his hand and displayed the chess piece. Its ivory gleam, oiled from much handling, set off the bronze tone of his skin. Half human, Liath thought, and then was ashamed of herself: Was she not also different from the rest, with her skin always burned so

brown? But at least slaves who worked all day in the fields were burned as brown as she was at summer's end, if they were not burned to blisters. And Da had told her of people living in lands far to the south, where the sun was hotter and brighter, who had skin burned darker even than hers. Was it then better to be fully human but a slave or a heathen, rather than a halfhuman prince who could never be fully trusted?

/ have already been a slave. She wrung her fingers through each other. Her back prickled, as if thinking of those days meant Hugh was watching her. He is watching me. Like the intelligence that waited, out among the Eika, dueling with Prince Sanglant, so Liath knew Hugh waited, always aware of her no matter how far away she might be from him. He waited only until she came again into his grasp.

I am still a slave, because I fear him. Tears burned her eyes and she ducked her head down so no one would see. But Manfred's hand brushed her leg, as if to reassure her. She swallowed, gathered courage, and looked up. No one seemed to have noticed her lapse.

"Like this chess piece," said Sanglant, "I exist only to be moved by another man's hand."

Wolfhere smiled thinly. He looked very old, suddenly, as he lifted the piece out of the prince's hand. "You are young to be so old in wisdom, Sanglant."

"You flatter me. I am but four and twenty years of age, by the calendars of my father's people." This was spoken tartly, almost defiantly.

"In the ruins of the old empire there is another calendar," said Wolfhere, "one that marks its time by the journey of bright Somorhas, who is both evening and morning star, and by the ascension of the seven stars that make up the seven jewels in the Crown of Stars. A child reaches for that Crown. Who knows what will happen when the Crown of Stars crowns the heavens?"

Sanglant stood up stiffly, regally, like a king about to pronounce judgment. "I have never known my mother, Wolfhere. Nor has she appeared to me, in mist or in night or by any enchantment I know of. She abandoned me when I was not yet two months old. If she left me here, if she allowed my father to get me on her, for her own purposes, for some plot spun and set into motion by her people, then I am ignorant of it and of them and of my place in their plans. Indeed, there is little enough trace of the Lost Ones in these lands, though I have heard that in Alba they are more likely to walk abroad in the deep forests. You have said these things to me before, or hinted of them, and I am tired of it and I am tired of your insinuations. I am a soldier. I am captain of the King's Dragons, as is my right, as was the right of those who served as captain before me, Conrad the Dragon, Charles Wolfskin, and the lefthanded Arnulf, all of us bastards of the reigning sovereign. In that service I have left behind me fields covered with blood, so I might prove myself worthy of the name my mother gave me at birth. I have watched my own men die as they fought to protect me and to protect the king's interests. I have killed the king's enemies without mercy and spared none I could find. Hear me now: I serve the king and no one else. Believe in your plots and plans and in the secret workings of the heavens, if you will. But leave me out of them."

He grabbed his helmet, tucked it under his arm, and walked the length of the attic and down the stairs. Only two Dragons followed him: the scarjawed woman and a blond man who walked with a limp.



When they had gone, it was silent except for the sound of rain and the sloppy clop of ox hooves on the wet street outside. Then there was a rustling, a sigh as of letout breath, and the men went back to their tasks.

Wolfhere set down the chess piece. Manfred rose, brushed straw from his tunic, and moved to stand beside the old Eagle, who looked out the window for a long time. Then Wolfhere also rose. Liath scrambled up and, keeping her head down, followed Wolfhere and Manfred to the stairs and down to the stables below. She felt as if every man there watched her pass. She wanted desperately to ask about her kinsman, but after the accusations Sanglant had made, she dared not.

She was, for the moment, afraid to ask Wolfhere anything, for fear she would not be able to resist asking him about the ancient calendar he had spoken of. The Crown of Stars she knew; it was a cluster of seven bright stars just outside the grasp of the constellation known as the Child, Second House in the zodiac, the world dragon that bound the heavens. She knew many of the names given by the ancient Dariyan mathematici to the stars, names different from those in common use in these days. But that the old Dariyans had marked time by a calendar markedly different from the one she knew . . . that knowledge Da had never taught her, if indeed he even knew it.

But the stars move in a fixed pattern. Given time and The Book of Secrets and paper to make the difficult calculations on, she could work out when next the cluster of stars known as the Crown of Stars would "crown the heavens." She wasn't sure what he meant by the phrase, but surely it had to do with a star reaching the zenith, the point on the sphere of the fixed stars where that star was seen as directly above the observer.

She kept silence as they walked through the stables. How many days had it been since she had been able to observe the heavens? During spring, as Da always said, the Lady clouds the skies so we remember to keep our eyes on the sowing. How many days since Wolfhere had freed her from Hugh? One day short of a month.

She shuddered. It was as if Hugh was speaking, braced outside the wail of the invisible city that protected her heart. Like the Eika who had thrown up earthworks against Gent, he besieged her, only she could see no end.

Thirty days since you were stolen from me.

"Are you well?" asked Wolfhere.

His tone was so gentle she started. They had reached a door. Manfred was about to dash outside; he hung back, looking at her with concern. He had kind blue eyes and a solemn face, not handsome, not ugly, just steady and quiet. A good comrade.

"A little hot." She draped her cloak over one arm and shifted her saddlebags over her shoulder. Manfred darted out into the courtyard, running hard for the doors that led into the mayor's palace. She pulled a corner of her cloak over her hair and started out after him. Wolfhere pulled her back.

"No need," he said, "to bring your gear. We'll be sleeping in the stables."

She had to turn around and go back, of course. She dared not tell him she had the book. He already knows you are educated as a mathematici, she told herself as she slunk along, hoping no one would notice her. But it was quiet in the stables. The Dragons were either upstairs, taking their ease, or elsewhere, on guard or out in the city. But what if Wolfhere simply took the book away from her? There would be nothing she could do to stop him or to get it back, once it was out of her hands.

Next to their horses was an empty stall, well padded with straw. Manfred and Wolfhere had left their gear here, neatly stowed, leaving room for them to sleep. She heaped straw up, shoved the saddlebags underneath, frowned. Too obvious. Could not help but reach inside the leather bag and feel the cold smooth grain of the leather binding, the raised letters along the spine. She traced the letters,

reading them with her fingers, and felt like the dry wings of a moth the parchment and paper leaves of the three books bound inside the cover.

"What happened to Sturm and his company?" asked a deep voice. "They never came in from patrol."

"You didn't hear that part? They stayed outside the walls to escort the two wounded Eagles and a deacon conveying a holy relic to a place of safety."

"No, I didn't hear." This spoken a bit peevishly. "I was just coming up. Unlike you, I fought a few Eika in this melee and had a bit of cleaning up to do." The other man snorted. "You mean you let a few get some blows past your guard. I'm as clean as a saint, and the more likely to be blessed by Our Lady with a willing helpmeet for my efforts."

"Hah! These Gentish women are as friendly as wild boars. Do you think he'll pursue the pretty young Eagle?"

It took her a heartbeat to realize that they spoke of her.

"What? After arguing with the old master? I think not."

"How can you say so? He plucked the young Villam heiress unbruised from the vine, and that after she was betrothed and her father had warned him off twice."

She saw, faintly, their shadows drawn on the wall by the weak light shining through the stable doors.

"Nay, lad, you've come from outside the world of the court and don't know its ways yet. What is said and what is done can be two different things. What the heiress and old Villam wanted was marriage to the prince, but King Henry can never allow the prince to marry. It makes the boy look legitimate, does it not? So words were said in public and a betrothal sworn to another family, and the girl got what she wanted and, so they say, a child to boot that was born after her marriage to another man."

"And the prince? Did he get what he wanted?"

"Who can say?" replied the other man, who had the higher voice and the more confidence. "The prince does what his father the king tells him to do. I doubt he minded that engagement."

"He did look," blustered the first speaker. "At the young Eagle. She's a fetching piece, all bright and warm. Why shouldn't he pursue it? I didn't like the way the old master spoke to him."

"Nor did I. There is no better man than our prince."

The other grunted angry agreement.

"But there is a world outside the Dragons, lad, which is easy enough to forget as a young hatchling like you. And harder work it is to know the rules for those battles than for the ones we fight against King Henry's enemies.

So. Listen to what I say. Never anger an Eagle. Never sleep with a woman if the price, in whatever coin, is higher than what the pleasure was worth. Now. In payment for those words of advice you can oil my harness tonight while I go out hunting wild boars."

"Oil your harness!"

The other man moved. Liath shrank against the wall, tight in a corner, one hand still on the book, and thought hard of shadows and silence and invisibility. The two Dragons walked past the stall without noticing her, the younger man still complaining.

A moment later she heard Wolfhere calling her name. She shoved the saddlebags under straw and set her saddle and bedroll over them, then hurried out. Manfred had returned; his cloak was wet but

the rest of him was reasonably dry. He actually smiled, seeing her. Conscious of his gaze, embarrassed by it, she picked at her hair, sure there must be straw caught in it. If only Hanna were here with her. If only she were sure Hanna was still alive.

"There you are," said Wolphere. "Mayor Werner asks us to sit down with him at this night's feast. He honors us; he has no new and better guests to entertain."

"Will the prince be there?"

Wolphere raised his eyebrows. "I suppose he will. Mayor Werner would not dare not to invite him, even if they do not get along. Sanglant is too much a lover of good food and drink to stay away."

And it was good food, an astonishing feast for a city under siege: a side of beef braised with spices Liath had never tasted before; a pudding; apple tarts; two roasted pigs; white bread; and a great deal of wine. Liath followed Wolphere's lead and drank sparingly, cutting her wine with water. The prince sat at the other end of the table from her and matched Mayor Werner cup for cup.

Manfred looked disgusted.

"What's wrong?" she whispered to him.

"Come winter townsfolk will starve for want of these scraps."

It was the longest string of words she had ever heard him speak at one time. "Surely they have their own food stores."

"Enough for a long siege?"

"Do you think the town will be besieged for that long? Surely Count Hildegard will lift the siege." "If she can."

The eating and drinking went on for what seemed to Liath an interminable time. An old man recited poetry in what he evidently conceived to be the style of the ancient Daryans; Liath had read a copy of Virgilia's Helleniad and cringed to hear him. But there were other poets who sang songs of their own devising that were more pleasing, songs about heroes of days gone by and episodes from the great epic, The Gold of the Hevelli. Musicians played on lyres and zithers. There was a juggler, and two girls who balanced and did tricks on a long rope held taut by two men. But all in all, it was hot, smoky, noisy, and dull. She excused herself, pleading a need for the privy. After she used it, she did not feel like venturing back inside. It had stopped raining, even cleared partially, so half the sky was stars. Liath clung to the shadows, breathing in the night air, the solitude; it was quiet except for the muted noise of the feast from the great hall and the distant tremor of drums. A quartet of women walked by, laughing merrily, headed for the kitchens, trays resting against their hips.

"A man's a man because he grows a beard," said one. "But fraters and monks have no beards." "To make themselves more like women and thus more pleasing to Our Lady! They pledge their bodies and their honor to the church, by cutting off their beards. It is the mark of their service."

"Is that what you say, then? A man's no true man who has no beard and is not a churchman?"

"Well, my dear Fastrada," said one who had been silent up until now, "that may well be true, but I speak truly when I say the prince is a man like any other. Or so it seemed to me."

They all laughed heartily and demanded more details, which she refused to give them.

Liath slunk across the courtyard, praying she would not be noticed, and sneaked into the stables. No one had disturbed the empty stall; all was as she had left it. She went back outside.

The mayor's palace stood on a rise near the eastern bank of the river, itself ringed by a smaller stockade of posts. Climbing the ladder that led to the small parapet, she found herself looking over the city of Gent, the eastern shoreline, and the dark line of the Vesper River. The moon was almost at the

quarter, waxing; it lent a pale glamour to the night. There were no guards. She supposed those who might once have stood watch here at the palace walls now were out on the city walls. East she saw the fires of the Eika camp stretching both north and south along the river as far as the eye could see. Gent was darker, only a faint gleam of light from the great hall and the distant bobbing torches that marked watchmen on their rounds in the city and guards posted along the city wall. Two dark lines, one east, one west, broke the line of the river: the two bridges that led to the broad island on which lay the city of Gent.

She was alone.

She stared up, thinking of Wolfhere's words. The cluster of stars known as the Crown, toward which the constellation known as the Child reached, had passed out of the sky around the beginning of the year, at the spring equinox. The Lion was fading. Now the Dragon and the Serpent ruled the Houses of Night. The red planet Jedu, the Angel of War still shone in the house of the Archer, the bright quester. But soon within seven days red Jedu would pass into the house of the Unicorn: ambition joined to will. That foretold a time of advancement, when people with a strong will could take advantage of the power of their will and their clear sense of ambition to get ahead in the world.

Yet Da had always told her to be skeptical of those astrologia who claimed the ability to foretell the future from the movements and positions of the planets along the fixed sphere of the stars. There was a real power to be had in the knowledge of the heavens, but it was not this. She had long since memorized these teachings though she did not have the ability to use them herself.

"The movement of the wandering stars in the heavens is one of the markers by which the magi and mathematici know the lines through which they can draw down power from the heavens to wield on the earth. By this means they may also distinguish those of the daimones of the upper air who, with their greater knowledge of the universe, are most susceptible at any given alignment of the heavens to coercion or persuasion."

From below she heard low voices, startling her out of her reverie. Footsteps sounded, moving softly up the ladder to the parapet walk. She retreated into shadows, drew her cloak more tightly around her as if it were also a shadow, transforming her into just one more element of night and stillness and darkness.

"It was not a debate of my choosing," said the first as he came up onto the parapet walk and leaned out to look east. It was the prince. She recognized both his voice, which had that odd scrape in it, and his bearing. He was quite tall and had the strong shoulders and confident posture of a man who has trained long and well with weapons.

With him, to her surprise, was Wolfhere. They spoke with apparent cordiality despite their argument in the barracks earlier. "But it affects you nevertheless. I have heard it said more than once that King Henry refuses to let Sapientia leave on her progress, as is her right should he choose her over Theophanu. She is almost twenty years old."

"By which age King Henry had already been named as heir by right of fertility, of which I am the result." Sanglant's tone was flat, almost mocking.

"Then you must speak."

"It is not my place to speak. King Henry has counselors. He has companions, men and women of his own age who have their own birthright, their lands and estates."

"Surely these great magnates cannot counsel the king without some prejudice toward their own advancement."

"Do we not all counsel in such fashion, Lord Wolfhere, not unaware of what would best benefit ourselves? Save for the rare few, who are wise without any selfish intent."

"And who are those, in your opinion, Prince Sanglant?"

"Of them all, I would only trust the cleric, Rosvita of Korvei. She has an elegant bearing that sits well with her affability and benevolence. She is both humble and patient, and she is very learned. All this makes her a wise counselor."

He shifted, turning slightly. Liath pressed back farther into the shadows, round wood posts hard against her back. But there was not enough light from moon and stars for them to see her.

Finally, the prince sighed. "What do you want of me, Wolfhere? Some seek my favor. Others speak ill of me in the hope of turning my father against me. You hint of terrible plots devised by my mother's people and suggest that I conceal from my father and the rest of you my part in those plots. But I am not bookeducated like you are. I cannot puzzle such things out from hints and fragments of words and phrases in languages I cannot read. It is said you were invested as an Eagle the year the elder Arnulf died and left Wendar and Varre to the younger Arnulf and Queen Berengaria. But it is also said of you, my friend, that the year Queen Berengaria died in childbed you were taken into the confidence of those who secretly learn the ways of the magi, the forbidden

arts. And that it is for this reason, despite your wisdom and experience, that you do not walk among those who name themselves counselors to King Henry."

"An Eagle serves the sovereign by carrying messages and decrees and by observing and reporting back what was seen. Not by giving counsel. We are eyes and ears, Prince Sanglant, nothing more."

"And yet you chance to bring the most beautiful young Eagles into your nest, or so / observe." He sounded as if he meant to provoke the older man.

Wolfhere did not reply at once. The drums that beat incessantly in the Eika camp changed rhythm, adding a hiccuping beat in the middle of what had been a straight pattern of four.

Wolfhere spoke so lightly the words resonated like a hammer blow. "Stay away from her, Sanglant. She is not meant for you. Nor are you meant for your father's throne."

Sanglant laughed. "Does anyone expect me to live that long? I am captain of the Dragons, after all. Of all the captains, only Conrad the Dragon served his king for more years than I have so far served mine."

"You can influence King Henry's decision."

"Can I?"

Wolfhere appeared incapable of losing his temper, no matter how annoying Sanglant meant to be. "There is not one soul who moves in the orbit of the king's progress who cannot see he prefers you to his three legitimate children."

"You want me to say I do not want the throne."

"I am not alone in this wish. We must settle the affairs of the kingdom before worse catastrophes befall us because the king and his court are not united."

Sanglant turned his back on Wolfhere and leaned even farther out over the parapet, as if to catch sight of the distant Eika camp or to reach out and grasp the stars in his hands. But he did not look likely to fall. "I refuse, as I always have and as I always mean to do. You must speak to the king on this matter. I am only the King's Dragon, his obedient son and servant. As I always have been."

"That is your only answer?"

"That is my only answer."

Wolfhere bent slightly at the waist, although Sanglant could not see the gesture. "Then I will leave

you to your meditations." If he was vexed, he did not show it in his posture or his tone.

"When do you leave?" asked Sanglant.

"My comrade Hathui even now rides to King Henry with news of the siege. We will abide here a while to see what happens, and to see if I can search out this intelligence among the Eika you speak of."

"You trust my instincts?"

"I would be a fool not to."

"That is praise from you, Wolfhere." They seemed, more than anything, like two soldiers sparring.

"As it was meant to be. I bid you good night."

"As I fully plan it to be."

The intent was unmistakable. Wolfhere moved his head as if looking around the parapet walk, the grounds, and the long roof of the palace. Liath stayed as still as ever, sure she had made no sound. Wolfhere did not notice her. He moved down the ladder and soon even the faint noise of his footsteps was lost to her.

There was a long moment of silence, except for the distant drums. She prayed Sanglant would move soon.

Suddenly he said in a low voice, to the empty air: "You've been here all along."

She did not move, dared not breathe.

He pushed back from the edge and walked with perfect confidence in the blackness down the walk to the corner, where she hid. Because she could see so well in the dark, she saw him lift a hand and beckon to her to rise. She dared not disobey.

Standing, coming forward, she halted a safe arm's length from him. "How did you know I was here?"

"I have been hearing. Don't you know what is said of my mother's people?" His tone was so bitter she suddenly realized that much of what he had said to Wolfhere was born out of a deep resentment she could neither place nor understand. "That they are the spawn of fallen angels, those known as the daimones of the upper air, who mated with human women. That like their unsightly fathers they have the gift of hearing even the unspoken wishes of a man's heart, and then taunting him with them."

"But that isn't what the blessed Daisan taught," she blurted out, and was aghast she spoke so freely.

"What did the blessed Daisan teach?" She could not tell if he spoke with true curiosity or if he was merely humoring her for his own reasons.

"The prince is a man like any other," the servingwoman had said. He moved a step forward toward her, and had she been able to, she would have bolted and run away. But she could not.

Not knowing what else to do, she talked fast. "He taught that elves were born of fire and light. For all things arose out of the four elements, fire and light and wind and water. It is only when darkness rose out of the depths that the universe became tainted with evil. So if elves are tainted by the darkness it is only because all things are that exist in this world. Only in the Chamber of Light has all darkness been burned away by the fiery truth of the gaze of Our Lady and Lord."

Because she could see so well in the dark, she saw him blink several times as if at a loss for words. He moved again, coming close enough for her to feel the heat of his body. "So. I am to stay away from you, am I?" He bent, as if to kiss her. Thought better of it and instead touched his own lips with a finger as if seal himself and her to silence. "It's too bad I have always been an obedient son."

He left her there, again alone, walked away and descended into the courtyard, vanishing into the night. Hugh. Hugh had seen them. Hugh would know. Ai, Lady. It wasn't Hugh she was thinking of. It was desire. She was bitterly ashamed of what stirred in her own heart. What was wrong with her, that such a feeling could come to life in her breast after the winter she had endured?

Out of a lake has grown an island. The city rises on the island, ringed by seven walls. At the height sits a tower of stone. In that tower are five doors, each locked by the same brass key. But in the door that opens to the north there lies the shade of a secret door that leads to the wilderness. It is bright in the wilderness now, warm and inviting, in those trackless lands where she has thrown away the key. Only she can walk safely there.

But it is never safe.

She sank down onto her knees, head bowed and resting in her hands. She must not be tempted.

The king's son. Sworn to the Dragons, and forbidden. Caught in the intrigues of the court. It was too dangerous to even think of such a man if such a man could ever think of her with an honest heart. She must put all such thoughts away.

She must stay hidden in every way she could. She must be careful, because she had no one she could trust, no one but Hanna, who was gone from her now, perhaps not even alive surely not that and who had no power in the world in any case.

"Ai, Lady, protect me, your daughter," she whispered. Yet, as bitter as her shame was, she could not stop thinking about the prince. Desire is like a flame, a torch burning in the night. A traveler in darkness cannot help but be drawn toward it.

Liath shut her eyes. She saw torches along the walls in her mind's eye, saw fires burning all along the shore as if they were the temptation that ate away at her heart. Hugh would see them and, seeing, use them to find her.

In her mind's eye she put them out. In the wild lands beyond the city she had built in her mind the sun ceased shining. It was, like a cool spring evening, soothing on her frozen heart. She was still safe; she could make herself safe by not feeling.

On the eastern shore, though she could not see it, fires vanished, snuffed out although there was no onset of rain. Along the walls of Gent a third of the torches blew out, though there was no wind.

X THE SIN OF PRIDE FIRES burn, thick smoke rancid with the scent of human fear. He stops, licks the air. In the tangled smell of charred wood, dead men, burning thatch, and dust kicked high by the trampling of many feet, he finds the familiar dry musky scent of his own kind though it is not marked with the peculiar piquancy of his own litter, his own tribe, his home shore.

Beyond, the sea surges below a distant headland, soughing up more softly along the strand where the clean wooden boats lie beached. They smell of seawater and barnacles and the good strong scent of oak flavored with ash and willow.

Shouting and crashing come from the wood beyond. He darts back into a thicket. Some of the soft ones, the humans, are running; their terror and pain are sweet on his tongue, tasted from the air. But he lets them pass. Two are children, carried by a strong mother whose tears smell like the salt of the sea. He senses a new weakness in himself, brought on by his contact with Halane, Son of Henri. He thinks of OldMother, who is already beginning the slow trek up the fjall where she will take her place with the WiseMothers. She speaks of the soft mothers with scorn because they cannot bear litters with the strength and numbers of the RockChildren. But Halane had a mother such as this. He lets them run by untouched before he crawls out from the thicket and starts his descent toward his cousins.

Will these cousins greet him with peace in their hearts? Or will they set their dogs on him?

He shrugs off these doubts. OldMother's scent is strong on him. She promised him much before her joints began to stiffen and she passed the knife of decision to the new YoungMother. Even if these warriors are not true cousins, they will not harm one who bears this sign of favor. Nor will any dogs, of any pack, eat one who has been marked by the scent of an OldMother.

Still, though, he carries his new weakness with him as he descends through the forest. The weakness rests within him, but he also conceives of the wooden circle which hangs at his chest as the physical sign of that weakness, a tangible reminder. Other humans flee past, but he avoids them. This new weakness has taught him a lesson: The soft ones are not true people, of course, but they are a kind of people. People can talk. It is the lesson the WiseMothers teach. It is what they whispered to him when he was a halfgrown pup and dared venture up the mountainside to the sacred place tended by the SwiftDaughters to see whether the WiseMothers would speak to him or else kill him for his presumption.

"The knife and the tongue are equally strong weapons."

The WiseMothers had spoken twice, and he had always remembered.

"Face your weakness and it can become your strength."

He steps out of the wood and into a landscape torn by wind and sea spray. The soft ones' houses are all burning now. The scent of fire mingles with the pungent smell of sea and sand and shore. The dogs bark, smelling him. Alerted, a Watcher sees him and whistles to question him. He whistles back, sees the sign given for free passage. With new confidence, he strides down to the sea.

Alain woke, cold and shivering, on the ground. He did not stir. The horrible images of his dream swelled in his mind. He still smelled the sea, and the fire burning. He still heard the screams of children and the grunts of men falling beneath the spears and axes of Eika savages. He still saw the monstrous dogs, their hollow bellies and tireless rage, their yellow eyes shooting off sparks. Always they panted, tongues hanging out, saliva or worse things dribbling down their fangs.

He shuddered and shifted. Rage and Sorrow pressed against him on either side. Their solid presence made him feel safe.

Unlike the foot soldiers who marched in Lavastine's train, he now had a decent bed to lie on: the carpet that was always thrown down in front of the entrance to Count Lavastine's tent. Every night after watering and feeding the other hounds and sending them in to sleep beside their master, Alain bedded down here. Though it was absurd he had a spear and a knife and was barely trained in either he thought of himself as protecting the count despite the fact that two guards stood watch at all times. But no one had demanded he move. Most likely no one dared to, not when he moved with hounds always at his side and Count Lavastine remained oblivious to all but his goal of aiding Lady Sabella.

Rage whimpered and stirred in her sleep. Sorrow was the quieter sleeper, but he would wake instantly if Alain moved. And now, of course, thinking of this, Alain simply had to get up.

Yesterday Count Lavastine and his army had caught up with Lady Sabella. The impressive retinue Alain had first seen at Lavas holding almost two months ago was now a formidable army. Rodulf, Duke of Varingia, and a number of counts and lords had joined with Sabella. Lavastine's arrival with one hundred and twenty more fighting men had been a convenient excuse for celebration. The feasting had lasted long into the night, and Alain had drunk more than he should of the ale passed around to the common soldiers. Indeed, his mouth was dry and sourtasting, and he had a headache. And he really, really had to urinate.

One of the guards was asleep. The other yawned, disinterested, as Alain got to his feet. Sorrow woke at once as Alain ventured into the sparse cover of wood that lay twenty paces behind the camp. The hound followed, whining softly.

Alain relieved himself. The moon had already set, but a thin line of red rimmed the eastern sky.



From the far side of camp he heard the sound, muted by distance, of clerics and fraters singing the service of Lauds, first light. As he turned to move out of the trees, Sorrow closed his jaws over Alain's wrist and tugged. Alain tripped over undergrowth.

"What's that?" A harsh whisper sounded from deeper in the wood.

Sorrow leaned so hard on Alain that the young man fell to hands and knees. Now he was partially screened by low bushes. He peered out through their branches to see two figures carrying between them a bulky weight. They had stopped to rest. "Hush," said the other.

Alain was silent. Sorrow was silent. The two mysterious men were silent. The clerics and fraters sang, distant voices blending in the chill air as the sky faded from black to gray.

"Nothing," said one of the men. "We'd best hurry before camp wakes." He hoisted the thing they carried up higher against his chest and they moved away through the curve of the wood toward the eastern end of camp.

They were carrying a body.

Alain's heart went cold. Sorrow licked his hand. Together they crept after them, Alain keeping one hand on the nape of the hound's neck. To reassure himself, he slipped a hand inside his tunic to touch the rose, still alive, still in bloom. The prick of its thorns gave him courage.

He could not tell if the body was man or woman, alive or dead. They carried it all the way round to the outskirts of Lady Sabella's encampment, where the kitchen tent was set up, and then even past that and past the livestock, to where a shrouded cage rested fifty paces away from any tent or fire. A man, face hooded, arms bound in heavy leather wrappings, met them.

They spoke in low voices. At first Alain could not hear; no man would have been able to. But an Eika . . .

Alain strained, stilling himself until he heard Sorrow's soft panting, heard each individual voice, some true, some off, as the clerics sang the final cadences of Lauds. He heard the scraping of claws against wood, the clack of twigs in the dawn breeze, heard even the loam as it crushed down beneath his fingers.

". . . will have no questions being asked."

"Brought him from the estate by Autun. Them are the Biscop of Autun's lands, and so they be the false king's lands. So does Biscop Antonia say, that false king's men are fair game."

The keeper grunted. "As long as we get no trouble of it. You must have walked all day, then, from the lands outlying Autun. Is he still alive?"

"Seems to be breathing. I gave him the drink, just as much as you said. Hasn't woken or eyes fluttered once. What's it for? Make him taste better?"

The keeper's voice radiated his distaste. "No need to make him suffer more."

"You feel mercy for the false king's man?"

"I do my job. Now stand back."

"We can't watch?"

The keeper snorted. "Watch all you wish. You'll regret it."

Some tone in his voice made the other two back away. But Alain knew suddenly he could not

stand by, not this time.

He jumped up. Sorrow nipped at his backside but missed, and Alain crashed out of the undergrowth. "Stop!" he cried.

The two men grabbed him at once and wrenched his arms behind his back. He struggled briefly, but together they were much stronger than he was alone. A thud sounded, inside the cage, as if something had thrown itself against the slats.

"We could throw this one in," said one of the men. "He's fresher and younger."

Sorrow bounded, growling, out of the trees. The two men instantly let go of Alain and backed off, drawing long knives.

"That's one of Count Lavastine's hounds," said the keeper nervously. "Do naught to harm it."

Sorrow sat himself down, leaning against Alain's legs. "Don't do it," pleaded Alain. "It isn't merciful. It isn't right."

This close, Alain saw the keeper had but a stump of one hand; his face was scored with old deep gashes on forehead and jaw, one of which had torn out his right eye, now healed as a mass of white scar tissue. A bronze Circle of Unity hung at his chest. "It must be fed, boy. Fed with fresh blood. Or do you volunteer to throw yourself in?"

Alain shuddered. But the memory of Lackling's terrified mewling and sobbing was still strong in him. His fault. His to atone. He thought suddenly of Prater Agius and his dangerous, heretical words: that the blessed Daisan offered himself as a sacrifice in order to redeem us from our sins; that by sacrifice we make ourselves worthy. Driven by this memory, by the intensity which pervaded Agius's speech and prayer, Alain took a step toward the cage.

Sorrow butted Alain so hard from behind he fell onto his knees. Sorrow got a good grip on his arm, tight enough that his teeth pressed painfully into flesh but not so hard that they drew blood. The two men sidled closer, knives up. Sorrow growled but did not let go.

"There's one as disagrees with you," said the keeper with rough amusement. He bent to the body that lay limp at his feet, hooked his elbows underneath the sleeping man's armpits. Despite his lost hand, the keeper was a strong man; he dragged the body easily to the cage, fussed with some kind of attachment, and rolled up a small barred door not more than the breadth of a big man's shoulders in both height and width.

"Let me go!" said Alain fiercely. Heedless of the pain, he wrenched his arm out of Sorrow's grip and flung himself forward. He would stop this murder. He must.

The keeper jerked up his head and then, the movement an extension of his surprise, yanked the shroud half off the cage, revealing

The two men behind Alain cried out in fear before their exclamations froze in their throats. The great eye slewed round for it had only one eye; the other was a mass of putrefaction, worms writhing in infected flesh, maggots crawling out from the pus to wriggle down its beaklike snout. Its gaze struck him like the sword of God.

He could not move.

But he could stare, throat choked with horror. With pity.

It was a sickly creature, however monstrous its appearance. Like a huge bird, it had two taloned feet and two wings, molting now. Feathers and waste littered the cage's floor. Like a dragon, it had a sinuous tail and a featherless head, scaled to an iron gleam, but with a yellowishgreen cast beneath, the sign of a creature that is no longer healthy. It heaved its great body awkwardly across the cage toward its

meal.

The keeper began to shove the body in, but suddenly the body shuddered and a tiny gasp escaped the unconscious man, the gasp of a man coming awake out of into a nightmare. The huge foot scraped at the body, sunk its talons into flesh, and yanked it inside the cage.

Mercifully, the keeper threw the shroud back over the bars. Alain heard a muffled moan and then the sounds of an animal feeding voraciously. The grip of the guivre's eye let him go. He fell forward, shivering convulsively, and began to weep. But he still did not move, though now he could. What he had seen was too horrible.

The keeper closed the tiny door and chained it shut. He peered at Alain with his one good eye. "You'd best go with them, lad. Biscop will want to see you."

Biscop Antonia. It was she, of course, who was behind all this. Prater Agius had refused to confront her in the ruins that night or in Lavas holding on the following day. Now, it seemed, Alain would have no choice but to do so or else, with Sorrow, fight a foolish skirmish he could not win.

The knowledge left him with a sudden feeling of peace as he was led away, Sorrow padding obediently at his heels.

That feeling of peace, of resignation to God's will, seeped away as he waited in the antechamber of the tent while outside the biscop led the service of Prime, the celebration of sunrise and a new day. All the noble ladies and lords stood in attendance.

But when Biscop Antonia returned, still resplendent in her white vestments trimmed with gold, her biscop's staff held confidently in her right hand, and listened to the whispered explanation of one of her clerics, she merely said:

"This one again? Brother Heribert, take a message to Count Lavastine that the boy will march with my retinue for the time being. Lavastine will make no objection."

The cleric left. Alain knelt outside, miserable and frightened, while the tent came down and was packed into a wagon. Sorrow refused to budge from his side. No one spoke to him, only glanced at him sidelong, but two guards remained at his side.

Just as all was ready, the nobles mounting their fine horses, a commotion eddied through their ranks. A black shape darted free from behind a line of wagons and Rage bounded over to him, taking up her station beside Sorrow. No one tried to stop her. Her presence heartened him as nothing else could. As the company started forward, two men-at-arms shoved him forward. He walked. What else could he do? Not knowing what to expect was, perhaps, the worst of it. Would he be punished? Executed? Fed to the guivre? He could not imagine what Biscop Antonia meant to do with him.

They marched all that day at a steady pace, stopping at midday to water the horses. They marched through hill country, mostly farm and pasture land with stands of forest topping the hilltops and long rides. It was easy country to move through, shallow fords, good grazing for the livestock that traveled with them, not a trace of any force loyal to King Henry.

But in the late afternoon the hills rolled into a long downslope that looked over the valley of the River Rhowne. From here, blurred by afternoon haze, Alain saw the stone tower of the cathedral of Autun, so far away it looked like a mason's tiny model. They had come to the border of the lands controlled by the Duke of Varingia; beyond lay the heart of the old kingdom of Varre, known as the duchy of Arconia. And beyond the duchy of Arconia lay Wendar.

Army and train came to a halt and began to settle in for the night. Alain was directed by his guards to enter the tent. There, at the biscop's order, he sat on a stool. The hounds followed him quietly and draped themselves over his feet.

She put him under the supervision of one of her clerics, a young man with pale blue eyes whom she named as Willibrod. Red lesions encrusted the cleric's hands and neck. While he sat, he shaved wood into holy Circles of Unity and carved letters into the backs of those Circles. Oddly enough, he also bound strands of hair and bits of leaves and some other thing, plucked from what looked like the fletchings for an arrow, onto the backs of these Circles and then strung each one on a leather cord, to make a necklace.

"You are a cleric in training?" asked young Cleric Willibrod. "You are cleanshaven, as befits a churchman."

Alain blushed, easy to see on his fair skin. It still embarrassed him horribly that he could grow nothing more manly than a bit of pale down on his chin. He had not shaved, and yet this cleric, who sat next to him, could not tell whether he was unshaven or cleanshaven.

"I was promised to the monastery," he stammered out finally, "but I serve Count Lavastine now as a manatarms."

The cleric shrugged. "It is not unknown for monk or cleric to serve in a lord's army, for is it not sung that while Our Lady tends the Hearth, Our Lord wields the Sword?"

Biscop Antonia came in. Servants surrounded her, bringing a pitcher of water and a fine brass basin and soft white linen so she might refresh her face and hands. Others brushed dust and travel dirt off her vestments while a woman braided Antonia's long silver hair, draping a shawl of white linen over the biscop's head when she was through. Atop the shawl two clerics placed her hather mitre the mark of her rank as biscop. Tall, pointed both at the front and at the back, the mitre was made of a stiff white cloth and trimmed with thickly embroidered gold ribbons. Two white and gold tassels hung from the back of the hat all the way to her feet.

A cleric handed Antonia her crosier and she turned, surveying her retinue with a kindly smile on her face as if to show her gratitude for their service. Her gaze came to rest on Alain. He bowed his head swiftly, mortified he had been caught staring at her and her ablutions. So he did not see her expression, only heard her voice when she spoke.

"There is another I requested be brought to me many days ago. He has not yet arrived?"

"Not yet, Your Grace."

"I hope he can be with us by Compline." She spoke mildly, even hopefully, but Alain now recognized the undercurrent that eddied around her. For all that her aspect was kind and her voice gentle, she did not allow her will to be disobeyed. Clerics scurried away; others took their place, and as a united party they processed out so the biscop could lead the service of Vespers, the evensong.

Cleric Willibrod, left in charge, allowed Alain to kneel and pray as Vespers was sung in another part of the camp. During the final psalm, two soldiers appeared at the open tent entrance. With them, as if he were under arrest, came Prater Agius. His brown robes looked travelstained and rumped, and he was limping. Alain was so surprised he jumped to his feet in midphrase.

Agius shook free of the guards. He knelt at once to finish the last lines of the psalm, and Alain, shamed by the frater's piety, copied him.

"I thought you had stayed behind at Lavas town," whispered Alain after the last Alleluia was sung. "I thought you did not intend to ride with Count Lavastine."

"I did not." Agius rose, glared at the guards, and limped over to wash his face out of the same fine brass basin used by the biscop. Alain was both astounded and entranced by this show of worldly vanity and arrogance on the part of Agius. The frater wiped his face and hands dry with the same soft white linen the biscop had used. "It is not my part in life to involve myself with the worldly disputes that tempt those who have been seduced by the glamour of earthly power and pleasures."

"Then why are you here?" Alain demanded.

"I was summoned against my will."

Agius promptly sat down in the cushioned chair which even an ignorant lad like Alain, unaccustomed to the ways of the nobility, could see was reserved for the biscop. This act of flagrant defiance set Alain shaking. The hounds, catching his mood, stirred restlessly, thumping their tails on the ground and lifting their heads to watch intently.

"I beg your pardon, Brother," said Willibrod nervously. He began picking at the scabs on his skin. "That is Biscop Antonia's chair. It is not fitting for a lowly brother to sit

Agius glared the poor cleric into silence.

Through the entryway, Alain saw torches flickering. Biscop Antonia had returned.

it fitting," asked Biscop Antonia in her mild voice after the outraged gasps of her servants had quieted, "that a simple frater of the church presume to sit in the seat of one whose elevation was ordained by the hand of the skopos herself?"

"Our Lady has already judged my heart and found it wanting. It is Her mercy and Her forgiveness I strive to be worthy of. Not yours." Certainly Agius was furious, to speak so.

"You are angry, child. Is this the heart you display to Our Lady and Lord?"

The frater did not seem in the least moved by the biscop's soft words. "She knows what is in my heart." He stood up, no longer looking like a lowly churchman brought before a highranking biscop but rather like a nobleman made angry by a retainer's presumption. "You do not."

A shocked murmuring rose from the crowd of servants; Antonia stilled it with a gesture. "Who speaks now, Frater Agius? The humble frater?" Her voice grew suddenly hard and accusing. "Or the proud son?"

king's dragon He actually winced, though he did not back down. "I will do penance for my pride. What do you want of me, Your Grace? Why have you had me brought here? I serve the world no longer."

"But you live in the world nevertheless. We cannot escape the world, Frater Agius, though we strive to do so. Even you have not yet learned to submit your will to that of Our Lady and Lord. Some part of your heart still lives in your old station, where you are accustomed to having your own way." "Our Lady will judge me," he repeated stubbornly.

"What do you want of me?"

If there had been any tiny line of harshness in her face, it dissolved now into a sweet smile made the more reassuring by her round, pinkcheeked face and her twinkling blue eyes. "To visit with your niece, of course."

"My niece\ He almost roared the word. "She is being fostered by the Biscop of Autun." Her placid countenance remained unmoved by his anger. "Did you know that?" "Of course I knew!" "It was by your suggestion, was it not?" He glared, refusing to answer. "You will remain here for the time being." "Do you mean to make me a hostage?" She signed. At once her servants and retainers left the tent until only she, Alain, the hounds, and Agius remained. She glanced once at the hounds and evidently decided she was safe with them or with Alain, who controlled them. "I mean to make you a weapon."

"I am no longer a weapon to be used in worldly pursuits, Biscop Antonia. When I pledged myself to the church, I pledged myself to no longer care for the things of this world."

She smiled gently. "We shall see." She nodded serenely at Alain and left the tent.

Agius followed her, but his way was blocked by guards. For a moment, Alain thought Agius

meant to

push past them, to force a confrontation. Abruptly he dropped to his knees to pray, wincing when his wounded leg obviously not yet healed although it had been almost two months since Sorrow's bite took his weight. It took Alain some time to distinguish words out of the mumbled flow of syllables.

"I am an unworthy son, Oh, Lady, please make me worthy of Your Mercy. Please judge me not harshly, Lady. Please grant Your Forgiveness to this sinner. Ai, Lady. Please grant me the serenity to accept humility and vanquish pride."

He went on in this way without seeming inclined to stop. Hearing voices raised outside in the short service of Compline, for sunset, Alain knelt and joined in the prayer.

Biscop Antonia did not return after the service was completed. Presumably she went to feast. Cleric Willibrod brought bread and cheese and wine for Alain and Agius; then he, together with several of the other clerics, went back to making necklaces. The frater touched nothing although, in the end, Alain got him to swallow a few sips of wine.

Antonia returned later and went to her bed, her servants and clerics sleeping on pallets around her. Alain slept miserably, huddled on the ground with the two hounds pressed up against him. Questions nagged him through his restless sleep. What did Agius' niece have to do with Lady Sabella's revolt? Agius was, after all, only a simple frater although a simple frater would never dare seat himself in the chair reserved for a holy biscop.

Every time Alain woke, he heard Agius, still whispering his prayers.

In the morning, Alain was allowed out under guard to let the hounds run. As he returned, he saw a retinue approaching, many finely dressed men and women in rich tunics hung with gold and silver chains. He hurried inside to Agius.

"The biscop and many others are approaching!" he hissed. "Noble folk are with her."

Agius rose, a bit shakily, but he straightened and faced the entrance proudly not at all like a humble frater. Alain knelt, hounds on either side of him; he could not stand before such noble lords and ladies. He was only a simple merchant's son.

The light from outside was dazzling but not as dazzling as the rich clothing of Lady Sabella and the portly man who attended her: Rodulf, Duke of Varingia. Contrasted to their elegant clothing, studded with jewels and trimmed with gold and silver ribbons, and the handsome display of gold in chains and coronets and rings, Biscop Antonia's vestments, merely sewn with gold thread, appeared modest.

Rodulf barked out a laugh and addressed Biscop Antonia. "Blessed Lord! I would not have recognized the child, dressed in such rags, had you not warned me, Your Grace." He stumped forward on thick legs. Broadshouldered and heavy, he had the red cheeks of a man who eats heartily and never wants for food. Clapping Frater Agius on the shoulder, he shook him with evident good cheer. "What is this, lad? Some disgrace? Ai, I heard your father and mother were in a red rage when you turned your back on marriage to enter the church. But I thought you'd surely be a presbyter, sent down to that damned hot city of Darre to stand attendance on the skopos. What is this?" He grasped a handful of the old robe in one fleshy hand and tugged on it so hard Alain cringed, hoping the cloth would not tear.

"I serve Our Lady," said Agius stiffly. "I never intended otherwise." He made no obeisance toward Rodulf nor toward Lady Sabella, who stood quietly behind, looking stern and thoughtful.

"But you have come to aid our cousin," said Rodulf, indicating Sabella.

"I have not."

Alain dared not stir by one finger's breadth for fear of the outburst that would certainly come next.

Sabella appeared unflustered. She stepped forward. "You will serve our needs nevertheless, Agius," she said in her flat voice. "I do not have time to spare for a siege of Autun, and Biscop Constance will not give the city over to me willingly, nor can I march forward with Autun's militia and resources and hostility at my back. In return for the safe passage of your niece, you will bring me the Biscop of Autun as a hostage by whatever means you must use."

This threat, if threat it was, did not sway Agius. He looked, if anything, more confident now. "If you do not have support enough to march against King Henry, then perhaps you would do better to retire to your own lands and administer them in a manner more fitting than this."

Sabella's thin lips turned up, though she did not really smile. She gestured to one of her servants. At once, a serving woman entered the tent, bringing with her a girlchild of some five or six summers, a wellgrown girl with hair as pale and wispy as Agius' was dark and thick. Her face still wore tears, but she shrieked aloud when she saw Agius, tore herself out of the serving woman's grasp, and flung herself on him, crying, "Uncle! Uncle! They killed my nurse!" She burst into tears.

He held her tightly, hushing her with whispered words.

When she quieted, Sabella spoke again. "My outriders came across your niece and her retinue as they rode in toward Autun. There was a skirmish. Some number of her retainers refused to come without a fight."

"What do you mean to do with her?" he demanded. "She is meant for the church, as you must know."

Rodulf fidgeted, playing with the rings on his fingers. He looked as if this interview were distasteful to him. Biscop Antonia beamed sweetly on all concerned. Alain felt her gaze settle on him, and he shuddered as if spiders crawled up his back. Rage growled, and he set a hand gently on her muzzle.

"I mean to do nothing with her," said Sabella. "Unless I am forced to. I want Biscop Constance."

Agius was so pale his dark eyes stood out as if they had been painted black, as a whore might to attract men. The child clung to him, face buried in his robes.

"Constance will not suspect you, Agius," Sabella continued. "You were raised together, and of course, as I recall, there was even talk of a betrothal between you and her before it was settled she should enter the church and you should marry Duchess Liutgard." She touched the gold torque she wore at her neck, then lowered the hand to display her palm, a hand empty to the air. "But that betrothal did not end in your marriage to the young duchess but rather in your brother's. A kind and generous man was young Frederic. A good soldier, too. Alas. So many killed in Henry's wars in the east when he ought to have been paying better attention to the lands he claims already to hold. Now." She signed again to the serving woman, who went forward to take hold of the girl.

The girl began to cry again, clutching at her uncle. He embraced her more tightly at first, a look of utter fury on his face, but in the end, his expression now twisted with self-loathing, he coaxed her into letting go of him. The serving woman led her away.

"I see we understand each other," said Sabella to Agius. Without further discussion, she left the tent.

"You must see," said Rodulf abruptly, "that I will have no more Wendish kings and biscopts set over my lands. You're of Wendish blood on your father's side, so you may have little sympathy for my views, but I hold strongly to them. But still, I do not like these methods.."

"Many lives will be spared thereby," said Biscop Antonia soothingly, "and the city of Autun will not be devastated by war. Surely we agree that peace is better than war."

"War is at least an honorable profession," mumbled Rodulf under his breath. "Deceit is not, even if approved by a biscop." He went outside.

"We leave tomorrow at midday, then," said Biscop Antonia. "I will escort you." She gestured toward the tent and its furnishings. "Prepare yourselves as you see fit."

When she had left, Alain and Agius were allowed privacy to bathe. Alain poured water from a pitcher into the plain copper basin reserved for the use of the biscop's servants. He stripped off his tunic and washed his chest and arms and face. The water was bitterly cold.

Agius' deep set eyes were red with exhaustion. He knelt and clasped his hands in prayer.

Alain felt a terrible compassion for the frater. Surely Our Lady and Lord did not intend for any one person to mortify themselves with this agony of selfdoubt? Was it not through Their Mercy that people were given the promise of being cleansed of darkness?

Taking the basin, he carried it over to Agius and knelt beside him. "Here is water to cleanse yourself, Brother."

Agius grimaced in pain. "I am tainted forever with the sin of pride," he said between clenched teeth, his eyes tight shut.

For the first time, Alain noticed the frater's feet, half covered by his threadbare robes. They were bare, covered with old, suppurated sores and fresh cuts caked with dried blood and dirt. Every step must hurt. Alain suddenly wished fervently to spare Agius any more pain, for he was so very full of pain, that was apparent by his expression of utter wretchedness. He dabbed cloth in water and gently wiped the other man's face.

"I pray you," said Agius without opening his eyes, "I am not worthy of your compassion."

"Surely every soul is worthy of compassion," replied Alain, surprised. He dabbed more water on the linen cloth and carefully began to wash the frater's feet. "Is kindness not what we are commanded to give freely to our sisters and brothers?" He glanced up. To his horror, Agius was weeping silently. He drew the cloth away at once. It was mottled with blood and pus and dirt. "I beg your pardon. I did not mean to cause you pain."

"I care nothing for my body's pain. It serves to remind me of my sins. Ai, Lady, in my pride I thought I had put aside the threads that bind me to the old ties of blood and earth. But it is not so. I cannot set my affection for my brother behind me. I cannot love him less than I love Our Lady, even though he is dead and in Her care. So now his child is put in harm's way and I am brought forward to be used, forced by that threat of harm, by those who seek power in this world. In my pride I thought I had put my birth behind me. Now I see it is not so. It can never be so, as long as I am bound by old affections. I am not willing to make the true sacrifice, that of unbinding myself from the ties of kin and giving myself entirely to Our Lady."

Not knowing what else to do, Alain went back to washing the frater's feet, dabbing carefully, trying not to break open freshly healed scabs. "Who are you?" he asked, then feared he was being presumptuous.

After a long silence, Agius replied. "I am the eldest son of Burchard, Duke of Avaria, and Ida, daughter of the due de Provensalle."

In Osna village, it was considered the duty of the eldest daughter to inherit her mother's goods and property and carry on her work and title, and the duty of the eldest son to marry well and thus weave a greater web of connection between households. Only younger children were sent into the



church. Surely the great princes of the realm, men and women, expected the same from their sons and daughters.

"No wonder your parents were angry," said Alain as the full import of Agius' rebellion hit him.

The frater merely grunted. He sat back abruptly and ran a hand through his hair, tousling it, then fingered his chin to rub at the days'old beard now growing there.

"What will you do?" asked Alain.

"I will save my brother's daughter, for the love there was between us. So will the number of my sins become greater."

"But you said you would not aid them . . . and she is so young." Alain trailed off. The girlchild was only a little younger than Aunt Bel's youngest daughter, sweet Agnes. "What hold do they truly have over you? Surely they wouldn't

"Kill her?" Agius smiled sourly. "You are a good boy, Alain. You do not yet understand what we are capable of, we who still pursue the power held before us by the Enemy as a temptation. For the power given us to wield on this earth is an empty power compared to the sacrifice of the blessed Daisan and the promise of the Chamber of Light. But we are tainted by darkness, and so with clouded eyes we grasp at shadows," He clapped his hands once, imperiously. "Cleric! Bring me a knife. I am not worthy to call myself a good churchman with such a beard." His expression was ragged with despair, but he moved with the sure and decided movements of a man who has come to terms with a terrible destiny.

I walked, and Alain walked beside him, trailed by the hounds. Biscop Antonia rode at the front of the procession on her white mule, led by her servants. A cleric carried a green banner on a pole, marked with the badge of her city: a black tower at the confluence of two rivers. The black cloth of the tower was embroidered in gold thread with a biscop's crosier.

"There is so much talk of dukes and lands and biscopos and allegiances," Alain confessed. "I can't make sense of it."

Agius smiled thinly. "You cannot make sense of why I am to be used as the snare to trap the white deer?"

"The white deer?"

"That is the name we gave Constance." When Alain nodded, trying to look as if he understood perfectly well what Agius was talking about, the frater gave a sigh of king's dragon frustration. "Constance is King Henry's sister, his youngest sibling except for Brun."

"But why would Lady Sabella call you cousin? You do not wear" Alain drew his fingers around the curve of his throat.

"Only those descended from the house of royal kin are permitted to wear the golden torque. It signifies their royal blood. Both Sabella and her husband Berengar may wear the golden torque. Duchess Liutgard is so ornamented. I am not."

"But why would? And not you? If you are the son of a duke?" Clouds had come in from the east. It was colder than it had been in the morning. Alain felt the dirt of the road under his boots. If it rained, the road would get muddy; how much rain, how much mud, would it take to prevent this plan from going forward? Yet he marched with Sabella's forces, under the aegis of Count Lavastine. Should he not wish devoutly for her victory? "As reading and prayer, so the ordering of the world," said Agius with a sigh. "What?"

"I seem fated to teach you, Alain. I trust to Our Lady's Wisdom that you will take better to the great truth of Her Son's sacrifice and redemption than you have so far to your letters. Now. Attend."

They walked along a deserted road. The farmers and freeholders who owed allegiance to Autun had all fled inside the city walls at the approach of Sabella's army. Though clouds were their roof and the green fields their chamber, Alain felt transported back to the days of lessons with the frater at Lavas Holding. Agius was not an easy teacher, more often ruthless and impatient with mistakes than forgiving of lapses. What he knew he was determined others should know.

"There are ten great princes in the kingdom of Wendar and Varre. Six of these princes we know as dukes. Four we know as margraves, since they administer the marches that lie along the eastern border. The sovereign is first among these princes, not apart from them. It is by their consent and the sovereign's strength that a prince or princess of the royal line comes to be acknowledged as the next ruler of Wendar and Varre."

"But weren't Wendar and Varre once separate kingdoms?"

"I can't imagine what your father was thinking," said Agius with some exasperation, "not to educate you properly."

"My father taught me all the things a merchant's son needs to know," said Alain hotly, stung by this unwarranted criticism. "I can repair a ship. I know a bit about sailing and navigation. I know the worth of coins from many different kingdoms and peoples. I can barter."

"I did not mean your foster father."

Distracted, Alain forgot his anger momentarily. "Surely you don't still believe I might be Count Lavastine's bastard?"

Agius gestured eloquently toward the hounds, which padded faithfully after Alain. They were as meek as puppies as long as Alain or Count Lavastine was next to them. Agius knew well enough what they would do to anyone else who approached them. "But that is neither here nor there. I will perform the task given me by our Lady. Attend."

They crested a rise. In the distance, Alain saw the city of Autun, the cathedral tower, the city walls, and the faint glimmer of the River Rhowne as it wound through fields lush with growing grain. Then the road dipped down into forest, and trees obscured the view.

"I will not trouble you with the story of the rise of the house of Saony. It is a long and complicated affair better left to the nuns of Korvei, who have for many years chronicled the deeds of the great princes of this realm. What you must know is that in the year , according to that chronicle, the young King Louis of Varre, known as Louis the Child, died. Two years later the elder Arnulf, king of Wendar, died. Arnulf the younger, his son, became king of both Wendar and Varre. What year is it now, Alain?"

What year? It was spring. This particular day was St. Casceil's Day, as had been duly recited in the morning service. Since they had not yet celebrated the Feast of St. Susannah, it must not yet be the month of Sormas, but he could not recall now which day of Avril St. Casceil's Day fell on.

And as for years! Alain was not used to the marking of years. He dredged back into his memory, stumbled over a pothole in the road, and remembered.

"It is the year since the Proclamation of the Word."

"That is right. You know of the struggle of Henry and Sabella for the right to sit on the throne of Wendar and Varre." Agius gestured, lips twisted in a frown, toward Biscop Antonia. She had begun to sing and as usual her clerics joined in with great sweetness of tone. Alain could not understand the words, since they sang in Dariyan.

But Agius, distracted, murmured words in time to their singing.

"These four Deacons were treasurers, Who held in their integrity, The key to the mystery. Four

days did they open to us, Each one of them with her key. To Thee be glory, Who chose them wisely!'

"Is that what the words mean?" demanded Alain.

"Yes. It is an old song, from the East. But never mind it. We must not be distracted from our purpose. Soon we will come to the walls of Autun and there will be an end to your lesson. Now. What is the name of the king, and who are his siblings?"

"King Henry, of course!" Aware that he had spoken loudly, Alain ducked his head, embarrassed. In Sabella's camp, one did not speak of Henry as king. "And Lady Sabella, who is his elder sister."

"His half sister," Agius corrected. "Queen Berengaria of Varre was her mother. When she died, the younger Arnulf married Mathilda of Karrone, who is Henry's mother. And then?"

"I don't know."

"These are the living children of Arnulf and Mathilda. Henry. Rotrudis. Richardis, known as Scholastica, who is Mother at Quedlinhame Cloister. Benedict. Constance. Brun. Henry also has a half sister who is the child of the younger Arnulf and a concubine. She is Alberada, now Biscop of Handelburg, but that is far to the east in the marchlands, and she has taken no part in the quarrels between Henry and Sabella. Now. Who are the six dukes?"

"I ... I don't know. Well. Duke Rodulf is one. And isn't Sabella's husband Berengar called a duke?"

"He is indeed. He is Duke of Arconia, although of course Lady Sabella administers his lands, as his wife. Rodulf is Duke of Varingia. The city of Autun lies on the border of those lands administered by Rodulf and his wife, which we call Varingia, and those lands administered by Sabella and Berengar, called Arconia. Perhaps you wonder, then, why the Biscop of Autun is sympathetic to Henry's cause, though her city lies within that region controlled by Lady Sabella?"

Alain nodded dutifully.

"When Sabella first rebelled against her brother's authority eight years ago, the biscop of Autun was one of her principal supporters. So Henry removed the biscop of Autun and made her abbess of a small, isolated convent instead. He then convinced the skopos to install in her place his young sister Constance. The white deer. Of course Constance supports Henry."

"What of the other four dukes?"

"Three of the dukes support Henry. Henry's sister Rotrudis is Duchess of Saony and Attomar. The duchy of Saony is the original seat of power of his family. Before they became kings, they were the dukes of Saony."

"How did they become the kings, then?"

"That you must learn another time, or read for yourself. Now attend." He looked ahead as they came out of the shadow of the trees into sun. A long downslope rolled out from their feet. Soon they would come within an arrow's shot of the city walls. Alain wondered how soon they would be noticed by the people within the city. "Burchard, Duke of Avaria."

"He is your father."

"Yes." Alain wanted to draw him out, but Agius spoke the word so curtly the boy dared ask no more questions. "And third, Liutgard, Duchess of Fesse, who is also of royal kin."

"The one you were betrothed to."

"I see you have listened more closely than I supposed."

"But your brother married her instead."

Agius looked away quickly, hiding his expression. Alain thought of the little girl who had clung to her uncle in Biscop Antonia's tent; clearly Agius's bond to his brother and thus his brother's children was very strong.

With sudden sympathy for Agius' grief and impotent fury in the face of his niece's captivity, Alain asked another question. "Who is the sixth duke?"

A hesitation. At last Agius spoke, although he still looked away, staring at the ground. "Conrad, Duke of Wayland, known as Conrad the Black. Sabella claims he supports her, but he has not brought his forces to march with hers."

"And the margraves?"

Agius had recovered his composure. He lifted his chin cleanly shaven that morning, as befit a man dedicated to the church and took in a deep breath of air, as if to fortify himself. "Chief among the margraves is Helmut Villam. Second, and almost as powerful, is Judith, margrave of Olsatia and Austra. Werinhar, margrave of Westfall, is the other."

"You said there were four."

!

A shadow crossed Agius' expression, the same raw grief. Alain understood at once that this had something to do with his beloved brother. "The margrave of Eastfall and both her sons died three years ago in a battle fought against the Quman."

"Isis that the battle your brother died in?" A wild guess, but Alain knew he was right by the sharp glance Agius threw him and the frater's sudden grim silence.

They walked for a while. The biscop and her clerics were still singing; the hymn from the East evidently had many verses. He did not want to look at Agius or to ask him any more questions, whether about margraves or verses. Agius held such a store of pain in him that it hurt Alain to see it.

Agius whispered words in Wendish under his breath, in time to the voices of the others.

"Daughters of Nisibia, act as did your mother, Who laid a Body within her, And it became a Wall without her!

Lay in you a living Body, That it may be a Wall for your life.

To Thee be glory, Who chose most wisely.'

As the clerics finished the hymn, the biscop slowed her mule and the entire procession came to a halt. Antonia dismounted.

Autun was built on a hill that rose out of the plain of the Rhowne Valley.hovels and huts stood outside the walls, but like the fields they were empty of any life except for a stray chicken pecking along the verge of the settlement. Antonia's party was as yet out of arrow shot of the city walls, but at the great palisade gate that marked the main entrance to the city a company had assembled. Two banners flew, and as the company descended the road, coming out to meet Biscop Antonia, Alain made out their devices: One, like the banner of the city of Mainni, showed a tower, this a gray tower surmounted by a black raven. The other banner, so

bright a gold it seemed to reflect the sun itself, depicted a white deer.

Agius moved forward to stand beside Biscop Antonia. He was sickly pale. Antonia, looking perfectly at her ease, had a magnanimous smile on her face as she waited for the group from the city to

arrive and greet her.

As befit the daughter and sister of kings, the Biscop of Autun had a handsome and impressive retinue. Her clerics wore robes of fine linen dyed a rich burgundy, and each one held a book, a token of their station. Draped over their left shoulders they each wore a long, embroidered linen scarf. There were perhaps thirty clerics in the company; Alain had never seen so many books in one place before. Indeed, it had never occurred to him so many might exist in all the world.

Monks and nuns attended her also, carrying thuribles, round vessels of beaten brass in which incense was burned; the thuribles hung from chains, swinging slowly back and forth to the rhythm of the soft chanting of the company. "Kyria eleison. Kyrie eleison." Lady, have mercy on us. Lord, have mercy on us.

The Biscop of Autun rode a white mule at the center of the procession. Though she wore a biscop's rich vestments and mitre, Alain could see at her neck the golden torque marking her as born of royal kin. She was young, certainly younger than Agius, but she had a grave expression that made her look as steady and wise as a woman twice her years. Her complexion was healthy if pale, and when she dismounted and came forward on foot, hands outstretched to greet her sister biscop, Alain could see she was tall and of good stature, like her elder half sister Sabella. She had a light step and an elegant manner. Alain saw immediately why she had received the name 'the white deer.'

She took Biscop Antonia's hands in hers and at once the soft chanting of her company ceased. There was silence except for the scrape of shifting feet on dirt and the jingling of harness.

"I greet you, sister, and welcome you to my city," said Constance. She had a pleasingly high voice, full and clear. But she did not smile. "I am surprised to find you here, so far from Mainni and the Hearth over which you were ordained to watch."

"I give you greetings in return, sister," said Antonia with rather more sweetness. "I come in the peace of Our Lord and Lady."

"There are others with you." Constance looked back along the road down which Antonia and the others had come.

Of course, the road was empty. Sabella's army was safely encamped several hours' ride into the Duke of Varingia's territory. This was strange, certainly, in itself. The duchy of Arconia remained under the aegis of Berengar and Sabella. Yet a biscop's duties were twofold. She watched over the spiritual wellbeing of her charges and over the Hearth of the cathedral given unto her by the authority of the skopos. But a biscop must be consulted in worldly matters as well, just as the king or duke had a say in what noblewoman was most deserving of elevation to biscop when a see became empty by reason of death or dishonor. As Biscop of Autun, whose spiritual duty was to watch over the inhabitants of the central portion of the kingdoms of Wendar and Varrethe region known as Arconia Constance had the right to demand to be consulted on matters pertaining to the administration of the duchy of Arconia. Perhaps Sabella's hold on the loyalty of the populace in her own husband's duchy was not as strong as that populace's love for their new young biscop, Constance.

"I fear there is strife in your family," said Antonia, sounding much stricken at having to be the bearer of bad tidings. "I have come as mediator. I beg of you to come with me to speak of these matters with Sabella and Rodulf."

"It grieves me to hear of such things," replied Con

stance without any indication this was news to her, "but I fear the illwill of Sabella, for reasons you must know, and in any case I am loath to leave my people" Here she gestured toward the city, which lay quiet in the midday sun. "without my guidance, and without my presence to protect them."

Agius had remained in the background, hidden by the robes of Antonia's clerics. Now he

stepped forward. The bleak dark stain of his frater's robes stood out starkly against the brighter clothing of his more worldly brethren.

Constance's expression brightened. She looked delighted. "Agius! You have surprised me." She released Antonia's hands and reached and drew Agius to her as if he were her brother. The show of familiarity astonished Alain. "I did not expect to find you in such company."

Just barely Alain caught in Constance's tone a muted disgust for the company Agius was keeping. If Antonia noticed it, she made no sign; she beamed as fondly on them as an elderly kinswoman might approve the reuniting of two feuding siblings.

"I travel where I must," Agius said. He looked torn between his obvious pleasure in seeing Biscop Constance and the dilemma that hung over him as the executioner's sword hangs over the neck of the condemned. "I follow the path which Our Lady has set before my feet."

"And that path led you to Sabella's camp?" asked Constance. If there was sarcasm in her utterance, Alain could not hear it.

"Worldly consideration led me to Sabella's camp, Your Grace."

"I thought you had turned your face away from worldly considerations, Prater Agius, when you refused marriage and took the brown robe of service instead."

He smiled grimly. "The world is not yet done with me, Your Grace. Alas."

"It is ever thus, that the world intrudes when we wish most devoutly only to contemplate God." Constance folded her hands together and bowed her head slightly, as if in submission to God's will. Then she raised her head to look at Agius directly again. "But God in kindness endowed humans with freedom equal to that of the angels. For is it not true that the sun and the moon and indeed even the stars are so fixed that they can only move in the path marked out for them? Yet it is not so with those born of human mothers. Thus must our behavior be reckoned with that of the angels. The praise or blame which a man's conduct deserves is really his own." She turned to Biscop Antonia. "Do you not agree, Your Grace?"

Of course Alain recognized at once that the remark was like a barbed spear: meant to sink in with little hope to ease it out without great pain.

Biscop Antonia had impenetrable armor. She nodded. "It is as you say, Your Grace. Thus do Our Lord and Lady judge our actions, by what we do and by what we leave undone."

Agius made no reply.

This silence Biscop Constance took in stride. "Now that we are met on the road," she continued, "I pray you will return with me to my hall, where my people will entertain you as is fitting with a good feast and a taste of Autun wine."

Agius shifted violently. "I have come to ask," he said quickly, "that you return with us to Sabella's camp, as Biscop Antonia requests of you."

"Surely it would be unwise of me to place myself in Sabella's power, although certainly I hold no personal enmity toward my sister."

"I will hold myself responsible, and none other, if any harm comes to you, Your Grace."

"Are you pledging me safe passage, Agius?"

"I pledge to escort you safely back to your city, Your Grace."

She was startled, though she tried to conceal it. "Then I will agree to go," she said. "Better peace than war, as the blessed Daisan said."

"I will go with you, then," added Agius, "to your hall while you gather anything you need to take

to Sabella's camp."

"No need." She shrugged and gestured to her servants to bring her mule. "I am armored with my faith, Prater Agius, as are we all who have given our lives to Our Lord and Lady. And I am made strong by my brother's confidence in me as he is by mine in him."

"Then it is well we should go." Yet Agius hesitated as both biscopts were helped onto their mounts. He came forward and took the reins of Biscop Constance's mule in the place of her servant. "But did not the blessed Daisan say, he who spurns what is offered is all too often in want? It is past midday, and if we ride on now, we and the others of Biscop Antonia's party will have walked all day fasting."

Even Alain did not have to guess at Biscop Constance's reaction to this statement; she was delighted to be able to offer hospitality. Aunt Bel had said many a time within his hearing: "So does Our Lady judge us, by our generosity at table." Aunt Bel was so wellknown for feeding folk passing through Osna village that less magnanimous householders sometimes fobbed guests off on her. Never had she turned one away.

"Then certainly we must return to my palace and dine," said Constance with evident pleasure.

They returned, Agius still leading the mule, to Autun. It was the largest city Alain had ever seen, with a stone wall and a stone and timber cathedral and so many buildings all shoved together that he wondered how the folk who lived there did not choke on each other. They passed quickly through the gate and down a wide avenue flanked with timber houses built in a style quite unlike the longhouses of his village. The walls of the biscop's palace rose to the height of three men. He barely had time to catch his breath before they were led inside its imposing timber frame.

There, he was allowed to sit by the great hearth and eat bread so white and soft it was more like a cloud than what he knew as bread, heavy loaves with thick dark crusts. He was given leave to eat as much as he wished of the best cheese he had ever tasted and the leavings of the fowl and fish that made up the biscop's simple midday meal. All this while Rage and Sorrow gnawed on hambones still bristling with meat and fat. Probably poor Lackling had never eaten as much pork in his entire cold and lonely life as the hounds devoured in the course of the next hour. It was a terrible thing to sit and eat with such pleasure while Lackling had not even the peace of a marked grave.

But Alain could not help himself. Even helping to serve at Count Lavastine's table during the visit of Lady Sabella and her entourage he had not seen a meal as casually elegant as this. But then, Biscop Constance was the king's sister, born of the lineage of kings. The dark beams and tapestried walls, the bustling clerics and the fine linen worn by every least servant, served to remind him how small a place Osna village was. Certainly Aunt Bel and his father Henri were respectable and prosperous freeholders. Of this they and their children could always be proud. Bel had lost children to disease but never to starvation, as many did. But sitting in this hall, even in the ashy corner by the hearth, that pride seemed little compared to the great state employed in the service of princes.

What the great ones spoke of he had no idea. He ate too much and then his stomach ached from the rich food, to which he was not accustomed. The long walk back to Sabella's camp seemed to take an eternity. Each step jolted him. He leaned, alternately, on Rage and then on Sorrow, to keep his balance. The two biscopts rode side by side, not giving pride of place to the other. Agius, evidently set on maintaining his pose as simple frater rather than duke's son, continued to lead Constance's mule.

Alain hoped he would make it to camp without throwing up by the side of the road.

But after an hour and with the day neither too warm nor too cold and the wind a pleasant touch on his face, he began to feel better. Of them all, only Agius looked steadily worse as they came closer to Sabella's camp.

Scouts had run ahead. As their party crossed the last rye field before the camp began its sprawl

through pasture and light woods, soldiers and campfolk appeared to line their path, to stare at the royal biscop. Together, Antonia and Constance made a striking pair: cheerful age and stern youth. To see two biscops in the same cavalcade was a rare sight, and Alain wished suddenly and painfully that Lackling could be alive to see it, for he so loved all that was bright and lovely to look upon even if only from a distance. But Antonia had brought death to the boy. How could she ride with such a smooth countenance, as if nothing troubled her conscience?

But was it not Agius who spoke of the inner heart? As Aunt Bel said: "A smooth countenance without reflects a calm soul within." So Alain had always believed. Now he wondered. How could any person make dealings with blood and dark shades and by that means bring about the death of an innocent simple boy, and yet show no sign of that terrible sin in her face?

Lady Sabella waited in front of the great tent surmounted by her banner. Her daughter Tallia stood beside her, looking pale and cold in a gown of silk the color of harvested wheat. Duke Rodulf and her other partisans stood at her side or a few steps back; Count Lavastine, in their midst, appeared wooden, drained of life. Sabella did not come forward to greet her half sister but rather waited for Constance to dismount and walk forward in her turn.

"Sister," said Constance mildly, "I give you greetings. It is my devout hope we can mend these troubles that have torn our family apart."

Sabella did not offer Constance her hands, the sign of kinship and safekeeping. Instead, she took a step back and signed to her soldiers. They swarmed forward to form a ring around the two women and their retinues. Antonia dismounted and came to stand beside Sabella. Tallia stared somberly at Constance, as if the young biscop were an apparition. Agius sank to one knee, head bowed, still holding the halter of Constance's white mule.

"You are now come to rest in my hands, Constance," said Sabella in the flat voice that disguised her emotions, if indeed she had any. "You are my hostage for Henry's good behavior and for his agreement to give precedence to my rightful claim."

Like a deer, startled by the sudden appearance of the hunter, Biscop Constance threw up her head, eyes wide, looking as if she were about to bolt. But of course she was surrounded. She drew her hands back and folded them in front of her. This gesture allowed her to regain her composure.

"I have been betrayed," she said in a loud, firm voice. She turned to gaze directly at Agius, who rose slowly to face her, his complexion white. "You promised me safe escort, Agius. Cousin." The word, said with emphasis and anger, was a weapon, meant to wound. Agius said nothing.

"He gave you safe escort," interposed Antonia. "He escorted you safely into your city, where we broke our fast. Then we came here, but he had already discharged the obligation. He did not promise you safe passage for a second time."

Constance did not even glance toward Antonia. "You have deceived me, Agius. I will not forget it."

"Nor should you," he replied, his voice rough. But he looked beyond Constance to Sabella. Alain was suddenly struck by the age of the two women: Sabella was old enough to be Constance's mother; as indeed she would have been, might have been, had she proven herself fertile on her heir's progress so many years ago, the progress that had resulted in her being passed over for

the throne. Tallia, the late fruit of her marriage, looked like a frail reed out of which to create the staff that would grant her the authority of a sovereign queen.

"And so, Lady Sabella," said Agius harshly, "my part in this is finished. Release my niece and let us ride free, as you promised."

"As I promised, I will free your niece into the custody of the biscop of Autun, whom I now



restore to the seat taken unlawfully from her by the decree of my brother Henry and with the connivance of my sister Constance." She gestured. An old, frail woman tottered forward, wearing biscop's vestments marked with the badge of the city of Autun.

"You will go against Henry's wishes?" Constance demanded. "/ am the biscop of Autun."

"And by what right did Henry remove this woman from her see?" Sabella's tone was mild but unyielding. "Helvissa was given the biscop's crosier by the authority of the skopos herself twenty years ago. Henry's worldly authority does not outrank the spiritual authority of the skopos in these matters. I merely restore Biscop Helvissa to her rightful place."

But looking at the old woman, whose hands shook with palsy, Alain could not imagine she would be anything except a pawn in Sabella's plans.

"She is Mother to a convent now," Constance said, "not biscop. / was invested"

"You were invested as a deacon in the church, sister. Your election to biscop can, I think, be treated as invalid. It is as a deacon you will remain in my custody."

Constance gasped. Looking furious, she shut her mouth tight.

A servingwoman came forward with the little girl, Agius' niece. The child had the expression of a cornered animal, gone still while waiting for the deathblow. She saw her uncle and leaned toward him as rashes lean in a stiff breeze, but she made no move to ran to him. It was

as if a leash held her to her captors. Tears trailed down her cheeks, yet she made no sound though her chin trembled. A slender gold torque gleamed at her neck.

"The child will return with the biscop to the city of Autun," said Sabella, sounding satisfied with herself and the fruition of her plan. "But you may not leave me, Prater Agius. I may still have need of you."

"Then my niece remains in your custody." His voice was quiet, too quiet, perhaps. Alain had never heard him so subdued. Agius glanced toward the girl, then tore his gaze away from her. The child hiccuped down a sob in response.

Constance knelt abruptly, extending her hands. "Come, child," she said, more order than request. The child looked to her uncle, got his bare nod, and took hesitant steps forward until Constance's hands rested lightly on her shoulders. "This is Ermengard, daughter of Duchess Liutgard and her husband Frederic of Avaria. She is destined for the church." Only then did Constance look back up at Sabella. "Even our quarrels must not stand in the way of Our Lady's and Lord's will. Let one of my clerics escort her to Autun and put her into the care of my chatelaine, a woman of good birth and education."

Agius stood with hands clenched, gaze fixed on his niece with uncomfortable intensity. The new biscop staggered and had to be supported by a servant.

"I will allow this," said Sabella at last. "Constance, I leave you in the hands of Biscop Antonia. Now." She turned to Duke Rodulf. "We march. Autun will comply with the wishes of her rightful biscop, although we will leave a garrison behind to make sure of their loyalty to us."

Alain caught sight suddenly of Sabella's husband, Berengar, sitting with a servant on the ground in front of Sabella's great tent. The two menoble and servant were playing chess. Berengar laughed with great gusto, almost braying with pleasure, knocked over the servant's pieces, and proclaimed himself winner. Tallia flinched. Biscop Antonia set a steadying hand on the young woman's shoulder.

So it was done. The girlchild, Ermengard, was led away in the company of the new biscop of Autun. Constance was led away under guard, though she refused to relinquish her biscop's robes and mitre and scarf, and none there dared take these things from her by force.

"You have deceived me, Sabella," said Agius finally.

"It surprises me to hear you say such a thing," replied Sabella. "For we both promised safe passage and met our obligations. I do not hold it as deceit."

"I do."

"Yet reflect on this, cousin. Were Constance to remain in Autun, there would be war between her people and mine. What better judgment is there than that by which discord is dissolved and peace reestablished?"

"What better judgment? That of Our Lady, who looks within our souls and judges what She sees there."

Sabella lifted an eyebrow, the most expressive gesture Alain had ever seen her use. "I am as you see me, Prater Agius. By this must you judge me. I trust you will submit to the custody of Biscop Antonia."

"I will submit because I have no choice."

"Then he is yours, Your Grace," she said to Antonia.

"And this one as well," said Antonia. To Alain's horror, the whitehaired biscop turned her gaze on him.

"This one?" Sabella looked first here and then there and finally, with some confusion, found him with the hounds as if she had not truly seen him before. "He is a kennel boy, is he not? I recognize Lavastine's hounds."

"Not just a kennel boy, I believe," said Antonia. "I would be gratified if you would render him into my care."

Sabella shrugged. She did not even consult Lavastine, who in any case no longer spoke except when spoken to and then in that flat monotone which reminded Alain of Sabella's voice. "He is yours." She turned away, leading Duke Rodulf and the others with her. Tallia trailed

behind, looking back over her shoulder. Briefly, Alain met her eyes: They were palest grayblue, like the dawn sky on a cloudless day. Then she followed her mother inside the great tent.

Alain shivered. He dared not look up at Antonia. Sabella's indifference to his fate terrified him. So easily was he abandoned. Outside of Lavastine's camp, none knew or cared what happened to him. What if Antonia suspected, or even knew, he had witnessed Lackling's murder?

"Come," said the biscop in her usual kind voice. "You will serve at the feast tonight, Alain."

He shuddered. She even remembered his name.

"Prater Agius, I hope you are not too proud to serve as well."

"I will serve as I am bid."

But Alain heard the terrible pain welling up underneath the humble words.

Together they were escorted to the river and given some privacy to wash. Agius' expression had taken on such a cast of blankness that Alain feared for him. But the frater said nothing. He knelt on the bank and prayed silently while Alain washed his own face and hands, then, tentatively, peeled off his tunic and washed his chest and back. Finally, not sure when he would have such a chance again, he stripped and waded to the deepest part of the little river, up past his thighs, took a ragged breath, and went under.

He came up, spitting and coughing, into a boiling mass of hounds. They swam round him, their tails whipping against his skin. Rage nipped at him, and Sorrow swam on to the other side of the river and shook himself all over with such power that Alain, in the middle, felt the spray off his coat.

Unexpectedly, Alain felt a swell of simple joy. He laughed. Had not Rage and Sorrow chosen him as their companion? It seemed impossible for Biscop Antonia to harm him as long as the two hounds protected him.

He waded back to shore. Agius was still praying. If his eyes had lifted from his hands even once, Alain saw no sign of it.

"Wash yourself, my friend," said Alain finally. "Is it not what Our Lady would wish, that we appear before her cleansed?"

He was not sure Agius heard the words, so he shook out his clothing as best he could, let himself dry off, and dressed. The guards shifted at their positions, anxious to return their charges to the biscop's custody.

"You are right," said Agius suddenly. He took off his frater's robe. Under it, against his skin, he wore a coarse shirt woven of linen and horsehair. But Alain noticed at once that his leg, where Sorrow had bitten him, was dirty, red, and swollen. Before Alain could utter a word, Agius removed his hair shirt.

Alain could not restrain a gasp. Even the guards murmured in awe and horror.

The stiff cloth had rubbed Agius' skin raw. In places, the open skin was festering.

"Doesn't it hurt?" Alain whispered, feeling the pain like fire on his own back and chest.

Agius threw himself full length on the ground, hands clenched, awful tortured skin exposed. "It is no more than I deserve. I betrayed one for the other, only to find myself betrayed in return. Ai, Lady, I thought only to help the child, for the love I bore Frederic."

"But you saved your niece, surely?"

"Saved her from what? She still remains in Sabella's custody, since Sabella's creature now acts as biscop of Autun in Constance's place. I could not even take the child to safety, back to her mother's castle or to the king's progress. I pray that the king learns of these deeds soon, for they will make him very angry." He spoke more slowly now, almost savoring the words. "The king's anger is a terrible thing to behold." A slight moan escaped him, the sound of a creature mourning. "Ai, Lady, You will judge me harshly, as I deserve. I vowed to leave the world and enter Your service, and yet the world pursues me and grants no mercy from its burdens. Forgive me my sins. Let my belief in the true knowledge of Your Son's sacrifice grant me a measure of peace in my heart."

So on he went, back to his prayers. The guards muttered, listening and watching.

Alain did not know what to do. In an odd way, Agius reminded him of the piteous guivre: wounded and suffering in a cage made for it by others. Yet the guivre was of itself no pitiful thing; it had a fierce and hideous nobility, separate from human concerns.

After a bit, the hounds ventured closer, then nudged at Agius' prostrate body. The frater did not react to this threat. Perhaps Agius hoped, at that moment, they would tear him to pieces and have done with it. But instead, Sorrow licked at the wound on his leg and Rage licked the sores on his back.

Alain hurried forward to find Agius weeping silently. He knelt and whispered soothing words to him as he might to Aunt Bel's youngest daughter Agnes when she was caught in nighttime fears.

Finally, Agius let Alain help him into the water and wash.

But that night Agius did not eat, nor did he the next day as they marched on, leaving Autun behind. Only in the evening did Alain coax him to take a crust of old bread, scarcely fit for beggars.

Watched as they were, this piece of information was conveyed to Biscop Antonia. She took Alain aside the next morning and thanked him kindly for his care of Frater Agius.

"Although he professes a heresy," she said gently, "I hope to bring him back to his senses and

into the church again."

But Alain feared, in Agius' silence and stubborn fixed stare, that the frater had taken into his head some kind of terrible idea, that he meant to do something rash or dangerous. Agius prayed incessantly, even while walking. At every halt in the march he spoke to a growing audience of the curious about the revelation of the Son, the blessed Daisan, through Whose sacrifice our sins are redeemed.

A MOUSE'S HUNGER LET us rest here," said Rosvita to her escort. She indicated a log that had, by the grace of Our Lady and Lord, come to rest like a bench just where the path broke out of the forest atop a ridge. From this plain but serviceable seat one could see the valley spread out below, the plaster and timber buildings of Hersford Monastery, the large estate, and the several villages strung like clusters of grapes along the Hers River.

She was not sure a magnate of Helmut Villam's stature would deign to sit on such a humble seat. But she sat down and, after a moment, handing the reins of his horse over to his son, so did he.

The thin wail of a horn carried to them on the stiff wind that blew along the ridge top. They watched as out of a copse below the king and his company emerged, bright banners signaling their passage.

A white banner marked with a red eagle in profile now flew among the othermore familiar pennants.

Duchess Liutgard of Fesse had arrived at Hersford Monastery yesterday. Hersford lay on the border between the duchies of Saony and Fesse; it was traditional for the reigning duke to escort the king across into her domain. Liutgard had inherited her position at a very young age and perhaps because of her youth she adhered strictly to the old forms.

"I fear you have missed the hunt," said Rosvita. What intrigues would be planted on today's hunt, their fruit to be harvested many months from now for good or for ill?

Villam coughed, flushed from the exertion of toiling up the hill. A big man, he had spared his horse the last steep climb by leading it instead of riding. "The hunt is ever on, Sister Rosvita. Only the prey we hunt differs from chase to chase."

"Do you think King Henry is serious? That he intends to elevate the illegitimate child over the legitimate ones?"

Villam's smile was slight and selfmocking. "I am not an unprejudiced observer in this matter. If King Henry did indeed designate Sanglant as his heir, against all custom, then can it not be said / have a direct interest in promoting Sanglant's elevation?"

"How would that be so?" she asked, wondering if he would actually state outright what most people believed to be true: that he had stood by while his eldest daughter, Waltharia, carried on an affair of some months' duration with the charming Sanglant, an affair that had ended with her pregnancy by the prince and subsequent marriage to a sturdy young man of noble birth and pleasant manners.

But for answer, he only smiled knowingly. Behind, his son Berthold, standing close enough to listen in, gave a snort of amusement. It would be well to remember, thought Rosvita, that the lad had, as well as undoubted skill at arms, his father's ironical bent and a seemingly endless store of amiability.

"I think," said Villam suddenly, "the king must make up his mind to marry again. Queen Sophia has been at peace in the Chamber of Light for almost two years now, and the nuns have sung prayers in her memory through two Penitires. The king is strong, but it is always to the benefit of a man to be strengthened by marriage to a woman his equal in courage and wit."

She chanced to glance up at the son, who was obviously trying to suppress laughter. Since Villam was notorious even among the great princes of the realm for his weakness for comely young concubines,

it was useful to know his children were aware of his fault and apt to judge him leniently despite it. She sighed. Now that King Henry had charged her with this errand, she knew she would be drawn more and more into the intrigues that journeyed along with the cavalcade of physical creatures and goods on the king's progress. The prospect gave her no pleasure. It would only take time away from her History.

"He must choose carefully if he marries again," she said, resigning herself to the inevitable.

"When he marries again. Henry is too shrewd to remain unmarried, and when a worthy alliance reveals itself, I am sure he will take advantage of it. Henry is a man like any other." Villam stroked his gray beard while he watched hounds and then riders vanish into a stand of wood. He wore his usual affable smile, but there was a certain reticence about his expression, a distance in his eyes as he contemplated the wood below, silent trees which concealed the hunting party within. "A man like any other. Except he has only the one bastard and wishes for no other. None can fault the king's piety."

"Indeed not," she hurriedly agreed. Certainly it was true.

"But it is not piety that stays him from that course."

"You are saying, Lord Helmut, that it is memory, not piety, that restrains him from taking a concubine. The events to which you refer occurred while I was still a novice at Korvei. You think he loves the woman still?"

"No woman. I am not sure I would call it love. Sorcery, more like. Understand this, Sister Rosvita. She

cared nothing for the rest of us." That same selfmocking smile teased his lips and vanished. "And I say that not only because I am a vain man and wished for her to acknowledge my interest in her, and was annoyed that she did not. Certainly, she was beautiful. She had also an arrogance worthy of the Emperor Tailiefer himself, were he to descend from the heavens and walk among us as she did then. But we were as nothing to her. Her indifference to the rest of us was as complete as ours is to He ran a hand along the smooth surface of the log, long since scoured free of its bark by wind and rain and sun. Picking up a tiny insect, he displayed it, let it crawl across the tips of his fingers, then flicked it casually away. It vanished among the weeds. "this least of Our Lord's and Lady's creatures. Perhaps it was only a man's vanity, but I always felt she wanted something from Henry, not that she felt affection toward him. But I have never figured out what it was she wanted," "Not the child?"

"Why leave the child behind if she wanted it? The infant was not more than two months old. No." He shook his head. "Perhaps a sudden madness took her, and that was all. Perhaps, like the beasts of the field, her time came upon her, and Henry happened to be the bull at hand. Perhaps her kind do not think as we do and so we can never hope to fathom her actions and intent. Or perhaps, as some whisper, there are forces at work we are not aware of." He shrugged. "Sanglant is strong and brave, well versed in warfare, generous and loyal and prudent. But he is still a bastard, and a bastard he will always remain."

"So we are brought around again to our purpose here today. I have rested enough, Lord Helmut. Shall we go on?"

He nodded assent. His son handed him the reins to his horse and Rosvita took up her walking staff. She had been offered a donkey to ride, but she preferred to approach a hermit of such holy reputation in the most humble manner possible, as St. Thecla was said to have

approached the blessed Daisan when first she came to him begging to become his disciple.

On they went. In fact, she had put off the errand for several days, hoping Henry would change his mind and decide not to send her. But he had not changed his mind. Sympathy for Father Bardo's plight had forced her hand: As long as the king's progress remained at Hersford Monastery, the abbot had to feed them. Hersford was prosperous but not rich enough to host the king's entourage for longer than five or six days.

The broad dirt path soon became a thin weedy track that cut through undergrowth and in and out of stands of trees. Their party had to walk single file and the horses were much bothered by vegetation slapping into them. Rosvita, at the fore, apologized more than once for getting and letting a branch spring back directly into the head of Villam's son, but Berthold never complained. It was a still day, a little muggy, suggesting a hot summer to come.

The crown of the hill was not, as she had supposed, the same thick forest through which they had ascended. The path broke suddenly into sunlight and they emerged onto a level field strewn with great fallen stones and the scattered saplings and bushy undergrowth that marked this as a place once inhabited by people but now abandoned, being slowly overtaken by the forest beyond. Four mounds overgrown with lush grass and wildflowers rose in the great clearing.

"I never knew the old Dariyans built on hills as high as this," said Villam, obviously surprised to find ruins here.

Rosvita ventured farther into the clearing. She bumped up against a stone hidden by grass. It was a great block of stone, gray and weathered, with pictures or words carved into it, so worn away by weather, years, and the lichen grown into its curves and grooves that she could not make out what the longdead builders had chiseled into the stone. She followed the shape of the monolith with her hands, tearing grass away. The block of stone was huge, twice her height though it now lay full length on the ground. At its base she saw the deep hole where it had been sunk into the ground. Now the sinkhole sprouted a thick tangle of nettles.

"This is not a Dariyan ruin, I think," she said when Villam and his son came up beside her. "See. These inscriptions or images here are much worn, and usually we can read those left by the Dariyan peoples. Also, all of the Dariyan forts I have seen were built to square lines. Look."

She turned to survey the clearing. From here the four mounds stood equidistant and at equal angles to the position of the base of the great stone block. The forest surrounded them, tall trees cutting off any view they might have of the lands below.

"It looks as if the other stones are laid in a circle around this one. And all of them contained by the earth mounds. This is not Dariyan work."

"Then whose might it be?" asked Villam. He was still puffing. "Giants must have carried this stone up here. Horses could not have dragged it, not up so steep and high a height as this."

"And with the trees so high," added Berthold, who was clearly intrigued by these ruins, "this serves no purpose as a fort. We can't see anything of the land around us."

Rosvita studied the mounds and the tree line. "I wonder." She used her walking stick to beat the undergrowth aside and made her way across the clearing to one of the mounds. Berthold followed her while Villam remained behind, still catching his breath. The menatarms had taken the horses aside to graze. As she walked and became more aware of the old stones around her, Rosvita felt suddenly that the menatarms might simply be reluctant to enter the old fallen ring of stones.

Since that certainly was what this was. A giant's ring, some called them; elf crowns, said others. Some said they were the teeth of dragons who had fallen asleep and turned to stone when sunlight struck them. Others said that even before the Aoi, the Lost Ones, had abandoned Dariya under the onslaught of Bwrmen and their human allies from the east, there were other creatures who roamed and built here: giants, or the halfhuman spawn of dragons, or the descendents of angels. These creatures were said to possess a strength and knowledge now lost to humankind, just as the collapse of the Dariyan Empire some four hundred years ago had left the humans who survived that calamity with but a fraction of the knowledge and wisdom that had grown and flourished in the great union of elves and men known as the old Dariyan Empire.

She used her stick to help her climb up the steep slope of one of the moundsthe westernmost

one, she judged by the position of the sun and the shadows. Her robes got in the way, and she yanked them free of her feet and of grasping bushes with a grunt of irritation. Berthold did not follow her up. Rather, he ranged around the base of the mound, knocking at slabs of stone and shoving aside shrubby stumps of plants with the butt of his knife.

Breathing hard, cheeks flushed, she scrambled up to the uneven top of the mound and stared out with great satisfaction. Indeed, as she had suspected, from the mounds one could see" out over the trees, although the lines of sight did not bring her eye down into the valley but rather to the summits of other hills and to the heavens themselves. From where she stood she had a good view of the clearing, the footprints of fallen stones in the tangled undergrowth; as far as she could tell, they had been aligned in a circle.

"Look here!" Berthold sang out with sudden excitement. He stood below her at the base of the mound on the side that faced away from the stone circle. She made her way carefully down to him, arriving at the same time as his father.

He was pink with excitement. "I've seen old mounds like this before. There was a cluster of them out by the river at my blessed mother's estate on the Auras River. Always there is some kind of opening, a passageway.

And see. Here." He had found a sturdy stick and wedged open a fallen slab of stone. Rosvita knelt and peered in. A dark opening yawed there, black as pitch and with the scent of air and objects long uncovered to the light. She shuddered and drew back. Berthold, with all the enthusiasm of youth, took her place, shoving the opening a little wider.

"Do you think that wise?" asked Villam suddenly.

"We crawled into the other one." Berthold shoved his shoulders into the gap so far his voice was muffled. "There was nothing but a dry chamber deep inside. Some old bones and broken pots. And dirt."

Villam drew the Circle of Unity at his breast. "Is that the way to respect the remains of the dead?" he demanded. "Or at the least, to be prudent when dealing with" He broke off.

"Ai!" said Berthold with disgust, backing out. "It's too dark and we have no torch. Even if I could move this slab, there's a bend in the passage ahead, and there'd be no light to see by. But I could come back up tomorrow or the next day, with some of my men and torches." He glanced up over his shoulder, grinning sweetly. "With your leave, Father."

"And disturb what manner of creature?" asked Villam, looking appalled.

Rosvita could not help but nod in agreement. The old tomb, if tomb it was, was better left undisturbed. But Berthold had all the blithe enthusiasm of youth. He looked delighted.

"Do you suppose?" he asked. "No. If old sorceries were at work here, then certainly they have long since gone to sleep. There might be treasure!"

"Surely, Sister Rosvita," said Villam, appealing to her in the face of his son's excitement, "you believe, as I do, that it is better to leave the dead asleep and not to disturb them unless they themselves invite you in."

"I know little of sorcery, Lord Helmut. The sisters of St. Valeria are better known for their studies of the forbidden arts while we at Korvei have long labored over our chronicles. But any suggestion of sorcery is not to be taken lightly. Whether living or long dead."

She spoke sternly, hoping to make some impression on the young man, but Berthold merely nodded his head obediently and then went to investigate the other mounds.

Villam sighed. "He is a fine boy. But too curious, and lacking prudence."

"We will be riding on from Hersford Monastery soon, Lord Helmut. I will attempt to keep an eye

on him until that time."

"I thank you."

Watching the young man pressing through the grass, her gaze traveled along the forest's edge. And there, she saw a track. It was no more than an opening among trees, but it corresponded to the vague directions given her by Father Bardo. "Beyond the height of the hill follow the trail of the animals, or so I have been told." Father Bardo had not, evidently, seen fit to visit the most famous holy member of his own cloister. But then. Father Bardo enjoyed his comforts and did not like to leave the pleasant luxuries of the monastery.

Be not too proud, Rosvita, she chided herself, lest you be judged as harshly as you judge others in your turn.

"That is our trail," she said, turning full to face the forest.

At once, her back to the mound and the thin black opening that yawned from it, she felt something watching her.

She spun back. Immediately that sense of an unseen presence vanished. It was only an overgrown mound with a passageway blocked by stone slabs.

But Villam had a strange expression on his face. "I had a sudden feeling," he said, and shook himself. "As if something clutched at me, trying to find out what I was, just as a blind man might grope at what is before him because he can only see and recognize it with his fingers."

"Let us move away from here," said Rosvita.

"I will fetch my son," he said, "and meet you at the path."

He hurried away. Cautiously, she turned her back to the mound. Again, she felt the unseen presence, but more muted, as if it was keeping its distance. It took a great deal of resolve for her to walk away from the mound toward the trail without looking back over her shoulder.

Villam and Berthold and the men-at-arms met her at the trail, which was scarcely more than a parting of branches. It led into the trees. But she took not more than one hundred steps, sloping down, before she found herself at a rocky outcropping. There rose a spring from a defile. Set back against tree and rock was a tiny hut. It had fresh plaster on the outside walls. Moss grew on the roof, giving the thatch a coat of green.

She became aware of the wind sighing through the trees and the clack of branches against rock, of the chitter of small creatures, hushing as the horses stamped, and the singing of birds in the boughs above.

It had been completely, unnaturally, silent in the clearing of fallen stones. There had been no sound but what they had brought with them or made by their own efforts.

Here it was quiet but not silent. Villam and his men stood respectfully back while she approached the hut. A bench hewn from a log sat in front of the door, which was built of many branches lashed together. This crude door had no latch. A small opening, about the length and breadth of her arm from hand to elbow, was cut into the bottom of the door. She knelt and spoke in a soft voice. "Brother Fidelis. I am Rosvita of Korvei. I am come to beg speech of you."

Nothing. No reply, no sound from within the hut. It was so miserably proportioned that Rosvita could not imagine that a man would ever truly be comfortable in there, never able to stand completely upright nor to lay down at full extension.

"Brother Fidelis?"

Nothing.



She had a horrible sudden fear he was dead. But that would be no terrible thing if the old hermit had died peacefully as he meditated and was then borne up to the Chamber of Light by angels. It would certainly be disappointing, for there was much she had hoped to learn from him. She smiled ruefully, aware her desire for learning caused her heart to be restless and thus not always able to singlemindedly contemplate the mercy of Our Lady's and Lord's Grace, as she ought.

Still, no sound. But what if the thing from the mound had taken him? What if some thing did live here on the height of the hill, an old thing, unused to company and jealous of its privacy, hating all things that still walked with confidence in the light of day?

But then, faintly, she heard a rustling.

"Brother Fidelis?"

His voice was like the whisper of leaves stirred along the forest floor by a searching wind. "Recite to me something from your new work, this history of the Wendish people that you labor over, Sister Rosvita."

"I have not brought it with me," she said, startled by this request.

"I am humbled for my curiosity." She heard amusement in that dry, quiet voice and a trace of a Salian accent in the way he pronounced the Wendish words. "But it is ever thus, my friend, that my heart seeks peace while my mind is yet restless." She smiled, and as if he had seen that smile, he continued. "So is it with you, I believe, Sister. But you did not come here to receive my confession."

This surprised her even more. "Are you wishing to give a confession, Brother? Of course I will hear you, if you are driven to speak."

"I am full of sin, as are we all who live on this earth. I have been a faithful son of the church, but alas, my heart has not always been faithful to Our Lady and Lord. Devils have appeared to tempt me."

The door of lashed branches stared at her, revealing nothing except the smooth coat of wood worn clean by time. Of course at this moment she wanted nothing more than to know in what guise devils had appeared to tempt Brother Fidelis. He was as old as Mother Otta, of a great age, having passed nine or even ten decades, or so it was said in Hersford Monastery. But it was not usual for a woman to hear the confession of a monk; that was done by a male cleric or one of the fraters. Most monks turned away explicitly from the world and that included the ministrations of deacons, who were of course all women.

Behind the blank screen of the hut, Brother Fidelis coughed, a scraping sound made worse because he seemed to have so little strength to manage it. "We are like, you and I," he said finally when he had recovered his breath. "I know what you are thinking, for I would be wondering the same thing, were I out there, and you in here. I have taken a vow of silence for many years now and shut myself in this hut so I would not be distracted by the world, but I feel that my time on this earth is coming to an end. So I will speak to you now, and answer your questions."

She settled back onto her heels and set her hands on her thighs, letting him catch his breath. "I have come at the order of King Henry. He wishes to know if you have any knowledge of the laws during the reign of the Emperor Taillefer."

"I was given as an infant to the cloister founded and ruled over by St. Radegundis, she who was the eighth and last wife and then widow of Taillefer. I served at that cloister among the brothers in the monastic quarters until her death, which occurred some fifty years after the death of Taillefer." Here his voice quavered and she had to bend until her ear touched the wood in order to hear him. His labored breathing was louder than his words.

"That was a time of trial, and I did succumb, to my everlasting sorrow." He took in a deep shuddering breath.

There was a long silence. Rosvita waited patiently. Behind, horses stamped. A bird trilled. The men-at-arms talked in low voices between themselves. Not even Villam dared approach the hut though Berthold was wandering restlessly along the outcropping, testing the rock for handholds.

"After that time I left the cloister to wander the world. With my voice I said that I sought more evidence of the miracles wrought by St. Radegundis, who in her merciful kindness and openhearted generosity was the best and most pious among us. But in my heart I sought knowledge. I was curious. I could not find in me that detachment which we seek, those of us who are dedicated to the church. Knowledge tempted me too much. In the end I came here, when I became too weak to walk many miles at a stretch. At last I left even the monastery behind and was carried to this hill, to seek and find detachment. But I have failed in that also." His voice was gentle, a little slurred. "It is well that Our Lady and Lord are merciful, for I pray they will forgive me these weaknesses."

"I am sure they will, Brother," she said, much touched by this vita, this brief history of his life.

"So I have some knowledge of the laws of Taillefer," he finished. "Ask what you will."

Here, she hesitated. But the king himself had charged her with this errand, and though she served the church, she also served the king. "King Henry wishes to know about the laws of succession among the Salians, during the time of Taillefer."

"Taillefer's influence once extended as far as these lands. But he died without naming an heir, as you must know, Sister, for you, like your sisters at Korvei, study the old chronicles. And without an heir, his great empire soon fell to strife between warring claimants for his throne."

"He had living daughters."

"Legitimate daughters, of whom three were in the church. But in the Salian tradition only men are allowed to be sovereign, and their women queen consort, not more than that."

"Yet Our Lady and Lord reign together in the Chamber of Light."

His breath whistled out, and she listened to him breathe for a bit, gathering strength again. "Did the blessed Daisan himself not say that 'people have established laws in each country by that liberty given them by God?' People do not lead their lives in the same manner. So is it with the Salians and the Wendish peoples."

"So did the blessed Daisan remind us that we are not slaves to our physical nature."

He wheezed out a soft laugh and then, again, she had to wait while he regained his breath.

"Some chronicles say," Rosvita added, "that Queen Radegundis was pregnant when her husband died, and that it was this child had it been a boy whom Taillefer would have named as his heir. But no one knows what became of the child, whether it was stillborn, murdered, or not brought to term."

"Radegundis never spoke of the child. Of all those who were at Taillefer's court at that time, only one servingwoman by the name of Clothilde remained by St. Radegundis' side throughout her years in the cloister. Perhaps she knew the answer to the mystery, but she kept silence also. It is that silence which brought about the end of Taillefer's great empire. If a boychild had been born and acknowledged, that boy would indeed have reigned after him. If Queen Radegundis could have found support among the Salian and Varren nobility, for enough years, to raise the child to manhood."

Rosvita reflected gravely on Sabella, raising revolt against a king as strong as Henry. Imagine how much more likely the nobles would be to fight over a throne held by a child. No infant was safe from the intrigues of the great princes, all of whom sought power. According to the histories, Radegundis had been very young

when she had married Taillefer, more pretty than wellborn, for by his sixtyfifth year Taillefer could choose his wives as he pleased. No young queen without strong family connections could hope to guide her child safely through such a world, with so many dukes and counts set against her.

"In Varre or Wendar," continued Fidelis, "the one daughter who was not pledged to the church would have inherited and held the throne, if she was strong enough. But the Salians preferred a bastard boy to a legitimate girl. With my own eyes, when I still lived at St. Radegundis Cloister, I read a capitulary from that time, stating that an illegitimate son could inherit a father's portion. This is why the dukes and counts of Salia and the bastard sons of Taillefer for he had as many concubines as wives fought over the empire and brought it to ruin."

This, thought Rosvita sadly, was the message King Henry wanted to hear: "A capitulary stating that an illegitimate son could inherit." Yet she hesitated, for Brother Fidelis also spoke of ruin. "Then a bastard son could inherit throne and crown in Salia?"

"One did. He ruled for four years before he was murdered by the due de Rossalia under the flag of truce. And for his perfidy, the due de Rossalia was punished by the fitting justice of Our Lady and Lord: His lands were purged and plundered for twenty years by the raids of the Eika savages until no house was left unburned and all his people fled. But the throne passed to distant cousins of Taillefer, not his own seed, legitimate or otherwise, and his lineage vanished from the Earth."

Rosvita allowed herself a deep sigh. Four years. Not an auspicious or stable reign.

"This is not what you wished to hear?" asked Brother Fidelis. She felt that he could see her expression, indeed, practically see into her very soul.

"It is not what I wish that matters. But perhaps, Brother, it is this message of ruin and the downfall of bastard sons that needs to be spoken to King Henry."

"Even I, in my hut, have heard whispers of the bastard son Henry got with an Aoi woman. The birds sing of this child, and at night when I am at my meditations the daimones of the upper air whisper to each other of the child's progress from infant to youth to man, so that I cannot help but hear them."

Was he jesting or serious? She could not tell. Nor did he elaborate. His breath whistled, a thin sound in the quiet afternoon, as fragile as the desiccated straw that had fallen from the thatch to the cold earth below. Rosvita felt the hard pressure of dirt on her knees. One of her feet was falling asleep.

"Speak to me of your work," he said.

And she heard in his voice the same yearning that ate away at her; a constant curiosity, like a mouse's hunger, insistent and gnawing.

"I am writing a history of the Wendish people, which will be presented to King Henry's mother, Queen Mathilda. She now resides at the convent at Quedlinhame where she has found peace, I trust, and where she watches over her son and her other children. Much of the history will deal with the reigns of the first Henry and the two Arnulfs, for it is by their efforts that the Wendish people rose to the power they now have."

She thought. He breathed, patient. The task of writing this history rose before her in her mind's eye, daunting and yet attractive exactly because it was a challenge. And this man, certainly, would understand what drove her, her curiosities, her fears, the need to investigate and discover. "I have worked as one who walks in a wide forest where every path lies covered deep in snow. I have had no one to guide me while I made my way forward, sometimes wandering devious paths, sometimes hitting the trail. There is so much you might tell me, Brother Fidelis. So much you must know! So much you must have seen with your own eyes or heard from those who did see!"

"I have little breath left to me." So weak was this utterance that she thought for a moment she had only imagined it. "Indulge me, Sister. As a child confesses to its mother, may I confess to you now?"

She was aware of bitter disappointment. But she could not refuse him. "I have taken orders as a deacon. I can hear confessions."

He spoke very slowly now, a few labored words with each wheezing breath. "I have sinned once, and greatly, for lying with a woman. That was many years ago, though I think of her still with affection. I have tried to be content. I have tried to still the anger that eats away at my heart. And so at last I have found peace of a kind. I have looked away from the world and seen that its temptations mean nothing compared to the promise of the Chamber of Light." He had such a kind voice, that of a man who sees his own faults and forgives himself for them not arrogantly or leniently but with wisdom knowing that he, as are all humans, is hopelessly flawed. "But still devils visit me. Not in the guise of women, as they so afflict some of my brothers. Not even in the guise of she whom I recall so clearly." Now he paused. To hear him breathe, harsh rasps torn out of a weak and failing chest, was painful. "But in the guise of scholars and magi, tempting me with knowledge, if only ... if only I would . . ."

His voice failed. She could hear his breath, so faint the flapping of a butterfly's wings might have drowned it out. All at once she became aware of the world beyond her. The birds still sang. Were they singing of the deeds of Sanglant? But she could not understand their language. Berthold had clambered to the top of the outcropping and was surveying the lands below with evident pleasure. The vitality of youth sang out from his figure where he stood never completely still at the edge of a sheer dropoff. Villam had stationed himself at the base of the outcropping and was clearly annoyed, or worried, but unwilling to raise his voice and thus disturb the holy man.

It was hot, though the sun was hidden behind clouds. Sweat had broken out under her wool robe, trickling down her spine. She restrained herself from wiping her neck. Any movement on her part might cover Brother Fidelis' next words.

She heard him shift within the tiny hut. "If only I would tell them what I knew of the secrets of the Seven Sleepers. But I swore never again to speak of these things. And yet. . ." She waited. He did not continue. From inside the hut she heard the sound of something being dragged, not something as heavy as a body, something light but solid. A shadow crossed the slit cut into the door, then a dark shape slowly emerged. Heart beating suddenly fast, Rosvita took hold of it and drew it out.

It was a book.

Laboriously bound, stitched out of parchment leaves, it was a book written in a clear, elegant hand.

"On this I have labored many years when I should have been meditating on the Holy Word of God in Unity. I pass it on to you, so that it will hold my spirit on this earth no longer. Godspeed, Sister. May Our Lady and Lord watch over your labors. Do not forget what you have learned here. Fare you well."

She stared at the book. Inscribed on the cover were these words: The Vita of St. Radegundis. Then, finally, his last words registered: Fare you well. "Brother Fidelis?"

The sun came out from behind the clouds, blinding her momentarily, its light was so unexpectedly bright.

"Go, then," his voice said, sounding in her ears. Spoken like a command, strong and firm, it was utterly unlike the frail voice with which she had conversed through the screen of branches.

She rose, keeping a tight hold on the book. "Fare you well, Brother. I thank you. I will keep your words locked in my heart."

Did she hear him smile? It was only her fancy. The hut stood in front of her, small and ragged, as poor a hovel as any beggar might build for himself to keep the rain off his back. She backed away, not wanting to turn her back on the old man, for fear of seeming disrespectful. Stumbled over the ground.

Villam caught her arm. "The interview is ended?"

"It is over." She looked back. No sign of life came from the hut.

"I heard nothing, and saw nothing," said Villam. "Except my son, climbing like a young squirrel trying to dash its brains out on the cliffs below."

"Let us go," said Rosvita. She did not have the heart to speak of their conversation.

Villam accepted her reticence. He signed to his men. Together they made their way back along the trail, this time skirting the clearing of fallen stones. Rosvita was too sunk in thought to observe the clearing or even think much of it, though Berthold tried to detour over to one of the mounds and was stopped by his father.

King Henry would not like what Brother Fidelis had said, not if Henry wished to name Sanglant as his heir. It was all very well to say a bastard might inherit the throne in Salia. But not when the price was death, civil war, and the extinction of a noble lineage. Perhaps Henry would see reason. He was a good man and a good king, and he had three strong legitimate children.

But that was not what ate at her. Like a hand scratching at a door, the question nagged at her. Who were the Seven Sleepers?

In all her reading and study, preparing to write her work of history, she had come across a few references to the Seven Sleepers. It was an innocuous story, one of many set among the tales of the early martyrs; even Eusebe mentioned it, in passing, in her Ecclesiastical History.

In the time of the persecution of Daisanites by the Dariyan Emperor Tianathano, seven young persons in the holy city of Sai's took refuge in a cave to gain strength before they presented themselves for martyrdom; the cave miraculously sealed over them and there they were left to sleep until. . .

Until when? That Rosvita had never learned, or even thought to ask. As she had learned over twenty years of studying the chronicles and interviewing eyewitnesses to events fifty years ago, not all tales were necessarily true.

But something in the way Brother Fidelis had said the words, his hesitation, his suggestion that creatures who were not human worried at him in his solitude, plaguing him to make him speak of these "seven sleepers," made her think this was more than just a legend.

"You are solemn, Sister Rosvita," said Villam, understandably trying to draw her out.

"I have much to think about," she said. He was too well mannered to press her.

ri AI night they celebrated the Feast of St. Susannah, saint beloved by cobblers and goldsmiths and jewelers. The king's retinue filled up the old monastery's guest houses and half the villages within an hour's walk of the cloister, in addition to those who stayed in tents pitched in the surrounding pastures. The brother cellarer, in charge of provisioning the monastery, was actually heard to mutter that the king's retainers were too many and too fond of their food and wine.

Henry presented a sober face to the assembly. Only Rosvita and Villam knew why she had spoken to the old hermit. Only Rosvita knew the content of that interview and Henry's reaction to it when she had told him the whole.

He had thought for a long time while she stood, patient and silent, beside him. Although Father Bardo had offered his own study to Henry, to use as bedchamber and receiving room, Henry chose the upstairs room in the chief guest house. The room was spacious but boasted no ornamentation.

Here, with both shutters open to the spring air, she and King Henry were alone for a brief time.

Except on formal occasions, Henry always dressed in the style of his people, if more richly than most: kneelength tunic trimmed with gold braid; leggings and; at this time of year, soft leather boots

worked with eagles and lions and dragons, the three pillars on which his power was built. The Eagles were his messengers, the Lions his faithful foot soldiers, and the Dragons his heavy cavalry, the pride of his army. But these were only his personal weapons.

His power as king of all Wendar and Varre rested on the submission of the great princes of the realm to his overlordship.

His black leather belt was embossed with the sigils of the six dukedoms, painted in gold: a dragon for Saony, a lion for Avaria, an eagle for Fesse, a guivre for Arconia, a stallion for Varingia, where horses were bred, and a hawk for Wayland.

He wore four gold rings, one for each of the marchlords: Helmut Villain, Judith of Olsatia and Austra, and Werinhar of Westfall. The margrave of Eastfall was dead now and the ring she had received in her turn from Henry lost on the battlefield or stolen away by looters to adorn some Quman lord out on the grasslands.

A fifth ring, bearing the seal of his sovereignty, he wore on a golden chain around his neck.

He wore no crown. It traveled, along with his robe of state, his scepter, and the Holy Lance of St. Perpetua, Lady of Battles, in an oak chest carved with griffins and dragons grappling in eternal war.

He listened to Rosvita's account of her interview with Brother Fidelis. He considered it while she waited. In his youth he had been more impetuous, blurting out his king's dragon first thoughts. Now, eighteen years after his election to the throne of Wendar and Varre, he had mastered the skill of sitting still.

"But Taillefer did not himself designate one of those illegitimate sons as his heir," he had said finally. "I need only look at my own family. Sabella was found unfit to rule, just as I would have been, had I not proven myself capable. In that case my father would have designated one of my sisters, or my brother Benedict, as heir. But he chose to present me to the dukes and margraves for their affirmation after my heir's progress. Taillefer did not single out any child, bastard or otherwise. If he had, events might have fallen out differently."

Rosvita was left none the wiser, for though she asked circumspectly, he offered no more insight into what he meant to do. His daughters Sapientia and Theophanu sat on either side of him at the great feast that night. His young son Ekkehard was prevailed upon to sing, accompanying himself on the lute; the child truly did have a sweet voice. If Henry chose to put Ekkehard in the church, his would be a fine voice raised in prayer to heaven.

At midmorning the next day two Eagles rode in, covered with dust, travelworn and weary. They brought grave news.

"Gent is besieged," said the senior of the two women, a grim woman who favored her left leg. She was not reticent in addressing King Henry. "We were five Eagles, riding to Gent to see the truth of these rumors for ourselves. Within sight of the city but outside the walls, we were set upon by Eika. I was wounded in the attack. So my comrade" Here she indicated the other woman, who was young, perhaps the age of Berthold or Theophanu. "and I fled west to carry this news to you, Your Majesty. We rode part of the way with a company of Dragons. They escorted a deacon and a holy relic to safety. The rest of the Dragons, including Prince Sanglant, remain besieged within Gent."

"You say it is a raiding party?" asked Henry quietly.

She shook her head. "Not according to the Dragons who escorted us, Your Majesty. At last count there were fiftytwo Eika ships."

Henry was sitting on a bench in the unicorn courtyard, attended by his companions and courtiers. This information sent up a murmur, quickly stilled when Henry lifted a hand to quiet them. "Do you think they mean to invade?"

"According to Sturm he was the commander of the company we rode with the Eika want the bridges that connect Gent to the east and west shore of the river thrown down. That way they can raid upriver at their leisure."

"And this Commander Sturm, where is he now?"

"He returned to the vicinity of Gent. He and his men hope to harry the Eika outside the walls, to aid their brethren trapped within."

Henry glanced to his right, where Helmut Villam stood. "Gent lies within the lands administered by Count Hildegard, does it not?"

Villam nodded.

"What of her forces?" the king asked.

"I do not know," admitted the Eagle. "They are not within the city. Certainly she must have news of the siege by now."

The king gestured, and a servant brought him a cup of wine. He sipped at it thoughtfully. "You said there were five Eagles?"

The woman nodded. Her companion, already pale, began to look quite white, the look of a person who has spent many sleepless hours in fruitless worrying; she had the light complexion that betrayed northern blood, light blue eyes and coarse wheatblonde hair twisted into braids. The older woman betrayed neither anger nor grief. "The others rode on. I don't know if they got into the city safely, but I believe they did."

"You did not see them enter within the walls?"

"I did not. But the man I rode with, Wolfhere, bound

my comrade Manfred and I to him with various small devices. Had he died, I believe I would know of it." "Ah," said Henry, one eyebrow arching. "Wolfhere." To Rosvita, mostly, one Eagle was much like another. Nobleborn boys and girls were given their own retainers when they came of age or, if circumstances warranted, they served with the Dragons. Service as a king's messenger or in the king's infantry was relegated to the children of freeholders, not those of noble birth. But every cleric in the king's chapel and schola knew Wolfhere by sight or at least by reputation. There was no Eagle senior to him, and it was sometimes whispered though not so often these days that he knew many things beyond the ken of human knowledge. He had been in favor during the reign of the younger Arnulf; some claimed he had too much influence over Arnulf, especially for a man not born into a noble family. That favor had ended within a year of Henry's ascent to the throne. Wolfhere had been banished from the king's presence. Rosvita did not know why.

"Yes, Your Majesty." The woman had a strong gaze, and she was not afraid to look King Henry in the face. "I am proud to call him praeceptor." Instructor and guide. She used the Dariyan word deliberately. Rosvita guessed she knew something, at least, of Wolfhere's reputation at court.

Henry's lips turned up. Rosvita knew him well enough, after all this time, to see he admired the young Eagle's forthright manner. "How long have you served in my Eagles, and what is your name and lineage?"

"For seven years I have served in the Eagles, mostly in the marchlands. I joined as soon as I came of age. I am named Hathui, daughter of Elseva, a freeholder in Eastfall."

"And your father?"

"My father was called Volusianus. He was also born of free parents. But alas, Your Majesty, he was killed while in the service of King Arnulf, fighting the Redari."

The king glanced toward Villam, who gazed benignly at the young woman. Rosvita remembered well the last war against the Redari; it had taken place in the final year of Arnulfs reign and was mostly fought in the March of the Villams. Indeed, the lands over which the Villams held authority had greatly expanded after the capitulation of the Redari tribesmen and their conversion to the faith of the Unities.

"After his death, my mother and her sister and brother were among those who traveled east of the Eldar River with grants given them by King Arnulf, to take lands for themselves, under the authority of no lord or lady."

"Except that of the king."

She bent her head slightly, acknowledging the truth of his words. "Except that of the king," she repeated.

Henry lifted his left hand, signing her to rise. "You will travel with my court, Hathui, daughter of Elseva, and serve me." This signal honor was not lost on the gathered assembly, who were no doubt wondering how much the king intended to favor this commoner. Rosvita examined the courtiers. Who would be first to attempt to befriend the Eagle and who first to attempt to bring about her downfall?

Hathui seemed untroubled by this sign of favor. "And my comrade, Hanna, daughter of Birtha and Hanal? She is new to the Eagles and has little experience, less training, and no kin nearby."

"She may join us as well. You may act as her praeceptor."

It occurred to Rosvita suddenly that Henry was rewarding the two Eagles for another reason: for bringing him news of his son.

"We must consider an army," he said, turning to Villam. "How soon can we ride to Gent?"

A.JT JJK. her initial shock wore off, Hanna found herself more frustrated than honored by her elevation to one of those exalted Eagles who waited in personal attendance upon King Henry.

Not because of Henry, of course. He was everything she had ever dreamed a king would be; stern but with the capacity for laughter; elegant in appearance and yet without the kind of vanity that leads men to wear fine clothes and jewels for the sake of showing off their riches; gracious without being friendly; unwilling to tolerate incompetence and delay.

But there was only so much a king could do when it came time to attempt to move his vast entourage the king's progress quickly, or when it came time to raise an army from lands as far apart as the northwesternmost reaches of the duchy of Saony, the highlands far to the south of Avaria, and the distant marchlands to the east.

Raised by a briskly efficient innkeeper, Hanna was amazed at how slow everything moved and how many arguments there were between chatelaines and stewards and lordlings over fine points of status and honor that would make not one whit of difference to the people trapped in Gent if the Eika broke through the city's walls.

"At this rate they'll be dead before we leave this monastery," she muttered to Hathui that evening as she watched yet another noble lord's young woman in this case making excuses before the king as to why it would take her some unreasonable number of days to raise levies and then yet again longer beyond that to march those levies as far north as Gent. Lady bless! Beyond being maddening, it was also boring. She stifled a yawn and felt Hathui shift her weight. "How is your leg?"

"It will do." said Hathui. "Attend to your duties. Who is that?"

"What?"

"Who is that speaking before the king?"



Hanna stared, but she could not tell one noble lordling from another; they all ran together in her mind in their handsome embroidered gowns or tunics and goldbraided leggings and fine necklaces and rings.

"That is part of your duty, Hanna," said Hathui sternly, sounding much like Wolfhere. "You must memorize all the great houses of Wendar and Varre and learn the names of the lords and ladies of those lineages and their alliances by marriage and kinship and oaths, and which dislike whom and who wishes to marry for advantage where, and what estates have lost their lady and thus are being willed to the church or given to the king to reward to some family who has done him a signal service."

"Ai, Lady," swore Hanna under breath. "All that?"

"And more besides." But Hathui grinned, taking the threat out of the words. "That is Liutgard, duchess of Fesse. Because Fesse lies in the center of the kingdom, it is a long ride from there to Gent, which lies to the northeast. Also, the duchy of Fesse lies next to the duchy of Arconia, which is the duchy administered by Henry's half sister Sabella. Surely you have heard the minors that Sabella plans to rebel against the king?"

Hanna had heard so many rumors just in the eight hours since she and Hathui had arrived at Hersford Monastery that she had given up trying to sort one out from the next. "And? What difference does that make to Duchess Liutgard?"

"This difference: that Liutgard does not want to send away troops to Gent, which lies many days' march north and east, when her own lands might be threatened by Sabella. Henry must balance the threat to Gent against the threat to Fesse."

Hanna sighed. "How do you keep this all straight?" "That is only the beginning."

But Hanna could see Hathui was laughing at her, not without sympathy. "Was it difficult for you, when you first came into the Eagles? Did it all seem like so many names that had no meaning attached to them?"

Hathui shrugged. "When Wolfhere is your praeceptor, you never admit you are struggling. But, in truth, it did seem difficult. After a time, though, I began to sort them all out. You must know the name of every villager in Heart's Rest, do you not? And in the neighboring farms and hamlets?" "Of course!"

"Well, then, think of the noble lords and ladies who move on the king's progress as a village. Some remain in the village all the time; others come and go according to what duties they have on their family's estates. Truly, Hanna, they are no different from common men and women. I have observed they have their feuds and their secret lovers, their alliances and their disagreements, just as any folk do. They sleep and eat and pray and use the privies. I am not convinced that, if you were to put one of them in a simple freeholder's smock and any hardworking freeholder into an elegant tunic, you could tell who was the noble lord and who the farmer." "Hathui!"

But Hathui only smiled her proud marchlander's smile and signed that Hanna should attend to the proceedings again.

Attend Hanna did. For some odd reason, Hathui's shocking opinions .made it easier for her to sort out one noble from the other. That thin glaze of intimidation had worn off, shorn away forever by Hathui's blunt observations. She noticed the old counsellorthe margrave Helmut Villamyawning as Duchess Liutgard promised she would ride out at dawn the next day with her retinue. But it would still take some weeks before a levy could be raised, and longer still to march that force across the kingdom.

The very young man standing beside Villamhis son, that was it, though Hanna could not remember what the boy's name was or if she had even heard it yetfidgeted and looked very much as if he wished to be somewhere else. Hanna's milk brother Ivar had that look sometimes when he was thinking about another prank to play or some expedition into the forest he wanted Hanna to come along for; Ivar

was the sort of person who was either full of a manic energy or gloomily downcast.

How was Ivar faring now? Had he reached Quedlinhame Cloister yet, to begin his life as a monk? Hanna was a bit unclear on distances within the kingdom and where all the different cities and cloisters were. But one thing Hanna did know: Ivar would not take well to cloister walls. He was bound to get into some kind of mischief.

She sighed. Ai, Lady. There was nothing she could do for Ivar, not now. She had chosen Liath over Ivar and now, as if to punish her for her choice, the Lady had granted she be separated from both of them.

Duchess Liutgard finished her business with the king and moved back to make room for a noblewoman who appeared to be about the same age as Henry. This woman wore her years proudly. Her hair was coiled into long braids and pinned back; though it was gray now, Hanna could see it had once been a rich brown.

Hathui leaned to whisper in Hanna's ear. "Judith, margrave of Olsatia and Austra."

The margrave informed Henry that she would ride immediately to her estates in Austra and raise at least two hundred men to ride to Gent.

"And do not forget that my son Hugh is abbot at Firsebarg now. If you will send word to him, I know he can send a contingent to reinforce yours, Your Majesty."

Hugh! Hanna did not breathe for a moment. She had almost forgotten Hugh, but staring at this imposing woman she was struck anew by memory of him. Judith was a woman of mature years, broad in girth and dignified of manner. She had delicate features not yet obscured by old age, and Hanna could see Hugh's features there: the sharp planes of his handsome face, the bright, deepset eyes, the haughty expression. But the margrave's hair had obviously been dark, quite unlike Hugh's light hair. Was it true that Hugh's father had been a slave from Alba, whose men were renowned for their goldenhaired beauty?

"Don't be a fool, Hanna," she whispered to herself. Instantly she wondered how Liath fared. Had they gotten into Gent safely? Was Liath well? Injured? Dead? Did Hugh think of Liath still? Of course he never thought of people like Hanna at all. What if he led a contingent of soldiers to Gent? Could Wolfhere protect Liath from Hugh when he did not understand what had taken place over that winter at Heart's Rest?

Hathui's fingers grazed her elbow, a reassuring touch, though surely Hathui couldn't guess what she'd been thinking. And Hanna had no desire to betray such feelings to anyone else, not when she was herself ashamed of them, knowing how viciously Hugh had treated Liath. This was no time for such nonsense, as her mother would say. She shook herself and attended to the business at hand.

Later, after the audiences were over, Hathui was sent to the king's physician and Hanna was sent to the guest house where the king's children made their residence.

Hanna paused inside the door while the two guards posted thereby their gold tabards sewn with a black lion members of Henry's Lion infantry examined her curiously.

Hanna was more curious about the king's children. Ekkehard was young, still in the schola, not yet old enough to be given a retinue of his own and sent out into the world as an adult. Right now he sat beside one of his sisters, who accompanied him on a lute. He had a beautiful voice.

"When the ships came down from the north  
And he saw the gleam of gold in their belly,  
Then he plunged into the waters  
Though they were as cold as his mother's heart,  
Then plunged into the waters  
And swam until he reached them.

With his sword he killed the watchmen  
With his knife he killed the steersman  
And the oar slaves bowed before him  
And begged for him to tell his tale.

When he captured the ships, This was his song."

That was Theophanu, accompanying him. Though the king's court was in a constant hum, and had been since morning, she sat calmly and strummed a lute in time to her brother's sweet singing.

The other sister, small and dark and neat, was Sapientia. She paced back and forth, back and forth, like a caged animal. Hanna took a hesitant step forward. Sapientia saw her, began to rush toward her, then stopped short, recalling her position. She beckoned.

"Do you have a message for me, Eagle?" she demanded.

Without losing track of the song, Theophanu raised her eyes briefly to take in the scene and went back to her playing. Ekkehard sang on, oblivious.

Hanna dropped to touch a knee to the floor. "Yes. King Henry charges you to go now to the smith's quarters."

"Hai!" said Sapientia under her breath, exultant. She turned and gestured to her servingwomen, who sat sewing near the fire. "Come!" she said, and strode out so quickly they had to drop their sewing work on the bench and had not even time to grab cloaks before running out after her.

Hanna hesitated. Ekkehard was well into the song by now, a song within a song, really, wherein the hero Sigisfrid relates to the hapless oar slaves his many great deeds as well as revealing for the first time his forbidden love for his cousin Waltharia, the love that would doom them both. Ekkehard had, in fact, an astonishing command of the epic. Hanna had heard old master bards sing from the great epic while taking a night's lodging at the inn, and while Ekkehard's rendition was clearly immature, it was still compelling.

Theophanu glanced up again to study Hanna. The princess' gaze was clear and completely unreadable. Suddenly selfconscious, Hanna backed away and ran right into one of the Lions.

He steadied her with a grin. "Begging your pardon, my friend," he said. "You rode in from Gent with the other Eagle, this morning." "Yes."

"You're new to the Eagles?"

She nodded. She didn't quite trust him: He was a goodlooking young man, and the few goodlooking men in Heart's Rest like her brother Thancmarwere, in her experience, full of themselves.

He opened the door, grinned at his companion guard, and followed her outside. "Where are you barracked tonight?" he asked. He did have a pleasant smile, and a pleasing face, and very nice shoulders, but Hanna loathed men who were full of their own selfimportance. All, except Hugh. She shoved that thought away.

"With the Eagles, I expect," she said coldly. "Wherever they sleep."

He considered. In the torchlit entryway, he did not appear downcast or offended by her rejection. In fact, she was not entirely sure he had taken her words as rejection. "Well, if we'll not be barracked together," he said quickly, glancing behind him. "I'm on duty, so I haven't time to talk. You were at Gent. Did you see the Dragons there?"

"We saw one company of them, but I never got inside the city. We turned back, Hathui and I." "Was there a woman with them, do you know?" "A woman? With the Dragons? Not that I noticed." "Ai." He grimaced, disappointed. Had he a sweetheart

among the Dragons? Having misjudged him, she suddenly found him rather attractive. "My sister rides with the Dragons."

"Your sister? He laughed outright. "You're thinking a common born lad like me has no business having a sister in the Dragons."

Since she was thinking so, she did not deny it.

"It's true most of them are nobleborn, bastards usually, or younger sons without a bequest to get them into the church. But my sister never wanted anything except to fight. She dedicated herself to St. Andrea very young, before even her first bleeding, and couldn't be swayed. She joined the Lions, bludgeoned her way into them, more like. I followed after her."

Hanna remembered how her young brother Karl had looked at her the day she rode away from the Heart's Rest as a newlyhatched Eagle. Had this young man watched his sister ride away so? Had he followed her, years later, because of that admiration?

"She distinguished herself," the Lion continued, eager to talk about his sister in front of a new audience. "Saved the Dragon banner, she did. Some say she saved the prince's life, although others say no man or woman can do that. That he's under a geas, spoken on him when he was an infant by his mother, that he can't be killed by mortal hands or some such kind of thing. Ai, well. I say she saved his life."

"I didn't see her," repeated Hanna, sorry she hadn't. "What's her name?"

"Adela." He touched a hand to his chest and gave a little bow, a courtly gesture no doubt picked up from watching the noble lords. When he smiled, he had a dimple. "And I'm called Karl."

She laughed. "Why, so is my brother called Karl. I'm Hanna."

"Ai, Lady. That's a bad omen that you might think of me as a brother." And, that suddenly, he had remembered it was night, and he was young, and she was

well, pretty, perhaps, but at the least desirable and a new face among so many familiar old ones. She flushed and was angry at herself for doing so.

"And what does your sister say? About the prince?" she said, to say something.

He grunted. "Nothing but praise, which is tiresome in a woman when she's speaking of a man. She's as loyal as a dog to him. They all are, the Dragons. don't see it myself." He ran two fingers down to a point at his chin, along his fine light beard, musingly. "How can you call him truly a man when he can't grow a beard?"

Since Hanna did not know the answer to this question, she wisely said nothing.

The door into the guest house opened. "Hai! Karl! You've had enough time." His companion blinked into the night, saw their figures, and beckoned. "Come on. Back inside. You'll get nothing from an Eagle, you know how they are."

Karl blew her a kiss and went back to his post. "Lord, have mercy," she muttered and hurried back to the chamber where the king held court. But Henry had gone to bed, or so Hathui told her. "Where do we sleep?"

"You haven't been propositioned yet?" asked Hathui and laughed when Hanna betrayed herself by blushing. But the older woman sobered quickly enough. "Attend to my words, Hanna. There is one thing that will get a woman thrown out of the Eagles, and that is if she can no longer ride because she carries a child. 'Make no marriage unless to another Eagle who has sworn the same oaths as you.'"  
"That's a harsh precept."

"Our service is harsh. Many of us die serving the king. I'm not saying you must never love a man, or bed one, even, but do not make that choice lightly and never when it is only for a night's pleasure. There are those old men and women mostly who know the use of certain herbs and oils"

"But that's magic," Hanna whispered. "And heathen magic, at that."

Hathui shrugged. "I've seen a deacon use herbs and chants from the Holy Book to heal wounds,

so if that's magic, I suppose some in the church don't frown on its use. I'm just saying, Hanna, that if the desire is strong enough, there are ways to prevent conception, though they don't always work. But every gift from the Lady is both burden and treasure. That is the lesson She teaches: Just as fire can both warm and kill, so can that feeling we call sweet passion bring as its fruit death or a blessing in the form of a healthy child." She smiled wryly. "Sometimes it is easier to devote yourself to a saint, as I did. I had no virginity to pledge to St. Perpetua when I became an Eagle, so I offered my chastity instead."

"You were married before you became an Eagle?" Hathui shook her head, one side of her mouth quirking down and an eye ticking shut as if she was trying to close up an old memory. "No. It was taken from me by a Quman raider. And if I ever meet up with him or his people, he will pay for what he stole." Hanna felt her mouth drop open. "You'll catch flies," said Hathui, who had already recovered.

"I'm sorry."

Hathui snorted. "What do you expect, from barbarians? I had no lasting harm of it, not like my aunt, who was killed in that raid."

"Butbut does this mean I can never have a child?" Hanna considered this prospect without pleasure. It was not something she had ever thought about before. She was a woman, and not in the church. Of course she I would have children.

"Of course not, if you wish for children. But you must either leave the Eagles or marry within them. A child born to a woman who is married to another Eagle is I accepted. I have seen three such children."

"Have you seen a woman cast out of the Eagles for well, for bearing a child?"

"I have." Hathui touched her brass badge, her long fingers tracing the eagle embossed there. "This is her badge. She died of the birthing, alas, and the child, too."

Hanna made the sign of the circle at her breast. Death or a blessing. Those words seemed apt enough. It was the kind of thing her mother would say.

"Come, Hanna. Let's sleep. There's bound to be more and much more running to do tomorrow." Hathui kissed Hanna affectionately on the forehead and took her by the arm. "We'll get our blankets. We can bed down here, at the foot of the king's chair."

"At the foot of the king's chair!" This was such a signal honor that Hanna wondered if her parents would ever believe it had actually been granted to their very own daughter.

"Indeed, he said so himself. He's a fine lord, is our king, and I am proud to serve him."

In the morning, just after the office of Tercethe third hour of the daywas sung, another Eagle rode in. He came from the west. He was faint with exhaustion; his horse had foundered.

Grooms took his horse. Hathui took him in hand and with Hanna following at her heels led him to where the king held audience with Helmut Villam, the margrave, Judith, and others of the nobles in attendance, discussing the final plans for their dispersal to collect armies that could ride to Gent. Henry broke off their conversation and rose.

The Eagle threw himself on his knees before the king. "Your Majesty." He could barely speak, his voice was so hoarse.

"Bring him mead," said the king, and mead was brought.

The man gulped down a cup of the honeyflavored wine, and it soothed his coughing. He apologized. "I beg pardon, Your Majesty."

"Your news?"

"It is terrible news, Your Majesty." Almost, the man wept. "I am come from Autun. I have ridden

four days and five nights, stopping only to change horses." He shut his eyes.

The tension in the chamber became unbearable as everyone present waited for him to continue. Hanna tried desperately to remember where Autun was, and what its significance might be. Wasn't it the seat of a biscopric? Yes! That was it: Henry's younger sister Constance was biscop of Autun.

As she remembered this, the Eagle took hold of himself and continued speaking. "I was able to escape Autun because of the aid of Biscop Constance's chatelaine. Autun is now in the hands of Lady Sabella."

Several of the courtiers spoke at once, then fell silent when Henry raised a hand. The king looked grave, as well he might. "The city has fallen?"

The Eagle spoke on a sigh. "By treachery, Your Majesty. Biscop Constance is a prisoner in the hands of Lady Sabella and her retainers. Sabella has installed Helvissa as biscop of Autun."

"Helvissa, whom I removed eight years ago with the consent of the others biscops of the realm?"

"Indeed, the same one, Your Majesty. Autun surrendered without a fight out of respect for the safety of Biscop Constance. Not one soul in Autun considers Helvissa their rightful lord. But that is not all. Sabella has an army, and Duke Rodulf of Varingia marches with her."

None moved or spoke, waiting for the king's reaction.

All Hanna could think of were those awful words: "Sabella has an army."

"What of Duke Conrad of Wayland?" Henry asked quietly.

Hanna did not recall how Duke Conrad of Wayland fit into the convoluted kinship surrounding the king's court and that of the great princes, but to everyone else, the question seemed fraught with meaning. All waited. Villam king's dragon wiped his lips with a knuckle. Duchess Liutgard who had not yet left, though she was dressed for riding clasped and unclasped her hands nervously.

But the Eagle only shook his head. He looked utterly exhausted. "I do not know if he marches with her or if he does not. I had to escape in the middle of the night. I have no information beyond that only that Sabella marches east."

East. Even Hanna knew what that meant. East, to

Wendar.

"She swore me an oath," said Henry even more softly. He looked furious and his movements, as he turned to be'n to those closest to him, were as taut as those of a lion's, waiting to pounce. But he did not rage out loud. "Wendar itself is in danger. Sabella rebels against my authority and that rebellion we cannot tolerate. We cannot ride to Gent."

The words struck Hanna like a hammer's blow.

"Ai, Lady," she murmured, her heart leaden in her chest. What was going to happen to Liath?

We cannot ride to Gent."

What cost to Henry to utter those words?

Rosvita glanced at Villam, saw him looking at her in that same instant, as though they shared a thought. Three legitimate children Henry had. For the sake of the kingdom, he must risk the loss of the fourth.

Henry's hands were clenched. He stared for a long while at the fine Arethousan carpet under his boots, a geometric pattern of imperial purple and pale ivory, floral circles encasing eightpointed stars. The rug had come as part of Queen Sophia's morning gift to Henry, for only she, daughter of an emperor and niece of the reigning Arethousan emperor, would dare to walk on purple. Some few of her possessions,

as she had wished, had been sent back to Arethousa upon her death. Henry had kept this rug, perhaps against her wishes, for was it not also said of Henry that he believed he alone of all the reigning kings had the power to wear the mantle of the Holy Dariyan Emperor? Others had attempted to take on the title worn first by the great Taillefer. None had succeeded. The "new" empire, restored by Taillefer, had lasted a scant twentyfour years and had died with Taillefer. No king facing civil war could hope to make himself emperor, even with the support of the skopos herself.

"Make ready to ride," King Henry said at last. "We leave at dawn."

The Eagle, though he had ridden hard and through great danger, received no sign of the king's favor. He was dismissed to get food, drink, and rest. The king retired to his bedchamber. The others went out to their own retainers, and soon the king's retinue was in a great uproar as they prepared to march. Those nobles, like Liutgard and Judith, who had been ready to return to their estates were now with whatever soldiers they had turned into Henry's army. There was no longer time for raising levies from faroff estates.

Eagles were dispatched to Rotrudis, Duchess of Saony and Attomar, and to Burchard, Duke of Avaria. Also, Eagles rode to the estates of lesser counts and lords. A great stock of grain and vegetables vanished from the monastery's cellars into the king's wagons, and chickens and geese were caged and the cages thrown on top of heaps of turnips and beans and baskets of wheat and barley and rye. Given the terrible news of Sabella's revolt, not even the cellarer complained when every cask of ale left in the monastery's wine cellar was rolled up the earth ramp and into wagons.

Just after Vespers, Villam came to Rosvita where she labored in the scriptorium, packing her notes and stylus and parchment, her quills and ink, into a chest for the journey. He appeared so close to panic that she immediately set aside her book and came to him.

"My son is missing," he said. "Have you seen him today?"

Guilt struck at her heart. So much had happened she had forgotten about her promise to keep an eye on the boy. At once she suspected where he had gone. "I have not seen him. His retainers?"

"Six are also missing, young men of his own age, none of the older ones. The others will say nothing." Clearly, Villam suspected the worst.

"Bring them to me."

With grim satisfaction, Villam left. She finished packing and left the chest in the care of one of her servants. She met them before the Hearth, the only place with any semblance of peace in the entire valley. Villam brought two men: a whitehaired man with the look of a faithful, battlehardened retainer and a much younger man, not above sixteen or eighteen years, who was flushed and had obviously been crying.

Rosvita studied them both. The old man she gave up on at once. He looked like the old praeceptor, the man who had been assigned many years back to train the boy at arms and whose loyalty would be fixed to the young lad he had half raised; he could not be swayed by fear. But the younger man could.

"You do not mean to lie to me?" she demanded of the young one. "Who are you, child? Who are your parents?"

Stammering, he told her his name and lineage.

"Where is Lord Berthold?"

He betrayed himself by glancing at the old man. The old retainer glared stubbornly ahead. The young one began to fidget, twisting his hands together, biting at his lower lip.

"Look in my eyes, child, and swear to me by the name of Our Lady and Lord that you do not

know."

He began to cry again.

That quickly, as if to spare the young man the shame of lying or of betraying his master, the old armsmaster spoke. "He knew nothing of the expedition. I advised against it, but, once determined, Lord Berthold would not be swayed."

"Yet you did not go with him!" Villam lifted a fist as if to bring it down, hard, on the Hearth, and only at the last instant remembered where he was. He slapped the fist against an open palm instead. It was getting dark. Her ability to read the subtleties of their expressions was already lost to her. Two monks entered the chapel, brands burning in each hand; they began to light the sconces. Soon the office of Compline would be sung and the monks would take themselves to their beds for the night.

"So did he order me, my lord. I am his obedient servant. And in truth, I feared no mischief. They are only old ruins. I have seen such with my own eyes and feared nothing from them. I made sure he took six of his best men-at-arms with him when he left this morning after Prime."

"Yet he has not returned."

The old armsmaster hung his head. Even in the inconstant light of torches she could now read clearly his guilt, his recognition of his own bad judgment, written as plainly as if he had spoken aloud.

"Take torches, picks and shovels, whatever you need, and ten of my men-at-arms and the rest of my son's retainers. Go now."

They did as Villam ordered.

Rosvita joined the prayers at Compline. It was crowded, for not only the king but every noble who could command room crowded into the monastery's church. But when the others filed out, Villam remained, and he knelt on the cold ground, hands clasped in prayer, for the rest of the night.

The monks sang Nocturns, then, at first light, Lauds. King Henry arrived for the office of Prime fully arrayed king's dragon for riding, wearing a coat of mail. Sapientia walked behind him, also fitted for riding; she carried her father's helm under one arm and she wore the badge of St. Perpetua, Lady of Battles, on her right shoulder. Theophanu would remain in the train, behind the main army, with those like Rosvita who did not fight.

As soon as Prime was sung and the last prayer spoken over the Hearth, Henry left the church and crossed to where his horse waited, already saddled. It was just dawn. No men had returned from the night expedition to the old ruins.

"We must ride," said King Henry. Villam bowed his head, for of course he knew the king spoke truthfully. He splashed water on his face to refresh himself and then, with the others, set forth.

That morning the army did not range out ahead of the cavalcade of wagons and animals that constituted the people and goods of the king's progress. At midday, a party from the monastery caught up to them.

Rosvita hastened forward from her place in the train in order to hear the news. Berthold was a good boy, full of promise. She felt herself responsible. She had not watched over him as she had said she would.

But she read no hope on the face of the old armsmaster, who came forward as spokesman for the others. "It is a grievous tale I have to tell, my lord." His voice was even, but his eyes betrayed the depth of his distress. "My son is dead," said Villam, as if voicing the words would cause the worst of the pain, of a father's loss of his favored son, to be over with quickly, to fade that fast into the dull ache of a loss suffered years before. Better that than the raw grief that cut to the heart.



The armsmaster bowed his head. "No, my lord." But his tone was not encouraging. He caught breath and could not for a moment go on.

Rosvita slipped into the crowd. Folk made way for her as she came up beside Villam. He saw her and set an arm on the sleeve of her robe, steadying himself. King

Henry, now, had come from his place at the front of the army. People made way for him so he could stand beside Villam.

"I have seen strange things I cannot explain. This is what happened."

This, St. Ambrose's Day, the second day after the Feast of St. Susannah and the third day of the month of Sornas, had dawned clear and fine and the weather looked to continue that way. Surely this was an omen that the Lord and Lady favored their expedition. And Rosvita noted, as the man told his story, that the weather did not shift, nor did the fine down of clouds that lined the northern horizon spread to engulf the sky. The sky remained clear; the sun remained warm. What this meant she could not be sure. If sorcery was awake, it was not at this moment directed at them.

"It took us many hours to climb the slope," said the armsmaster. "Even with the moon's light and though we followed the path, it twisted and turned in such a confusing fashion that we lost our way several times. We came to a stand of wood, tall northern pines, which none of us had seen from below. At first light we came to a rocky outcropping which we had not known was above us, though one of your menatarns, my lord, recognized it as that place where the holy man had retired to meditate.

"To our amazement, as the light rose and we could see more than an arm's length in front of us, we saw two lions resting at the height of the rock. When they saw us, they sprang away into the rocks and we lost sight of them. Fearing for the life of the holy man, we hastened to his hut."

Now he drew the Circle of Unity at his breast and then touched knuckles to lips softly, as if giving a kiss to the Lady.

"When I touched the door, it fell easily aside, revealing what lay within." He blinked several times as at a sudden blinding light. "A miracle! There sat the holy man, upright in that tiny space yet not touching the side of the hut. He smelled as fresh as if fields of flowers had bloomed there inside with him, but there was nothing except him, the thin white loincloth in which he was dressed, and the dirt floor. And when we ventured to touch him, to wake him, for he appeared to be asleep, he was cold as stone. He was dead." His voice shook.

Rosvita bowed her head and said a silent prayer for the dead man. His name would be added to the prayer lists which were sung in full every Penitire. Yet she could not mourn Brother Fidelis; he had ascended to the Chamber of Light. And she had something of him with her still, the book he had given to her.

"Ten of the men I sent ahead to search for the ruins you spoke of, my lord," continued the armsmaster, "While I remained behind with the others to give a proper burial to the holy man. I cannot explain . . . some other force watched over us, for as we dug the grave in the hard ground the lions appeared again on the outcropping above. But they made no move to approach us. Indeed, they appeared to watch over us, that is all, and when the holy man was decently laid to rest, they vanished.

"Then we found the track and soon after dawn we came out into the ruins at the height of the hill. But what a strange sight met our eyes! You said they were ruins, but they were nothing of the kind! There lay before us a circle of standing stones with a huge stone placed at their center."

"Upright?" demanded Villam, jerking forward as if he had been yanked.

"Upright and perfectly placed, with lintels across. I have seen such ruins in my years, which were surely the work of giants, but never one as perfectly preserved as this."

"Impossible!" cried Villam. "They were fallen to pieces just three days past."

The armsmaster bowed his head until his forehead touched his clasped hands. He remained in that position

for some time while King Henry drew Villam back and spoke soothingly to him.

"We marveled," said the armsmaster finally, in a whisper. "The mounds were open. Each one had an entrance framed by stone slabs. We lit our torches and walked inside, somewhat hunched over, it is true, but the walls were so cunningly laid together with flat stone that they were more like the corridors of a stronghold than of a tomb. But each mound was the same. We entered by a passageway which led in a straight line to a round chamber that lay at the center of the mound, buried under dirt. And in that chamber, nothing. No other passages. No sign of graves or of the bones of giants or sacrifices. No sign of treasure. Nothing. Except a single footprint, caught in the dust. And this."

He extended his right hand and unfolded it, like a petal opening to the sun. In his hand lay a gold ring.

Villam groaned out loud and snatched the ring out of the old man's hand. He turned it over, and over again, but there was no doubting the look on his face. "His mother's ring," he whispered, "which she willed to him on her deathbed."

After that he wept, and the others wept with him, the armsmaster and young Berthold's retainers. By not protecting him, they had failed their young lord. Henry, quick to tears, wept as well, as befit a king showing sympathy for the pain felt by others and soas was a kingly virtueby himself on their behalf.

Rosvita could find no tears. The tale had overset her. It had astonished her, and yet set her mind racing. Strange forces were at work. How could stones of such size be lifted and returned to their places? From where had come the lions which the men had seen? Why had Brother Fidelis given her the book at just that time, as a man might dispense of his possessions when he knew death was upon him? What had he meant by his reference to the Seven Sleepers?

What had prompted Berthold to go exploring with six young companions?

king's dragon Rosvita did not believe in coincidence.

At last, Villam mastered his grief, though surely it would haunt him in the months to come. He had, after all, a duty to his king, and a war to fight.

With somber faces and heavy hearts, they rode west to meet Sabella's army.

BLOODHEART THE streets of Gent were chaos and only the misting slant of rain over rooftops and roadways kept them from boiling with clouds of dust in the pandemonium. Mud and dirt were everywhere; no one dared use precious water to clean. The wells continued to supply water and with the river on both sides were unlikely to run dry, but no one cared to take that chance. It was still possible to wash by the river's bank on the island's shore, but the Eika had primitive bows and even stonetipped arrows could kill.

Liath had seen many places in her life; she had lived in the skopos' city of Darre, visited villages built on the ruins of the magnificent ancient cities of Sirraquasae and Kartiako, resided near the Kalif's palace in the fine clean Jinna city of Qurtubah, passed through the seat of the Salian kings, Pairri, taken ship at the emporium called Medemelacha along the coast, and walked among the proud, bustling townfolk of the cathedral city of king's dragon Autun. She and Da had passed through villages recovering from famine, avoided towns flying the red banner that warned of plague; she had prayed at churches small and vast, including the great basilica dedicated to St. Thecla the Witnesser in Darre. In eight years she and Da had traveled as much as a thousand people might in an entire lifetime.

But she had never seen anything like Gent: a prosperous cathedral city crammed with twice or

three times its usual population, the refugees fled within the walls from the countryside, and living constantly on the edge of terror. Siege was an ugly business. Now she walked through this chaos every day. Mayor Werner was a vain man, spoiled by his mother and accustomed to getting his own way. He was overjoyed at the opportunity to have a King's Eagle at his beck and call. In the evenings, Werner expected Wolfhere to attend him at the feasts he held every night. Werner was reasonably enough terribly impressed by Wolfhere's age and knowledge and reputation as a man who had once been King Arnulf the Younger's most favored counsellor. So in the evenings Wolfhere could not question Liath about the life she and Da had led for the last eight years.

Liath made sure she came to Werner's attention, and so during the day she waited on Werner and ran messages here and there within the walls of Gent. Most of the messages were pointless, but it gave her something to do and it kept her out of Wolfhere's way. She had many questions she wanted to ask Wolfhere, but as Da said, "Always measure the ground before you jump the stream." She was not fool enough to think she could outwit Wolfhere and she did not yet feel confident enough to face him. So she avoided him.

But, running messages for Werner, she could not avoid the city. This day she felt an undercurrent of madness running like ground lightning through the streets. On her way to the armory to get the daily count of swords forged and spears readied and to find out how

their fuel was holding out, she had to shove her way along the plank walkways despite that she wore the redlined cloak of a King's Eagle. Folk crammed the streets, some of them carrying their earthly belongings on their backs as if they had no place to rest them. Others spoke, gesticulating, shouting, in pockets at corners or under the shelter of overhanging houses or bursting out of alehouses.

"Make way!" she said, trying to force her way through a knot of men gathered at the corner of the marketplace. "I am an Eagle."

"Cursed Eagle!" shouted one of them, lifting a staff threateningly. "You're well fed enough, up there at the palace!" He was ragged and thin, stooped by hunger, but anger is its own food. And Liath became aware at once that his many companions, at his back, stared at her with hostile expressions. One fingered a knife.

"Come now, my friend." Another man stepped forward, a stout artisan with smudged hands and a grim face. "This Eagle is but the King's messenger. She is not responsible for the mayor's faults. Let her by."

Grudgingly the other man stepped back, his comrades with him, muttering.

"I thank you," she said to the artisan. "I think you will find it better to avoid the marketplace," said the artisan, "for there are many angry folk gathered there. There is an alleyway back by here. Go, and when you return to the palace tell the mayor from me, a good citizen of Gent, that he should beware the inner beast as much as the outer one, if he will not feed it properly."

"I will," she said, puzzled by this reference. She took the side route gladly but even here she had to make her way through refugees huddled with all their belongings what they could carry against wooden walls, some of them without even a bit of cloth to cover their heads against the rain. Babies cried. Children whimpered. An old woman sat wrapped in a filthy shawl whose fancy embroidered edge peeked out beneath a caking of mud.

king's dragon She tried to bake flour and water mixed to a muddy paste into flatcakes over a steaming fire placed hard up against the back of a house.

Ai, Lady, thought Liath. How easily a fire could start, in drier weather. Maybe it was for the best that it rained. But then, she had a roof over her head.

"I pray you! Eagle!" The man's voice was soft, thickened with the congestion of a gripe.

Surprised, she halted in the shadow of a pile of garbage. It stank. The bones and skin of rats lay littered at the base of the pile; the flesh had been gnawed from their small remains. She smelled urine and feces. A man wearing the heavy tunic of a farmer emerged from the shadows; he had a thin, desperate face and mucus running from his nose. She stepped back, startled, away from him.

"I pray you," he repeated. "Take me to the mayor." "I cannot. I only run errands."

"Please," he begged. Then he tried to grasp her hand, to pull her. She bolted back and yet something in his manner stayed her from running away. "Please. There must be something you can do. My daughter." "Your daughter!"

"She's ill and she hasn't enough to eat. Here. See." His daughter. Her grief at Da's death choked her anew and tears flooded her eyes. Numb, she followed the man into the tiny garbagestrewn alley, a fetid corner where he had made shelter for them. The girl was perhaps eight or ten years old; it was hard to tell. She coughed incessantly, half in sleep, but when she heard her father's footsteps she raised her arms piteously toward him.

"Da?" she whispered. "Da, I feel such a pain in my chest. I'm sorry, Da, I meant to be stronger." Then she saw Liath. Her eyes widened and she went into a spasm of coughing.

The man knelt beside her and petted her, soothed her, until she calmed and quieted. Then, with an agonized expression, he looked up at Liath. "We are not poor folk, Eagle. I was a good farmer and paid my rents faithfully to Count Hildegard. I lost my wife two winters ago to the lungfever, and the babe she'd just born died with her. This child, my Miriam, is all I have left. But we have nothing here and no kin, no one to help us and I can find no work. Please, can you help us, Eagle. They say in the marketplace the mayor feasts every night, but out here we have nothing. I am feared she will" He broke off and buried his face in the girl's hair.

Liath gulped down a sob. It hit her, then, again and so sudden, so unexpected: Da was dead. He was dead and he was never coming back, never going to walk beside her again or comfort her again or teach her again. No matter what his flaws were, for they were many, he struggled with the darkness as do all of humankind, yet he did his best and he was a good man and he had always, always, taken care of her. Tears and rain mixed on her face. The girl gazed at her in awe, the man in desperate hope.

"Can you not go to the cathedral?" she asked. "The bishop has allowed many of the refugees to camp in the nave and I believe she tries to feed them as well."

"I have tried," he said, hope dying in his eyes, "But there are so many. We were turned away even before we could reach the steps. The mayor's guard beat us back."

She took her Eagle's ring off her finger and held it out. "Take this," she said, trembling, "to the palace and ask for entry to the stables. Tell the Dragons there that I mean for you to have employment from them. You can care for horses, can you not?"

He swallowed. "I had sheep and goats and chickens, but never a horse."

"Chickens, then," she said recklessly. "Take your daughter. This will gain you entrance. You must do it, for I need the ring back and so I will fetch it from you there."

"Da!" whispered the girl, and then coughed.

The man began to thank her so profusely she was king's dragon afraid he would draw attention to them, even here behind the midden. She could not save them all.

"I must go," she said. "I have an errand." She fled gratefully into the rain and cried the whole way to the armory and back.

Werner kept her busy for the rest of the day, and that night, to assuage his fretting, he called for a lavish feast which she had no appetite for. Afterward she took a turn on watch late into the night and then

lay down to sleep just before dawn only to sleep fitfully and then be woken midmorning by a distressed servant. He begged her to come to the hall at once.

"Eagle!" Werner paced in his hall, frantic. "Have you heard? Have you seen?"

"I beg your pardon, Mayor Werner," she said. "I have just woken. I was on watch last

"Lady and Lord! What have we come to!" He threw up his hand and called for a tray, popped a sweetmeat into his mouth as if that could comfort him in his distress. "I have already sent Wolfhere and the other Eagle down to the tannery, so now what shall I do? What shall I do?"

She waited as he snapped at a passing servant. That seemed to calm his nerves enough for him to speak coherently. "A crowd of people has gathered outside the gates. Outside these gates, as if / were their enemy! What a calamity this is!"

"Have they said what their purpose is, Mayor Werner?"

"Bread and beans!" he snorted. "Bread and beans! The good citizens of Gent would never act this way if these country people were not acting as a bad influence upon them. There is at least one deacon who imagine this! has inflamed them with tales of feasting here in my own hall going on while their children starve! No child starves within the walls of Gent. The biscop sees to that. They are calling me a glutton and say I feast while their children starve! Imagine! Can you imagine?"

She waited, but unfortunately he appeared to expect

an answer. Carefully she said, "I am here to serve you, Mayor Werner."

"Someone must go out and placate them," said Werner, eyeing her with a mixture of craftiness and doubt.

"They are asking for you, my lord." said the steward cautiously.

Werner smoothed down his fine wool tunic nervously, twining his fingers into the soft leather belt. Its gold buckle was studded ostentatiously with lapis lazuli. "I can'tit would be too dangerous" His distracted gaze caught again on Liath and his expression brightened. "Eagle, fetch Prince Sanglant. He will attend me. After all" He began twisting the rings on his fingers, a habit Liath had seen him indulge in before. They were stunningly beautiful rings, one set with tiny rubies, one with an amethyst, one with an engraved stone of lapis lazuli of a particularly intense blue; the fourth was a thin circle of cunninglyworked cloisonne so delicately done Liath could not imagine how human fingers could have wrought it. "After all he is here to protect Gent, and if the crowd were to grow angry or vengeful, or to threaten me . . ."

She nodded obediently and withdrew from the hall. Outside, the sun shone. From the safety of the great courtyard, bounded by the palace and great hall on one side, the kitchens and outbuildings on the second, the barracks and stables on the third, and the palisade gates on the fourth, she could hear the crowd that had gathered on the other side of the palace compound gates. They spoke in many voices, but their murmuring was edged with fury and with that kind of desperation past which there is nothing left to lose.

Werner could not afford to have riot within and siege without; abruptly she realized what the artisan in the marketplace had meant by the inner beast. She straightened her tunic and twisted the end of her braid in a hand, then cursed herself for caring what she looked like. Perhaps it was true Prince Sanglant looked at her now and again, but he looked at every remotely attractive woman he came within sight of. Liath only noticed because she would watch him, and try not to watch him, when they were in the hall at the same time or passing in the courtyard or around the stables.

But this was not time to reflect on such trivial concerns. As Da always said, "No point in worrying at a loose thread while the sheep are being eaten by wolves."

She steadied herself and strode to the stables and then down the long dim passage. She saw no

sign of the man and child she had tried to help. Beyond the actual stables, but within the palace stockade, was a stableyard with its own gate. In this yard the Dragons took their ease in the fine spring sun or most often practiced with sword and spear. So did they now.

She paused at the doors, brushing straw dust off her nose and trying not to sneeze. Two men sparred with staves. Several of the younger men pounded dutifully on a sturdy wooden pole set upright in the ground. An older man sat on a bench, repairing a pair of boiled leather greaves that had been oiled to a fine brown sheen. Sanglant laughed.

His laughter was so sharp and bright that it rang on the air. She found him half hidden behind a line of laundry hung out to dry in the warm morning sunlight. He came out from the shadow of the laundry, head flung back. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He held a sword wrapped in cloth in one hand and his teardrop shield painted with the black dragon device in the other. He wore not his mail but only the padded gambeson that went underneath armor. After him came two others—the woman and a young man with light hair and a yellow beard—similarly armed; they had obviously been at sword practice.

Sanglant wiped the sweat from his face and turned to look directly at Liath, across the stableyard. He lifted a hand. All activity ceased and every Dragon there turned

to look at her. She bit down a sudden impulse to flee, lifted her chin, and walked across the yard to the prince.

"Mayor Werner wishes you to attend him," she said boldly and clearly. "There is a crowd

"Ah, yes," said the prince interrupting her. "I was wondering when Mayor Werner would send someone to fetch me. They've been gaining in numbers since dawn." He seemed more amused than angry or worried. He handed sword and shield to the woman, got a spear in exchange, and gestured for Liath to precede him. No one else came, only him. As they walked back through the stables, she felt his gaze on her back.

He said, "I've never seen you use that bow. It's of Quman make, is it not?"

"It is."

"It's a strange pattern, the deer who is vanquished and yet whose antlers are giving birth to griffins."

The observation startled her, but she dared not slacken her pace or turn around.

"You have such brilliantly blue eyes," he added, as if it was an afterthought. "Like the heart of fire. Or that fine lapis lazuli stone on Mayor Werner's finger."

Her cheeks burned. She did not know what to say.

They passed out through the stable doors into the courtyard to find Mayor Werner and a number of palace stewards and servingfolk huddled together in an anxious band.

"Open the gates," said Sanglant, striding past Liath.

"But!"

"Open the gates!"

Werner could not bring himself to give the order until he had been helped to the safety of the palisade wall, out of reach of the ravaging hordes should they decide to swarm inside. But once on the parapet, he could be seen by the crowd beyond. Liath climbed up after him and saw people below. They were, indeed, country folk and poor people, frightened, thin, and desperate—the same sort of people she had pressed through yesterday. See

king's dragon in the mayor above they began to call out, some with anger, some pleading, some cursing. One man lifted a tiny child above his head as if willing the mayor whose round red face clearly

betrayed that he never wanted for food to see the hunger on the child's face. A few had staves or scythes, and these shook them angrily while Werner tried to shout out a few conciliatory phrases but got nowhere; nor could he be heard above their noise.

The gates opened. Sanglant walked out, spear in his left hand, right hand raised, open, and empty. He had no escort. Suddenly nervous, Liath got out her bow, nocked an arrow, and drew down on the prince so she could get the first shot in if anyone assaulted him.

He glanced up as if he had heard the creak of the string rubbing against the bronze caps as she drew it back. He smiled his charming smile up at her, as if her protection amused or flattered him, and for an instant she forgot where she was and what she was doing there. Then he looked away, out into the crowd, and lifted his spear. The people moved restlessly, their attention shifting suddenly from the mayor to Sanglant. He waded out into their midst, obviously unafraid; he was easy to follow because he was half a head taller than the tallest person there. They parted to let him through, and at some point he found a box or a block of stone to stand on and with this platform he held the spear up over his head and with his right hand gestured for silence. To Liath's amazement, the crowd quieted. "Oh dear, oh dear," murmured Werner, and then, suddenly, realizing Sanglant was not about to be set upon and rent limb from body by the mob, he stopped muttering.

"You must pick three of your number," said Sanglant without preamble, "and they will be brought before the mayor to speak your grievances. Choose them quickly and do not argue. The rest of you must go to your homes or to wherever you are staying. I will request that the biscop mediate." He paused.

His voice sounded so hoarse Liath was astonished it carried so well, but his voice always sounded like that. He shifted, and the sunlight caught on his gold torque, winking. Liath lowered her bow. She could not concentrate, not looking at him. Did not the ancients write that desire was a curse? She found that her hands were shaking, and she let the arrow go slack. The prince was in no danger.

Although perhaps she was.

"Let me tell you," he went on, "that Gent is a city under siege. The enemy who waits outside the walls is more implacable than your hunger, for there are stores enough in this city if they are rationed fairly but there is no mercy in his heart, if he even has one. We cannot fight among ourselves, for that way lies death for everyone. You are within your rights to demand food if your children are hungry, but none can expect feasts

"The mayor feasts every night!" cried a woman in a shrill but carrying voice. She wore deacon's robes.

"Then you, good deacon, may come before him and tell him what you think of that. You are the first. Let two more be chosen."

His brisk command stilled the crowd. Already the people on the fringes were drifting away. After a brief flurry of talk, two men came forward with the deacon, and they followed Sanglant inside. Liath recognized one as the artisan who had aided her in the marketplace. The gates closed behind them; only then did Werner venture down from the parapet. Once brought inside the great hall, the three commoners appeared subdued, perhaps cowed by the mayor or more likely by Sanglant's imposing presence.

"Eagle," said Werner, "you will find and bring the biscop to me. Beg her to attend me, that is."

Sanglant moved, and almost Liath thought he was going to offer to escort her. But he did not. Instead, with a sigh, he went to sit in the chair beside Werner. Ai, fool! She cursed herself as she hurried away. The king's dragon gates were opened to let her out, and this time the folk dispersing from the square parted to let her through as she jogged from palace to cathedral. Maybe Da had been right; he usually was. "Are you so vain?" he had asked her. But he had been speaking of Hugh, and she had been right about Hugh. Da had not understood what Hugh truly wanted.

But she did not want to think of Hugh now. She never wanted to think of Hugh again.

Gent's bispoc was a woman who wasted little time; Liath was sent back with a message that Werner could expect her within the hour and that a solution to this difficulty would be found before nightfall or else she would impose one.

When Liath returned to the hall, the deacon and artisan had, evidently, spoken already. Now the third representative, an elderly man in the good linen tunic of a person of wealth, regaled the mayor at length about the positions of the stars in the heavens and the fate they foretold for Gent in general and the mayor in particular. Werner listened with such rapt attention that he did not acknowledge or perhaps he did not notice Liath's return.

"For in the writings of the church mothers, and in the calculations of the Babaharshan mathematici," intoned the man in that sonorous voice only the truly self-important can manage, "it is written that the passage of Mok into the sign of the Healer, the eleventh House in the lesser Circle, the world dragon that binds the heavens, betokens a period of healing and hope whose emanative rays are only intensified by the passage of Jedu, the fierce, the Angel of War, into the same sign, as will happen very soon, very soon indeed, for fierce Jedu soon will move out of the Unicorn and into the Healer. So should you take heart that the heavens grant us hope at this dark hour, and you should be generous in relieving the burdens of those of us trapped inside your fair city."

"Oh, spare us this nonsense," muttered Liath under her breath. She regretted saying it at once. She had forgotten how well Sanglant could hear.

Sanglant glanced at her but said nothing.

"Say on," said Werner to the man, who continued, oblivious to everything except Werner's rapt attention.

"Yes, the heavens give us hope. You must not expect disaster for no comet has flamed in the sky and only such glowing swords portend ruin. Therefore, we may all feast and celebrate for our rescue is at hand Werner was, indeed, beginning to look more cheerful. "and if gold is laid out in a pattern known only to me, then I can read by various diverse and secret means the exact hour and day of our liberation!"

"Ah," sighed Werner ecstatically.

Ai, Lady! This man would do more harm than good. But Eagles had no opinions. Princes might, however. She had to risk it. "He's a fraud," she muttered under her breath.

At once, Sanglant lifted a hand for silence. "Where did you learn this knowledge of the heavens?" he asked the old man. "How can you assure us this is true?"

The man clapped hand to chest. "Noble prince, you honor me with your notice. I was trained at the Academy of Diotima in Darre, under the shadow of the skopos' palace itself. In the Academy we learned the secrets of the heavens from the writings of the ancients and also how to foretell the fates of man and the world from the movements of the stars."

"For a price," said Liath. "Usually in gold."

Then was aghast she had spoken out loud. But how could she help it? In all their wandering, Da had never passed himself off as an astrologus or haruspexone of those men or women who claimed to be able to divine the fate of "kings and other folk." Frauds, all of them, Da claimed, though he was learned enough that he could have made a decent living for them both had he been willing to do so. But Da respected the knowledge he had and, perhaps, feared it as well. It was nothing to trifle with. It burned in her heart that the knowledge he had

paid for so dearly should be treated as merely another form of commercea lucrative trade visited



upon the ignorant and gullible by such people as this charlatan. The old man frowned imperiously at her. "Mine is a proud trade, and though some in the church have frowned upon it, it has not been condemned"

The deacon interrupted him. "At the Council of Narvone, the casting of horoscopes was outlawed. Only God and the angels may have foreknowledge of our fate."

"Well, I" he sputtered. "I do not cast individual horoscopes, of course, but I have great knowledge and none dare scorn me, for I know the ways of the heavens. I have studied the very Astronomicon of Virgilia and" Liath snorted. "Virgilia wrote the Helleniad. It is Manilius who wrote the five books called the Astronomicon that I suppose you speak of. And the Academy founded by Diotima of Mantinea rested in the city of Kellai, not in Darre."

Sanglant coughed, but he was only stifling a laugh. She faltered. Every person in the hall stared at her as if she had suddenly begun speaking a foreign tongue, like the disciples at the Pentekoste, touched by the Holy Word.

Ai, Lady. She had let her impatience with fools and that old slowburning anger at Da's death get the better of her. She had betrayed herself to them all.

"What?" said the mayor, mouth popped open with the look of a fish on a platter. "What? I don't"

"I am outraged!" said the man who claimed to be an astrologus, and the deacon, too, stepped forward, staring with interest or was it surprise? or was it suspicion? at Liath.

"Mayor Werner," said Sanglant, cutting into this so sharply that all of them drew back from Werner's chair. "I have need of this Eagle, messages to be run to those of my men who are posted along the walls. You have this business in hand, I believe, and the bispoc will arrive soon." Werner opened his mouth.

"Good," said Sanglant. And to Liath: "Come."

She followed him outside. Her heart hammered hard in her chest. But for some strange reason she was not afraid but instead relieved and even elated.

He halted in the great courtyard, full in the sun, and stretched shoulders and neck like a great beast settling itself after a triumphant struggle. Then he studied her, and because she had already betrayed herself, she was not afraid to look directly at him in return.

"I have heard the Helleniad, of course," he said, "or parts of it at any rate. In the king's progress many poets have sung the epic to entertain the court, and of course you have heard the poet who resides in Werner's palace recite it over these past ten nights."

"Mangle it, more like."

He smiled. "Perhaps you would render it more pleasingly."

She shook her head sharply. "I am not poet or bard, to sing in public."

"No, you are not. You are something altogether different, I think. Is there truly such a book as this . . . Astronomicon?"

"I have heard of such a book, but never seen it. There is a reference to it in the Etymologies of Isidora of Seviya where she comments on" She broke off. Lord in Heaven! Was she trying to impress him?

"You are truly Wolphere's discipula, are you not?"

"I don't know what you mean by that."

"I don't know what I mean either," he said sharply, and frowned and looked abruptly away from her. It was almost painful to have him look away; she had not realized how much his gaze warmed her, or

at least how much she wanted his attention. Like bread given to a hungry child.

She winced, for was it not a true enough comparison? She was alone and he was here

He was like no one she had ever laid eyes on.

Sanglant lifted a hand, and she tensed, but only be

cause half of her willed him to touch her while at the same time the other half feared what his touch the tangible and irrevokable sign of his interest in her would unleash. How could she even feel this way after what had happened with Hugh?

But Sanglant was not trying to touch her; he opened his hand to reveal her Eagle's ring. "A man brought this to me yesterday. I believe it is yours?"

He waited. Finally, as carefully as one might pluck a jewel from the coils of a snake, she picked it up off his palm. "It is mine. What happened to the man?"

"We gave him shelter and employment of sorts." His eyes glinted. She could not read his expression. "His daughter I sent to our healer. She may yet live."

"I thank you," she said softly. The ring was still warm from his skin.

"Let me," he said, and he took her hand and slipped the ring onto her finger. He glanced up over her shoulder, released her abruptly and stepped back. "Here is your praeceptor." Acknowledging Wolfhere, he allowed himself a brief, selfmocking smile. "She is yours," he said to Wolfhere. "Though perhaps you should watch her more closely." He spun and left them.

Wolfhere crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at her. She twisted the ring and, blushing, said nothing. The stench of the tannery clung to his clothes. "Prince Sanglant is right," he said finally. "I should indeed be watching over you more closely." He gestured. "Come." She dared not disobey.

WERNER detained them again, but in the end Liath found herself seated opposite Wolfhere in the empty stall that had become both bedchamber and storage room for her and Wolfhere and Manfred.

"Now," said Wolfhere in the quiet tone of a man who intends to brook no disagreement, "for twentyfive days we have bided here in Gent and you have avoided me except when I have demanded your time to teach you about the duties of an Eagle."

"Mayor Werner has need of my services as a messenger."

"Mayor Werner thinks too much of his own consequence and is perfectly willing to enhance it by having a King's Eagle to carry his messages for him on trivial errands. You would be more useful running errands for the Dragons . . . and their captain."

She flushed.

"He is a king's son, Liath. What is commonplace for him would be disastrous for you." She flushed more deeply, mortified. "Remember the precepts I have taught you, and understand that you must hold to them once you are fully an Eagle." She tried to nod but could only manage a slight jerk of the head. Mercifully, he changed the subject. "In any case, this evening I have excused myself from the feast, which apparently will be much reduced now that the biscop has stepped in to set up rations for the city. Manfred will attend Mayor Werner. You will attend me. It is time for you to witness the workings of the magi, even one as weak in the craft as I am."

"Da said was deaf to it," she blurted out. Anything to delay.

"Deaf to what?"

"To magic." There, it was spoken out loud.

"So he did teach you magic. You must trust me, Liath. You cannot conceal the truth from me. I

know your background too well."

Better, it appeared, than she herself knew it. She shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant, but Wolfhere's gaze was too keen. She could not fool him. And yet. . .

Wolfhere lifted an eyebrow, waiting for her to speak.

She brushed a piece of straw off her leggings and king's shifted her seat. She was by now thoroughly sick of straw; it poked through everything and tickled her nose all night. Behind her, her saddle provided reasonable support. But she felt the presence of the book, hidden beneath the saddle and within the leather saddlebags. Could Wolfhere feel the book's presence as well? Was he only biding his time?

"What do you mean to do?" she asked.

"I mean to seek a vision of this intelligence Prince Sanglant speaks of, whatever creature it is that directs the Eika siege." He rose. Because she no longer had a choice, she rose with him and followed him out of doors.

It was dusk in Gent. Clouds had come in after that glorious morning sunlight and now it was again a dreary, overcast, damp spring evening. St. Melania's Day, Liath thought, named for the saint who had admonished the patriarchs of Kellai when they refused to accept the supremacy of the Lady and Lord of Unities. It was also the seventeenth day of the month of Sormas. Because cloud covered the sky, she could not orient herself by the stars. And dared not. It was bad enough Wolfhere knew her father and mother had studied the forbidden arts. She had only made it worse by speaking so rashly in Mayor Werner's hall.

This night the streets were mostly empty. Perhaps the morning's excitement had exhausted everyone. Their footsteps were swallowed in the greater hush of a city turning over from day to night, from activity to restless sleep, haunted always by the presence of the Eika outside the walls. A thin sheen of moisture from the afternoon's shower covered the plank walkways that kept them above the muck of the streets. The drums that always pounded in the Eika camp were, thank the Lady, muted this night, though still audible. Even so, she found her footsteps falling into beat with them; she skiphopped, trying to walk off the rhythm.

Wolfhere smiled and they turned past the old marketplace and skirted the edge of the royal mint, which was heavily guarded. The wind shifted, bringing the stink of

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the tanning works up from the western bank of the river. There, work went on into the night at adjacent warehouses where armor and weapons were being turned out from iron and wood and leather that had been carted in from the countryside by the refugees.

He led her across the central square of Gent and up the steps of the cathedral. Built all of stone, its massive front stood like the shield of faith in Gent's center. They slipped inside easily, since the doors had no locks.

And in any case, some of the refugees from the countryside had taken up residence in the nave. Liath hesitated in the entryway, hearing the shuffle of bodies within, coughs and whispers. No light was allowed after sunset, even in a stone building, for fear of fire, but she could see blocks of shadows, awnings and blankets thrown up as walls between the benches to separate one family from the next. Everyone had settled down to sleep. Wolfhere touched her on the arm and she followed him silently to the stairs that led down to the crypt.

Liath had never been afraid of the dead or the darkness. As Da always said: "Those who rest in the Chamber of Light are at peace; the others have no power to harm us." Even so, it soon became so dark as they descended stairs made first of stone and then, as they descended still deeper, of bare earth,

that even she with her salamander eyes could not make out the walls but had to feel her way by touch.

Wolfhere, ahead of her, stopped, and she steadied herself, one hand on his shoulder. It was utterly black. The crypt smelled of clay and lime. It was damp. At the edge of her hearing came the sound of the slow drip of water.

It nagged at her, that uneven sound, a droplet of water shattering to pieces on stone, then, finally, another. It reminded her of the water in the crypt of the church where Marshal Liudolf had locked her up after Da's murder. It had been dark there, as well, and she had been imprisoned. Until Hugh came.

Her chest was tight with fear and she clutched convulsively at Wolfhere's shoulder, suddenly terrified. What if Hugh lurked in these shadows? "Call light, Liath," said Wolfhere. "I can't."

"Seek in your mind for the memory of light, and call it forth."

She shook her head. She was sweating now, although it was cool in the vaults. Strange noises caught in the air. She knew Hugh was far away and yet felt him as if he was just about to touch her.

Wolfhere continued, as calm as ever. "If I remember, there is a torch here. Think of flames, then, and call fire to it."

"I was not taught these things!" Air stirred behind her neck. Light! She shut her eyes, though it was hard to find the courage to do so, even when she couldn't see. She formed a picture of light, the chamber illuminated, sunlight streaming in through the windows of her memory tower to limn the four doors of her tower that led to nowhere and to everywhere, to cover as with a gold wash the fifth door, set impossibly in the center of the room. Light.

But nothing came. In the frozen tower, the light was as cold as midwinter's kiss and though it illuminated, its touch did not bring life. A tendril, like a spiderweb come loose from its moorings, brushed the nape of her neck. She flinched and batted it away, but there was nothing there. And yet there was something behind her, always stalking her.

She could stand it no more. "Better to go forward," Da always said, "than to look behind at what's creeping up on you." She shoved past Wroflhere, stumbled on level flagstone floor, and groped along the wall. Her hand came to rest on the stem of a torch. She wrenched it free and spun, holding it out like a weapon, but it touched nothing. There was nothing, except her own fear.

And that sparked anger. What right had Hugh to plague her like this? Would she never be free of him?

His was the dark presence always at her back, and yet there was another, which she could not name, whatever had stalked her father and herself for all those years.

"Leave me be!" she cried. The stone walls of the crypt sucked her voice away, muffling it. "Now, Liath" Wolfhere began. Ah, but she was furious by now, a raw anger that throbbed through her like fire. The torch in her hand caught flame and burned with a strong, uncanny light. She started back, blinking away tears. Wolfhere looked sickly pale, but then her eyes adjusted and she saw he was smiling wryly. "That's better," he said.

Liath was horrified. She had called fire, by what means she did not know. Now Wolfhere thought she knew the arts of sorcery.

And yet, if she could call fire, why should she not learn the arts of sorcery? Why should she not become magus and mathematicus? Was it not her birthright?

Wolfhere made no more mention of the blazing torch, nor did he ask her how she had accomplished the deed. He crossed the crypt floor and because she did not want to be alone in this buried chamber, she followed. Under the broad stone arches that held up the crypt he paused to study the famous tomb of Biscop Mariana, predecessor of the current biscop. Nestled between her grave and

the heavy stone wall of the crypt lay another tomb. Carved of less imposing granite, it nevertheless displayed a more elaborate epitaph.

Here lies Flodoard, presbyter of the Holy Church, servant of Our Lord and Lady, guide and instructor to Louis, king of Varre. Devout in practice and humble in spirit, he was the best among us. So does he rest in the light of truth above.

Liath became aware all at once of the space opening behind her, the vast womb of the cathedral, and the monuments that marked the graves of the women and men who had served within these precincts. Best among us. She felt at peace, here among the holy dead. She might not be safe with Wolfhere, or any other mortal man or woman, but surely these holy ones remained her guardians as they guarded all who kept faith.

"I have heard it said a saint's tomb lies hidden in the crypt of Gent Cathedral." Wolfhere surveyed the dark cavern. The hush was profound. She could hear not even the least sound from above, though several hundred refugees crowded the church and beyond the doors the city of Gent certainly lay restless in its uneasy sleep, one eye always open toward its besiegers. Tombs faded into the darkness, marking distance by their shade of gray in the torchlight. Liath could not see the far walls or even the opening that led to the stairs. Gent was an old cathedral, its foundations laid, some said, in the last years of the old empire by a halfelvisish prince who had converted to the faith of the Unities as the empire collapsed around him.

Wolfhere walked farther into the crypt, into dark chambers and down a short flight of steps, and Liath followed him. The deeper they went, the fresher the air smelled, tinged with the dry sweetness of some kind of grain. She sneezed.

"But it is also said," added Wolfhere, "that only those of great holiness, great innocence, or great need ever find that grave."

"Whose grave is it?" Liath asked, casting about, looking for any least gleam of silver light or hidden corner of stone concealed in the shadows, but she saw nothing besides the tombs of bishops and presbyters, holy deacons and robed mayors, and one count of Gent whose effigy showed her holding a scroll in one hand and a knife in the other.

"St. Kristine of the Knives, she who endured unspeakable tortments in the last days of the old empire rather than yield her place to the invaders. It is said of her that though an empire might fall from grace, she could and would not fall because of her great strength."

But they found no saint's tomb.

They returned to the halfflight of stairs and passed into a dim corridor and thence into a side chapel that contained two tombs so ancient their inscriptions were almost rubbed away, as well as a single slab of black stone that glinted when she brought the torch up beside it.

She knelt and ran a hand along its surface. It was smoother than glass. "This is obsidian," she said. "Though some say that this is not stone at all but the remains of dragon bones that have been exposed to sunlight."

Wolfhere knelt opposite. "By this means, I will view. Did Bernard teach you the art of vision?"

She shook her head. She had never seen Da "vision" anything, although she had read it was possible to look long distances through certain media: water, fire, and certain kinds of stone. "Is itis it right to practice the forbidden arts on holy ground? In a church?"

He glanced up. His gaze was mild but direct. "It is needful, and Our Lord and Lady do not prohibit what is needful. Or so agreed the church elders at the Council of Kellai. The church did not condemn sorcery, Liath, though at the Council of Narvone it imposed a penance on those who practice it outside the supervision of the church."

What had Hugh said to her? "/ am sure there are those in the church who have made it their task to lean the forbidden arts of sorcery, but I have not found them so far." "But they are called the forbidden arts," she whispered.

"It is true the church looks with disfavor on those who j seek the elder arts, those practiced by the ancient heathens which have come down to us in their writings. Those which can be used by the unscrupulous to gain power. But it would be more than foolish to deny that such arts and powers are within our grasp, or to attempt to condemn them as heresy is condemned. It would be impossible, as well as dangerous. So in her wisdom Skopos Mary Jehanna, who presided over the Council of Kellai, was first to pronounce some of the forbidden I arts as lying within the provenance of the church, and king's dragon that ruling was confirmed by the Council of Navrone a hundred years ago. Indeed, in these days the Convent of St. Valeria is known for its study of the forbidden arts." "But you are not in the church." "I received some part of my training at a monastery in Aosta, at a schola there. I was never pledged to the church. Now. Attend."

He opened the leather pouch that hung from his belt and took out a flask. Then he took dagger and sword from their sheaths and laid them to one side. He unstoppered the flask and offered it to her. She shook her head, and he took a drink himself and set the flask down.

She waited. It seemed safe, now, to betray her intense curiosity. He knew what her parents were, after all. And had she not called fire?

He placed both hands, palms down and his shoulders' width apart, on the glassy black stone surface. For a long while he simply stared at the rock face. It was so quiet in the crypt she felt she heard the sound of dust settling on the tombs and the slow creak of stone shifting against the bones of the earth. The darkness beyond the flickering torchlight no longer scared her; it was merely shadow and silence and the physical remains of the dead, their spirits long since risen up through the seven spheres. "Liath."

She started up. Wolfhere glanced at her, surprised.

He had not spoken.

His look was a question. She shook her head and settled back. "I beg your pardon," she said.

"What is it?" he asked. Either he had not heard the voice or he was more subtle than she feared.

"Nothing." She settled back into place, her grip tight on the torch. It blazed with undiminished strength. "A spider crawled up my hand."

Whether he believed this excuse or not, he accepted it. He turned his left hand palm up, the back of the hand still lying on the stone, fingers curled up slightly as if he was about to cup a sphere. "Sorcery is a mental discipline, not a physical one. It is the manipulation of the unseen forces that surround us, that are always active, though they are invisible to our five senses. There are those who profess knowledge of the forbidden arts who use physical means, incantations, chants, and objects, to focus their minds and reveal knowledge beyond what is common. These we know by many names, depending on what elements they seek to manipulate. The tempestari try to control the weather; the haroli seek to call down the daimones of the upper air, who are almost as knowledgeable as the angels. The sortelegi cast lots and make predictions, and old wisemen and women who may yet remember the old gods and have not yet turned their hearts entirely to Our Lady and Lord make predictions by means of the flights and cries of birds. These we call augures. Even unlearned folk have among them those who by diverse means and complicated misunderstandings have some simple skill in magic."

He paused and seemed to be waiting for her to comment.

The marble tomb at her left hand was engraved with the likeness of a woman wearing a biscop's mitre and robes: Caesaria, deacon and biscop. In the carving, the biscop held a shield depicting a saint, a woman with arms outstretched holding a knife in each hand; she also wore, as the sign of her martyrdom,

a knife buried hilt deep in her breast. St. Kristine.

"But the church condemns some magi," said Liath, "and watches with suspicion over any who are not sworn to its service."

"True enough. The church does not approve of those who seek such powers without its guidance. There will always be people who use the arts only for their own gain or to harm others. These we call malefici. The worst among them are those who consort with devils by means of blood and sacrifice. But others also remain suspect, chief among them those we know as the mathematici, for the study of the heavens is derived from the arts of king's dragon the Babaharshan magi and the church looks with disfavor upon arts known to be heathen in origin."

And what of those who can speak a name and have it resonate across a great distance? This was not the first time she had heard that voice, calling her name, but obviously it must be the voice either of a magus or of some creature not of human birth, an angel or a daimone. Or a devil in service to the Enemy. She shuddered.

Wolfhere lifted a hand to touch her, briefly and reassuringly, on the knee. "You are safe with me, Liath."

She said nothing. She did not believe him. He regarded her silently. Suddenly calm, she examined him: his grave expression; the stern light in his eyes which was, nevertheless, touched with kindness; the marks of age on his skin; and in his hair and beard, where only a trace of the younger man remained, a few strands of brown hair nestled among the silver.

It was not that Wolfhere might personally wish her harm; she did not believe that. But she suspected his ultimate ends. She suspected him of wanting her for some other purpose, one which he chose not to reveal to her. "Trust no one." Even if he meant well by her, how could he protect her from the fate that had stalked Da? How could he protect her against a power that could strike death onto a man without unlocking door or window and without leaving a mark on the body? How could she protect herself?

Wolfhere laid his hand back on the stone. "But if the mind is properly trained, none of these other ways are necessary or even preferable. By what means do the magi focus and train their minds?" "The ladder."

He nodded. "The ladder by which the magi ascend. Can you recite it?"

She had tried so hard not to think of these things while she had been Hugh's slave that it took her some little time to walk back through the city of memory, to mark the gates, the levels of the great city in which all her knowledge was stored. "There are seven rungs on the ladder, which correspond to the seven spheres of the heavens. First is the rose of healing. Then the sword of strength. The cup of boundless waters. The ring of fire, which is known to us also as the Circle of Unity, the symbol of our Lady and Lord who together form the God of Unities. The throne of virtue. The scepter of wisdom. And the Crown of Light, which we also know as truth."

Wolfhere nodded. "These are the tools the magi use. Follow with me, in your mind's eye. Through the ring of fire we may see a vision of another place." He drew his hands farther apart and stared fixedly at the black stone. Liath felt his silence reach a new and deeper level, as if he were drawing away from her, although of course he did not actually move. But she had never learned to build the ring of fire in her own mind; Da hadn't taught her the mental exercises beyond the sword of strength. She stared at the expanse of stone that lay between Wolfhere's hands, one palm down, the other palm up. Her grip tightened on the torch. The air itself seemed to grow taut. Wolfhere sucked breath in between his teeth. His pupils widened, then shrank to pinpricks as at a sudden bright light. She saw nothing except black stone. "What do you see?" he whispered, as if the words took effort. "Nothing."

He shook his head suddenly and his pupils expanded. He seemed to be searching. "I, too, see

nothing," he murmured. "Campfires, tents, their ships, and a kind of darkness that shades the center of their camp." He shut his eyes, then lifted his hands off the stone and, rather like a dog letting itself off guard, shook himself slightly all over. He looked at Liath. "This enchanter shields himself against my sight. That bodes ill, I fear. My powers are not strong, but as an Eagle I am adept at certain things. Seeing is one of them. You saw nothing as well?" "I saw nothing." But her nothing was not, she real

king's dragon

ized, the same nothing as he had seen. She had truly seen nothing. Da had been right all along; she was deaf to magic.

But then how had she managed to cause the torch to catch flame?

Wolfhere frowned. "I have never heard Eika were accomplished magi, or that they had any skill at the forbidden arts, or even knowledge of them. They are savages, after all. But I no longer doubt Prince Sanglant. There is a presence among them who controls great power. That must explain" He ran a hand over the slab of obsidian. "Strange." "Explain what?"

But now an edge came to his voice. "Sit still," he ordered. He traced a ring on the stone and then rested his hands, one palm up, the other palm down, a shoulder's width apart. He stared at the black surface, intent, concentrating. She saw nothing, but she felt a breath like wings brushing her cheek.

"An eagle!" he breathed sharply, starting back. "An eagle in flight, plummeting to earth." He jumped up. "Come, Liath. We must go back. I don't know what this portends." Hastily, he collected his weapons from the floor, and they hurried back to the stairs that led out of the crypt. When Liath stuck the torch back in a sconce, it snuffed out as soon as it left her hand, plunging them in darkness. Wolfhere grunted, sounding surprised, but he said nothing. They climbed the stairs by feel and hastened out of the cathedral.

It was dark and still overcast, but after the blackness of the crypt, the night did not seem heavy. The Eika drums sounded louder now; they usually reached their peak at midnight.

As they walked swiftly back toward the mayor's palace Liath recalled Wolfhere's broken sentence. "You said the presence of an enchanter might explain something."

"Ah." For the space of twelve steps, clipped and hard and rapid on the plank walkway, he considered. "When

we rode into Gent, I cast a spell to attempt to delay the advance of that group of Eika who were coming after us. Nothing more than an illusion. My skills are not great, and I am only adept at certain arts of seeing. I warned you to ignore what you saw."

The flight to Gent was still graven in her mind with the vivid colors of a freshly painted mural. What he spoke now made her suddenly understand that which she had almost forgotten, because it had made no sense at the time.

A flash, a glittering of light like a fire's light seen from inside a dark room. Her horse had almost thrown her, and Manfred had flung a hand up to cover his eyes, as if to protect himself from a much fiercer vision. A tingling on her back. The tiny winkings of fireflies. But that was all she had seen. Either Wolfhere's magics were indeed very small, or else . . .

"I knew there must be some kind of sorcery at work," he continued. "Now I know it is more powerful than I feared. To dissipate my illusions is one thing. To cloud my seeing is entirely another."

Or else she had seen only the faint edge of his magic or not his magic at all, but the barest trace of the enchantment that had protected the Eika against it. "You've thought of something," Wolfhere said. "No. Nothing." Until she understood it herself, she would not confess this mystery to him. It would give him power over her, more power than he already had, "Only what Da said: 'To master knowledge is to



have power from it.' '

"True words," commented Wolfhere. The palisade marking the inner fortress, the mayor's palace, rose before them in the gloom. She heard the distant buzz of many voices speaking at once.

Were they true words? When Da said, "trust no one," had he meant her to include himself? She was deaf to magic, yet he had begun to teach her the arts of the , magi. She was deaf to magic, yet she had some kind of power; she had seen it manifested twice, once when she |

king's dragon had burned the Rose of Healing into the table in Hugh's study and this night in the crypt, when she had caused the torch to light.

"Is that all you have thought of?" he asked.

She remained mutely silent.

"Have I made any attempt to harm you, Liath?" he asked gently, if a little accusingly. "To bring you to harm?"

"You brought me to Gent!" But she said it with a wry smile, hoping to distract him.

They came though the wooden gateway into the courtyard of the mayor's palace. The stonepaved courtyard was awash in torchlight, smoke and flames setting a yellow haze over the people gathered like so many bees swarming. This was a new crowd, smaller than the one this morning, and agitated in a completely different way. "Alas that I did," he murmured. Then he grabbed her by an elbow and with a grim expression pulled her through the crowd, shoving Dragons and rich merchants and the mayor's retainers ruthlessly aside so that he and Liath could get to the center.

There, they found the mayor, Manfred, and Prince Sanglant and an Eagle, battered beyond belief, his cloak torn, his head wrapped in a bloody, dirty cloth, one arm hanging useless at his side, and his horse dying at his feet.

He looked up, saw Wolfhere emerge out of the crowd, and tried to get to his feet, but staggered. Manfred steadied him.

"Find a healer," Prince Sanglant ordered, signing to his Dragons. "Bring a stretcher, and wine." His closest attendants, the scarredface woman and the man with the limp, hurried off.

Mayor Werner's complexion had a ghastly white cast under torchlight. But it was not only the light but also his expression. He looked like a man who had seen his own grave.

"Lie down, my son." Wolfhere knelt beside the Eagle and lowered him onto Manfred's bundled cloak. "What is your news?"

Liath crept closer. Blood soaked the Eagle's tunic, and he breathed in ragged bursts. The broken end of an arrow protruded from his chest. She caught in a gasp and took an involuntary step closer. The next instant, a hand caught her by the shoulder.

She knew before she looked, felt in her whole being, that she had come up beside the prince and that it was he who had stopped her from going forward. His hand seemed to burn her shoulder even through the cloth, though she knew it was only the shame of her desire that made her feel his presence so keenly. She risked looking up at him because it would be cowardly to do otherwise. But when their eyes met, he was the one who looked away. He let go of her and even took a half step away. She had a sudden uncomfortable notion that her presence troubled him.

The Eagle coughed, spitting blood. Ai, Lord, the arrow had caught him in the lung. It was only a matter of time.

"Bad news." His breath came in bursts now. His skin flushed a deep red as he struggled to speak. "Count Hildegard. Riding to Gent. Many troops. We were ambushed. I escaped to

"He came to the east gate less than an hour ago," said Sanglant. "These folk brought him here." He gestured toward the crowd, which by dint of glares and simple force from the prince's everpresent escort of Dragons, had finally moved back, giving the rest of them air. "Though he would have gotten through the streets more quickly had they stayed in their beds and not swarmed out into the streets to get in his way."

"What of Count Hildegard?" Wolfhere asked. The man coughed again, this time clots of blood, and when he spoke, Liath had to bend forward to hear him. "I don't know. Perhaps she won free. Our Lord

He went into convulsions. Liath threw herself forward and helped hold his shoulder down, Manfred oppo

site her, while Wolfhere leaned on a leg and Sanglant grasped the other. As if from a distance she heard Mayor Werner wailing and the cries and sobbing of the crowd. The Eagle went lax. Liath sat back, looked up to find Sanglant staring at her, his hands resting on the man's left leg. The prince stayed there, poised like that, for a long breath. Wolfhere muttered a curse and hunched over, ear to the injured man's chest.

"No need," said Sanglant, not taking his gaze off Liath. "He's stopped breathing. There is no pulse of blood. He's dead." That strange hoarse scrape in his voice lent a verisimilitude of grief to his words that she did not see in his expression; not that he was pleased, either, just that death no longer grieved or surprised him.

She looked away in time to see Manfred cover his eyes with a hand. Wolfhere remained bent over the body for a long while, his face hidden. Finally, he straightened.

"He is dead." He sat on his heels while beyond Mayor Werner wept copious tears, although not, Liath suspected for the dead man but rather for the loss of hope.

Sanglant lifted a hand. The Dragons drove the onlookers out of the courtyard. "This is no time to weep," the prince said, rising and turning to Mayor Werner. "He was a brave man, and he deserves this honor: that we not lose heart because of the news he paid his life to bring us. Count Hildegard may yet win through." "If she does not?"

"If she does not," replied the prince, "if her force is utterly broken, then we will ration food more strictly and settle ourselves in for a long siege. We have good water supplies here. There is yet hope that Wolfhere's companions will reach King Henry. Some of my own men still reside outside the walls, and they will harass the Eika until we can either break out or another force comes to break in."

Finally Wolfhere moved, but only to unpin the brass badge the dead Eagle wore at his throat. It was wet with blood and drying spume. He wiped it off on the tatters of the dead man's cloak. Then he rose, and Manfred and Liath rose with him. Wolfhere extended a hand, open, the badge lying on it, winking in the torchlight.

"What are the precepts which govern the conduct of an Eagle, Liath?"

They were simple enough. She had memorized them easily. "Serve the king and no other. Speak only the truth of what you see and hear, but speak not at all to the king's enemies. Let no obstacle stand in the way of your duty to the king, not weather, not battle, not pleasure, not plague. Let your duty to your kin come second, and make no marriage unless to another Eagle who has sworn the same oaths as you."

She could not help it. She glanced toward Sanglant, who had turned back to watch her, or to watch Wolfhere, she could not tell which. His gaze was steady and a bit imposing, but he made no sign or sound.

Yet as she took a breath, to finish, she saw that Manfred also watched her, but with an odd

expression, as if he was watching to see what she would do or how she would react. Had she been blind? Was his affection for her something more than that of comrades? She dismissed the thought quickly and with impatience; to believe so was vanity, nothing more. Just because Hugh had desired her and no other woman in Heart's Rest did not mean every man desired her.

Manfred smiled sadly at her. She smiled back and continued.

"Aid any Eagle who is in need, and protect your comrades from any who might harm them. And, last, abide by your faith in Our Lady and Lord.

"Do you swear to abide by these?" Wolfhere asked.

It was quiet now that most of the crowd had been chased away. The mayor had stopped wailing. He huddled behind Sanglant, his servants clustered round him with solemn faces and hands clasped in prayer. Torches flared, and as the wind shifted it blew smoke into her nostrils, stinging and bitter. From the east, stronger now, she heard the Eika drums.

"I do so swear," she said quietly, understanding now what was going on.

Manfred knelt and pulled the remains of the dead Eagle's cloak across his slack and bloody face, concealing it. Wolfhere leaned forward across the body, lifting the badge. But Sanglant stepped in and set a hand between them.

"As the king's representative, it is my right," he said.

Wolfhere hesitated only a moment. What choice did he have? He relinquished the Eagle's badge to the prince. And Sanglant fastened it to Liath's tunic, his fingers at her throat. His lips were turned up slightly, but Liath could not be certain if the expression was meant to be a smile. She only knew that she was flushed. He kept his gaze where it belonged: on the sharp pin as he fastened it through the cloth of her tunic. But when he had finished, he did not immediately drop his hands away. He met her gaze and mouthed three words which, with his back to Wolfhere and Manfred and all the others drawn back or gone, only he and she knew:

" 'Make no marriage.'"

Then he turned and walked away and soon was lost in the darkness beyond the torchlit haze. She watched him go, then, selfconsciously, dropped her gaze away. But it came to rest on the dead Eagle. She touched the badge at her throat. The metal was cold and still slick with the effluvia of his dying.

"Now you are truly an Eagle," said Wolfhere softly, not without triumph.

LIATH woke at dawn, stiff and shivering. It was colder than it had been the night before, and as she slipped her wool tunic on over her shift she noticed the light was of a different quality as well. Throwing her cloak over her shoulders, she went outside.

The clouds had blown off, and from the parapet she saw the glittering cold disk of the sun, bright but with the breath of old winter on it, a last reminder of snow and ice and the grip of cold weather. She stamped her feet and rubbed her arms. She refused to let memories of Hugh spoil this day, her first as a true Eagle. She touched the brass badge at her throat. Surely this badge protected her from him. Surely not even a noblewoman's bastard like Hugh would attempt to make her break her oath that had now been given to the king's service. Or at least she told herself that. It was too clear and fine a morning to taint with fear.

The eastern shore was shrouded with fog that the sun had not yet burned off. She could not see the Eika camp and only the suggestion of earthworks, dark forms shouldering through the white blanket of fog. To the west she saw clouds. Licking a finger, she held it up. The wind was coming from the east; those western clouds, then, were those that had covered Gent last night. She smiled, slightly; Hathui

would merely snort at this profound observation and point out that a child could have made it.

But thinking of Hathui made her think of Hanna. Where was Hanna now? Had she escaped the Eika? Had she found safety? Had they reached the king, and was he even now marching to raise the siege? She missed Hanna so badly. The bite of cold made it worse because cold wrenched her mind back to Hugh, to that night when she had chosen not to die, when the light had bobbed an erratic course out to her where she huddled in the pig shed only to reveal itself as Hugh, with a lantern. Hugh, who had taken her back inside

But there was no point dwelling on that. "No point thinking only of what troubles you," Da always said. But Da had been a master at ignoring the trouble that stalked him, whether it be debt or whatever had finally caught and killed him. She wiped away a tear with the back of a king's dragon hand, then clapped her hands together, rubbed them briskly, trying to warm them.

"Liath!"

She turned. Below, in the courtyard, Wolfhere waved at her. She climbed down the ladder and jogged over to him.

"I must prepare the body for burial," he said. "But in my surprise and haste last night forgot my flask in the cathedral crypt."

She nodded. "I'll fetch it for you." "Come back here after," he said. "We'll bury our comrade after Terce."

The city was more restless than usual, this day, this early. People wandered the streets as if looking for lost relatives. The hammering of blacksmiths sounded a steady din from the armory, and a constant stream of men and women carried loads on their backs—metals, leather, anything that could possibly be made into weapon or armor—down to the warehouses where the armories had been set up. There were, Liath noted, no children on the streets at all. ~~

When she reached the cathedral, she heard the final psalm of the office of Prime.

"'God, Our Lady and Lord, have spoken and have summoned the world from the rising to the setting sun.'" She hurried up the steps and through the open doors. The cathedral was packed: with refugees, with townspeople, with the Mayor and his entourage. At the front, in the place of honor, knelt Prince Sanglant, his blue-black hair and the wink of gold at his neck a beacon for her gaze. He wore mail and his fighting tunic, and fifty Dragons knelt with him, all arrayed for battle, helmets tucked under their arms. The bishop stood before her gold bishop's chair, set behind the Hearth; she raised her arms as she led the congregation in the final verses of the psalm.

'Our Lord is coming and will not keep silence: fire runs before him and wreathes him closely round.

Our Lady summons heaven on high and Earth to the judgment of the people.

Think well on this, you who forget God, or you will be torn in pieces and no one shall save you.'

All were kneeling. Liath knelt in the side aisle, at the very back of the crowd, and spoke the final Kyria with the congregation.

Lord, have mercy. Lady, have mercy.

Then, in the hesitation as the final prayer died into the air and the congregation waited for the bishop to dismiss them, Liath stood and slipped along the wall to the shadowed corner of the vestibule where a heavy wooden door barred passage to the crypt. It creaked as she opened it. She glanced back, but the hum of the crowd, rising, stretching, waiting perhaps for a word from bishop or mayor about last night's message, covered the noise. She left the door ajar behind her.

A thin line of light marked the door as she descended, and at the first sharp corner it glanced off stone and illuminated a bead of water caught on a delicate spiderweb. Turning the corner, she lost sight of the door, though the suggestion of daylight still trailed after her. She went as silently as she could, not wishing to disturb the peace of the dead. She reached the bottom, foot slamming into level floor where she thought there was another step down, and paused to let her jolted shoulders recover.

Strange, that the light from above still gave a steady if faint radiance, just enough that she could see the shape of her hand if she held it up in front of her face. Last night but of course, last night it had already been dark when she and Wolfhere had descended; that was why it had been pitchblack. Abruptly, she heard a noise above, from the stairs. She froze, listening.

Footsteps descending. They were heavy and accompanied by a fine rattling and shaking, many small chains muffled in cloth. The pale ghosts of tombs watched from the gloom. She was, she discovered with surprise, not

afraid at all. Indeed, without knowing why, she was expecting him.

"Liath," he said. She could only see his shape, bulky in armor, only feel the air shifting as he stopped five steps above, his body blocking the narrow passage.

"You heard the door creak," she said, "even above the noise of the congregation."

"Below the noise of the congregation," he corrected. She felt that he smiled or perhaps only wished that he did. In any case, he walked down the rest of the stairs. He stumbled on the floor, not expecting it so soon, and swore. "Damn, it's dark down here. How can you see anything? What are you doing here?"

"Fetching something left behind."

"An answer worthy of Wolfhere. I am not your enemy, Liath."

"No," she said. Her voice shook. "I never thought you were."

Seeking, his hand found her shoulder; he was like a blind creature groping by sound. The crypt echoed strangely, and even the faint harmonics of his mail, rippling and clicking with his every least movement, got caught and distorted among the tombs and the vast breathless cavern, all air and stone.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Who are your kin?"

"I am the daughter of Anne and Bernard. I know nothing of my mother's lineage, save that she is of free birth. Wolfhere knew her. It's likely he knows things about her he has not chosen to tell me."

He chuckled, a soft sound on an exhalation of breath. "Wolfhere is not a man for sharing confidences. Or so my father claims. But I did not expect you would be given the same treatment as the rest of us."

His hand on her shoulder was terribly distracting, but neither did she want to move away from him. "Why? Why do you say that?"

"He favors you. Or I should say, he seems to be protecting you."

"Perhaps he is. I don't truly know."

"Ah. And your father's kin?"

"I know little about them, save that they came west and settled in Wendar during the reign of Taillefer. There is still a cousin who holds lands near Bodfeld, but I have never met her. One of her sons rides with the Dragons."

He removed his hand from her shoulder, and she was sorry to lose the contact. He shifted,

restless, and she glimpsed in the halfdarkness the shape of his head, tilted back, then cocked to one side, as if he was listening. She could only hear the weight of the stone above her, a heaviness more sound than feeling.

"Bodfeld," he murmured. "That would be Sturm. But he is trapped outside."

"I met him!" She thought back, recalling the Dragon who had led the company which had saved them from the first attack of the Eika. But all she had seen of that man were blue eyes, blond beard, and a grim expression. Much the same expression, she supposed by the tone of his voice, which Sanglant wore on his face right now.

"He is a good soldier."

This praise for her kinsman warmed her, though it was delivered bluntly and without any suggestion he meant it as flattery toward her.

"Why did you follow me?" she asked boldly.

Rather than answer, he sat on the last stair but one. It was an unexpected gesture and oddly moving; now, instead of towering above her, his head was level with her chest. He appeared less imposing. Perhaps that was his intent.

"A good lineage, if not of the first rank," he said. "Which may account for your lack of deference."

Stung and embarrassed, she flushed. "I beg your pardon, my lord. My Da always told me we came of a proud lineage and need bend our knee to none but the king."

He YaugYv&d soM^. Obviously Vie was not offended.

"You didn't answer my question. Why did you follow me?"

He shook his head, refusing to answer. Perhaps he did not truly know.

But she knew. She was not afraid of Sanglant. His reticence piqued her, irritated her. Surely the darkness, the stone, and the earth hid them from the sight of any who might be watching. Only the cold tombs gleamed with a faint phosphorescence, but the holy sisters and brothers of the church were used to sin, were they not? Did they not preach forgiveness? Was it not allowed, even once, to give in to the urging of your heart?

Liath had forgotten she had a heart. It hurt, like a wound salved with salt, to rediscover it now. Sanglant did not move. She could not make out his expression. Gold gleamed softly at his neck, the twisted braid of gold that was the emblem of his royal kinship. She could make out the outlines of the black dragon on his tabard, as if it had been stitched with thread spun of moonlight and dewladen spider's silk.

Was it true he had no beard at all, like a woman? Impulsively, she raised a hand to touch his face. She almost flinched away, thinking of Hugh's unshaven face, but Sanglant's skin was nothing like: his was toughened by exposure to the weather, chafed by the chin strap of his helmet, and cool.

And beardless. He might have shaved an hour ago, his skin was so smooth.

Her heart was beating hard. Hugh's shade was furious, but he was far away at this moment, very far away.

"Sanglant," she whispered, wondering if she would have the courage to

To what?

He took her hand in his though his were encased in gloves sewn of soft leather and drew it away from his face. "Down that road I dare not walk," he said quietly but firmly. He let her hand go.

Numb, she let it fall to her side.

"I beg your pardon," he added, as if he meant it.

Ai, Lady. She was annoyed and embarrassed and such a jumble of other emotions she could not disentangle them one from the other. Sanglant was a notorious womanizer; everyone said so. Why was he rejecting her!

Sanglant shifted restlessly. This was her punishment. She could almost hear Hugh laughing, that soft arrogant sound. You are mine, Liath. You aren't meant for anyone else. Tears stung her eyes. This was her lesson: that she must remain locked within her tower. She must not succumb to temptation. It would never be allowed. She was already hopelessly stained.

"I must go," he said abruptly. The hoarseness in his voice made her think, for a wild moment, that he was sorry to be leaving; but his voice always sounded like that. He stood, mail shifting. "We're preparing for a sally out of the walls if we see any sign of Count Hildegard or her people."

"Why did you say that, last night?" Anger helped her fight against tears, anger at Sanglant's rejection of her, at Hugh for his unrelenting grip on her, at Wolfhere for his halftruths, at Da for dying. "Why?"

"What did I say?"

"You haven't forgotten."

He made a sharp gesture, and she understood abruptly that he had not forgotten and that he spoke as much with his physical being as he did with words. "Make no marriage, Liath," he said harshly. "Be bound, as I am, by the fate others have determined for you. That way you will remain safe." But he mocked himself as much as he spoke to her.

"Will I remain safe? And from what? What are you safe from, Sanglant?"

He smiled derisively.

How could she see him smile? It was far too dark.

But it was not dark, not entirely. His face and front were illuminated by a soft white light, like muted starlight. The black dragon winked and stirred in that light as Sanglant moved, looking beyond her into the vaults.

His eyes widened in shock. He lifted a hand, stood there, poised, frozen, and utterly astonished.

Liath turned. Just behind her, so close she felt the displacement of air, Sanglant knelt.

She stood beside the tombs as if she had just stepped out of the earth itself. She wore a long linen shift of a cut Liath had never see except in mausoleums and reliefs carved into stone. Her face was as pale as the moon, marked by eyes as blue as the depths of fire. Her long hair, gilded with that same touch of unearthly light, looked like spun gold, hanging to her knees. Her feet were bare. They did not quite touch the floor of the crypt. In each hand she held a knife, and those knives shone as if their blades were made of burning glass.

And she bled, from her hands, from her feet, from her chest where a knife stood out, its blade thrust deep to take her heart's blood. Blood slipped in trails like the runnels of tears down her shift from that wound, and she wept tears of blood.

But she gazed on Liath and Sanglant with the calm serenity of one who is past pain and suffering. And she beckoned to them.

Hesitant, hand clutching through cloth and wood the Circle of Unity she wore as a necklace, Liath took slow steps forward. Sanglant followed. She heard him murmuring a prayer under his breath.

She spoke no word, merely retreated farther into the night vault of the crypt, into the warren of chambers where the deacons and laybrothers and sisters, servants of the biscop, were buried, least known and least honored.

There lay a plain gravestone, flat against the earth. It bore no markings, no inscription; a grayflecked fungus obscured half its face, grown in a pattern that might have revealed a new mystery had there been better light. But the light that limned the saint for how could she be anything but a saint? was enough to see the hollow that opened up behind the simple gravestone, a sinkhole that transmuted into stairs, leading down and farther down yet into total blackness.

Sanglant knelt beside the grave. Liath ventured forward, following the saint, who descended the stairs. Her light receded away from them and was lost around a bend in the catacomb. Liath set foot on the first stair.

"Go no farther," said Sanglant abruptly. "The air smells fresh here, and it carries the scent of oats."

She halted, looking back over her shoulder. Already the unearthly light dimmed, as a candle gutters.

He added, impatiently: "The soil in the river valley and east of Gent is rich enough to grow wheat and rye. Only in the western hills do the folk hereabouts grow oats. This tunnel must lead miles from the city."

"But she called to us

Voices sounded from above, accompanied by the ring of mail and the stamp of heavy feet. Torchlight streamed into the chamber, sending streaks of light glaring over stone and tomb and earth. Liath shaded her eyes.

"My lord! Prince Sanglant!"

He rose and turned as the first of his Dragons found him.

"My lord Sanglant!" It was the scarredface woman. She looked first at him, then at Liath, who still stood half in the sinkhole, then back at the prince.

He said quickly and loudly, as the others crowded in, "We have followed a vision of St. Kristine. This is where it brought us."

A few drew the circle at their breasts. None seemed inclined to laugh or make jokes, even finding the prince alone in such a place with an attractive and young woman.

"The fog has lifted from the eastern shore, my lord," continued the woman. She, too, wore armor and, with her exceptional height and broad shoulders, looked as ready for hard battle as any of her comrades. "The watch has spotted Count Hildegard's banner among a mob of horsemen. They are fleeing just ahead of an Eika horde. They are coming to Gent."

Sanglant looked once, and sharply, toward Liath. He was not a man who betrayed emotion easily through the expression of his face; she could read nothing there now. But he lifted a hand and touched his cheek with a finger, an unconscious echo of the moment she had touched him so. Realizing what he was about, he jerked his hands down. Then he swept out at the head of his Dragons. Their heavy steps and the weight and clink of their mail rang through the crypt like thunder, hurting her ears. None waited for her.

She waited, but the light died, torchlight and the pale fluorescence of saint's light, both together, leaving her in a gloom relieved only by that faint trail of plain good sunlight filtered through dust and darkness. Air touched her face, as soft as a feather, rising softly from the catacomb at her feet. She smelled fresh earth and growing things, although she could not have sorted oats out from that distant



aroma of earth and hills and open air.

The saint had vanished down the stair into the black mystery beyond. Liath dared not follow her, however desperately she wished to. Perhaps, for a moment, she understood Sanglant. Down that road I dare not walk. But that did not lessen the ache.

She shook herself and stepped out of the sinkhole. Groping, she made her way back to the large vault, found the obsidian slab and the little flask tucked forlorn and forgotten up against Biscop Caesaria's tombstone. Liath unstopped the flask and took a draught. It was bitter enough to make her eyes sting, but bracing. Thus fortified, she climbed back to the living world above.

Like Sanglant, she did not doubt that St. Kristine of the Knives had appeared to them. But she could not answer the most pressing question: Why to them? And why now?

She reached the steps of the cathedral in time to see Sanglant mount his horse. He received his helmet from the woman, but before he settled it over his head, he glanced up toward the open doors. Their gazes met across the mob that had gathered. The noise in the streets was that of people hysterical with fear and hope.

He did not smile at her, only looked. Then someone spoke, and his attention was pulled away. He settled his helmet on his head and by that means was transformed; he was Prince Sanglant no longer, but captain of the King's Dragons.

Their gold tabards were as bright as sunlight and his most of all, the black dragon sigil stitched onto gold cloth with veins of silver thread. They looked, indeed, as terrible as their reputation, fierce and unforgiving in iron helms faced with brass; that his helm with its delicate gold dragon was also beautiful only made the contrast between the fine ornamentation and the grandeur of their stark and forbidding strength the more striking.

The prince hefted his teardrop shield on an arm, touched his sword's hilt, and led the way. The rest clattered behind him, over one hundred, headed down the main avenue to the eastern gate where they would meet the rest of their fellows, those who were already on duty and those still arming.

She ran back to the mayor's palace. The people on the streets, seeing her scarlet-trimmed cloak and her Eagle's badge parted to let her through.

Wolfhere waited, pacing impatiently back and forth in the Lady Chapel where the dead Eagle had been laid out. The corpse was now clad in a white linen shift, face decently covered by a square of white cloth; it lay, as was appropriate, at the foot of the Hearth.

"Liath!"

She handed Wolfhere the flask. He took it reflexively, without really noting it, and thrust it between belt and tunic. "I sent Manfred ahead to the eastern gate, to be our eyes with the Dragons. Go there now. If they must ride out, you will watch and report back to me. A horse has been saddled."

Everything was happening so fast. She checked herself for bow, quiver, and sword; all were there. Then she hurried outside to the courtyard where a horse was indeed waiting, one of Mayor Werner's geldings, a big handsome bay. His size helped her more than her Eagle's badge now. The streets were thronged and more and more people spilled out of their crowded homes as word spread through the city of Count Hildegard's approach.

But the closer she came to the eastern gate the more the crowd thinned; in a besieged town, even with as daunting a force as the Dragons within their walls, the townsfolk chose the path of prudence. A street ran parallel to the river wall. Here she found a group of boys, old enough to be useful and young enough to be fearless and, thus, enamored of the Dragons. She handed her reins over to one, a gangling weed of a boy with a thin face and quick eyes. From this vantage point she could see the ranks of the Dragons, ten abreast, about two hundred of them, lined up in the open space that fronted the gate.

The boys, citybred and citywise, showed her a ladder that led up the wall and to the wallwalk. She clambered up, surprising the men of the city's militia who stood watch there, looking out anxiously to the eastern shore.

The fog had lifted, or most of it, in any case. Out on what had once been rich cropland the land boiled with movement like flies swarming over a carcass. The Eika were out in force. The level ground gave a clear view. After a few minutes of confusion, she began to sort out the picture displayed there like a shifting mosaic.

The Eika were out in force, truly; they infested the ground. She had never seen so many bodies in one place, and all of them mobile. The green and white banner that marked the remains of Count Hildegard and her retainers bobbed unsteadily in a tight mass of horsemen supported by a straggling line of running infantry. Those who could not keep up were enveloped in the mass of Eika that came close behind, swallowed and consumed. The Eika closed in around the count's force, slowly cutting them off, encircling them. Only one narrow strip of unclaimed ground remained: the road to the river and the eastern bridge to Gent. It was a race. Liath could not imagine how the count and her remaining soldiers could reach the bridge in time unless the Dragons sallied out into the very jaws of the Eika army.

This thought hit her with the force of a bracing flood of cold water on a hot day. It cleared her mind. Clearing, her vision clouded, and she closed her eyes and rubbed them with her knuckles. Opened them.

Now, as she stared with horror, the view of the fields beyond the river looked utterly different.

There was a banner, green and white, bearing the blazon that was, probably, the badge of Count Hildegard's lands and kin. But no human retainers surrounded it. No horsemen rallied to it, no infantry fought desperately at the rear. It was surrounded instead by the icewhite glare of a thousand Eika warriors jogging at a brisk pace along the thin strip of road that led to the stone and timber bridge. That led into Gent.

What she had seen before was illusion.

What she had seen before was what everyone else saw, all the watchers along the wall, the Dragons who had left their horses and gone to the posts above the gate to call down their report to the prince, to judge to the instant the best moment to sally out. What they saw was a vision brought by a terrible and powerful enchantment, brought into being by what skills she could not imagine, only that she was the only one who saw past the enchantment to the truth.

"You are deaf to magic, " Da always said.

Or else guarded against it.

The thought hit her with such force that for one awful moment she simply could not move or think.

But she had to think. What had happened to Count Hildegard and her soldiers she did not know, but she could guess. The count's army had been utterly destroyed, and the banner wrested from the dying hands of her last loyal retainer to be used now as the lure to draw the Dragons to their death.

And she was the only one who could stop them.

JL A JM. practically slid down the ladder, she moved so fast. Splinters sliced into her left hand, but the pain was only another goad. The boys who held her horse stared after her as she sprinted toward the Dragons, whose attention was entirely on the men who stood watch above the gate.

"Let me through!" she cried. "I must speak with the prince."

They let her by without demur. Sanglant sat his horse at the front of the line, in conference with others: an elderly militia man, a dismounted Dragon, and his chief attendant, the scarred woman.

Sanglant caught sight of Liath; perhaps he had heard her voice. He lifted a hand to silence the militia man, who was speaking.

"But my lord Sanglant!" the man protested, misunderstanding the prince's intent. "There are too many of them! It would be foolish to sally out into such numbers. If Count Hildegard can win through, we will open the gates to receive her." Then he saw Liath and stuttered to a halt.

"You can't!" Liath cried. She took the reins of Sanglant's horse out of the hands of a Dragon, as if by holding his mount's harness she could control the prince's decision. "Count Hildegard isn't out there at all. It's an illusion. There's magic

Sanglant was off his horse at once. Without waiting for her or anyone, he ran to the wall and took the steep steps three at a time to the lookout over the gate. She scrambled after him. Manfred stood here with two Dragons and a cluster of city militiamen. He motioned the others aside so the prince could come forward. Liath

pressed up beside Manfred; surely he would believe her, if the others could not see. There, on the parapet, protected by a timber wall covered by animal skins soaked in water, they stared out at the far shore.

She saw so clearly now. There must be more than a thousand Eika, two thousand perhaps, a vastly greater number than those who defended Gent. The barbarians jogged forward at a steady trot, the banner swaying in their midst, a prize of war. Their enormous dogs loped beside them, muzzles lifted to the wind. There was rank after rank of blue and yellow shields with their menacing red serpent blazon, the dark line of their weapons, held at the ready; their bone white hair gleamed in the new sunlight as the fog dissipated along the shore of the river. How could anyone see this as the remnants of Count Hildegard's army? The Eika called out, too, in words she could not understand, only that they sounded like taunts in her ears. The dogs ran silently which was, perhaps, worse. The river streamed on, oblivious. Drums beat to the time of running feet.

They came closer, and closer. Liath could make out the details in the green and white banner: a boar on a white field. She could see the long flanks of the dogs, saw their tongues lolling out. The Eika had come so close, first rank almost on the bridge itself, that the prince had possibly twenty breaths to make a choice.

"Don't you see?" she cried.

Sanglant narrowed his eyes.

"Manfred!" She grabbed Manfred's arm and shook him, hard. "It isn't Count Hildegard at all! It's only Eika! Look harder. You're an Eagle. You must be able to see with true sight."

"There!" called Sanglant. "In the fourth rank. There is Count Hildegard and her brother!" He pushed away from the wall.

The banner and the first of the Eika troops hit the bridge. Their footsteps sounded like the hollow tramp of doom on the stone and timber structure. A shrill keening rose from the front ranks of the Eika, as if they had king's dragon caught the scent of their quarry. As if they had seen Sanglant's dragon helm on the walkway above and knew he was waiting for them.

"The Eika are almost upon them!" cried Manfred, jerking his arm out of Liath's grip. He shot her a single glance, as if to say he was sorry.

Sanglant looked then, piercingly, at Liath. He wavered. Clearly he did. He wanted to trust her that much. But then he looked back. Howls rang from the bridge, a chorus of them, dogs and Eika

joining in strength until they deafened her. The faces of those watching, those whose faces she could see, went white with horror. Liath could no longer imagine what they saw, or what they thought they saw. She could only see the Eika army almost upon them.

"Open the gates!" Sanglant commanded. As he pushed past her, she grabbed his arm. The Dragons nearest him swore and lunged for her. The great wheels that controlled the gate began to creak and roll, and the doors swung outward.

"Close the gates!" she yelled, but no one listened. Below, the Dragons parted, half to each side, making room for the flight of the count and her retainers into the city. "It's an illusion. It's a trick."

All she could see of Sanglant's face was his eyes, jade green, staring hard at her. He shook his head. Then he was gone, down the steps.

The gates creaked farther open, gaining speed. Mirroring them, the Eika in the front ranks broke into a dead run.

"Manfred!" she screamed, grabbing his cloak, shaking him. "Can't you see Manfred! Trust me!"

But it was too late.

The gates opened. Count Hiidegard's banner passed the last pylon, crossed over the transition from bridge to land. And Eika poured through the open gate into Gent. Sanglant, caught on the ladder, could not reach his horse or his men.

The square below boiled into chaos. Their howling reached a peak, so sharp and high it hurt her ears. Manfred gasped aloud and then he shoved her along the walkway.

"Run! Run along the wall until it's safe. Find Wolfhere!"

She stumbled and went to her knees just as an arrow thudded into the militia man standing, still in shock, behind her. He grunted, more surprised than pained, and tumbled slowly to his knees. Gripping the arrow as if to his chest, the man fell forward to the edge of the walkway and over as she grabbed for and missed him. He landed atop two Eika warriors just as they hacked at a Dragon cut off from the others. They went down under his weight, but more came behind them, many more, like the unstoppable waters coming up the river at floodtide. Then the dogs found him; some ran on, but others began to feed. Liath gagged, bile rising in her throat.

A mailed hand yanked her to her feet. She came up hard, jolted against a tabarda black dragon sewn with silver.

It was Sanglant. He did not speak. He pulled her along the walkway behind him so fast her feet barely touched the ground. She could not even look back to see what had become of Manfred. She was too numb even to feel fear; she felt completely paralyzed.

Two arrows stuck out of Sanglant's back, quivering, points embedded in mail. One shook loose and fell harmlessly away. Militia men knelt, shooting with their bows, aiming out over the wall toward the bridge where Eika crowded in from the eastern shore. It was too confused in the square fronting the gate to hope to shoot Eika safely without chancing to hit Gent's defenders.

The defenders were hopelessly outnumbered. Already the Dragons had been borne back by the force of the unexpected assault and the sheer weight of numbers and ferocity. The Eika gave no quarter. Beyond that, she could make out no pattern to the battle swirling at the gate except that of ironhelmed Dragons fighting desperately to form back into ranks.

She heard, distantly, the creak of the wheels that moved the gates. Then screams. She smelled smoke.

In a staccato pattern arrows thudded into the wood just behind her, like a sudden spatter of drum

beats, sharp and final. Sanglant grunted and swore and stopped. She turned her head. An arrow stuck out from his left leg, just above the knee. As she watched as if time obeyed different laws here a drop of blood welled up through leather and leaked out, following by a second and then a third, sending a trail of red down the curve of the knee. Red blood, just like her own, like any human's blood. She could not get any breath in to her lungs. She was going to choke.

"Break it off." Sanglant let go of her. Obedient, she gripped the arrow, one hand braced against his leg, the other clamping down over the fletching. Blue, she noted idly; the feathers were stiff as metal, digging into her skin. The shaft was strong. Somehow, she snapped it in two and tossed the end away. He grabbed her and tugged her on. "My lord prince!" A militia man called to them from the safety of a lookout post built into the wall. Sanglant pulled her inside, where the whitebearded militia man threw back a hatch to show a trapdoor beneath.

"This way, my lord," he said. Liath was unable to catch her breath. She stared at the man's brown cloak, strangely fascinated with its plain weave and ordinary texture. It had been patched on one shoulder with a piece of material that did not match in color, as if taken from a different batch of dye.

Sanglant leaned against the closed door, panting, for this moment safe from arrow fire. Liath heard the sounds of the battle, swords chopping at mail, at ironrimmed shields; the alarm, a thin horn rising like a clarion again and again, alerted the people of Gent.

Sanglant pushed away from the door and crossed to an embrasure. He had not let go of Liath, so she perforce had to follow. The archer standing there moved aside instantly. Together, she and Sanglant stared out the thin slit of a window toward the eastern shore of the river.

The angle of the lookout post was such that the embrasure's line of sight took in the river's bank where the bridge touched the eastern shoreline. Eika poured onto the bridge, but even as they watched the tide slowed, stemmed by the halfclosed gates, by the resistance from within the city, by the narrow path itself, the roadway and bridge, that forced the Eika warriors close together. But although they slowed down, they still moved inexorably forward, howling and keening like wild beasts. On the eastern shore, swathes of fog concealed patches of field. A shadow lay over the land, wreathed with mist, there on the far shore.

Neither fog nor mist. Something about it: a pattern, a shifting, the way her eye wanted to slide away from it. It was an enchantment. She forced herself to look hard at it, to not believe it was shadow and fog but rather concealment.

It dissolved, or not dissolved as much as faded from her sight and resolved into four figures. Two of them were Eika warriors painted and outfitted like the rest of their kind, red serpent round shields resting casually against their legs, twobladed axes cradled like infants in the crooks of their arms. Between the two warriors stood an Eika remarkable for his scrawny stature and his apparent nakedness: He wore only a ragged loincloth and a gold belt. In his hands, he held a small wooden chest. A leather pouch hung from the belt.

But beside these three stood one other, one unlike the rest by stature alone, by some indefinable quality Liath could not name, yet recognized. She could not tear her gaze away; he was a huge Eika whose face and arms and chest had the scaly sheen of a creature clothed in living bronze. He had no tunic, nothing covering his chest not even the garish painted patterns sported by his warrioronly layers of necklaces, beads, shells, and bones strung together and mixed in with chains of gold and what looked like gold and silver coins, holes king's dragon drilled in their centers and strung on thin ropes of metal. His stiff trousers were sewn of cloth dyed a brilliant blue, belted by a mesh of gleaming gold that draped in delicate folds to his knees. He wore gold armbands, like twining serpents, around each thick arm. His hair glinted bone white in the sunlight, braided into a single braid that hung to his knees.

Beside her, Sanglant sucked his breath in between his teeth.

"There!" said Liath. "Do you see him?"

"I see him." He shook his head as if to shake away an annoying insect. "He is the one whom I felt all along.

His is the power."

"He is the enchanter." She felt the power, just as Sanglant did.

Sanglant leaned forward into the embrasure, suddenly intent, staring hard toward the distant Eika. His lips parted. "Tell me your name," he whispered.

The Eika enchanter shifted, head turning so abruptly that Liath shuddered. It was as if he had heard. He looked around and focused that fast, looking toward them although certainly he could not see them, concealed as they were by the timbered walls and the narrow confines of the lookout post. Certainly he could not know the prince watched him from there.

And yet, why not, if he was truly so powerful an enchanter?

She thought, then, that he spoke a word in reply, but she could not see him clearly to guess at the syllables he spoke, and she certainly could not hear above the clash of battle raging in the city beyond.

"Bloodheart," said Sanglant in a low voice, staring out as if the two of them watched each other, tested each other. "We will meet, you and I."

Beyond, on the shore of the river, the Eika tide swelled. The knot shoving forward on the bridge broke loose and Liath tore her gaze away from the Eika enchanter to see the gates shoved open and more Eika flood into Gent.

Jerking back from the embrasure, Sanglant turned to Liath. "Go to the cathedral. Save those you can." The militia man waited, nervous, taut, at the trapdoor.

"Where are you going?"

But it was a stupid question. She knew the answer before Sanglant said the words, although he said them anyway.

"My Dragons need me. We will hold them as long as we are able." He lifted a hand and touched her cheek with his mailed hand as she had touched his, in the silence of the crypt.

Then he hefted his shield, raised his sword, and was out the door before she could say anything more. She started after him, back to the wallwalk, only to see him descending an outside ladder. Then he was gone, running into the chaos that raged around the gates as the battle moved steadily outward, farther into the streets of I Gent. A cry went up, a piercing shout, his name called over and over. Before the militia man grabbed her she saw the overwhelmed Dragons rallying, fighting on horse or by foot toward the lone figure of their prince who seemed to be intent on running alone full into the force of the Eika assault.

A hand clapped onto her shoulder and dragged her back away from the door just as an arrow thunked into it. A burning arrow. Smoke made her eyes sting. It guttered against the wood; the bearded man slammed the door shut, but she heard more arrows thud into it, an echo of the drums that pounded relentlessly in the Eika camp.

"This way!" he said urgently. "Down two levels to a tunnel beneath. It runs all the way from this lookout post to the mayor's palace. You will meet up with a larger tunnel, which runs straight. Take no side tunnels, they only lead to other posts. I pray that the Eika have not yet taken the other posts and gotten into the tunnels."

She descended the ladder, not looking back. The man I did not follow. The first ladder gave out on dirt, a tiny space within the wall, banks of sod and timber, so tight

king's dragon she could hardly breathe. She found the other ladder and climbed still farther down, twelve rungs, to a tunnel lined with fired bricks. The space was barely wider than her shoulders. She hesitated, touched her bow, then drew her short sword instead. Her fingers brushed the words graven in the hilt: "This good sword is the friend of Lucian."

"I pray you," she whispered, "be my good friend as well."

She walked cautiously, for it was dark and she could hear the distorted echoing noises of battle not far above her, crossing and crossing back like a complicated tapestry being woven. Pray God that this tapestry was not to be the fall of the city of Gent.

The narrow side tunnel debouched into a larger passageway, one that might support two men walking abreast but not more. Behind, where she judged the wall stood, she caught the flickering glare of fire and smelled the stinging scent of smoke. Her eyes had already adjusted to the dark. Ahead, it was darker and more silent. Behind, she heard a grunt and the hard thump of a person landing on dirt. She whirled. Saw the betraying gleam of white hair. What else to do?

She had the advantage. She ran forward, and just as the Eika whipped round, she stabbed it in the gut. Felt the resistance of its skin, as if it was alloyed with metal. But Lucian's was a good sword indeed. Perhaps the Dariyans had known secrets of metallurgy lost to the blacksmiths of today. Perhaps Eika skin was not as tough as it looked. The blade sank in and pierced the creature through.

It howled and sliced at her. She yanked backward and cut at its face; it went down. The stink was horrible. Above, fire flared and she heard a man screaming over and over and over again, Ai! Ai! Ai! and more distantly, heard through smoke and pounding feet and shouting and the whole chaotic cacophony of a battle being slowly and brutally lost, a sharper call: "To the prince! To the prince!"

She jumped back from the Eika's body. It twitched and she fled away down the tunnel. If any followed, she did not notice them. She was too busy running. Too busy remembering.

He had touched her cheek. Did he care for her? Surely he would be killed. And what did it matter, now? There were not enough defenders in Gent now that the Eika had breached the gate. Not enough in any case, if the Eika had, as their leader, an enchanter even if his only gifts were for illusion. Illusion was a powerful weapon in the hands of one who dared use it any way he wished.

"Save those you can." So Sanglant had said. Surely that was why the saint had appeared to them. Saints, like angels, like the daimones of the upper air, were not bound to the world of time: They could see the future.

She passed side tunnels and all she heard was fighting and screaming, all she smelled was blood and smoke.

The tunnel led to the barracks. She climbed up a narrow ladder into the tackroom, head butting into a trapdoor which, with main force, she shoved open from underneath, scraping knuckles on the iron bands that bound the trapdoor together.

The barracks were entirely empty now; there was only the distant sound of drums and the clarion call of the horn. And, drifting ever closer, the aroma and music of battle. All the Dragons were gone. Gone. Dead, soon enough. She had no energy to cry. She had to warn Wolfhere. She had to lead as many people out through the catacomb as possible before the city fell. She no longer doubted Gent was doomed.

But at the door of the barracks, she stopped dead. Hesitated and turned back, staring at the empty ranks of stalls, smelling the straw, some of it dry, some of it damp with urine or manure. The barracks would burn very well.

She ran back to the stall where she and Manfred and Wolfhere had slept. Manfred's saddle sat against a post, king's dragon

just where it had always sat this past month. Its presence was like an accusation. What had happened to him? Was he still alive? Had she thought of him once since the breaching of the gate? But she did not have time; she should not even be here. Every moment meant another life saved, or lost.

But she had to get the book. She heaved her saddle up and over, grabbed the saddle bags and slung them over her shoulder. Then she sprinted back, outside, crossing the deserted courtyard. It was far too quiet, here in the mayor's palace. "Liath!"

Wolfhere stood on the palisade. He practically jumped down the ladder, he was in such haste to get to her.

"No hope!" she cried. "The Eika have breached the gate. Everyone must arm and fight, or go to the cathedral." "How?"

"An enchanter." She remembered, suddenly, that strange exchange. Someday it might be important that more people than she and Sanglant knew that name. "He calls himself Bloodheart."

Wolfhere nodded once, sharply. "Then go, Liath. Go. If you win free, you must get word to the king."

She did not wait to ask him what he meant to do. She did not have time. Already smoke rose in thick clouds, heavy, black, and forbidding, from the eastern part of the city, and flames licked the roofs of houses near enough to see. Perhaps the mayor's guard had already run to the eastern gate.

But when she crossed out through the arch and started down the main thoroughfare of Gent, she found utter confusion. The street was packed, every soul there wild with fear. Half of them seemed to be headed to the western gate. Some few, armed with butcher knives and staves and shovels and hatchets and any object that might be used as a weapon, shoved their way toward the

east. But not as many ran east. Mostly, the people of Gent had forgotten everything and completely panicked.

Liath pushed and elbowed her way through the crowd. At first she tried to yell, every third step, "To the cathedral!" but there was no point to it. Her voice simply could not be heard above the roar of shouting, donkeys braying, chickens squawking, children wailing, fire snapping, and untold feet slapping down on plank and stone roadway all headed every direction and none.

But she needn't have worried. Pushing her way along the length of the palace palisade, crossing the square, and reaching the broad steps and inviting facade of Gent Cathedral proved the easiest part of her journey.

The cathedral was packed.

People were shoved together on the steps, crowding in, crying and pleading, lifting their children high over their heads so the infants might be granted sanctuary inside if not their own selves.

"Make way!" Liath cried, although their noise drowned out her words. She drew her sword and used its hilt to knock hard into the people. When they turned, angry or sobbing, they gave way before her Eagle's badge.

In this fashion, though slowly, she got up the steps. If possible, it was more crowded inside. All of them had shoved inside until she could not understand how anyone could breathe pressed up toward the Hearth, the haven, the holy space. Surely not even savages like the Eika would profane the holy space of the God of Unities.

They stank of fear and sweat. It was impossible, absolutely impossible, to imagine getting through this crowd to the Hearth where she might hope to find the bispoc. She sheathed her sword.

And then, amazingly, she heard a shift in the tone of the crowd. Like a muting blanket drawn bit



by bit across the congregation, the wordless mutter and yelling and king's dragon weeping took on form and flow. Creeping back from the front, a hymn slowly took hold.

"Lift me up!" Liath commanded.

Half to her surprise, two men did so, grabbing her by the legs and hoisting her up. There, at the Hearth, the biscop presided, arms lifted toward the heavens as she led the congregation in a psalm.

" 'You that live in the shelter of Light, you who say, 'The Lord is my safe retreat, the Lady the fastness in which I trust.'

He will cover you with His pinions.

She will grant you safety beneath Her wings.

You shall not fear the arrow that flies at night or the spear that stalks by day.

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand close at hand, but you it shall not touch.' "

Liath sang with them. When the psalm finished in a somber Kyria, the biscop turned her hands, palms outward, and the mass of people quieted so all were listening. Only the hiccuping sobs of terrified children broke the silence.

"Pray, let us have silence," cried the biscop.

In that moment, while silence trembled and the roar of fire and battle and distant drums leaked in through the walls and the open doors, before the panic of the people outside could upset this tenuous peace found here, Liath raised her voice. She called attention to herself in the very way Da had warned her against.

"Never be noticed. Never stand out. Never raise your voice."

"Biscop, I pray you, listen to my words. I am a King's Eagle!"

The men holding her shifted, and she had to steady herself, one hand on each of their shoulders. Every head in the cathedral skewed round, faces bleached white with fear. The biscop lowered her hands and signed to her to continue.

"Your Grace, please believe my words. I have seen a sign. St. Kristine appeared to me" Liath faltered. She could see she was losing their attention, their belief. "St. Kristine of the Knives appeared to Prince Sanglant! It was a true vision. There is a catacomb beneath the cathedral, a tunnel, leading west. By this way That was all she had time for. A shout rose from the gathered crowd outside. "The Dragon! The Dragons have broken!" Liath clapped her hands over her ears just as the two men lost their grip on her. She fell but could not land hard because the people were packed so tightly in the cathedral. Even shoving, panicking, trying to move one way or the other, no one could shift more than half a step to right or left.

The next instant a horn call blasted through the space, echoing off stone, deafening her and every other soul inside. But it silenced the crowd long enough, just long enough, that the biscop could be heard.

"This I say!" she cried in her powerful voice. "This I say to you, my people, that I will not stir from this Hearth until all have reached safety or the Eika have been repulsed. So must all who are fit take up any weapon you can find and fight to save this, our city. In the name of Our Lady and Lord, in the name of St. Kristine who, though she suffered and died in this holy place, did not forsake us."

She drew breath, but such was the power of her voice and the tense expectation that none spoke or filled the void with clamor.

"So has St. Kristine appeared to the prince, he who even now fights with his own body to spare ours pain and desecration. This is my word, and you my people shall obey it. Let those who are children or who are nursing children follow this Eagle into the crypt, in an orderly fashion. Gather the children, for

they and the holy relics of this Hearth are the treasures of our city.

king's dragon We must save them, if it is so willed by Our Lady and Lord and the saint who watched over us. Let the elder children shepherd the younger, and let the infirm wait with me at the Hearth. Let us put our trust in God. Lord, have mercy. Lady, have mercy upon us."

Her deacons brought torches. With the crowd parting before her, Liath took a torch and led the way down into the crypt. As she descended the steps, all the din and tumult was lost to the muffling encasement of stone and earth, to the cloak of death and the pale tombs of the holy dead. The torch burned steadily, heat blowing in her face, stinging her eyes.

She stood while deacons carrying the holy relics of St. Kristine crowded behind her and the stairs filled with softly weeping children, pressing, waiting. She felt them at her back like a weight: on her all depended.

"Save all you can," Sanglant had said. And others, crying out: "The Dragons have broken."

She had no idea where the saint's tomb was. Everything looked changed. The crypt opened out before her in silent mystery, taciturn, unwilling to give up its secrets.

Then, on a whim, she knelt where her footsteps and Sanglant's, so short a time before, had scuffed the earth. She cast about, and there!

On the dirt perhaps two strides away she saw the flecking of dried blood.

She followed this trail left by the bleeding saint. It led her to the sinkhole and the stairs that yawned into the black earth beneath. The crypt quickly filled behind her. Deacons whispered, frightened. An infant sobbed and was muffled.

Of the battle in Gent, she could hear nothing. She did not know whether Sanglant yet lived; she had no idea what had happened to Wolfhere and Manfred.

She could at least hope that Hanna had made it away from Gent alive. It seemed ironic now that Hanna, forced to flee, had been granted the safer path, though it had not seemed so at the time.

She could not delay. What lay there in the dark earth could not be worse than the fate awaiting those who faced the Eika onslaught. She took in a deep breath and started down the steps.

She counted as she went, aware always of the press of refugees at her back though she never turned to see them, to help them, to make sure they did not stumble. She had to walk the unknown path. She counted eightyseven steps, because counting gave her the courage to go on, speaking the numbers aloud so she couldn't hear, so the blackness didn't seem so utterly enveloping. The air was close, smelling of mildew and earth. Once, or twice, hand brushing the wall, she thought her fingers touched worms or other moist creatures that live only in the night. But she did not have time to flinch. She had to press forward.

The steps ended and the floor leveled out and turned sharply. It widened to the width of her outstretched arms. She paused then, but only that one time. The torch illuminated rough stone walls and a low ceiling hewn out of rock. The floor here was also rock, strewn with small stones and pebbles that rustled under her boots.

But it was fairly smooth, as if water had once streamed through here or many feet marched back and forth, grinding it down under the weight of years and passage.

She could not see far ahead of her, but she felt the air had a flavor untouched by burning and war and death.

She smelted oats, a touch caught on a bare wisp of a breeze borne down from distant hills. That gave her heart. The deacons pressed up behind her, the wooden chest which contained the saint's relics

jutting into her back. A child said, in a high, wavering voice: "But it's so dark. Where is my momma?"

She walked on into the darkness. She led them, counting until it became ridiculous to count, past one thousand and two thousand and beyond that. The tunnel ran straight, like an arrow toward its intended victim.

She wept as she walked, plain good tears, quiet ones. She could not afford to sob. She could not afford to be blinded by grief. Behind, she heard those who followed, the thin wails of infants and the helpless weeping of children who could not understand what was happening to them. The deacons murmured in soft voices to the rhythm of their step, the words of the psalm they had sung in the cathedral:

" 'For She has charged Her angels to guard you wherever you go, to lift you on their hands.' "

On she walked, leading them. On and on, away from the fall of Gent. So few would be saved.

"We will hold them as long as we are able." His last words.

He was not meant for her, of course. It was foolish, an infatuation, not love, surely, for love is built on ties of blood or of shared work and companionship, not on a glance or the stray wanderings of stubborn and insistent desire. Never meant for her, even if he had lived. It was not only the difference in their births, for she believed what Da had told her, that she need only bend her knee before the king. They were freeborn, of an old lineage, so Da always said, though he had never given her more information than that. Of a lineage that had gained lands in return for lordship over themselves, beholden to no count or duke but only to the king. As Hathui's people had, in these times, in the eastern marches.

No, it was more than that, and utterly different.

"Be bound, as I am, by the fate others have determined for you." So Sanglant had said. Was it not the duty of the captain of the King's Dragons to die in the service of his king? And hers to live, if she was able?

Was she not bound by that other mystery, of Da's death, of her mother's death eight years before, of the treasurehouse, the secret, that she both carried in her saddlebags and even perhaps in her own person? Of her own person? She had been made a slave because of another man's desire to possess what was hidden within her. She was now always and ever marked by that slavery, just as she was marked by Da's murder and by the mystery of the white feather she had found next to his dead body. Deaf to magicor guarded against it. But bound to it, whichever was true.

Some destinies cannot be escaped.

So she walked and left Gent behind. She felt nothing in her body, not truly. She could not afford to be crippled with grief, and during those long months with Hugh she had learned how to put strong emotion away from her, locking it away behind a sturdy door.

But she allowed herself tears. She wept for Sanglant and for what could never be. She wept for Da, for her mother, for Wolfhere and Manfred, for the dead Eagle whose badge she had inherited. For all the souls, the brave biscop and her people, who would die. Liath had seen the Eika enchanter who named himself Bloodheart. She did not believe he would show mercy or respect the sanctity of the Hearth. Why should he? He had not been brought within the Circle of Unity. He had slaughtered Count Hildegard and then used her banner as part of an unscrupulous trick. He wanted Sanglant for reasons she could not fathom. But he and Sanglant were engaged in a duel set in motion before they had ever set eyes on one another.

Her torch burned steadily and did not go out or expend its substance. She held it in front of her as a beacon; it was the only light left to her.

Not the only light. She had to believe Hanna was alive. She would find Hanna again.

She reached up without thinking and touched her badge, felt the eagle embossed on brass.

Hanna was all, except for the Eagles. She truly was one of them now. And that, perhaps, gave her a place where she might find safety.

So she walked. The tunnel ran on and on and on. If those behind her faltered, she did not know. She led them and did not look back.

Liath Eika had breached the eastern gates just after dawn. It was midday by the time Liath emerged, blinking, halfblinded, and exhausted, from a narrow cave mouth into the glaring light of a fine spring day.

Behind her, the refugees from Gent staggered out, stumbling after a steep climb up several hundred steps. The tunnel itself had been long and made arduous because of fear. But Liath feared the final climb, up steps carved into rock, would prove too much for the smallest and weakest of the refugees, thus holding up those who tried to escape behind them.

They came so slowly. First the anxious deacons emerged, carrying the holy relics from the cathedral. Then came a long line of children, younger carried by elder, infants in the arms of their mothers. There were women in all stages of pregnancy, including one who had gone into labor. Here and there, other folk appeared a blacksmith with his hammer and tongs, his skills too precious to waste in a hopeless fight, the two lanky girls who had performed as acrobats in Mayor Werner's palace, the elderly bard who had mangled the Heleniad and produced his own atrocious imitations of old Dariyan verse at the many feasts in the great hall.

Too slowly. A clump of a dozen would stream out, and then there would be a pause, so long Liath would catch her breath and pray this was not the end of the line. Then more would emerge, stumbling, halt and lame, or a child collapsed and no longer able to walk on its own. The trickle would as suddenly turn again into a steady stream as those held back behind the knot hurried out and dispersed onto the hillside.

Liath could not bear their grief. Hers was heavy enough. She walked out away from the cave, which lay

half hidden by shrubs and trees in a great jutting ridge of hill.

It was just as Sanglant had said. There was a field of oats here, straggling along the hillside.

Stumps of trees edged the ripening oats, and beyond them the forest climbed back into wilder lands. Two huts sat in the shadow of the trees. As she watched, a man came out from behind the closer of the huts to stare. Then, waving his arms, he ran over to the deacons. They began to talk all at once. Liath edged closer, then recalled that as King's Eagle she had every right to listen to their conversation.

but . . . but it is a miracle!" the man was crying, hands clapped over his cheeks. "The cave narrows and ends in a rock wall one hundred paces back. We have hidden in there, now and again, when Eika scouts rode too close by. A company of Dragons sheltered there five nights ago. But never have I seen steps or a tunnel leading east!"

Though the sky was clear, they heard a low rumbling like distant thunder. Liath hurried back and scrambled up the ridge that sheltered the cave. From its height the hill dropped away precipitously to the river plain below, stretching eastward, green and gold patched with earth, to a stark horizon. From here she could see the river winding like a dark thread through the plain. The sky was so clear the sun's light had leached away the most intense blue at the zenith, washing the land in brightness. Distant Gent looked like a child's toy, tiny carved blocks fashioned in the model of a city.

Arnulfs city, some called it, where King Arnulf the Elder had joined his children in marriage to the last heirs of Varre.

The city was on fire. Liath stared for a long time. Smoke stained the horizon, reaching in streaks toward the heavens. There was so little wind this day that the smoke rose straight up in thick columns,

obscuring her view. The city lay too far away for her to identify buildings, but she could not even pick out the cathedral tower.

On the plain, ants crawled. The Eika had come to feast on the leavings. She shook her head. She felt by turns numb and then suddenly engulfed with a crushing grief. No matter how she tried she could not push it away any longer.

She abandoned her position to three boys who came scrambling up behind her. They stared and pointed at the view, and one gaped at her. His thin face appeared familiar, but she could not place him. Perhaps he had been a servant at the mayor's palace.

He said, "I lost the horse," and then burst into tears.

She fled. She had nothing to say to him, or to any of them. As she climbed back down, careful to find good footing among the loose scree and wiry roots, she watched the refugees emerge from the cave mouth. Children and yet more children, a darkhaired plump child of indeterminate sex carried in the arms of a thin palehaired girl who did not look strong enough for such a burden, a few older people now, some of them carrying bundles on their backs, a few precious possessions, or else nothing at all, only themselves. Some fell to their knees to praise God for this deliverance. Others merely sank onto the ground and had to be helped away, to clear the path that led out from the cave's mouth.

But they were coming out too slowly. So few would escape. Surely by now the Dragons had been utterly overwhelmed. At any moment she expected the stream of refugees to end, or Eika to spring forth, hacking right and left with their axes and deadly spears.

"Ai! Wagons!" cried one of the boys at the ridgetop.

And another: "They bear the mayor's colors!"

Liath ran with the farmer to where a road such as it was cut up near his farmstead. A few brave deacons followed, but the rest remained by the field as if the cave and the reminder of the saint's mercy would grant them safety. Liath took out her bow and gave herself cover behind a tree. The farmer hefted a pitchfork.

But they needed no weapons, not this time. The wagons did indeed belong to Mayor Werner. They lurched and

careened over the two ruts that served as road. The mayor himself, redfaced and flushed with weeping, sat in the front of a wagon driven by

"Wolfhere!" Liath leaped out and ran forward, jogging almost dancing beside the wagon as it pitched and jolted the rest of the way up the hill, coming to rest at last beside the two poor huts of the oat farmer.

Wolfhere swung down, looked her over carefully, then beckoned to the farmer. "Show these servants where they can build a fire. Somewhere out of the way."

"And alert the Eika?" the man protested.

Wolfhere made an impatient gesture with a hand. "They have found better prey today than the poor pickings they could scavenge here." The farmer retreated obediently.

"I saw Gent," said Liath. She could not take her eyes off Wolfhere. She could not believe he was alive. "It's burning."

"So it was when we left."

"How did you get out?" She stared back, hoping to see

But there were no Dragons in attendance, only servants from the palace, about thirty of them walking alongside the ten wagons. A pale, pretty woman drove in the last of the wagons and, dryeyed

and grim, began to rub down the horses. Liath recognized her: She was the servingwoman who had, everyone knew, been carrying on an affair with the prince. Would she weep for her lover? Or was she only glad to be alive?

A man came up beside her to aid her; in the wagon's bed a girlchild raised her head weakly to look around. It was the pair she had saved from the streets, father and daughter.

Refugees from the tunnel swarmed forward, surrounding Mayor Werner, drowning him in questions and pleas and demands. "Where is my husband? Do you know what happened to my mother? Has my brother been seen? What of the mint? My father guarded there. Does the biscop yet live?"

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And on, and on. Like a coward, she thought bitterly, the mayor had saved himself rather than die in the defense of his city. That duty he had left to Prince Sanglant and the Dragons.

"My good people," he cried, wiping tears from his cheeks. How she had come to hate his voice, filled with selfimportance and a trace of the whiny, indulged son he had been. "Pray, grant me silence. There is no time to waste. We must begin to march. It will take many days to reach Steleshame, and most among us are weak or young. We have emptied the stores from the palace. This must serve us on our journey. Listen to my words!" Now, finally, the ragged band of refugees had quieted and drawn closer while yet others still emerged, in ones and twos, from the cave mouth.

"Let the elder children shepherd the younger, and let the children be divided into groups so there will be no confusion and none left behind. Let those who are strong enough carry food on their backs, so there may be room in the wagons for those whose legs grow weak. We will pass out bread now. In one hour we begin our journey. We dare not wait longer than that."

With that he turned and began directing his servants. The pretty servingwoman pulled back the heavy cloth that had been draped over the foodstuffs in her wagon, and she began distributing bread with the efficiency of long practice, aided again by the father. Deacons began to organize the children into groups of ten, each under the command of an adolescent. A woman, sobbing quietly, nursed her infant while another child clung to her skirts. One of the slender acrobats came up cautiously to the woman and offered her and the child bread. At the cave's mouth, more refugees stumbled out into the noontide glare. Now, however, there were servants to guide them to food and a place to rest until the next stage of the journey began. Now, one in five of the refugees were adults with wounds or singed clothing; there were, perhaps, eight hundred people in the oat field. She judged, by measuring the height of the sun with her fingers, that she had emerged an hour or so ago. Would the Dragons never come?

But of course they would not. Prince Sanglant would not leave the city until every last soul was safe or dead.

"Liath." Wolfhere beckoned. She followed him back behind the hut where the farmer had built a fire in an outdoor hearth. It blazed merrily, a lattice of sticks that collapsed as those at the lowest rung burned to ash. The farmer set more logs on the fire and, at a sign from Wolfhere, retreated, leaving them alone.

"We must look," said Wolfhere.

"How did you get free?" she asked. "Did any others? Where is Manfred?"

He shook his head. For the first time she saw his mouth tighten, concealing heart's pain. "We loaded the stores into the wagons and made our way to the western gate. Others fled the city by that gate as well, though many died at the hands of Eika. Some may have escaped. But we came later. By that time the battle that started at the eastern gate had grown until it engulfed half the city. So we were able to get away with less trouble. We lost only one wagon, and that because its axle broke. And we met Dragons

"Dragons!"

He lifted a hand sharply, silencing her. "You will remember them. They were the ones who saved us when we first rode into Gent a month ago."

"Sturm," she murmured. Her cousin, if report was true.

"They cut through a company of Eika, freeing us."

"And then?" she demanded.

He frowned, almost wincing, as if the memory did not bear recalling. "Then they rode into the city by the west gate, to join with their fellows."

Liath shut her eyes.

"Attend," said Wolfhere. "We have no luxury for grief, Liath. We must see with Eagle's sight. That is our duty."

"Through fire and stone?" she whispered.

"Not every Eagle has such skills, it is true. Now. Attend." He shut his eyes and raised his hands, shoulder width apart, palms facing in toward the fire.

"But it's true," she said, interrupting him. He had to understand. "I can't see that way. In the crypt I saw nothing, not because there was a shadow, but because I saw only the stone. And the Eika There is an enchanter, and he is Eika, not any other kind of creature." This memory hurt, it was still so raw. Remembering how Sanglant had seen and named the Eika chieftain. "That is how the gates were breached. He wove an illusion. It wasn't Count Hildegard's forces at all."

Wolfhere opened his eyes and stared at her. "Go on."

"It was an illusion. Everyone saw the banner and the count and her people. Everyone. Except me. / could see through the illusion."

"What are you saying?"

T am saying that I am deaf to it, as Da said. Or else guarded against it. I don't know which." Immediately she cursed herself inwardly for confessing to him. But she had been so happy to see him. Surely that joy meant he could be trusted, or trusted in part. He had saved her from Hugh. He had treated her with unrelenting kindness and good will. And she had, she realized, come to care for him. Reflexively she rested a hand on the warm leather of her saddlebags, feeling the book hidden with . in. She waited.

Wolfhere looked truly startled. "Bloodheart," he said. "Illusion. I understand now. I did not before. I wondered why I had seen nothing of Count Hildegard's soldiers within the city, even the last survivors of that force. I wondered how the gate had been breached. For I saw it, too, Liath. I saw her banner, and her retainers, pursued by Eika. From the palisade at the mayor's palace I saw them reach the bridge, and then I saw no more. And yet you say you saw through the illusion." "I did." "I cannot explain it, either to you or to myself. Attend me, Liath. Tell me what you see." He lifted hands again and shut his eyes, then, after a moment, opened them, staring into the fire.

Yelloworange flame licked the air. Liath stared hard at it. She envisioned in her minds' eye a circle branded into the air the Ring of fire, fourth step on the ladder of the mages. Through this she viewed the flame.

She saw nothing but the lick and spit of fire. And yet, had she not once seen salamanders, their blue eyes winking in the coals of the hearth? Had she not once seen butterflies called up by her father in the summer garden? Once, years ago, before her mother died, she had seen magic. Before her mother died. Then everything had changed.

Da was protecting me.

He had given his life to protect her. To hide her.

There are spirits burning in the air with wings of flame and eyes as brilliant as knives. At their backs a wall of fire roars up into black night, but there is nothing to fear. Pass through, and a new world lies beyond. In the distance a drum sounds like a heartbeat and the whistle of a flute, borne up on the wind like a bird, takes wing.

Wings, settling on the eaves. A sudden gust of snow through the smokehole. Bells, heard as if on the wind.

"Where is she?" said the voice of bells.

"Nowhere you can find her," said Da.

The fire blazed higher, growing, engulfing the logs until it burned like a storm. And in the flames she saw battle, the steps of the cathedral, the Dragons in a last ragged line, so few of them now, the last, their horses and their comrades strewn like so much refuse along the course of their retreat. Dogsthoose who were not raging in the thick of battle fed voraciously. She shuddered, convulsed by nausea.

A last knot of city militia fought desperately by the mint and then finally were overwhelmed. Behind them, the palisade of the mayor's palace and the timber roof of the great hall burned in sheets of flame, a terrible bright backdrop to the last killing field.

The Eika pounded at the Dragons, axes chopped down again and again on the teardrop shields, red serpents pressed against dragons, shoving them by sheer weight of numbers back and back up the steps to the doors.

There! Sanglant, limping and bloody, striking at either hand as he retreated step by step, the last man in the wedge, taking the brunt of the onslaught. At his right hand, the scarredface woman, ragged Dragon's banner draped around her shoulders, her spear working, jabbing, wrenching free; at his left, Sturm, blue eyes grim as he cut down first one Eika then, when that one fell, the next. Manfred stood half inside the cathedral doors, staring; seeing, as was his duty.

But one by one, Dragons fell, Gent burned, and the streets were deserted except for Eika, prowling and sniffing in doorways and looting. Except for the dead. Except for the feeding dogs.

A wagon had been brought into the square fronting the cathedral and from atop this, surrounded by his howling troops and by a pack of slaving dogs, Bloodheart surveyed the ruins and the last stand of the Dragons. He leaped down and hefted a spear in his huge hands, ran with it to the steps and took them two at a time. Behind him came his soldiers, their mouths open in shrieks and howls Liath could only see, not hear. Only the naked old Eika male remained behind in the wagon, but even he grinned, jewelstudded teeth winking in the reflected glare of flame.

Bloodheart's charge hit the last Dragons like a hammer. So few, and already wounded and exhausted, half of them went down, crushed beneath the assault. Sturm vanished in a hail of ax blows. The scarredface woman was torn away, the weight of huge dogs bearing her down. Dragons shouted their prince's name, but they were all separated now, a few at the door, a few swarmed and surrounded and harried down to the base of the steps, and Sanglant in the center the eye of the storm striking on either side like a madman as he hacked his way toward Bloodheart.

The blow that took him came from behind.

Surrounded, flanked, engulfed. A screaming Eika had leaped into the gap that opened behind the prince. The creature swung. Sanglant jerked and then collapsed, that fast, like a rock let drop. His body landed hard, sprawling, at the feet of Bloodheart.

The Dragons were gone, vanished, as if they had never existed. Bloodheart stared down at the



prince. He bent and wrenched the helmet from Sanglant's head to reveal the lax face. He twisted a hand under the gold torque and yanked it off, his white claws cutting the prince's face and neck. Blood seeped, slowed, stopped.

Bloodheart raised the gold torque up like a trophy, threw back his head, and howled with triumph.

Liath shuddered. She could not hear it, yet she could as if borne miles on the wind, as if carried through the ranks of the refugees who fled through the tunnel, as if cutting straight to her heart.

But she could not look away.

Bloodheart lowered the torque but only because he had to beat back the dogs. He hit hard around himself, using both haft and head of his spear, and he growled and cursed at the dogs, driving them back from his prize: Sanglant. The dogs cowered finally and sat back on their haunches, eyes burning yellow with rage, tongues hanging out, muzzles rimed with saliva and blood. The biggest of them snarled, baring its fangs at the Eika chieftain, and he struck it hard on the head with his bare hand; his own claws a bristling growth at his knuckles sliced its cheek open. It whined and groveled before him. The others slewed their ugly heads round and stared hungrily at the prince's body, but they didn't move in. Yet.

Soon. Soon he would be theirs.

Liath leaned in toward the fire as if she could reach and drag the corpse to safety, spare it this desecration.

The heat burned away her tears, but it could not burn away her pain. It could not change what she saw and so witnessed.

Bloodheart shook himself and whirled once, spinning as if he felt the breath of an enemy on his spine. His gaze lifted to the middle distance. Everything shifted; the fire flared before her. She blinked, and he was looking at her.

"Who are you?" Bloodheart demanded, gaze impossibly fixed on her through the fire. "You trouble me with your spying. Be gone!"

He spit. She flinched back and was staring at fire, roaring and crackling and consuming, burning, buildings of stone consumed by the dull red of heat and the whiteblue searing of flame, smoke thick and oily in her nostrils. She heard the pound of horses galloping past, a haze of distant shouting, a faint horn caught on the wind. But these were no buildings she had ever seen before. These were not the buildings of Gent.

A figure turned, staring, a male figure, armed with a bronze breastplate and silvertipped lance. "Liathano," he said.

But through him a gateway, his shade itself is the gateway, like stars seen through a gauze of fine linen. A drum sounds like a heartbeat, and a flute draws its music over the air like the rising and falling of waves. She sees through flames, staring out through a fire but a different fire, not her own.

There on a flat stone sits a man not a man, perhaps, for his features are exotic and unlike those of any man Liath has seen except there is a passing resemblance to Sanglant, that bronzetinged skin, the high, broad cheekbones, the beardless face. He is dressed strangely in a long, beaded loincloth so cunningly worked that the pattern of beads describes birds and leaves woven into a tight embrace. Leather sheaths encase his forearms and his calves, covered with gold and green feathers and tiny shells and gold beads and polished stones strung together. A cloak trimmed with white shells and clasped with a jade brooch at his right shoulder drapes to his waist. He twists lengths of fiberflax, perhaps along his bare thigh, binding them into rope.

He looks up, startled, and stares at her but without truly marking her. Behind him, a figure moves, too far away to be plainly seen.

"Liath."

She jumped back and found herself, face singed from heat, staring at the hearth fire and at Wolfhere, across from her. Tears stood on his cheeks, but only a few. He stared into the flames and finally drew his gaze away as if from down a long distance and murmured, so soft she barely heard him:

"Aoi."

She blinked, bewildered. Who had spoken her name, there at the end, wrenching her out of that final vision?

"Those were the Lost Ones, Liath."

"Who were?" But she could not make sense of the world, of her fingers on her hands, of the snap of fire or the brush of wind on her face.

Ai, Lady. Sanglant was dead.

Wolfhere shook himself all over, like a dog or a wolf and stood abruptly. "This mystery must be solved later," he said. "Come, Liath. Our first duty is to the king, and he must have word of this."

"Word of what?" To form the question was difficult enough. She could not move. She could not even remember what it was to move.

"Of the fall of Gent. Of the death of his son."

The death of his son.

"Fed to the dogs," murmured Wolfhere. He grimaced like a man enduring an arrow's barbed head being dug out of his thigh.

Liath fell forward onto her knees and clasped her hands before her. "Ai, Lady," she whispered. "Hear my pledge. I will never love any man but him."

"Reckless words," said Wolfhere, his tone sharp. "Come, Liath."

"Safe words," she replied bitterly, "since he is now king's dragon dead. And I will follow the fate others have determined for me."

"So do we all," he said quietly. They left the fire still burning and returned back around the huts to find the field crowded with refugees forming into staggered lines, making ready to leave.

"Has so long a time passed?" Liath asked, amazed. She judged that another hundred or so refugees filled the oat field, and a few more trickled from the tunnel, scarred, shaking, and weeping. But these had left Gent hours ago. They could not know what had just transpired, what she and Wolfhere had seen. "How long did we look into the fire?"

Wolfhere did not answer. He had gone to confront Mayor Werner, to demand that the Eagles be given two horses. Liath did not listen to the argument; she stared at the cave's mouth, where people still emerged into daylight, blinking, weeping, frightened, relieved. How many more would arrive? Was Manfred among them, or had he been killed? Did the biscop survive?

"Liath!" Wolfhere called to her, impatient, tense, and angry. "Come!"

Horses were brought. Werner sputtered and looked furious, but could not refuse. Liath took the reins of a gelding and mounted.

"What about Manfred?" Liath asked, looking back over her shoulder past the line of wagons and the tidy groups of refugees as they got into place, ready to begin their long march. She stared hopefully,

hopelessly, toward the cave's mouth.

"We can't wait," said Wolphere. He urged his horse forward, angling up to the old road.

The first of the wagons jerked forward, heading west for Steleshame and safe haven. The refugees, with murmurings and sighs and one voice that could not stop sobbing out its grief, began to walk. But Liath hesitated, staring back.

Perhaps it was a trick of the eye. She thought she saw

a faint figure standing on the rocky ridge above the mouth of the cave: the form of a woman draped in a gown of ancient design, herself wounded yet standing, unbroken by those wounds. The patron saint of Gent still watched over her flock.

Perhaps it was a trick of the breeze. She thought she heard a shout from the last figure to clamber out of the cave's mouth. "The tunnel is closed! It's sealed shut as if it never existed!"

"Liath!" Wolphere was already into the trees. Wagons trundled up the road behind him.

Liath followed Wolphere onto the old path that led into the forest and away from Gent. They soon left the ragged column of refugees far behind.

THE SHADOW OF THE GUIVRE I SABELLA'S army pitched camp in the Elmark Valley, at the eastern edge of the lands inherited by her husband. Here, fifty years ago, the kingdom of Varre had given way to the lands ruled by the kings and queens of Wendar. In the highlands beyond the valley lay the outermost villages sworn to the duke of Fesse, whose loyalty to the Wendish royal house was absolute.

News came at dusk that an army commanded by Henry himself had arrived at the town of Kassel, within a day's march of the border and their position. That evening Biscop Antonia's clerics moved through camp, passing out amuletstone to each soldier. Alain walked with the clerics, by now accustomed to their presence; he slept, ate, walked, and prayed within sight of either Willibrod or Heribert.

Agius, too, of course. But Agius' company was rather like the hairshirt the frater wore: Alain supposed that its constant rasping harsh presence was good for the soul and thus its elevation toward a more holy cast of thought, but for himself he preferred not to be always rubbed raw.

No doubt this failing on his part revealed how lacking he was in true holiness. But then, he had only to watch Agius each day to observe a man who wished for nothing except union with God. Alain admired the ferocity of Agius' devotion. For himself, and despite his circumstances, Alain was amazed and heartened to be seeing something of the world at long last. He supposed, and prayed, that Our Lord and Lady would forgive him for wishing to experience the world before trothing himself entirely to Their service.

"What is this?" Agius asked when Alain and the clerics returned, late, to Biscop Antonia's tent. Agius preferred to pray under guard rather than roam through camp in the company of Antonia's clerics, whom he despised. Also, perhaps, he wanted to remain obviously caged, a hostage, rather than let anyone believe in the fiction of his willing complicity to Sabella's cause. "Is this an amulet?"

Cleric Willibrod stammered something incomprehensible and scratched at his lesions.

Heribert, who never appeared cowed by Agius' high station, held out the amulet impatiently. "It is for protection. Take it."

Agius raised a haughty eyebrow. "Magic? Does Biscop Antonia dabble in magic now as well as treason?"

Willibrod giggled nervously.

Heribert dropped the amulet into Agius' hand and turned away. "It is late, brother," he said to Willibrod. "We must pray and then go to our sleep."

Biscop Antonia's camp bed remained empty: She was still in conference with Sabella and the other lords. Outside, a guard yawned. Rage and Sorrow found their favorite corner and turned several times, in the way of dogs chasing their own tails, then settled down. Agius king's dragon stared at the amulet, fingering it, turning it this way and that.

Alain sat on his haunches beside the frater. "Do you think it is magic?" he whispered.

Agius shrugged. "I know nothing of magic, or nothing more than you might, I suppose."

Alain wore one of the amulets around his own neck, tied there with a bit of string. He held it out, comparing it to the one Agius had. It was a small circle of wood, innocent enough, for it appeared to be a Circle of Unity, the very ornament any person would wish to wear at his breast. But carved on the back were tiny letters Alain did not recognize, and bound in with the string were a strand of hair, a thin delicate quill that appeared to be from a feather, and a single withered elder leaf.

"There is an old woman in our village who can understand the language of the birds," said Alain. "Once a man traveled through Osna village claiming he could read our fortunes by reading the map of the heavens on the saint's day on which we were born. But he charged coin for this prophesying, so Deacon Miria said he was a fraud and drove him out of the village."

Agius frowned at the letters burned into the back of the wooden circle. "I do not know this script or these words," he said. "Nor do I intend to ask our brother clerics what the words mean, if they even know." He looked up, meeting Alain's gaze. His expression was forbidding. Alain knew at once what he was recalling: the night when Antonia sacrificed Lackling, when the spirits came, drawn by the scent of blood. After that night, Count Lavastine had changed from a decisive, clever man to a puppet dancing to strings controlled by someone else's hands.

"Biscop Antonia must mean to use magic," Alain whispered, glancing back at the clerics. They were praying and did not seem to be attending to their captives' conversation. "She has used it before."

"But for what purpose?" Agius murmured. "And how? There were a few among those in the schola, when I attended the king's progress as a boy, who might know or guess. Margrave Judith's bastard son, for one. He was always interested in what the clerics never wanted to teach him. But the forbidden arts never interested me. I had already discovered the lost words of the blessed Daisan and the suppressed testimony of his holy disciple St. Thecla"

He broke off and stood. Sorrow raised his head and growled, low in his throat. Alain sprang up just as the biscop swept in with her retainers. Her robes bore a sheen of raindrops, glittering in the torchlight. The air that swelled into the tent on her heels was laden with moisture. Distantly, Alain heard drunken singing, something bawdy. Sabella had recently dismissed her latest concubine in favor of a younger, handsomer man, a freeborn soldier in Duke Rodulf's guard. There had been a bitter if brief confrontation between the two men five nights ago, in which the abandoned man had come off poorly. The castoff lover was now the object of ridicule and of a great deal of bad verse.

"Cleric Heribert," said the biscop. The young cleric came at once and knelt before her. "See that a bed is set here, in the corner with our other guests." By this euphemism she always referred to Alain and Agius. "Then go and bring her here. We must make room. More have come to join Sabella's army. 'So shall all the people gather in the house of righteousness.'"

"Do not invite all comers into your home," retorted Agius. "Dishonesty has many disguises."

Antonia spared the frater a pitying glance, as one might to a boy who, old enough to herd the goats, still wets himself. Then she turned her kindly gaze on Alain. Sorrow growled. Alain set a hand on the hound's muzzle, silencing him. "Come, child," said the biscop, ignoring the hound's hostility. "We will

Speak while I am readied for bed."

Willibrod brought a stool for Alain and hovered anxiously behind him while the bishop's other servants king's dragon helped her with her mitre and vestments, lifting them off and folding them carefully into the elaborately carved and painted chest that sat at the foot of her camp bed. The bishop wore a robe of fine white silk beneath. She sat and one of her servingwomen unbraided and rebraided her hair while Antonia toyed with a gold Circle of Unity studded with gems. Alain watched, by turns, his hands and then hers.

"You are continuing your lessons in the evenings?" she asked.

"I am, Your Grace."

"Read to me." She took from the bed a book so beautifully bound in a carved ivory case that when she opened it and handed it to him, he was at first afraid to touch it. She nodded that he was to take it from her.

Gingerly, he took the book out of her hands. At first he just gaped at the pages. The facing page was beautifully illuminated with an image of the seven disciples raising their hands toward the heavens, celebrating the miracle of the Pentekoste. The scrollwork was traced in gold ink, and the large initial letter that initiated the text held within its heavy black outline countless tiny owls perched on a narrow Tree of Wisdom, each clutching in one claw a tinier scroll or pen, all of which had been executed in cunning and meticulous detail. He had never touched anything this rich before. "Read, child," she repeated.

Haltingly, he began to read. "So it happened that when seven times seven days had passed after the Translatus, Thecla heard the voice of the blessed Daisan and her vision was restored. He showed himself to her and her companions and gave proof that he was alive. He spoke to them for seven hours, teaching them about the God of Unities and the Chamber of Light."

Heart pounding, he stopped and took a few gasping breaths. It was bad enough to read when Agius stood over him, but Antonia's watchful gaze made him terribly nervous. Agius had knelt, as he always did when anyone read from the book of Holy Verses.

"You have improved," said Antonia. "But you are still far from fluent. Go on."

He sent a silent prayer of thanks to the Lady and Lord above. He could puzzle out the language of the church, Dariyan, but the truth was that any book but this would have been impossible. He had heard this story so many times in Osna church, when Deacon Miria read aloud from the Holy Verses or told the story in loving detail from memory, that if he did not recognize a word, he still knew what ought to come next.

"And the blessed Daisan told them, "You will receive power when an angel bearing the Divine Logos, the Holy Word of God, comes upon you. You will bear witness for me in Sal's, and all over Dariya and even into Arbahia, and away to the ends of the earth."

"When he had said this, as they watched, he was lifted up and a cloud removed him from their sight.

"Then they returned to Sai's from the hill called Olivassia, which is near Sai's, no farther than a Hefensday journey. Entering the city they went to the house where they were lodging: Thecla, Peter and Matthias and Thomas, Lucia and Marian and Jahanna. All these were constantly in prayer together.

"This was then the day called Pentekoste, the fiftieth day after the Ekstasis and the blessed Daisan's Translatus into the heavens. On this day while they were all together, there came suddenly from the sky a noise like that of a strong driving wind, which filled the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues like flames of fire."

Antonia sighed and nodded her head, as if the tale affected her deeply. "So did the disciples

speak in every tongue of every nation," she said, "even in those languages which they did not know. So did the Blessed Daisan reveal that the Holy Word and message of Light was meant for all peoples, of every kind."

"Even the Eika?" Alain asked. "Or the Lost Ones? Or the goblins who live in the Harenz Mountains?"

king's dragon "Even they," she replied solemnly. "For it is not our part to judge which kind may enter the Chamber of Light and which may not."

Alain thought of Fifth Brother. He thought of how he had told the Eika prince the story of the Ekstasis and Daisan's Translatum up into the heavens. But the prince could not understand Wendish. And yet ... that story had caused the prince to speak his first word to Alain, to betray both that he could speak and that he had an intelligence that understood and sought speech. It had caused the prince, savage that he was, to attempt friendship, of a kind.

A servant brought a pitcher filled with steaming water. Pouring it into the fine ceramic basin, the servingwoman wet a cloth and carefully bathed the bishop's face, then patted her skin with oils perfumed with the scent of lavender.

"Go on," said Antonia, her eyes shut as the servingwoman drew the cloth away from her face. "Read on, child."

He swallowed and glanced at Agius, but the frater had placed his forehead on his clasped hands and was staring at the carpet. Licking his lips nervously, Alain went on. "Now there were living in Sai's peoples of every nation under heaven, and because of this miracle a crowd gathered, and they were all amazed and perplexed.

"Thecla stood up with the Six and addressed them: "This is what the prophet spoke of. So say the God of Unities: 'This will happen in the last days: we will pour out upon everyone a portion of our Holy Word. Your women shall see visions and your men shall dream dreams. Yes, even the slaves shall be given a portion of Our word, and they shall prophesy. And We will show portents in the sky above and signs on the earth below blood and fire and storm. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood. Call upon the Lady by Her name, the Mother of Life, and call upon the Lord by His name, the Father of Life, and ye shall be saved and lifted in glory to the Chamber of Light.' " And the other disciples clasped their hands and raised their voices in loving prayer, as affirmation to her words.'"

A cleric entered and leaned to whisper in Antonia's ear. She smiled kindly and made a gesture, then rose herself. "We have a new guest in our tent tonight," she said. As she turned, the entrance was pushed aside and Cleric Heribert, accompanied by two guards, led Constance into the tent. Behind him came servants carrying a wooden pallet and feather bed.

In the intervening days Constance had lost her bishop's vestments. Alain did not know if she had given them up or if they had been taken away from her. Her face, at least, was unmarked by signs of physical coercion.

"My blessed sister," said Antonia, coming forward. Constance extended a hand, as if she meant Antonia to kiss it, but Antonia merely clasped it fondly, as she might the hand of a kinswoman. If this impertinence irritated Constance, she did not let it show. After all, Sabella had taken her bishopric away from her and by that standard Bishop Antonia now stood above her in the church's hierarchy, if not in that of the world. Even in her bishop's vestments Constance had worn the gold torque that marked her as born of royal kin; in simple deacon's robes she wore it still.

"I am so sorry," Antonia continued, "at this loss of comforts. But you were alone with your servants in the other tent, and now it appears that Duke Conrad's cousin, the son of his father's sister, has joined us with twenty mounted men and fifty infantry."

"And what of Conrad?" asked Constance coolly. "He has not come to join Sabella? Perhaps he has thought better of lending his aid to an unlawful rebellion." One of her servants brought forward a stool, and she sat. She had not acknowledged Agius' presence, not even with a glance, nor had he looked up from his prayer. But there was a tautness in the frater's shoulders, as if his body betrayed what his eyes and lips resisted: any comment on the presence of the woman he had betrayed.

king's dragon

"Duke Conrad has not arrived. It is said his wife Eadgifu is within a sevenday of her time."

"Their fourth child, this will be," said Constance. If she was nervous or angry, she only betrayed it by the slow movement of her right hand, stroking the fingers of her left. "But that is only an excuse, Your Grace. Eadgifu has kinswomen with her; there would be no need for her husband to stay with her at such a time. Do not deceive yourself. If Duke Conrad has not come to Sabella's side yet, then he does not mean to do so." "Nor has he gone to Henry's side." Constance smiled faintly. "Conrad is not without ambition on his own behalf. Besides my family, he is the only other surviving descendant of the first Henry. Should the children of Arnulf the Younger waste themselves on a war over their right to the throne, his will become the surviving claim."

"Do you forget the claim that might be put forward by Duchess Liutgard?"

"It is true she is of royal kin, being the greatgrandniece of Queen Conradina. But when her grandfather gave up his claim to the throne and supported Henry instead, he gave up his claim in perpetuity. No. Liutgard's loyalty is assured." Here, as if despite herself, she glanced at Agius, and he, looking up briefly, met her gaze and winced away from it.

"Then what is it you counsel?" Antonia asked. She did not use the honorific granted to a biscop'your grace'and the omission was clearly deliberate; Constance was no longer Biscop of Autun as long as Sabella controlled the city.

"I counsel peace," said Constance. "As ought we all who have given our service to Our Lady and Lord."

Antonia signed to her servants, and they brought pillows and a feather quilt to the pallet. "It is late," said the biscop. "We march in the morning."

"Once you cross into Wendar you will have signaled outright your defiance of my brother's reign," said

Constance, "beyond all else that has occurred in these last months."

"So will it be," replied Antonia with one of her kindly smiles, as if patient with a student who is slow to learn. "Henry waits at Kassel, so our scouts inform us. That is where we will meet. Now, let us pray, and then rest."

She knelt, and her servants and cleric knelt with her. Constance hesitated, but then, proudly and with the noble air of a woman who will not let adversity beat her down, she knelt as well and joined in the prayer.

That night, Alain dreamed.

The pitch of the boat rocks him, but he does not sleep. There are twenty prisoners, taken to be slaves, huddled in the belly of the boat. They weep or moan or sleep the sleep of those who have given up hope. His cousins took only the strong ones, the young ones, who will give service for a hand of years or longer before they succumb to the winter ice or the predations of the dogs. Some might even breed, but the soft ones' infants are weak and fragile, not suited to survive. How they have grown to spread themselves across the southern lands is a mystery he cannot answer, nor dare he ask the WiseMothers, for they do not care to hear of the fate of infidels. But did Halane Henrisson not speak of a god and of

faith? He touches the Circle that hangs at his chest. It is cold.

Waves slap against the hull and oars creak with a steady beat in the oarlocks as the longship pierces forward through the seas. This music he has heard for all of his life and its cadences are like breath to him. It is a good night for travel on the northern sea.

He stands at the prow, watching mist stream off the waters. He studies the stars, the eyes of the most ancient Mothers, those whose bodies were at last worn away by wind and borne up into the vale of black ice, the fall of the heavens. The moon, the heart of OldMan, spreads light over the waters.

Once he, too, took his place at the oars. But that was before his father stole the secret of the enchanter's power and, binding that power into his own body, lifted his tribe and his litter of pups out of the endless pack struggles and made them supreme.

Once he toiled with the others, but that was before his father drilled holes in his teeth and studded them with jewels to mark his primacy. Now, together with his nestbrothers, he leads.

This ship does not belong to his home tribe, but he is marked by the wisdom of the WiseMothers, and his father is a great enchanter and chief of the tribes of the western shore. So these cousins have accepted him as their leader. Of course, he had to kill their First Brother and the dogs' pack leader, but that is the way of each litter and each tribe: Only one male can lead. The others must bare their throats or die.

Do the soft ones pick their leaders in this fashion? Are they weak because they do not? He does not understand them, nor does he understand why Halane set him free. Compassion is not part of the cruel north. As OldMother once said, the RockChildren would have died out long ago had they succumbed to compassion.

The wind brings the scent of shore to his nostrils. One of the slaves sobs on and on, a whining cry that grates on his nerves. Before, he would have set the dogs on her or cut her throat with his own claws. Now, the memory of Halane stays his hand. He will abide. He will suffer the complaints of the weak.

For now.

The smell of freshwater touches his lips. He licks them, suddenly thirsty, but he will not give in to this need yet. To give in quickly is to build weakness. Behind him, as if catching his thought, the dogs growl. He turns his head and growls back at them. They subside, accepting his primacy.

For now.

He smells a grove of ash and the still, wise scent of oak. They pass forest here as they voyage east. East, to where his father hunts.

The oars beat the sea, sunk steady and deep. The wind whips at his face, and salt spray rimes his lips. From the shore, he smells a hint of charcoal, and he casts back his head and scents, touching his tongue to the air.

Alain woke. He was completely awake, uncannily so, eyes open and already adjusted to the blackness. Rage slept. Sorrow whined softly but did not stir. Beyond Sorrow, the blankets where Agius slept lay empty.

By the light of the coals in the brazier, Alain saw a dark shape kneeling by the pallet on which Constance slept. His heart pounded. Was someone about to murder her?

Almost, he sprang up. But his hearing was keen, this night. He heard their breathing, heard the dry slide of skin against skin as they touched hand to hand, heard them whisper in voices as low as the murmur of daimones on the night air.

"Frederic was involved with Sabella's first revolt. Why should I trust you now, after what you



have done, knowing what I do about your brother?" But her words were entirely at odds with her tone and with the sense Alain had that she held tightly to Agius' hands, more like a lover than a stern bishop.

"He was discontent. He was very young. He came of age, and my father gave him a retinue but no other duties. His was a rash soul, and it wanted action. You know that is true. So when the rebellion failed, he was disciplined and married off to Liutgard."

"Do you consider that punishment? Marriage to Liutgard?" Almost, she laughed.

"Ai, Lady. It would have been for me." Here he choked on the words, they came forth laden with much emotion.

"Hush, Agius." She stirred on her pallet, and Alain thought she lifted a finger to the frater's lips, touching him most intimately there.

Alain flushed and looked away. For some reason he thought of Withi, of her shoulders and the white expanse of bosom she had let him glimpse, that day before he followed her up to the ruins at Midsummer's Eve. He had never touched a woman so.

"You must love God, Agius," murmured Constance. "Not the world and those who live in it. Bishop Antonia tells me you are involved in heresy. I have no reason to trust her, so I will let you defend yourself to me against such a base accusation."

"I cannot. I will not. After you were promised to the church instead of to" he faltered. "instead of to marriage, I swore I would not rest

"You swore you would avenge yourself on your father and my brother. But you must not, Agius. You must let this anger go. There was nothing you could do. There was nothing I could do."

"My father swore before the Hearth. As did your brother. But Lord and Lady did not strike them down when they went back on their vow. So I knew by this sign that their pledge was empty, for it was sworn to the shadow of the truth. They had listened to the false words of those who presided at the Council of Addai, those who suppressed the truth. So did St. Thecla speak the truth of the end that came to the blessed Daisan. I have seen the scroll that records her words." "Where have you seen such a scroll?" "It is hidden, lest the church burn it and destroy her true speaking, which is shamefully forgotten. Then came the blessed Daisan before the judgment of the Empress Thaisannia, she of the mask. And when he would not bow before her but spoke the truth of the Mother of Life and the Divine Logos, the Holy Word, then she pronounced the sentence of death. This he met joyfully, for he embraced the promise of the Chamber of Light. But his disciples with him wept bitterly. So was he taken away and put to the flaying knife and his heart was cut out of his breast." "The hush was so deep, and Agius' voice so low, that I thought Alain thought he could hear the sifting of the coals, red ash burning and cooling to gray.

"A darkness fell over the whole land, and then the blessed Daisan gave a loud cry and died. His heart's blood fell to the earth and it bloomed as roses. There came a light onto the land and to the ends of the Earth, and it was as bright as the garments of angels. By this light Thecla and the other disciples were blinded. And they lived seven times seven days in darkness, for they were afraid."

"But I am not afraid, Constance. I am not afraid to proclaim the truth. Did the blessed Daisan not say: 'Be assured I am with you always, to the end of time?' Did the Mother of Life not give her only Son for the forgiveness of our sins?"

Constance sighed. "Ai, Agius, this is heresy indeed. How can you speak these words? It is a serious charge, to be brought before the presbyter who watches over the order of fraters. Is this what you want? To be condemned as a heretic?"

"It is better to speak the truth and die than to keep silence and live."

"You are bitter, Agius. You were not like this before."

With an abrupt movement, he buried his head against her chest. He spoke, his voice muffled further by the cloth of her robes. "Forgive me, Constance. I did it to save the life of my niece, for the love that lived between her father and myself."

"You have always loved too deeply, Agius." She sighed, her breath catching in her throat. "You know I forgive you. How can I not? You are first in my heart, after my pledge to Our Lady and Lord."

"Yet you did not protest. You did not rebel, when your brother gave you to the church."

"I know my duty," she said softly, stroking his hair.

Agius was, Alain realized, weeping quietly. Constance wept as well, and Alain felt that by licking his tongue into the air he could taste the amalgamation of their tears, each into the other. Perhaps Agius did love too deeply. But was it not written that the blessed Daisan loved the world and all the people on it? Was love not the chief blessing granted to human beings by the mercy and grace of Our Lady and Lord?

Alain could feel their closeness, could taste the heat of their bodies, pressed against each other and he felt envy. What would it be like to love a woman that much? So much that, if those hints Agius gave were true, he had turned away from the world when it came about that he could not marry her and instead devoted himself to the church as a humble frater, far below his rightful station in life? Would any woman ever weep for Alain? Press herself close against him?

Ai, it was true, that old saying. Envy is the shadow of the guivre, the wings of death. Alain knew shame, for he desired what was not his to have. He had been marked twice, once by the church and once by the Lady of Battles, whose rose he bore.

But he could not help but think of nights in the longhouse when as a child he lay awake, listening, hearing the soft sounds from other beds, Stacy and her husband, Aunt Bel and Uncle Ado, before Ado died. Of all the adults Alain knew, only his father Henri and those pledged to the church did not engage in such congress. Agius and Constance engaged in nothing now more intimate than an embrace, and yet there was so much more between them that it flared like a bright light, like the heat of coals in the brazier.

There was another brazier in the tent, this one placed beside the bed where Antonia slept. Alain glanced that way reflexively, trying not to move or betray that he was awake. But he gasped, more of a grunt, then bit his lip. He did not breathe for the space of five heartbeats.

Antonia's eyes were open. He caught the glint of dim light against them, eyes glittering in night. Constance and Agius were too caught up in themselves to notice. But he did.

She watched, silent. She appeared to him like a huge yawning maw, sucking in life and air. She watched, he felt, not because she had her own yearnings or because she wanted to spy and thus gain information, but because she was greedy, because like a cat laps up cream or a griffin suckles the blood of its mother, she wanted as much as she could take from them. As if she intended to gather to herself and hoard all that intensity of emotion.

It made him sick, the feeling of her watchfulness.

He shut his eyes and turned his face against the safe, warm flank of Sorrow.

Later, when there was no more whispering, he slept.

JL XT.C JL held council at dawn outside Antonia's tent.

"I still say the battle comes too soon," protested Duke Rodulf. Obviously this argument had been raging for many days, and he was not quite yet resigned to losing it. "We risk everything by meeting Henry now."

"Meeting Henry now is exactly what I planned for and wish for," said Sabella. The odd thing about her voice, as monotone as it was, was the way its lack of emotion lent her an air of stubborn decisiveness. She was not a bright light or a leader of great radiance; she did not even have that brusque impatient authority by which Lavastine had (once) ruled his lands. Like a boulder rolling down a slope, she made no great claims, sparked no great fire, but simply crushed any obstacle in her path. "He has rushed to meet me. He has no great force with him today."

"Yet according to our scouts he has a greater army than what we have gathered here." Rodulf frowned and shook his head.

"Not as great a force as the one he will gather, given time to raise levies. Given time for his supporters to raise levies from their lands and march them across

Wendar to Henry's side. No, this is as small a force as Henry will ever wield in defense of his crown. And this time it will not be enough."

"You are sure of this," said Rodulf. Of all the various nobles and petty lords in attendance on Sabella, he was by now the only one who still questioned her. She endured his questioning, as she must: He was a duke, her equal in rank in all things except for the gold torque. But Rodulf's mother's mother had been a princess of Salia, so in this way he, too, came of noble lineage.

Alain stood behind Biscop Antonia, hiding among her clerics, and watched the council. By now Cleric Willibrod was not alone among the clerics in having a rash and unsightly sores on hands and lips, though he remained the only who picked nervously at them. Only Heribert, as fastidious as any man Alain had ever met, maintained his clean, unstained skin. But as chief among Antonia's clerics, he kept himself above the actual work; he only supervised the care of the vestments, the making of amulets, the care for the sick in Antonia's train, and the rest of the multitude of small tasks that accompanied attendance on a biscop.

"I am sure of this," said Sabella. "Now is the time to act. Now is the time to fight." She looked at Biscop Antonia; the biscop nodded, answering an unspoken question. Sometimes Alain wondered if Antonia controlled Sabella the way she controlled Lavastine, but even now he saw no sign of such a thing. Sabella and Antonia worked in concert. What grievances, in their inner hearts, drove them to these deeds he could not tell, though he wondered mightily. Sabella's complaint was the more obvious. She believed she had been deprived of a throne which was rightfully hers. But had not God spoken, by default, when Sabella had ridden out on her heir's progress and returned without having conceived a child? Henry, on his heir's progress, had conceived a child, even if it was with as strange a mate as an Aoi woman. Why could Sabella not accept what fate and God had decreed for her?

No more than could I, he thought ruefully. Fate and the God of Unities had decreed he must enter the church as a novice, and yet here he was, marching to war, seeing more of the world than he had ever expected to, though this was exactly what he had dreamed about.

So did they all ready themselves. Duke Rodulf took himself off to his own troops, and Sabella waited for her horse to be brought to her. The army formed a great cavalcade as it rode east, crossing the El River at a shallow ford and marching up into the highlands. They now moved through the lands that owed allegiance to the duke of Fesse. They were in Wendar.

By bringing troops into lands outside Arconia, Sabella had now crossed the line past which there was no going back. Alain could not help but feel a thrill of excitement, the men he marched beside, the guards and clerics who protected Biscop Antonia and her "guests," Constance and Agius felt it, too. They laughed and sang boisterously and made jokes among themselves, boasting about what they would do with the riches they intended to loot from the bodies of Henry's soldiers: a spearhead, a good dagger, any kind of armor, shield or metal helmet or leather surcoat or, for a truly lucky man, a

mail shirt or a sword.

No matter who won this battle, Alain realized, a great deal of wealth was about to change hands.

At midday the two armies met as if by design. They arrayed themselves on a broad field. Henry's force took the better position. The field sloped gently upward toward steeper heights beyond, and Henry had ordered his forces so Sabella would have to attack up the hill at him.

But she seemed unperturbed.

"Hai!" she said fiercely and triumphantly to Duke Rodulf, who had dropped back from his mounted soldiers to consult with her. "Look you, at the banners of Henry's forces, and tell me what you see."

From this place in Antonia's retinue, which marched always at the side of Sabella, Alain surveyed Henry's army. It seemed vast, unnumberable; he had never seen so many people gathered into one place at one time. He could not even count that high, though he heard Cleric Heribert whisper to Antonia:

"Something less than eight hundred men, and perhaps a third of them mounted."

Alain recognized the dragon of Saony, but the men assembled under the banner of Saony's duke were no more in number than those who rode in Count Lavastine's retinue. The eagle of Fesse flew over a more formidable band of soldiers, many of these mounted. One group of these mounted soldiers was massed tightly around a figure wearing a surcoat of white and gold, royal colors; this person must be Duchess Liutgard. A banner also flew for Avaria, and though Alain glanced to where Agius stood meekly beside Constance, he did not think Agius was paying any particular attention to the banner of his father's dukedom or to that of the woman his brother had married in his stead. Agius was praying. Constance stood calmly, hand raised almost to her throat but resting lightly on her chest, and her lips moved as she spoke seemingly to herself the names of the lords and counts and dukes who rode in Henry's host.

In the center a huge bold banner of red silk fluttered in the stiff spring breeze. Three animals, stitched in gold thread, were displayed in a column on the banner: an eagle, a dragon, and a lion, the signs of Henry's authority. Even from this distance Alain thought he recognized the king himself, surrounded by a richly arrayed group of retainers.

The king wore a crested iron helm and mail sleeves, and his chest was protected by a metal breastplate over a mail shirt. He wore also, on his legs, mail to protect his thighs and iron greaves on his calves; indeed, many of the mounted soldiers in his retinue wore such greaves, a sign of their wealth and station. In his left hand the king held a lance, in his right hand nothing, so that he might better grasp his sword when it was needed. The shield iv\lt ELLIOTT hanging from his saddle was of iron, without device or color.

Like the other common soldiers, Alain did not even have a metal helmet much less armor this elaborate. He could only imagine how many sceattas such equipment would cost. Not even Duke Rodulf wore such impressive armor, though certainly he was heavily protected.

It was a formidable army. Only two ducal banners waved in Sabella's forces: the guivre of Arconia and the stallion of Varingia, but both she and Rodulf had fielded many men, though not as many were mounted or armed as well as Henry's men. It seemed a desperate gamble.

"Conrad the Black has not chosen to appear on the field," said Rodulf to Sabella, squinting at the line of banners and soldiers on the slope above them.

"Conrad plays his own game," said Sabella. "If he will not support me, then I am just as happy that he chooses not to support Henry either. But don't you see, Rodulf? Don't you see what is lacking, there?" She gestured broadly, her arm taking in the entire line of Henry's army and the banners displayed. "There is no Dragon banner. The red dragon of Saony I see, but there is no black dragon. Henry's best fighters are not with him on the field!"

Rodulf whistled breath out between his lips. "So are they not. I no longer despair, Sabella."

"Nor should you ever have despaired. Do you wear your amulet, Rodulf?" "I do, but"

"That is all that matters. Return to your men." "Where are the Dragons, then? Surely Prince Sangiant has not turned agamst Yus Miner ? never heard before that the boy had the least drop of rebellious blood in him." He laughed, a little nervous still but obviously resolved to see this fight through to the end. "often wish my own children were so obedient."

"Surely you heard me mention that my informants said the Dragons had ridden north, well out of the way, to fight Eika raiders?"

"Ah, of course. Strike at the sheep while the watchdog is out hunting the wolf, eh?" He grimaced, more by way of a grin than a frown. "If the Dragons stood beside Henry on this day, I would judge it wiser to ask forgiveness than to light. But"

"But they do not. And now you do not need to make that choice. Go, then." She made a sign to one of her menatarms. He had been expecting the signal, because he turned and rode back toward the train.

Rodulf reined his horse away and with his attendants rode back to his soldiers, who held the right flank opposite the banner of Fesse. Lavastine and a motley assortment of lordlings as well as levies taken from monastery lands made up the left flank, facing the lion of Avaria and the small contingent that had marched long days from Saonyor perhaps, Alain supposed, there had not been time for a contingent to come all the way from Saony. Perhaps the banner of Saony rode over those folk who had been in attendance on Henry already. Perhaps they flew the banner more to show Saony's loyalty than to boast of their force of numbers.

"They mean to parley," said Constance suddenly and clearly as several figures carrying a blue banner marked with a silver tree detached themselves from Henry's retinue and rode into the open space that separated the two armies. "That is Villam's device."

"Of course," said Sabella.

Abruptly, the figure in white and gold rode out under the banner of Fesse to join Villam.

Sabella nodded toward Biscop Antonia. "You know what to say."

The biscop was already mounted on her white mule.

She signed to her clerics and all but Heribert dropped back away from her.

"Tallia," said Sabella curtly. Her daughter came forward reluctantly. "Attend Biscop Antonia. It is time for you to be seen." The girl nodded obediently, but she did I not look happy; she looked, in truth, more like a mouse caught in the clutches of an owl.

Antonia measured the number in Villam's party: Villam, Duchess Liutgard, and two others. She considered the company around Sabella, but her gaze fell finally on Alain. "Come, child," she said. "You will lead my mule."

Sabella raised an eyebrow. "A kennel boy?"

"Something more than that, I think. These two hounds that accompany the boy are Lavastine's hounds. Villam will recognize them and by that know Lavastine willingly marches with us."

Sabella snorted. "So we will send Lavastine's hounds as proxy? I am amused, although my brother will not be. That serves my purpose also. Go, then."

Given no choice, Alain took the mule's reins and led the animal forward, up the slope. Sorrow and Rage padded at his heels. Cleric Heribert followed suit, taking the reins of Tallia's horse and walking alongside Alain, so the biscop and the girl rode side by side, granting them equal status.

As he walked, he studied the four figures they had been sent to meet. Two were Eagles; he recognized them by their cloaks trimmed with scarlet. Both were women, one of them surely no older than he was himself. It was this younger one who held Villam's banner in her left hand.

The hale older man had to be Villam. He was armed in a fine mail shirt; over it, he wore a handsome tabard marked with the device of the silver tree.

But Alain's gaze kept snapping to the fourth member of their party> Dwcfiess Liwtgard. Ttvvs, than, was, tive, woman Agius had refused to marry. She was tall and rather younger than he expected. She had a cleanly arrogant face and a steady gaze, and a hint of temper in her eyes.

She held her own banner, an odd affectation, and rode a beautiful white gelding outfitted with harness worked with gold ornamentation. Her armor was richer than Villam's, more elaborate even than the king's. Indeed, it surprised Alain to see a woman of this rank, in the prime of her childbearing years, riding to war and thus putting herself at risk. But her expression, the very set of her jaw, suggested that Duchess Liutgard had a strong will that was not easily overridden.

She noticed his gaze and, curious in her turn, looked him over; much could be said at a parly simply by the choice of people sent forward to conduct it. He could hear Aunt Bel's voice: "Keep your hair tidy and your hands washed, lad. And meet new folk with a face that is neither too sullen nor too smiling, for they will trust neither one." He tried to school his face to an expression of indifferent humility.

Now his gaze slid to Tallia. He had never been quite this close to the young princess before. She had fine clean skin, brushed with freckles, and in the sun her wheatblonde hair had a touch of fire's gold in it. Her lower lip trembled. He risked a glance back at Antonia, but the biscop wore her usual expression of kindly solicitude.

Villam, with some show of reluctance, dismounted and kissed the biscop's ringed hand as a mark of respect for her office. After a deliberate pause, and after handing her banner over to the other Eagle, Duchess Liutgard followed suit. The two Eagles were not important enough to be allowed this honor; like Alain and Heribert, they hung back and observed.

"Lady Tallia," said Villain, nodding toward the girl, "it is a pleasure to see you again."

She nodded in return but did not speak. At this moment, she looked incapable of speech.

"Is there no one who comes forward with you to parley?" Villam continued. "Duke Rodulf does not graceus with his presence."

"I think you know his opinions well enough."

"It is true," said Villam, not quite hiding a smile, "that Rodulf is refreshingly frank. But I see other banners here which surprise me. Count Lavastine is known to me, and to the king, and yet he does not come forward with you to speak his mind."

Barely, Antonia's lips quirked. She gestured toward the hounds. Villam looked that way. His reaction was twofold, and rather strange. At first he looked annoyed. Antonia was suggesting, of course, that Lavastine was either a dog running at Sabella's heels or else that the count himself meant to insult the king by sending the two hounds as his representatives. But then Villam registered Alain. He looked at the boy, studied him for one awkward moment; something in his face betrayed him, and he had to look away to hide ita grief he could not share. Oddly, Duchess Liutgard touched him on the elbow, the way one steadies a man who has stumbled.

"I would have speech," continued Villam after a moment, "with Sabella."

"Of course," said Antonia smoothly, "any words which you speak here will reach her. I am merely the vessel through which they travel. Indeed, Sabella has words for her brother as well."

"No doubt," said Villam dryly. "But I fear we speak of deeds, not words, now. Why has Sabella

marched with this army out of Arconia, the territory she administers for her husband Berengar?"

The mule shifted, and Alain tightened his grip on the reins to still it. Antonia opened one hand and gestured eloquently toward Henry's red silk banner. "She is grieved by her brother's usurpation of her rightful place as queen of Wendar."

Villam shook his head. His eyes were dark and heavy, as if he had recently endured many sleepless nights. "That dispute was settled eight years ago. Sabella vowed on your ring, Biscop Antonia, to hold no more grievance against King Henry and to retire to her own holdings and be a faithful supporter of his rule. Has she broken that vow?"

"She swore that vow under duress, as you yourself witnessed. Only those who have sworn themselves to wear martyr's garments are expected to choose death king's dragon' over life, no matter what the charge. So does Our Lady forgive us for our attachment to life, as long as our hearts remain pure and our bearing dignified. As long as we do not forsake our duty to God."

"Is that how you interpret the scripture?" asked Liutgard sharply, suddenly coming to life.

"I do not intend," replied Antonia with a patient smile, "to debate scripture here, my lady." She turned back to Villam. He was a tall, broad man, and though she still sat on her mule, she did not loom over him as she would have a smaller man or woman.

"Sabella is a reasonable woman. Henry may keep his title as duke of Saony, giving the county of Attomar to his sister Rotrudis. Sabella will take the crown and throne of Wendar, and Varre will go to Tallia. She will show her favor toward Henry by allowing his young son Ekkehard to marry Tallia and become king of Varre as Tallia's consort."

Villam was too old and wily and too burdened by that other, nameless griet to get angry. "I would laugh if only the suggestion were not so offensive. As well as ridiculous. To Sabella, King Henry sends these words: She may keep her dukedom if she turns and quits the field now."

"It is not her dukedom to quit, Villam. Berengar is Duke of Arconia."

Villam grunted, finally sounding irritated. "Your Grace, please do not treat me as if I were a fool. Berengar is a fine and noble man, I am sure, but he does not shall we say carry a full kettle of wits with him. Sabella rules that dukedom as both man and woman." Then he quickly nodded toward Tallia, who had flushed a bright pink and was staring so hard at her hands that first Alain, and then Heribert, and then the two silent Eagles, and finally the other three who knew better also looked at the girl's hands to see if something was growing there. "Begging your pardon, Lady Tallia."

She murmured something indistinguishable, but its tone sounded like apology.

Antonia spoke. "If we cannot agree, Lord Villam, there is no point in discussion, is there?"

"You wish to fight?" He looked genuinely puzzled. As well he might: Henry's force was clearly larger and, more importantly, had more mounted soldiers. Their weight and overbearing force alone assured Henry victory.

"Of course we do not wish to fight," said Antonia with a heartfelt sigh. "Of course we wish for peace, Lord Villam. Duchess Liutgard. All souls wish for peace, for is that not the devout wish of Our Lord and Lady? But is it right for Sabella to allow Henry to continue on a throne that is rightfully hers?"

"She did not"

"She has a child. Here is Tallia, before you. Henry has only the word of a heathen woman, if you can even trust the word of an Aoi. Is it not said that elves are children gotten by fallen angels on human woman?"

"In fact," began Liutgard, breaking in as Antonia took breath, "if one studies the Dialogue on

Fate, one reads that the blessed Diasan said that elves were

"I do not mean to discuss church matters here." Antonia made a sharp sign with her right hand, as if she was lopping off her left hand at the wrist. Silence.

Duchess Liutgard whitened; she looked mightily annoyed, and her mouth tightened. Villam made a soft noise, and with an obvious effort the duchess kept silent.

"How can we know Henry earned his heir's right?" Antonia continued. "How can we know Sanglant is his son at all? Sabella was Arnulf's first choice as heir. Not Henry. Men may swear all they wish that any child is of their begetting and their blood, but only a woman giving birth before witnesses can prove a child is hers. No man can do that, for even if he locks a woman up, there are creatures not of human blood and earthly make known to have other methods of entry."

"You are saying," said Villam quietly but with real growing anger, "that Henry lied about Sanglant and his heir's progress."

"I say nothing about Henry. I say Henry can never know, and thus we can never know. Why do you think the church encourages inheritance to pass through the mother's line, Lord Villam? Duchess Liutgard? The old Dariyans practiced adoption, bringing any kind of person into their houses, but the church outlawed that practice for inheritance purposes over three hundred years ago at the Council of Nisibia. So do some of us work today to ban inheritance through the male line." Antonia had by now worked up real fervor. Always, she presented a benign facade. Alain had never before seen her so impassioned. "If Henry continues his reign, who will become sovereign after him? The children of Sophia and Arethousa? Will the taint of the East infiltrate our kingdom? Does this new heresy that has spread its tendrils into our fine pure faith not come from the lands ruled by the Arethousan emperors? Will our rulers be Arethousan, and not of Wendish blood?"

"They will be Henry's children," said Villam firmly. "And strong rulers, despite what you say, Biscop Antonia."

"Beware Arethousans bearing gifts," she replied, darkly. "Had Henry married a good Wendish woman of noble birth, I would not be so adamant in my cause. But he did not. Two women he is known to have consorted with, both of them foreigners and one not even of human blood." She had finally and entirely lost that placid grandmother's face. Beneath it, she was hard and cold. "I cannot trust such a man. Nor will I trust his offspring. Sanglant! His pet! A bastard child who isn't even human and probably isn't even his, since we have only the mother's worthless word that she did not act the whore. And Henry makes a fool of himself everyone knows; it is common knowledge throughout Wendish lands because he favors such a child! I do not call this a kingly virtue. I do not think this shows strong judgment. Sabella married, as was her duty, a man of her own people.

But Henry cannot be content with that, can he? He has his eye on greater things, does he not? He has his eye on the chair of the emperor, in Darre. He wants to follow in the wake of Taillefer. Well! Let Henry nurse his own lands before he sets off to heal others. Let him mate with a woman of his own people before he breeds with the whores of strangers." Antonia was by now quite red and quite furious. Alain was both impressed and horrified.

Liutgard made as if to stride forward and confront the biscop physically, but Villam stayed her with a gesture. "I have heard enough insults," he said. "There is no more to be said. Let this battle be on your head, then, Biscop Antonia. Let it be said, from this hour forward in all the chronicles that record this day, that Sabella rejected King Henry's leniency when it was offered and chose to face his rage." He mounted, reined his horse around, and set off up the hill.

Liutgard tossed her head, like a spirited horse, and met Antonia's gaze with one no less hard. "You are like a sweet water well that has been poisoned by the venom of a guivre." She turned and followed Villam, the Eagle bearing her banner trailing in her wake.



One of the Eagles hung back. Alain stared at the younger one. She had the palest hair coarse whiteblonde he had ever seen, except for the hair of the Eika prince. Her gaze caught his, and, for a moment, they simply looked at each other; she appeared more curious than hostile. And she had astonishingly pale blue eyes.

"Hanna!" said her companion sharply, calling back over her shoulder. The young Eagle wrenched her gaze away from Alain, glanced quickly at the hounds, then followed her companion up the hill after the two nobles.

"Is it true, Your Grace?" asked Tallia.

"Is what true?" Antonia had recovered her outer calm. "Come, child, we must ride back behind the lines. The battle will soon begin."

"Those things you said. About Henry."

"Of course it is true. Why would I say such things if they were not true?"

"Oh," said Tallia, and that was all.

Meekly, she let Cleric Heribert lead her back to her mother. When they arrived at Sabella's banner, Willibrod took the mule's reins away from Alain. Tallia was taken back behind the lines to the safety of the supply train, where the noncombatants awaited the outcome of the battle. One wagon had been brought forward from the train. This was unusual enough but made more so because Alain recognized it as the shrouded cage that concealed the guivre.

"You saw no sign of the Dragons?" Sabella asked.

"None. And I have never heard it said the Dragons hide themselves. Always they ride in the vanguard."

"Bastard and whore's child he may be," said Sabella grudgingly, "but Sanglant is known for being brave. What of the others?"

"I saw none."

"None of Henry's children?"

"None."

Sabella frowned. "That is unfortunate. I was hoping I might catch one or all of them for hostages. It would serve me well to have them in my hands."

Antonia's reply was so soft only Alain and perhaps Heribert heard it. "It would serve you better if they were dead."

Sabella's captain rode up with the message that Rodulf's people were ready. "You must go back behind the lines, Your Grace," said Sabella to Antonia. She settled her helmet over her mail coif and tightened the strap. The banner of Arconia flapped beside her, held by one of her men-at-arms: a green guivre with wings unfolded and a red tower gripped in its left talon, set against a gold silk background. "You I cannot afford to lose."

"What of our guests?" The bispoc looked, and smiled, at Constance and Agius.

"Take them with you. They are too valuable to risk here where the battle will be fought."

Antonia signed, and Constance and Agius were led away under guard. "Come," she said to her attendants. They began to move back. Alain hesitated. "Come, child," said Antonia, beckoning to him.

"You will attend me as well."

Sabella noticed his hesitation. "This is one of Lavastine's men-at-arms, is it not? It is time he returned to the count's levy."

"But

"Do as I say," snapped Sabella with the expression of a woman who has no time to argue.

Antonia paused. Her face became a mask of stillness. Then, as the sun came out from behind clouds, she smiled in her usual benevolent fashion. "As you wish, my lady." She did not bow, but she gave in. So Sabella danced to no puppet strings. Antonia might control Lavastine, but she did not control the daughter of Arnulf.

Once Antonia was gone, no one paid the least attention to Alain though several rough men-at-arms pushed him back and told him sharply to find his place, only to apologize when the hounds growled at them. But they made the sign of the Circle at their breasts, as if he was some evil thing.

He retreated to the back of the line. Sabella had in her own company over one hundred well-armed mounted soldiers and perhaps twice as many skirmishers and infantry; all together (according to Heribert's count) she had six hundred or so soldiers. But Henry's army was bigger, and Henry commanded more of the heavily armored cavalry that was the backbone of any lord's army. Of the infantry Lions, there was one century, but by all reports most of the Lions manned the eastern frontier against the raids of the Quman horsemen and other barbarians.

Alain trotted along the back of the line. He heard leather creaking as men shifted, waiting, anticipating the first step. On the hill above, none of Henry's soldiers moved. Alain could see the red silk banner flapping against blue sky and trailing white clouds, but the headsome helmeted, some with hard leather caps, some with no covering at all of Sabella's soldiers blocked most of his view.

Was this how a battle was fought? Was there a strategy involved, or did the two sides merely wait until one commander lost patience or nerve and sent his side forward into retreat?

A gap opened between Sabella's leftmost company of infantry and the rightmost company of those men under Lavastine's command. The men stood with their arms tight against their sides so they could rest the weight of their shields on their hips. Most of these men carried spears; few common men had the wherewithal to purchase a sword.

As Alain sprinted past the open ground, dashing for safety among Lavastine's men, he looked up toward Henry's army. Movement coursed along the ranks. Then, suddenly, the sky darkened with arrows. Most of them fell harmlessly in front of the line of Sabella's army; some overshot. A few found their mark. But even as men cursed and one shrieked in pain, the archers among Sabella's army took aim and shot.

They had to arc their arrows higher, to gain the height, but, if anything, this volley had more effect. A ripple passed down the line of Henry's army as if many arrows had hit their mark. And the line moved.

Horses started forward at intervals. Henry had sent out his skirmishers, mounted men armed with spear and shield or even spear alone. They raced forward, flung their spears, and turned back to gallop out of range, only to turn again.

Alain dashed along the rear of the line and saw Lavastine's back and the black coats of his hounds just as a great cry went up from the crowd of soldiers around Sabella's banner. A rank of infantry trotted forward into the empty field that lay between the two armies. They pulled the shrouded cage along with them.

"Hai! For Henry!" the host above them shouted.

Alain shoved his way through to Lavastine's side. The count did not even notice the boy, he was so intent on the battle. At his leftmost flank, about twenty of his own skirmishers had raced out to meet the skirmishers opposite them. One group of horsemen broke away from the banner of Saony and began to sweep wide, disappearing into the forest.

Lavastine sought and found his captain. "Send a company after them," he said.

Another cry rent the air from Henry's army. The king rode a few paces forward and lifted his lance.

"The Holy Lance of St. Perpetua," murmured Lavastine, but to whom, Alain could not tell.

St. Perpetua. Lady of Battles.

Alain groped at his neck, found the rose. King Henry carried the Lance of St. Perpetua, a relic of the greatest antiquity and holiness. Was it not the Lady of Battles herself who had come to him, a simple merchant's son, on that stormy day above Osna Sound? Was it not the Lady of Battles who had changed his destiny?

He could not imagine for what purpose he had been led here, to this day and this hour and this moment.

Henry's army began to move down the hill, picking up speed so their weight could smash through Sabella's line. And first, in their way, was that knot of infantrymen, dragging the shrouded cage up the slope.

The cage juttled and bounced and lurched. Stuck. One of the wheels had gotten stuck. Henry's soldiers picked up speed and force. Sabella's captain shouted a shrill command and lifted a white banner, waving it. The line of her army lurched forward in its turn.

Lavastine lifted an arm. And Alain found himself as the two armies lumbered forward to their inevitable meeting. Rage and Sorrow whined. He faltered, unsure where to march, how to fall into place, or what to do. He was not even armed, except with his eating knife. What was he meant to do?

He fell behind and from this vantage point could see nothing except banners and pennants and the chaotic blur of movement on the hill above.

But he knew instantly when the first ranks met. It was a clamor unlike anything he had ever heard, made the more terrible because of the unforgiving clash of sword and spear set against the sudden harrowing screams of mortal men.

He thought of Rodulfs warnings and Sabella's answer: "This time it will not be enough." How could she hope to win against a better armed and larger force? He could not know whether the cage was opened deliberately or knocked over accidentally in the charge. He only knew it had happened because at that moment there came from the center of the milling battle a shriek from a hundred throats as from one throat that froze his heart in his chest. He could not breathe for so long a span of time that he coughed and gulped air when Rage butted him from behind, jarring him out of his stupor.

On the slope above, half seen through the chaos of soldiers scattering, through horses rearing and screaming, through the press of bodies and of many men intent on moving forward or on running away, he saw it rise into the spring day as a bird flies toward the heavens and freedom.

Only to be yanked hard, almost to plunge to earth again, because of the great iron collar that bound its leg to a heavy iron chain, the shackle that tied it to the earth and captivity. It screamed its rage and righted itself, still in the air, the downdraft of its great wings toppling men from their horses.

Still shrieking that harsh eaglelike cry, the guivre swept its gaze across the battlefield. And everywhere that men by design or accident met its eye, those men froze, unable to move. Everywhere, except among the soldiers of Sabella's army, who wore the amulets so painstakingly wrought by

Antonia's clerics. The slaughter began.

Henry was the kind of man who left nothing to chance.

In a strange way, he reminded Hanna of her mother, i Mistress Birta. He had a hard, pragmatic side and yet j was as likely as any other person to give full expression | to his feelings. But to Hanna the most important thing ! about Henry was what Hathui had said of him that same evening after they had reached Henry's court at the monastery of Hersford and been taken in as members of the king's personal household: "He's a fine lord, is our king, and I am proud to serve him."

Hathui, with her fierce marchlander' s independence, was loath to serve anyone. That Henry had captured Hathui's loyalty so quickly was to Hanna's way of thinking a mark of his kingliness. He was the true heart of the kingdom, not any city, not any holy site, not any palace or stronghold.

Now, sitting astride her horse as Villam conferred with Henry after the disastrous parley, Hanna worried. She was not, by nature, a worrier, but she had come to be one these past weeks ever since she and Hathui had been forced to leave Liath behind. It was all very well for Hathui to proclaim that she would know if something had happened to Wolfhere and Manfred. A constant nagging anxiety ate away at Hanna. What if something terrible happened to Liath? Hanna had sworn in her heart to protect Liath, and now she had broken that promise.

Through no fault of your own. Isn't that what Birta would say? Isn't that what Liath herself would say?

But Hanna could only think of broken promises as she stared down the slope toward Sabella's army, drawn up in a strong line below them. She had sworn to protect Liath, and now she rode far from her side. Sabella had, by all reports, sworn an oath to Henry and now she had broken it. By my deeds, Hanna thought, / belong on Sabella's side.

Then, angry at herself for this ridiculous musing, she let out an exasperated sigh. There was no use blaming herself. She was not the Eika chieftain who had besieged Gent. She had not asked those Eika to attack the five Eagles. She had fallen off her horse and sprained her ankle, but the truth was, she was still not that experienced a rider. She and Hathui had brought the message of the siege to Henry as quickly as they could. She had done her best and now must live with what came after. It was not her fault but rather Sabella's that Henry could not ride immediately to Gent.

Liath was the one who worried incessantly and to no purpose, wondering what she had done wrong rather than accepting that sometimes one did nothing and still had ill luck. That was the way of the world, though perhaps Deacon Fortensia might say it was a heathen way of looking at things.

But Hanna and the rest of her family still laid flowers at the foot of certain trees in the forest and offered garlands where the spring rose from rock along the south ridge. Of course she believed in Our Lord and Lady and in the Circle of Unity. But that did not mean the old spirits had ceased to live in the world. They had only gone into hiding.

The old spiritslike that boy who had held the reins of the biscop's white mule and stared at her so strangely. He had an odd, fey look about him. And those hounds! They weren't ugly, like the Eika dogs she had seen, but they looked as deadly; yet they sat next to the boy like sweet puppies. Ai, well, there were a great many strange things that walked abroad in the world, if only one had the eyes to see them.

"the young Eagle

She shook her head and attended to what Henry was saying.

will attend Sapientia. She knows what to do. I will have Constance back before Sabella can retreat and take her away as a prisoner."

Henry was surrounded by his century of Lions. Hanna searched and found Karl's broad back

among the ranks; if she craned her neck just right, she could see his profile. He did not notice her. With his fellows, he stared intently down the slope toward the restless mass of Sabella's army. The Lions were ready for battle.

Henry and Villam finished their consultation. Hathui rode away with a message intended for Theophanu, who had been left in charge of their supply train. Henry, ever cautious, had left the train and his noncombatants behind in the fortified town of Kassel.

Hanna was sent back behind the lines to the wood beyond. Henry had chosen this field to stand and fight because of the lay of the land. Guessing that Sabella would bring her supply train with her rather than leave it behind in Arconia, he had hidden some eighty mounted soldiers in the woods and put Sapienia with a veteran captain at her side for good measure at their head. Concealed by the trees and by the skirmishing that prefaced any battle, they would sweep wide round Sabella's right flank and hit all the way back to the supply train, thus freeing Constance.

Or causing her to get killed, thought Hanna, but she supposed Henry would rather see his sister die than remain a hostage. After all, as long as Constance remained alive in Sabella's hands, she was a weapon to be used against the king.

That was how Hathui had explained it, at any rate. But Hathui had been raised in the harsh cauldron of the borderlands, which were in a state of constant war. There, as the hawknosed Eagle had said more than once, one killed one's children rather than let them fall into the hands of Quman raiders.

Sapienia looked like a greyhound being held on a tight leash: eager to run. She was small enough that Hanna was surprised Henry let her fight.

Of course every adult fought in the right circumstances, under conditions of siege or a raider's attack on a village; it would be foolish to waste any strong arm. But women blessed by the Lady with the gift of bearing lived did not often join the ranks of armed soldiers. Some, who dedicated their lives to St. Perpetua or St. Andrea both soldiers for God turned their hearts away from marriage and childbearing, as Hathui had done. Others by reason of unusual size or strength served a year or two in a lord's levy before returning to their holding and taking up their old lives.

But it was no shame for a noble lady to excuse herself from battle: that was what she had a husband and brothers for. Her first duties were to administer her lands and bear children to carry on her lineage. And Sapienia was particularly small, so that Hanna running messages to her retinue from Henry had been aware of the trouble the king and his smiths had gone to, to outfit her in decent armor.

But Sapienia wanted to fight, to lead her own unit. And Henry allowed her to, because Hanna suspected he had something to prove thereby. Something for her to prove to him, most likely. No person could become sovereign if he, or she, could not lead the great princes and their levies into battle.

"When will we go?" demanded Sapienia, and the old captain spoke to her soothingly, calming her down.

From the direction of the field, Hanna heard the soldiers raise their voices in a great shout: "Hai! For Henry!" That was the signal.

Sapienia lifted a hand and at the head of her troop of soldiers began to ride, circling through the trees. Hanna kept tight hold on her spear. She rode toward the back of the ranks, protected by them; no one expected an Eagle to fight unless they were overwhelmed. But she was still nervous. She stared through the trees, half starting every time new trees sprang into view. Luckily the soldiers next to her were too intent on what lay ahead to notice how jumpy she was. Possibly they were jumpy themselves, but she doubted it. For her first command Henry had given Sapienia experienced soldiers who had, most of them, spent time fighting in the east. After all, if this raid went well, they could fold up Sabella's right flank or even overtake and engulf her rear, thus preventing her from retreating.

Distantly, through the trees, Hanna heard a change in the echoing noise from the field. One of the soldiers beside her grunted: "They've engaged," he said to the man beside him.

They rode on, curving back to the right. A horrible shriek rose above the distant thunder of battle.

"What was that?" muttered one of the soldiers.

But then, at the fore of the company, the riders broke into a gallop. They had sighted their quarry. Their pennants whipped behind, streamers of red and gold.

Hanna saw the line of wagons ahead, drawn up in twos to make a wall and a gap between where the noncombatants could take shelter. Amazingly, Sabella had left only a token force to guard her supply train. A few arrows cut through the sky, their whirring like a warning come too late.

Sapientia raised her voice in a shrill cry: "Hailililili!" and, with her soldiers fanning out, they hit the line of wagons and broke into a dozen small swirls of fighting, soon stilled.

Hanna hung back, watching. Hathui had drilled this into her over the last ten days as they had ridden west to meet Sabella.

"You are the king's eyes and ears. You watch and mark all that occurs. You are not meant for heroics. You are meant to live and bear witness."

But there were no heroics here. Sapientia's troops took over the supply train easily and began to herd their new prisoners together, searching for Biscop Constance.

A cry came from the woods on the opposite side of the line of wagons. Hanna rode closer, to investigate.

There! Among the trees she saw riders, but she could not identify them. Sapientia's captain took twenty soldiers and rode into the wood to head them off.

And at that moment, someone grabbed her reins and jerked down hard on them. She started and swung her spear around to point at

A frater.

She stared. He had a harsh face. One of his lips was bleeding.

"Give me your horse!" he demanded. This was no humble churchman. After almost twenty days in the king's progress, Hanna recognized a great lord's arrogance when she saw it.

But she hesitated. He was dressed as a simple frater, after all.

"Ai, Lady, grant me patience!" he said aloud. "Eagle! Dismount and give me this horse!"

"For what purpose?" she demanded in her turn. "You are in Sabella's train "I am Sabella's prisoner, not her ally." "How can I know?"

Distantly, that awful shriek rose again on the wind, followed by a strange muttering, like calls of triumph and moans of defeat melded together, like a battle gone to rout.

The frater grunted in anger, grabbed her arm, and yanked her bodily off the horse. She hit the ground hard enough to jolt her and scatter her wits. The animal shied, but he jerked down on the reins and, while Hanna was trying to pick herself up, threw himself over the saddle and swung his leg over. Kicked the horse, hard, and with robes flapping up around his thighs, he rode at a gallop off toward the battle. Lady! He was barefoot!

Panting, Hanna heaved herself to her feet. In the woods, two forces had met and blended

together: she caught sight of the red dragon of Saony. Friends, then, but as soon as she thought it, she heard shouting.

"Lavastine's riders are coming! Turn round! Turn round and face them!"

Ai, Lady! What had Hathui said? An unhorsed Eagle is a dead Eagle. The frater, and her horse, were long gone. Still clutching her spear, Hanna ran for the shelter of the wagons.

is what it had all meant, of course. Alain saw that now with a clarity obscured only by the screaming of men and the milling of soldiers lost, frightened, and running, or caught up in the brutal and numbing work of slaughter.

Henry's soldiers those caught by the guivre's glare were like so many trussed pigs, throats slashed while they squealed. This was not battle of the kind sanctified by the Lord of Hosts, who did not falter when He was called upon to wield the Sword of Judgment. This was a massacre.

Alain knew it was wrong, knew it in his heart. The guivre screamed in rage, trying to break free, beating its wings frantically. Sabella's first rank of horsemen moved steadily up the hill, their progress slowed because it was so easy to kill Henry's soldiers, because they had to scramble over the dead and dying and over horses collapsed onto the grass. On the far right flank, a melee swirled, back and forth, but the standard of Fesse wavered and began to move backward.

Above, about half of the century of Lions had begun to march forward to meet Sabella's army. The rest either could not or would not march. And behind them Henry sat on his horse, unmoving. Was he waiting and watching? Or was he already caught in the guivre's eye?

The mounted soldiers opposite Lavastine's forces were trying to turn Lavastine's soldiers back so they could punch in to aid Henry's center. Alain ran, fought his way through the back ranks of archers and spearmen who had fallen back after the first skirmishing. He shoved, and Rage and Sorrow nipped and bit to make a passage for him, toward their sisters and brothers, the black hounds who attended Count Lavastine.

Alain reached the count, who was sitting back from the front lines, waiting and watching the progress of the battle, Alain grabbed his stirrup and pulled hard. Lavastine stared down at him. There was no sign in his eyes that he recognized Alain.

Desperate measures for desperate times. He prayed for strength to the Blessed Lady. Then he grabbed Lavastine's mail coat and tugged as hard as he could.

Because the count was not expecting it, he lost his seat. Alain shifted his grip to the count's arm and pulled him right out of the saddle. Lavastine fell hard and lay still.

And a spear pinched Alain between the shoulder blades. He dropped to his knees and fumbled at his neck as he turned his head to look up and behind.

It was Sergeant Fell. "You know me, Sergeant!" Alain cried. "You know the count is acting strangely. This is wrong! We shouldn't be here!"

Fell hesitated. Lavastine's captain fell back from the front lines, seeing the count unhorsed. All at once the hounds surrounded Alain, growling and driving everyone back. No one dared strike them. Alain found the rose and drew it out.

"I pray you, Lady of Battles, come to my aid," he breathed. And he brushed the petals of the rose over Lavastine's pale lips, just below the nasal of his helmet. Beyond, he heard the clash of battle. Here he was protected, caught in an eddy, surrounded by a black wall of hounds. Sorrow licked Lavastine's face, and the count opened his eyes. He blinked and passed a hand over his helmet as if feeling it there for the first time. Then he sat up. Alain grabbed him under the arms and the hounds parted to let Sergeant Fell through. Together, Alain and the sergeant pulled Lavastine to his feet.

"What is this?" demanded Lavastine, staring at the chaos around them, his front rank of fighters pressing against the fighters from Saony. Fesse's banner was retreating. In the center, Sabella's banner moved up and farther up and came against the banner of the Lions. The guivre shrieked. The Lion banner toppled and disappeared from view. Henry, surrounded now only by his personal guard, did not move.

The captain pressed his horse through the knot of hounds and men, who parted to let him through. Sergeant Fell let go of the count and grabbed his horse's reins before it could bolt. The guivre made all the horses nervous, and they shied at every harsh call and scream.

"We are marching with Sabella, against Henry," said the captain.

"We are not!" cried Lavastine. "All of my men, withdraw from the battle."

This command raced through the ranks like wildfire. Lavastine mounted his horse and pulled back, and step by embattled step his soldiers withdrew from the battle until the captains of Saony's line realized what was occurring and, at last, let them go.

But Henry's center was broken. Sabella was halfway through the Lions and still Henry had not moved. As Lavastine's soldiers cleared the field, Alain stood his ground and their retreat eddied around him and ebbed until he stood among the dead and watched Saony's cavalry wheel and turn to aid their king. He watched the guivre twist and turn, still battering against the wind and against its shackles, watched its baleful glare sweep across the ranks of Saony's soldiers. Watched as half of Sabella's company split off to strike at this new threat.

A few arrows and spears cut through the air from above, sliding harmlessly off the guivre's scaly hide and fall to the ground. The grass was empty around the guivre; Sabella's soldiers, though protected against its gaze, gave it a wide berth. Not one soul had king's dragon come within reach of its claws, circumscribed by the length of the chain that fettered it to the iron cage.

Slowly, Henry's soldiers were cut down or retreated up the hill toward the king for their final stand.

The rose fell from Alain's suddenly nerveless fingers. He could not stand by and watch any more. He could not judge the tightness of Sabella's grievance against Henry. But he knew it was not right that she win by these means, as horrible as they were. Lackling had been murdered to gain Lavastine's support. Henry's soldiers could not fight, so as to pit honest strength against honest strength, but were scythed down like wheat.

He ran across the field, stumbling on corpses, jumping over men who writhed or struggled to drag themselves to safety. He ran toward the guivre, and paused only once, long enough to take a sword from a noble lord's slack and bloody body. He did not even register the man's face.

But another figure reached the guivre before he could. Someone else, riding a dun-colored horse. The man flung himself off the horse and slapped it on the flank. The horse bolted away.

And the first for it was Frater Agius, Alain saw that now as he ran, knowing suddenly that he would come too late walked without fear into the circle of the guivre's talons.

Its cry was as much delirium as fury, but it stooped and plunged. Halfstarved and long since driven wild by captivity and the torment of its wasted and suffering body, it took the food offered it.

Agius vanished under a flurry of metal-hard wings and sharp talons. The guivre lowered its head to feed.

Henry's army what was left of it and Henry himself cast a look at the scene, driven almost to a frenzy by what they had witnessed and been helpless to prevent, they charged and hit Sabella's line, which had fallen out of formation as they took the hill and killed their easy prey. The soldiers from Fesse and Avaria regrouped and slammed into Duke Rodulf's stretched thin line. Saony's



troops fell back, reformed, and drove for Sabella's faltering center.

Alain ran for the guivre. Already the first of Sabella's men, shocked and not yet recovered from this reversal, stumbled backward past him. He ignored them, though Sorrow and Rage nipped and barked, protecting him so no man tried to stop him.

Why would any man try to stop him? The guivre loomed huge, this close, a stooped shape that was yet as high as two men, one standing on the other's shoulders. Sun glinted off its scales, and it fed with the rapacity of a creature who has been denied pleasure for too long. Alain came up behind it, thought of striking but did not. It remained oblivious to him. He heard the crunch of bone and Ai, Lady! a horrible moan that pitched up into a strangled wail and was abruptly cut off.

He circled the great beast. Worms fell from its diseased eye to slither away on the ground. From this side it could not see his approach. And anyway, it was too busy feasting.

He raised the sword just as he heard a warning cry behind him and then a cry from farther away: "Hailililili!" and the thunder of hooves and shouts of dismay, carrying Rodulf's name on the wind, and again and again the cry of "Henry! For King Henry!"

He brought it down with all his strength on the creature's neck. It screamed aloud, deafening him, and lifted its great and ugly head from what remained of Agius. Lifting, casting first to its sighted side and then slewing round the other way, it beat its wings, sending him tumbling forward underneath it. It was an ungainly thing, not meant for the ground; it had only the one set of talons and wings.

It clawed for him, missed, because it could not see him, tottered, because it was so ill and could barely find its balance. Alain stumbled back and righted the sword, turning it so the blade pointed up. His heel met resistance and he fell to one knee. Glanced behind himself.

The guivre had opened Agius at the belly, to feed on the soft entrails. Horribly, the frater's eyes caught on and tracked Alain; he was still alive.

The guivre screamed its fury and found its footing. Its shadow covered them, Alain and the dying Agius.

But, of course, as the old tales told, every great beast has its weak spot. Alain did not hesitate but plunged the sword deep into its unprotected breast.

Blood fountained, pouring over him like the wash of fire. He let go of the sword's hilt and jumped back, grabbing Agius and tugging him as the guivre writhed in its death throes. Spitting and coughing, blinded by the stinging, hot blood, he stumbled backward, dragging Agius. The guivre fell and the impact jarred Alain off his feet. He collapsed on top of the frater. The guivre shuddered, a great convulsion, and was still.

Agius breathed something, a rattling word and then another. Alain bent, eyes streaming, his hands smarting. A body slammed up against him, and then Rage was licking his face and hands. He tried to chase her away. He could not chase her away and concentrate on Agius. "Free the white deer," whispered Agius. "Ai, Lady, let this sacrifice make me worthy of Your Son's example." His eyes glazed over and he shuddered once, like the guivre, and died.

Sorrow nudged up against Alain. The hound had something in his mouth. Rage licked Alain's eyes clean of the guivre's blood and Alain blinked into sudden brightness and made sense first of all of the field lying washed by the sun's light and the chaos ranging there: Sabella's banner fell back and farther back yet. All the weight of victory had shifted. With the death of the guivre, their standard, Sabella's soldiers had lost heart and now they turned and fled.

A thorn cut Alain's cheek, a thin prick. He started back to see Sorrow carrying the rose in his mouth.

brought from the other side of the battlefield. Its petals had darkened to a deep bloodred, as red as Agius' blood that yet leaked onto the ground. Alain dropped his face to his hands and wept.

THE PROMISE OF POWER ROSVITA could not concentrate when she was waiting. She paced up and down in the feasting hall that adorned the palace built by the first duke of Fesse some eighty years ago. Now and again she walked over to the great doors that opened onto a beautiful vista of the town of Kassel, lying at the foot of the hill on which the palace had been erected. A huge grayblue stone capped the lintel of this monumental doorway. When Rosvita stared up, she saw tiny figures and patterns carved into the stone, their outlines blurred by age.

In the town below, a few bedraggled streamers still decorated the streets. When Henry and his army had marched in, the town of Kassel had been recovering from the raucous Feast of St. Mikhel, celebrated four nights before. Though the bishop dutifully spoke out against several of the local customs, even she could not prevent the usual festival which involved a young woman riding through the streets of Kassel clothed only

in her hair in this case, in a gauzy linen undershirt, some attention being shown to modesty while the townsfolk closed their shutters and pretended not to watch her go by. After this procession everyone trooped out of doors and drank themselves sick. Rosvita was not sure exactly what had happened in the original story to force the poor woman to ride out in such a humiliating way, only that St. Mikhel was by a miracle supposed to have clothed the hapless virgin in a light so blinding it protected her from the stares of the heathen and the ungodly.

"It is said," said Princess Theophanu, coming up beside Rosvita to stand in a splash of sunlight, "that this stronghold was built on the ruins of a Dariyan fortress which was itself built on the ruins of an older palace whose great stones were set in place by the daimones of the upper air." She indicated the huge lintel.

"Like the stone circles," said Rosvita, thinking of young Berthold. "Though some say they were set there by giants." That was what Helmut Villam had said, that day when they had explored the old fallen stone circle and Berthold had still walked alive in the light of day. Ai, Lady, this sorrow she must bear with her. But she could not allow it to drag her down. "Come," she said, turning to Theophanu. "We will read from the book I was given by the hermit, Brother Fidelis. In this way we may reflect upon the life of a holy woman while we wait to hear from King Henry."

She turned back into the hall, where light and shadow played among the thick wood pillars and in the eaves far above. No fire burned in the hearth this day; it was warm enough that only cooking fires in the kitchen house needed to be lit. Servants dressed in tabards sewn with the gold lion of Fesse lingered nervously beside the side doors. One brought wine forward, but she gestured for him to take it away. She was not thirsty.

Young Ekkehard had fallen asleep on a bench. His gentle face and sweet profile reminded her bitterly of Berthold Villam, who was lost to them now. Ekkehard

was a good boy, if a little too fond of carousing late into the night and singing with the bards who traveled from one great court to the next.

"It is just as well," said Theophanu, coming up beside Rosvita.

"What is just as well?"

Theophanu nodded toward her younger brother. Of all Henry's children, Ekkehard looked the most like his father: goldenbrown hair, round face, and a slightly arched, strong nose. At thirteen, he was lanky and tall and a bit clumsy except when he was playing the lute, but so it was said had Henry been at that age before he grew into the broad and powerful stature of his adult years. "It is just as well," said Theophanu, "that Ekkehard loves music and the pleasures of the feast more than he does the promise of power."

Rosvita did not quite know what to make of this bald statement.

Theophanu turned her dark eyes on Rosvita. "Is that not the source of Sabella's rebellion? That she is not content administering her husband's dukedom? That she wants more?"

"Is greed not the source of many sins?" asked Rosvita.

Theophanu smiled innocently. "So does the church teach, good sister."

Theophanu was old enough to have her own retinue, and yet her father kept her close by his side, just as he kept Sapiaientia beside him rather than giving her a title and lands to administer. Did Theophanu chafe at this treatment? Rosvita could not tell. Was she angry that her sister had been allowed to accompany Henry to meet Sabella on the field and been given her own command? That she had been left behind when truly she was larger and stronger and more fit physically for the exertions of battle? Theophanu's expression and her inner thoughts on these matters remained unreadable.

Rosvita unwrapped the old parchment codex from the linen cover in which she had swaddled it and turned carefully to the first page. Brother Fidelis' calligraphy was delicate yet firm, betraying the lines of an older age in the loops and swirls of the occasional fillips of ornamentation he had allowed himself as he wrote. A Salkian hand, Rosvita thought; she had examined many manuscripts and books over the years and come to recognize various quirks and telltale signs of specific scribes or of habits learned in certain monastic schools. She touched the yellowing page with reverence, feeling the lines of ink beneath her fingers like the whisper of Fidelis' voice, coming to her as from down a long tunnel, through the veil of years.

Theophanu sat beside her and waited, hands clasped patiently in her lap. Rosvita read aloud.

'The Lord and Lady confer glory and greatness on women through strength of mind. Faith makes them strong, and in these earthly vessels, heavenly treasure is hid. One of this company is Radegundis, she whose earthly life I, Fidelis, humblest and least worthy, now attempt to celebrate so that all may hear of her deeds and sing praise in her glorious memory. The world divides those whom no space parted once. So ends the Prologue.'

Rosvita sighed, hearing Fidelis in these words as if his voice echoed through the ink to touch her ears. She went on. "So begins the Life. The most blessed Radegundis was of the highest earthly rank

Ekkehard snorted and woke up suddenly, tumbling off the bench onto carpets carefully laid there by his servants. At that same moment, one of Theophanu's servingwomen appeared in the doorway. "An Eagle!" she cried. "An Eagle comes." Rosvita closed the book with trembling hands and wrapped it in linen. Then she clutched it to her breast and rose, hands still shaking, and hurried over to the great doors. Theophanu came with her, but the king's daughter was completely calm. Ekkehard was talking excitedly behind them, and his servants swarmed around him, helping him up. The chatelaine and other servants of king's dragon the duchess of Fesse crowded behind Rosvita and the princess.

The Eagle was Hathui, the young woman Henry had honored by taking her into his personal retinue. She handed off her horse to a groom and walked forward to kneel before Theophanu.

"Your Highness, Princess Theophanu," she said, lifting her eyes to look upon Theophanu's face. She had the rare ability to be proud without being impudent. "King Henry sends word that his sister Sabella refuses any terms of parley, and that battle will be joined." "What of the course of that battle?" asked Theophanu. "I do not know. I rode quickly, and without looking back, as is my duty."

"Bring her mead," said Theophanu. She stared off across the town. Kassel was laid out as a square with two broad avenues set perpendicular to each other, dividing it into four even quarters. An old wall surrounded it, the last obvious remains besides the baths that this had once been a Dariyan town in the days of the old empire. The town had probably been larger then, and certainly more densely populated. There was room now within the old walls for a few fields mostly vegetables and one

impressive stand of fruit trees as well as some common pasture for cows between the last line of houses and the town gates. Outside the wall lay fields, rye and barley because of the soil of this country, the red clay of the highlands.

Where had all those people gone, and what had become of their descendants? Had they fled back to Aosta, to the city of Darre out of which the empire had grown? Had they died in the wars and plagues and famines that had devastated and ultimately destroyed the old empire? Had they simply vanished and never returned, like poor Berthold?

Rosvita could not help but wonder. "Knowledge tempted me too much," Brother Fidelis had said. At times like this, she knew she also was too curious. Henry Kate Elliott might be dead and all he had worked for overthrown. Or he might have committed the terrible crime of slaying his own kin, the very crime that some chroniclers wrote had brought about the fall of the Dariyan Empire. And here she stood, wondering about the history of the town of Kassel when the peace and stability of the kingdom was at stake!

"Come," she said to Theophanu, "let us sit down again and wait."

Theophanu, barely, shook her head. "It is time to saddle our horses," she said quietly. "And to gather together healers. Either we will ride to the battle to give aid to the wounded, or we will ride away."

"Away?"

Theophanu turned now, her dark lashes framing eyes as startlingly large as those of queens in ancient mosaics. She looked entirely too composed. "If Sabella wins, then Ekkehard and I must remain out of her hands at any cost. We must be prepared to ride to my Aunt Scholastica at Quedlinhame."

Rosvita placed a hand on her chest and bowed slightly, showing her respect for the young princess. Of course Theophanu was right. She had learned politics at her mother's knee, and her mother Sophia had learned politics in the court of Arethousa, where intrigue ran in webs as convoluted and dangerous as those in any court in the world of humankind.

This, then, was the choice Henry had to make, because it was long past time for him to send one of his daughters on her heir's progress. He had to choose between Sapiaientia, the daughter who was bold and open and yet too often did not show good judgment, and the cool, inscrutable Theophanu, who had fine political instincts but none of that vital charismatic charm that marked a sovereign as the chosen of God. One was too trusting; the other, no one trusted. No wonder Henry dreamed of placing his bastard son Sanglant on the throne.

. frater to deacon. "Get me a horse!"

The woman who made this demand of Hanna had the imperious tone of a noblewoman though she wore simple deacon's robes and her braided hair had not even a shawl to cover it. But there was nothing Hanna could do. She had no horse, having lost it to the desperate frater.

"Begging your pardon, Deacon," she said, hefting her spear just in case the woman meant to attempt an escape while Princess Sapiaientia's soldiers fought off the new attack, "but all who are in this train are now in the custody of King Henry."

To her surprise, the deacon laughed. "Of course, child. Do you not know me?"

Hanna could only shake her head while she stared into the woods, hoping to catch sight of the princess' troops. A few soldiers lingered. Most of the people in the supply train were down, wounded or dead, or else they milled around aimlessly with that lost look on their faces of men and women totally out of their element. Some ten paces behind the deacon lay two guards in Sabella's colors; both were dead. About five wagons beyond their bodies, Hanna suddenly saw a woman in bishop's vestments being helped onto a wagon. "Ai, Lady!" she breathed. "That is Biscop Antonia." "She must not escape," said the deacon in a hard voice. "Find me a horse, or find my niece and bring her back from the woods."

My niece. Hanna had a horrible thought. She risked a close look at the woman's face and decided it could be true, that the resemblance could be marked in the cast of the woman's features, in her nose and jawline and piercing gaze.

She bent to one knee, swiftly, and bowed her head. "Begging your pardon, Your Grace," she said quickly.

"Never mind that!" snapped the woman. "I do not want Antonia to get away. And I have no weapon that can stop her."

Hanna obeyed her. She ran toward the woods, sure that she would get run through at any moment. But Sapientia's troops came riding back, flanked by the red dragon soldiers of Saony. The other troop of soldiers, Lavastine's skirmishers, had evidently retreated. Hanna hailed her, and the princess pulled up at once.

"Your aunt, Biscop Constance, waits for your protection," Hanna cried, grabbing hold of the reins as Sapientia's horse shied away. Hanna knew horses well enough to see that this one had, besides a nervous disposition, a heavyhanded rider, and far too much excitement to cope with. "She begs of you to stop Biscop Antonia from making her escape."

Sapientia's expressive face lit up. "Captain!" she cried, "you must find and protect Constance. Follow, you who are with me!" She urged her mount forward so quickly she tore the reins out of Hanna's hands. Perhaps thirty of her troops went with her; the rest hung back, confused or waiting for confirmation of this order from the old captain. He muttered something under his breath, then raised his voice so all the soldiers could hear him.

"You ten, you return to the wagons and protect Biscop Constance. We have more than enough soldiers here. The rest, and you soldiers from Saony, will return with me to the field where Henry fights." They began to form up. He looked down at Hanna. "Eagle! You remain with Biscop Constance."

She nodded, happy at this moment to be subject to an authority that knew what it was doing. They rode back toward the battle, whose outcome none of them knew.

So it was that, despite everything and despite several flurries of disorder caused by Sapientia's enthusiasm, king's dragon Biscop Antonia was taken prisoner together with her host of clerics. Duke Berengar was found, huddling underneath a wagon with only one loyal servingman at his side; he was so frightened he had pissed in his leggings. Hanna actually felt sorry for him when he was brought before a stern Biscop Constance, who, having taken command of Sapientia's forty soldiers, now controlled the supply train. But Constance showed him not pity, but indifference. Hanna quickly understood why: she had seen that slackjawed gaping and sudden bursts of inappropriate laughter before. Berengar was a simpleton, and therefore a simple pawna mere Lion in the game of chess. He did not matter.

The person who mattered here was Biscop Antonia, who looked to Hanna's eyes rather cheered at the thought of being in Constance's power. Antonia was a kindlooking woman who did not bear herself with the haughtiness of most of the noblyborn but rather with a smiling modesty. And yet in the parley, faced with Helmut Villam, she had raged with a passion that did not appear to be part of her now.

And there was one other prize, hidden among the clerics.

"Ah," said Constance. "Come forward, Tallia. I will not hurt you, child."

The girl was led forward. She was crying, and it made her nose red. She had nothing to say for herself except to throw herself on Constance's mercy. But Hanna kept looking past her toward Antonia's clerics. They were the most unsightly mass of churchmen Hanna had ever seen; they all looked as if they had some form of pox, with red sores on their faces and hands and rashes along their chins. Several of them were coughing feebly, and one the most sickly of the lothad a thin stain of blood on his hand when he lowered it from his mouth.

Ai, Lady! thought Hanna. What if they have the plague?

"Separate them from the others," said Constance to Sapientia, as if she had the same thought. "But I will keep Tallia and Berengar beside me."

"Are they sick?" demanded Sapientia, who had finally dismounted after riding around in the trees for a while, looking for someone else to fight. She had returned from the woods to declare she would ride back to the battle, but Constance had forestalled that with a direct order, aunt to niece, and even the brash Sapientia dared not go; against a biscop's command. Constance could not be more than four or five years older than Sapientia, but her authority far outweighed that of her brother's daughter. "I do not know if they are sick," she said now, "but we must be cautious. I have heard many tales of the; plague in Autun, which was hard hit by a sickness some twenty years ago. Take them aside and guard them, but let none touch them." i Biscop Antonia showed no sign of the disease, nor did! the one young cleric who stood closest to her. But Constance did not look likely to let the biscop out of her sight, sickness or no. I "You will answer for what you did, Antonia," said Constance.

"We all answer to God," said Antonia reasonably.

A thunder of hooves alerted them. Sapientia's captain had returned with the rest of her troops but without the skirmishers from Saony. His expression was chilling.

"What is wrong?" cried Sapientia.

Antonia smiled knowingly.

"Good captain," said Constance in a firm but calm voice. "What news do you bring?"

He appeared stricken. "The Lord has blessed us with victory, Your Grace, but a terrible prize it is this day."

For one instant, Antonia's triumphant expression was wiped clean to show something nastier, cunning and brittle, beneath. Hanna glanced toward Constance, who looked grave as well she might. When she looked back at Antonia, the old biscop had regained her usual expression, as placid as a saint's, as smooth as cream, and Hanna had to shake her head, wondering if she had imagined that other face.

"Give us your report," said Constance. Sapientia looked likely to grab her horse and gallop away, but after one sharp look from Constance she stayed where she was.

The captain dismounted and knelt before her. "Victory belongs to King Henry, but at high cost. Many lie dead on the field, for Sabella used" Here he faltered. "she brought a creature on the field, a terrible thing that truly must have sprung from an evil sire, and by its magic her army slew fully half or more of Henry's army, indeed, almost all of his Lions while they stood frozen on the field, held in the grip of some misbegotten enchantment."

Sapientia gasped aloud. Soldiers muttered in disbelief and horror. Almost all of his Lions. Hanna gulped back a sob of foreboding.

Constance raised a hand for silence, and it was granted her.

"How then did Henry win the day? If all transpired as you report?"

"I do not know. Only that a mana frater threw himself on the beast and somehow it was distracted from its sorcery and killed."

Antonia said something under her breath, but Hanna could not hear. Her face remained pleasant, but her eyes had grown hard.

Constance paled. "A frater?" she asked. "What do you know of this?"

"Some say it is the son of Burchard, Duke of Avaria, but I can scarcely believe that" Constance

lifted a hand sharply and he fell silent.

One tear rolled down Constance's cheek, and then the wind blew it away and it vanished as if it had never existed. "Take her away, out of my sight," she said, pointing at Biscop Antonia, "but guard her closely." The captain, startled, jumped to his feet and did as he was told.

"What about Sabella?" Sapiaentia called after the captain. "Did she escape?"

"No," said the captain as his men surrounded Biscop Antonia and led her away to one of the wagons. "Villam captured her himself, though he was sorely wounded. Some fear he will not live. She is in Henry's custody now."

Constance shut her eyes and remained that way for a long while as Antonia was taken away and lodged in a wagon under heavy guard, as Sapiaentia finally lost patience and called for her horse.

"Come, Eagle," called the princess. "You will ride with me."

"No," said Constance suddenly, opening her eyes. "Go if you wish, Sapiaentia, but I will have an Eagle by me, as is my right." She touched the gold torque at her neck.

"It is true," said Sapiaentia thoughtfully, tossing her head, "that your loyal Eagle reached us from Autun, and that was how Father knew to ride here." Then, strangely, she smiled. "But without an army, how can Father ride to Gent?"

"Ride to Gent?" asked Constance. "Why would Henry wish to ride to Gent?"

Sapien reined her horse aside and rode away without answering the question, back to the battlefield to meet her victorious father.

"Ai, Lady," murmured Hanna. For it was true. Henry had marched with a large army, fully eight hundred or more soldiers. He could raise more, it was true, but it would take months to raise levies from the farflung lands of Wendar and Varre and the marchlands and more time after that to march them all the way to Gent. Sabella had lost many soldiers as well, this day; how was Henry in any case to trust the lords of Varre, who had risen against him? They might well refuse to give him an army, to save the son none of them had any love for.

They would not think about the people of Gent and

what they might be suffering. They would not think about Liath and the danger she faced. What did kings and princes care for the lives of Eagles? Like swords, they were only a tool to be used for the nobles' own gain.

KING Henry was in a foul mood. He was, indeed, in as rare a fury as Rosvita had ever seen him.

At Kassel they had received news of the victory and ridden out at once, only to arrive to find Henry pacing back and forth, back and forth, outside the hastily erected tent in which Helmut Villam lay. It was rumored Villam was dying. All of Henry's servants and the various lords and ladies in attendance on his progress looked terrified, cowering at least twenty steps from him. Henry was perfectly capable of delivering a stinging and unprovoked rebuke to any persons who placed themselves in his line of sight.

Theophanu, sizing up the matter in one glance, drew Ekkehard aside and led him away to where shelters had been set up for the wounded, to give succor there. The Eagle Hathui, adept at being anonymous, walked over and took up her post beside the tent's entrance, close to the king and yet so still, so effaced against the plain cloth siding, that he seemed not to notice her.

Rosvita found herself besieged by courtiers begging her to bring the king to his senses. She calmly distracted them and sent them off on various useful errands and finally found a person who might give her information: Margrave Judith.

The margrave sat in a camp chair and surveyed the scene from a safe distance. Her servants kept importunate courtiers away from her, and so she sipped wine in a semblance of solitude and watched Henry pace. Servants fluttered close to the king and were chased off.

Beyond, Rosvita saw carnage. The field was littered with corpses. Most of the wounded had been moved, but there were far far too many to bury so quickly. Possibly the field would simply have to be abandoned; it had happened before. Men and women common soldiers and people from neighboring farms walked among the dead, looting the corpses for valuables. Rosvita supposed the best booty had already been taken by the king's servants or by the noble lords.

Strangest of all, and worst to behold, a creature lay in the center of the field of slaughter, a great beast so ugly in death that she shuddered to look on it, even at this distance. Its head was as big around as a cart's wheel, resembling more than anything a grotesque rooster's head, but it had the sinuous body and tail of a reptile and the talons of a giant eagle.

"That is the guivre," said Judith with the detached interest of one who has taken no harm in the midst of disaster.

"A guivrel" Rosvita stared. "I have read of such monsters but never hoped to see one."

The creature lay with one huge eye open to the sky, staring blankly at the blue heavens above. Its wings wore a sheen like metal, feathered with copper, and most gruesomely the shape of a man's body was half covered by its carcass. Some rash looter had stolen the dead man's shoes or else he had been barefoot. Small white things, like maggots, crawled over the guivre's body. Rosvita looked away quickly.

"What has happened?" she asked Judith.

"A great beast has met its death, as you can see," said the margrave. She had blood on her tabard, a rent torn in her mail shirt, and a purpling bruise on her right cheek. Her helmet, somewhat dented, sat at her feet. "Ai, Lord. I'm too old for this. No more children, no more fighting, or so the healers say. A man can fight long after his hair has gone silver, if he lives so long. I hurt to the very bones. After this, my daughter's hus

bands ride out, as is proper, or if a woman must attend the battle, then one of them can go!"

Rosvita did not know quite what to say. She had seen death many times, of course, but never on such a scale as this. Up among the Lions, an Eagle knelt weeping over the body of an infantryman.

"It was a hard fought battle," Rosvita said finally.

"Which? The one on the field, or the one we witnessed just before your party rode in?"

"Which one was that?"

"Henry's argument with Duchess Liutgard."

Rosvita did not know Duchess Liutgard well the young duchess came to court rarely but she did know that Liutgard possessed the fabled temper that had, so the chroniclers wrote, marred the reign of her great-great-aunt, Queen Conradina, a woman fabled for having as many arguments as lovers and both in abundance. "Why should the king argue with Liutgard?"

Judith found a stain of blood under one fingernail and beckoned to a servant. The serving woman hastened over and washed the margrave's hands while she talked. "Liutgard rode beside Villam when Sabella's guard was overtaken. They fought loyally

"Liutgard and Villam?"

Judith smiled, but there was a hint of derision in her expression. "That is not what I meant. Sabella's retinue fought loyally and many were slain before the fight was given up. Rodulf died there."



"Duke Rodulf? That is grievous news."

"He fought for Varre, as he has always done. More for Varre I would suppose than for Sabella. Alas, he could not bring himself to accept a Wendish king."

"Perhaps his heirs will be more reasonable."

"Perhaps," echoed Judith with a quirk of the lips that expressed doubt more than hope.

"Villam was wounded?" Rosvita asked. She was beginning to wonder if Judith was toying with her for her own amusement.

"Badly, yes." If this distressed the margrave, she did not show it. Rosvita had never much liked Judith, but the margrave had been loyal to Arnulf and then to Henry, never wavering in her support. She was not an easy woman to like, yet neither could she be dismissed. She was far too powerful for that. "Because Villam was wounded, Liutgard was able to take Sabella into her custody."

"Ah." This explained much. "I suppose that did not sit well with Henry."

"It did not. That was what they argued about. Henry demanded that Liutgard surrender Sabella into his custody. Liutgard told him she would not until Henry was calmer and more able to think clearly."

"Ai, Lady," murmured Rosvita. "That was rashly spoken of her. She might have found more diplomatic words."

"Diplomacy is for courtiers and counselors, my dear cleric, not for princes. I have never found Liutgard possessed of subtlety in any case. You know Burchard's son is dead?"

"Burchard's son?" What had the Duke of Avaria and his children to do with this? The subject changed so quickly, and before Rosvita was done understanding the last one, that she did not follow the leap. Liutgard had married the duke of Avaria's second son, Frederic, but he had died several years ago.

Judith sighed ostentatiously, examined her fingernails for traces of blood or other detritus of armed struggle, and allowed the servant to dry her hands on a clean linen cloth. Then with a gesture she dismissed the servant. "Sabella seems determined to take the men of that line with her in her defeats, though she cares not one whit for them. I speak of Burchard's elder son, Agius, the one who went into the church."

Judith related a rather confused tale of the guivre, the frater, and a boy who had led Count Lavastine's hounds to the kill.

"You are going too quickly for me," said Rosvita. "I do not know what part Count Lavastine has in this battle. The last I heard of him, he had refused Henry's command to attend him on his progress. That was almost a year ago."

"He turned up at the battle on Sabella's side." Judith paused and brushed a finger along her upper lip where a fine down of hair grew, the mark of her impending passage from fertility to wisdom. "But that is the strange thing: he withdrew his forces from the battle halfway through."

"After the guivre was killed, when he saw which way the wind was blowing?"

"No. Before that, when it appeared all was lost for Henry and that Sabella would win. No one can explain it, since Lavastine and his men have fled."

At long last, Rosvita was beginning to see where all this led. "What of Henry and Sabella?"

"We are at a stalemate there, it appears. Liutgard refuses to turn Sabella over to Henry, and Henry rages, as you can see."

"Have you attempted to intervene, my lady?" "I?" Judith smiled.

That smile. It was that particular smile, one Judith was famous for, that made Rosvita not like her,

although she had no other good reason. The margrave of Olsatia and Austra was loyal to the house of Saony, had pledged her loyalty first to the younger Arnulf and then after his death to Henry. But Rosvita did not believe any affection or deep bond held her to them. Rosvita believed Judith remained loyal to Henry because she needed him and what he could bring her: his military support. The position of prince in the marchlands, the unstable border country, was a precarious one, and Judith had called on and received aid from Henry more than once.

Like many other noblewomen of the highest rank, Judith had given birth before her first marriage to a child gotten on her by a concubine or at any rate some handsome young man not of noble birth whose looks had caught her youthful fancy. That first marriage, as such marriages were, had been arranged for her by her kin to the mutual advantage of both houses. The concubine had long since disappeared. But the child had lived and thrived.

Lady bless, but Judith had petted and cosseted that boy; perhaps he would not have turned out so insufferable had he not been so handsome those who had been at court longer than Rosvita said the boy resembled his father, in looks, at least; some said in charm as well. He had been a brilliant student, one of the most brilliant to pass through the king's schola in Rosvita's time there, but she had not been unhappy to see him leave. How unlike Berthold he had been in all ways except the one for which she of all people could not condemn him: curiosity.

But Hugh was gone now, into the church, and no doubt caught up in church concerns and his new position as abbot of Firseburg. Without question his mother hoped to elevate him to the rank of presbyter, and with that honor he would leave Wendar to live in the skopos' palace in Darre. He would have no reason to trouble the king's progress with his presence. Thank the Lady.

"I have sent my personal physician to attend Villam," said Judith. She shrugged her shoulders, settling the mail shirt down more comfortably over her torso. "But no, I have not attempted to intervene. That duty is for his counselors."

Rosvita smiled wryly and humbly. By such means did God remind her not to pass judgment on others. She nodded to the margrave and excused herself. It was time to take the bull by the horns.

"What have you to say for yourself," demanded Henry as soon as he caught sight of her. "Why have you not brought Sabella to me? Ai, Lady! That idiot daughter of mine has made a fool of herself, according to report, right in front of everyone and not even knowing she was doing so. Ai, Lord, what did I do to deserve such children?"

"I am here now, Your Majesty," she said, trying to remain calm. Henry was so red in the face that his veins stood out and he looked likely to burst. "And though my lineage is a proud one, you must know I cannot give orders to such as Duchess Liutgard."

He considered this for at least two breaths, which gave her time to put her hand on his elbow. The touch startled him. It was not her place, of course, to touch the king without his permission, but the gesture served to make him think of something other than his grievances.

"You are angry, Your Majesty," she added while he was gathering his wits.

"Of course I am angry! Liutgard denies me the very person whose treason may yet cost me the only child

"King Henry!" She said it loudly and sharply. She knew with bitter instinct that he had been about to say something he would later regret. Something about Sanglant. "Let us go inside and see to Villam."

Had no one thought to calm him by appealing to his genuine affection for his old friend and companion? Rosvita could not believe they were so nervous of him as that. She gestured toward the tent. He frowned at her, but he hesitated. Then, abruptly, he went inside, leaving her to follow. The EagleHathu nodded as Rosvita ducked inside. Approvingly? Rosvita shook her head. Surely no

commonborn Eagle, not even one as proud as that one was, would think of approving or disapproving the actions of the nobly born.

Villam had lost his left arm just above the elbow. Rosvita dared not ask how he had taken the wound. The old man seemed half asleep, and she feared even whispers would wake him.

But Henry pushed the physician aside and laid a hand gently, despite the fury that still radiated from himon Villam's forehead.

"He is strong," he murmured, as if to make it true. The physician nodded, concurring.

"There is no infection?" asked Rosvita softly.

"It is too early to tell," said the physician. He had a light, rather high voice, marred by a strong accent. "He is, as His Majesty say, a strong man. If no infection set in, then he recover. If one do, then he die."

Henry knelt beside the pallet. The physician dropped to his knees at once, as if he dared not remain standing while the king knelt. Henry looked up and gestured to Rosvita. She knelt beside the king and murmured a prayer, which Henry mouthed in time to her words, right hand clutching the gold Circle of Unity hanging at his breast.

When she had finished, the king looked over at the physician. "What do you recommend?"

Rosvita studied the man. She did not trust physicians. They seemed to her like those astrologi who wandered from town to town promising to tell people's fates by reading the positions of the stars for a substantial fee, of course: They catered to the credulous and the frightened. But this man was beardless, so he was either a churchman or, just possibly, a eunuch from the East. She wondered where Judith had found him and what trade the margrave might be carrying on with Arethousa.

His voice, when he spoke again, confirmed his status. It was too high for a true man. "I learn by the writings of the Dariyan physician Galene, she of old days but great learning. This I follow. A man with such a wound must rest many weeks in a dry, warm place. The wound must keep clean. The man must" He broke off and made eating gestures with a hand. "ahtake broth and other food good in the stomach. His body will heal, or it will not heal. We aid. God choose." He drew the Circle at his chest and bowed his head to show his submission to God's will.

Villam's right arm lay folded across his chest. Henry took it now, and the old man's eyes fluttered open and focused, but he did not speak. Henry brushed away tears.

"You must go to Kassel, Helmut, and there recover your health," said Henry softly. "I march on Autun to restore my sister to her biscophric." He leaned forward and kissed the old man gently on either cheek, the kiss of peace, and rose.

This interlude had calmed him outwardly. The king nodded to the physician, who in the Eastern way touched his forehead to the ground.

Outside, Henry turned to Rosvita. "Let Sabella wait," he said in a low, intense voice that betrayed the rage still boiling within him. "Let her wonder, while we ride to Autun and I refuse to see her."

Rosvita smiled slightly. Henry had indeed returned to his senses. How quickly he turned the tables. Now, rather than Liutgard keeping Sabella from him, everyone would speak of Henry's anger being so great that he could not bring himself to look his sister in the face. That was, of course, much more effective.

But there was one question she had to ask, though she dreaded it. "You will not ride to Gent?"

His jaw tightened. He clasped his hands behind his back, as if holding them there was the only way to control himself. "Twothirds of this army is dead or wounded. I will restore Constance, and more

besides, and then we will have the summer to raise an army. Gent must hold firm until autumn." His eyes flashed with anger. "And Sabella will learn what it means to raise her hand against me a second time."

HENRY and his retinue camped outside Autun for three days before Biscop Helvissa worked up enough courage to open the gates and let them in.

Alain watched from a vantage point above Autun as the great gates swung open and the people of Autun swept out with wild rejoicing to welcome Constance back to the city.

"Henry will not leave Helvissa as biscop for long," said Lavastine. He stood beside Alain, a strange enough occurrence in itself, and together they stared down at what remained of Henry's army and of Sabella's rebellion. For the last many days, as they had marched west to Autun and then camped here, out of sight, Alain had seen groups of men fleeing westward, the remains of the men-at-arms levied from the lands controlled by Sabella, Duke Rodulf, and the other lords who had come under their sway. Fleeing westward; fleeing back to their homes. They had work to do, after all, in the fields. The time for spring sowing was long past. Now they must hope that summer would be long and the harvest delayed and that their families had been able to plant something against winter's hunger. Now they must hope for a good crop of winter wheat and rye for next year.

Besides Henry's army, and the retinues of the great lords who remained in Henry's custody, only Lavastine's company remained intact. He had sent Sergeant Fell on ahead with the infantry, for the count and his people also had fields to tend and next winter to survive. Miraculously, none in his company had taken any serious wounds. All would return to their families.

But Lavastine had remained behind with his twenty mounted soldiers, and he had shadowed Henry's progress to Autun and now waited here. Alain did not know why Lavastine waited or what he meant to do. All Alain knew was that something had changed radically. Now he slept in Lavastine's tent, on a decent pallet, and he was fed the same food that the count ate; he had been given a fine linen tunic to wear instead of his old ragged wool tunic, now much worn and patched.

"Come," said Lavastine, turning away as Henry's banner vanished into the city. "We will return to my tent."

They went, the hounds leaping around them, in fine good spirits this beautiful day. Alain was troubled. He king's dragon

still had nightmares about Agius. If only he had saved the frater. But he had not. Agius had sacrificed himself and for what? Agius did not love King Henry. He had acted against Sabella and Antonia, not for Henry, though his action had saved the king.

Ai, Lady. If only he had the courage, but he did not. He had stood by while Lackling was murdered, because he had feared Antonia's power. He had said nothing after he had witnessed the feeding of some poor innocent to the guivre. He had accused no one though surely the word of a freeholder's boy would never be listened to by the nobly born. He had not even thought to throw himself in front of the guivre at the battle; that he had managed to kill it was only because of Agius' willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of others. Or for his own revenge on Sabella. Alain sighed. It was all too deep and convoluted for him to make sense of.

"Come inside," said Lavastine, as much order as request, and yet Lavastine's attention toward him was perhaps the greatest mystery of all. Alain followed the count inside. He was half a head taller than Lavastine but never felt he towered above him, so intense was Lavastine's presence. Truly, the sorcery Antonia had laid upon Lavastine had been powerful in order to overcome that commanding disposition.

Lavastine sat in a camp chair that one of his servants brought to him. "Sit," he commanded Alain, sounding irritated that Alain had not sat down immediately.

"But, my lord" began Alain, while around them the count's captain and servants stared. They were just as amazed as he was that the count wished a common boy to be seated beside him as though they were kin. "Sit!" Alain sat.

Lavastine called for wine, two cups, and then dismissed everyone but Alain. When the flap closed behind the last retreating servant, a gloom pervaded the tent chamber. Thin shafts of light lanced through gaps in the

tent walls. Illuminating a line of carpet, the hilt of a sword, the ear of a hound. The hounds panted merrily. Sorrow rolled onto his back and scratched himself along the spine of the carpet. Rage growled and snapped at Fear, who had crept too close to Alain.

"Alain Henrison," said the count. "That is what you call yourself?"

"Yes, my lord."

"You saved my life and my honor on the field of battle."

Alain did not know what to say, so he merely bowed his head.

"I did not intend to support Sabella. Nor, for that matter, did I intend to support King Henry. My lands are my concern, as are the safety and wellbeing of the people who live there. That is all. I never wanted to be dragged into these conspiracies. But you could not have known this. Why did you act as you did?"

"Bbecause ... I..."

"Go on! You must have had a reason."

Seeing that even in this friendly mood Lavastine was irritated by delay, Alain spoke as quickly as he could, hoping it made sense. "I saw that Biscop Antonia wasn't she had Lackling murdered. She was going to murder the Eika prince you took prisoner, but he got away. Then she killed Lackling and I couldn't trust her"

"Hold, hold, boy. Who is this Lackling?"

"One of the stableboys, my lord."

Lavastine shook his head slightly. The name meant nothing to him. "She had him murdered? Why was this not brought to my attention?"

"She brought strange creatures, my lord, to the ruins, and then you changed. You were'

"Under a compulsion, yes." He made what was almost a spitting motion, as if the word, passing his lips, was distasteful to him. "I suppose Biscop Antonia would have denied everything and set her word against yours. Go on."

"Well, then, my lord, it just seemed wrong. The battle seemed wrong, that Sabella should win by treachery and sorcery and that poor imprisoned creature"

"The Eika prince? But he escaped."

"No. I meant the giiivre."

"The guivrel" Lavastine barked a laugh. "I have no compassion for such a beast as that." He set a hand on the head of the hound that sat at his feet; actually, the hound sat half on his boots. This one had white in its muzzle, a sign of age, and Alain recognized it as Terror. The hound lifted its head to get a scratch from Lavastine's fingers.

"No, my lord," replied Alain, because it seemed expected of him. But he had compassion for the beast, horrible though it was; it had suffered, too, and he had killed it as much to put it out of its misery as to save Agius. "And Prater Agius"

"Yes," said Lavastine curtly. "Prater Agius saved the king at the cost of his own life. And you, what reward would you have for saving my life?"

"I?"

"Since there is no one else here, I would suppose I mean you! When I ask a question, I wish for an answer."

"But I wish for no reward, my lord. I did what was right. That is reward enough in the eyes of Our Lord and Lady, is it not? But something for my family, perhaps

"Ah, yes. Your family. This Henri, he is?"

"A merchant, my lord. His sister Bel is a freeholder of some distinction in Osna village."

"Yes. Near where the monastery was burned last year. What does Henry the merchant say about your parentage, Alain?"

Alain squirmed in the chair and took a sip of wine to cover his discomfiture. The wine was fine and smooth; he had never tasted anything as good before. Wine such as this did not come to the lips of common folk, not even the freeborn.

"He says" He says. Alain thought, briefly, about lying. But Henry and Aunt Bel had not taught him to lie.

They had treated him as kin, and it would dishonor them to twist their words now, even if the truth disgraced him before Count Lavastine. "My mother was a servant woman at your holding, my lord. My father Henri ... had an affection for her. She was known to" He bit at his lip. Ai, Lady, he could not simply call his mother a whore. "to have consorted with men. She died three days after giving birth to me. The deacon gave me into Henri's care in return for his promise to offer me to the church when I turned sixteen." "You are older than sixteen, are you not?" "Seventeen now, my lord. I would have entered the church last year, but the monastery at Dragon's Tail was burned. Yes. That is the whole of the story?" "Yes, my lord."

Lavastine sat in the gloom and toyed with his cup, turning it around and around until Alain feared he would spill it. From outside, Alain heard Lavastine's captain speaking, something about Henry and Autun and the king's mercy, but even with his sharpened hearing, he could not string the phrases together into intelligible sentences. Sorrow yawned a dog's yawn, full of teeth, and threw himself against Alain's legs, leaning there until Alain was practically tipped over. He adjusted the chair, and this movement stirred the count to a decision.

"Attend, child," he said in his brisk, impatient way. "I must now tell you a tale and you must listen carefully, for this story I have never before confessed the whole of, and I will not speak it aloud again while I live."

Alain nodded and then, realizing the light was dim, managed to whisper, "Yes." The hounds snuffled and whined and grunted, eight fine black hounds, beautiful creatures, if vicious.

"I married once," said Lavastine softly. "But as all know, my wife and daughter were killed by my hounds."

"But how could that be?" asked Alain, curiosity overcoming good sense. "Or the child, at least"

"Listen!" snapped Lavastine. "Do not interrupt." Fear, thwarted of a place at Alain's side, had gone to the entrance and nosed aside the canvas flap. By this new stream of light, Alain saw Lavastine smile grimly. "How can that be? Even I don't know the true story of how my grandfather got the hounds, whether he received them in exchange for some kind of pact with whom, I don't know or whether they came to him as part of his birthright. But my father the only surviving child inherited them in his turn, and I also the only child who survived to adulthood in mine. So my father arranged a marriage for me at the

appropriate time so I could beget children more than one, it was hoped to carry on the line."

He drained the cup of wine suddenly and set the empty cup down on the carpet. "I was young, then, and I had taken a lover, a pretty girl from among the servingwomen. We often met up among the ruins, because I wanted to keep our meetings secret. But in time, as happens, she became pregnant and begged me to acknowledge the child so that she would not be branded as a common whore. But my bride was proud and covetous, and when she came to Lavas she told me she wanted no bastard child running about the hall. So I put aside the other woman and denied any knowledge of the child, and confessed my sin to the deacon, may her memory be blessed. The deacon promised to take care of the child and assured me I need trouble myself no longer. She was not even a freeborn girl." He picked up the winecup, tested it as if he had forgotten he had drunk it all, and set it down again with some annoyance. "I was not, perhaps, without fault in this matter."

Alain gulped air. He had forgotten to breathe. "Did she die? Giving birth, I mean."

Lavastine jumped up and strode to the entrance. He slapped Fear lightly on the flank and the hound retreated; the flap fell shut. "You will remain silent while I speak, Alain."

Alain nodded but Lavastine's back was to him. "No more wine," muttered Lavastine. "Yes, she died in childbed." He turned and spoke crisply and rapidly, as if to hurry the story to its ghastly conclusion. "My bride was young, strongwilled, impatient, and argumentative. Since I was of the same disposition, we did not suit. She rarely allowed me into her bed. I refrained from taking a concubine, but I soon suspected that she had taken a lover. I could prove nothing because her servingwomen were loyal and helped her hide this fact. When our first child was born, I did not trust her. I did not believe the infant was my child, and yet" He made a sharp gesture and strode back to the chair, but did not sit. "Yet it might have been. She raised the child to distrust me, though I tried to befriend it. The child was often a sweet girl, or so I could see from a distance. And with a daughter to assure the succession, my wife gave up the pretense. She forbade me her bed completely and began to flaunt a lover openly, a common man. She might as well have slapped me publicly in the face. But she said, 'what you had, a commoner in your bed, I may have as well.' She became pregnant again and knew that this child was not could not have been mine. I demanded she put our daughter to the test, to face the hounds."

Alain gasped, then clapped a hand over his mouth. Of course, he could now see what was coming.

"She tried to run away with the child. The hounds broke loose that night."

Even the hounds were silent, as if listening. Sorrow and Rage were young, not more than three years old. Ardent and Terror were the eldest of the hounds. Had they been there that night? Had they pursued the fleeing pregnant woman and her bastard child? Had one of them been the first to catch up to the fugitives?

Lavastine spoke so softly Alain had to strain to hear him. "On her dying breath she cursed me. 'You will have no heir of your own body. Any woman you marry will die a horrible death. I swear this by the old gods who still walk abroad and whose spawn these hounds are.' The next year I did my duty and became betrothed to a young woman of good family. One week before the wedding she was drowned when her horse inexplicably king's dragon collapsed while she was fording a river, on her way to our wedding feast. The year after, I married a young widow. She sickened at the feast itself and died of the flux two days later.

"I have not tried to marry again. I want no more deaths on my conscience. But now . . ."

Now? Alain said nothing, but he waited.

Lavastine crossed the carpet to stand in front of Alain's chair. The dim light made him loom above, more shadow than living man. "I began to wonder last autumn, after I returned from the campaign against the Eika raiders, but I forgot everything under the compulsion. Now, isn't it as obvious to you as it

is to me?"

At first Alain did not understand what the count was trying to say. But then he realized the hounds were lying every which way about the tent, some by Alain, some by Lavastine's chair, some shifting as Lavastine moved. Alain touched the hem of his new, fine tunic, sewn with embroidered ribbon so rich even as prosperous a householder as Aunt Bel would have to trade a child in exchange for an arm's length of such an exquisite piece of fabric.

Lavastine took one of Alain's hands in his and lifted him to his feet. His mouth was set in a thin, determined line, and when he spoke, his tone allowed for no argument.

"You are my son."

JLJA. JL JH. had nightmares. Every night, the dogs came and tore at her flesh, ripping her, tearing her limb from limb. Every night she would wake, sweating, heart pounding, and bolt upright in her blanket until the cool night air washed the stain of fear from her. But it could not wash away her grief.

Then she would weep.

Always Wolfhere slept through these episodes, or pretended to be asleep. She could not tell which. She did not want to know which it was. He was deeply preoccupied, spoke only when spoken to or when it was absolutely necessary to get supplies or new mounts. Only once, in an unguarded moment, did she hear him whisper a name. "Manfred."

They rode many days. Liath did not keep track of them. Though the skies were clear and perfect for viewing, she did not follow the course of the moon through the Houses of the Night, the world dragon that bound the heavens. She did not trace the courses of the planets through those same constellations. She did not repeat the lessons Da had taught her over and over again. She did not walk in the city of memory, so laboriously built, so carefully maintained for so many years. She mourned and she dreamed. Sometimes, if she chanced to stare into a hearth fire or campfire, she would get a sudden feeling she was peering through a keyhole, watching a scene that unfolded on the other side of a locked door.

There are spirits burning in the air with wings of flame and eyes as brilliant as knives. They move on the winds of aether that blow above the sphere of the Moon, and now and again their gaze falls like a blazing arrow, like the strike of lightning, to the Earth below, and there it sears anything it touches, for they cannot comprehend the frailty of Earthly life. They are of an elder race and are not so fragile. Their voices have the snap of fire and their bodies are not bodies as we know them, but the conjoining of fire and wind, the breath of the fiery Sun coalesced into mind and will.

"But are we not their cousins, then? Were we not born of fire and light? Is our place not here out beyond the sphere of the Moon, as their is?"

The first speaker shifts, studying the flames, for he too stares into the fire and across some doorway impossible to touch he watches Liath. He seems to know she is listening, that she can see him. But he speaks to the woman who stands out of sight in the shadows behind him.

"We are not as old as that, my child. We were not born of the very elements themselves, though they wove themselves into our shaping. We are the children of angels, but we can no longer live cast out from the Earth which gave us birth."

He lifts a hand. Liath recognizes him; he has come to be familiar to her, but he frightens her, not because he looks threatening but because he is so utterly inhuman, so unlike Da or any of the other people she knows, those few she has come to care for, even unlike Hugh, who is an abomination but a fully human one. He is Aoi, one of the Lost Ones, old, surely such is the authority of his bearing although he looks neither young nor old by any sign she knows how to read. He has the look of Sanglant about him. That frightens her, too, that seeing this strangely clad male reminds her bitterly of Sanglant, whom she wishes only to forget. Never to forget.



"Who are you?" he asks with simple curiosity, neither angry nor frightened, not like her. "Who are you who watches through the fire? Where have you found this gateway? How have you brought it to life?" Across his bare thighs rest the strands of flax he is twining into rope, a longer length each time she sees him through the fire. But the rope grows slowly, a finger's breadth, a hand's breadth, while days pass for her as she and Wolphere ride south and west, seeking King Henry.

She cannot answer him. She cannot speak through flame. She fears her voice will echo down unknown passageways and through vast hidden halls, that wind and fire will carry it to the ears of those who are listening for her, seeking her.

The sorcerer for he must be such, to have knowledge and vision together plucks a gold feather from the sheath that encases his right forearm and tosses it into the flames.

Liath started up, scrambling back as the fire flared up and then, abruptly, died down. She blinked back tears, streaming from smoke, and wiped her nose. Her face was hot. Behind her, the door slammed open and Wolphere walked in from dark night outside.

She sat in the middle of a small guest house such as the abbot granted to Eagles, not the best of his accommodations but not the worst either at the Monastery of Hersford. The fire snapped and burned merrily, innocent of any sorcery. She might have dreamed . . . but it was no dream. When she dreamed, she dreamed of the Eika dogs. "What did you find out?" she asked. Wolphere coughed and wiped his hands together, dusting something off them. "Henry and the court celebrated the Feast of St. Susannah here, but they were called away west. According to Father Bardo, Sabella raised an army and Henry had to ride west to meet her, before she entered Wendar. She removed Biscop Constance from the biscop's chair at Autun and set another woman there as biscop in her place. And took Constance prisoner, as well."

Liath set her elbow on her knee and her head on a hand. She was very tired, now, and did not much care for the troubles and intrigues of the noble lords. "Sabella would have done better to send her army against Bloodheart," she muttered.

"Well," said Wolphere, "the great princes most often think of their own advantage, not that of others. Father Bardo does not know what happened to the king, or if it came to battle. Come now, we'll sleep and ride out at dawn."

She dreaded sleeping, but in the end her exhaustion drew her down, and down, and down . . . . . into the crypt at Gent, where corpses lay strewn

among the pale tombs of the holy dead and the dogs fed so voraciously she could hear the cracking of bones . . .

She started awake in a cold sweat, heart racing. Ai, Lady! How much more of this must she suffer? Wolphere slept on the other side of the fire, which lay in cold ashes, as cold as her heart. Only one wink of heat remained, a flash of gold among the gray.

Without thinking, she reached and plucked from the dead ashes of the fire a gold feather.

HjbJNKY held court in the great hall of the biscop's palace in Autun, his three children sitting on his right side, his sister Constance and other trusted counselors on his left. Earlier, in the cathedral, Biscop Constance restored to her position had celebrated Lucia's mass, one of the four quarters masses of the year. Rosvita knew that the mathematici gave these other names, the spring and fall equinoxes and the summer and winter solstices, but she preferred to think of them as the masses celebrating the blessed Daisan's four missionary disciples, those who carried the Holy Word to the four quarters of the Earth: Marian, Lucia, Matthias, and Candlemass, known to the old pagans as Dhearc, the dark night of the sun. This last was the feast of St. Peter the Disciple, burned alive as a sacrifice to the fire god of the Jinna when he would not recant his faith in the God of Unities.

After mass, Henry and his court had returned to the great hall where feasting would continue late into the night, for this was midsummer and the sun stayed long in the sky, celebrating the triumph of the Divine Logos, the Holy Word, and the promise it offered of the Chamber of Light.

But Henry had business to conduct. He sat beside his sister and gathered his folk together. They waited in orderly lines, crowding in from outside, more even than the people who had marched with him, for many of the more prosperous natives of Autun had also come to see the king and pledge their loyalty.

On this occasion, Henry wore his clothofgold robes of state, and in his left hand he held his scepter, symbol of the king's justice, and on his right hand he wore the gold ring of sovereignty. On his silvering hair rested the heavy crown, studded with jewels. Biscop Constance blessed him and anointed him with oil blessed by the skopos herself and scented with attar of roses.

Thus was he confirmed in the eyes of his court and of the people of Autun as their king, chosen and approved by the divine wisdom of Our Lord and Lady.

"Let justice be served," said Henry to the multitudes. He called before him the heirs of Duke Rodulf.

Rosvita felt some sympathy for the young man who came forward, his retainers cowering like frightened dogs at his heels. He had none of Rodulf's bluff authority and was in any case barely past his majority. The duke had probably brought the boy along to get his first taste of war, only to have the poor child be forced to witness his father's death.

"Who are you?" Henry demanded, although he knew perfectly well who the young man was.

"I am Rodulf, son of Rodulf and Ida." The boy's color was high, and his hands trembled, but he did not disgrace himself.

"Do you speak for the heir of Varingia?"

"I speak for my elder sister, Yolande, who was named heir by my father five years ago."

"And where is she now?"

"Aat Arlanda Holding, the fortress built by my father." Young Rodulf bit his lip and waited. The penalty for treason was, of course, death.

"Let her present herself to me before Matthiasmass," said Henry. He extended a hand, as if beckoning, and the young man practically flung himself forward onto his knees before the king. "If she does so, I will demand these things from her in return for clemency. Fifty of Varingia's finest horses, for my stables. Gold vessels and vestments to adorn the cathedral in Autun, as recompense for the insult given Biscop Constance. A convent founded in the name of my mother, Queen Mathilda. And you, young Rodulf, with ten young noblemen of good character, to join my Dragons and protect my kingdom."

The boy began to weep. The crowd murmured, impressed by the king's justice and his mercy. Rodulf's family was no kin of his, so he could easily have taken their lives in payment for their treachery. Rosvita nodded. This was the wiser course.

"I shall carry the message, Your Majesty," said the boy. "We shall abide loyally by your side from now on. I swear it." Constance brought forward a reliquary which contained the thighbone and a scrap of the robe once worn by St. Thomas the Apostle, and young Rodulf kissed the jeweled box and then the king's ring, to seal his oath.

"Let Biscop Antonia be brought before me," said the king.

Under heavy guard, Biscop Antonia was brought before Henry. She had her hands clasped in front of her, and she beamed as fondly on him as she might on a favored nephew.

Henry sighed. "You are under the protection of the church, Your Grace, so although you have conspired against me, I am forced to send you to Darre and let you plead your cause to the skopos herself. Let her judge your treachery."

"I have not forsworn my oath to the church, Your Majesty," said Antonia sweetly. "I doubt not the skopos will pass judgment in my favor." She was attended by only one cleric, the one known as Heribert.

Constance moved forward, looking grim. "What of your other attendants, Biscop Antonia? Half of them are dead and the rest soon to die of a disease which strikes none but them, not even the holy nuns who have ministered to them as they lay dying."

"I grieve," said Antonia, "but even I cannot interfere with the hand of Our Lord, when with His sword He cuts the thread that binds us to life."

"There are some who have accused you of sorcery," continued Constance, determined to have this out now. She did not look at Henry for permission, nor did he attempt to stop her. She was the only other person here whose spiritual rank was equal to Antonia's, and no secular power could intervene. "There are some who speak of amulets fashioned by your clerics at your order, and that their suffering is the mark of this cruel sorcery, the same sorcery that brought a guivre to the battleground and let Sabella's soldiers walk free of harm from its gaze while Henry's soldiers were stricken to stone."

Antonia unclasped her hands and raised them, palms up, in a gesture of innocence. "If their suffering is a mark of sorcery, and I the sorcerer who devised such amulets, then how is it I stand untouched by disease? How is it that Heribert" Here she signed toward the young cleric who stood, as always, one step behind her. "remains unstained as well? Many things cause disease, including evil spirits. I am sorry they are suffering, and I do what I am allowed to ease their pain, for it grieves me sorely, but what has stricken them comes from other hands than mine."

"Enough," said Henry suddenly, interrupting just as Constance took a breath to speak again. "We have gone over this a hundred times, and I no longer wish to speak of it. Biscop Antonia will be taken under guard to the skopos in Darre, there to stand trial accused of certain sorceries condemned by the church at the Council of Narvone."

Antonia was led away with her retinue of one. But even from her vantage point to the left of the king's throne, Rosvita could see no sign of fear or regret or repentance in the old biscop's expression. She looked, indeed, as angelic as an ancient faultless grandmother who has seen all her children and grandchildren grow to adulthood.

Henry sat for a long while in silence. The crowd did not grow restless; indeed, they scarcely stirred. They knew that next, surely, he would call his sister Sabella before him.

Finally, he made a sign, and young Duchess Liutgard came forward. "I will now agree to speak to the woman you hold in your custody," he said.

Liutgard gave a curt assent and glanced once up at Rosvita, as if to thank her for her part in saving Henry from rash action.

When Sabella was brought into the hall the hush was so profound that Rosvita thought she heard the barking of hounds in the distance. Perhaps she was hearing things, or perhaps some lord kept kennels nearby.

Sabella refused to kneel before her brother. Henry did not rise and go forward to greet her, nor did he extend his hand for her to kiss. Rosvita did not think Sabella would have granted him that honor, that homage, in any case.

"What do you have to say?" he asked instead, gaze jumping past her for a moment to linger on her entourage, whose expressions were certainly more contrite and fearful than hers was. A servant

wiped spittle off Duke Berengar's lips. Young Tallia stood pallid in a green silk gown, looking more like a captured fawn than the princess she was.

Rosvita glanced toward the other princesses, Henry's daughters. Sapientia was, of a mercy, behaving circumspectly today, holding her temper, her tongue, and her enthusiasm in check. She sat as still as she was able and watched the proceedings with a dark and avid gaze, as if soaking it in, as if playing herself in the role of queen. The pool of stillness that surrounded Theophanu was of a colder kind; she had no expression on her face, nor did she react when each judgment was passed. Even young Ekkehard, who half the time looked as if he was about to fall asleep, had jumped and murmured in surprise at the clemency Henry had shown to Duke Rodulfs heirs. Next to these three handsome and robust children, Tallia was a colorless bloom, lost in the glare of her mother's ambitions.

"I have nothing to say," said Sabella. Henry's wrath was evident though he did not lose himself now to his anger. "You have conspired against the rightful king of Wendar and Varre, anointed by the hand of the skopos, named by our father, Arnulf, as his heir, confirmed as such by the great princes of the realm. This is treason, and the punishment for treason is death." A gasp from the multitudes, quickly stifled. Every soul crowded into the hall strained forward. The air itself seemed not to breathe or to allow for any breath, for even the rise and fall of a single chest might stain the clarity of sight and hearing that reigned within the hall.

"But we are kin, and you wear the gold torque of the royal house." Henry did not touch the one he wore at his neck, but Sabella as if involuntarily reached up to touch hers. "I will not stain my hands, nor the hands of my children, with the blood of my kin. But this I will do. This judgment I will pass." He rose.

"Your child, Tallia, I take as my ward and remove to my custody. Your husband, Berengar, duke of Arconia, I judge unfit to rule, and I strip from him his rank as duke. He will retire to Hersford Monastery, where the holy brothers will care for him as is fitting. And you, Sabella"

No one moved. No one spoke.

"From you also I strip the title of duchess, and from your heir I take this title, for all time. The duchy of Arconia is without a duke, and so it comes to me to dispose of this title and the authority it grants. I give it now into the hands of my sister, Constance, Biscop of Autun, and you I give into her custody, as you once held her unwillingly in yours,"

The crowd could no longer restrain its astonishment. They burst into a haze of noise so loud Rosvita could scarcely hear herself think. Sapientia, echoing the crowd, leaped to her feet and a moment later, sheepishly, with her brother tugging on her sleeve, seated herself. Theophanu had not stirred, but she had a thin smile on her face.

Sabella said nothing, showed nothing except a deadly and bitter anger, but there was nothing she could do. She had gambled and she had lost. Duke no longer duke! Berengar was blowing his nose onto his sleeve, and at once his servingmen led him away. Poor man. He would be better taken care of in the monastery, Rosvita supposed. Tallia was crying. Tears made her fair skin blotchy and her nose red. Sabella turned and snapped angry words at her daughter, but it was too noisy for Rosvita to make them out.

What a great roar of sound there was in the hall, shouts of "Henry! King Henry!" and others, acclaiming Constance as duke and biscop an unprecedented act, to combine the two titles in one person. But Constance was being rewarded, of course, for her constancy. And the people of Autun were clearly happy about it; they loved their biscop.

Except Rosvita could not understand why she heard the sound of hounds barking so loudly and a sudden edge to the ovation of the crowd. "Clear the way!" someone cried. "Out of the way!" shrieked a woman. "Lord protect us! Devil's spawn!" Quickly, guards hustled Sabella and her retinue aside. Into the hall came a most astounding procession, the last fugitive, the only one unaccounted for after the battle:

Count Lavastine and his famous black hounds. With him walked his captain and a finely dressed youth caught in that twilight between boy and man.

King Henry blinked several times, but that was the only sign he gave of his astonishment. The count walked boldly forward and stopped below the king's dais. He did not kneel.

"Last year," said Lavastine, "you sent an Eagle to request my presence on your progress. I have come."

This was so brash that Henry almost laughed. But the situation was too grave for laughter.

"It is late, and the summons was long ago," said Henry, "and you rode all this way in strange company, Count Lavastine."

"So I did, Your Majesty, but not of my own will. I have witnesses to prove that another's hand controlled me and that I did not march with Lady Sabella because I wished to, but because I was compelled to."

"It is a good excuse, Count Lavastine. Indeed, an elaborate and cunning one, now that Biscop Antonia has already been accused of other condemned acts of sorcery."

These words were spoken so harshly that Rosvita expected Lavastine to respond in kind, but for once he restrained his famous irritability. "I will give sworn testimony before your clerics," said the count. "I have others who will bear witness in my favor including, I hope, my kinsman Lord Geoffrey, whom I treated very badly while under this compulsion."

"Your testimony will be sent south with, the party who accompanies Biscop Antonia to the skopos," said Henry. "But I will tell you truly, Count Lavastine, that I know you withdrew your forces from the field of battle while the tide still flowed in Sabella's favor. This will tell in your favor, when I come to pass judgment on you. But tell me, we all thought you had escaped. Why do you come before us now? I know you have no love for me."

"I am not a conspirator, Your Majesty, and I intend to clear myself of these charges. I have nothing to hide. But I do have a boon to ask of you."

"Ah," said Henry.

parting "Ah," whispered Theophanu, her mouth slightly as she leaned forward, intent now.

"He wants something," murmured Sapientia wisely to Ekkehard. "That is why he has come here now when he could have escaped back to his own lands."

"Hush," said Constance.

The crowd quieted. There was a great rustling of cloth as people shifted position. The hounds that sat in attendance on Lavastine the only retinue he needed growled. One rose up and bared its teeth at an importunate lord who inched too close.

That was when the strange thing happened. Count Lavastine did not move. His captain, of course, got a brief sick look on his face. It was well known that Lavastine must be a fine and generous lord to command the loyalty of so many good servants and soldiers, since they were any of them at any time likely to be rended limb from body by the black hounds.

But the youth spoke a quiet word, and the hounds subsided.

"Kneel before the king," said Lavastine, and the boy came forward obediently and knelt. He was tall, lanky, with black hair and amazingly clear eyes; he was not precisely handsome or elegant, but Rosvita found that it cheered her heart in some inexplicable way to look upon him.

"You know I am twwx NKviwitd •asvd \*«vttvoiaiv •&« Yveii," said Lavastine, "and unlikely to get one now, for reasons I have long since confessed and done penance for. So I come before you, Your

Majesty, to ask this of you. That this youth, my bastard child Alain, be recognized as my heir so he may inherit my title and my lands when I am dead."

Lady above! Rosvita's knees almost gave out from under her. She turned her gaze to study Henry's expression. Indeed, by the crawling feeling she had on her shoulders and her back, everyone looked at Henry. His childrenhis three legitimate childrenstared fiercely at him. Constance had laid the back of a hand against her cheek, and her eyes were closed.

In the silent hall, a laugh rang out.

"What will do you?" cried Sabella mockingly. "What will you do, brother? Make one bastard a count, and the other one a king?"

Henry made a sharp and angry sign with his right hand. The guards escorted Sabella out of the hall and back to the tower where she was being held prisoner.

Henry took one step down from the dais and laid his ringed hand on the boy's head. He met Lavastine's gaze, and the two men remained locked that way for some moments.

"Many a lord might claim a bastard so as not to lose their lands to an unloved kinsman. How can you prove this?"

"My deacons keep careful records of all the births and deaths at Lavas Holding, but I believe you need no better proof than this," Lavastine whistled.

The hounds swarmed forward, and even Henry stepped quickly back up onto the dais. The youth started up, eyes wide, and called the hounds to order. Like so many meek retainers, they obeyed him instantly and threw themselves at his feet. When Henry took a step forward, they growled.

The boy snapped his fingers and chased them back to a safe distance away from the king.

"What of you, child?" the king said, looking finally at the youth. "What is your name?"

"I am called Alain, Your Majesty." He had a clear voice, and he did not falter in his words, nor did he speak coarsely, as a lowborn boy would have.

"Is it true?"

He bowed his head modestly. "Count Lavastine has acknowledged me as his son."

"What do you know of your birth?"

"I was born in Lavas Holding to an unmarried woman who died three days after I was born. I was raised by

freeholders in Osna village and promised to the church. But" he related quickly a story of Eika and a burned monastery. "So I came to Lavas Holding to serve for a year."

"And saved my life," interrupted Lavastine, who had been tapping his feet impatiently throughout this recital, "and freed me from the compulsion laid on me by sorcery. I was not the first to suggest the connection, indeed, Your Majesty. Prater Agius, who served at my holding, mentioned the matter to me some months ago, but I was hesitant to believe him." Constance lowered her hand from her face. Henry blinked several more times and raised a hand to his lips. "This is the youth who killed the guivre, then!" he exclaimed. "Many stories were told of what happened that day, but we searched and none could find the man who saved my kingdom. Come, child, kiss my hand."

Alain glanced back at Lavastineat his fatherand then knelt before the king and was granted the signal honor of being allowed to kiss his hand.

"This cannot go unrewarded," said Henry. He had gained in spirits since the bitter confrontation with his sister. Indeed, he appeared almost elated.

Rosvita had a sudden feeling that Henry was about to commit an act whose repercussions would haunt him for a long, long time. She stepped forward, raised a hand to gain the king's attention but it was too late.

"By my power as king of Wendar and Varre and by the right of law recorded in a capitulary from the time of Emperor Taillefer, I grant you, Lavastine, Count of Lavas, the right to name this youth as the heir of your blood, though he is not born of a legitimate union. He may succeed to your title and to the authority vested in that title over your lands. Let my words become law. Let them be recorded in writing."

Ai, Lady. Everyone knew what this meant, why Henry's expression was so triumphant. He had made his choice. Now it remained only to see it through. Sapientia Kate eluott started to her feet so suddenly her chair tipped over; she began to speak, stopped herself, and bolted from the hall instead. Ekkehard gaped. Theophanu raised one expressive eyebrow but made no other sign.

"Henry," muttered Constance softly enough that no one but Rosvita and the handful of others crowded onto the dais could hear her, "do you know what you are doing?"

"I know what I am doing," said Henry. "And it is past time I did it. Long past time. He is the only one I can trust to take my place as sovereign king when I take my leave of this Earth and pass up through the spheres to the Chamber of Light."

Constance drew the Circle at her breast to avert ill omen.

"No one," proclaimed Henry, louder now, "and no argument, can sway me from this course."

From the doors came a shout.

"Eagles! Make way for Eagles!"

They came in haste, two of them, travelworn and weary. One was young and startlingly dark, as if a summer's sun had burned her so brown her skin had stayed that way. She bore a touch of summer's brightness with her still, so much that the eye lingered on her.

The other was Wolphere, who had been banned from Henry's presence and Henry's court many years ago. But he strode forward with no sign that he remembered or chose to obey that ban. The young woman looked riven by sorrow, the strong lines of her face set in a mask of wretchedness and hopeless longing. Wolphere looked grim. Behind her, Rosvita heard the two Eagles, Hathui and her young companion, gasp out loud.

"No," murmured Hathui to the younger one, "Do not go forward. We must wait our turn."

"She's wearing an Eagle's badge," whispered the younger one. She sounded ready to burst into tears.

"Ai, Lady," swore Hathui. "Look at their faces." And was silent.

The two new Eagles paused before the dais.

"Why have you come before me," demanded the king, "when you know you are forbidden my presence?"

"We come from Gent," said Wolphere, "and we bear grievous news. Gent has fallen to an Eika assault, and the Dragons have been wiped out, every one. Prince Sanglant is dead."

"Lady," breathed Henry, clapping a hand to his chest. He spoke no other word. He could not speak.

Rosvita saw at once he was paralyzed by this terrible, terrible news. And because someone must act, she did so, though she felt as if someone else was acting, not her. She went to him and took his arm. Almost collapsed herself, because his whole weight fell on her and he appeared so close to fainting that it

was only with the aid of the Eagle, Hathui, that she got him out of the hall and into the private chapel that opened onto a garden behind it.

There, he threw himself onto the stone floor in front of the Hearth, in his gold robes, heedless of the crown tumbling to the floor, heedless of his scepter, which slipped from nerveless fingers. He groped at his chest and drew from next to his skin an old scrap of cloth stained a rusty red.

He could not weep not as the king must weep, easily and to show his sympathy for those of his people who suffer. This pain was far too deep for tears.

"My heart," he murmured into the unyielding stone, "my heart is torn from me." He pressed the cloth to his lips.

Hathui wept to see him.

Rosvita drew the Circle at her breast and then she knelt before the Hearth, beside the prostrate king, and began to chant the prayer for dead souls.

After the hall was cleared and she and Wolfhere given bread and mead, after some hushed consultation between various noble lords and ladies whose names she did not know and whose faces all blurred into a single unrecognizable one, Liath was escorted to a small chapel.

Wolfhere did not come with her. Indeed, she saw they prevented him and led him away by another hall. A fine proud woman in bispop's vestments brought her before the king, who sat on a bench, no longer in his fine robes and regalia. He was held upright by a cleric and several other attendants, one of whom wiped his face repeatedly with a damp cloth. Liath knelt before him. His right hand clutched an old bloodstained rag.

"Tell me," he said hoarsely.

She want to beg him not to make her tell, not to relive the fall of Gent. Not again, Lady, please. But she could not. She was an Eagle, the king's eyes, and it was her duty to tell him everything.

Not everything. Some things she could not and would not tell anyone: Sanglant's face close to hers, the light in his eyes, the grim set of his mouth, the bitter irony in his voice when he told her, "Make no marriage." The feel of his skin when she had touched him, unbidden, on the cheek. No, not that. Those were her memories and not to be shared with anyone else. No one need know she loved him. No one would ever know, not even Sanglant. Especially not Sanglant.

Telling the story would be like living through it again. But she had no choice. They all watched her, waiting. Among the crowd stood Hathui, and the Eagle nodded, once, briskly, at her. That gesture gave her courage. She cleared her throat and began.

Barely, barely she managed to get the words out. Terrible it was to be the bringer of this baleful news, and worse still to relate the story with the king staring at her as if he hated her, for whom else could he hate?

She did not blame him. She would have hated herself too, did hate herself in a way for living when so many had died. At last she stumbled to a halt, having spoken the last and most damning part of the tale, the vision seen through fire. She expected them to question her closely, perhaps to lead her away in chains as a sorcerer. The king lifted a hand weakly, half a gesture. It was all he could manage.

"Come," said the bispop. She led Liath away. Outside, she stopped with her under the arched loggia that opened out into a pretty garden, lilies and roses and brash marigolds. "You are Wolfhere's discipula?" she asked, using the Dariyan word.

"I? No. I don't know. I am newly come to the Eagles, just after Mariansmass."

"Yet you already wear the Eagle's badge."



Liath covered her eyes with a hand, briefly, stifling tears.

"What you saw in the fire," said the biscop, going on in what she perhaps meant to be a gentler voice, "is known to us as one of the arts by which certain Eagles can see. Do not fear, child. Not all sorcery is condemned by the church. Only that which is harmful."

Liath risked raising her head. The biscop was quite a young woman, really, pale and elegant in her fine vestments and tasseled biscop's mitre.

"You are Constance!" exclaimed Liath, remembering the lineages Da had taught her, "Biscop of Autun."

"So I am," said Biscop Constance. "And I am evidently now Duchess of Arconia, too." She said this with a hint of irony, or perhaps sadness. "Where were you educated, child?"

"My Da taught me," said Liath, now cursing the fate that had separated her from Wolfhere. She did not have the strength to fend off pointed questioning of her past kate eluott and her gifts, and certainly not from a noblewoman of Constance's education and high rank. "Begging your pardon, Your Grace. I am very tired. We have ridden so far, and so quickly, and" Almost the sob got out, but she choked it back.

"And you have lost someone who is dear to you," said the biscop, and in her own face Liath saw a sudden and surprising compassion. "One of my clerics will show you to the barracks, where the Eagles take their rest."

A cleric led her to the stables. There she found herself alone in a loft above the stalls. Shutters had been thrown open, admitting the last of the daylight. She flung herself down on the hay, then rose again, wiping her nose, and paced. It was as if, reciting the awful tale, she had passed some of her numbing grief off onto King Henry. Now she was too restless to rest. Grooms murmured below. She was utterly alone.

For the first time in months, for the first time since Hugh had taught her the rudiments of Arethousan all those damned impossible verbs! she was alone.

Carefully, she lifted The Book of Secrets out of her saddlebags and unwrapped it. She opened it to the central text, that ancient, fragile papyrus, dry under her skin as she ran a finger along the line of text, written in a language she did not recognize but glossed here and there in Arethousan. The Arethousan letters were still strange to her, but as she concentrated, opening doors in her city of memory, finding the hall where she had stored her memory of the Arethousan alphabet, she could transpose them in her mind into the more familiar Dariyan letters and thus form words, some of which she had learned from Hugh, most of which were meaningless to her.

At the very top of the page, above the actual text, was written a single word in Arethousan: krypte.

"Hide this," she whispered and felt a sudden, sharp pain in her chest. Hide this.

She put a hand over her mouth, breathed in, calming herself, and then studied the text beneath. The letters that made up the text were totally foreign to her, unlike Arethousan letters, unlike the more common Dariyan letters; perhaps, faintly, they resembled the curling grace of Jinna letters although these had a squarer profile. She could not read them nor even imagine what language this was.

But a different hand had glossed the first long sentence with Arethousan words beneath, translating it; only that first sentence had been glossed completely. On the other pages brief glosses appeared here and there, a commentary on the text. But this sentence, at least, she could read part of. Perhaps it gave a clue as to the subject of the text. Perhaps that had been the scribe's intent in translating that entire first sentence.

Painstakingly, pausing now and again to listen for the movements of the grooms below, she sounded out the first sentence.

Polloi epekheiresan anataxafthai diegesink peri ton peplerophoremenon en hemin teraton, edoxe kamoi parekolouthe koti anothen pasin akribds kathexes, soi grapsai, kratista Theophile, hina epignois peri hon katekethls logon ten asphaleian.

The light was getting dim, too dim for anyone to read except someone who had salamander eyes.

"Many people ..." she whispered, knowing the first word, and then skipped words until she found another word she knew and here she stopped short, heart pounding, breath tight in her throat. "... about magical omens ..." She skipped back to the pluperfect verb, such an odd form that Hugh had taken pains to point out the form to her, "... magical omens which have been fulfilled among us. It seemed good to me ..." Here again followed words she did not know, and then, again and suddenly, one she did. "... all the things from the heavens ... to you to write about..." She shut her eyes, so filled with commingled horror and stark excitement that for a moment she thought her emotions would rend her in two like the Eika dogs. "Theophilus." That was a man's name. "... so that you may know about these these words? These spells? Could it be spells? ..." in which you have been instructed by word of mouth ..." The last word she did not know.

Her hands shook. Her breath came in gasps. All the things from the heavens.

She heard voices below. Hastily she bundled up the book and stuck it away into her saddlebags just as people came up the ladder. It was Wolphere and Hathui. Hanna was with them. All the excitement, all the grief, all the days of longing and hope and sorrow, overwhelmed Liath. She threw herself into Hanna's arms and both of them burst into wrenching sobs, the release of so many weeks of tension and fear.

"We must pray for Manfred's soul," Wolphere said. He wiped a tear from his seamed face. They knelt together and prayed.

Afterward Wolphere rose and paced. "I would give you Manfred's badge, if I could, Hanna," he said. "Though you did not see him die, you rode with him, and that counts for the same. You have in any case earned it twice over." He sighed. "But it is now beyond recovery. Will you wait? I will commission a new one to be made."

Hanna held tightly to Liath and Hathui, still holding their hands, and she nodded gravely. "So will it be done," said Wolphere. "I must return to the king," said Hathui. She left. "It is late, and we have ridden far and all suffered much," said Wolphere to the other two. "Let us rest."

Liath found herself a pallet on which to sleep, a richer bed than any she had lain in since Hugh.

No. She was Safe now. She need fear him no longer. She set her sword, her good friend, beside her. Reached into the bowcase to touch the wood and horn of her bow, Seeker of Hearts. Last, she settled her saddlebags next to her body. She felt the book like balm against her soul and, nestled against it, hidden as well, the gold feather; she had hope now that she might in time puzzle out the secret of the inner text.

For the first instant she feared sleeping, but she was so very very tired she could no longer fight it off.

Hanna lay down beside her and put her arms around her. "I thought you were dead," she whispered. "Oh, Liath, I am so glad you are alive."

Liath kissed her on the cheek and wiped the last tear from her face. There was nothing more she could do, not now, except to rest and pray that her path would seem clearer in the morning. There was so much she had to learn and so much she must discover about herself, about the book, all the things Da had hidden from her for all these years.

krypte. "Hide this."

"Trust no one." Da had not meant to leave her alone. He had meant to protect her, for as long as he could.

"I love you, Da," she whispered.

Sleeping in her friend's embrace, she did not dream.

would not leave the chapel, or perhaps he simply could not. At last, with the efforts of several servants, he was taken to the bedchamber set aside for his use. There he lay silent and unmoving on the bed, not because he slept but because he did not have the strength to stand or to kneel or even to mourn. His children came in, Theophanu shepherding a trembling Ekkehard. No tears stained Theophanu's face, but she was pale. Sapientia was sobbing noisily. As a girl, Rosvita recalled, Sapientia had idolized Sanglant, had followed him like a puppy even to the point of being annoying, but Sanglant had never lost his temper with her not that he had had much of a temper, being in all things a tractable child. It might be that Sapientia truly mourned him, despite her jealousy at her father's preference for the bastard over the eldest legitimate child.

Rosvita had never observed that Sapientia was capable of duplicity.

Margrave Judith appeared in the doorway, spoke to a servant, and was ushered inside. She walked over to Rosvita. "News from Kassel," Judith murmured, eyeing the king with interest and perhaps pity. "Helmut Villam has taken a turn for the better. It appears he will live."

Roused by this whispering, Henry pushed himself up, though it was clearly exhausting for him to move at all. His face was graven with sorrow; he had aged ten years in one hour.

"Is it Villam you speak of?" he said. "What news?"

"He will live," said Rosvita in a calm voice, which was surely what the king needed at this desperate time rather than more hysteria.

Sapientia caught in a sob and let it out, bursting into a new stream of tears.

Henry shut his eyes. Slowly, he lifted a hand, the cloth, to his face. He murmured something, a word. No, it was a name: "Alia."

The touch of the old rag appeared to give him strength. "I want him gone!" he said. "Gone! Out of my sight. Send him south to Darre with the escort for Biscop Antonia."

"Whom, Your Majesty?"

"Wolfhere! But keep the other one here, the one who also witnessed. Where is Hathui?"

She stepped out from the shadow by the doorway. "I am here, Your Majesty."

"You will stay by my side," he ordered.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"It is time," he continued. His voice broke on the words, and yet none there would have mistaken him for anyone but the king. "Sapientia." Startled, the young woman flung herself to her knees and clutched at the bedcovers, bowing her head. Henry reached out but did not quite touch her hair. This mark of affection he could not quite now, not ever, perhaps bring

himself to show for her. "You will ride out in the morning on your heir's progress."

Her sobs ceased. She began to speak.

He turned his back on her. "Go," he said, the word muffled by the cloth in which he buried his face.

Rosvita began to move forward, to lead Sapientia away before she did something foolish, but Judith forestalled her. "Let me," said the margrave. "I will see she is outfitted and sent properly on her way."

"Thank you," murmured Rosvita.

The margrave led Sapientia from the room. The servants hovered nervously, but Henry did not move. He had done what was necessary. He had done what should have been done months ago, but she was not about to tell him that now. Sanglant was a brave man and a good soul half human though it was but he was not meant to be king. She sighed, heartfelt. The servants brought water and cloth to bathe the king's face.

Theophanu glanced toward Rosvita and asked a question with her expression. Rosvita shook her head. Better to take the living children away so as not to remind him of the dead one. With a slight nod, Theophanu led Ekkehard out of the chamber.

Henry did not respond, not when his servants offered him wine, not when they bathed his face. He was as stone, lost to the world. Together with the Eagle, Rosvita stood vigil beside him long into the dark night.

ALAIN could not sleep. The bed he had been given was too soft and too warm and too comfortable. He just could not sleep. The hounds snored softly. Count Lavastine snored, too, in a hushed counterpoint to the hounds. Unlike most noblemen, Lavastine did not sleep

in a room with his servants; no one dared sleep within range of the unchained hounds. Perhaps it was the very lack of bodies that made Alain keep starting awake. He had never slept so privately before. In Aunt Bel's longhouse here were full thirty people sleeping at night, and in the stables

Not my Aunt Bel any longer.

He sat bolt upright for perhaps the tenth time, and Sorrow woke and whined softly, seeking his hand and licking it.

Lavastine's heir. This in his wildest dreams he had never imagined. He knew at that moment he would sleep no more this night, so he rose and dressed quietly and slipped outside, Sorrow at his heels. Rage slept peacefully and did not stir.

Outside, a servant woke instantly. "My lord, may I escort you?"

How quickly they changed their treatment of him. But he was Lavastine's heir now, sealed by the king's own words. He would control their fates and their families in ten or twenty years. He knew better, from serving in a lord's household, than to try to go anywhere alone. It would never be allowed.

"Is there a chapel nearby?" he asked. "I wish to pray."

One of the bishop's clerics was found and Alain was escorted to a tiny chapel whose Hearth bore a fine jeweled reliquary box sitting in muted splendor on the polished wood of the altar. The chapel was not empty. A servant girl knelt on the stone before the Hearth, polishing the pavement with her own skirts.

In the next instant, just before she looked up, like a mouse caught in the act of nibbling at the cheese, he recognized her.

"My lady!" he said, aghast to find Tallia on her knees on the stone wiping the flagstone with her fine silk skirts. Her hands were red, rubbed almost raw by the unaccustomed work.

She stared at him, eyes wide and frightened. "I pray you," she said in a whisper, "do not send me away. Let me unburden myself before Our Lady in this fashion, by the work of my hands, though it is

unworthy of Her regard."

"But surely you do not wish to ruin that fine cloth?" Alain could just imagine what Aunt Bel would say if she saw silk of that quality being used to sweep floors, however holy.

"The riches of Earth are as dust to the glory of the heavens and the Chamber of Light. So did Prater Agius preach."

"You heard Agius preach?"

"Did you not hear him as well?" she asked timidly. She came forward, still on her knees, and clasped Alain's hands in hers, almost in supplication. "You were his companion. He saw that you were of noble birth before any other did, is that not true? Was his vision not a gift to him from the Lady Herself? Did he not preach the true Word of the blessed Daisan's sacrifice and redemption?"

"That is heresy," Alain whispered, glancing around, but they remained alone in the chapel. Sorrow sat panting by the door, and no man dared enter because of him.

"It is not heresy," she finished, her pale face taking color as she took heart from whatever memory she had of Agius' preaching. "You must acknowledge it. You heard him. You must know it is the truth."

"I" It made him deeply uncomfortable to have a princess who wore the gold torque marking her royal kinship kneeling in front of him and speaking of heresy, in a bishop's palace. "You must rise, Princess." He tried to tug her to her feet, but she was either stronger than she looked or holding fast to her purpose. Her hands were warm on his, warming his, and he looked into her face and did not understand what he saw there.

"I pray King Henry will put me in the church," she said, staring up at Alain.

Or marry her to me. The thought popped unbidden into Alain's mind. He was so stricken by it that he let go of her hands and sat down on the nearest bench. Ai, blessed Lord and Lady. He was a lord, now, heir to the count of Lavas. He could think about marriage.

"Then, when I am made deacon, I will preach," she said in a fierce whisper. "I will preach the Holy Word Agius taught me, though the skopos calls it heresy. If they condemn me for it, then I will be a martyr, as he was, and ascend to the Chamber of Light where the saints and the martyrs live in the blazing light of Our Lady's gaze and Her Son's sweet glory."

Alain almost laughed, not at her but at the strange path that had brought him here to this chapel on this night.

Serve me, the Lady of Battles had said, and she had given to him a bloodred rose as her token, as the sign of her favor. He had served, as well as he was able. He had ridden to war. He had broken the compulsion laid by sorcery on Lavastine, and he had killed the guivre, though only because of Agius' sacrifice. He had tried always to do what was right, though sometimes he had failed. He had not saved Lackling, but he had saved the Eika prince, although perhaps the life of the savage had not been worth the life of the poor simple boy. But it was not his place to judge the worth of their souls.

And Alain knew that although he had been raised from freeholder's son to count's heir, a huge leap in the world of men, such fortune could only have come about because of the presence of divine favor.

"Come, Tallia," he said, bold enough to use her name and hoping he would not be judged proud and insolent for doing so. "It is not fitting that you kneel. Sit beside me, I pray you." He gave her his hand and helped her up and, after a hesitation, she deigned to sit beside him on the bench.

She glanced past him toward the door and shuddered.

"What is wrong?"

"The hound. It scares me."

"I won't let it hurt you." He snapped his fingers. "Sorrow, come, boy." Sorrow padded dutifully over to him, and as if pulled along behind it on a string, his distraught servant crept into the chapel where he could observe safely, from a distance. Tallia shrank back from the hound's massive presence, but he bade the hound sit . and then he took her hand in his and, whispering softly, let her touch the hound's head. "You see," he said, "they are like any soul that wishes only to be touched with compassion and not with hatred or fear."

"You are very wise," said Tallia, but after a moment she withdrew her hand from Sorrow, though the hound made no move to snap or growl at her, obedient to Alain's command.

Alain smiled wryly. "I'm not wise. I'm only repeating what my fa" But Henri was not his father. Lavastine was his father. Yet at this moment it did not truly matter. Henri had raised him as well as he was able. "I'm only repeating what others have taught me."

There was a sudden flurry of movement by the door. Rage bounded in, followed by Lavastine. Tallia shrank away, but Rage sat down firmly on Alain's slippered feet, as if to make sure he did not run, and ignored the girl.

Lavastine ran a hand through rumpled hair and glared at Alain. "What do you mean by this?" he demanded. "My lord! Well! Out with it!"

"I couldn't sleep. I just came here" He gestured, half terrified that he had offended Lavastine, half confused by the expression on Lavastine's face, which he could not interpret.

Lavastine caught himself and made a simple bow. "Princess Tallia. I beg your pardon." He called to a servant. "Escort the princess back to her chamber."

Given no choice, Tallia left, but she cast one look pleading or grateful, Alain could not tellback at Alain before she was led away.

"She's in disgrace now," said Lavastine, sitting down on the bench beside Alain and absently letting Sorrow chew on his hand. "And her mother certainly is." He rubbed his beard, then fingered the silver Circle that hung at his chest on a gold chain. "Henry might be willing to marry her off, if the right bargain was offered. Any lineage is strengthened by royal blood." He stared at the Hearth for some moments longer, though he was obviously not viewing the fine reliquary or meditating on its holy contents. Then he shook himself, this stillness as much as he could muster in the course of one day. "Come, lad. It is almost dawn, did you not know?"

Alain had not noticed, but now through the glass he saw the faint glamour of light. He shook his head.

"I had a terrible fright when I woke and you weren't in the room. I thought I'd dreamed it all, the Eika prince, Sabella, the campaign, and you, my son." Lavastine stood and beckoned to the servants. "Go on, then! I see no reason to wait. Henry has pardoned us and I for one do not intend to wait in this dark palace and intrude on his grief. Nor remind him of what I have gained that he has lost." He took hold of Alain, his hand closing over Alain's wrist as if he meant never to let go of him.

"Come, son," he said, relishing the sound of the word on his tongue.

"Where are we going?" asked Alain. Beyond, through the glass windows of the chapel, he saw now the enclosed garden, its flowers and hedges rising from the gloom into the light of a new and fine day. Distantly, he heard a woman's voice intoning the mass for the dead.

Lavastine smiled. "We're riding home."

At first he did not realize he was still alive. Caught in the middle of a waking sleep, his mind awake but his limbs as leaden as a corpse's, he became aware he rested half on cold flagstone and half on another body. His spine was aflame with agonizing pain, but even as it flared through him it began to dull down into a throbbing ache.

He could not quite manage to open his eyes. But he knew he was surrounded by bodies, strewn about him like so much refuse. Some few were still alive. He heard the muffled thunder of their heartbeats, felt their shallow breathing on the air, though he did not touch them. The body he lay on was, certainly, dead, but only recently so. Warmth pooled out from it, turning cold as he fought into full wakefulness.

It was so hard to wake up. And perhaps better not to.

No. Never let it be said that he did not fight until his last breath.

He heard the snuffling of the dogs. He began, then, to be consumed by dread: that the dogs would reach him before he could move and defend himself against them. There were few worse fates than being torn to pieces by dogs, like some dumb passive beast caught outside the stable.

He heard their growls and the way they shoved their muzzles against cloth and skin and metal, smelling for the ones who still lived. He heard the low rumble of voices, farther away, speaking words he did not know but in a guttural language he recognized that of the Eika savages. Now and again these unseen speakers laughed. Now and again the dogs barked in triumph, and then he would hear a man's grunt or a scream, cut off, and then he would hear and now he cursed his keen hearing the flow of blood and the rending of flesh from bone. Once he recognized, however briefly, the voice of one of his own men.

Still he could not move.

A nose nudged his slack left hand and a hard fang traced up the sleeve of his mail shirt. The dog growled. Its hot breath, rank with fresh blood, touched his cheek.

He struck.

Miraculously, he twitched. His right hand moved. And then, throwing himself on his side, he slammed his mailed glove into the dog's muzzle. It staggered back, and he shoved himself up. He had gotten to his knees when two more dogs hit him, snarling and biting, from behind. He threw one of them bodily over his head and jabbed his elbow into the ribs of the other, groped at his belt for his knife but found no weapon.

His left hand had lost its glove. One of the dogs caught it and sank teeth into flesh. He hammered the creature's jaw down onto the stone floor. Stabs of pain lanced up his left arm, but he pried the beast's mouth off his hand, heaved up its stunned body, and threw it at the other two.

Now more came and more yet. They closed in, circling. He waited, panting, and licked the blood from his mangled hand.

One jumped in and snapped at his mail shirt. He swung and struck it, and it leaped back, but now behind him another broke in and nipped at his heel. He kicked. It yelped and bolted back.

He spun, staring them down. But they were only waiting, only testing him, to see how quick, how strong, how determined he was.

Beyond the dogs he caught sight of other shapes, but this fight with the dogs was to the death, and he did not have time to look. He had no helmet, no tabard, no protection on his bleeding and torn left hand, but he still had a mail glove on his right hand and the good mail shirt covering his torso and upper arms. He still had the dogs themselves, and though they were terrible to look upon eyes sparking fire and tongues hanging out, saliva dripping from their fangs they were yet mindless rage-filled beasts and he was

smarter than they were.

He backed up, stepping and stumbling over the dead, found a wall at last, and with this at his back he stared them down. A few sat down on their haunches and growled, unsure now. He singled out the biggest and ugliest one and darted out before any of the dogs could leap in upon him, grabbed the beast with a hand on each side of its thick neck, and with every ounce of strength he possessed swung it round and smashed it against the wall. It fell, limp, to the ground.

They erupted into a deafening chorus of howls and swarmed him, all leaping in at once. Their weight carried him down until he was trapped under their bodies, his arms and legs pinned. He was helpless. He was, at last, going to die.

One of the biggest yet fought through the pack to stand over his chest. Its head loomed over his face, its great muzzle yawning wide as it howled its triumph before the death strike.

And he saw his chance.

It bit down he slammed his head up under its jaw and lunged for the creature's throat. Clamped down.

Ai, Lady. He could not rip its throat out, but, by the Lord, he could crush its windpipe until it suffocated. The big dog thrashed above him as he bit down. Its iron-gray hide tasted like metal. Blood leaked down his own throat. Its paws scabbled at him, slowed, and then went lax. He felt the windpipe crack and, finally, jaw aching, he dared let go.

The beast collapsed on top of him.

The other dogs, worrying at his arms and legs, backed away. They snarled at him as he struggled to his feet. He spit out hair from his mouth and wiped his teeth. He ached everywhere. But he had killed it.

Movement coursed through the lofty space, and just before the Eika came, he finally realized that he stood in the great cathedral of Gent. Had they dragged every one of his Dragons in here? He did not even know how much time had passed since the fall of Gent. It could have been an hour or a day, or perhaps the enchanter had other spells surpassing even his illusions by which he could change the course of the stars.

"What have we here?" A huge Eika moved into his line of sight, shoving dogs aside, striking them back with clawed hands.

"Bloodheart," he whispered, because he had long since learned to mark his enemy by name.

The Eika enchanter laughed, a rasping sound like a file sharpening iron. "A prince among the dogs! This is a fine prize to have in my pack. Better even than this. And Bloodheart tapped his left arm. There, wrapped around his upper arm like an armlet, Bloodheart had fixed the gold torque that signified royal kinship.

Sanglant could not help himself. He growled, low in his throat, to see his father's gift to him made mock of in this way. He sprang forward and flung himself on the Eika chieftain.

Bloodheart was strong, but Sanglant was faster, and he had already marked with his gaze the sheath that held Bloodheart's dagger. He found the hilt, wrenched it free, and with Bloodheart reeling backward, plunged the dagger into that hard skin, through it, up to the gold and jeweled hilt, right into the Eika's heart.

Bloodheart threw back his head and howled in pain. Then he grabbed Sanglant by the neck and shook him free and threw him hard to the floor. The dogs swarmed forward, but Sanglant struck wildly around with his fists and his hopeless fury drove them back. That fury was a companion when all his other companions were dead or dying. The dogs sat again except for two more who lay



stilland with saliva rolling down their tongues they stared at him, ringing him so he could not move without coming within range of their teeth.

With a grunt, Bloodheart yanked the dagger out of his chest. He cursed and spit toward Sanglant, then laughed, that awful rasping sound. He handed the dagger to a small Eika who was naked except for a dirty cloth tied over his loins, a wizened creature made grotesque by the strange patterns painted on his body, by the sight of his body, so like a man's body except for the sheen of scales that was his skin. The small Eika spit on the blade and licked it clean. The blood hissed and bubbled, and then the small Eika pressed the blade against the wound on Bloodheart's chest and with some unseen sorcery burned the gash closed.

Sanglant winced at the acrid scent, but that wince sent a dog nipping forward toward his legs. He cuffed it hard, almost absently, and it whined and slunk back. He stared as the knife was lifted to reveal a thin white scar on the bronze sheen of the enchanter's hide.

"You'll have to do better than that," Bloodheart said, taking in a deep breath and puffing his chest up. The girdle of tiny gold links, interlaced into a skirt of surpassing beauty and delicacy, shifted around his hips and thighs as he moved, a dainty sound quite at odds with his bonewhite hair and the blood that splattered his arms and knees and the one last streak of blood that trailed down his bare chest.

He grunted, grabbed the biggest of the dead dogs, and dragged it backward. Then, looking again at Sanglant, he bared his teeth; jewels winked there, tiny emeralds and rubies and sapphires. "You'll not kill me that way, prince of dogs. I do not keep my heart in my body."

Sanglant felt a warm trickle running past his right eye. Only now did he feel the gash, whether opened by Bloodheart's claws or one of the dogs he could not know; he did not remember getting it. He only hoped it would not bleed too profusely and obscure his vision.

Several of the Eika warriors came forward now, grunting and pointing, rasping out words in their harsh language. He could guess what they said: "Shall we kill him now? May I have the honor?"

He braced himself. He would go down hard and take at least one with him, in payment for what the Eika had done to his beloved Dragons. There was nothing else he could do for them now. Under the voices of the muttering Eika he heard no faint breathing, no catch of air in a throat, no gasp of a loved one's name. He risked one look, then, swept his eyes across the vast nave of the cathedral. Light shone in through the huge glass windows, cutting light into a hundred shafts that splintered out across the carnage within.

There was Sturm, his company heaped around him in death as they had been in life. There was Adela, a woman as fierce in her own way as the Eika were in theirs, but she was dead and he had to look away ravaged by the dogs. There, where he had come to his senses, lay the Eagle, poor brave soul, who had stood with them to the bitter end. Dead now, every single one of them. Why did he still live?

With his other senses he remained painfully aware of each least shifting of the pack of dogs as they twitched their shoulders or shifted their flanks or closed their mouths and then opened them again to bare teeth, a threatening smile much like Bloodheart's. Better to go down fighting against men, even if they were Eika, than to be thrown to the dogs. There was no honor among the dogs.

"Shall we kill him?" the Eika warriors demanded, or so he supposed by the way they pointed at him and hefted their axes and spears, eager to swarm him and bring him down, the last, the prize of the battle.

"Nay, nay," said Bloodheart in the tongue of Wendish men. "It is our own way, is it not? See how the dogs obey him. See how they wait, knowing he is stronger and smarter than they are. He is First Brother among the pack, now, our prince. He has earned that right." He leaned down and unfastened from around the neck of the dead dog its iron collar. Rising, he barked out words in his own language.

The Eika soldiers laughed uproariously, their harsh voices echoing in the nave as hymns once had. Then they threw down their weapons and swarmed Sanglant. Because they were smarter than the dogs and stronger than he was, they pinned him finally, though he did some damage to them before he went down.

They fixed the iron collar around his neck, dragged him along the nave, and fettered him by a long chain to the Hearth, so massive and heavy an altar that though he strained he could not move it. The dogs loped over to him. A few worried at his feet but in a curious way, not precisely hostile. One bit at him, and he slapped it hard across the muzzle. It whined and backed away, and it was at once jumped by another; they fought for a moment until one turned its throat up to the victor.

"Stop!" snapped Sanglant, and there was, this time, no killing.

The strange old Eika man was chanting in a soft voice, hunkered down and rocking back and forth on his heels. He had a little leather cup and he shook it and rolled white objects out: dice or bones. Then he passed a hand over these objects, studied them, chanted again, and scooped them up. The cup he tucked away into the pouch he wore at his belt. A small wooden chest sat beside his feet.

More Eika swarmed into the cathedral, and they began dragging corpses down into the crypt. Others carried a great throne carved out of a single piece of wood. The huge chair was painted gold and red and black and ornamented with cunning interlock, dogs and dragons biting each other, mouths to tails, in endless circles. They set this chair beside the Hearth, in mockery of the bishop's seat.

On this throne Bloodheart sat and he surveyed his new domain with satisfaction. Possessively, he rubbed the gold torque on his arm. Sanglant could not help himself:

he reached up and touched the iron collar that now circled his neck where once he had worn gold.

The movement drew Bloodheart's eye. He leaned toward Sanglant but not too close. No closer, really, than he would have gotten to his own dogs.

"Why are you still alive," Bloodheart asked, "when all the others are dead?"

"Let me fight," said Sanglant, and suddenly feared he sounded like he was pleading. Ai, Lady, he did not want to die such a dishonorable death. He would not have wished this on his worst enemy, to die like a dog, among the dogs. "Give me an honorable death, Bloodheart. Let your boldest warrior choose weapons and we will have it out, he and I."

"Nay, nay." Bloodheart bared his teeth in a grin. Jewels glinted, a rich treasure studding his teeth. "Am I not king among the Eika of the western shore? Have I not fought down all the other tribes until they all bared their throats before me? Do I not boast a king's son in my pack of dogs?" He laughed, pleased with his triumph. "I think not, my prince. You are the prize in my pack, a fine lord with his handsome retinue. For my dogs are like to the kingdom of Wendar, are they not? Led by you." His grin turned into a snarl. "Lead them for as long as you can. For you will weaken, and when you do, they will kill you."

Beyond, the Eika methodically looted the corpses before they dragged them into the crypt. One, rifling the Eagle's body, ripped his Eagle's badge from his cloak and tossed it. It landed at the feet of Bloodheart, who picked it up, bit it, and spat.

"Brass! Pah!" He tossed it down and Sanglant swatted dogs aside and grabbed it up from the floor. But that turmoil set the dogs to snapping and snarling again. He made good use of the badge; it had a clean, rounded edge and was good for jabbing. The dogs backed off and settled down again. One of the big ones growled at him, but he made a sharp gesture, and it lifted its head to expose its throat to him in submission.

He wiped hair from his lips, trying to clean the horrible taste out of his mouth. His left hand

throbbled. Blood leaked, slowed, stopped as had the gash on his head, which had already stopped bleeding. That was the secret of his mother's geas, of course, the one she had set on him when he was an infant, the day she vanished from human lands. That was what her blood had given him: keen hearing and unnatural powers of healing.

An Eika grabbed the dead Eagle by the heels and dragged the body away toward the crypt. Sanglant pressed the Eagle's badge against his cheek.

He was hit so hard by the memory of the young Eagle Liath touching him on his cheek in the silence and intimacy of the crypt that he was dizzy for a moment. The dogs, alert to any least weakness, stirred and growled. He tensed; they quieted.

By the Lady, he would not, he must not, let Bloodheart win. This at least he could believe, that Liath was still alive, for the last report he had been given before he and his Dragons were utterly overwhelmed was that the children of Gent had been led to safety.

"You are speechless, Prince," said Bloodheart. "Are you half dog already? Have you lost the power to talk?"

"I am like you, Bloodheart," he said, his voice hoarse; but his voice always was hoarse now, for he had survived worse injuries than these. The iron collar, and his chains, weighed heavily on his neck. "My heart rests not within me but with another, and she is far away from here. That is why you will never defeat me."

But the dogs, ever watchful, growled softly. They were willing to wait.